Screening Politics: The Egalitarian Film Theory of Jacques Rancière

by

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Abstract

There is a longstanding and rich history of theorizing cinema in terms of its politics. This tendency culminated in political modernism, an avowedly politicized discourse for which Althusserian Marxism and Lacanian psychoanalytic theory served as conceptual touchstones. Since the collapse of this discourse, film theory has fractured into two largely unrelated projects that are, however, united by a shared interest in limiting or deferring inquiries into the politics of film. On the one hand, post-theory draws on the principles of analytic or scientific philosophy in proposing to reconstruct film theory along the lines of a naturalizing epistemology. On the other, film-phenomenology seeks to revive the pure cinema project of the 1920s and its founding premise that cinema fundamentally alters our mode of being in the world. In both cases, the question of film’s politics is expressly set aside or suppressed.

In this thesis, I argue that film theory’s renewal in the aftermath of political modernism’s decline can accommodate the politics of film as a question or concern by turning to the post-Marxist philosophy of Jacques Rancière, whose important writings on cinema, aesthetics, and politics have been largely ignored by contemporary film theorists. I make my argument by examining how Rancière’s philosophical framework advances, confronts, or otherwise inflects longstanding debates in film theory. In particular, this thesis brings his work and thought to bear on the following issues: the still-unresolved question of film’s aesthetic status; the discourse of sobriety in contemporary documentary film theory; the ongoing deliberations on the nature of film spectatorship. At the same time, this thesis considers how Rancière’s philosophical project, as summed up in the principle of axiomatic equality, reframes the political stakes of these debates.
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Introduction

The philosophy of Jacques Rancière has breathed new life into the question of art’s relation to politics. After distinguishing himself as a political philosopher, Rancière began a sustained inquiry into axiomatic equality, and the “distributed” character of all sensible experience, which led him to consider more fully the nature and function of aesthetics in processes of political subjectification. The resulting body of work includes an innovative taxonomy of art “regimes” that catalogues and explains the various discursive contexts in which art has historically been discussed and conceptualized, as well as a vaunted critique of so-called critical art, long the only available model for thinking through art’s politics. Given the current state of the humanities, whose ongoing renewal is taking it in a scientific direction, it is no surprise that Rancière’s work has been greeted with a certain ambivalence, or even skepticism. Nevertheless, certain academic fields, like literary theory and art history, have tentatively engaged with his philosophy. In film theory, by contrast, Rancière has been largely ignored, despite the prominent status of cinema in his writings on aesthetics. This omission on the part of film theorists can be explained with reference to the current state of the field, which is still haunted by the spectre of the once-dominant, and thoroughly politicized, discourse of political modernism.

In today’s film theory, the question of the politics of film lies mostly dormant. This is notable to the extent that, historically, politics has been the motive force for a significant number of important film-theoretical projects. The hypothesis that film is
somehow urgently political has guided countless inquiries into its nature, function, and value. As a question, the politics of film reached its zenith in the 1970s with the consolidation of the discourse of political modernism, or so-called “Grand Theory,” which at the time was practically synonymous with film theory, newly emergent as an academic field.¹ Subjected to a concerted backlash, political modernism was effectively dismantled in the 1990s by critics and scholars who were both skeptical of its ungrounded premises and hostile to its sweeping claims.

The present state of film theory can be summarized with reference to the two discourses that supplanted political modernism in film theory and currently dominate the field.² The first and more prominent is post-theory.³ Although composed of myriad projects, post-theory coheres around its identity as a naturalizing epistemology that seeks to determine the causal laws and regulative principles responsible for organizing the domain of art and culture. The second is film-phenomenology, a project that addresses

² It should be noted that some may find the term “film theory” hopelessly antiquated. Given the critical censure of so-called Grand Theory, contemporary scholars working in the field tend to substitute the term philosophy for theory. I have avoided doing so because no consensus has yet been reached on the most appropriate way of relating philosophy to film, resulting in general confusion. For example, we have not only a branch of studies dedicated to the “philosophy of film,” but a mix of projects under the banner of “film philosophy” or some variation thereof, such as “film-philosophy” and “filmosophy,” each signaling different philosophical commitments. A partial account can be found in Thomas E. Wartenberg’s “On the Possibility of Cinematic Philosophy,” in New Takes in Film-Philosophy, ed. H. Carel and G. Tuck, 2011 edition (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 9–24. To my mind, the most appropriate way of organizing the field after the decline of political modernism is into two broad categories: post-theory and film-phenomenology, each of which can be situated in a wider film-theoretical tradition—poetic and aesthetic, respectively. I take up the history of these traditions in Chapter 3.
film as a medium of experience rather than as a knowable object distinct from its
knowing subject. For film-phenomenologists, the chief attraction of film lies with its
supposed power to recalibrate the relationship between thought and reality.

It is well known that both discourses established themselves in part by addressing
political modernism as an object of critical censure. Less discussed, although arguably
more consequential, is how their respective campaigns also targeted the more general
question of the politics of film, which got swept away in the same tide that toppled
political modernism. The result is that it is no longer possible to pose this question in the
context of film theory with any credibility or legitimacy. Both post-theory and film-
phenomenology, each according to its own logic, have made the theoretical grounds for
pursuing this question unavailable.

My thesis rests on the assumption that the radical severing of politics and theory
in film studies in the wake of the critical censure of political modernism, itself a symptom
of a more general crisis in the humanities, was overhasty and unjustified, and that there is
a need today to reconsider anew the links between cinema, theory, and politics. This is
not to say I am advocating for a revival of the doctrines of political modernism, whatever
interest they might still hold for us. Noël Carroll’s critique of this discourse, however
reductive in other respects, is instructive on this point. Carroll argues convincingly that
political modernism overdetermined the relationships between cinema, theory, and

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4 The key film-phenomenology texts of the current era are the following: Vivian Carol Sobchack, *The
Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press,
1992); Christian Keathley, *Cinephilia and History, or the Wind in the Trees* (Bloomington, Ind. [u.a.]:
Indiana Univ. Press, 2006); Daniel Frampton, *Filmosophy* (Wallflower Press, 2006).
5 I explore the specific arguments advanced by these discourses on this question more fully in Chapter 1
and in Chapter 3.
politics. The premise that “every film is political,” which political modernism adopted as a theoretical axiom, has proven to be untenable. Whatever our commitment to a political understanding of art and culture, we must resist the urge to claim for politics an omnipresence that saturates both the critical discourses about cinema as well as the universal corpus of films. Such an approach risks blurring the lines between the separate practices of making films, developing a critical discourse on cinema, and political activity. Treating these distinct practices as identical, and endeavouring to reveal their mutual identity, has proven to be a misguided approach, as the cautionary tale of political modernism makes clear.

However, ascribing a hermetic autonomy to cinema, theory, and politics, as suggested by both post-theory and film-phenomenology is also questionable. If political modernism erred in attempting to dissolve the relations between the discrete practices of film production, film theory, and politics through a process of identification and unification, post-theory and film-phenomenology miscalculate in holding such relations to be non-existent or of no relevance. Their reflexive distaste for a politicized film theory, precipitated by the excesses of political modernism, has led these projects to turn a blind eye to film’s politics. Yet it does not necessarily follow that the faults of a discourse rests with the questions that precipitate and sustain it. Put otherwise, a retreat from political modernism need not, and indeed should not, entail a retreat from the more general question of the politics of film.

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6 See his “Prospects for Film Theory: A Personal Assessment,” in Post-Theory, 37–68.
7 This phrase was first uttered in a contribution to the October 1969 issue of Cahiers du Cinéma and was soon translated and reprinted as Jean-Louis Comolli and Paul Narboni, “Cinema/Ideology/Criticism,” trans. Susan Bennett, Screen 12, no. 1 (March 20, 1971): 27–38.
On what theoretical grounds and with what conceptual framework can the question of the politics of film once again be raised and explored? My search for answers to these questions led me to take an interest in the work and thought of Jacques Rancière. In conducting my research, I was guided by two mutually implicated objectives, which together structure this thesis. The first was to address the paucity of substantive commentaries from a film-theoretical perspective on the subject of Jacques Rancière’s philosophy, including and especially his extended discussions of cinema. The second was to rehabilitate the question of the politics of film within the field of film theory.

The claim I make and attempt to substantiate in this dissertation is that it is possible to renew the question of film’s politics on the basis of Rancière’s thesis concerning the relationship between aesthetics and politics, which can be summed up in the phrase “the distribution of the sensible.” For Rancière, the irreducible distance between words and things—what he calls the “fault” of language—means that the way in which the sensible is configured into the intelligible is a matter of aesthetics. 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 artistic practices have political stakes. The logic according to which the sensible order is carved up and shared—in the form of art, in particular—describes not only 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,

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8 His most extensive treatment of this thesis can be found in Jacques Rancière, The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London; New York: Continuum, 2006).
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.  

In adjoining the political to the aesthetic in this way, Rancière advises us against looking to themes and subject matter in our search for the politics of film. It does not necessarily follow that thematizing a particular political viewpoint or struggle precipitates dissensus. More to the point, films that are excessively didactic with respect to a political agenda actually forfeit any claim to politics, as he construes the term. The attempt to win over an audience to a particular ideological persuasion, or to take on a social issue with a view toward applying pressure on public policy, however necessary in other respects, always plays into the hands of a policing consensus. We must be wary, as well, of reductive forms of identity politics that have little patience for the politics of aesthetics and are overly dependent on an essentialist notion of the social subject. In such cases, the tendency is to calcify social identity, or of otherwise seeking, however tacitly or inadvertently, to regulate the social status and code of conduct of the very people on whose behalf it purportedly speaks and whom it wishes to emancipate.  

Following Rancière, we can view the effort to educate and inform, to provide uplift and edification,  

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9 I take up Rancière’s thesis concerning the distribution of the sensible, as well as the principle of axiomatic equality in Chapter 2.  
10 For a good account of the complex relationship between the “post-Marxism” of Rancière and the field of cultural studies see Paul Bowman, Post-Marxism Versus Cultural Studies: Theory, Politics and Intervention, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007). I take up this problem in the final section of Chapter 1.
as forever susceptible to stultification, a term that Rancière uses to signify pedagogical projects that merely re-inscribe hierarchies of social relations in the very process of attempting to dismantle or rearrange them. I will not speak, then, of political films. I will speak only of the politics of film, an instance of a more broadly conceived politics of aesthetics.

As part of his philosophical project, Rancière has written extensively on cinema.\textsuperscript{11} Much of what he has to say has profound implications for some of the key debates that constitute the field of film theory. By and large, however, film theorists remain curiously silent on his work and thought. There is a notable lack of serious and sustained inquiries from the perspective of film theory, and indeed film studies more generally, into Rancière’s provocative claims regarding the relationship between politics and film. One understands that most contemporary film scholars wish to exclude from the field anything that might threaten to politicize its discourse or otherwise repeat the mistakes of political modernism. The body of work on this subject, then, is regrettably small. The few exceptions, however, are worth noting.

Studies devoted to addressing Rancière’s philosophy in the context of cinema can be organized into several categories. Some of the more interesting studies examine how Rancière engages with the work of other philosophers of cinema, notably Gilles Deleuze

\textsuperscript{11} In the title of this dissertation, I sum up this body of work as a kind of film theory, rather than a philosophy of film. Whether Rancière would agree with this characterization is uncertain. I do so, however, largely to avoid adding yet more confusion to already muddled debate in film studies regarding the most appropriate way to relate film to philosophy. The phrases “the philosophy of film” and “film-philosophy” are not used consistently by film scholars. They can refer to any number of philosophical commitments and/or film-theoretical projects. Moreover, in many important ways Rancière’s body of writing on film resembles what traditional film theory looks like: it is an account of the nature, function, and value of cinema, even if, as we’ll see, he seeks to subvert some of the most fundamental premises of film theory as it has been traditionally practiced.
and Jean-Luc Godard. Rancière has commented extensively on both Deleuze’s writings on cinema and on Godard’s written and filmic output, and the results have attracted critical attention, with most accounts characterizing the encounters—rightly I think—as one of productive disagreement.12 Another kind of study draws on Rancière as a conceptual resource for the analysis of individual film texts and/or the cinema of individual auteurs.13 This should not surprise us, since philosophy has always nourished film studies in this way. In at least one case, Rancière’s concepts have also constituted a resource for the historical film scholar.14 Finally, there are those studies that examine Rancière’s comments on film with reference to other theoretical discourses, such as those concerning modernism, media/medium, and spectatorship.15


Only a few scholars of note have addressed Rancière’s relevance for film theory, as I attempt to do here, at any length. The pioneer of the group is Tom Conley, who published the first significant work in this area—a brief study of Rancière’s most extended treatment on cinema, *Film Fables*—and who has followed up with a few more key texts.\(^\text{16}\) Another scholar who has made important contributions is Richard Rushton. His book-length study of theories of filmic realism, as well as his volume devoted to the politics of Hollywood cinema, each include a chapter featuring Rancière.\(^\text{17}\) Perhaps the scholar most committed to the study of the significance of Rancière’s philosophy for film theory is Nico Baumbach, whose work I discuss in more detail below.

Two comments with respect to this corpus of scholarship is warranted. The first is that there is a tendency to prioritize Rancière’s theories of art at the expense of the political aspect of his thought, which is either unduly minimized or passed over entirely. For example, there is typically little or no mention of axiomatic equality, the foundational principle that organizes Rancière’s larger philosophical project. This is less a question of appropriateness than of adequation. His tripartite model of art—ethical, representative, aesthetic—arises from, and is fundamentally implicated in, his political thesis concerning the distribution of the sensible. To be sure, this model is flexible and powerful enough to sustain studies confined to, for example, the aesthetic history of forms. But outside a

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\(^{17}\) Richard Rushton, *The Reality of Film: Theories of Filmic Reality* (Manchester, USA: Manchester University Press, 2010), Chapter 7. See also Richard Rushton, *The Politics of Hollywood Cinema Popular Film and Contemporary Political Theory* (Basingstoke [u.a.]: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), Chapter 8. Rushton can be counted among those who are seeking to revive the question of the politics of film in a way that maintains a critical distance from the doctrines of political modernism.
specifically political consideration of art, its analytic power is considerably diminished. In Rancière’s thought, aesthetics and politics, though fundamentally distinct from one another, are nonetheless thoroughly interrelated. Consequently, inquiries into Rancière’s discussions of cinema that do not take this aspect of his thought into account are, to my mind, insufficiently grounded.

A second point worth raising is that, with a singular exception, no film scholar has yet conducted a thorough and systemic study that attempts to account for the wide-ranging implications of Rancière’s philosophy for film studies (let alone film theory). A 2013 edited collection called *Rancière and Film*, the sole work extant of its kind, is symptomatic. Although composed of important contributions, each of which is original and scholarly, the volume as a whole is less than cohesive. The anthology format severely inhibits the formation of the kinds of connections necessary to establish a wider and sufficiently distinct view of Rancière’s project and its relevance to the study of film. Only a synoptic perspective, I argue, allows for a systemic analysis.

The one scholar who has successfully provided such a perspective is Nico Baumbach. What sets Baumbach’s work apart, aside from its comparative depth and breadth, is his commitment to the political dimension of Rancière’s thought. Baumbach understands better than most that Rancière’s project is built around the principle of axiomatic equality and his related thesis concerning the distribution of the sensible. Baumbach is also sensitive to the many challenges posed by Rancière’s philosophy to the reigning orthodoxies of film theory. In this respect, I share Baumbach’s conviction that Rancière’s philosophy can provide the theoretical grounds necessary to revive within film
theory the otherwise dormant question of the politics of film.\textsuperscript{18} Some of Baumbach’s original scholarship that I do not attempt to replicate, review, or revise here include his analysis of the nature of Rancière’s disagreement with Althusser, Rancière’s critical distance from the discourse of political modernism, and the relation of Rancière’s thought with regard to cinema to that of other contemporary continental philosophers, including, Slavoj Žižek, Alain Badiou, and Gilles Deleuze.\textsuperscript{19}

My dissertation makes several important contributions to this corpus of scholarship, the most significant of which is an account of how Rancière’s philosophy advances, confronts, or otherwise inflects longstanding debates in film theory. In particular, this thesis brings his work and thought to bear on the following issues: the still-unresolved question of film’s aesthetic status; the discourse of sobriety in contemporary documentary film theory; the ongoing deliberations on the nature of film spectatorship. At the same time, this thesis considers how Rancière’s philosophical project, as summed up in the principle of axiomatic equality, reframes the political stakes of these debates.

In the first chapter, I provide the necessary historical context for my study.

Composed of two parts, this chapter both describes how the politics of film has been

\textsuperscript{18} It should be noted, then, that I view my project as a continuation of Baumbach’s work.

taken up as a question in the past, as well as clarifies its current status in both film studies and the wider humanities. The first part begins with a section on early conservative efforts to erect a theory of film organized around the premise that, as an object of inordinate mass appeal whose psycho-social effects resembled hypnotic suggestion, cinema posed a threat to the supposed elitist foundation of civic life. I then discuss the conjoining of cinephilia and Marxism in the materialist film theories of Sergei Eisenstein and Walter Benjamin, who both conjectured that film, on the strength of its medium-specific properties, prepares the way for the socialist revolution. The subsequent section examines two cinephobic film theories that also depend on Marxist premises: Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer’s remarks on cinema, which they make in the context of their wider denunciation of the so-called culture industry; political modernism, that avowedly politicized discourse of the 1970s and 1980s for which Althusserian Marxism and Lacanian psychoanalytic theory served as conceptual touchstones. Finally, I take a look at how the question of film’s politics fares in today’s film theory, which is dominated by the expressly anti-political projects post-theory and film-phenomenology. One of the arguments I advance in this thesis is that Jacques Rancière inflects this history by challenging a key assumption, namely, that film is somehow intrinsically or ontologically political. As we’ll see, for Rancière there is a politics to film that is, however, not directly attributable to its medium-specific properties.

The second part of Chapter 1 shifts the historical gaze to the contemporary moment. It looks beyond the specific context of film theory to examine the prospects for a rehabilitated inquiry into film’s politics with respect to structural and philosophical
shifts taking place in the humanities more broadly. Three challenges, in particular, are identified. The first concerns ongoing efforts to remake the humanities so that they more closely resemble the social sciences. Here, an emphasis on quantification and data-derived claims, I argue, deters more qualitative speculations of an aesthetic nature. To the extent that politics concerns the distribution of the sensible, as Rancière conceives it, a lack of support for aesthetic research complicates the task of inquiring after the politics of film. The second challenge relates to efforts to have the study of art and culture follow the protocols of the natural sciences. In this naturalizing epistemology, tests of fallibility are supposed to adjudicate between rival claims, and the acquisition of knowledge advances teleologically. Here, I rehearse David Rodowick’s argument that claims of an aesthetic nature are not corrigible in the scientific sense, nor do they accumulate according to the logic of a telos. The third complication has to do with the perception that the question of the politics of film ought to be pursued in the disciplinary context of cultural studies, since it is largely devoted to examining the relation between culture and power. Here, I argue that, to the extent that cultural studies considers politics strictly in terms of identity and representation, it is not a suitable context in which to address political questions of an aesthetic nature.

If Chapter 1 supplies my study with a historical perspective, Chapter 2 supplies it with a theoretical one. Given the relative scarcity of analysis regarding Rancière’s philosophy from a film studies perspective, I have devoted Chapter 2 to the exegetical task of summarizing his project as a whole and, where appropriate, pausing over relevant aspects of this thought. Key in this regard is: his formulation of politics as the
manifestation of dissensus; the cardinal status in his work of the principle of axiomatic equality; his thesis regarding the distributed character of the sensible; his tripartite model of “regimes” relating art and politics. Here I argue that the politics of film can be revived, per Rancière, as part of a broader consideration of the politics of aesthetics.

The remainder of the thesis is devoted to an analysis of Rancière’s intervention in three specific debates within film theory that have largely dominated its history and that to my mind still constitute the field as such. In Chapter 3, I consider the longstanding question of film’s aesthetic status. I argue that, historically, this question has evolved two distinct, if somewhat related, traditions. On the one hand, film is theorized from a poetic perspective that assesses cinematic art on the basis of the craft principle. On the other, film is theorized more strictly as a singular aesthetic experience that brings about a new world, or that fundamentally alters our relation to the old one. Each has its contemporary variant in post-theory and film-phenomenology, respectively. I argue that, among other contributions to this debate, Rancière’s taxonomy of aesthetico-political regimes provides the means for uniting these traditions under one conceptual schema, and in a way that reveals how the question of film’s aesthetic status is inherently a political one.

In Chapter 4, I take up the discourse of sobriety that dominates contemporary documentary theory, and in particular the two “sober” premises that underwrite this discourse: that fiction must be radically opposed to non-fiction; that history is reducible to an absent cause. I first note the conceptual difficulties documentary theorists encounter in their attempt to assimilate the documentary to the logic of sobriety, and particularly the problem posed by the peculiar nature of indexical media. In a close reading of some of
the key texts that constitute this discourse, I show how, as a conceptual framework, sobriety is routinely opposed to aesthetics, which pre-empts any consideration of the “art” of the documentary. Drawing on Rancière, I argue that these conceptual difficulties may be alleviated by setting aside the criterion of sobriety and shifting the ground of documentary theory to aesthetics. One of the advantages of undertaking this shift is that, within an aesthetic framework, documentary theory can better accommodate the peculiarities of indexical media. Such an approach, as I show, also respects the political principle of axiomatic equality. To be sure, an aesthetic understanding of the documentary means accepting it as a species of fiction, what I call “documentary fiction.” However, I show how Rancière’s historical analysis enriches the concept of fiction in a way that safeguards a documentary theory founded on aesthetics from succumbing irretrievably into either skepticism or relativism.

The third and final film-theoretical debate on which Rancière’s aesthetic-political philosophy is brought to bear is the question of spectatorship. In Chapter 5, I examine how this question is currently being addressed in the field by post-theory, on the one hand, and film-phenomenology, on the other. I indicate how post-theory, drawing on cognitive science, prescribes a program in which the spectator is defined by his or her capacity to make logical inferences on the basis of explicit and referential cues in the work of art. On this point, I argue that implicit and symptomatic cues are inappropriately excluded. With respect to film-phenomenology, I indicate how, working out from the premise that the moving image is opposed to language, this discourse posits a spectator held captive to film’s so-called organic meaning. As I demonstrate, what is at stake in
post-theory and film-phenomenology is the practice of interpretation, which both explicitly censure. Drawing on Rancière and his original concept of the “emancipated spectator,” however, I argue that a theory of film spectatorship is better served by acknowledging how the spectator makes the work of art meaningful in part by consulting his or her own aesthetic sensibility. In other words, I argue that we need to recoup a certain idea of interpretation, one which can account for that aspect of the spectatorial encounter in which the spectator makes, as it were, a new poem with the elements of the poem under review.

In the pages that follow, I argue that Rancière’s remarks on cinema and his innovative theory concerning the relation between art and politics advances these debates by both resolving certain impasses as well as taking them in new directions. At the same time, while they revive the political stakes of these debates, they do so in a way that does not lead to the politicization of the wider field. A more general argument I make, which I take up in the concluding chapter, is the relevance of Rancière’s philosophy for the ongoing renewal of the humanities. Through the premise of aesthetic distance and the principle of axiomatic equality, Rancière suggests an alternative to some of the proposals currently on offer, particularly those that would have the humanities emulate either the natural or social sciences. In this respect, I argue that film theory’s renewal, as outlined in the present study, can serve as a model for the humanities going forward. Before considering what Rancière has to say about cinema, art, and politics, however, it is worth examining how the question of film’s politics has been taken up in the past, as well as its
current status in the field of film theory and its uncertain prospects in the wider humanities.
Chapter 1

Film, Theory, Politics: Then and Now

Part 1: A Brief History of the Politics of Film (Theory)

Theorizing the politics of film is almost as old as cinema itself. Of course, there was nothing new in attributing political significance to a form of art; film was not unique in this respect. But it was not long after its initial popularization that film was identified as representing a new frontier for political struggle. At the very least, it seemed to pose a distinct and perhaps unprecedented challenge to the existing social and political order. Consequently, a variety of critical efforts were launched whose purpose was to determine in what, precisely, film’s politics consisted. To be sure, these efforts never quite coalesced into a unified project. Until the development of the discourse of political modernism, which was the first to inquire after film’s politics in the disciplinary context of the university, the undertaking was largely sporadic and disjointed, involving at most small pockets of researchers effectively working in isolation, with contributors rarely following up on their predecessors work. As we’ll see, however, they all rely on the same fundamental premise, namely, that film is intrinsically or constitutionally political, that politics is inherent to its nature. If the history of the effort to determine in what film’s politics consists is discontinuous, it can nonetheless be organized around this premise.

Determining the politics of film has historically meant examining its peculiar nature, invariably conceived as a function of its medium-specific properties, which were thought to be the source of its politics. Film’s novelty was too radical for one to merely
evaluate it in light of the other arts. The properties of film, including its psycho-social effects, were considered unique and even unprecedented. Quite simply, a critical framework that was adequate to film was felt lacking, and that therefore a theory of film was required in order to account for its politics.

The purpose of this chapter is to provide the proper historical context for my study. As such, it consists of a brief history of the various attempts to construct a theory of film in order to account for its politics. I start with the earliest efforts to “police” cinema, both in its content and as a social experience. I then examine how the politics of film was taken up in the 1920s by Soviet film theorist Sergei Eisenstein, and later by the Frankfurt School of critical theory. Finally, I relate how this project culminated in the discourse of political modernism, which perhaps even more so than the Soviet tradition radicalized the politics of film and of film theory. After discussing the social and political context of the consolidation of political modernism, I extend the historical narrative to the present day. I describe how film theory has been depoliticized from within the field as well as how recent institutional transformations affecting the humanities more broadly has eroded the capacity to revive the politics of film as a question or concern.

**Policing Cinema**

Knowing cinema, and what it did to people and social groups, was for a time important to the broader governmental project of knowing people in order to act upon their conduct.¹

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What is cinema? The question that launched film theory as a critical project, and that still to a large extent defines its program, was taken up in some quarters not merely as an epistemological matter, but as a political one. In a meticulously researched study, film scholar Lee Grieveson has demonstrated how some of the earliest efforts to “know” cinema were coordinated with larger political projects—often tied explicitly to governmental agencies and their agendas. However diverse in other ways, these projects all shared in the same politically conservative program: to resist or dismantle the radical social transformations constitutive of modernity. The relevance of cinema to these political programs must be viewed in this larger historical context, particularly the social disruptions caused by the rise of the masses as a political and social force.

Conservative commentators were generally distrustful of the masses, citing, in particular, the threat they posed to a regulated social regime that they held responsible for the great achievements of civilization. A classic account in this vein is offered by philosopher José Ortega y Gasset. For the conservative-liberal Ortega y Gasset, the increasing influence of the masses represented nothing short of a return to barbarism. In contrast to what Ortega y Gasset called the “select-man,” the “mass-man” is an incurable vulgarian, clinging to mediocrity while stubbornly declining to conduct himself in a way that would distinguish him from his peers. The obstinate vulgarity of the masses was

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2 José Ortega y Gasset, The Revolt of the Masses (New York, N.Y: W.W. Norton, 1964); see Chapter 1, in particular. Gasset follows in a long conservative tradition of challenging the modern order on the grounds that it devalued the supposedly higher virtues of the ancien régime, a tradition stretching as far back as Edmund Burke’s defence of chivalry in his essay on the French Revolution. See his Reflections on the Revolution in France, ed. L. G. Mitchell, Reissue edition (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).
viewed by Ortega y Gasset as a contaminating agent. He was alarmed that the masses had successfully infiltrated those public spaces—cafés, trains, theatres—previously reserved for the more cultivated members of society. By polluting these monuments to, and venues of, civilization with his debasing mediocrity, the mass-man crowded out the select-man and his more cultured sensibility, a trend which Ortega y Gasset equated with an assault on the very integrity of the civilizing project.

As Grieveson notes, the cinema became of political interest only once it had achieved mass appeal. This political interest was often expressed in epistemological terms. Social control of the masses drove the conservative agenda, and insofar as such control is a matter of knowledge, the preferred strategy was what Grieveson, following Michel Foucault, calls “governmentality,” or the bringing together of epistemological and institutional practices in the interest of shaping, guiding, and modifying individual and group behaviour.  

Conservatively inclined governmental agencies, who shared Ortega y Gasset’s interest in preserving traditional or pre-modern social relations, often colluded with members of the academic community and other civic-minded research institutions to ensure that the general unruliness of the masses did not infect the wider social body.  

In other words, gaining knowledge of the masses and their habits was to be put towards the political effort of managing their conduct. As an object of unprecedented mass appeal, cinema was deemed of crucial importance to this effort.

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3 For an account of Grieveson indebtedness to Michel Foucault and his concept of governmentality, see note 14 of “Cinema Studies and the Conduct of Conduct.”

4 For an account of these organizations and their links, as well as a detailed summary of their activities, see Alan Havig, “The Commercial Amusement Audience in Early 20th-Century American Cities,” *Journal of American Culture* 5, no. 1 (spring 1982): 1–19. It should be noted that Grieveson draws heavily on Havig’s research.
The assumption guiding many of these research projects was that the experience of film spectatorship left the viewer in an unduly impressionable state and thus vulnerable to cinema’s dubious influence. It was conjectured that film had the power to overwrite the moral code of the susceptible spectator, substituting its own set of questionable values for those that conformed to traditional social standards. As Grieveson makes clear, this power was given a specific conceptual formulation: mimesis.\(^5\) Intellectual trends at the time endorsed a view of the psychological subject as fundamentally mimetic in nature, as something that develops through a process of engagement and interaction with respect to other psychologies. In a stark departure from Kantian and Cartesian models of subjectivity, which are characterized by a certain self-sustaining autonomy, this notion of the self was “essentially social, and thus as derived from relationships with others.”\(^6\) One of the implications of such a model of selfhood is that the subject is considered to be impressionable by nature. Grieveson notes how the mimetic paradigm “conceived of selfhood as fundamentally experiential and as ‘suggestible’ and thus malleable or plastic.”\(^7\) This mimetic model of subjectivity provided the intellectual context for the moral panic that erupted over the cinema once it had acquired mass appeal.

To be sure, cinema was not the only mass medium to be accused of having an undue and likely pernicious influence over the impressionable mass-man. Similar

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\(^5\) This notion of mimesis, as Grieveson, following the literature of the time, uses it, refers to a narrowly psychological phenomenon, and is therefore wholly distinct from the aesthetic understanding of the term.

\(^6\) Grieveson, “Cinema Studies,” 5.

\(^7\) Ibid.
allegations arose around both print and radio. But the panic around cinema was unique in many respects. Although the problem generally consisted in the unsanctioned influence of mass communication over the impressionable masses, cinema was thought to pose a particular challenge in this regard. Its supposed powers of persuasion and manipulation were often singled out for their unrivalled potency, a consequence, many believed, of properties that distinguished it from other media. Chief among these is its visual nature. Grieveson describes an intellectual and scholarly discourse that attributed a kind of hypnotic power to images that other means of mass communication were incapable of mustering and to whose influence the masses were particularly susceptible. So although the mimetic effect was operative in all mass media, it was thought by many to be especially pronounced in cinema. Given the stakes, projects were launched with the explicit aim of constructing a comprehensive theory of film. As Grieveson notes:

The pressing need to study cinema, as many had argued, was a consequence of the problems it presented of mimesis and, in turn, to the governance of undisciplined subjects...To innovate the study of cinema thus was a critical task for maintaining social control.

One of the earliest such project was also one of its most apposite. In her 1909 study *The Spirit of Youth and the City*, social reformer Jane Addams identifies several cases of youth delinquency whose direct cause was, she claims, traceable to the

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9 For example, he describes how social psychologist Gabriel Tarde, working from the social model of subjectivity described above, went so far as to suggest that “imitation functioned through images,” and even conceptualized the process as “inter-psychical photography,” drawing an analogy between the impressionable mind and the imprinting of images on film through the photographic process. Qtd. in Grieveson, “Cinema Studies,” 8.

deleterious influence of cinema. Although she cites the disturbing content of films—in particular, the glorification of violent or otherwise indecent behaviour—as culpable, her concern has more to do with a specifically cinematic effect: the way the vulnerable spectator feels compelled to replicate in their own conduct the behaviour and activities depicted in the images. Further research led her to conclude that the danger lay not in the images per se, but in the particular way in which they were delivered to the social subject by the medium in question. For Addams, cinema seemed to induce a powerful imitative response in the spectator that was both spontaneous and difficult to resist. As a result, she argued, we should think of cinema as a “mimetic stage.”

Addams’ study constitutes perhaps the first instance of the practice of theorizing film explicitly in the context of its politics. An avalanche of similar research projects followed in her study’s wake. This effort culminated in the Payne Fund Studies, the most concerted and systemically organized project of its kind. The Payne Fund Studies, which brought social reformers, academic researchers, and government agencies together within one institutional framework, was convened for the express purpose of providing empirical evidence of cinema’s mimetic influence, evidence persuasive enough to justify, as Grieveson puts it, “more stringent forms of legalized social control over the film industry.” The Payne Fund Studies corroborate Addams’s findings that cinema constitutes an imitation-inducing machine so potent that its rising popularity among the masses was cause for concern.12

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11 Qtd. in Grieveson, “Cinema Studies,” 11.
12 Another well-known example among film scholars is the case of Hugo Münsterberg, who argued that the cinema’s psychological effect on the spectator is so overpowering that it “cannot remain without social consequences.” Qtd. in Grieveson, “Cinema Studies,” 4. As the director of Harvard’s prestigious
Faced with mounting evidence that cinema had the power to impose its own perhaps socially corrosive values on unsuspecting and vulnerable viewers, programs whose objective was to regulate the mass-man’s exposure to the medium became widespread. These were many and varied, but usually took the form of either restricting access or shaping the content of individual films. Local and regional censorship boards, which had the power to ban films that were judged to run afoul of prevailing social norms, were common, and, most famously, the American film industry formally adopted a set of strict moral guidelines known as the Motion Picture Production Code. This set of guidelines, which serves as the precursor of today’s rating system, applied to all studio films from the early 1930s to the late 1960s.¹³

Soon after its invention, then, it became clear to those with a vested interest in preserving the status quo against the incursion of mass culture that there was an urgent need to arrive at what we today would call a theory of film. As the case of Ortega y Gasset illustrates, at stake was the very project of civilization, a project to which the rise of mass culture was felt to pose an existential threat. As an object of mass appeal with unrivaled mimetic properties, cinema embodied this crisis. As such, controlling the masses meant controlling cinema, and controlling cinema required a coherent theory concerning its essential nature and psycho-social effects. In order to erect such a theory, the forces of governmentality were brought to bear on the medium. Drawing on an

intellectual tradition that conceived the subjective self as an essentially social product, and substantiated in study after study, a fully formed film-theoretical discourse emerged in which cinema was identified as a mimetic stage capable of rewriting the moral code of the susceptible mass-man, and potentially directing him or her towards delinquent kinds of behaviour. As a result of this theory of film, measures were adopted to regulate the cinematic experience, chiefly in the form of censorship of one kind or another.

What is important to note about this film-theoretical discourse is that it treated film not merely as one particular case within a more general theory of mass media. Although other mass media forms endured similar scrutiny regarding their mimetic capabilities, the theory of film and of its politics summed up in the term “mimetic stage” was tailored especially for understanding film and the properties and effects unique to it. In other words, this was not a theory of media and its political implications, but rather a dedicated film theory, one devoted to disclosing the politics specific to film.

**Marxism and Film Theory**

The mimetic theory of film, which emerges out of a conservative perspective, discovers its progressive or revolutionary counterpart in a series of discourses on the politics of film for which Marx serves as the conceptual touchstone. Marxism, as an economic, social, and cultural theory, would be repeatedly pressed into service to help secure a theory of film inimical to conservative political agendas, or sometimes to disclose film’s unfortunate complicity with them. This is not to say that theories concerning the politics of film on both the left and right did not share some basic assumptions regarding the medium and its properties; for example, the idea that film
promotes imitative behaviour found proponents on both sides of the political divide.\textsuperscript{14}

But despite such overlaps, partisan principles and values generally precluded any collaboration or intellectual traffic to take place between conservative and progressive film-theoretical projects.

As we’ve seen, conservatives developed a theory of film on the basis of a specific political imperative: control over the masses in the interest of preserving the prevailing social order (or, in the extreme case of Fascism, of revitalizing an ancient and supposedly more vital order). But where conservatives sought to preserve, Marxists sought to reorganize. Embracing the concept of the dialectic and emphasizing the determining power of the economic base in matters of the superstructure, Marxist cultural critics found in Marx’s theories both a powerful diagnostic tool and a means for facilitating or expediting the overthrow of the class system. For many, cinema was crucial to this project. By turns conspicuous symptom of capitalism’s degradations and redemptive agent or harbinger of socio-economic revolution, cinema was for a long time a fixture in Marxist cultural discourse. In seeking to determine the politics of film, Marxist debates on the subject were often led to consider in greater depth the nature of the medium and the psycho-social effects specific to it. They were led, in other words, to develop a theory of film.

\textbf{Eisenstein: The Dialectic as Cinematic}

Building a completely new form of cinematography—the realization of revolution in the general history of culture; building a synthesis of science, art, and class militancy.\textsuperscript{15}

\textsuperscript{14} As we’ll see, this is especially true of Frankfurt School considerations of cinema.

The first in what would become a series of Marxist-inspired film theories was developed by Sergei Eisenstein, a theorist and filmmaker who actually lived through the profound socio-economic transformation from capitalism to communism, or at least some version of it, that Marx foresaw. Much like his cinema, Eisenstein’s body of film writing cannot be separated from complex cultural and historical legacy of the Russian Revolution and its aftermath. Although eventually subject to aesthetic censure and political terror, Eisenstein was nonetheless intensely alive to the new possibilities for art and culture occasioned by the Revolution. In particular, it encouraged him, as it did so many others, to use the thought of Marx and the dialectical method he developed to guide an inquiry into the nature of the bonds that connect modes of production with cultural expression. But Eisenstein was unique among such thinkers in insisting that the path to a materialist theory of art and culture goes through a very specific and privileged object: cinema. If for Eisenstein the dialectic was the principle that governed the movement of history and organized our social relations, then cinema was its most profound cultural expression. At his most optimistic and utopian, Eisenstein would proclaim that cinema had the power to achieve “the realization of the revolution in the general history of culture” and that the medium’s ultimate vocation is to secure a “synthesis of science, art, and class militancy.” In this respect, the politics of film for Eisenstein was rooted in what he saw as a certain formal correspondence between the cinematic and the dialectic, a correspondence on which his theory of film is ultimately predicated.

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To grasp the intricacies of his film theory, it is first necessary to clarify Eisenstein’s somewhat eccentric conception of the dialectic. In its most usual sense, the dialectic refers to a process wherein two opposing or contradictory forces resolve their opposition in a moment of synthesis. In the concept of dialectical materialism, Marxist theory applies this principle in modelling the historical process and the dynamics of the class struggle. The contradictions that beset any mode of production that produces a class system resolve themselves dialectically through the formation of new forces and relations of production until a classless society, free of contradiction, is achieved. To be sure, Eisenstein’s thought is sometimes guilty of lapsing into the orthodox or “vulgar” variant of this theory, which limits the effects of the dialectic to the economic base and views the sphere of art and culture as the direct expression of material conditions. From this perspective, cinema is political to the extent that it is at the mercy of, and in conformity with, the logic of a class system determined in advance by economic forces, and whose contradictions cinema serves to express directly. But while he never wavered from his belief that the antinomies of a stratified society will always be reflected in its art and culture, Eisenstein would prove capable of thinking the dialectic as something much more profoundly complex, involving not just the forces and relations of production, but nature, mind, and aesthetics.

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17 Thus, he will say that the filmmaker’s aesthetic and formal strategy “is inevitably determined, consciously or unconsciously, by [his] social premises” and that his “class-determined tendency is the basis of what seems to be an arbitrary cinematographic relation to the object placed, or found, before the camera.” See Eisenstein, Film Form, 4.
In his more complex conceptualization, Eisenstein begins with the premise that the dialectic is a natural law with near universal applicability. As a characteristic of nature itself, its logic is organic rather than mechanical: by virtue of its power to synthesize a higher unity from the confrontation of opposing forces, its task is to sustain the organic character of the whole in the face of the constant threat of disintegration posed by discord and conflict. Indeed, the whole as an organic unit—what he will sometimes refer to as “Being”—is itself identical with this relentless process of confrontation and accommodation. From this perspective, the dialectic explains why the whole persists despite the almost constant presence of contradictions that would otherwise nullify it. In more narrowly Marxist terms, the dialectic is that which seeks to harmonize man with his material needs, managing discord and conflict until a classless society is achieved and the organic whole is made manifest in the form of a communist state. But Eisenstein, who was open about his debt to Hegel, will argue that above and beyond the material dialectic lay the immaterial dialectic of mind, intellect, and consciousness. To qualify the dialectic as a force of nature is to attribute its logic to any natural phenomena whose operations are dynamic and which display the tell-tale signs of opposition overcome. According to Eisenstein, such is the case with human thought.

Eisenstein is careful to distinguish between two modes of thought. On the one hand, there is a passive mode that he identifies with bourgeois culture, and to which he attributes the qualities of immobility and sterility—a kind of unthinking. On the other,

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18 His most extensive treatment of the dialectic can be found in the essay “A Dialectic Approach to Film Form” in *Film Form*, 45-63.
19 Like the organic whole, Being is in a state of “constant evolution” resulting from “the interaction of two contradictory opposites.” See, Eisenstein, *Film Form*, 45
there is the dialectical mode of thought that yields a thinking process that is dynamic and creative, and thus commensurate with revolutionary consciousness. Eisenstein will eventually make a further distinction between uttered speech, which is logical and informative, and inner speech, which is pre-linguistic and inchoate. This distinction is significant insofar as Eisenstein believes that dialectical thinking is fundamentally imagistic and non-verbal in nature. It is primarily by way of inner speech, and its capacity for entertaining and synthesizing incongruous images—as we’ll see, an instance of montage—that the mind can achieve the condition of the dialectic. In Eisenstein’s theory, image is a general term that may refer to any non-verbal aspect of thought, such as perceptions, sensations, emotions, and abstract ideas. The dialectical interaction of these imagistic forms is effectively identical with inner speech.

To be sure, Eisenstein felt that outer speech can support and express dialectical thinking, but only when it is arranged in a manner that provokes the dialectical process in inner speech, which alone can accommodate the co-presence of conflicting images and allow for their synthesis in the unity of thought. In any case, the advantage of the mind that obeys the dialectical principle is that it is attuned to the dynamic processes characteristic of the organic whole. It results, as Eisenstein will say, in a “dynamic comprehension of things,” or in the apprehension of things in all their dynamic mobility, evolution, and interrelations. The result is revolutionary consciousness, a mode of thought that is commensurate with the workings of the whole, and that, as such, prevails

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20 This is especially the case with “attractons,” which bypass outer speech and appeal directly to the sphere of inner speech. To arrange attractions according to the principles of montage is to induce inner speech to perform dialectically.
21 Ibid., 46.
at the stage of socio-economic development in which dialectical materialism has culminated in the classless society.

It is important to bear in mind that Eisenstein develops these ideas in the context of his wider project on art and aesthetics. For Eisenstein, art is vital to the dialectical harmony between nature, history, and mind that constitutes the organic status of the whole. But its value and purpose depend on the socio-economic context in which it finds itself. The socialist work of art serves to reflect this harmony and, in its own way, to sustain it. By contrast, the work of art characteristic of bourgeois culture can only disclose that the struggle to achieve such harmony is ongoing—although Eisenstein does not rule out the possibility that it might, thereby, play an insurgent role or otherwise prepare the ground for the eventual triumph of socialism. In either case, art is the indispensable medium through which nature, history, and mind communicate and interact dialectically with one another. As an instrument of creation and invention, art brings nature and history into contact. As a bearer of sensuous forms, art provides the means for the mind to experience the dialectical rhythms of existence and to picture the organic dynamism of the whole. But Eisenstein will stipulate that for art to fulfill its task it must permit the interactions it mediates to take a very specific form: conflict.

Eisenstein ascribes to art a particular “social mission.” This mission is to “make manifest the contradictions of Being,” not only in the sense of disclosing to the mind the dynamic nature of the organic whole, but also in the sense of inducing the kind of thinking in the mind commensurate with this dynamism: dialectical thinking.22 To

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22 Ibid.
accomplish its mission, art itself must assume the form of the dialectic. In practice, this means that the various elements art brings together in the work are arranged so as to enter into conflict and collide with one another, for only such collisions can, as he puts it, project “the dialectical system of things into the brain.”23 When taking the form of art, the dialectic is able to “[stir] up contradictions within the spectator’s mind, and to forge accurate intellectual concepts from the dynamic clash of opposing passions.”24 Such a condition is, of course, identical with revolutionary consciousness. It is for this reason that Eisenstein believes art ought to be evaluated according to the degree of conflict it engenders between its constituent parts. For art to harmonize with the natural state of Being and the dynamic unfolding of the organic whole—that is, to fulfill its social mission—it must be organized with a view toward maximizing collisions between the contradictory elements it brings into contact.25 For Eisenstein, the method or poetic principle proper to dialectical art—the art of conflict and collision—can be summed up in a specific concept: montage.

As a general aesthetic term, montage refers to any process of construction, assemblage, or installation. For Eisenstein, however, “montage is conflict.”26 In applying the concept of montage to the specific case of dialectical art, Eisenstein makes it take on a political meaning. Although it retains the mechanical connotation of assembly, montage in Eisenstein’s lexicon also refers to the practice of exploiting the power of juxtaposition

23 Ibid., 45.
24 Ibid., 46.
25 This is the basis for Eisenstein’s antipathy towards the realist aesthetic. For Eisenstein, realism is fundamentally illusory because it masks the dynamic nature of the organic whole. It prefers the sterile (and ultimately false) image of a universe untroubled by conflict and dialectical movement. Only a dialectical aesthetic reflects reality as it actually exists: dynamic and antagonistic.
26 Ibid., 38.
inherent in this process for the express purpose of bringing opposing elements into collision. In obeying the montage principle, the dialectical work of art declines to synthesize its constituent parts—instead of completing itself in an act of coherence, it remains riven with conflict and discord. Thus, the moment of synthesis does not transpire in the work itself, but rather in the mind that apprehends it. Using the example of painting, Eisenstein describes the montage effect as follows:

The eye follows the direction of an element in the painting. It retains a visual impression, which then collides with the impression derived from following the direction of a second element. The conflict of these directions forms the dynamic effect in apprehending the whole.27

Dialectical art, via montage, yields dialectical thinking. Eisenstein insists that all art is, to some degree, formally organized on the principle of montage since its very vocation is to bring nature and history into a dialectical relation.28 To be sure, art might be constructed in such a way as to appear internally coherent and self-sufficient—the crude, and bourgeois, aesthetic of realism. But this is only the result of a deliberate effort to sabotage or neutralize the montage effect and, as such, constitutes a betrayal of art’s vocation.

For Eisenstein, then, art constitutes the medium through which revolutionary consciousness links up with the dialectic of Being. More so than its capacity to reflect on and give expression to political themes, Eisenstein concludes that this is the source of art’s politics. On this view, montage is the formal mechanism by which art fulfills its

27 Ibid., 50.
28 As Eisenstein will say: “In the realm of art this dialectic principle of dynamics is embodied in CONFLICT as the fundamental principle for the existence of every artwork and every art-form.” See Eisenstein, Film Form, 46. Dudley Andrew provides the following gloss on the subject: “Montage...is formally isomorphic to the organic structure of nature and of history.” See J. Dudley Andrew, The Major Film Theories: An Introduction, 1 edition (London ; New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 67.
political function. All the arts aspire to the condition of montage, and Eisenstein will often draw examples from poetry and music, in addition to painting, for illustrative purposes. But cinema, he argues, is a special case. Its uniqueness with respect to the other arts rests with the degree to which it is able to extend and intensify the power of montage. As he says, in cinema “the mutual work of frame [as montage element or cell] and montage is really an enlargement in scale of a process microscopically inherent in all the arts,” and that, moreover, “this process is raised to such a degree [in cinema] that it seems to acquire a new quality.”

Eisenstein’s aesthetic theory concerning montage mutates into a theory that is more exclusively about cinema. Indeed, Eisenstein will effectively identify montage with cinema, as if to speak of one is always and inevitably to refer to the other. In an oft-quoted passage, Eisenstein remarks that “[to] determine the nature of montage is to solve the specific problem of cinema”—a statement that can be read in both directions.

Film does not merely aspire to the condition of montage, as do the other arts. It is already and inherently montage. The two tasks of the theoretician are thereby collapsed into one since a theory of film suffices as a theory of montage.

Eisenstein defends his thesis that cinema is tantamount to montage in at least two specific ways. There is, first of all, the way in which cinema manages to unify into a single mode of expression the otherwise disparate and distinguishing features of each of the other arts. For example, cinema adds movement and a temporal element to the immobile figures of painting and sculpture. It also adds a spatial and graphic element to

29 Eisenstein, *Film Form*, 5.
30 Ibid., 48.
the strictly temporal or lyric art of music. And it adds tangible density and materiality to
the feeble and insubstantial images mustered by the written word. In other words, cinema
embodies the montage principle because, like montage, it is directly expressive of the
dialectic.31 As a synthesis of all the arts, cinema constitutes, aesthetically, a dialectical
leap. This is what Eisenstein means when he says that cinema “constitutes the highest
stage of embodiment for the potentialities and aspirations of each of the arts.”32 Whereas
the other arts merely serve as a platform for the conflict and collision of montage, cinema
is itself constituted by conflict and collision—the very essence of montage.

A second argument has to do with cinema’s aesthetic implications with respect to
the relationship between inner and uttered speech. For Eisenstein, art is expressed
intellectually in the form of uttered speech. However, every work originates as, or is
composed from, indistinct affects in inner speech, or what he calls “sensual thinking.”33
Art in the most general sense is realized in the traffic between the two; that is, when the
“sensual chaos” of inner speech is formulated into a recognizable theme or intellectual
idea and concretely expressed as uttered speech. Dialectical art is no different, except that
it manages to strike a certain synthetic balance between the two domains. According to
Eisenstein, in order to achieve harmony between thought and the dialectical state of
Being it is necessary for uttered speech to retain something of the affective qualities of
inner speech, for while the former serves as the medium for concepts, the latter is the
motor of dynamic movement and exchange—the characteristic qualities of the dialectic.

31 His most extensive treatment of this subject come in the essay “Achievement” in Film Form, 179-194.
32 Ibid., 181.
33 Ibid., 130.
Err too much on one side or the other and the work fails to bring thought and Being into dialectical alignment. Art must express an idea, but the trick is do so without nullifying the dialectical power of the sensual affects from which it is composed.

This is relevant to the present discussion in that, for Eisenstein, the medium of film has a uniquely intuitive connection with inner speech. Unlike uttered speech, which is verbal, logical, and linear, inner speech is imagistic, sensual, and in constant motion. As a medium of moving images, of course, film effectively shares these attributes. But it would be overly reductive to conclude on this basis that an essentially visual constitution is the key link between the two. Instead, Eisenstein wants us to focus on the way in which both film and inner speech adhere to a similar syntax, or way of organizing expressive elements. It is not merely that both are in the business of circulating images, although this is vital to their dialectical complicity. The more relevant issue for Eisenstein is that both film and inner speech have the power to invent wholly synthetic images out of the collision of more elementary ones. In other words, the syntax common to both film and inner speech obeys the montage principle.

It is in considering the features of this syntax that Eisenstein’s theory of montage is at its most lucid. As Eisenstein will repeatedly insist, montage in both its cinematic and cognitive guises does not refer to a method of assembly in which a meaningful whole is

34 This is how he puts the matter: “By allowing one or the other element to predominate the art-work remains unfulfilled. A drive towards the thematic-logical side renders the work dry, logical, didactic. But overstress on the side of the sensual forms of thinking with insufficient account taken of thematic-logical tendency-this is equally fatal for the work: the work becomes condemned to sensual chaos, elementalness, raving.” See Eisenstein, Film Form, 145.

35 Consider the following two statements in juxtaposition: 1) “Cinematography is, first and foremost, montage” (Film Form, 29); and 2) “…the montage form, as structure, is a reconstruction of the laws of the thought process.” (Film Form, 106).
erected from the compilation of discrete pieces, as in bricklaying. Rather, in its full dialectical sense montage refers to a generative process in which the collision of conflicting elements results in a “third something,” a unit of meaning that is not independently present in any of the constituent parts but emerges only as a product of their juxtaposition. What’s more, the process is self-replicating in that the unit of meaning that is thereby synthesized—the third something—itself enters into a subsequent act of montage as one of its constituent terms, the result of which is yet another synthesis, which then fuels further acts of montage—and so on. Eisenstein seizes on the fact that both film and inner speech are capable of such complex syntactical transactions. The crucial difference, however, is that cinema is also an art. It is like inner speech in that it naturally assumes the syntax of montage, but it has the vital distinction of also qualifying as an art with art’s capacity to express a theme or idea in the form of uttered speech.

Eisenstein argues that it is a mistake to identify cinematic montage with either the perceptual illusion of persistence of vision or the purely mechanical activity of editing. The complex montage effect that so fascinates Eisenstein about cinema—and that, for him, defines its politics—is dialectical in structure, rather than linear, chronological, or sequential. In dialectical cinema, the pattern of collision and synthesis is fulfilled at every level of the film and transpires over the course of its full running time. It begins within the frame, where opposing elements collide in the tension of the shot. Such conflict and

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36 On this point, he is rather emphatic: “The earliest conscious film-makers, and our first film theoreticians, regarded montage as a means of description by placing single shots one after the other like building blocks. The movement within these building-block shots, and the consequent length of the component pieces, was then considered as rhythm. A completely false concept!” See Eisenstein, Film Form, 48.

discord persist at a higher level, between individual shots, whose mutual opposition and resulting syntheses serves as the basis for the organization of scenes and sequences, which also enter into collision and conflict with one another. Form and content, picture and sound, image and text—these, too, are organized according to the syntax of montage. Thus, every montage transaction in a film fuels ever-more complex dialectical relationships.38

One would assume that the process culminates finally in one grand synthesis—the completed film. And, to be sure, Eisenstein’s language sometimes points in this direction. But at other times Eisenstein seems to suggest that cinema has the remarkable capacity—absent in the other arts—to transcend dialectical closure. According to Eisenstein, because cinema replicates the syntax of inner speech while also having the expressive powers proper to art at its disposal, it can perform a synthesis of inner and uttered speech. In this astonishing dialectical feat, cinema unites sensual but chaotically arranged affects, on the one hand, and logical but sterile units of expression, on the other. On those occasions when it has managed to execute this synthesis, he claims, cinema has rendered itself “an affective embodiment for ideas.”39 Thus, even from the perspective of its completed state, the dialectical film never surrenders its montage effect, since that effect is retained dialectically in the synthesis it performs of inner and uttered speech. More than anything else, it is this capacity that defines the politics of film for Eisenstein. Film is political, says Eisenstein, because it can externalize as theme or idea the montage

38 For a full account of this process, see his essay “Methods of Montage,” in Film Form, 72-83.
39 Ibid., 147.
principle that regulates inner speech, and thereby bring thought and Being into dialectical alignment.

Eisenstein gives the concrete expression of the politics of film, conceived as such, the following name: intellectual cinema. By this, Eisenstein is not suggesting that cinema’s destiny lies with its use as an instrument of propaganda, one that forcibly implants ideas into the mind of the pliant spectator, or that shapes consciousness in the image of a specific ideology.\textsuperscript{40} Such a reading does not do justice to the complexity of his film theory or his philosophical thought more generally. To be sure, Eisenstein was seeking to realize “a kind of filmic reasoning” in which cinema, via its synthesis of affect and logic, becomes the means whereby the artist can “encourage and direct the whole thought process” of the spectator.\textsuperscript{41} And, of course, he was fully aware of how this power might be mobilized to achieve ideological ends. Mere propaganda, however, does not amount to intellectual cinema, and in fact might constitute a debasement of the montage effect specific to film. Rather, what the concept of intellectual cinema captures for Eisenstein is the way in which films that are organized dialectically can sustain in (and as) uttered speech a measure of the sensual immediacy that characterizes inner speech. As he clarifies in the following passage, the “purely intellectual film” will be “freed from traditional limitations, achieving direct forms for ideas, systems, and concepts, without any need for transitions and paraphrases.”\textsuperscript{42} Intellectual cinema does not traffic in propaganda or impose an ideological vision on the spectator. This is not the politics

\textsuperscript{40} This is a running theme of David Bordwell's analysis of Eisenstein's cinema. See his \textit{The Cinema of Eisenstein}, (New York, NY: Routledge, 2005).
\textsuperscript{41} Eisenstein, \textit{Film Form}, 62.
\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., 63.
proper to film, according to Eisenstein. Quite the contrary. Rather than dissimulate, he
argues, it discloses. In reconciling inner and uttered speech by means of montage,
intellectual cinema liberates dialectical thought from the confines of the mind. In so
doing, it fulfills once and for all the social mission of all art: to put revolutionary
consciousness into contact with the organic whole. No longer sterilized by non-dialectical
modes of expression, dialectical thinking takes on an external form and, in the most
political of acts, enters into harmony with the dialectical agitations of Being itself.

**Benjamin: The Politics of Film, Art, and Aura**

[For] the first time—and this is the effect of film—the
human being is placed in a position where he must operate
with his whole living person, while forgoing its aura.\(^{43}\)

[The] expropriation of film capital is an urgent demand for
the proletariat.\(^{44}\)

Another significant entry in the history of theorizing the politics of film from a
Marxist perspective is Walter Benjamin’s essay on art, aura, and technological
reproducibility.\(^{45}\) Like Eisenstein, Benjamin was seeking to advance a materialist theory
of art and aesthetics. And, again like Eisenstein, film was identified as the key to
unlocking this theory. Despite such kinship, however, the stakes for each were markedly

\(^{43}\) Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility: Second Version,” in
*Selected Writings Vol. 3*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, trans. Edmund Jephcott and Harry Zohn (Cambridge,

\(^{44}\) Ibid., 115.

\(^{45}\) Three versions of this essay are extant. I restrict my analysis to the second, since this is the one that
Benjamin himself considered the most authoritative. The intrepid reader is invited to consult the alternate
Its Technological Reproducibility: Third Version,” in *Selected Writings Vol. 4*, ed. Michael W. Jennings,
trans. Harry Zohn and Edmund Jephcott (Cambridge, Mass. [u.a.]: Belknap Press of Harvard Univ. Press,
2003), 251–83.
different, resulting in dramatically diverging accounts. Although the eventual triumph of Stalinism forced Eisenstein to reign in some of his more radical tendencies, the utopian possibilities announced by the Russian Revolution never ceased to inform his critical and theoretical work. Benjamin, by contrast, composed his famous essay in an uncertain and dangerous political climate that harboured no utopian fantasies. So, whereas Eisenstein saw in film the pinnacle of dialectical art and aesthetics, Benjamin saw a potential weapon against the cultural forces that sustained fascist ideology. This is the broadest context in which to understand his theory of film. To be sure, Benjamin did not set out to advance such a theory in his “Work of Art” essay. As is well known, his stated concern is with aura as a reactionary aesthetic and its potential decline in the face of technologies of reproduction. But in film he discovers the most significant player in this aesthetic and political drama such that he is led to advance a theory of its very nature, function, and value.

Benjamin’s film theory emerges naturally out of his broader theory on the politics of art and aesthetics. For Benjamin, the history of aesthetics can be organized into two distinct phases. In the initial phase, prior to technological reproducibility, art and other objects of aesthetic appreciation enjoy a unique existence in time and space. By dint of their status as unique, such objects eventually bear the distinct marks of history—over time, they accumulate a chronology of changes to their individual circumstances; for example, modifications to their physical structure or their circulation as property. But the very fact that the object retains its individuated identity through time and space invests it with an authoritative presence that Benjamin calls its authenticity. In Benjamin’s words,
“The authenticity of a thing is the quintessence of all that is transmissible in it from its origin on, ranging from its physical duration to the historical testimony relating to it.”

Benjamin will further argue that such transmissibility depends, in turn, on the object’s association with a given tradition, since tradition is the context within which the object’s authenticity becomes legible. He makes this clear in the following passage:

The here and now of the original underlies the concept of its authenticity, and on the latter in turn is founded the idea of a tradition which has passed the object down as the same, identical thing to the present day.

Benjamin’s reflections on authenticity and tradition with respect to the unique work of art are summed up in his concept of aura. His choice of term reveals a subtle rhetorical strategy. On the one hand, he wishes to validate the aesthetic experience aroused by the encounter with an object’s authenticity, irrespective of (or even especially) the mystical quality that characterizes such an experience. For example, in one of many such passages he states that the encounter with aura consists quite legitimately in “the unique apparition of a distance, however near it may be.”

On the other hand, the Marxist Benjamin wants to disarm the term of its occult value and re-situate it in the context of a materialist theory of art. In such a context, the auratic experience becomes amenable to historicization, which serves to illuminate both its social function and its status as a site of political struggle. This is the basis for his claim that the politics of auratic art is located in tradition.

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47 Ibid.
48 Ibid., 104-5.
Significantly for Benjamin, this tradition was initially and indelibly expressed as cult, which forbid it from assuming anything other than a ritual function. Benjamin discovers in the protocols of ritual, then, the source of an artwork’s aura. Put otherwise, it is its inclusion in rituals that invests a work of art with aura and that accounts for the discrepancy between historical distance and spatial proximity that marks one’s mystical encounter with it. Moreover, aura persists as long as ritual provides the context for its reception, even as it is transposed from one tradition to another. As he says, “the artwork’s aурatic mode of existence is never entirely severed from its ritual function,” or, more strongly, “the unique value of the ‘authentic’ work of art always has its basis in ritual.” Benjamin’s thought here betrays the reactionary value he attributes to aura, for fascism is predicated precisely on a cult appeal that is solicited via a dedication to ritual and tradition. Under a fascist regime, he explains, aura penetrates all aspects of social life. Politics itself succumbs to a hyper aestheticization whereby it is evacuated of all content and reduced to nothing more than a ritualized activity, the unthinking glorification of which leads inevitably to war and destruction.

But the history of aesthetics, Benjamin insists, does not end with the triumph of aura. The introduction of technologies of reproduction—and film, above all—challenges its current and future hegemony. The reason turns out to be quite simple: “there is no facsimile of the aura.” In other words, whereas the work of art as an object of perception and contemplation can be reproduced, its aura cannot. Recall that, for Benjamin, aura is not an illusion that can be dispelled by, say, purifying one’s gaze or by

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49 Ibid., 105. Italics in original.
50 Ibid., 112.
receiving training in materialist aesthetics. It is a real and legitimate quality of the unique work of art. Thus, to neutralize aura it is necessary to disable the very source of its beguiling power: the authenticity of the artwork. Benjamin argues that technologies of reproduction accomplish this feat naturally. Under the condition of technological reproducibility, the work no longer exists solely at a particular time and place. Its many copies circulate freely and in varied contexts. The authoritative presence that constitutes its authenticity is thereby hopelessly diluted, with the result that the auratic effect “decays” or becomes irretrievably attenuated.

The dismantling of aura by technologies of reproduction has profound implications for politics. For Benjamin, of course, the politics of aura is a kind of anti-politics insofar as the auratic work is evacuated of any political content as a result of its surrender to the protocols of ritual. This is why fascism consolidates around aura. According to Benjamin, the success of fascism depends in part on substituting ritual for politics, and ritual is sustained primarily in and by the auratic work. Technological reproducibility intervenes on behalf of politics—and against ritual—by foreclosing the possibility of authenticity. Deprived of its authenticity, the work cannot muster the aura on which ritual depends. One can put the matter in the following terms: technologies of reproduction precipitate the decay of aura such that art assumes not a ritual but a political function. As Benjamin explains, “as soon as the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applied to artistic production, the whole social function of art is revolutionized. Instead of being founded on ritual, it is based on a different practice: politics.”

51 Ibid., 106. Italics in original.
his essay by reiterating this point in an oft-cited passage. But here, the political stakes of aura and of aesthetics are put in even starker terms: “[Humankind’s] self-alienation has reached the point where it can experience its own annihilation as a supreme aesthetic pleasure. Such is the aestheticizing of politics, as practiced by fascism. Communism replies by politicizing art.”52 The struggle between fascism and communism, in this sense, is fought primarily on the terrain of aesthetics, and ultimately constitutes a battle over aura.

Technologies of reproduction are therefore political in that they bring about the decline of auratic presence, and thereby inhibit the lapse into pure ritual. According to Benjamin, the importance of film is that it radicalizes this effect. For Benjamin, film has an aesthetic profile that is inherently inimical to auratic presence. As a result of its technological basis in photographic processes, film, like photography, produces nothing but copies. In contrast to traditional works of art, each copy of a film or photograph exists without reference to an original. Indeed, photographic processes in general confound the very logic that relates original to copy. As Benjamin explains,

[F]or the first time in world history, technological reproducibility emancipates the work of art from its parasitic subservience to ritual. To an ever-increasing degree, the work reproduced becomes the reproduction of a work designed for reproducibility. From a photographic plate, for example, one can make any number of prints; to ask for the ‘authentic’ print makes no sense.53

As a result, says Benjamin, it is a mistake to identify film as an art since there has always been a tendency to assign the latter a cult value. This tendency culminates in the project

52 Ibid., 122.
53 Ibid., 106.
of “l’art pour l’art,” whose express mission is to purify art of all supposedly external concerns, such as its potential social function.\(^{54}\) As such, the art for art’s sake movement serves to illustrate perfectly the aestheticization of politics undertaken by fascism whereby politics is effectively reduced to empty ritual. But such a reactionary program is impeded, says Benjamin, in the context of technological reproducibility. Under the conditions of technological reproduction, works of art cease to be identified solely by their artistic function. They become, instead, a “construct” in which their social value is emphasized at the expense of their more narrow aesthetic value.\(^{55}\)

In a real sense, art becomes revolutionized. And as Benjamin will repeatedly insist, “This much is certain: today, film is the most serviceable vehicle of this new understanding [of art].”\(^{56}\) Film, then, is not only unique among the arts, it alters the very condition of art, including its political status. As the paragon of technological reproducibility, film subverts the traditional paradigm of art according to which the unique work achieves a cult status by virtue of its authenticity, and on the basis of which it lends substance to ritual and tradition. Film not only resists this fate, it actively seeks to annul its possibility: “The social significance of film...is inconceivable without its destructive, cathartic side: the liquidation of the value of tradition in the cultural heritage.”\(^{57}\) For Benjamin, because film is capable of this “radical renunciation of eternal value,”\(^{58}\) it promises to thwart the designs of fascism.

\(^{54}\) Ibid.
\(^{55}\) Ibid.
\(^{56}\) Ibid., 107.
\(^{57}\) Ibid., 104.
\(^{58}\) Ibid., 109.
In pointing to the way in which it nullifies uniqueness and repudiates authenticity, tradition, and ritual, Benjamin argues that technologies of reproduction are naturally aligned with class consciousness and the revolutionary politics he feels is proper to the masses.\textsuperscript{59} This is particularly the case, he says, with respect to film and photography, which speak more naturally to a mass existence than to an individual one. Objects that are filmed (or photographed) lose whatever cult appeal they may solicit. We begin to perceive their latent anonymity and, by extension, the natural parity that relates all objects. In Benjamin’s words,

\begin{quote}
The stripping of the veil from the object, the destruction of the aura, is the signature of a perception whose ‘sense for all that is the same in the world’ so increased that, by means of reproduction, it extracts sameness even from what is unique.\textsuperscript{60}
\end{quote}

This quality of sameness that film liberates is also the quality that constitutes the masses as a social and political class. In the reproduced object, the masses see their own reflection. They, like the object, are the instrument of aura’s decay and the consequent weakening of tradition as a political weapon. This is why film belongs more to the masses than to any other class. Anonymity is a revolutionary value, and it is a quality made manifest in and by the film image, by its capacity to lay bare the “sameness” that auratic presence otherwise occludes.

These arguments converge in a discussion about film acting and the filmed subject. In this discussion, Benjamin suggests that what happens to a human being when

\textsuperscript{59} He notes, for example, that socialism and photography were both birthed around the same time, implying that the conditions that gave rise to one gave rise to the other.

\textsuperscript{60} Ibid., 105.
recorded by the film camera is the same thing that happens to a generic object or work of art: its aura evaporates. By virtue of being filmed, the human being/actor becomes a technologically reproduced—and reproducible—copy. As such, he or she is no longer governed by the rules of time and space that constrain the circulation and reception of the original and that secure the authenticity on which aura depends. In pursuit of this point, Benjamin will again dwell on the decisive role played by technology in neutralizing aura, emphasizing how the apparatus of recording intervenes between actor and audience on behalf of reproducibility and against auratic presence:

[For] the first time—and this is the effect of film—the human being is placed in a position where he must operate with his whole living person, while forgoing its aura. For the aura is bound to his presence in the here and now...What distinguishes the shot in the film studio...is that the camera is substituted for the audience. As a result, the aura surrounding the actor is dispelled—and, with it, the aura of the figure he portrays.61

Here, the link between the filmed subject and the constitution of the masses is further clarified. The masses as a class is defined by the parity that relates its members. By conferring on it a quality of sameness, the film camera conditions the subject for a mass existence. This is why Benjamin celebrates the fact that “[any] person today can lay claim to being filmed.”62 For Benjamin, the widespread filming of ordinary subjects is nothing short of revolutionary.

Benjamin is keenly aware, however, that the decay of aura and the politicization of art at the hands of technological reproducibility is far from assured. Never straying far

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61 Ibid., 112.
62 Ibid., 114. Italics in original.
from the Marxist doctrine of economic determinism, he will often argue that film can only reach its full revolutionary potential in societies, such as post-revolutionary Russia, that have already achieved socialism. In capitalist and fascist societies, film does not yet belong to the masses but to a narrow group of property owners. These purveyors of “film capital” seek to subvert the revolutionary potential of film by devising ways to assign it a cult value. Key in this regard is the star system, which overcomes the quality of sameness conferred on the subject by the camera, so that instead of paving the way for mass participation, film capital revives individuated aura in the form of the movie star. In this way, film capital “obstructs the human being’s legitimate claim to being reproduced” the consequence of which is that “the expropriation of film capital is an urgent demand for the proletariat.”

Another threat, says Benjamin, is posed by reactionary considerations of film that seek to assimilate it—against its nature—to the category of art. Such an effort not only reflects a failure to recognize the way in which film challenges the very terms according to which art is understood, it also constitutes a political threat insofar as art is identified with auratic presence. By claiming film as an art on par with the auratic arts that preceded it, these critics hope to secure a cult value for film. As an object of ritualistic veneration, its politics would evaporate. But notwithstanding these threats, Benjamin ultimately puts his revolutionary faith in technologies of reproduction. And he remains adamant that film, in particular, has a specific political destiny to fulfill. For Benjamin, its invention augers nothing less than the collapse of aura as a reactionary aesthetic and the validation

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63 Ibid., 115.
of mass existence via the propagation of reproducibility. Film is political, according to this account, because its natural capacity for reproduction makes it a natural ally of the revolution.

**Marxism and Cinephobia: Introduction**

Eisenstein and Benjamin are both exemplary of a tradition in Marxist film theory that takes film to stand in solidarity with socialism, or even to serve as a proxy for it. It is therefore no surprise that, within the context of their larger political projects, both grant film a heroic status. Indeed, it wouldn’t be overstating the case to suggest that these kinds of accounts are predicated on a certain cinephilia, a fascination with the medium so intense that it interferes with its rational analysis. But there is another strand of Marxist film theory that is far more suspicious of film and its politics. This “cinephobic” tradition is inclined to view film as complicit with capitalism, even accusing it of serving as an agent of alienation, revolutionary suppression, and mass subjugation. The most noteworthy of these is undoubtedly political modernism. But this highly politicized film theoretical project had a precedent in the critical theory of the Frankfurt school—and in particular Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer’s critique of the so-called “culture industry”—that is worth touching upon.

**Cinephobia: Film and the Culture Industry**

Automobiles, bombs, and films hold the totality together.  

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To impress the omnipotence of capital...is the purpose of all films.\(^{65}\)

To be sure, Adorno and Horkheimer’s discussion of film in their famous essay on the culture industry never quite amounts to a fully realized film theory. The object of their critique, as they make clear, is not film per se but mass, modern culture: the kind of culture that emulates in its own design the industrial practices of the capitalist mode of production. Standardization, uniformity of design, interchangeable parts—the authors contend that in the context of modern industrial capitalism, these principles of mass production are applied indiscriminately to both industry and culture such that the latter takes on the qualities of the former. In the malignant hybrid of industry and culture, they suggest, the radical conformity that industrial capitalism visits on the factory floor is extended to all other spheres of experience. Everyday life takes on a mindless and mechanical quality, as even during their leisure hours human beings are made to perform the function of a machine part. The result, they say, is the “withering of imagination and spontaneity.”\(^{66}\) As such, culture no longer serves as an intellectual refuge from the numbing uniformity of industrialization or as a space from which to either resist or combat the ever-expanding force of capital. In the following passage, the authors identify what they feel are the politics commensurate with the culture industry: “The relentless unity of the culture industry bears witness to the emergent unity of politics.”\(^{67}\)

\(^{65}\) Ibid., 98.
\(^{66}\) Ibid., 100.
\(^{67}\) Ibid., 97.
an equivalence between industrial capitalism and fascism, the authors insist that the culture industry inevitably culminates in the totalitarian state.

With respect to this thesis, the authors single out film as particularly culpable. From their perspective, industrialized film constitutes the perfect assimilation of art to the processes of mass production. Whatever aesthetic properties film might possess are ultimately overwhelmed by its status as a standardized commodity. The viewer might feel that each screening constitutes a distinct experience, but this is merely the result of the culture industry’s campaign of “mass deception” aimed at confusing a sense of variation and spontaneity with what the authors call “the reproduction of sameness.” Hence their claim that “To impress the omnipotence of capital...is the purpose of all films, regardless of the plot selected by the production directors.” The differences that exist between individual stories distracts from the general uniformity that qualifies the mass spectatorial experience. Instead of the leisure activity and respite from the drudgery of work that it is taken to be, then, film is the very model for the standardization and mechanization of leisure time that characterizes the culture industry. Under these conditions, leisure becomes indistinguishable from drudgery.

According to the authors, film distinguishes itself in this respect partly on account of its photographic constitution—a medium-specific attribute. They argue that the film industry exploits the realism of the photographic image to erode the distinction between reality and its representation, which naturalizes the morbid uniformity that serves to

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68 Ibid., 106.
69 Ibid., 98.
confuse work and leisure, and that is the mark of the culture industry. They underscore this point in the following passage: “mechanization has such power over leisure and its happiness...that the off-duty worker can experience nothing but the after-images of the work process itself.” Spectators at film screenings are thus more readily susceptible to the delusion that theirs is an empowering culture of choice and variation, whereas, the authors claim, experience in the context of the culture industry is largely determined in advance by the unifying and ubiquitous force of capital and its relations of production.

As the authors make clear, film as photography is also fascist in its epistemological implications. In this respect, they argue that film is the epitome of a thoughtless mode of existence. The synchronized sound film, in particular, achieves an illusion of reality greater even than the silent cinema, and so “positively debars the spectator from thinking.” To the extent that it seeks to emulate natural perception, industrially made cinema comes to replace thought. It offers its own kind of “photological proof” in place of rational analysis, leading to a situation in which “technological reason [triumphs] over truth.” These claims are intended to disclose the complicity that relates the logic of industrial cinema to the ideology of fascism. Each makes a mockery of reason as a means to achieve total power over the unsuspecting masses. This is how the authors justify situating film on the same moral plane as

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70 Ibid., 99.
71 Ibid., 109.
72 Ibid., 100.
73 The authors once more single out film in this regard: “Far more strongly than the theatre of illusion, film denies its audience any dimension in which they might roam freely in imagination...; thus it trains those exposed to it to identify film directly with reality.” See their “The Culture Industry,” 100.
74 Ibid., 118.
automobiles and bombs. None of these mass products of industrial capitalism can escape their destiny as the instrument and harbinger of totalitarian doom.

Cinephobia: Political Modernism and the Politicization of Film/Theory

[Every] film is political\(^\text{75}\)

Another, more potent, strain of the kind of Marxian cinephobia developed by Adorno and Horkheimer was the monumental film-theoretical discourse political modernism. With the events in Paris of May 1968 in the background, the editors of *Cahiers du cinéma*, long a venue for impassioned and impressionistic accounts of popular Hollywood studio films, made the startling announcement that they were politicizing the journal. In practice, this meant renouncing their support for dominant cinema and restricting their coverage to accounts of film’s relationship to the prevailing, which is to say capitalist, ideology. This editorial shift inaugurated what Rodowick, following Sylvia Harvey, has famously characterized as film theory’s political modernism, a discourse seeking to account for the ideological effects of cinema through an elaborate synthesis of Sausserian linguistics, Althusserian Marxism, and Lacanian psychoanalysis.\(^\text{76}\) In this discourse, the politics of film as an object of philosophical and theoretical inquiry achieved its zenith. This was partly the result of how the question of film’s politics became entwined with a larger debate consuming the humanities at the time that concerned the politics of theory and of theorizing more generally. In this debate, it was


thought that theory itself—at least as practiced in the humanities—constituted an intrinsically politicized activity. The result was not only a renewed interest in the politics of film, but also a film theory that was reflexively and self-consciously political. Political modernism enshrined itself not only at a variety of film journals, it also gave shape and coherence to the emerging academic field of film studies. The consequences of this coincidence reverberate in the discipline even today.

The essay in which *Cahiers* announce the politicization of their coverage lays the theoretical foundation for what would become political modernism, and arguably serves as its founding document. At the heart of this film-theoretical enterprise is the application of Marxist science to the cinema object. Marxist science is a critical mode of analysis that proceeds deductively from the premise that seemingly natural cultural habits, including viewing practices, are in fact shaped, if not wholly determined, by more fundamental socio-economic forces—specifically the means and relations of production that together compose the capitalist mode of production. This kind of cultural critique is heir to Marx’s famous analysis of the commodity form, in which he states that “A commodity appears as first sight an extremely obvious, trivial thing. But its analysis brings out that it is a very strange thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties.”

The unremarkable appearance of the commodity masks its more disquieting nature as the embodiment of alienation. To uncover this nature, it is necessary to apply a mode of critical analysis that takes political economy into consideration, for it is inescapably shaped by such underlying forces. Film is no different. To approach it uncritically—as

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the source of a pleasurable and benign experience or as an autonomous art isolated from material concerns—is to remain ignorant of its “metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties,” which is to say, its true nature as accomplice to the totalitarian agenda of capitalism.

To adopt Marxist science as a critical methodology is to agree to the premise that social life is composed of two spheres: the manifest and the latent. The first is the world of appearances, the second the underlying system which determines the first. Marxism settles on the term ideology to describe the relation between the two. From a Marxist perspective, the function of ideology is to perpetuate the malignant social relations unleashed by capitalism by veiling the truth of their material provenance. It buys the acquiescence of the capitalist subject to their enslaved condition by creating the false impression that the system which subjugates them is natural and immutable, rather than merely one among many moments in the dialectical unfolding of history. To use more orthodox Marxist language, it prevents the formation of “class consciousness.”

This is the theoretical context in which Comolli and Narboni make the following claim, which was to become axiomatic for political modernism: “every film is political.” They mean this literally. Every film, even (and especially) those films that do not tackle social or political issues overtly, are assumed to be invested with a certain politics. This is so, they claim, because every film “is determined by the ideology which produces it (or within which it is produced, which stems from the same thing).” According to political modernism, there is a politics to film because, as with any commodity or cultural object,
it is first and foremost a bearer of ideology. As such, it naturalizes existing social relations, however unjust, by obscuring the material conditions which determine them.

To be sure, Marxist critical theory considers all aspects of social life to be political to the extent that they are a more-or-less direct expression of the mode of production. But the axiomatic claim that every film is political is also meant to single film out as unique, as somehow more urgently political than other commodities, including and especially the other arts and media. They cite two points in support of this claim. First, although all the arts and media are inescapably caught up in the dynamics of a class-divided, property-owning system, film’s ambivalence as an industrial art sets it apart. According to the authors, “The cinema is all the more thoroughly and completely determined because unlike other arts or ideological systems its very manufacture mobilizes powerful economic forces in a way that the production of literature...does not.”79 In a distinct echo of the culture industry argument, film is all the more radically political for performing the neat trick of confusing ideology and economy, such that the distinction between art and industry no longer applies.

But there is a second and more significant reason for film’s outsized politics according to Comolli and Narboni, one that concerns its unique aesthetic properties. Repeating a well-worn theme in film theory, they argue that there is an inclination to view film as having the means and the vocation to transfer reality from the world to the screen. But as we’ve seen, Marxism distinguishes between concrete, materially constituted reality, and ideology, which has the appearance of reality but is in fact its

79 Ibid.
counterfeit and opposite. As Comolli and Narboni put it, “‘reality’ [i.e. appearances] is nothing but an expression of the prevailing ideology.”⁸⁰ We might think of it as an inverse relationship according to which the more captive we are to ideology the less we experience reality, and vice-versa.

Such a thesis has deep implications for thinking the politics of film, for the film image promises to provide access to reality even and especially in the absence of critical analysis, or any other sort of mediation. But according to Marxist science, this is impossible. Lack of mediation in the naked apprehension of reality is correlated precisely with ideology, and the so-called impression of reality that characterizes the film image is predicated precisely on a lack of mediation. Indeed, film is all the more inherently ideological—and politically dangerous—for supplying such a compelling impression of reality. As the authors note, “the classic theory of cinema that the camera is an impartial instrument which grasps, or rather is impregnated by, the world in its ‘concrete reality’ is an eminently reactionary one.” Instead of reality, they continue, “What the camera in fact registers is the vague, unformulated, untheorized, unthought-out world of the dominant ideology.”⁸¹ Thus, film is not a machine of reality but of ideology, to the detriment of the class struggle. Comolli and Narboni contend that film is “ideology presenting itself to itself, talking to itself, learning about itself,”⁸² with the result that it short-circuits any route to class-consciousness. Film’s natural tendency, rather, is to reinforce the prevailing ideology, which it does all the more effectively for masquerading as reality.

⁸⁰ Ibid.
⁸¹ Ibid.
⁸² Ibid.
The theory of the politics of film advanced by Comolli and Narboni in their analysis was seminal, but it nonetheless failed to adequately address the question of how the subject was implicated in the ideological drama of film spectatorship. Why is cinema’s impression of reality so compelling? What drives the alienated subject to capitulate so willingly to the very source of its alienation? For answers, the discourse of political modernism turned to the Freudian and Saussurian-inspired theories of Jacques Lacan. The key expositor in this regard is Jean-Louis Baudry, who published two essays that together make the case that the true subject of dominant cinema is not the concrete, coherent spectator seated in the theatre but the divided subject of the unconscious.

The object of critique in these essays is, once again, the so-called impression of reality constitutive of film spectatorship. For Baudry, the apparatus of cinema reproduces the specular relations characteristic of what Lacan called the “mirror” stage of psychic development: the spectator encounters its specular reflection phenomenologically in the form of an address provided by the film image and its seemingly masterful view of a coherent and fully present world—an “impression” of reality. To the extent that this view is idealized and homogeneous or otherwise fails to confront the viewer with the contradictions of the dominant economic and social order, the film image addresses a subject who is, correspondingly, coherent and indivisible.

From a psychoanalytic perspective, the specular regime of cinema is significant insofar as the subject of the unconscious—which the conscious self both originates from

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and disavows at the same time—is in fact constituted by difference rather than identity, a result of the castration anxiety brought about by the oedipal scenario. On this view, the self-identical ego reflected in the mirror/screen is misconstrued as such and constitutes nothing more than a mirage aimed at mitigating the on-going threat of existential dissolution—the primal anxiety that one lacks coherence and stability as a subject. But psychoanalytic theory lays great stress on the unconscious drive to return to a pre-oedipal state of wholeness and integrity. Indeed, the theory stipulates—and the category of the fetish is paradigmatic—that virtually all of the desires we experience at the conscious level are, in one way or another, expressions of this more archaic and fundamental drive. Hence, the fascination with cinema. By virtue of its innate realism, says Baudry, film produces a “transcendental subject”: it substitutes for the subject’s own internal divisions a misleading experience of timeless self-identity.\(^8^4\) As such, it “mime[s] a form of archaic satisfaction experienced by the subject”—the pre-oedipal state, a state Baudry describes as one of “complete” satisfaction.\(^8^5\)

In synthesizing his argument, Baudry will innovate the concept of the “cine-subject.”\(^8^6\) Adapting and extending Comolli and Narboni’s more strictly Marxist thesis, Baudry suggests that we conceive the specular relations of the cinematic experience as a kind of ideological trap, in the sense that the profound satisfaction provided by cinema’s impression of reality is actually a means to “shackle” the spectator to the prevailing ideology. This cine-subject might experience a welcome sensation of plenitude, but this is

\(^8^4\) Baudry, “Ideological Effects,” 43.
\(^8^5\) Baudry, “The Apparatus,” 117.
\(^8^6\) Ibid., 122.
only because it mistakes itself for an integral subject of a seamless reality. Its true identity, however, is as a divided subject of a fragmented ideology, and its inevitable condition is to be “chained, captured, or captivated.” According to Baudry, this is how cinema serves the interest of capitalism. It motivates the spectator to ascribe a timelessness to a state of affairs that is, in fact, historical and dialectical. Cinema does this by leveraging the threat of dissolution that haunts every post-oedipal subject, for to accept that what the screen projects is ideology rather than reality entails surrendering a sensation of complete satisfaction in favour of a disquieting experience of lack and loss. Hence, argues Baudry, cinema “is an apparatus destined to obtain a precise ideological effect, necessary to the dominant ideology: creating a phantasmatization of the subject.” As formulated by 1970s film theory, then, the politics of cinema consists precisely in the fact that it performs the function of Freud’s fetish object: it recuperates the lost sense of integrity precipitated by the subject’s encounter with difference. And it does so, like every ideological experience, while occulting that function.

To be clear, the specific target of political modernism was dominant cinema, or the kind of cinema that makes a concerted effort to amplify and exploit the impression of reality that supposedly overwhelms film spectatorship. As an antidote to the cinema of realism, political modernism championed a “counter-cinema,” a fully modernist cinema in the mould of Brecht’s epic theatre. It was thought that adapting the kind of modernist techniques developed by Brecht—and reflexive gestures with respect to the production

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87 Baudry, “Ideological Effects,” 44.
88 Ibid., 46.
process, in particular—to film would undermine the reality effect, disclose the ideological character of film, and provoke a political response in the spectator in the guise of a critical self-reflection. But as an instrument of Marxist science, political modernism also discovered a potent weapon against the ideological proclivities of cinema in itself and in its theoretical activity. In this respect, it was thought possible to write a proper theory of the politics of film and, in the same stroke, achieve emancipation from both cinema and ideology in general. The caveat was that one had to be willing to forego the pleasures of cinematic spectatorship that dominant cinema was so effective at activating. Laura Mulvey was perhaps the most militant in this regard, openly calling for a cinema of “unpleasure.” 90  

Christian Metz, another prominent contributor to the discourse, also understood the steep personal cost exacted in theorizing film’s politics under the terms of political modernism:

To be a theoretician of the cinema, one should ideally no longer love the cinema and yet still love it: have loved it a lot and only have detached oneself from it by taking it up again from the other end, taking it as the target for the very same scopic drive which had made one love it. 91

Emancipation—in the form of a politicized film theory—demanded nothing less than a complete disavowal of his cherished cinephilia. But such is the disquieting logic of the politics of film as construed by political modernism.

The Decline of the Politics of Film

The decline of the politics of film as an ongoing question or concern coincided with the critical censure of political modernism. Critical attacks against political modernism, now referred to derisively as “Grand Theory,” were often used as a pretext to censure the question of the politics of film more generally. The two film theoretical projects that supplanted political modernism—film-phenomenology and post-theory—have explicitly organized themselves with a view to marginalizing the question of film’s politics. There is also another factor that inhibits any effort to once again raise the question of the politics of film. Indirectly related to the backlash against political modernism, this second consideration has to do with the academic community’s on-going drive to prioritize research that has evident instrumental value with respect to urgent economic and social concerns. Here, the emphasis falls on the quantification of data, rather than on the more speculative question of aesthetics, and as I argue in subsequent chapters, aesthetics is the privileged context for reviving the question of film’s politics. The remainder of this chapter is devoted to providing an account of the decline of the politics of film at the hands of those who saw to the dismantling of political modernism, as well as to addressing the formidable, but surely not insurmountable, obstacles for this project’s renewal in an difficult critical and institutional context.

**From Political Modernism to Film-Phenomenology and Post-Theory**

This first insurrection against the hegemony of political modernism was launched in the early 1990s by a loose coalition of film scholars who prioritized the

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92 I take up this point more fully in Chapter 3.
phenomenological experience of the film spectator over its social and political function. This movement sought to recover for film theory what might be described as the purity of experience—of a libidinal or affective nature—specific to cinematic spectatorship as such, and to limit the role of film theory to accounting for, or attending to, this experience. This movement is best understood as a continuation of the pure cinema movement of the 1920s. Today’s phenomenological film theory is heir to, and current standard bearer of, this tradition, often explicitly so. Like its forbearer, it wishes only to describe, celebrate, validate, and even transmit the immediate phenomenological experience of film viewing. By the same token, it has no patience for a detached and objective style of inquiry with respect to cinema. Not only does studying film at a clinical remove rob the spectatorial experience of its peculiar pleasure and fascination, it is said, it also misses its target, since cinema, according to this tradition, is not an empirical object. Rather, its true nature, essence, or “ontology” consists of its power to give birth to a new world or to alter our relationship to the existing one.

By definition, politics is antithetical to the program of the phenomenological tradition since any consideration of social factors threatens to interrupt the otherwise isolated cinematic experience that mediates film and spectator, or to intrude as a distorting third term. The film theory of Vivian Sobchack, a seminal figure in this tradition’s recent revival, is an exemplary case. Sobchack’s innovation, which drew directly from the philosophical school of phenomenology, was to make a distinction between primary and secondary communicative structures. The first is our natural—

\[93\] Many of the texts that constitute this movement are collected in Richard Abel, French Film Theory and Criticism, vol. 1, Princeton Paperbacks (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1993).
unmediated and unfiltered—conscious experience. The second constitutes our mediated experience of the world by means of language and culture. But language and culture are not construed here as benign. Rather, they are thought of as contaminating agents that sever the otherwise direct link to reality we experience naturally through our consciousness. For Sobchack, the significance of film is that, as a purely phenomenological experience, it replicates the primary order of communication. In so doing, it reclaims for consciousness the purity of one’s direct encounter with the world, a purity which language and culture serve only to adulterate. This is made explicit in the following passage:

[The] primary structures, founded in existence and constitutive of conscious experience, produce themselves in the world as a systemic ‘cinematic communicative competence,’ against which the secondary (but always present) notion of systematic ‘distortion’ can be identified and, indeed, from which it can be constituted as ideology, rhetoric, and poetics.94

For Sobchack the secondary communicative structure inevitably—and regrettably—“distorts” the primary one. The result, she says, is ideology, or what amounts to the same thing, politics. Thus, contrary to the claims of political modernism, cinema is not fundamentally political but in fact anti-political. It assumes a political status only when its more fundamental nature as primary communicative structure is contaminated by language and culture. The same logic informs the recent film-phenomenology revival as a whole, and unities the otherwise disparate film-theoretical projects of Christian Keathley (on cinephilia) and Daniel Frampton (on “filmosophy”). All propose to disavow the

politicization of film theory in the interest of keeping faith with film’s ontology and preserving the purity of the spectatorial experience.

But a second and arguably more potent insurgency against political modernism took place from a completely opposing perspective, proposing instead to “reconstruct” film theory along more empirically objective and scientific lines. This movement culminated in 1996 with the publication of a volume called *Post-Theory*, whose express agenda was to both bury political modernism and ensure only apolitical projects took its place.\(^95\) Although *Post-Theory*’s critiques of political modernism were many and varied, it was chiefly concerned with restoring “theory,” as concept and practice, to its proper role as a hypothetical and fallible account that serves to organize scientific inquiry. The problem with political modernism, claimed the post-theorists, was that it elevated theory to the status of doctrine—so-called Grand Theory. As doctrine, Grand Theory’s premises went unquestioned while, in a rhetorically vacuous gesture, the research conducted under its name served only to recapitulate the theory itself. Insofar as it disdains empirical methods and indulges in totalizing narratives, Grand Theory's top-down, doctrine-driven approach was accused of actually impeding the acquisition of legitimate—which is to say reproducible and falsifiable—scientific knowledge about the cinema.

On the basis of these critiques, post-theorists demanded a return to a more modest program of “middle-level” or “piecemeal” research whose model would be the natural sciences.\(^96\) Starting with specific questions or problems rather than a fixed theoretical

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\(^95\) See, in particular, its two introductions; the first by Bordwell, the second by Carroll.

\(^96\) For a detailed summary of this program from a critical perspective, see D. N. Rodowick, “An Elegy for Theory,” *October* 122 (2007): 91-109. Rodowick identifies post-theory as heir to Bertrand Russell’s project
position, this research program would generate relatively discrete theories about the cinema, each of whose validity would in turn depend on the viability of the empirical evidence cited in support. Clearly, there is no room in this program for the speculative subject of the unconscious on which political modernism depended. Rather, the emphasis falls on the empirical human being, whose measurable biological features could, for example, generate a plausible but ultimately fallible theory of cognitive universals. Moreover, a piecemeal approach means there is no pressure to assimilate such a theory with other theories about cinema, nor any need to subsume it into a larger theory about society and culture. In short, post-theorists demanded a return to small “t” theorizing.

For post-theorists, the elevation of theory to doctrine posed another problem for film theory. To the extent that Grand Theory identified film with politics (“every film is political”) it lost sight of the specificity of its object of analysis. So, in addition to a more modest concept of theory, post-theory also demanded a clearer delineation of the film object. In practice this meant isolating film from such supposedly extrinsic concerns as politics and culture. A related argument was that “theories underdetermine political commitments.” Post-theorists did not believe one could deduce a theory of film from a specific political position, as political modernism had done. Indeed, they argued that the validity of a theory depended on its support from a wide range of sponsors, irrespective of their political commitments, which might conflict. Finally, David Bordwell, one of the

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97 Now accepted as a general tenet of cognitive film theory, the idea that film spectatorship can be accounted for in terms of cognitive universals rooted in biological features of human anatomy was first broached by David Bordwell in his “La Nouvelle Mission De Feuillade; Or, What Was Mise-En-Scène?,” *Velvet Light Trap*, no. 37 (Spring 1996): 10–29.

98 Carroll, “Prospects For Film Theory,” 47.
architects of post-theory, attacked “reflectionism,” the thesis that films somehow reflect broader national concerns and anxieties, including political ones. Bordwell argues that such claims are too sweeping, ignoring both the variety of films released at any given historical moment and the fact that the ratio of paid spectators to population is too small to infer any direct connection between cinema and the so-called zeitgeist.

Although launched separately, critical attacks from both film-phenomenology and post-theory effectively dismantled political modernism as a viable theoretical framework. It is now thoroughly discredited, too toxic even to renovate or update. But lost with the demise of political modernism, as well, is our ability to think the politics of film more generally. The current establishment in film theory, dominated by film-phenomenologists and post-theorists, considers the question to be illegitimate because it runs afoul of film’s ontology, on the one hand, and scientific protocols, on the other.

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Part 2: Humanities Now

The first part of this chapter constitutes a historical account of the politics of film as a recurring theoretical concern or project. Two points regarding this history are worth emphasizing. The first is that despite constituting a relatively rich tradition with respect to film theory or theorizing, it is no longer considered tenable to raise the question of the politics of film; the collapse of political modernism and the subsequent consolidation of anti-political projects brought an end to such inquires within the field. The second point

is that the critical projects that constitute this history all share the assumption that politics is intrinsic to film, and that, moreover, film is somehow uniquely political with respect to the other arts, perhaps even the only one that is ontologically political. In later chapters, I argue that inquiries into film’s politics can be recuperated under different terms. For the moment, I will only remark that the politics of film is best conceived not as an ontological certainty but rather as a specific case of a more general “politics of aesthetics,” as this concept is developed in Rancière’s thought, and that it is the “art” of film to which its politics is linked. Consequently, in this second section, I look at the prospects for a politics of film and of aesthetics in our contemporary moment by examining transformations taking place in the humanities more generally. This broader context cannot be ignored, since any effort to revive politics as a question of aesthetics must be undertaken in the context of a humanities whose continued support for such inquiries is uncertain.

**The Humanities in Crisis**

Let us begin by noting that the humanities are being reorganized in ways that, from one perspective, are serving to save it from a steady decline into irrelevancy or, from another, pose an existential threat to it. This crisis involves, in part, the push to

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100 As we’ll see in Chapter 3, by “art” of film I am referring neither to the so-called art or arthouse film, nor to the poetics of cinema, as David Bordwell understands it, but rather to the power of cinema, as a kind of art, to configure (and thus “distribute”) the sensible environment. For an explanation of Rancière’s thesis concerning the distribution of the sensible, see Chapter 2.

instrumentalize knowledge in all sectors of academia. The result is the promotion of quantifiable research that can serve narrowly conceived economic agendas.\textsuperscript{102} The assumption here is that the kind of knowledge that is traditionally produced in the human sciences is of relatively little economic or immediate social value and, as such, constitutes a waste of resources.\textsuperscript{103} Hence the widespread shuttering of humanities departments that on the basis of undisclosed or obscure metrics are assessed as irremediably antiquated in relation to what are held to be pressing economic and social concerns. In this respect, it is felt that renewal efforts should be directed at reorganizing the human sciences so that it approximates the social sciences in method and objectives.

A related effort seeks to reshape the humanities in the model of the natural or “hard” sciences. Post-theory is most readily intelligible in this context. At stake in this project is the very epistemological legitimacy of the humanities. In emulating the natural sciences, a revamped human sciences would seek empirical and causal explanations of art and culture that aspire to the condition of universality on the presumption that knowledge tends towards an ideal state such that its acquisition unfolds teleologically, fuelled by the ever-increasing accumulation of raw data and propelled by the perpetual refinement of

\textsuperscript{102} In what seems to be a new front in the ongoing culture wars, the humanities are now regularly compared unfavourably with so-called STEM education, and public funding is increasingly being redistributed accordingly. See Patricia Cohen, “A Rising Call to Promote STEM Education and Cut Liberal Arts Funding,” \textit{The New York Times}, February 21, 2016, http://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/22/business/a-rising-call-to-promote-stem-education-and-cut-liberal-arts-funding.html.

hypotheses. The humanities as they are traditionally practiced are presumed to lack the
epistemological rigour of this model. Insofar as the humanities are prone to subjective or
speculative reasoning, rather than rely more stringently on empirical evidence and
indifferent analysis, their findings not only risk the taint of bias but remain unverifiable
and unfalsifiable in the narrow scientific sense, and as such constitute an unreliable or
even illegitimate form of knowledge. In short, as against the standards of the natural
sciences, it is thought that the human sciences rely on methods and modes of inquiry
whose epistemological premises are, at best, highly suspect. In tandem with the
instrumentalization push, the drive for a more scientifically grounded study of human
phenomena is proving highly disruptive to almost every corner of the humanities.

**Instrumentalization and the Quantification of Knowledge**

To a large extent, instrumentalizing humanistic knowledge means remaking the
humanities in the image of social sciences.\textsuperscript{104} Whatever might be gained by such a
transformation, I argue that this poses a problem for aesthetic inquiry. To the extent that
it relies on raw data to substantiate and ground its sociological claims, the mode of
inquiry specific to the social sciences turns on the practice of transforming quantity into
quality. Indeed, guided by a faith in the evidentiary value of empirical investigation, an
implicit assumption at work in this mode is that the epistemic value of a claim is more or

\textsuperscript{104} For a good account and measured critique of this new orientation for the humanities, see Heather Love,
“Close but Not Deep: Literary Ethics and the Descriptive Turn,” *New Literary History* 41, no. 2 (October
less proportional to the volume of data from which it is deduced. The most obvious product of the institutional effort to assimilate the aims and methods of the social sciences to the human sciences is the emerging field of digital humanities, whose research program is likewise organized principally around mining data sets. In fact, digital technologies significantly enhance this mode of inquiry, not only by increasing exponentially the volume of data that can be submitted to sociological or sociocultural analysis, but also by supplying computational tools that greatly expedite the analytic process itself. I want to emphasize, however, that digital tools are not on trial here, nor ultimately is the field of digital humanities, whose computational profile undoubtedly opens up new and exciting lines of research for the film scholar. But one of the disadvantages of the sociological or data-driven approach—and I think it is a crucial one—is that it does not seem to offer any perspective from which to launch inquiries into aesthetics, and for the simple reason that aesthetic judgements cannot be reduced to or deduced from an expression of quantity. This is felt most keenly in the institutional effort to bring the discipline of film studies, for which aesthetics has historically been of paramount concern, under the auspices of an expanded and expansive media studies.

Media Studies

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105 Some in the social sciences are beginning to recognize the need to correct for a longstanding bias that favours quantification over qualification. Consider the following statement, which comes from academic economists: “too many economists believe their quantitative tools and theoretical lenses are the only ones that count as ‘scientific,’ leading them to dismiss disciplines that rely more on qualitative analysis and verbal theorizing.” Dani Rodrik Suresh Naidu, “Economics After Neoliberalism,” Boston Review, February 15, 2019, http://bostonreview.net/class-inequality/suresh-naidu-dani-rodrick-gabriel-zucman-economics-after-neoliberalism.

106 A key exponent in this regard is Franco Moretti, whose concepts of “distant reading” and “quantitative formalism” inform the field in general. See his Distant Reading (London ; New York: Verso, 2013).
One expression of the growing pressure in and on the humanities to look to the social sciences as a model for its renewal efforts is the increasing tendency to subsume the discipline of film studies into media studies. Notwithstanding its interest in the media “arts,” media studies generally retains the sociological orientation of its parent discipline communication studies at the expense of more speculative or theoretical inquiries into aesthetics. If pressed to pinpoint the precise object around which media studies organizes itself, the likeliest candidate would undoubtedly be what social theorist Arjun Appadurai calls the “mediascape.” Drawing on the work of Benedict Anderson, Appadurai identifies the mediascape with the repository of images and texts that circulate throughout a given community by means of its characteristic media, and that thereby serves to bind its members together by encouraging them to believe they inhabit a shared (if ultimately fabricated, illusory, or fictional) narrative. More specifically, Appadurai describes the mediascape as “image-centered, narrative-based accounts of strips of reality,” adding that “what they offer to those who experience and transform them is a series of elements (such as characters, plots and textual forms) out of which scripts can be formed of imagined lives, their own as well as those of others living in other places.”

It is precisely the mediascape conceived in these terms that grounds media studies as a research program. It is media studies’ essential vocation to inquire into not only the flow of images and texts that traverse the media landscape, but also, and perhaps more

109 Ibid., 9.
fundamentally, the ways in which the content that circulates in the mass media constitutes, organizes, and sustains communities—audiences, social collectives, subcultural groups—as such. Such a program cannot do without recourse to quantitative data, since picturing the imaginary worlds of such large groups of individuals requires proof that the elements that compose a given mediascape are being circulated and consumed in adequate numbers. By the same token, the media studies scholar is diverted from the task of assessing the aesthetic qualities of the individual texts or works of art that constitute the basic elements out of which imagined lives are weaved.

To the extent that it seeks to explain and understand the aesthetics unique to cinema, film theory suffers from being shuffled into the orbit of this research program. Instead of starting with the question of the art or aesthetics of film, and then leveraging the resulting theory for inquiries into film’s social or psycho-social effects and functions, media studies takes film as merely one among many audiovisual phenomena with which to pursue questions of broader sociological or socio-cultural interest. The problem of film aesthetics, and art more generally, is thereby deferred or dismissed in favour of inquiries into, say, the variegated media habits of different social groups, or the constitution of audiences and the content of their exchanges through and across the mass media. Another way of stating this is that within the framework of a reformed humanities in which film studies is absorbed into media studies, what gets lost or imperilled is a certain idea of film, not only as a technical term designating an arguably outmoded piece of media technology and thus easily dispensed with, but as a particular medium for or bearer of aesthetics—in short, an art. Of course, other art forms—no less than the category of art
itselves—find themselves caught up in precisely the same predicament, namely: faced with the incursion of sociological imperatives into the humanities, how to restore or sustain an interest in investigating the aesthetics of a given text, work of art, or artistic movement, and not merely the content or narrative elements these help to circulate.

To be sure, politics as a question or concern is not abandoned in a media studies milieu. But in keeping with its critical interest in the mediascape, contemporary media studies restricts itself to the circulation of politically meaningful content or information, and it remains highly suspicious of or indifferent to the question of the politics of aesthetics. Given its sociological profile, media studies is predisposed to ask the practical question of how social actors use the media to circulate information that will advance a political agenda.\textsuperscript{110} By the same token, it is less inclined to raise questions of a more speculative—though no less political—character, such as how our social world, and our place in it or our relation to it is made intelligible to us aesthetically, or via art’s power to configure the sensible environment.

**On Epistemologies, Natural and Human**

Along with the sociological turn, the humanities have been under pressure in some quarters to remake itself in the model of the natural sciences. Hence the post-theory turn in film theory. But such a program should give us pause. This is because the circumstances of human social activity as expressed in art and culture differ fundamentally in kind from the those of the natural world, and so the epistemological

\[\textsuperscript{110}\text{To take only the most vivid example, books and articles examining the role of social media in political protest movements, such as the “Arab Spring,” have proliferated in recent years.}\]
criteria applied in each case must be commensurably distinct. In the disciplinary context of film studies, the terms of this debate are helpfully clarified through the opposing views of David Rodowick, who seeks to redeem theory in the form of a philosophy of humanities, and Malcolm Turvey, an analytic philosopher and proponent of post-theory. It is worth examining each account in turn.

A Philosophy of the Humanities

To want to relinquish theory is more than a debate over epistemological standards; it is a retreat from reflection on the ethical stances behind our styles of knowing.\textsuperscript{111}

To my mind, the most credible and persuasive argument against the imposition of scientific standards and protocols on the human sciences comes from David Rodowick. Seeking to salvage what he believes is of lasting value in theory by restoring or renewing a neglected philosophy of humanities, Rodowick make two critical points. The first is that all modes of inquiry or “styles of knowing” are informed, wittingly or not, by ethical concerns. When post-theorists promote the pursuit of empirical and causal explanations of art and culture, they assume that such knowledge is more legitimate on the grounds that it is less prone to the supposed epistemic distortions caused by the imperatives of an agenda, particularly political or ideological ones, or other forms of bias. This is the motivation for their attack on theory, an explanatory framework that insists on making the researcher’s agenda explicit by incorporating a kind of recursive self-critique into its

\textsuperscript{111} Rodowick, “An Elegy for Theory,” 92.
protocols. But as Rodowick notes in reference to the arguments of post-theorists, the promotion of the natural sciences as the preferred mode of inquiry for art and culture is itself tantamount to an ethical appeal:

In a perspective that strives to be free of ideological positioning and to assert an epistemology that is value-neutral, the introductions to Post-Theory nonetheless express the longing for a different world modeled on an idealized vision of scientific research: a community of researchers united by common epistemological standards who are striving for a universalizable and truthful picture of their object.\footnote{Ibid., 97.}

Moreover, if it is a mistake to assume that the natural sciences are value-neutral and are conducted, or ought to be conducted, in an absolutely indifferent or bias-free manner, then it is doubly so for the human sciences, a sphere of research that is organized in large part around questions of value.

The significance of value to humanistic inquiry is captured in Rodowick’s distinction, following Wittgenstein, between causes and reasons. Whereas causal explanations are legitimate in the context of natural phenomenon, human social activity is better explained through a kind of litigation over reasons. This is because culture is in principle already “public and accessible to all” rather than something “empirical,” which is defined here as that of which we have no prior knowledge. Its study, then, consists only in “clarifying and evaluating what we already know and do, or know how to do, and

understanding why it is of value to us.”  

This is not to suggest that the human sciences can dispense with either analytic rigour or evidential support. It means only that such a mode of inquiry requires criteria distinct from those used in the natural sciences to justify a claim. Because the object of research in the human sciences is ultimately our own behaviour and activity, soliciting agreement over a claim invariably involves some degree of self-justification, and so can be achieved in the absence even of empirical research and formal experimentation. As Rodowick observes, “a philosophy of humanities may make propositional claims, but these claims need not be fallible—they only require suasion and clear, authoritative self-justification.”  

Indeed, the possibility of the humanities turning to empirical research and formal experimentation, as it is practiced in the natural sciences, is further complicated by the fact that humanistic inquiry is inevitably implicated in the transformation of the very object it studies, since it is itself a product of culture and makes a direct contribution to it, however modest.

This raises a second and, to my mind, more conclusive point. Rodowick asserts, correctly in my view, that “natural and cultural phenomena do not have the same temporality.”  

What he means by this is that, unlike human social activity, natural laws are “time-independent” in the sense that they are not historical in the context of human time scales. Such a temporality, he explains, has epistemological consequences. In particular, it means that the acquisition of knowledge in the natural sciences obeys a teleological principle. Insofar as the laws of nature are time-independent, they are

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114 Ibid., 101.
115 Ibid.
116 Ibid., 94.
amenable to an epistemological process organized around the ever-increasing refinement of hypotheses, a process that in principle culminates, finally, in the perfect reproduction of such laws as effectively timeless and universal objects of knowledge. What the human sciences tries to picture, by contrast, is historical in the sense that its transformation takes place within human time scales. Cultural knowledge inevitably “emerges and evolves in the context of multiple, diverse, and conflicting social interactions that require constant reevaluation.” Consequently, a non-teleological epistemology that can accommodate such rapid and ceaseless mutation is needed in order to account for such objects. Whether we describe such a style of knowing as theory, a philosophy of humanities, or aesthetic philosophy, a humanistic epistemology must rely on protocols that remain distinct from those that compose the natural sciences:

Human history and natural history may not be investigated by the same means, even if, with respect to certain problems, their domains may overlap. Unlike the scientist, the humanist must examine phenomena that may be shifting before her very eyes. She must account for change in the course of its becoming, while she herself might be in a process of self-transformation.

Cultural knowledge is ill-served by scientific inquiry because it does not tend to evolve into an ideal or perfectly reflected state which can, thereby, solicit universal agreement. Human history never rests, and because it consists primarily of self-investigation, it is inevitably and perennially subject to dispute.

**Dialectical Criticism**

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117 Ibid., 101.
118 Ibid.
In a direct riposte to Rodowick’s argument, Malcolm Turvey reiterates post-theory’s petition to apply scientific standards and criteria to the activity of theorizing film.\textsuperscript{119} To be sure, Turvey disputes the claim that post-theory wishes to introduce some of the more exacting protocols that distinguish the natural sciences—“formal equations, predictive models, or laboratory experiments”—into the human sciences. Citing Carroll, he states that it is not film theory per se that ought to be modelled on the natural sciences but rather the practice of film theorizing.\textsuperscript{120} It seems to me, however, that this is ultimately a distinction without a difference. For Turvey, what the natural sciences can bring to the study of art and culture is the means by which theoretical activity is conducted. Once again drawing on Carroll, Turvey describes the process whereby knowledge is acquired in the natural sciences as “dialectical.”\textsuperscript{121} This is not meant in the Hegelian sense of contradiction overcome in a synthetic unity of opposites, however. Dialectical here means a competitive process in which contradictory or non-diverging claims regarding the nature of the object under discussion confront one another in a test of fallibility, with the “better” theory eventually emerging the victor and thus qualifying as knowledge. It is this “criticism of rivals” process as practiced in the natural sciences that, according to Turvey, ought to structure all theoretical activity, including film theorizing.

However, there is nothing in Rodowick’s account, or in the history of theorizing in the humanities as such, to suggest a renewed philosophy of humanities would or even

\textsuperscript{120} Ibid., 112.
\textsuperscript{121} Ibid.
could disavow the practice of critiquing rivals. On the contrary, Rodowick clearly affirms that humanistic inquiry is fundamentally litigious: it is organized, and in fact primarily sustains itself, on the basis of disagreements over the object of its knowledge. Indeed, not unlike the natural sciences, it is the very purpose of the human sciences to adjudicate from among rival claims.

There are reasons, however, why we ought to resist the temptation to apply the principle of dialectical criticism, as conceived by Turvey and Carroll, to the human sciences. Put simply, such a principle cannot be applied indiscriminately to spheres of knowledge that do not share the same means of adjudication and that rely on dissimilar criteria to certify knowledge. Although Turvey states that the experimental and mathematical protocols of the natural sciences are inappropriate in the context of the human sciences, he nonetheless believes its method of theorizing can and ought to be applied to humanistic inquiry. It is, however, those very protocols that govern the adjudication process in the natural sciences. Formal equations, predictive models, laboratory experiments—from the perspective of the natural sciences, there is no separating these activities from the dialectical sorting of claims they regulate, for their very purpose is to ensure such claims satisfy the cardinal criteria of non-fallibility and universalizability. A claim arrived at in the absence of such protocols would, rightly, fail to qualify as scientific knowledge. Experimental and mathematical protocols are inextricable from the dialectical principle by which “better” theories are determined in the natural sciences. Consequently, it would be inappropriate to apply a scientifically-derived concept of dialectical criticism to a sphere of knowledge that does not share the
same epistemic criteria as the natural sciences and in which experimental and mathematical methods are inapplicable.

Per Rodowick, the modes of inquiry appropriate to the humanities must accommodate the temporality unique to human social activities. As he says, “Aesthetic inquiry must be sensitive to the variability and volatility of human culture and innovation; their epistemologies derive from (uneven) consensus and self-examination of what we already know and do in the execution of daily life.”122 Turvey does not directly address the question of temporality in his rebuttal to Rodowick, but he tacitly opposes Rodowick’s view on the matter. Film theories, he says, “should be formulated through dialectical criticism of rivals because it is only by proposing better theories of film that film theory can make progress.”123 On the presumption that the laws of art and culture are time-independent, and therefore subject to tests of fallibility, Turvey believes that our understanding of them must therefore unfold teleologically. Like our knowledge of the laws of nature, our knowledge of culture evolves from an original state of ignorance, is acquired or accumulates by means of a dialectical process that sorts winners and losers, and culminates in an ideal or universal state. But the temporality unique to human history means that its investigation does not make “progress,” in Turvey’s scientific sense of the term; as we’ve seen, its epistemology is not teleological. We neither begin in a state of pure ignorance regarding our object of study, nor is a universal consensus possible since ethical considerations of value are fundamental to the process. Turvey’s is not an isolated case. To my knowledge, the post-theory movement has yet to address the issue of

123 Turvey, 112. Italics added.
temporality and teleology in any substantive manner. And in the absence of a viable alternative, the human sciences cannot do without theory, or, if you like, a philosophy of the humanities.

**The Humanities: Aesthetics and Politics**

The process of remodelling the humanities in the image of either the social or natural sciences erodes our ability to inquire into the politics of aesthetics, and with it, the politics of film. If we are to pose the question of how the art of film is implicated in politics, it is necessary to consider the various ways it has been put to use in configuring (and therefore, per Rancière, “distributing” or sharing) the sensible environment; that is, it is necessary to consider the matter in the context of aesthetics. Instrumentalizing research of art and culture in order to serve the objectives of the social sciences marginalizes this form of inquiry to the extent that aesthetics is not amenable to quantification. Meanwhile, the politics of aesthetics cannot be accounted for from the teleological perspective of science since the condition of aesthetics is historical and non-teleological, in Rodowick’s sense, and thus cannot be submitted to tests of fallibility nor reduced to a set of causal laws.

**Cultural Studies**

To close our discussion of how institutional shifts have contributed to the marginalization of the question of politics from film theory I want to examine what happens to this question in the context of another discipline or field housed within the
humanities: cultural studies. At first blush, cultural studies would seem to offer the ideal disciplinary context for inquiring into the politics of film. After all, the guiding mandate of cultural studies is to facilitate and further the study of the relationship between cultural practices and power.

If the mediascape constitutes the object that gives media studies its sense of coherence, then ideology, in its widest sense, might be said to serve the same purpose for cultural studies. This is as much to say that, even more so than media studies—for whom politics is ostensibly incidental to its broader interest in the mediascape, which always and inevitably frames the question of politics—cultural studies is political in its very constitution. It should therefore come as no surprise that when film theory undertook, via post-theory and film-phenomenology, to leave behind the legacy of political modernism, the question of politics as it relates to film found refuge in the welcoming arms of cultural studies.

Cultural studies provides a safe harbour for a politicized study of film on account not only of its critical interest in the intersection of politics and culture, but also because it is generally amenable to the activist principle motivating the new humanities. By and large, cultural studies considers itself not only a contributor to our knowledge of the social order, but just as equally an agent of change whose task it is to dismantle the inequities that plague that order. There is, then, a practical spirit animating cultural studies that aligns rather neatly with the reformist agenda to equip the humanities with

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the power to address pressing social and economic concerns. Cultural studies thus not only survives in the context of a reformed humanities but thrives. Its relative success in this new context, coupled with its avowedly political orientation, is the reason it can provide such a robust environment for research that brings film and politics together. The result is that embarking on research of a political nature for a film scholar today inevitably means engaging in depth with cultural studies, or even proceeding directly from within a cultural studies framework.

From its inception, cultural studies has advocated strongly for the rights of the dispossessed and disenfranchised, and it is difficult to overstate just how indispensable the field has become to the broader struggle for a more inclusive and just social order. By sheltering and nourishing such areas of research as critical race, queer, and feminist studies, it has been remarkably effective in helping to mitigate some of the worst effects of patriarchal capitalism’s deep-seated animosity towards difference. While this legacy is to be defended and admired, cultural studies is not without its limitations. In particular, it is as inhospitable as media studies to questions that examine politics from the perspective of aesthetics, albeit for different reasons.

Recall that media studies is organized around the study of those constituent parts (characters, plots, textual forms) that come together into more-or-less cohesive social or communal narratives. In this respect, media studies trains its gaze on what a society says to itself or to other societies. Consequently, it often seeks out a critical mass (of spectators, auditors, users, authors, contributors etc.) on which to base its findings, since it assumes that the value of a claim is proportional to the size of the pool from which it is
deduced. By contrast, cultural studies is more inclined to look past official statements to wonder at what hidden forces, systems, or structures governs their utterance. To borrow psychoanalytic concepts, we might say that media studies remains at the conscious level of a society whereas cultural studies takes an interest in its unconscious. It does so in the belief that statements can be read for more than their literal meaning, that they not only harbour unspoken agendas but can be rife with tensions, excesses, irrationalities, and outright contradictions—in a word, difference. Because it tends to construe its object of study as something structural or systemic, cultural studies has little use for statistics and other forms of quantified knowledge. Rather than accumulate data, it finds its footing in treating the text as a symptom of something that exceeds the text itself, and that under normal or quotidian conditions escapes conscious thought. In a symptomatic reading, the apparent surface of a text is bypassed in the search for some underlying motive or pre-textual determining force, on the basis of which the significance of the text is subsequently reconsidered. A study undertaken from a cultural studies perspective will thus need relatively fewer examples to make its point, and often only one cultural artefact or instance of expression will occupy the whole of its attention.

In attempting to take the measure of ideology through a symptomatic reading of a text or collection of texts, cultural studies looks not to what society says to itself or to other societies regarding what it is or who its members are. The material it is interested in

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125 Its interest in ideology seems to align cultural studies with the discourse of political modernism. Unlike that discourse, however, cultural studies insists on a conceptualization of the subject unfettered from normative reading or viewing habits, one capable of subverting the intended meaning of a given text. See Stuart Hall, “Encoding/decoding,” in *Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies*, ed. Stuart Hall et al. (Routledge, 2015), 128–37.
does not consist of the narrative elements that bring a community together and constitute it as such. Rather, because its goal is to account for the relationship between depth and surface, cultural studies is drawn to what mediates those two dimensions: representation. In the concept of representation, cultural studies discovers the mechanism that links structural or systemic forces to expressions made manifest in daily life; indeed, it is only owing to the concept of representation that a symptomatic reading has any coherence as such.

It is by virtue of their status as symptoms, which is to say their role in mediating power and expression, that representations are thought to define a certain kind of politics. The assumption here is that the relation between representation and referent is amenable to manipulation and, as such, is routinely exploited for political purposes. This can be stated in another way. From a cultural studies perspective, biases and distortions in representations can be attributed to an underlying cause: structural power relations organized asymmetrically; or, a will to power with a vested interest in circulating false or misleading representations. The concern is that misrepresentations serve to both justify and perpetuate the imbalance of power a privileged class sustains at the expense of the disenfranchised. Thus (mis)representations are deployed to effectively marginalize a social group, whose subsequent status as marginalized is taken to justify the very (mis)representations that excluded them in the first place. The act of misrepresenting is thereby equated with subjugation, and its continuation as a practice is considered a major impediment to the political project of realizing a more inclusive social order.\(^{126}\) To

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\(^{126}\) Two examples from film studies are representative of this mode of inquiry: Tommy Gustafsson, *Masculinity in the Golden Age of Swedish Cinema: A Cultural Analysis of 1920s Films* (Jefferson, North
understand why the politics of film or of aesthetics commands little attention in this context, it is worth examining in more detail the forms of political resistance called for in the cultural studies program.

Cultural studies grounds a critique of the asymmetries of power relations on the basis of the identities that are supposedly constitutive of those relations. Identity politics operates on the premise that marginalized social groups are chronically misrepresented by the dominant class in the interest of maintaining their hegemony. Such a view assumes a distinction between good and bad representations; that is, between representations that correspond to a given subject’s social identity and those that, through either ignorance or misconduct, misconstrue that identity. On this basis, cultural studies proposes two forms of resistance. On the one hand, representational biases in the media are to be exposed, and misrepresentations identified as such. This is the critical and evaluative side of cultural studies. On the other, a self-representational strategy in which the social subject claims the exclusive right to represent itself, or in which self-representations are asserted as the only legitimate and authentic kind, is to be pursued at all times. This is its prescriptive side. Taken together, these measures add up to a program whose goal is to more closely align representation with subjective identity, and in this way contribute to the larger project of dismantling, challenging, or resisting the asymmetrical relations of power that generate and perpetuate a class of the disenfranchised.  

127 It is on this basis that


cultural studies can be said to sustain a critical interest in, and indeed put into practice, an identity politics or politics of representation. In isolating identity as the site of resistance, cultural studies finds itself preoccupied with the quality of representations put into circulation, or with the degree to which a given representation matches its designated subject.

Here we might note a distinction between cultural and aesthetic approaches when it comes to the question of politics. The role of the cultural scholar is to defend and accommodate identities as they are thought to be authentically experienced by groups that are socially marginalized, underrepresented, vilified, or otherwise subjugated. In this context, culture is presumed to be composed of a depth and a surface whose interrelation is a question of power. Accordingly, a symptomatic reading is thought to constitute a political intervention.

Aesthetic research is different. At its most general, aesthetics wishes to account for how intelligible forms arise from, or are given shape with, the elements that constitute the sensible environment. When politicized, such a style of knowing looks not to the degree of correspondence between image and subject, but rather to the modes of being the logic of a given sensory order permits or encourages. Hence Plato’s concern that art provides the opportunity for social subjects to lapse into what he considers a false mode of being, and thereby become diverted from their ethical commitments to the community. Or Walter Benjamin’s enthusiasm for technological reproducibility, which he speculated would provide the masses with a mode of being commensurate with their revolutionary status. In this sense, aesthetics does not take social identity as consisting of a true reality
behind a false or misleading representation, but rather approaches it as a product of the sensory order within which it circulates, and dependent on the logic of that order for its coherence. To the extent that its emphasis remains on the problem of bias in representations, cultural studies overlooks how aesthetics, as defined above, is implicated in politics. The result is that by forgoing queries into aesthetics, cultural studies reduces the problem of film’s politics to one of representation and identity.

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As we’ve seen, the politics of film has a rich and storied history. But pressure to reconstruct film theory after the so-called crisis of political modernism entailed censuring the question of politics altogether. Film theory was expressly targeted by reformers internal to the field on the basis of two interrelated suppositions: that it was unduly politicized, and indeed wantonly partisan; and that it was overly indebted to a defective or corrupt idea of theory, one which encouraged inappropriately speculative analysis and rested on suspect assumptions rather than on the firmer ground of empirical evidence. In either case, film theory was felt to be contaminated by the question of politics, and so this question had to be scrubbed from the field. At the same time, broader institutional reforms, in which the humanities are increasingly modelled on the social and natural sciences, has eroded the capacity to revisit the question of the politics of film from the perspective of aesthetics. And although cultural studies is avowedly political, it effectively reduces the question of politics to one of identity and representation, and neglects the more fundamental role of aesthetics.
In the chapters that follow, I examine how the philosophy of Jacques Rancière provides the theoretical grounds and conceptual tools for reviving the question of the politics of film. I show how Rancière inflects the history of thinking the politics of film by revoking the longstanding premise that every film is political or that film’s politics is grounded in its ontology. According to Rancière, film is not constitutionally political. Its politics does not originate from within itself as an ontological fact, but rather is tied to aesthetic practice, or what he calls the “idea of art” that organizes a given film text. Consequently, a renewed inquiry into the politics of film on the terms established by Rancière need not, as we’ll see, entail the politicization of the wider field. Before taking up the question of Rancière’s intervention in the debates of film theory, however, it is worth examining in more detail the broader philosophical project of Jacques Rancière, a task to which the following chapter is devoted.
Chapter 2

Jacques Rancière and the Politics of Aesthetics

Politics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of space and the possibilities of time.¹

[A]esthetics acts as configurations of experience that create new modes of sense perception and induce novel forms of political subjectivity.²

Since the collapse of political modernism, the question of the politics of film has lain dormant in film theory. To the extent that this question enriches the field, it is worth considering how we might revive it. The memory of political modernism complicates the task, however. The scope of the critical attacks sustained by political modernism, coupled with the continued mistrust in which it is held by so many in the field, ensure that the attempt will be met with a great deal of skepticism. For it to become a sustainable discourse, a revitalized inquiry into the politics of film must accomplish two things: it must establish a rigorous philosophical foundation; it must open up a critical distance between itself and the discourse of political modernism. This chapter is devoted to these tasks.

Jacques Rancière³

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² Ibid., 9.
³ I must warn the reader that in the following exegesis of Rancière’s aesthetico-political philosophy, I make extensive use of direct quotes from primary sources. In support of his thesis regarding the distribution of
The question before us is how to re-imagine the link between politics and film without lapsing into either the politics of the mediasphere or the politics of representation. If there is a politics to film as a distinct art, one must seek it elsewhere, at the level of aesthetics. Accordingly, to once again raise the specific question of the politics of film, one must ask a more general question: what is the relationship between politics and aesthetics? Jacques Rancière’s entire philosophical project has been devoted to exploring this question.4

What would become Rancière’s life-long project took root in the ruins of the May ‘68 student and worker uprising, in light not only of the ultimate failure of the protesters to secure the sweeping social and political changes they sought, but also in view of the official left’s condemnation of the protests.5 A spontaneous and disorganized challenge to the legitimacy of the prevailing regimes of power, the uprising was not sanctioned by any political party or institution. This was unacceptable for the officials of the French Communist Party, who insisted on retaining the sole right to speak for the left and to implement its agenda. Rancière was struck by this lack of solidarity, for the students and workers were seeking precisely the kind of social revolution the official left ostensibly


championed. It motivated Rancière to break with his teacher, Louis Althusser, who toed the party line, and set him on a philosophical path to rethink the very nature of the political.⁶

**Disagreement**

The principle of political interlocution is thus disagreement; that is, it is the discordant understanding of both the objects of reference and the speaking subjects.⁷

What Rancière deduced from the failure of the protests and the betrayal of the Party was that politics could not be reduced to the struggle between competing ideological programs, between the conflicting policy proposals of left and right, between the ceaseless turf war of revolutionaries and reactionaries. After all, the students and workers ostensibly shared the same social and political agenda as the official left. What transpired between them was, rather, what Rancière would call a “disagreement,” by which he means something other than a dispute over an object of mutual interest. For Rancière, disagreement designates primarily a discursive situation in which there is a lack of accord over who qualifies as a legitimate interlocutor; that is, over who has the right to speak and participate in a collective debate. Thus, what constituted the transgression on the part of the students and workers in the eyes of the Party was not that they insisted on amendments to its official program, but that they asserted their status as legitimate

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speakers, and thereby usurped the discursive authority (or “logos”) that the Party had always appropriated for itself. It is in this sense that disagreement serves as the basis of politics.

Rancière develops this claim on the basis of certain passages in Aristotle’s *Politics*. He notes that Aristotle defines the political initially by distinguishing between two types of vocalizations: the inchoate cries and murmurings we tend to associate with animality; the linguistic utterances of humans. Both animals and humans have a voice and can therefore communicate, but only the latter are capable of speech. According to Aristotle, speech is a necessary prerequisite for framing a common world, since only language can transform abstract concepts such as justice into objects of perception. Rancière fixates on the specific passage where Aristotle makes this claim: “humans alone have perception of good and evil, the just and the unjust etc. It is the sharing of a common view in these matters that makes a household and a state.”8 Rancière argues that the difference between these two types of vocalizations amounts to two distinct modes of access to sense experience. Those deprived of the logos can only register and express immediate sensation, whereas those invested with the power of speech are able to assimilate sensation into the collective project of erecting a world in common. An animal can only groan in displeasure. But a human can articulate a grievance and express a demand for justice.

**The Juridical Basis of the Community**

Characteristically, Rancière takes an unremarkable concept—in this case, justice—and appropriates it for his own purposes. For Rancière, justice is not to be confused with the pursuit of balance as regards interests and power. Nor is it to be identified with the practice of ensuring that no one in the community profits from others excessively or suffers unduly at the hands of another. Rather, for Rancière justice refers to the practice of determining what is common to those in a community, and that thereby identifies and sustains the community as such. A grievance can only be addressed to fellow members of a community; it can only be aired from within a communal discursive space in which complaints from fellow members are received as legible signals. Conversely, those excluded from participating in the community emit only unintelligible noise, since whatever it is they have to say is utterly inconsequential.

Logos is therefore necessary to frame a common world, which it does by enabling the adjudication what is just and what is unjust. This process of adjudication, however, amounts to the partitioning and sharing of the commons. As Rancière explains, “[justice] begins when what is at issue is what citizens have in common and when the main concern is with the way the forms of exercising and of controlling the exercising of this common capacity are divided up.” Rather than concerning itself with individual cases of reparations and retributions, then, justice is the “choice of the very measuring rod by which each party takes only what is its due.” Or, more precisely, “It is the order that determines the partition of what is common.”

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9 Ibid., 5.
10 Ibid.
The juridical basis of the community thus raises the question of apportionment. However, the matter does not solely concern the sharing of communal spoils among interested parties. The more fundamental question relates to the logic according to which apportionment takes place. Following Aristotle, Rancière identifies at least three such “measuring rods”: oligarchy (rule by the wealthy), aristocracy (rule by the meritorious or the noble), democracy (rule by the people or demos). Not all regimes are created equal, however. Both oligarchic and aristocratic regimes (Rancière will eventually reduce both to the class of the “rich”) assume an account of the commons in which there is no remainder or supplement such that all of the parts that make up the whole are strictly accounted for. This is achieved by allotting shares according to a precise mathematical formula—a geometric ideal—in which the amount of wealth or the extent of noble lineage accords precisely with domination. Oligarchs and aristocrats both claim entitlement to greater shares on the basis of their greater contribution to the commons; they simply expect to get back in shares what they contribute in value. Rancière explains it the following manner, pointedly taking up the language of classical political philosophy: “For the city to be ordered according to the good, community shares must be strictly in proportion to the axia of each part of the community: to the value it brings to the community and to the right that this value bestows on it to hold a share of common power.”

11 Ibid., 6. Italics in original.
The Demos

But democracy, in Rancière’s idiosyncratic sense of the word, is a special case. When the demos is introduced as a part of the whole, it must by necessity be accounted for. But what does the demos contribute that would qualify it for a share of the commons? Nothing, says Rancière, except “freedom.” In contrast to wealth and nobility, however, freedom is an “empty property.” Freedom cannot be submitted to mathematical calculations with respect to the allotment of shares because not only does it make no positive contribution to the commons, it is also an attribute shared by all members of a community. Freedom cannot be used to distinguish one class from another because it belongs as much to the oligoi and aristoi as to the demos. This is what makes democracy unique among the various regimes of adjudication. When the demos insists, on the basis of a fundamental freedom, to be counted as part of the whole—to be, that is, of account—they are asserting a principle that thwarts the very of logic of entitlement. This is the principle of equality: the demos is the equal of those who are otherwise superior to them with respect to other virtues because they share in precisely the same freedom. Thus, even though the demos makes no positive contribution to the commons, it insists on its equality with respect to the community on the basis of its freedom, a property that is shared equally among all parts and parties.

A juridical crisis is precipitated when those without the prerequisite qualifications for a share in the commons are identified with those—the wealthy or meritorious—who claim such qualifications. On the basis of a strict egalitarianism, the demos identifies

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12 Ibid., 6-9.
itself with “the people,” which is to say, with the community as such. Its membership status in the community is thus paradoxical: it is at once part and whole, both the part that comprehends the other parts and the part deemed of no account because its members have no rightful claim to any shares. Rancière will underscore this paradox by making repeated reference to the demos and their lot as “the part of those who have no part.” It is the part that is included in the count of the community only in the form of a supplement: it is at once present and unaccounted for. The appearance of the demos thereby confounds any effort to carve up the shares of the commons according to a mathematical or proportional logic. As a result, the demos announces a crisis in the proper apportionment of communal shares because it yields “a false count, a double count, or a miscount.”

Politics vs. Police

Rancière will challenge received notions of what constitutes the political with the following claim: the juridical crisis precipitated by the demands of the demos does not merely qualify as political—it is in fact identical with politics. It is not that politics emerges after the fact as a kind of mechanism for recuperating the demos into the whole, or for fashioning a new consensus among the various parts and parties with respect to the distribution of common lots. Politics is the crisis itself, the very appearance in the community of a supplement as represented in the form of the demos and as expressed in the principle of equality. The demos must not be confused with a specific social class or an empirically calculable group of individuals. The scandal of the demos is not that it is

\[13\] Ibid., 6.
one class among others that merely clamours for a greater share of the commons. The
demos is scandalous because it identifies itself with the community in a way that levels
all hierarchies and dispenses with the very notion of class. The demos should not,
therefore, be understood in terms of synecdoche, as a part that stands for the whole.
Rather, it insists on its identification with the whole itself. The demos is any instance of
this identification, whether the actual demos of Athens who challenged aristocratic rule in
the time of Solon, the great Plebian Secessions that ruptured the patrician order of ancient
Rome, or the proletarian agitations of modern capitalist societies. In each case—demos,
plebs, proles—their appearance in the community asserted an egalitarian principle
whereby the usual alignment of individuals with social categories was disrupted. All that
remained, thereby, was “the people.”

Symmetrically, those who insist on the impossibility of a part of those who have
no part—typically the wealthy and noble—are constitutive of the anti-political. From
their perspective, the kind of axiomatic equality announced by the demos is
fundamentally incommensurable with the reality of social divisions as measured by
relative contributions to the commons. Rancière will give this anti-political logic a
familiar name: the police. Not to be confused with the armed wing of the state or security
officials as such, the police is that which seeks to ensure the neutralization of politics. As
Rancière explains, he conceives the police as that “set of procedures whereby the
aggregation and consent of collectivities is achieved, the organization of powers, the
distribution of places and roles, and the system for legitimizing that distribution.”

The system of party politics with which we are familiar and which is nominally responsible for achieving a consensus from among rival ideological visions thus falls within the police order. According to police logic, there are only ever “those of substance and those of no account, elites and unwashed masses, experts and ignorant fools”—those with the proper qualifications and those without.

Before even enforcing the rules that parcel out common lots, then, the police is entrusted with ensuring that the social order is properly configured. This means that, on the basis of a certain regime of visibility and audibility, an accord is rigorously maintained between a mode of being on the one hand (ways of saying and doing) and a specific class or category on the other. This “distribution of places and roles” is perhaps the key function of the police. Rancière will summarizes this function in the following passage, which is worth quoting in its entirety:

The police is, essentially, the law, generally implicit, that defines a party’s share or lack of it. But to define this, you first must define the configuration of the perceptible in which one or the other is inscribed. The police is thus first an order of bodies that defines the allocation of ways of doing, ways of being, and ways of saying, and sees that those bodies are assigned by name to a particular place and task; it is an order of the visible and the sayable that sees that a particular activity is visible and another is not, that this speech is understood as discourse and another as noise.

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14 Ibid., 28. It should be noted that “police” is not a derogatory term for Rancière. It is merely the unqualified name he gives to the regime of consensus that brings a community together, and he allows that some police regimes might be eminently preferable to others.
15 Ibid., 14.
16 Ibid., 29.
The police secures the integrity of the social body by first establishing a regime of the visible and the audible in which names and things are set in alignment, and then by ensuring that everyone (every “body”) knows their place and role within this regime, which is to say that they abide by the particular rules that configure the perceptible. It is not so much that politics substitutes its own configuration for the existing social order as that it negates the very idea of configuration or suspends its implementation. As supplement or lack, the demos cannot be accounted for within any possible configuration of places and roles since it asserts equality as an axiomatic principle that levels all hierarchies. In a perfect police state—and Rancière will often cite Plato’s Republic as the archetype—a supplement or lack is impossible to recognize and countenance. Consequently, the police insist that there is no such thing as politics, and that, moreover, there never was and never will be.

**The Aesthetics of Politics**

Politics is not made up of power relationships; it is made up of relationships between worlds.\(^{17}\)

Politics is by no means a reality that might be deduced from the necessities leading people to gather in communities. Politics is an exception in relation to the principles according to which this gathering occurs.\(^ {18}\)

By virtue of the perceptual or sensible basis of the social body, Rancière will claim that politics is a matter of aesthetics. To understand more fully what Rancière means by the “aesthetics of politics,” we must return to the distinction Aristotle makes

\(^{17}\) Ibid., 42.
\(^{18}\) Ibid., 43.
between two types of vocalizations: on the one hand, there are those who emit what amounts to noise, while on the other there are those capable of making an intelligible utterance. Police logic applies this distinction in constituting the community. Those who are granted the right to speak on behalf of their interests are by definition those who are of account, who are included in the count of all parts and parties. But those excluded from participating in the sharing of the commons—typically the great majority—are not merely forced into silence, or have their objections heard only to be dismissed. As Aristotle makes clear, theirs is a more severe kind of phonic exclusion. From the perspective of the police, those who have no part in the community are thereby consigned to the sphere of animality whose plaintive cries are incommensurable with the logos that frames a common world.

What qualifies the demos as political is that it upsets this distinction. The police order is confounded by the demos because although it should, by rights, lack the capacity for speech, it nonetheless demonstrates this capacity. This demonstration obliges the police to treat the demos as a countable part—that is, a part that needs to be accounted for. But its perennial status as supplement, as “the part of those who have no part,” makes such an accounting impossible.

To avoid its rupture as the hands of politics, the police order wishes to insist on the feral character of the demos. As an example, Rancière cites Plato, for whom the demos is akin to a “large and powerful animal” capable only of roaring in jubilation or hissing in displeasure. According to Rancière, Plato must be taken literally: “The metaphor of the large and powerful animal is no simple metaphor: it serves to rigorously
reject as animals those speaking beings with no position who introduce trouble into the logos and into its political realization as analogia of the parts of the community.\textsuperscript{19} In these remarks, Rancière clarifies what Plato finds so disturbing about the demos: it usurps the privilege of the logos and, in so doing, “troubles” the count of community parts.

Rancière will adopt the term “wrong” to identify the juridical crisis precipitated by the incursion of the demos into the community. But Rancière wants us to understand this term in its double sense—wrong both morally and logically. In the first sense, the demos is the wronged party of any social order: all speaking beings who are wrongly denied the capacity for speech. But in its second sense, the demos is the supplement that introduces a logical error into the count of the community and, consequently, disturbs the coherence of the social order. As Rancière says, “For Plato, the mob of anonymous speaking beings who call themselves the people does wrong to any organized distribution of bodies in community.”\textsuperscript{20}

It is not the case, therefore, that the police fears the demos as a threat to its hold on power. That is not the nature of their opposition. If it were, then it would simply be a matter of direct suppression. The fundamental wrong of the demos that so troubles the police and that makes its neutralization so problematic is that its very existence should not be possible. The juridical basis of the social order is founded on the distinction that confers on a minority the power of the logos and excludes all others as irredeemably feral, or wholly deprived of this power. It is only by virtue of this distinction that the social order (which is identical, ultimately, to the police) secures its coherence.

\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 22.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid.
According to Rancière, this is as much to say that the logic that binds a community together is a sensory one. It is owing to a certain kind of “common sense”—a shared aisthēsis or “con-sensus”—that the various parts and parties of a community come together into a discrete social body. From the perspective of the police, the demos is an impossible being because it does not “make sense”—it speaks when it should not be able to and from a place in the community that does not exist. That it appears in the midst of the otherwise regulated social order at all confounds the very logic on which the police is predicated.

Dissensus

The essence of politics is the manifestation of dissensus as the presence of two worlds in one.21

The fundamental dispute of politics, which arises out of the opposition between the demos and the police, concerns the confrontation between two regimes of sensory experience. The speaking minority and the feral majority do not share a world in common. They are separated by the logos, which alone has the power to frame a common world. The demos brings these two sensory regimes into collision by demonstrating that the great animal mass is, in fact, capable of intelligible speech. The meeting of these two irreconcilable worlds is the political moment. Because it does violence to the reigning consensus that coordinates the collection of functions and places that make up the social body, Rancière will resort to the term “dis-sensus” to describe this moment. For Rancière,

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democratic dissensus constitutes a “gap in the sensible” expressed as a radical
disagreement over the fundamental elements that are necessary to organize a common
world, such as “the givens of a particular situation, of what is seen and what might be
said, on the question of who is qualified to see or say what is given.” It is not the
specifics of what the demos says that constitutes the dispute of politics, then, but rather
the very fact that it proves itself capable of wielding the logos.

But the transition from dumb mass to intelligible interlocutor is never assured and
always precarious. Before even engaging in an exchange of ideas and perspectives the
demos must first intervene aesthetically and “stage” the “scene” upon which such an
exchange can take place. The reason is simple enough: such a scene or space does not
exist prior to its staging by the demos. He makes this point explicit in the following
passage:

In order to enter into political exchange, it becomes
necessary to invent the scene upon which spoken words
may be audible, in which objects may be visible, and
individuals themselves may be recognized. It is in this
respect that we may speak of a poetics of politics.

Correlatively, without such a stage upon which to perform its speech act, the demos itself
does not exist. To demonstrate that it, too, is endowed with the power of the logos, the
demos must “play” the part in a scene of its own invention and at a place it must itself
construct. Rancière cites a number of celebrated historical cases, but he finds one in
particular to be exemplary: the first plebeian secession in 494 BCE on the Aventine Hill
near Rome. The plebs gathered on this hill to threaten secession from the patrician order

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23 Ibid., 116.
that ruled Ancient Rome unless their grievances were addressed. As legend has it, the patricians sent Consul Menenius Agrippa to quell the revolt and return the plebs to their proper place. To be clear, there was no question of entering into negotiation or discussion with the plebs “for the simple reason,” says Rancière, “that plebs to not speak.” But with Aventine Hill serving as a staging ground, the plebs greeted Menenius with an alternative to the sensory order whose preservation he was sent to secure: they spoke, and to Menenius’ great surprise he found their speech intelligible. Quite simply, by erecting a podium from which to make themselves visible and audible, and then conducting themselves as speaking beings capable of articulating a demand for a justice, they obliged Menenius to consider the possibility that they were, in fact, of account. Faced with this scene and in the grip of its dissensual logic, Menenius spoke to them as he would to his fellow patricians: not as feral creatures to be cowed but as equals before the power of the logos, endowed with precisely the same capacity to frame a world in common. This response made no sense to the patrician leaders. As Rancière explains, the patricians were convinced that Menenius was the victim of a “sensory illusion” because “he imagined that words were issuing from the mouths of plebs when logically the only thing that could issue forth was noise.”

**Subjectification**

Politics is a matter of subjects or, rather, modes of subjectification.  

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26 Ibid., 35.
According to Rancière, what happens on a political stage to those who mount it is a process of “subjectification.” By this, Rancière is referring to the fact that politics dis-aligns modes of being with the categories that constitute an ordered society. Recall that the primary function of the police, in Rancière’s sense, is to set up and enforce a sensory regime in which words and things are placed into a specific correspondence such that identities (or “names”) can be assigned to specific bodies, and bodies assigned to specific places. Politics opposes this regime with a counter logic expressed as an inverted sensorium in which names, bodies, and places are uncoupled and remain precariously unconfigured. The result, says Rancière, is the “opening up of a subject space” in which bodies, emancipated from their police-sanctioned task and place, take on unsanctioned tasks and occupy unsanctioned spaces. Rancière explains that

Political subjectification redefines the field of experience that gave to each their identity with their lot. It decomposes and recomposes the relationship between ways of doing, of being, and of saying that define the perceptible organization of the community, the relationships between the places where one does one thing and those where one does something else, the capacities associated with this particular doing and those required for another.²⁷

Ultimately, the subjectification process so defined is co-extensive with the appropriation of the logos by the demos. In demonstrating its capacity for speech—not only to be heard but to be understood—the demos introduces an egalitarian logic that authorizes anyone, anywhere, at anytime to say anything to anyone else. In Rancière’s words: “By subjectification I mean the production through a series of actions of a body and a capacity for enunciation not previously identifiable within a given field of experience, whose

²⁷ Ibid., 40.
identification is thus the reconfiguration of the field of experience.” 28 It is through subjectification that the disorder characteristic of all politics is at its most conspicuous.

One way of approaching Rancière’s theory of the police and processes of political subjectification is note how it departs from, and indeed is composed explicitly in opposition to, Althusser’s formulation in his famous essay on the workings of ideology. 29 For Althusser, the police is that social force that calls the subject into being through a process of interpellation. The scene of politics consists, on this view, of the subject acquiring its identity when “hailed” by the police, as in “Hey, you there!” 30 Rancière takes this Althusserian political drama and inverts its premises. Whereas Althusser assigns the police an interpellating function, Rancière argues that the subject of politics emerges precisely in conflict with and opposition to police logic. For Rancière, “police intervention in public spaces does not consist primarily in the interpellation of demonstrators but in the breaking up of demonstrations.” 31 The role of the police is to repress political subjectification by “recalling the obviousness of what there is, or rather, of what there isn’t,” that is, by insisting that the social body is perfectly configured, untroubled by lack or remainder. 32 According to the police, everything and everyone is always and inevitably accounted for. Thus, the slogan announced by the police is not “Hey, you there!” but rather “Move along! There is nothing to see here!” 33 The police insist that public space is reserved solely for this sort of frictionless circulation. Politics,

28 Ibid., 35.
30 Ibid., 118.
31 Rancière, Dissensus, 45.
32 Ibid.
33 Ibid.
by contrast, transforms this space from one of circulation to one of “demonstration.” A subject is one who interrupts the smooth flow of an ordered society by appearing where they shouldn’t be able to, by making visible or “demonstrating” their status as the unaccounted for.

The concept of subjectification clarifies what Rancière means by the miscount attributable to politics—the wrong that so troubles the logos. Rancière explains that on account of its dissensual logic, politics “inscribes a subject name as being different from any identified part of a community.”34 Because it is a process of dis-identification between a given body and the name the police order assigns it, subjectification “produces a multiple that was not given in the police constitution of the community, a multiple whose count poses itself as contradictory in terms of police logic.”35 This is as much to say that the bodies that populate the political stage exist in two worlds—two sensoriums—at once. The same empirical body assigned a specific identity or name—like “woman,” “worker,” or “student,” to use some of Rancière’s examples—complicates that identity by adopting a new mode of being, by saying and doing things that do not accord with who they are supposed to be. When politicized, says Rancière, a woman is “denatured, defeminized,” a subject that “measures the gap between an acknowledged part (that of sexual complementarity) and a having no part.”36 In other words, the body named woman takes on multiple or unfixed identities when striding the political stage,

34 Ibid., 37.
35 Ibid., 36.
36 Ibid.
and so introduces a supplement that make a conclusive count of community parts by the police impossible.

**Axiomatic Equality**

[P]olitical activity is always a mode of expression that undoes the perceptible divisions of the police order by implementing a basically heterogeneous assumption, that of a part of those who have no part, an assumption that, at the end of the day, itself demonstrates the sheer contingency of the order, the equality of any speaking being with any other speaking being.\(^37\)

In undoing the links that bind a given body to a specific social category or mode of being, politics demonstrates that these links have no basis in nature but are, in fact, wholly artificial. When police logic organizes the social body, it does so on the assumption that a speaking minority can be isolated from a feral majority. Its founding principle is therefore inequality, the inequality that privileges those bodies thought to be in exclusive possession of the logos and devalues every other body. Indeed, it is only possible to frame a world in common if you start with inequality as a given. Put another way, police logic must be qualified as fundamentally inegalitarian since the ability to organize and order the social body is predicated on establishing an initial hierarchy between two types of beings. By contrast, when it dis-identifies with its police-sanctioned role, the subject of politics makes manifest the sheer contingency of any social arrangement. That bodies are paired with certain tasks, that they are required to occupy certain spaces, that they remain forbidden from doing something other than their assigned tasks.\(^37\)

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\(^{37}\) Ibid., 30.
task at their assigned place—these are purely contingent matters. Aside from police logic, nothing precludes alternative arrangements and configurations. The contingent nature of the social order is disclosed every time the demos appears and demonstrates that feral beings are misidentified as such, that they can in fact speak and be understood as well as any other body.

In sum, politics thus opposes the principle of inequality—expressed initially as the distinction between speech and noise—with an egalitarian logic, one that posits the fundamental equality of any speaking being with any other speaking being, or axiomatic equality. The process of subjectification, which constitutes the dispute of politics as such, embodies this egalitarian logic. Whereas the principle of inequality calls forth a social order in which bodies and modes of being are placed in strict alignment, axiomatic equality insists on the contingent nature of any social arrangement, and thereby authorizes the dis-alignment of bodies with modes of being.

It is at this point that Rancière’s political philosophy might disappoint those who believe that political emancipation can be institutionalized in the form of, say, a style of government. By its very nature, however, equality can be neither embodied by the state, nor pursued by political actors as a condition to be applied universally. This is for two reasons. The first is that all institutions—including “political” and civic ones—achieve coherence only by submitting to the logic of the police. Communism might idealize equality, but it can only remain viable as an ongoing project by embracing police logic and suppressing subjectification. The other reason is that the attempt to extend equality to others invariably takes the form of pedagogical instruction. And as Rancière will insist
repeatedly, pedagogy is paradigmatic of the anti-political and forever confronts equality as its enemy.38

Here it is imperative to emphasize that the kind of equality of which Rancière speaks is axiomatic in the sense that one assumes it from the outset and proceeds on the basis of this assumption. That one can speak and be understood suffices to demonstrate equality, suffices, that is, to prove that one’s intellect is up to the task of constructing a world in common. Consequently, emancipation is not a condition that can be imposed, nor is it a status to be achieved. Every speaking being already enjoys emancipation by virtue of an equality that links them with every other speaking being. The problem with conventional forms of pedagogy is that it neutralizes equality by pre-emptively establishing a hierarchy between one who knows and one who doesn’t, between the authority of the master and the subservience of the disciple. As conventionally understood, the pedagogical relationship presupposes inequality, and thus only serves to recapitulate it. As Rancière says, “anyone who assumes inequality and proposes to reduce it, can only succeed in setting up a hierarchy of inequalities” and will thereby produce “inequalities ad infinitum.”39 Rancière will eventually settle on the term “stultification” to denote the process whereby the pedagogue generates the very intellectual distance or inequality they set out to annul.

Insofar as it is radically opposed to police logic, politics will only ever exist as an ephemeral event. It is by nature precarious and fleeting since every attempt to fix equality

in institutional form will always set up the conditions for stultification. Rancière makes this clear in the following passage:

[Equality] cannot consist in any form of social bond whatsoever. Equality turns into the opposite the moment it aspires to a place in the social or state organization. Intellectual emancipation accordingly cannot be institutionalized without becoming instruction of the people, in other words, a way of organizing the eternal minority. The two processes must remain absolutely alien to each other, constituting two radically different communities even if composed of the same individuals, the community of equal minds and that of social bodies lumped together by the fiction of inequality.  

Political subjects cannot form a permanent community without succumbing to an inegalitarian police logic that places limits on what can be said and done. The “community of equal minds” is therefore a kind of anti-community in the sense that it is composed of figures who are self-divided as a result of the process of subjectification, and so cannot come together permanently to construct a world in common. As Rancière says: “The essence of equality is in fact not so much to unity as to declassify, to undo the supposed naturalness of orders and replace it with the controversial figures of division. Equality is the power of inconsistent, disintegrative and ever-replayed division.” The idea that equality, so defined, can be institutionalized in the form of a government or social program is thus paradoxical, since the very attempt will be self-defeating.

40 Rancière, Disagreement, 34.
41 The impossibility of institutionalizing equality is one of Rancière’s most controversial claims. It leads many to wonder how political change can thereby be effectuated. See for example Ella Myers, “Presupposing Equality: The Trouble with Rancière’s Axiomatic Approach,” Philosophy & Social Criticism 42, no. 1 (January 2016): 45–69. To my mind, such critiques overlook how Rancière’s concept of the “police,” as the radical opposite of “politics,” is ultimately value-neutral. As he often insists, there are better and worse police orders, and our institution-building efforts ought to be directed towards erecting better ones.
42 Rancière, On the Shores, 33.
The Politics of Aesthetics

The democratic experience is thus one of a particular aesthetic of politics. The democratic man is a being who speaks, which is also to say a poetic being, a being capable of embracing a distance between words and things which is not deception, not trickery, but humanity; a being capable of embracing the unreality of representation.43

If politics is a matter of aesthetics, where does that leave art? By virtue of the aesthetics of politics—as Rancière construes it—the temptation would be to answer that all art is therefore political, since its very business is aesthetics. But this would be to grossly misapply Rancière’s political philosophy to the realm of art. It is worth recalling that Rancière’s definition of aesthetics does not conform to its meaning in art historical contexts or to that branch of philosophy concerned with beauty and taste. For Rancière, aesthetics is more closely tied to its origins in the classical term *aesthesis* and so denotes something like the sensible articulation of an integral world or the process of ordering and sustaining a given sensory regime. The aesthetics of politics takes concrete form in the act of subjectification, in which a given regime of the sensible or a given consensus is opposed by rival partitions of the visible and audible order that, in one way or another, embody a dissensual logic. Politics, as Rancière so memorably puts it, is made up of “relationships between worlds.” Aesthetics, therefore, comprehends all modes of expression that participate in the process of composing regimes of sensibility.

Within this conceptual schema, Rancière often collapses the distinction between poetry and art. For him, art *qua* poetry constitutes the means by which configurations of

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43 Ibid., 51-2.
the sensible takes place. Accordingly, the most fundamental “work of art” is the speech act, here defined as an occasion where links are forged (and/or undone) between words and things. Politics is the result of a disagreement over the givens of a situation, when two incommensurable ways of aligning words and things are brought into contact. This is why Rancière will say that the democratic subject is a poetic being. If a given distribution of the sensible constitutes a regime in which names are affixed to bodies, which in turn circumscribes what can be said and done, political subjects achieve emancipation not by taking up arms but by uncoupling names from bodies. But this is only possible on account of an irreducible gap between words and things that allows for their rearrangement, a gap that also constitutes the very source of poetry. Hence, to embrace democracy is to embrace the poetic constitution of meaning.

Art in its more conventional sense has a crucial role to play in politics, but it is not inherently political. In fact, Rancière repeatedly cautions against reducing art to politics since the very attempt is paradoxical. It implies that both works of art and the artist have a specific destiny to fulfill, that both are restricted to a particular mode of being. Reducing art to politics, then, is a policing gesture that actually neutralizes dissensual logic. So there is no question of identifying art with politics. However, there is the more specific case of so-called critical art, a practice that is self-consciously political in that it wishes to subvert or resist forms of social, economic, and ideological domination. The assumption here is that art has the power to persuade spectators of the necessity to revolt against the dominant order by disclosing the nature of their enslavement to that order. According to Rancière, however, there is no evidence to suggest that critical art has ever
successfully incited any such revolt, and so the very premise must be called into question.\textsuperscript{44}

In addressing critical art’s failure as a political project, Rancière argues that the source of this failure can be traced to its tendency to suppress subjectification rather than enable it. This is on account of the fact that critical art invariably resorts to one of two aesthetic strategies in carrying out its agenda, both of which preempt a dissensual logic from taking hold. In the first, the artist takes forms of social injustice and transforms them directly into art, a practice Rancière calls “indiscrete aestheticism.”\textsuperscript{45} Here the problem is not that art is reduced to politics but the inverse: politics is reduced to art such that the work either loses sensible contact with its political referent or merely mimes the injustice it seeks to remedy. In either case, indiscrete aestheticism can only ever bring social injustice to the awareness of the spectator. The second strategy involves striking a militant tone. Here, the goal is not merely to raise awareness of either injustice in general or a particular case thereof, but to solicit the active participation of the spectator in the effort of resistance called for in the work. Rancière calls this model of critical art “inveterate populism,\textsuperscript{46} and its paradigmatic expression, taken up by, among others, political modernism, is Brecht and his epic theatre. Brecht sought to wake spectators from their supposed ideological stupor by dissolving the boundaries between them and the work so they could experience their enslaved condition more directly. For political

\textsuperscript{44} His most sustained critique of critical art is the essay “The Paradoxes of Political Art,” which can be found in the volume \textit{Dissensus}, 142-159.
\textsuperscript{46} Ibid.
modernism, this was to take the form of a counter-cinema. But in a brilliant analysis, Rancière shows how this strategy cannot but succumb to the stultifying logic of pedagogy.\(^{47}\) In every instance, critical art in the Brechtian mould finds itself setting up the very distance it seeks to annul. In assuming inequality from the outset, the Brechtian work of art will inescapably recapitulate inequality ad infinitum. In sum, whether through indiscrete aestheticism or inveterate populism, critical art embodies the inegalitarian logic of the police because it seeks, by means of instruction, to organize bodies into specific configurations and compel them to a specific form of action.

If art has a political capacity, it is a very general one. Art is political insofar as we consider it an extension of the speech act and acknowledge its capacity to implement dissensus by reorganizing existing regimes of sensibility. The following is perhaps Rancière’s most definitive statement on the matter:

Politics resembles art in one essential point. Like art politics also cuts into that great metaphor where words and images are continuously sliding in and out of each other to produce the sensory evidence of a world in order. And, like art, it constructs novel combinations of words and actions, it shows words borne by bodies in movement to make them audible, to produce another articulation of the visible and the sayable.\(^{48}\)

Art is merely another means by which the logos can be wielded. It has the power to brings words, things, bodies, and spaces, into a certain configuration. It can therefore support the framing of a world in common—a shared \textit{aesthesis}—in which the sensible is


distributed into roles and places. But just as art can knit together a given social reality, so
too can it be used to undo that reality by opposing it with the principle of axiomatic
equality, whose logic discloses the contingency of any distribution of the sensible. Like
speech, art can embrace the poetic constitution of meaning: it can exploit the gap between
words and things in the interests of political subjectification. But it is not naturally or
inevitably political, and there is no question of assigning every work of art, or even a
particular mode of artistic practice, a positive political value.

**Aesthetico-Political Regimes**

It is here that Rancière makes what is perhaps his most significant contribution to
aesthetic, rather than political, philosophy. His argument is that art’s political significance
is to be found not in the work of art *qua* political statement, but in the poetic strategy or
aesthetic logic embodied in and by the work, what Rancière will call simply the “idea of
art” that gives the work its sense of coherence. The shift in emphasis from political
statements to the aesthetic logic that organizes sensible matter into works of art allows
Rancière to conceptualize what he calls “the politics of aesthetics.” What is the difference
between the politics of aesthetics and the aesthetics of politics? Rancière offers some
clarifying remarks in the following passage:

If there is such a thing as an “aesthetics of politics”, it lies
in a re-configuration of the common through political
processes of subjectification. Correspondingly, if there is
such a thing as a “politics of aesthetics”, it lies in the
practices and modes of visibility of art that re-configure the
fabric of sensory experience.\(^49\)

\(^{49}\) Rancière, *Dissensus*, 148.
We might formulate the distinction as follows: the aesthetics of politics concerns the art of making sense; the politics of aesthetics, how we make sense with art.

In pursuing the question of the politics of aesthetics, Rancière identifies three broad “modes of visibility of art”—three traditions, that is, of making sense with art—each with its own political significance: the ethical regime of images, the representative regime of art, and the aesthetic regime of art. His formulation of these “aesthetico-political” regimes is the cornerstone of his aesthetic theory.

**The Ethical Regime of Images**

Rancière identifies what he calls the ethical regime of images with the aesthetic theory of Plato, on which basis he formulates the logic of this regime. Rancière begins by stressing that Plato insists on a strict homology between modes of being and the order of the Republic, a homology summed up in the concept “ethos.” For Plato, the ideal community is radically ethical in that every individual is behaving in a way that harmonizes the various occupations and places that constitute the community as such. Art is therefore permitted in Plato’s Republic but only on the condition that it is made in conformity with the ethos of the community. For Plato, this means two things. The first is that art cannot take the form of simulacra but must serve as an expression of the True. The second is that art must instruct citizens on the ethical organization of the community.

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51 Mason notes that “It is sometimes thought that he banished poetry completely from that state, and indeed some of his own language suggests that, although in fact he allows a place for hymns to the gods and odes in praise of good people.” See his *Plato*, 181.
In both cases, art is assigned a pedagogical role, and indeed art can have no role other than pedagogy in Plato’s Republic. For Plato, art becomes dangerous when it deviates from its pedagogical vocation, since if it is not properly educating the community’s citizens it is likely to have a corrosive influence. The misuse of art can leave the citizenry misinformed, which in turn can disrupt the ethical harmony of the community by inciting bodies to turn away from their assigned task and place, or by blurring the distinctions between identities, activities, and spaces.

The ethical regime of images, then, evaluates art according to the didactic function it serves in relation to the ethical order of a community. Much more so than in the other regimes, art under the auspices of the ethical regime is meant to be highly regulated such that novel configurations of the sensible are outlawed and the range of possibilities for action, speech, and thought thoroughly circumscribed. The most commonplace expression of the ethical regime is censorship, whether in the form of graven image prohibitions, the burning of books, the Hays Code of classical Hollywood, or the parental warning stickers that used to decorate rap records. But its more subtle (and perhaps more ubiquitous) incarnation is as a moral fable, here understood as an idea of art organized with a view towards instructing individuals on the kind of behaviour necessary to ensure the ethical integrity of the community. The moral fable does this primarily by modelling behaviour that is consistent with the community’s ethos. It is thus a class of art that includes Soviet socialist realism as much as children’s literature.

The Representative Regime of Art
If Plato provides the ethical regime with its paradigmatic formulation, Aristotle may be said to do the same for the representative regime. According to Rancière, Aristotle’s key innovation with respect to aesthetico-political regimes is that he liberates art from its ethical function. In the representative regime, art is no longer required to support the ethical constitution of the community: it need not express the True, nor must it necessarily serve a didactic function. Indeed, for Aristotle the virtue of art qua poetry lies precisely with its ability to fashion fictions that have no claim to Platonic Truth. But by fiction Aristotle means something very specific: the arrangement of events into meaningful action that is directed towards specified ends or objectives. For Aristotle, the value of fiction is that it can formally represent—and thus rationalize—the social activities of community members. As against a kind of banal history that merely records empirical life in its brute, successive moments, Aristotle expresses a preference for the arranged actions that transforms life into a poetic spectacle—what he calls *poiesis*.

Aristotle then weds this idea of art to another principle: mimesis. As Rancière explains, Aristotelian mimesis should not be confused with the aesthetic principle of iconic resemblance. Rather, mimesis is the logic according to which the representative poem is to be organized. It stipulates that a good representation is one that harmonizes form and content, genre and subject matter. If poetry is “the fabrication of a plot

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53 As Halliwell notes, it is an all-too-common error to summarize Aristotle’s view of mimesis as the “imitation of nature,” a turn of phrase that, as he says, is nowhere to be found in the Poetics or in any other Aristotelian discussion of poetry.” See his *Aesthetics of Mimesis*, 151.
arranging actions that represent the activities of men,” then the task of the mimetic artist is to ensure that the poem serves to represent these activities accurately. In principle, this means that the categories that organize the social body—identities, activities, spaces—are recapitulated in the work itself in the form of a “mime”: a king on stage must act and speak like a king, a commoner like a commoner, etc. Aristotle believes that for it to “make sense” art must observe this mimetic principle in the forging of its poems. Rather than an ethical homology, then, the representative regime proposes “a homology between the rationality of poetic fiction and the intelligibility of human actions, conceived of as an adequation between ways of being, ways of doing and ways of speaking”—in other words, a mimetic homology.

In what consists the politics of the representative regime? The following remarks by Rancière suggest an answer:

The representative primacy of action over characters or of narration over description, the hierarchy of genres according to the dignity of their subject matter, and the very primacy of the art of speaking, of speech in its actuality, all of these elements figure into an analogy with a fully hierarchical vision of the community.

In other words, the politics of the representative regime can be traced to the hierarchies that it organizes. High genres and low genres are clearly delimited in the representative regime, with each expected to adopt a style appropriate to its subject matter. By virtue of

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55 In Halliwell’s gloss of the same point, he states that “an Aristotelian definition of human ‘action’ has a strongly intentional cast: an action of the kind poetry is concerned with cannot be encompassed by a purely physical description, but must make reference to the reasons, desires, and choices of the agent.” See his *Aesthetics of Mimesis*, 168.
56 Rancière, *Dissensus*, 156.
this mimetic logic, social categories are given precedence over the actual bodies that occupy them, since these identities, activities, and spaces are thought to have a transcendental quality; it is they that endure, whereas the body exists only to perform the social role or “character” it is assigned and with which it is identified, even if only temporarily. Hence the value placed on speech, which creates an intimate bond between bodies and the social categories they inhabit, over the written word, which attenuates that bond. In sum, modes of being in the representative regime are determined in advance, effectively restricting what a body can do and say. It is not that a king becomes incoherent when he speaks like a commoner. It is that he ceases forthwith to be a king, which in turn renders the poem nonsensical. If the representative regime has a politics, then, it has to do with its acquiescence to hierarchical sensory regimes and a corresponding antipathy to an egalitarian logic that would suspend all pre-established ties between bodies and social identities, activities, and spaces. The representative regime thus proposes to evaluate art according to its mimetic status vis-a-vis the hierarchical order it sets about to represent. Everything we consider to be “classical” art, including the specific mode of cinema that bears that name, falls under the category of the representative regime.

The Aesthetic Regime of Art

[The aesthetic regime] strictly identifies art in the singular and frees it from any specific rule, from any hierarchy of the arts, subject matter, and genres. Yet it does so by destroying the mimetic barrier that distinguished ways of doing and making affiliated with art from other ways of doing and making, a barrier that separated its rules from the
First theorized by German philosopher Friedrich Schiller, the aesthetic regime is distinguished by a wish to remove the barriers between art and life. It does this primarily by revoking the mimetic principle that organizes the representative regime, a shift that has far-reaching social and political consequences. In shedding the principle of mimesis, art in the aesthetic regime is liberated from the burden of representing the activities of social subjects. It is therefore indifferent to any rule binding form to content, or genre to subject matter. By the same token, it is averse to a rationalized form of action in which characters are motivated to achieve specific objectives. In the aesthetic regime, meaning no longer derives from the articulation of events into action, and activity loses all purpose and is free to be conducted aimlessly. Because art in the aesthetic regime aspires to the condition of prosaic life, it finds meaning in the passivity of resting objects, as well as in modes of existence unassimilated to the organized structure of a plot. In effect, prosaic life is itself treated as a huge poem or work of art, a collection of expressive signs that lie latent in the fabric of the world itself. Rancière discovers in the realist novel of the nineteenth century the paradigmatic case of such an idea of art. As he explains, “[realism’s] principle was not reproducing facts as they are...It was displaying the so-called world of prosaic activities as a huge poem—a huge fabric of signs and traces, of obscure signs that had to be displayed, unfolded and deciphered.”

Thus, he continues, the vocation of the artist working within the context of the aesthetic regime, such as the realist author, is to “unfold the poeticality, the historicity written on the body of ordinary

58 Ibid., 23.
59 Rancière, *Dissensus*, 162.
Meaning in the representative regime is to be found in the relationship between one will and another—in the exchanges that transpire between social subjects—each striving to achieve a given objective. But the aesthetic regime discovers meaning in the proliferation of signs and their relations that constitute the order of prosaic and expressive life.

The aesthetic regime approaches the condition of the political more readily since it embodies the very egalitarian logic called forth in politics, a logic rejected by both the ethical and representative regimes. Equality is asserted in the aesthetic regime by its very indifference to the coordination of form with content or genre with subject matter. It rescinds all rules that stipulate ways of making and doing, or that discriminate between high and low genres. As Rancière explains, “the negation of any relationship of necessity between a determined form and a determined content” implies “the equality of all subject matter.”

This kind of equality is summed up by Rancière in the concept of “muteness.” In the representative regime, an addressee for a given expression is always assumed: the orator to the popular assembly; the preacher to the flock; the general to the troops. This is how it ties the art of speaking, no less than the speech act itself, to the hierarchies that organize the social order. By contrast, the aesthetic regime discovers that the prosaic world itself is capable of expression. Consequently, it promotes writing over the speech act since the written word constitutes merely one more sign to be deciphered among others in the world. Writing is mute because it is virtually dislocated from any social

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60 Ibid., 163.
category. Unlike speech, the written word can circulate without the support of a specific body, and is thereby free to be read by anyone, anywhere, at anytime, and in varied contexts.

There are therefore two aspects to the muteness of writing according to the logic of the aesthetic regime. First of all, there is the written word, which Plato derisively refers to as “orphaned”: it has no master to guide where it goes, who reads it, what use is made of it. To Plato’s dismay, it can therefore “speak too much.” But by muteness, Rancière is also referring to the expressive meaning that is “written” into the very fabric of the everyday world. In this case, the verbal capacity of the orator is transferred to the prosaic elements of life; in effect, things absorb the power of speech. Thus, as an expression of equality, muteness dismantles hierarchies while also gesturing towards the possibilities of political subjectification. As Rancière explains, the egalitarian logic of muteness “destroys all of the hierarchies of representation and also establishes a community of readers as a community without legitimacy, a community formed only by the random circulation of the written word.”

**Literarity**

This “excess of words” that I call literarity disrupts the relation between an order of discourse and its social function.

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64 Panagia and Rancière, “Dissenting Words,” 115.
The aesthetic regime thus completes the circuit from the politics of aesthetics to the aesthetics of politics. Absent a final authority to dictate the meaning of any given sign or relation of signs, art under the aesthetic regime readily exploits the intrinsic gap between words and things—a precondition for processes of political subjectification. As Rancière is fond of saying, humans are political animals because they are literary animals, and “not only in the Aristotelian sense of using language in order to discuss questions of justice, but also because we are confounded by the excess of words in relation to things.” Rancière sums up the way the excess of words characteristic of language use can be directed towards political ends in the concept “literarity.” Ultimately, literarity is a corollary to the muteness of writing. It is predicated on the assumption that there are endless ways to coordinate words with things, an assumption which assures the mutability of regimes of sensibility. In his words, “literarity refers at once to the excess of words available in relation to the thing named; to that excess relating to the requirements for the production of life; and finally, to an excess of words vis-à-vis the modes of communication that function to legitimate ‘the proper’ itself.” Literality invites the speaker to use language improperly, to configure or reconfigure identities, activities, and spaces into unauthorized distributions of the sensible. This is the capacity that defines the human political animal. Both the ethical and representative regimes, however, disavow literarity in the interest of circumscribing what can be said, done, and thought. The aesthetic regime, however, adopts literarity as its very logic. I close this exegesis with a

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65 Ibid.
66 Ibid.
final quote from Rancière, which lucidly sums up his concept of literarity no less than his more general aesthetico-political philosophy:

Humans are political animals, then, for two reasons: first, because we have the power to put into circulation more words, ‘useless’ and unnecessary words, words that exceed the function of rigid designation; secondly, because this fundamental ability to proliferate words is unceasingly contested by those who claim to ‘speak correctly’—that is, by the masters of designation and classification who, by virtue of wanting to retain their status and power, flat-out deny this capacity to speak.\(^67\)

\(^{67}\) Ibid.
Chapter 3

The Art and Politics of Film

The thesis that cinema constitutes a form of art encounters virtually no opposition today, either in or out of academia. On the other hand, the thesis that cinema is political is eyed with suspicion, even and especially within the academic field of film theory. To be sure, it is widely accepted that individual films continue to take up political themes or traffic in the politics of identity and representation. However, the politics of film formulated as a question of aesthetics is no longer considered credible or tenable as a project. As we’ll see, it is often the case that film’s status as art is affirmed in the same breath that its politics is denied. There is an art to film, it is said, and precisely because of that fact, not a politics.

My purpose in this chapter is to demonstrate how Jacques Rancière’s philosophy, in ways both implicit and explicit, poses a challenge to this premise. In his work on what he calls the politics of aesthetics, Rancière advances the argument that there is invariably a politics to art.1 Consequently, if cinema has an aesthetic dimension, it also, and by the same token, boasts a political one. As we’ll see, Rancière does not agree with the claim that every work of art is political, as the discourse of political modernism presumed about cinema. On the contrary, Rancière insists that politics is something that surfaces only infrequently, in art no less than in other spheres of life. His more subtle claim, which I

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1 See, in particular, his *The Politics of Aesthetics*. I take up his thesis concerning the politics of aesthetics and the distribution of the sensible in Chapter 2. To understand how Rancière’s arguments fit into a wider intellectual history on the subject, see Martin Plot, *The Aesthetico-Political: The Question of Democracy in Merleau-Ponty, Arendt, and Rancière* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014).
explore here, is that politics has a virtual presence in every activity we qualify as aesthetic, even if it is rarely actualized and made manifest.

My objective is to consider this claim in the specific context of film theory. I will begin by identifying and summarizing two distinct discursive traditions in film theory—the poetic and the aesthetic—each of which, in its own way, defends cinema’s claim to art. As we’ll see, neither allows for the possibility that there might also be a politics of film. Drawing on Rancière’s aesthetico-political philosophy, I will then offer a critical perspective on these discursive traditions. One of the claims I will be advancing is that Rancière’s philosophy, and particularly his tripartite model of art’s relation to politics, can bring these two otherwise divergent discourses in film theory under one conceptual schema. In the concluding section, I perform a comparative analysis of the cinema of Alfred Hitchcock and Abbas Kiarostami in order to illustrate the relevance of Rancière’s philosophy to specific cases.

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Theorizing the Art of Cinema

In film theory, there is a rich history of theorizing cinema as art and of theorizing the art of cinema. But the fundamental question of whether cinema constitutes a form of art was generally settled in the affirmative long ago. It is now so entrenched as a premise that film theorists generally accept it uncritically. But perhaps we have become too complacent, for conferring on cinema the status of art is neither natural nor self-evident, nor is doing so without philosophical and political implications. It is therefore worthwhile
to renew our interest in the question of cinema’s status with respect to art. Is cinema an art? If so, what kind of art is it? Is it merely an addition to the pre-cinematic arts? Or is its aesthetic nature of a fundamentally different sort? The need to revive these questions becomes increasingly evident the more one examines the history of the various discourses devoted to affirming the art of cinema, for it turns out that such questions are less settled than we might assume.

In the context of film theory, there are two distinct traditions organized around the claim that cinema constitutes a form of art. While both are committed to defending such a claim, each means something different by the expression “art of cinema.” This disagreement has its source in the divergent aesthetic criteria each tradition relies on to identify and evaluate art, a disagreement that can be traced, ultimately, to Aristotle and the conceptual distinction he makes between poiesis and aisthesis. For each concept of art handed down by Aristotle, a distinct tradition has developed in film theory informed by that concept. According to the “poetic” tradition in film theory, cinema is an art because, as with all things artistic, it is an instrument of expression and can be used to craft representations. Here, film’s claim to art rests on the extent to which it serves as a material conduit for the expressive will of the artist—cinema is an art because it involves a craft element. The second or “aesthetic” tradition conceives of art not only or not primarily as a means of expression, but as a medium that affects, and might even
determine, our mode of being in the world. Here, film’s claim to art rests on the extent to which it serves to qualify or condition our referential coordinates with respect to reality.

**The Poetic Tradition**

The poetics of any artistic medium studies the finished work as the result of a process of construction.

Some of the earliest books on the art of cinema are indebted to a poetic theory of art. A 1913 publication called *The Art of the Photoplay*, for example, sought to convey the practical considerations that went into drafting a production-ready scenario or script. It addressed both dramaturgical and technical aspects of the process and promised the attentive and enterprising reader of the book a lucrative career in the industry. Two years later saw the publication of Vachel Lindsay’s *The Art of the Moving Picture*, which more fully delineated the parameters of a specifically poetic consideration of cinematic art. Lindsay was interested not only in expounding the principles that guided the film scenarist and other production personnel, but in developing a critical framework for receiving and evaluating individual works of cinema—a instruction manual more for the spectator than the filmmaker. The book is largely an exercise in taxonomy, with Lindsay suggesting, for example, that films can be organized into three broad generic categories—action, intimacy, and splendor—each of which could be further decomposed into

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2 While Aristotle’s remarks on *poiesis* are generally better known, there has been a renewed interest in his related but less-developed concept of *aisthēsis* or “common sense.” See Pavel Gregoric, *Aristotle on the Common Sense*, Oxford Aristotle Studies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).
subcategories. Film genre studies of this kind, as well as taxonomies of cinema more
generally, are commonplace in the discipline of film studies, and are paradigmatic of its
poetic inheritance.

Interestingly, neither book questions cinema’s more fundamental claim to art but
accept it tacitly as a given. United by a shared commitment to a poetic theory of art, both
restrict their analysis of cinema to the application of technique and to elements of craft, to
principles of organization and construction. The very premise of cinematic art goes
uncontested in these studies because their authors presume films to be, simply or self-
evidently, the product of a practice-based activity, and are therefore works of art by
definition. But other theorists working in this tradition discovered in cinema a test or
limit case for the poetic approach to the study of art, which in turn led them to investigate
precisely to what extent cinema may be qualified as art.

Arnheim and the Poetic Tradition

One of the earliest and most accomplished studies of cinema in this vein is Rudolf
Arnheim’s *Film as Art*. Although a stout defender of cinematic art, Arnheim nonetheless
recognized how cinema’s dependence on photographic technology throws its legitimacy
as an art form into question. Arnheim states the problem clearly: if art “is not simply an
imitation or selective duplication of reality but a translation of observed characteristics
into the forms of a given medium,” then any medium that could plausibly be qualified as

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6 Throughout, I will be referring exclusively to the following edition: Rudolf Arnheim, *Film as Art*
(Berkeley, Calif.: Univ. of California Press, 1957). Most of the material was originally published in the
1930s and remains only slightly modified, while the 1957 edition adds a preface and a section called “A
Personal Note,” the latter of which makes important contributions to his argument.
producing “a mechanical reproduction of reality” fails to achieve the condition of art. As Arnheim will specify, the mechanical reproduction of reality obstructs the creative will of the artist. The image or representation of reality conceived mechanically is effectively without meaning, since the artist is prevented from assigning it any significance. Consequently, the work so produced does not amount to art. As Arnheim explains, “The creative power of the artist can only come into play where reality and the medium of representation do not coincide.” This is, in essence, the argument against photographic art. To the extent that a photograph is produced by mechanical means, it constitutes “an imitation or selective duplication of reality” rather than a meaningful representation of it. Cinema is guilty by association. Like photography, cinema fails to achieve the condition of art because it does not do anything more than copy reality.

Arnheim defends cinema against these charges on the grounds that those who claim photography and film copy reality mechanically ignore the many ways photographic and cinematic images diverge from reality, or at least from the natural, unaided perception of it. With respect to cinema in particular, these include discrepancies regarding depth perception, colour and luminosity, perceptual independence and mobility, and experiences of space and time. Put simply, Arnheim argues that cinema discovers its artistic resources in composition, framing, and editing. It does not slavishly

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7 Ibid, 3.
9 Although a minority opinion, the claim that cinema qua photography is not art has its stubborn adherents. It has been most forcefully defended by philosopher of art Roger Scruton, who states that “A film is a photograph of a dramatic representation; it is not, because it cannot be, a photographic representation.” According to this view, photography (in its ideal or pure state, at least) is incapable of representation. Ergo, it is conceptually distinct from art. See his “Photography and Representation,” Critical Inquiry 7, no. 3 (April 1, 1981): 577–603.
copy reality but rather diverges from it enough to allow for the creative intervention of the artist. So, while it might constitute a liminal case, says Arnheim, cinema nonetheless qualifies fully as an art form.

Among its many virtues, Arnheim’s discussion of cinema helps to clarify the stakes of the poetic analysis of art, particularly as applied to cinema. There is, first and foremost, the emphasis on craft. In keeping with the poetic tradition more generally, Arnheim understands the work of art to serve as a means of expression whose ultimate purpose is to transmit meaning from artist to spectator. In this respect, the poetic theory leans towards an idealist aesthetics: it presupposes that what the work of art represents, finally, is an idea that originates in the mind of the artist, an idea which is embedded in and communicated by the work. This is why the poetic tradition identifies art exclusively as a practice or craft-based activity. According to Arnheim, for the work to qualify as art it must have been constructed manually—that is, through the expenditure of labour and the application of ingenuity. Otherwise, there would be no opportunity for the transmission of an idea. A mechanically produced image—an image produced automatically or by means of a machine—is effectively dumb: it does not say anything because it is not the product of any mind and can therefore harbour no ideas.

Cinema proves to be such a provocation for the poetic tradition in part because its photographic constitution threatens to obviate the question of craft. This is what prompts Arnheim’s investigation into cinema. His project is motivated by a wish to prove that despite its automatisms cinema is as much a medium of expressive communication as any other art, which he does chiefly by identifying the many ways a cinematic image is given
shape by a creative mind. This imposition of form on a material or medium, which according to the poetic tradition is the source of the artwork’s meaning—including works of cinematic art—is a function of craft.

This brings us to a second aspect of the poetic tradition for which cinema poses a problem. As the case of Arnheim illustrates, implied in the poetic theory of art is the premise that the application of craft is governed by rules that vary with each art form, and that are determined in advance by the nature of the medium with which each art is identified. In confronting the problematic case of cinematic art, Arnheim is obliged to make this aspect of the poetic tradition explicit. Arnheim, in fact, is emblematic of a certain strand of early film theory that tied a defence of cinematic art to the doctrine of medium specificity. Arnheim was a tireless defender of the medium-specificity argument—the idea that the destiny of each art lays in the properties specific to its material base—and even once considered developing it into a comprehensive theory. The purpose of this Materialtheorie, he once said, was to explain how “artistic and scientific descriptions of reality are cast in molds that derive not so much from the subject matter itself as from the properties of the medium—or Material—employed.”

For Arnheim, one of the advantages of the medium-specificity doctrine is that it simplifies the critic’s task considerably by both facilitating the classification of the individual work and setting the terms for its evaluation: a painting can be judged by the techniques employed in the application of pigment to canvas (colour, line, composition),

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11 Arnheim, Film as Art, 5.
theatre in the staging and performance of a written play, etc. In each case, the work is assessed on the basis of the properties specific to the medium with which it is identified.

But its greater significance, he explains, is psychological. One of Arnheim’s innovations with respect to the philosophy of aesthetics was his introduction of psychology, in which he had formal training, to the question of art. In this respect, the Gestalt school of psychology was of particular importance. Arnheim theorized that aesthetic purity satisfies a psychological need to organize and simplify our otherwise disordered experience of the natural world. A work of art that is faithful to the properties specific to the medium from which it is crafted, he believed, admitted a perspective on the world that made its governing principles visible and communicable to the perceiver. In his own words:

One of the most basic artistic impulses derives from man’s yearning to escape the disturbing multiplicity of nature and seeks, therefore, to depict this bewildering reality with the simplest means. For this reason a medium of expression that is capable of producing complete works by its own resources will forever keep up its resistance against any combination with another medium.12

Here, Arnheim is not only providing shade for the doctrine of medium specificity. He is, by the same token, justifying the poetic approach to the study of art more generally through the suggestion that it is sanctioned by a natural law.

There is, however, a trade-off: the medium-specificity argument is viable only on condition that the rules of craft specific to each medium are rigorously policed. To the extent that it adheres to the doctrine of medium specificity, the poetic tradition tends to

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12 Ibid., 201-2.
favour works that strive for purity: they must make use of or in some direct way refer to
the material properties and formal qualities exclusive to the medium from which they are
made. Arnheim speaks for a whole tradition when he insists that “It is the business of the
theorist to inspect the tools [of the artist] and to ask that they be cleaner.”  

In other
words, the doctrine of medium specificity adds a prescriptive dimension to the poetic
tradition. Any work that smacks of hybridity or of material contamination constitutes a
corruption of the purity idealized by Arnheim and thereby invites critical censure.

In much the same way that it challenges the craft principle, however, cinema
confounds the medium-specificity argument of the poetic theory of art. Writing from the
perspective of the poetic tradition, Arnheim discovers that the medium-specificity
argument cannot so easily be applied to cinema because there is something about the
medium that is fundamentally impure. To be sure, Arnheim most often insisted that
cinema is, intrinsically, as legitimate and distinct an art form as any other. On these
occasions, he identified cinematic specificity with the moving image, or with visual
action more generally. Arnheim considers the “talking” film to constitute such an
intolerable hybrid: synchronized sound is, he says, materially incommensurable with the
essentially visual nature of cinematic specificity. In effect, the talkies disturb the
psychological tranquility otherwise afforded by the use of “cleaner tools.”

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13 Ibid., 7. He will later clarify that a “mixed-media” work is acceptable so long as each medium out of
which it is composed remains distinct and exists only in parallel to the others. From page 215: “We found
that a composite work of art is possible only if complete structures, produced by the media, are integrated
in the form of parallelism.”
14 See the section titled “Motion” in his Film as Art, in particular.
15 Moreover, he says, the pre-cinematic arts, such as painting or music, are more easily reducible to
properties specific to a material support—pigment on canvas and sonorous notes, respectively—than
cinema generally is. Speaking for many early film theorists, Arnheim identifies cinematic specificity in
relation to the movement of images it is capable of displaying, for, he argues, no other medium can make
Yet there are times that Arnheim, expressing a more ambivalent attitude, muses openly that perhaps cinema will forever fall short of true art. In a revealing aside, Arnheim explains that the complicating factor is, once again, its photographic constitution: “film will be able to reach the heights of the other arts only when it frees itself from the bonds of photographic reproduction and becomes a pure work of man, namely, as animated cartoon or painting.”\[^{16}\] Cinema might never reach parity with the other arts, he suggests, because there is something impure about its very nature. If the very specificity of cinema relies on a certain non-creative automatism, the medium itself might, thereby, be hopelessly compromised. Arnheim never fully resolves this ambivalence. His hesitation, however fleeting, forever haunts his more frequently expressed support for cinematic art.

**Bordwellian Poetics**

Few can rival Arnheim in the depth and clarity he brings the debate over the poetic study of cinema. But one such figure is David Bordwell. Among the many film scholars working today in the poetic tradition, Bordwell is doubtless the most theoretically self-aware: his interest is not only in working within the tradition but in reflexively examining its premises and protocols, as well as updating its program to accommodate contemporary views on art and aesthetics. Crucially, as part of his project Bordwell draws on the principles of the poetic tradition to mount an argument against the

\[^{16}\] Ibid, 213.
politics of film as a valid problem or question. Bordwell’s work is thus indispensable for
demonstrating the ways in which the poetic study of art lacks (or refuses to admit into its
program) the conceptual resources necessary for adequately addressing the politics of
film and of aesthetics.

Bordwell himself openly situates his work in the broad tradition of poetics
inaugurated by Aristotle. He cites a number of different projects and thinkers within this
tradition as sources of influence, including and especially Russian formalism and the
Prague school of structuralism. But he was also a keen pupil of Arnheim’s work, and the
continuities between their respective film-theoretical projects cannot be overstated. In
particular, Bordwell takes up the question of craft that guided Arnheim’s cinematic
consideration of poetics. Even more emphatically than Arnheim, Bordwell relies on the
concept of craft to serve as the gravitational centre of his theory, the unvarying core
around which the other elements orbit. In this respect, Bordwell understands poetics to
constitute, before all else, the search for “constructive principles.” As he explains:

The poetics of any artistic medium studies the finished
work as the result of a process of construction…Any
inquiry into the fundamental principles by which artifacts
in any representational medium are constructed, and the
effects that flow from those principles, can fall within the
domain of poetics.17

Along with his avowed inheritance of the Russian tradition, it is statements like these that
invite the characterization of Bordwell’s project as “neo-formalist.”

But insofar as it fails to capture the full complexity of Bordwell’s project, the neo-
formalist label is misleading. Once again following in Arnheim’s footsteps, Bordwell

17 Bordwell, Poetics, 12.
introduces a psychological component to his theory of poetics. Arnheim and Bordwell both believe that art’s vocation is to transmit an idea from artist to spectator, and both discover in psychology a framework to explain this process. Bordwell departs from Arnheim in one key respect, however. Recall that Arnheim draws on Gestalt theory to ground his argument that art’s role is to serve as a psychological balm for the spectator by imposing order, focus, and logic on the natural world. In this case, the artist uses the artwork to transmit an organized perspective to the spectator, who is motivated for psychological reasons to attribute coherence to what is ultimately chaotic. Bordwell pursues a somewhat related claim but turns to a more contemporary branch of psychology—cognitive studies—for support. And unlike Arnheim, he has no interest in considering the therapeutic value of art for the individual psyche. Rather, Bordwell conceives of spectatorship in almost purely cognitive terms. Borrowing elements from what cognitive scientists call the “rational agent model,” Bordwell begins with the premise that spectators are rational agents who construct meaning through a mixture of incoming data and stored experience. On the basis of this premise, he advances the argument that spectatorship is, in effect, a kind of puzzle-solving activity.

For Bordwell, the work of art’s purpose is to achieve a specific effect in relation to the spectator. This effect is defined in advance by the artist, who embeds it in the very form of the work, in how it is designed and assembled. Speaking specifically of cinema, Bordwell says that “All other things being equal, and as a point of departure, it’s fruitful

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18 David Bordwell, “A Case For Cognitivism,” Iris, no. 9 (Spring 1989): 11–40. It should be noted that Bordwell sets cognitivism in opposition to psychoanalytic accounts of film spectatorship, of which he was deeply skeptical and which were dominant at the time.
to assume that a filmmaker makes [formal] choices in order to achieve some purpose,” a process he refers to as “means-ends reasoning.” This purpose, he specifies, is invariably psychological in nature and brings the cognitive faculties of the spectator into play.\footnote{Bordwell, *Poetics*, 28-29.} According to Bordwell, works of art are constructed as a collection of clues and prompts, and invite the spectator to generate meaning by making a series of inferences. Guided in this way, the spectator eventually arrives at the work’s ultimate significance, which is identified, finally, with what the artist is saying or trying to say by means of the work. For Bordwell, then, the transmission the work makes possible between artist and spectator is not the communication of an ordered perspective, as Arnheim theorizes, but rather a message or meaning wrapped in a code which can be deciphered only via the application of the spectator’s cognitive faculties.

Although combining the seemingly disparate fields of aesthetic formalism and cognitive science, Bordwell’s theory coheres, once again, around the concept of craft. For Bordwell, art is constituted when the artist encodes a message or meaning through the imposition of form on a material or medium. His theory therefore seeks to explain both the production and reception of the work as one contiguous process between two minds whose pivot is the formal design of the individual work. As Bordwell states, “Craft practices always offer a range of options, and the choices made by the artist will be correlated with…the design of the work or the effect on the perceiver.”\footnote{Ibid, 15.} More specifically, he believes it is the work of art’s vocation to bridge material form and mental cognition so as to facilitate the transmission of an idea: “once the artist has the

\[20\] Ibid, 15.
idea, she will make choices about how to integrate it into the work at hand, and these will be inflected by means and ends, purposes and patterns.”21 The concept of craft, then, permits Bordwell to map the links that supposedly connect matter and form with idea and cognition.

To illustrate how a poetics can be put into practice by the scholar or critic, Bordwell turns to *Rope*, the 1948 Alfred Hitchcock thriller whose fame rests primarily on its unusual formal design: instead of classical continuity editing, which was still the dominant style at the time, Hitchcock composes his film almost entirely from extreme long takes, some lasting as much as nine minutes in duration. Bordwell’s choice is not arbitrary, for Hitchcock is well known for meticulously planning every aspect of his films, including and especially its formal construction. He is thus, per Bordwell, the quintessential craftsman, which means that the road that leads from the mind of Hitchcock to the mind of the spectator via the work’s formal design is all the more easily mapped.

Bordwell’s poetic analysis of the film leads him to conclude that the significance of *Rope*’s formal strategy can be traced to an effort on Hitchcock’s part to maintain his reputation as a cinematic innovator. Although still normative, continuity editing, which relied on shots of relatively short duration to compose scenes, was being challenged by a new generation of filmmakers—led primarily by Orson Welles—who favoured longer takes and a fluid camera: rather than cut two or more shots together in the classical style, the camera reframes the action through uninterrupted movement. Bordwell posits that

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21 Ibid, 29.
Hitchcock wished to prove himself capable not only of adopting this innovative technique, but of pushing it as far as technology and logistics would permit. In short, Hitchcock wanted to convey his unrivalled mastery over the medium by deliberately placing unprecedented technical obstacles in his way and proving that he (and perhaps he alone) could overcome them.

**Poetics and the Politics of Film**

In Bordwell’s poetic account, the concept of craft organizes his theory of film. As it happens, this same concept is also mobilized by Bordwell to contest the legitimacy of the politics of film as a question or concern. Ironically, Bordwell’s most famous statement on the subject of the politics of film occurred in a different context: an introduction to a landmark anthology he co-edited with another skeptic, Noël Carroll, and in which he methodically dismantles what was at the time the reigning theory regarding the politics of film.  

On this earlier occasion, which predates his extended discussion of craft, Bordwell limits his critical remarks to a specific discourse—political modernism—which he considered fatally flawed and untenable. In his later work on the poetics of cinema, however, Bordwell makes what is arguably a more consequential argument: the question of the politics of film, and not merely this or that discourse within it, is itself fundamentally illegitimate.

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To be sure, Bordwell is open to the idea that films can serve as emissaries for political ideas:

Nothing in principle prevents the poetician from arguing that economics, ideology, cultural forces, or inherent social or psychological dispositions operate as causes of constructional devices or effects.\(^{23}\)

Crucially, however, a film has a politics only insofar as the content embedded into its formal structure can be political in nature. As he says more concisely in another context: “Understanding a film’s ideology typically involves analyzing how form and style create meaning.”\(^{24}\) Bordwell doesn’t doubt that art can be political. Only that its politics is always and inevitably a function of craft. A work’s meaning might be political or carry political implications, but this is plausible only on condition that we accept the premise that such meaning is transmitted from one rational mind to another via the work’s formal design. Bordwell lucidly and economically sums up this argument in the following remark: “Ideology doesn’t switch on the camera.”\(^{25}\) Bordwell disputes the premise of a politics of film because, from the poetic perspective no less than the cognitivist one, such a premise is nonsensical. To assume a politics of film is to assume that film can make meaning on its own, in the absence of a rational agent. But ideology doesn’t switch on the camera, as Bordwell so incisively puts it. He insists that a film can have no meaning, political or otherwise, aside from what a rational agent can invest in it.\(^{26}\)

\(^{23}\) Bordwell, *Poetics*, 16.
\(^{26}\) As we’ll see, it is not a question of rejecting this claim outright but of complicating it. Bordwell is, if only tacitly, operating within a Habermasian communicative rationality model of politics in which social actors, for pragmatic reasons, seek agreement with one another through a process of linguistic interaction and exchange. As we’ve seen, however, Rancière argues that this kind of politics ultimately serves a
Too often, claims Bordwell, analysts mistakenly attribute political statements to non-rational—indeed non-human—agents. The exemplary case, according to Bordwell, is the “reflectionist” mode of criticism, which posits that works of art, and films in particular, directly mirror the cultural values and social dramas of the historical moment in which they are made. Bordwell’s impatience with reflectionism, which circumvents the individual artistic will or creative mind, is palpable in the following passage:

[Reflectionist] criticism throws out loose and intuitive connections between film and society without offering concrete explanations that can be argued explicitly. It relies on spurious and far-fetched correlations between films and social or political events. It neglects damaging counterexamples. It assumes that popular culture is the audience talking to itself, without interference or distortion from the makers and the social institutions they inhabit. And the causal forces they invoked…may exist only as reified abstractions that the commentator turns into historical agents.27

If art is a product of human labour and ingenuity, how can a work transmit historical forces directly, without the mediation of the artist? For Bordwell, it is inconceivable that craft does not play a role in a work’s meaning. This is not to say that the artist might not unwittingly transmit certain values and assumptions about culture and society in crafting the work. Only that whatever meaning we ascribe to a work must be understood as originating as an idea conceived by a rational mind for the purpose of being communicated to another rational mind via the work’s formal design.

27 Bordwell, Poetics, 31-2.
The Aesthetic Tradition

A tacit rival to the poetic tradition of theorizing the art of cinema is the aesthetic tradition. Despite some conceptual traffic between the two, the aesthetic tradition relies on a set of criteria for identifying and evaluating cinematic art distinct from the poetic tradition. In the aesthetic tradition, art is not reducible to craft. Rather than a medium of ideas, the aesthetic tradition views art as a medium of sensory experience. As such, works of art are thought to provide us with a means for grasping or otherwise coming to terms with reality, irrespective of the ideas which they may or may not be transmitting.28 With respect to film, theorists working in the aesthetic tradition suggest it is no mere addition to existing pantheon of arts, nor even privileged among them. Rather, they believe that film is transformational with respect to art and, by extension, sensory experience more generally. According to the aesthetic tradition, film promises to rewrite the laws according to which reality is both apprehended and comprehended.

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28 Some clarifying remarks with respect to my use of the term aesthetic to describe this tradition, and to differentiate it from what I call the poetic approach, are likely warranted here. My use of the term as applied to film theory overlaps with but is not identical to what film theorist David Rodowick calls the aesthetic discourse in classical film theory. Rodowick argues persuasively that nineteenth-century German aesthetic philosophy, which originally codified the typology of the fine arts, serves as the philosophical touchstone for this discourse. It is clear, however, that in order to come to terms with cinema’s unique aesthetics, some contributors to this discourse reach further back, however tacitly, to Aristotle’s original concept of aisthesis, or the ordering of the sensible into the intelligible in the construction of a common world, a usage that was only partly recuperated in German Romantic thought. Consequently, unlike Rodowick I distinguish between poetic or craft-based accounts of cinematic art, such as Lindsay’s The Art of the Moving Picture, and aesthetic (or what we might also call referential) accounts of cinematic art, undertaken by, among others, Ricciotto Canudo, which understand art as providing the sensible coordinates that determines our relation to reality. See D. N. Rodowick, “The Aesthetic Discourse in Classical Film Theory.” Given film’s unusual relationship to reality with respect to the other arts, it should not surprise us that the term’s classical usage is revived for film-theoretical purposes.
A Plastic Art in Motion

One of the earliest accounts of cinema’s transformational aesthetic is also exemplary. In 1911, Italian critic and film theorist Ricciotto Canudo published his seminal essay “The Birth of the Sixth Art,” which represents the first substantive effort to defend the thesis that cinema constitutes a form of art.29 Although it is a seemingly straightforward thesis, Canudo encounters one difficulty after another in mounting his argument. Is cinema an art? Remarkably, given the provocation of the title and his general enthusiasm for the idea, Canudo ultimately equivocates. It might someday achieve the status of art, he says, but it has not yet done so. Canudo explains that film is not naturally suited to serve as a means of personal expression. Prefiguring Arnheim’s doubts about film’s artistic potential, Canudo suggests that, insofar as it is founded on photographic processes, the technology of film is tantamount to a copying machine, and is thus incapable of conveying artistic intent. As Canudo says, “[cinema] is not yet an art…because it lacks the freedom of choice peculiar to plastic interpretation, conditioned as it is to being the copy of a subject, the condition that prevents photography from becoming an art.”30 In effect, cinema qua photography is not, or not yet, a medium, in the aesthetic sense of the term, a point to which I will return.

But Canudo also argues the opposite, that despite its unfortunate connection to the aesthetically barren technology of photography, there is something uniquely aesthetic about cinema that augurs well for its future as a great art. Canudo cites the fact that

cinema’s images are both in motion and capable of being edited together. These properties open up aesthetic possibilities for cinema in a way that divorces it from photography. They ensure its vocation is not to make copies but to serve the will of the artist. In fact, says Canudo, not only is cinema a worthy addition to the existing pantheon of arts—the so-called “sixth art”—but its peculiar aesthetic properties are such that it might someday make the other arts obsolete. Unlike the pre-cinematic arts, which are limited to either plastic representation (painting and sculpture) or rhythmic construction (music and poetry), cinema is capable of doing both: it is an art of both space and time.

For Canudo, the implications of this complex aesthetic profile are far-reaching. In particular, Canudo suggests that cinema provides the means with which to reconcile the otherwise incompatible aesthetics of plastic and lyric art into a single mode of expression—what he calls, in an attempt to underscore the apparent paradox, the “plastic arts in motion.” According to Canudo, this is what secures cinema’s privileged aesthetic status: cinema is the highest art because it constitutes a synthesis of all the others. This synthesis appears so improbable and confounding to Canudo, however, that he is made to wonder if the birth of cinema might not alter the very condition of art.

**A New World**

It is in the pursuit of this point that Canudo leaves behind the poetic principle of craft and lays the foundation for the aesthetic tradition in film theory. Canudo realizes that the premise of a plastic art that is also in motion not only upends received wisdom on

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31 Ibid., 59.
the nature of art but may even precipitate a reconfiguration of the “whole aesthetic life of the world.”

Canudo describes how, since time immemorial, a uniform aesthetic sensibility governed by the five traditional arts has organized our relationship to the “natural environment.” This aesthetic order has been in effect for so long and is so entrenched, in fact, that a different way of perceiving and experiencing reality is, he says, “unthinkable.”

Nevertheless, cinema, as the apotheosis of art, promises to dismantle this order and replace it with one organized in accordance with its own logic. Such a shift would serve to reorient us with respect to reality, for we would no longer draw on plastic and lyric art for our referential coordinates but on cinema. By the “birth” of cinema, then, Canudo means the constitution not only of a new art but of a new world, a world whose underlying premise is fundamentally cinematic.

Canudo expresses a desire to be more specific regarding what, exactly, a cinematic world would look like. But by his own admission he is living through a period of transition, that twilight moment between two ages when the past lingers and the future remains indistinct. Because cinema has not yet transcended its origins in photography and is only just beginning to realize its transformative aesthetic, Canudo is forced to consider the matter indirectly. He decides that it is possible to infer the properties of the cinematic world to come by examining the properties specific to the art that will bring it into being. This leads him, as it has so many others, to the question that organizes any film theory: what is cinema? It is in his attempt to answer this question that the tensions that

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32 Ibid., 58.
33 Ibid.
34 Ibid.
ultimately compromise Canudo’s argument are at their most pronounced, for what distinguishes and elevates cinema aesthetically in his eyes are precisely those qualities that derive from its photographic constitution. Seemingly unaware of the contradiction, Canudo will insist on the aesthetic sterility of photography while elsewhere identifying cinematic specificity—and the source of its aesthetic powers—with properties that strongly suggest the photographic.

Canudo addresses the question of cinematic specificity by first qualifying cinema as an art of animation or reanimation. In their display of life-like movements, he says, cinematic images constitute “a vibrant agglomeration, similar to an organism.”

Canudo’s analogy indicates that, in his view, cinema gives rise to a confusion between material reality and the immaterial image on film. To underscore the way in which cinema seems to transfer something of “living” reality to the screen, he remarks that “[film] reels are impressed with life itself.” This confusion is also felt, he continues, when the image displays a far-off place. As such times, it is as if “the spectator [is] transported” over great distances, so strong is the reality effect of the cinematic image.

Canudo cements his unwitting identification of cinematic specificity with the photographic in a later discussion of the indifferent objectivity which distinguishes cinematic art. Canudo explains that the cinematic image obeys a scientific rather than an aesthetic logic. For example, he opposes the “calculus” of cinema to the “fantasy” of the pre-cinematic arts, especially theatre. Because it constitutes “a mechanical mode of

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35 Ibid., 59.
36 Ibid.
37 Ibid., 60.
38 Ibid.
expression,” cinema is capable of inscribing the real so objectively and with such mathematical precision that the results verge not on a representation of reality but on its re-presentation.\textsuperscript{39} Canudo sums up cinema’s natural indifference—which, it bears repeating, is largely attributable to its photographic constitution—by referring to the way its images constitute “total life.”\textsuperscript{40} By this he means not only the way living reality is captured on film in its entirety, without the loss of fidelity characteristic of the pre-cinematic arts, but also cinema’s propensity to prioritize natural and exterior appearance over improbable fictions. This is a power denied “bourgeois” dramaturgy, which, he claims, is fundamentally incapable of addressing prosaic or “total” reality. For Canudo, this astonishing aesthetic—which we today would perhaps call documentary realism—is peculiar to cinema. Implicitly citing film’s photographic logic, Canudo traces the source of cinema’s transformative aesthetic to properties that are specific to its material base.

\textbf{A Cinematic “Age”}

Clearly, then, Canudo is making a medium-specificity argument. But what must be emphasized is that Canudo is applying the concept of medium specificity in a way that departs from the more familiar modernist formula, according to which art is assigned the task of limiting its operations and effects to the properties specific to its material base. As we’ve seen with Arnheim, the modernist conception of medium specificity is more consistent with the logic of the poetic approach to art. Canudo pursues a notion of medium specificity which stipulates that the properties of a medium determine not the

\textsuperscript{39} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{40} Ibid., 62.
formal logic of the individual work, but rather a whole, integral sensibility, one whose sweep is historical in scope. Not unlike the doctrine of technological determinism, it is a belief that historical periods can be defined in relation to the artistic or technical media thought to dominate those periods. This version of medium specificity is summed up neatly by Marshall McLuhan, who famously claimed that “the medium is the message.” Like McLuhan, Canudo collapses any distinction between signifier and signified—between medium and message—in proclaiming that cinema as a medium constitutes its own meaning. We can also cite Friedrich Kittler, who identifies a modernist age or epoch with the media that supposedly defines its logic: gramophone, film, typewriter. It is Kittler, after all, who insisted that “Media determine our situation.”

Although representing vastly different projects, Kittler shares with Canudo the belief that cinema ushers in a cinematic “age.”

That cinema sits uneasily alongside the other arts is a familiar theme of film theory. In Canudo’s essay it is given its first full expression. He himself admits to harbouring the specific prejudice that both compels a defence of cinema’s claim to art and that ultimately complicates any such defence. Because its material basis is photographic in nature, cinema can be accused of lacking the means to serve as an instrument of expression. To a meaningful extent, film restricts the amount of control the artist can exert over the final work, which retains enough of the objective character of unmediated reality to provoke uncertainty over its aesthetic value. Defending cinematic

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41 This thesis is first advanced and explored in his *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Gingko Press, 2003), first published in 1964.

art—as Arnheim also discovered—thus requires emphasizing those aspects of the cinematic image that diverge from reality or that can be attributed to the creative will of the artist, such as editing and cinematography. By such means, one is able to qualify cinema as an art on par with the others.

The debate, however, widens with Canudo’s claim that cinema is no mere art but a special and perhaps privileged case thereof. In this instance, the argument hinges on the premise that cinema constitutes a synthesis of pre- or non-cinematic arts—the so-called plastic art in motion—and is thus art’s apotheosis or paragon. But as Canudo’s essay demonstrates, the effort to prove cinema an art, when taken far enough, leads to an even more consequential claim, one that serves as the aesthetic tradition’s founding premise: film alters the very condition of art. Not only does it provoke a reconsideration of the criteria against which we measure art and ascertain its value. More provocatively, film overwrites the referential codes derived from the other arts and imposes its own distinct set of aesthetic laws that governs how reality is organized for our perception. In Canudo’s terms, cinema creates a new world. As we’ve seen, it is an account of cinema that takes the medium-specificity argument in a curious direction—the source of film’s transformative aesthetic power is identified, paradoxically, as the very thing that seems initially to disqualify it as an art and that sets in motion the quest to secure its aesthetic legitimacy: its technical or material indebtedness to the photographic.

The idea that cinema alters the condition of art, first proposed by Canudo in his seminal account, would nourish a whole discourse in film theory—what I have called the aesthetic tradition. With the notable exception of the “pure” cinema movement, these
were largely dispersed efforts, with little to indicate an awareness among contributors of a coherent and shared intellectual project. Nonetheless, a number of prominent film theorists and cultural critics would become preoccupied by film’s transformative aesthetic. The fundamental premise of this discourse was that film promised to enact a new and more vital relationship to reality. It held, further, that this power derived from the properties specific to cinema’s material base. Cinema was an art, yes. But because of its innate automatism, it was something more—a new world, or a reimagining of the old one.

One would think that attributing to cinema the power to alter our relationship to reality, or to constitute a new world for our perception, leads inevitably to a discussion of the political. But time and again, the question of politics is dismissed or deferred by those working in the aesthetic tradition. Like Canudo, most have no interest in contemplating the social or political implications of inhabiting a new aesthetic sensibility. This is most clearly evident in the pure cinema movement that flowered during the silent era. Pure cinema proponents, such as Jean Epstein, Antonin Artaud, and Germaine Dulac, insisted on limiting accounts of cinema to the novel and singular aesthetic experience it supplies, often by constructing an analogy between cinema and non-discursive or non-linguistic thought. Artaud, for example, claimed that cinema’s primary purpose is “to express matters of thought, the interior consciousness, not by the play of images but by something

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43 Those associated with the pure cinema movement include Jean Epstein, Germaine Dulac, Antonin Artaud, and Pierre Porte. Their work has been collected in *French Film Theory and Criticism*, particularly volume 1. Other notable contributors include Walter Benjamin, Béla Balázs, Siegfried Kracauer, André Bazin, and Stanley Cavell. As we’ll see the tradition has recently been renewed in the form of what I call film-phenomenology and what Daniel Frampton calls “filmosophy.”

44 Bazin is perhaps a notable exception, although even he stopped short of explicitly linking film’s aesthetics to its politics.
more imponderable which restores them to us in their direct matter, without interpositions, without representations.”\textsuperscript{45} These remarks capture perfectly how the inward focus of the pure cinema movement deterred inquiries into the politics of film.

\textbf{Filmosophy}

This aversion on the part of the aesthetic tradition to the question of politics has been forcefully defended most recently by film theorist Daniel Frampton in his book \textit{Filmosophy}, a 2006 publication which aims to revive the pure cinema program and adapt it to contemporary digital filmmaking practices. At every step, Frampton rehearses assumptions consistent with the aesthetic approach to cinematic art pioneered by Canudo. Key in this regard is the medium-specificity claim peculiar to the aesthetic tradition, which Frampton reformulates as follows: “we need to understand film as issuing from itself.”\textsuperscript{46} What he means by this is that film does not offer a perspective on the world, as the poetic tradition has it, but rather constitutes its own world. As he says, film “becomes the creator of its own world, not from a ‘point’ of view, but from a realm,” a so-called “film-world.”\textsuperscript{47} Implicitly rejecting the craft principle that organizes the poetic theory of cinematic art, Frampton points instead to cinema’s transformative aesthetic, which creates a self-generating and self-sufficient world capable of unhinging or otherwise recalibrating our relationship to reality, a feat it accomplishes without direct reference to the formal design of the individual work. He states that “Cinema allows us to re-see

\textsuperscript{46} Frampton, 38.
\textsuperscript{47} Ibid.
reality, expanding our perceptions, and showing us a new reality. Film challenges our
view of reality, forcing a phenomenological realisation about how reality is perceived by
our minds,”48 or more simply, “how we engage with film informs and reflects how we
engage with reality.”49

For Frampton, any account of cinema must begin with what he takes to be its
defining feature—its transformative aesthetic. But rather than explore what such an
aesthetic might imply for social relations or political conditions, Frampton insists on a
narrowly defined phenomenology of film spectatorship. This is a phenomenology whose
horizon is individual affect. As he explains, “before we can talk about the social effects
of film we first must study the personal affects of film.”50 The reference to an eventual
social understanding of film’s transformative aesthetic, however, is mere hand-waving.
He exhorts the reader here and in the pages that follow to “forget culture and theories and
philosophies…and think of film, just film—think simply of the personal experience of
film.”51 Hence, filmosophy: a knowledge of film that is somehow identical with the
cinematic experience itself. On this view, it is counterproductive to bring political
questions to bear on a filmosophical undertaking, since such an inquiry would disturb the
powerful affective experience of film spectatorship that constitutes filmosophy’s sole
object of interest. Such a disruption would entail a loss not only of pleasure, but of
knowledge, since the intimate bond between film and viewer—between the film-world

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48 Ibid., 3.
49 Ibid., 2.
50 Ibid.
51 Ibid.
and the mind of the spectator—that permits the spectator to “re-see” reality would undergo a schism.

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Both the poetic and the aesthetic traditions in film theory are predicated on the premise of cinematic art. At the same time, contributors to these traditions often refer to the art of cinema when seeking to discredit the notion of a politics of film. Film is an art, they say, and the properties that lend it artistic legitimacy are the same ones that unburden it of politics. For the poetic tradition, cinema is merely a means of transmission from one rational mind to another. It can serve to communicate a political message from artist to spectator, but to attribute politics to it outside this framework is incoherent. For the aesthetic tradition, cinema is tantamount to pure experience such that the question of politics is deferred in perpetuity.

Such is the current state of film theory’s discourse on cinematic art. What is notable about the philosophy of Jacques Rancière is how it inflects this discourse, in ways both implicit and explicit. In particular, Rancière’s work challenges the fundamental premise of these debates, namely that cinema, as a kind of art, is necessarily isolated from—even antithetical to—politics. For Rancière, cinema is assuredly an art. By the same token, however, it is also political. To be sure, he does not commit political modernism’s error of identifying art with politics. But even if art is not reducible to politics, or politics to art, Rancière insists that there is invariably a politics to aesthetics no less than an aesthetics to politics. Drawing on Rancière’s work, and in particular his taxonomy of aesthetic-political regimes, I will propose a way of reconstruing the relation
between the art of film and its politics. I will also indicate how Rancière’s taxonomy productively inflects the debate about cinema art in another way, namely, by offering a way to reconcile the poetic and aesthetic traditions in film theory.

**The Art of Cinema and Cinematic Specificity**

Perhaps the most significant aspect of Rancière’s philosophical framework for film theory is that it provides the means to reconcile its poetic and aesthetic traditions. These are nominally distinct discourses, each working out the implications of a different premise. Yet Rancière’s rethinking of the nature of art and aesthetics shows how they can be brought under one conceptual schema. As a preliminary step, however, it is necessary to adopt his vocabulary. A keen student of Aristotle, Rancière is well aware of the poetic-aesthetic split that organizes (however asymmetrically) the classical philosopher’s theory of art.52 On the basis of this distinction, Rancière discovers that, in general, the theory and practice of art over the last several hundred years can be divided into two regimes: the representative regime of art, and the aesthetic regime of art.53 According to Rancière, what divides these two regimes is that each can be reduced to a different “idea of art.” For the representative regime, the purpose of art, he says, is to reconstitute life in a representational format by means of what Bordwell calls the craft principle: “The representative regime understands artistic activity on the model of an active form that

52 Rancière argues that, historically, the logic of the aesthetic regime found its footing only in the 19th century as part of the turn to Romanticism, but that it was first theorized by Aristotle.

53 Since it is not relevant to this discussion, I am omitting the third mode of relating art and politics identified by Rancière—the ethical regime of images—although it should be noted that it, too, was practiced throughout this period, most conspicuously in the form of censorship.
imposes itself upon inert matter and subjects it to its representational ends.”

By contrast, the aesthetic regime believes, like Canudo, that prosaic life can constitute its own form of art, and counts on the withdrawal or deferral of the artist’s will—what Rancière calls a “becoming-passive”—in the fashioning of the work:

The aesthetic regime rejects the idea of form willfully imposing itself on matter and instead identifies the power of the work with the identity of contraries: the identity of active and passive, of thought and non-thought, of intentional and unintentional.

What distinguishes the aesthetic tradition in film theory is the premise that cinema recasts reality, or our perception of it, and thereby provokes an aesthetic experience so unprecedented that it cannot be accounted for within existing critical or theoretical paradigms. Rancière disputes this premise with the following claim: “Cinema as an artistic idea predated the cinema as a technical means and distinctive art.”

Rancière’s rather provocative thesis is that the so-called photographic logic on which the aesthetic tradition’s argument is predicated predates not only the birth of film but also the birth of photography. Neither cinema nor photography invented the aesthetics that so captivated the pure cinema proponents. Conceptually, it is present in embryonic form in Aristotle, although it only reached maturity in both theory and practice around the 19th-century.

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55 Ibid. Although the concept of “becoming-passive” informs his earlier work on the politics of literature and art, particularly as a corollary to “muteness,” it is interesting to note that it does not fully command Rancière’s attention until his studies on cinema.
56 Ibid., 6. Although it seems to rehearse André Bazin arguments on the “ontology” of cinema, made some 50 years prior, Rancière is actually making a highly original claim, as we’ll see. Whereas Bazin draws on the idea of resemblance and its psychological force to ground his theory, Rancière advances the argument that cinema does not, in fact, constitute a novel aesthetic but rather can be accounted for within pre-existing regimes of art.
Realist fiction is the exemplary case. Realism as a literary project was organized around the principle of de-figuration, which is the defining trait of the aesthetic regime of art. Achieved by adopting a “passive” mode of writing, de-figuration was thought to provide the conditions necessary for allowing the world to “speak” for itself. Flaubert, for example, sought to create “a book stripped of every trace of the writer’s intervention and composed instead of the indifferent swirl of specks of dust and of the passivity of things with neither will nor meaning.”\(^{57}\) Summed up in the concept of “muteness,” it is the thesis that the elements of prosaic life can constitute their own significance and can be read in the same way one reads the written word. For the aesthetic regime, the signs of life and the signs of art are interchangeable. This is the same logic Canudo and his followers adopt in positing that film “issues from itself,” for cinema seems to them to defy, on some fundamental level, the craft principle that organizes the poetic tradition. Already before cinema was invented, then, one finds a practical example of the following idea of art: by withdrawing the will of the artist in the manufacture of the work, the world itself assumes the condition of art.

As Rancière explains, the temptation is therefore to conclude that cinema represents the culmination of the logic of the aesthetic regime. By virtue of the automatic quality of its recording function, cinema appears, naturally and with evident finality, to fulfill Flaubert’s wish of realizing a form of art that “effaced the difference between itself and the ordinary prose of the world.”\(^{58}\) Hence the pure cinema program, with its insistence that narrative plotting fatally compromises cinema’s natural and prodigious

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\(^{57}\) Ibid., 8.
\(^{58}\) Ibid.
power to reveal the “truth” of the world.\textsuperscript{59} But this is a false conclusion, says Rancière, “for the very simple reason that cinema, being by nature what the arts of the aesthetic age had to strive to be, invariably reverts their movement.”\textsuperscript{60} There is no question that cinema thrived in part because it proved to be an excellent vehicle for telling stories, for restoring the representative logic that the aesthetic regime, through the becoming-passive of the artistic will and the de-figurating gesture, was bent on overturning: “At the end of the day, the whole logic of representative art finds itself restored, piece by piece, by this [cinematic] machine.”\textsuperscript{61} Why such a reversal? The reason given by Rancière is that there is an “indecisiveness at the heart of [cinema’s] artistic nature.”\textsuperscript{62} On the one hand, it appears self-evidently as the embodiment of the becoming-passive that characterizes the aesthetic revolution in art. As such, it relieves the artist once and for all of the labour necessary to achieve the passivity of aesthetic art since the camera is already and automatically passive. But by the same token, cinema invites, and even demands, some kind of contribution from, as he says, the “intelligence that manipulates it.”\textsuperscript{63} In one sense, it is so radically passive that it requires the application of what the poetic tradition calls the craft principle: the artist can only serve this passive artistic instrument by deliberately overcoming its natural automatism. The passively recorded images of the camera must in some way be given form, a situation that rekindles the signifying impulse

\textsuperscript{59} Consider Jean Epstein’s famous pronouncement that “Cinema is true. A story is a lie,” a statement that frames Rancière’s argument against reductions of cinema (along with every other art) to any one mode or idea of art. See Jean Epstein, “The Senses I (B),” in \textit{French Film Theory and Criticism}, ed. Richard Abel, vol. 1, Princeton Paperbacks (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1993), 242. Epstein’s essay was originally published in 1921.

\textsuperscript{60} Rancière, \textit{Film Fables}, 9.

\textsuperscript{61} Ibid., 10.

\textsuperscript{62} Ibid., 11.

\textsuperscript{63} Ibid., 9.
of the artist, who feels compelled to transform the “reasonless” signs of life captured by
the camera back into the rational signs of art. Hence, cinema becomes not the downfall of
the representative regime but rather its most faithful servant. In the midst of what should
have been the triumph of the aesthetic regime, cinema revives the art of telling stories, of
narrative plotting and dramatic reversals, of rising action and tidy conclusions—precisely
the kind of art the technical apparatus of cinema promised to overthrow.64

This is not to say that the aesthetic regime is defeated by cinema. Quite the
contrary. Rancière suggests that cinema’s artistic resources are drawn precisely from the
deep ambivalence or “indecisiveness” at its heart. As he explains, cinema “raises to the
highest power the double resources of the mute impressions that speak for themselves
and the montage that calculates their signifying force and truth-value.”65 Cinema can be
reduced to neither an art of life nor an art of signs. It is inevitably both at once. More, it is
the art that is most capable of uniting them:

Cinema...experiences more than any other art the conflict
of these two [artistic regimes], though it is, by the same
token, the art that most attempts to combine them. Cinema
is the combination of the gaze of the artist who decides and
the mechanical gaze that records, of constructed images
and chance images.66

64 Film scholar Rob King suggests an alternative, if also compatible, explanation: the cinema’s apparent
fidelity to aesthetic logic was viewed as a political threat by the elitist financiers who sponsored the film
industry, thus spurring them to shift their resources to the production of so-called “quality” films that
adapted literary and theatrical properties in order to confer onto cinema the status of “high” art and thus
link it to the hierarchical logic of the representative regime. See his “The Discourses of Art in Early Film,
or, Why Not Rancière?” Although a fascinating argument, I think King overstates the importance of elite
sponsoring in cinema’s shift from actualities to its embrace of Aristotelian fictions.
65 Rancière, Film Fables, 161.
66 Ibid.
Rancière’s thesis on the ambivalent nature of cinematic art leads him to make what is undoubtedly his most well-known pronouncement on cinema: “The film fable is a thwarted fable.”⁶⁷ To be sure, Rancière encourages multiple readings of this statement, but it is essentially a claim against any reductive theorization of cinema. Cinema cannot be reduced to any one idea of art because it not only cuts across multiple artistic regimes, it is also always forging links between them. Any attempt to claim cinema for one side or the other finds itself inevitably “thwarted.” Not surprisingly, his main target in making this claim is the medium-specificity argument.

**Ontologies**

What is cinema? In Rancière’s reading, this is a pernicious and misleading question, for it does not merely aim to satisfy the taxonomist. It is a question that culminates, ultimately, in the spurious doctrine of medium specificity. It implies one can identify the art of cinema with its material base when in fact cinematic art persists despite the shift from analog to digital (and other) materialities:

> There is no shortage of theoreticians who have attempted to ground the art of moving images on the solid base of the means specific to it. But the means specific to yesterday’s analogical machine and to today’s digital machine have shown themselves equally suitable for filming both love stories and abstract dances and form.⁶⁸

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⁶⁷ Ibid., 11.  
⁶⁸ Ibid., 4
Consequently, “There is no straight line running from cinema’s technical nature to its artistic vocation.”\textsuperscript{69} This applies most obviously to Arnheim’s modernist claim for cleaner tools, or the conviction that the practice of cinema ought to be founded programmatically on the technical means specific to it. But it applies equally well to that other medium-specificity argument, the filosophical claim that the art of cinema consists of a transformative aesthetic that ushers in a new world or reworked reality. Here, the technical peculiarities of cinema are thought to alter the condition of art so thoroughly that the medium itself recalibrates the prevailing sensory environment. But as Rancière demonstrates, aesthetic properties can carry over from one “medium” to another—for example, television can accommodate the remediated presentation of a modernist film by Robert Bresson, which remains the same work of art across platforms:

The images of \textit{Au hazard Balthazar} are not primarily manifestations of the properties of a certain technical medium, but operations: relations between a whole and parts; between a visibility and a power of signification and a affect associated with it; between expectations and what happens to meet them.\textsuperscript{70}

In other words, what persists across media, and despite their technological differences, is the same idea of art. The inverse is also true, for the very fact that the same medium (television or the “cathode ray tube”) can be used to support such a range of aesthetic styles, from narrative serials to modernist cinema to live game shows, indicates that no

\textsuperscript{69} Ibid., 11. For rhetorical purposes, I have separated two remarks that perhaps should remain together. Here is the uninterrupted passage: “There is no straight line running from cinema’s technical nature to its artistic vocation. The film fable is a thwarted fable.”

single medium or art form can hold a monopoly over our collective sensibility. The medium is not the message. There is no cinematic (or digital) “age.” Our culture is not being held hostage to the properties of any media technology or art form. The film fable is a thwarted fable.

For Rancière, the more appropriate query, then, is: what is the idea of art that organizes a given work? Rather than puzzle out aesthetic criteria from the properties of the technical apparatus or medium with which the work is crafted, Rancière asks us to consider the aesthetic logic embodied by or in a given cultural expression, as well as the discursive context in which it is received. Put another way, Rancière proposes we define “medium” differently, not as a material to be given shape but as a conceptual space of articulation whose specific configuration determines how aesthetic experience achieves the condition of intelligibility. In Rancière’s terms, a medium is the space wherein artistic “operations” are carried out. As such, a medium implies neither a specific mode of expression nor an inescapable cultural sensibility. Rather, art is the product of the application of an aesthetic logic or idea of art to given materials or media. This is why we can speak coherently about a classical and a modernist cinema, about one cinema that adopts the representational agenda of mythos, and another that appeals to opsis in seeking to display the mute expressions of prosaic life. Both can be qualified as “cinematic,” but each performs a divergent set of operations and embodies a distinct idea of art.

Of course, Rancière is not the first to mount a critique of the medium-specificity argument. But his original analysis of this doctrine provides fresh insight into its political dimension. This is particularly true in the context of film theory. With respect to the
poetic tradition, Rancière’s thesis makes manifest the latent political implications of prohibitions against certain film practices, which need not programmatically obey the logic of cinema’s technical base. The following remarks on the art of painting apply in equal measure to cinema:

Modernist discourse presents the revolution of pictorial abstraction as painting’s discovery of its own proper ‘medium’: two-dimensional surface. By revoking the perspectivist illusion of the third dimension, painting was to regain the mastery of its own proper surface. In actual fact, however, this surface does not have any distinctive feature. A ‘surface’ is not simply a geometric composition of lines. It is a certain distribution of the sensible.\(^7^1\)

Rudolf Arnheim disparages the talkie because he views it as a corruption of cinema’s essentially visual nature. On the basis of the medium-specificity argument, he insists on a prescriptive model for film practice, one that imposes significant limitations on the kinds of cinematic art one can make. The prohibition on synchronized sound he prescribes is only the most flagrant example. But injunctions of this sort are not merely aesthetic, they are also political. In Rancière’s terms, Arnheim’s Materialtheorie constitutes a certain “distribution of the sensible”: it assigns tasks to bodies, names to things, and order to spaces. And it does so while insisting that such a carving up and sharing of sensible material is natural and proper—the very definition of a policing “con-sensus.”

Furthermore, Rancière’s thesis suggests a way to resolve the ambivalence experienced by someone like Arnheim, who couldn’t help but harbour suspicions concerning cinema’s artistic bonafides due to its unfortunate connection to the automatic art of photography. Arnheim proposed that the ordered perspective effected by a work is

\(^7^1\) Rancière, The Politics of Aesthetics, 15.
a function of the properties of the medium in question, but that film complicates the matter. Conversely, Rancière argues that a perspective achieves coherence in a work of art on the basis of the operations it performs on or with a given material or medium, a subtle but critical difference. For Rancière, the technical properties of this or that medium are only indirectly implicated, as the case of the televised film proves.

Rancière’s reformulation of medium also has implications for David Bordwell’s brand of poetics, even though Bordwell is sensitive to the dangers of the medium-specificity argument and openly questions its premises. To the extent that he is dependent on the craft principle, which underwrites both his theory of film and the critical model he espouses, Bordwell is limited to one very narrow idea of art. For Bordwell, a medium provides a means of communication from one mind to another, and art constitutes the act of embedding that idea in the formal design of the work. Rancière’s thesis on the question of medium and aesthetic regimes disputes the premise that art is a strictly craft-based enterprise. Wedded inextricably to the logic of the representative regime, Bordwell’s poetics is not rich enough or flexible enough conceptually to account for works of art in which the artist’s role is diminished or bracketed out in the interest of a becoming-passive, or that otherwise runs afoul of the craft principle. More importantly, Bordwellian poetics cannot account for the “indecisiveness” at the heart of cinema, its capacity to contain and integrate two distinct kinds of gazes.

Bordwell’s argument on the question of cinematic art raises the question of politics. To grasp how, it is worth recalling that Rancière identifies the political moment

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72 As we’ll see, Abbas Kiarostami’s cinema is a case in point.
of dissensus with the staging of unconditional equality between speaking beings.

According to Rancière, a de-politicized consensus primarily takes the form of pedagogy, in which a hierarchical relation that opposes student to master is imposed. Bordwell’s poetics resembles this pedagogical form in uncanny ways. In particular, the dynamic of the craft principle, as he construes it, and the relation between artist and spectator that it models, rehearses the principle of transmission that organizes pedagogical hierarchies, according to which the student uncritically absorbs the lesson of the master. It is not that every idea given sensuous form as a work of art constitutes a lesson in the traditional sense. The stultifying conditions of pedagogy are satisfied merely by the expectation that the spectator’s sole purpose is to reconstitute the idea transmitted by the artist by means of the work. This is true of Arnheim’s poetics as well, for the ordered perspective he demands of the artist also prescribes in advance the task of the spectator. This task, it bears repeating, is not necessarily to fall into agreement with the perspective the work organizes. That is not the nature of its politics. It suffices to expect the spectator to assume for him or herself the perspective organized by the work and give assent to its coherence. For both Arnheim and Bordwell, the artist assumes the role of master, the spectator that of student.

It might be objected at this point that all works of art are pedagogical, in the sense defined by Rancière. After all, is it not the very vocation of the artist, as we commonly understand the term, to arrange sensible matter into a coherent and intelligible form on behalf of the spectator? Hitchcock underlines this point with his habit of inserting himself

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73 I take up this point in more detail in Chapter 5.
into each of his films—“signing” his work in this way asserts his privilege as the work’s author. But insofar as it conforms to the craft principle, according to which it is the spectator’s role to decode the idea embedded in the work by the artist, this idea of art obeys the same principle of transmission that organizes the pedagogical relation.

Clearly, there are ideas of art other than the poetics espoused by Bordwell and Arnheim. And some of these lend themselves more readily to the staging of the axiomatic egalitarianism Rancière identifies with dissensus. By way of illustration, it might be useful to offer a comparative analysis between two artists whose works embody opposing ideas of art. On one side is Alfred Hitchcock, whose work, it will be recalled, served Bordwell as a practical example of his theory of the poetics of cinema. On the other is Abbas Kiarostami, an Iranian filmmaker whose cinema, with its dismantling of representative logic, hews more closely to the aesthetic regime. As I will show, the first is an example of the art of cinema as pedagogy, while the second attempts the realization of an egalitarian cinematic art.

**Cinematic Pedagogies**

According to David Bordwell, Hitchcock made *Rope* with a particular idea in mind. Perceptive to the daring formal innovations of some of his upstart contemporaries, Hitchcock set out to assert or reassert his reputation as cinema’s preeminent innovator. To this end, Hitchcock designed his work of art around the long take, a formal device that was then gaining currency as a more dynamic alternative to the staid protocols of continuity editing. Through considerable ingenuity, Hitchcock overcame some
formidable challenges, both technical and logistical, to create a film that applied the long take in genuinely innovative ways. The result is a singular work of cinematic art, rightly worthy of our critical attention. As spectators, we are—and should be—impressed. While it is certainly worthwhile to identify both the challenges posed by Hitchcock’s innovative design and the particular solutions he arrived at—as Bordwell does so effectively in his poetic analysis—such an approach fails to disclose the idea of art his film embodies, which in turn obscures its politics. Hitchcock serves Bordwell’s defence of poetics so effectively because his films exemplify the craft principle. By the same token, however, they tend to constitute exercises in cinematic pedagogy.

In this respect, *Rope* is typical. By insisting on such an original and difficult formal design for his film, Hitchcock was hoping to impart a lesson. In fact, two lessons. The first instructs his implied pupils—those upstart cinematic innovators—on the possibilities of the long take, possibilities they had not yet conceived themselves and might have difficulty replicating, so challenging were the technical and logistical demands that confronted Hitchcock. But there is a second lesson to absorb from *Rope*, and that is that he, Hitchcock, has mastered this formal device of the long take while his contemporaries, however proficient in its uses, have not. What’s more, Hitchcock situates himself as the unyielding master of cinematic form and his contemporaries as perennial students whose knowledge of cinema and control over its artistic resources will be forever inferior to his own, even as he insists on instructing them on its possibilities. *Rope* is meant to provide proof of Hitchcock’s peerless skill; he can bend the medium of cinema to his will to a degree beyond what his rivals are capable of. *Rope* therefore
constitutes a lucid example of how the craft principle, as a particular distribution of the sensible, organizes the social order into a pedagogical hierarchy of master and student.  

Rancière himself make this point about Hitchcock in an analysis of *Vertigo*, and it is worth reviewing his comments, along with extending them somewhat, if only to show that *Rope* is not an anomaly when it comes to the pedagogical element of Hitchcock’s cinema. Even in the case of *Vertigo*, where formal innovation plays a secondary role, Hitchcock finds ways to assume the guise of artist-master who takes it upon himself to provide instruction to the spectator-student. In a highly original analysis, Rancière contends that *Vertigo* mobilizes a poetics that pits the falseness of semblance against the truth of reality, and that Hitchcock, ever the pedagogue, reserves for himself alone the privilege of adjudicating between the two. This dynamic is played out on two interrelated levels that eventually collapse into one. There is first of all the detective narrative that constitutes the Aristotelian plot of the film. In this instance, the truth of the murderous scheme perpetrated by Scottie’s old friend is masked by a veil of deceitful appearances, with the investigative activity of the detective resulting in the dissipation of such appearances and the revelation of the truth. But there is also a second “vertigo,” that of a gaze obsessed with images, a penetrative gaze that seeks relentlessly to pierce the image because it is forever haunted by the nihilistic thought that images are not only unreliable witnesses to reality but perhaps only ever depthless illusions that make of reality a mockery and send us headlong into the void of nothingness. Hence, the recurring image

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74 To underscore the point, one of the themes of the film is how the killers took the wrong “lesson” from their master-teacher. This film thus also serves as a cautionary tale against the supposed dangers of pedagogical practice gone awry.  
of falling towards emptiness that marks Scottie’s fascination with Carlotta/Madeleine/Judy, as well as his desperate attempt to dispel the illusion once and for all and assure the substantiality of the image by remaking Judy into Madeleine.

This thwarted fable is therefore composed of an Aristotelian plot involving “peripatetic and recognition” as well as a “romantic or symbolist story of the man fascinated by an image.”\(^{76}\) These two vertigos, which are also two distinct ideas of art, work in smooth synchronization throughout most of the running time. After all, it is Scottie’s restoration of Madeleine (romantic/symbolist) that leads him to uncover the murder scheme (generic plot). But Rancière discovers that the relationship between them is built on a “fault,” a fundamental incongruity that provides Hitchcock with the opportunity to “[reveal] himself as the supreme manipulator who invents illusions and vertigos at will.”\(^{77}\) Rancière identifies this fault with two moments of excessive authorial intervention: Scottie’s vertiginous nightmare following the staged death of Madeleine, which reduces the obsessive gaze into a mere pathology or psychological abnormality, and the scene of Judy’s confession in which the spectator is prematurely informed of the truth of the murder plot rather than discovering it along with the detective. Instead of allowing two naturally incompatible vertigos—machination and fascination—to exist side by side, these moments cause (clumsily, claims Rancière) the Romantic logic of the film to become absorbed into its Aristotelian one.

It is as if the obsessive gaze, though necessary to the plot, poses a threat to Hitchcock’s control over the work of art he is crafting, for such a gaze inevitably

\(^{76}\) Ibid., 21.
\(^{77}\) Ibid., 26.
culminates in the void and is therefore beyond calculation or manipulation. Above all, it represents a loss of Hitchcock’s power to distinguish, on behalf of the spectator, what is real and what is illusion. As if eager to secure his position as master, Hitchcock sets out to recover the power to adjudicate between semblance and reality, a distinction that conforms to representative logic and the Aristotelian plot but one that the obsessive gaze ultimately annuls. In the event, this is merely a matter of Hitchcock reasserting his authorial will over the material, even if traces of the breach, in the form of lingering incongruities, remain.

The nightmare Scottie experiences is a case in point. Stylistically outdated by contemporary standards and verging on the comical, the scene nonetheless serves the purpose of assimilating the obsessive gaze to the principle of revelation that organizes the detective narrative, disarming it of its essential nihilism. Scottie’s existential obsession with the wavering truth value of images is linked in this scene to the more mundane vertigo of a fear of heights. What is common to both, and thus assures the coherence of the link, is that each contemplates an eventual fall into the void. Cinematically, Hitchcock needed a way to forge this link in a way that made narrative sense and was thus in keeping with representative logic. Staging it as a nightmare is a tidy solution. Nightmares have a surreal logic that allows for the incongruous, which is necessary to the process of dissolving the obsessive gaze into a pathological fear of heights—neatly captured in the subjective image of Scottie approaching, and finally falling into, the bottomless pit of Carlotta’s grave. The nightmare also conforms to representative logic in that does not threaten the distinction between the truth of reality and the dissimulations of semblance—
the nightmare, like the illusion, can be dismissed as unreal. This pivotal scene thus prepares the way for the eventual triumph of the Aristotelian plot over the Romantic one: Scottie is cured of his vertigo(s) the moment he dissipates all deceitful appearances and uncovers the truth of the murder scheme. In this instance, Hitchcock’s pedagogy consists in raising the spectre of the void for the opportunity it provides of proving himself its master: “The director introduces himself as the manipulator of manipulation, the well-meaning conjurer who invents and melts simultaneously into a single continuum the wonders of confusing true with false and dissipating that confusion.”78 That the scene in question verges on the comical is merely the price paid to keep this pedagogical relationship intact.

**Egalitarian Cinema**

Bordwell’s poetics, however, constitutes only one kind of idea of art. Throughout the history of cinema, there have been film artists who have explored alternate aesthetic horizons, in the course of which they have dispensed, in whole or in part, with the craft principle exemplified by Hitchcock’s cinema. Some have, on occasion, discovered ways of using cinema to create art on the egalitarian principle of dissensus, according to which bodies, tasks, and spaces become dis-aligned with respect to the prevailing social order. I argue that such is the case with Abbas Kiarostami. Insofar as his cinema fails to obey the craft principle, it is ill-served by Bordwellian poetics. By the same token, his films often advance an idea of art that makes no pedagogical claim over the spectator but rather

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78 Ibid., 28.
seeks to suspend the rules according to which we assign roles and tasks to bodies, and identify and configure spaces. When he succeeds, his films embody an idea of art that is strictly identical with equality.\textsuperscript{79}

In this context, his 1991 film \textit{Close-Up} is undoubtedly the pinnacle of his cinematic art since it is the film in which Kiarostami is at his most thorough in shedding the guise of master or pedagogue. His goal as director in this case is not to impart a lesson but to confront one regime of sensory experience (common sense or con-sensus) with another (dis-sensus). But \textit{Close-Up} is also a relevant counter-example to the cinema of Hitchcock because of the way in which Kiarostami chooses to cultivate dissensus: by challenging the representative logic that insists on distinguishing between reality and semblance.\textsuperscript{80} This takes many forms in the film. Like \textit{Vertigo}, \textit{Close-Up} takes up the theme of impersonation: the story concerns the actual court case of one Hossein Sabzian, who took advantage of his physical resemblance to famed Iranian filmmaker Moshen Mahkmakbaf to convince a family, the Ahankhahs, that he, as Mahkmakbaf, wanted to make a film about them. Upon uncovering the deception, the family had Sabzian arrested and the resulting court case serves as the film’s point of departure. Confusing cinematic modes, \textit{Close-Up} has no interest in deciding between either documenting the court proceedings of this fascinating case or in recreating its unusual circumstances through the artifice of fiction. Kiarostami’s wish here is to explore forms of what Rancière calls

\textsuperscript{79} What follows is highly indebted to Nico Baumbach’s account of Kiarostami’s cinema in his “Shareable Cinema: The Politics of Abbas Kiarostami.”

\textsuperscript{80} Alternatively, Nico Baumbach argues that Kiarostami pursues an egalitarian cinema by blurring the boundaries that typically distinguish the social roles constitutive of the production and reception of cinema: filmmaker, actor/actress, spectator. See his “Sharable Cinema.”
subjectification, a process that opens up a subject space by decomposing and recomposing the ways of doing, of being, and of saying that together define the perceptible organization of the community. For Kiarostami, Sabzian’s guilt or innocence is beside the point. What interests him is indicating how Sabzian, ostensibly a member of the “lumpen proletariat,” is as capable of wielding the logos and framing a world in common as the middle-class family whom he deceives. Like Hitchcock, Kiarostami also inserts himself into the film. But whereas Hitchcock’s cameo affirms his status as the final authority on what is true and what is false, what is reality and what is semblance, Kiarostami withdraws from the position of master and sets the very question of what really happened aside in order to extend the logos to those supposedly feral beings who lack the proper qualifications to speak at all—the so-called criminals, the unemployed, the underclass.

Early in the film we are treated to shot of a newspaper headline that puts the matter of Sabzian’s deception in conventional terms: “Bogus Makhmalbaf Arrested.” Kiarostami’s purpose in the film is to challenge the sensory logic that allows such a statement to appear self-evident. The police-sanctioned story, as told by members of the family, is that Sabzian took advantage of the family’s avid interest in cinema to gain their confidence so that he could eventually rob them. From this perspective, Sabzian’s relationship to the family is unequivocally fraudulent. Moreover, the case is made that he deserves incarceration for his alleged attempt to acquire funds that ought by rights to have been procured in the proper and legal manner: through the labour market, no matter its deficiencies. What Sabzian is guilty of, ultimately, is conforming to a sensory order
that identifies him with a certain class of being, one incapable of both honesty and productive labour. Such a being is unworthy of being heard since what he has to say is almost literally immaterial: he lacks the means to make any meaningful contribution to the commons—his lies and alleged thievery confirm this. In this light, Sabzian amounts to something less than a self, the so-called “Bogus Makhmalbaf,” a mere shadow of a real person.

But Sabzian struggles against this sensory order, claiming “I am not a con man…What I did looks like fraud [only] from the outside.” This comment is delivered to Kiarostami in their initial interview together, preparatory to the trial. It is the first indication of a wish on Sabzian’s part to challenge the role or “part” in which police logic has cast him, the proverbial “part of those who have no part.” It is clear, however, that as long as he is caught in this sensory order, his claims will not only go unheeded, they will be regarded effectively as non-sense, the unintelligible speech of a feral being.

Sabzian does, however, get his wish when Kiarostami agrees to film his trial. In the course of filming the proceedings, Kiarostami’s camera will open up a space for Sabzian to speak—to affirm his capacity for intelligible speech—a gesture which at the same time asserts an equality that is shared among all speaking beings. Kiarostami manages this by means of that most ordinary of cinematic devices: the close-up. For the court proceedings, Kiarostami chose to set up one of his cameras so as to frame Sabzian in close-up, and the bulk of Sabzian’s speech as a defendant is delivered from this perspective. In classical or dominant cinema, the close-up is reserved for the star of the film or mobilized to confer onto a specific actor the status of stardom. This is significant
to the extent that one of things we learn from hearing Sabzian speak is that he is an avowed cinephile, claiming to have viewed the films of the real Makhmalbaf multiple times. Even more, he admits to entertaining fantasies about leaving the anonymous underclass behind by becoming an actor and director, fantasies he was able to momentarily indulge by convincing the Ahankhahs that he was Makhmalbaf. In his testimony, Sabzian confesses to taking his role seriously, so much so that he admits he began to plan a real film with the help of members of the family, who were all too eager to indulge their own cinephilic desires by attaching themselves to the forthcoming project of a major director. As he explains, “I felt like I really was a director…describing where shots should be filmed, and what decor should be used…I’d give directions.”

The appellation “Bogus Makhmalbaf” willfully denies Sabzian the capacity for this kind of creative undertaking. Such a sensory order obscures the fundamental equality that exists between Sabzian and Makhmalbaf, an equality shared by all speaking beings. To bring Sabzian out from under Makhmalbaf’s shadow, as it were, is to thwart the logic that assigns Sabzian to one sphere of experience and Makhmalbaf to another. In the hands of Kiarostami, this is precisely what the close-up accomplishes. Giving the image and soundtrack (since, crucially, it is both a visual and aural “close-up”) over solely to Sabzian gives him, however provisionally, the starring role that will deliver him from the social indigence that is otherwise his lot. Whether his dialogue is scripted or spontaneous, or whether what he does while in close-up can be considered “acting” in the conventional sense matters less than the fact that Sabzian proves himself up to the task: the speech he delivers is eloquent, thoughtful, and moving. It is a vivid and compelling example of
what Rancière refers to as “the capacity of ordinary beings to express the wealth of common experience.”

Kiarostami underscores the principle of equality expressed in and by his use of the close-up in the closing sequence of the film, in which a just-released Sabzian meets the real Makhmalbaf (supposedly for the first time) and they share a ride on the back of a motorcycle. Such an image makes a mockery of the claim that Sabzian is merely the shadow of an other, more worthy self. Pressed together on the motorcycle, the one hardly distinguishable from the other, the image makes manifest the presence of two worlds in one. In this moment of dissensus, a fundamental equality prevails.

But the significance of the close-up as a marker of stardom is also subverted in the film. As much as the close-up elevates Sabzian from a no-body into a some-body, it also disperses him into an anonymous every-body. At one point, Sabzian reveals that is drawn to the kind of cinema, and art more generally, that is able to express the suffering he experiences as a member of the underclass. When asked by Kiarostami in their initial interview together what he can offer Sabzian, the jailed man responds with the following request: “show our suffering.” This statement can be taken in two ways. The first is as the more familiar political imperative to represent the destitution of the underprivileged in the mass media in order to influence the direction of social and economic policy. But the second way speaks more directly to the “our” in that comment. When Sabzian is finally granted his close-up, it is not only material deprivations he laments, but the ways in which his voice goes unheard as a result of his marginal social status. He argues that his

81 Ibid., 125.
words were taken seriously by the family—that his statements were of account—only because they were under the impression that he was Makhmalbaf; they not only heard what he had to say but treated him as an intelligible being making statements worthy of consideration. Sabzian is painfully aware that had they recognized him as a “poor man,” his remarks would have been considered wholly inconsequential. The fact that the sensory order which distinguishes between feral noise and intelligible signal is so arbitrarily arranged is not lost on Sabzian, who was able to play both parts—poor man and star director—convincingly. When he says “our,” then, he is not simply or not only referring to members of the underclass, but implicitly to all speaking beings, since all are invariably forced into assigned roles and tasks that places limits what they can say and do and be. Despite his star-making turn as the object of the close-up, then, Sabzian stands as much for a universal figure—call it the demos—as a marginal one.

Aside from his use of the close-up, Kiarostami will advance the egalitarian principle of dissensus in one other crucial way: by having all parties—Sabzian, the family, and himself as director—re-enact certain moments from their actual encounters as if they were making a fictional film. Inserted between documentary scenes at the police station and in the courtroom are scenes of, for example, Sabzian’s fateful meeting with the matriarch of the family, in which she first mistakes him for Makhmalbaf, scenes between Sabzian and the rest of the clan as they discuss the film project they are supposedly collaborating on, and scenes of Sabzian’s arrest once the deception is uncovered. In these scenes, documentary conventions give way to fictional ones.
Resorting to re-enactments in order to illustrate historical reportage is nothing new, but in this film the practice is put to novel use. For one thing, the relationship between the events as they are reported to have occurred and what transpires in front of the camera—between the historical record and the fictional drama—is never clarified. How close the re-enactments match what really transpired remains a mystery to the spectator. Moreover, there is no evident concern to reconcile the two accounts or to have them coincide. What such a disregard for historical fidelity facilitates is the realization of a desire, on the part of both Sabzian and the Ahankhahs, to appear in a film by a major director. Through the formal device of the re-enactment, both get their wish: the fake film that initially united them is somehow actualized in the film we are watching. What is also noteworthy is that each participant plays him or herself—they are not displaced by professional actors. The result is a general confusion between Sabzian, the Ahankhahs, and Kiarostami as characters (in what is, generically, a tragedy) and as relatively insignificant and anonymous historical beings caught up together in a minor scandal. This confusion is the cornerstone of Kiarostami’s egalitarian approach to cinematic art, for it suspends the rules according to which bodies are assigned to roles and tasks. Representative logic, according to which reality and semblance must be rigorously distinguished, is once again undermined. By the same token, it disrupts the hierarchy that defines the pedagogical relationship. In a very real sense, this is not solely Kiarostami’s film. Following Nico Baumbach, we might call it an example of “sharable” cinema, since it belongs as much to Sabzian and the Ahankhahs as to the director. That he gives his cinema over to them, that he finds a way to make it sharable, is the act not of a
pedagogue or master, nor of a disciple or student, but of an equal seeking to sustain and propagate equality by means of his art.
Chapter 4

Documentary Fictions

Any characterization of the documentary had better work to distinguish the fiction from the nonfiction film.  

*Carl Plantinga*

Documentary film, film devoted to the “real,” is...capable of greater fictional invention than “fiction” film.  

*Jacques Rancière*

What is the documentary? This question has traditionally proven to be a troubling one for film theorists. Carl Plantinga, a specialist in the field, took up the search for a definition of the documentary in a 2005 essay only to eventually admit defeat. His failed effort is paradigmatic of the way in which contemporary documentary theory never seems to find its object.  

According to Plantinga, the conceptual problems raised by the documentary can be traced to the indexical nature of film and sound recordings, and the uncertain relationship of these to the documentary’s status as non-fiction. As he remarks,

> It is clear that the special nature of the film medium—and in particular its use of photographic images and sound recordings—has proven particularly difficult to conceptualize in relation to the fiction/nonfiction film

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1 Carl Plantinga, “What a Documentary Is, After All,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 63, no. 2 (Spring 2005), 114. It’s unclear whether the title of the essay is meant to be ironic.


The so-called “special nature” of film—which here refers to its claim to an indexical relationship with reality—is, of course, a key theme in the history of film theory more generally, particularly in its more rhapsodic corners. That it sows confusion even in the relatively staid and sober discourse of documentary film theory—and, more provocatively, that this confusion is linked to the fiction/non-fiction distinction that organizes the discourse—is a curious claim, one that warrants more discussion than Plantinga devotes to it here. What does it mean to say that the documentary is difficult to conceptualize because the fiction/non-fiction film distinction is, in some unspecified way, complicated by the indexical nature of film and sound recordings?

That is the question I take up in this chapter. My guiding hypothesis is that the conceptual problems posed by the documentary are not inherent to the form but result from a reluctance on the part of theorists to interrogate the distinction between fiction and non-fiction on which accounts of the documentary are inevitably premised. I examine how a commitment to this distinction—codified in the doctrine of “sobriety”—results in a characterization of the documentary as essentially propositional in its logic, rather than aesthetic: the documentary is more a medium for arguments, it is said, than a kind of art. I indicate how the conceptual problems that plague documentary theory stem from the difficulties posed in the attempt to reconcile sobriety with the “special nature” of

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5 Rather than attempt to address this question, Plantinga builds on previous attempts from those working in the analytic tradition, such as Gregory Currie, Noël Carroll, and Trevor Ponech, to arrive at a universal definition of the documentary. Plantinga’s contribution to these debates is to define the documentary as “Asserted Veridical Representations” (AVR), according to which the propositional content of the documentary is composed of both assertions about the world and audio-visual traces of it, the one lending evidentiary and propositional support to the other.
indexical media. The argument I make is that a possible solution to these conceptual difficulties lies with assigning aesthetics, rather than sobriety, as the privileged context for theorizing the documentary.

Drawing on the work of Jacques Rancière, I propose that we can conceive of the documentary as a form of fiction, and that we can do so without confusing it with the novelistic fiction of Hollywood, and without succumbing to an unwanted skepticism. The doctrine of sobriety stipulates that history holds the status of an absent cause and is thus ultimately incommensurate with our experience of it in the textual form of sober discourse, of which the documentary is a species. As we’ll see, an aesthetic approach to the documentary views it, rather, as a means for “fictionalizing” reality, in that it serves as a means for arranging the signs and traces of prosaic life, which are otherwise merely “mute impressions,” into an intelligible structure—the documentary as a particular fiction of reality, or “documentary fiction.” I argue, moreover, that conceptualizing the documentary in aesthetic terms—that is, as an intelligible arrangement of signs and traces rather than as a “representation” of reality, in the sober sense—brings clarity to the value and function of indexical media with respect to the documentary mode.

The Doctrine of Sobriety

Plantinga gives voice to the cardinal rule of contemporary documentary theory in proposing that “Any characterization of the documentary had better work to distinguish the fiction from the nonfiction film.” To the extent that we can identify a principle that brings unity and coherence to the discourse of contemporary documentary theory, it is
surely this one. Why even entertain the notion of carving out a unique identity for documentary film if not to distinguish between cinematic accounts of a fictitious nature and those of a factual one? The degree to which documentary theory depends on the fiction/non-fiction distinction to give coherence to its enterprise cannot be overstated. In this respect, it is worth reviewing the premises and claims of the doctrine of sobriety, first proposed by Bill Nichols in his seminal *Representing Reality*, a work that lays the groundwork for the dominant paradigm in today’s documentary theory.  

As Nichols remarks in the introduction, the problem consists in the fact that the term documentary “fails to identify any structure or purpose of its own entirely absent from fiction or narrative. The terms become a little like our everyday, but unrigorous, distinction between fruits and vegetables.” What is the difference between documentary and narrative or novelistic fiction? We seem to know it intuitively rather than critically: we might be able to isolate documentary films from fictional ones, the way we do fruits from vegetables, but lack the proper critical framework of concepts and vocabulary for justifying our assessment. 

Nichols’ solution is to assign the documentary to a particular class of non-fiction systems that together constitute what he calls the “discourses of sobriety.” Like other systems in this class of discourse—Nichols mentions science, economics, politics, foreign policy, education, religion, and welfare, specifically—the documentary’s sobriety

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6 I should add that I trace the origin of “contemporary documentary theory” to Nichols’ book and the doctrine of sobriety it elaborates. It should be noted, however, that unlike the discourse that grew out of his doctrine, Nichols’ project is not explicitly conducted within the framework of analytic philosophy.

7 Ibid., 6.

8 Ibid., 3.
is a function of its opposition to figures of a fictional or fanciful nature. But given the
often similar structure, style, and purpose between them, on what grounds can we
distinguish between the two textual systems? Nichols argues that the distinction rests
with “the status of the text in relation to the historical world.” Fictional systems and non-
fictional systems each claim a different relation to reality. Fictions strike a metaphorical
relation to the historical world. They address not the world we inhabit, but any number of
imaginary worlds. These might bear a striking resemblance to the historical world, but
our absence from them is decisive. A fictional world might address historical events and
historical subjects, but the effect it might have on the historical world is, at best, indirect.
As a system of non-fiction, by contrast, documentary claims a relation to the real that is
“direct, immediate, transparent,” even if it sometimes qualifies this claim as provisional,
tentative, or otherwise uncertain. Whereas fictions claim a metaphorical relation to the
historical world, says Nichols, non-fictions claim a relation that is metonymic or even
indexical. The referent of the non-fiction text is, finally, the historical world itself, not an
imaginary one.

The Politics of Sobriety

As Nichols makes clear, the stakes of the debate are not merely academic or
epistemological. They are fundamentally political. Not unlike the Marxist perspective, to
which he is sympathetic, Nichols places great stress on our capacity to make historical
forces both legible and intelligible. Suffering is not a fiction and death is not imaginary.
Both not only qualify as real, they ground reality and define its logic: history, says Nichols, “kills.”\textsuperscript{11} War, famine, genocide, exploitation—these exist as historical referents: they involve historical subjects and exert historical pressures. According to Nichols, the purpose of the sober discourse is to respond to these and other historical forces.

This response, says Nichols, unfolds in two ways. The first is by transforming these forces into objects of knowledge. Through observation, investigation, and analysis, we can come to know history. Through reportage in the form of, say, the scientific paper, the essay, or the documentary, we can disseminate this knowledge and thereby contribute not only to the sense that we inhabit a shared reality but also to a consensus regarding the nature of that reality. Non-fiction systems like the documentary respond to history in a second way, by leveraging knowledge of the historical world for the purpose of guiding its development, for it is only by knowing reality that we able to act upon it. In this respect, Nichols notes that discourses of sobriety are capable of a kind of instrumental power that is denied to fiction. Social issue documentaries are exemplary but are not alone in this respect. Consider the sobriety of a film like \textit{The Thin Blue Line} (Errol Morris, 1988), which helped to overturn a wrongful conviction by uncovering and disseminating exonerating evidence. In the way they orient us with reference to the historical world, documentaries provide both the context and the means for its transformation (for better or worse). They can direct us to take historically meaningful

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 109.
actions by increasing awareness of historical events, as well as furnishing the logistical
and material support such actions require.

But Nichols also identifies the politics of the documentary with another of its
aspects, and it is here that a complication arises, one which threatens the neat division he
wishes to uphold between fiction and non-fiction. What the documentary shares with
novelistic fiction, claims Nichols, is its status as a textual or signifying system. Nichols
remarks that whatever claim documentary films have to the historical world, “they also
remain texts. Hence they share all of the attendant implications of fiction’s constructed,
formal, ideologically inflected status.”¹² Fictions are organized more conspicuously
around formal principles than expository ones, with stakes that are taken to be aesthetic,
rather than, say, epistemological or ethical. As such, qualifying novelistic fictions as
fabrications—that is, as something constructed—courts no controversy. But attributing
the same textual status to the documentary is another matter, for it would seem to come
into conflict with its preferred conception as a discourse of sobriety purporting a claim to
reality that is “direct, immediate, transparent.” In addressing documentary films as
something constructed, are we not dooming them to the same fate as fictional stories,
which exist apart from reality rather than as a party to reality? To put it in the simplest of
terms, if documentary films are reducible, finally, to texts, do they not thereby forfeit
their special status with respect to the real? By the same token, can the documentary-as-
text ever escape the politically corrosive influence of ideology? In other words, are not all
instances of the documentary—and not merely the explicitly partisan works of, say, Leni

¹² Ibid., 110.
Riefenstahl and Michael Moore—politically suspect due to the textual—and therefore ideologically inflected—nature of its discourse?

Sobriety and Representation

This is the central dilemma confronting the project of theorizing the documentary, as Nichols makes so admirably clear. His attempt to address this conceptual problem is significant to the extent that it lays the groundwork for much of today’s documentary theory, including Plantinga’s contributions. Nichols confronts the difficult theoretical questions raised by the documentary by returning to the idea that the distinction between fiction films and their documentary counterparts rests with the way the former extend a metaphorical relation to historical reality while the latter extend a metonymic one. Nichols insists that this premise is sound even when their shared status as textual constructs is taken into consideration. In this respect, what for Nichols best exemplifies the distinction between them is the concept of representation. Like novelistic fiction, the documentary may be qualified as a kind of textual construct, but Nichols argues that the “documentary differs [from novelistic fiction] by asking us to consider it as a representation of the historical world rather than a likeness or imitation of it.”13

For Nichols, this is no mere wordplay or language game in which one kind of figure of speech is uncritically substituted for another. As he is quick to remind us,

13 Ibid. Italics in original. The use of “representation” here is unusual in that he opposes it to imitations when in fact the term is routinely applied to imitative forms. It should be noted that Plantinga retreats from the term, preferring “rhetoric” to “representation” to describe the textual nature of the documentary. This is one of his central arguments in Rhetoric and Representation in Nonfiction Film (Grand Rapids, MI: Schuler Books, 2015).
historical forces exert material pressure; they transform the world we ourselves inhabit and can be felt at every turn. By contrast, imaginary worlds are materially void. They are incapable of directly transforming historical reality. To represent the material, historical world, then, is quite different from creating something in its likeness. As Nichols remarks, “Though our entry to the world is through webs of signification like language, cultural practices, social rituals, political and economic systems, our relation to this world can also be direct and immediate…Material practices occur that are not entirely or totally discursive, even if their meanings and social value are.”14 Such a theory has the curious effect, however, of splitting “history” into two realms: 1) historical reality in its brute, and not fully textualizable, form; 2) textualized accounts that are more-or-less adequate to brute historical reality. Referring the reader to Frederic Jameson’s theory of the historical real as “absent cause,” Nichols distinguishes between a kind of history that is identical to reality, and thereby inaccessible to thought, and textualized history, which, although removed from reality to a degree, has the advantage of making the real thinkable.15

Nichols is aware of the many questions raised in characterizing the documentary text as a representation of reality. In particular, as a representation rather than a reflection, repetition, or reproduction of reality, can we trust the documentary to do justice to historical forces? After all, a representation is still a kind of text. Whatever its claim to reality, is not the documentary unavoidably subject to at least some distortion or

14 Ibid., 109.
15 Ibid., 143. See also Fredric Jameson, The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act (Cornell University Press, 2014). In a nod to Jacques Lacan, Jameson formulates inaccessible reality as the “Real.”
bias? Moreover, is the documentary not always in danger of succumbing to propaganda, or even outright fraud?\footnote{Along the same lines, Ponech states that “the term ‘non-fiction’ seems to whisper that representation is pre-eminently fictional— that fiction is always already there and must with effort be negated.” See his \textit{What is Non-fiction Cinema?}, 1.}

Nichols points out that this accusation is often levelled at discourses of sobriety more generally and is part of a wider argument concerning the criteria we rely on for assessing truth claims. His reply is that such a line of thinking rests on a faulty premise, namely, that it is reasonable to expect the documentary, along with its discursive siblings, to provide what he calls Platonic Truth. From an epistemological perspective, says Nichols, historical reality is not amenable to idealism, nor should we expect it to be since it is neither timeless nor subject to a totalizing perspective. The concept of representation, then, is necessary if we wish to make historical reality legible, to keep its “Truth” from blinding us. This does not mean, he continues, that historical reality is fundamentally unknowable. Nichols argues that to adopt this perspective, which he identifies with the postmodern theorist Jean Baudrillard, is to fall into epistemological nihilism. For Baudrillard, the world has become so saturated by representations that they now assume the status of the real, precipitating the situation of the so-called hyperreal.\footnote{See Jean Baudrillard, \textit{Simulacra and Simulation}, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994).} But Nichols argues that such a premise is untenable in light of the material pressures exerted by historical forces, which even in a postmodern context continue to be unavoidably felt:

Our access to historical reality may only be by means of representations, and these representations may sometimes seem to be more eager to chase their own tails than able to guarantee the authenticity of what they refer to. Neither of these conditions, however, precludes the persistence of
history as a reality with which we must contend.\textsuperscript{18}

As these comments make clear, Nichols’ formulation of documentary representation relies on a theory of history as absent cause—that is, as fundamentally split between textualizable and non-textualizable spheres.

**Sobriety and the Assertoric Argument**

For Nichols, then, the concept of representation serves to redeem the documentary. In fact, one of the most significant contributions made by Nichols to documentary theory is his transformation of the textual nature of documentary discourse from a liability into its most prized asset. The fact that documentaries only ever represent rather than perfectly reflect historical reality—that they must pass through a process of textualization—does not, says Nichols, diminish the discourse’s claim to the real, but in fact enhances it. This is because the representational character of the documentary provides the conditions necessary for the development of an argument.

Nichols explains that documentary films neither seek Platonic Truth nor lapse irremediably into simulation. Rather, they solicit our agreement about the state of historical reality, which as absent cause is otherwise inaccessible to thought. It is the textual nature of the form that, finally, compels the documentary to qualify all its content as propositional. This is perhaps Nichols’ most consequential claim, for it provides the theoretical justification for describing the documentary as fundamentally assertoric in

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 7.
character.\textsuperscript{19} This aspect of the documentary, however, can be easily overlooked if we focus narrowly on the documentary’s power, via its use of indexical media, to disclose the real in a way that we might intuitively experience as unmediated. In this case, says Nichols, the documentary appears to make the following claim: “This is so.” However, the documentary’s defining power is not to disclose but to assert. Nichols insists that the claim “This is so” is always accompanied, however tacitly, by the solicitation “isn’t it?”\textsuperscript{20} Every proposition made in and by a documentary film is just that: a proposal about a state of affairs made available for public consumption and consideration. The assertoric character of the documentary holds, says Nichols, even in documentaries that lack overt commentary, such as those in the poetic or observational mode like, say, \textit{Baraka} (Ron Fricke, 1992) or \textit{High School} (Fred Wiseman, 1968). Like all documentaries, such films assert, at a bare minimum, “This is so, isn’t it?”

\textbf{The Problem of Indexical Media}

Anticipating Plantinga, Nichols understands that the assertoric constitution of the documentary is complicated by the fact that it is composed primarily of indexical media. Nichols explains that its use of indexical media sets the documentary apart from the “written essay or book, the scientific survey or report,” and in a way that diminishes the documentary in the eyes of its fellow discourses of sobriety. Indeed, says Nichols, to the

\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 30. It should be noted that the assertoric argument has largely consumed contemporary documentary theory. Its proponents and expositors include Noël Carroll, Carl Plantinga, and Trevor Ponech, among others.

\textsuperscript{20} Nichols’ most extended treatment of this point can be found in Part II of his \textit{Representing Reality}, and Chapter IV in particular.
extent that such discourses identify as factual, pragmatic, and instrumental accounts of the historical world, the documentary “has never been accepted as a full equal.”

According to Nichols, indexical media cast suspicion on the documentary in two ways, both having to do with the fiction/non-fiction distinction on which discourses of sobriety are generally predicated. The first relates to the cultural history of sound cinema specifically, which cannot fully evade its reputation as a vehicle for the production of diverting fictions. Paradoxical as it may seem, in this case the documentary’s reliance on indexical media actually weakens the perception of it as sober discourse of non-fiction. As Nichols observes, “Instead of directly confronting an issue or problem, the [documentary] discourse must ricochet off this…illusionistic medium of entertainment.”

The second way concerns the so-called special status indexical media seemingly enjoy with respect to the real. Here, Nichols speaks of the perceived danger posed by the temptation to treat photographically constituted images and recorded audio as self-authenticating evidence of a fundamental reality. Indexical media, he says, can confuse the replication of a perceptual situation with the historically real. They seem to present reality rather than represent it by means of a process of textualization. They do not solicit agreement so much as command acquiescence; they reject the rider “isn’t it?” but leave intact the bald claim that “This is so.” As such, they compromise the documentary’s

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21 Ibid., 4.
22 Ibid. See also Trevor Ponech, What Is Non-Fiction Cinema?, in which he states that “Many scholars and cineastes think that the pull of fantasy and illusion on the cinema is too strong for any of its genres to exist beyond fiction's rings.” (1)
23 Nichols elsewhere refers to this property of indexical media, as applied to documentary, as “denotative literalism,” a property, he continues, that “centres around the look of things in the world as an index of meaning.” (27)
capacity to mount an argument or otherwise make assertions about historical reality. The problem is compounded, says Nichols, by the fact that “all photographic and motion picture images made according to the prevailing conventions that allow light reflected from physical objects to be registered on photosensitive film or videotape will exhibit a distinctive bond between image an object.”\textsuperscript{24} In other words, despite the impression that they constitute self-authenticating evidence of the historical world, indexical media are routinely used for fictional purposes. Such an impression, then, is wholly deceptive since “The bond of image to object will not…certify the historical status of the object nor the credibility of an argument.”\textsuperscript{25}

To gain admittance into the club of sober discourses, the documentary must rid itself, or be shown to be exempt from, the contaminating influence of fiction. But its use of indexical media complicates the task. It puts the documentary in a position where it must be defended against the charge that it is more illusory than real, more spectacle than argument. Nichols responds by insisting that the documentary traffics in representations rather than reflections of reality, that its photographic images and recorded audio, whatever the impression they give, are never deployed as ends in themselves but always serve the documentary’s primary goal of assembling and advancing propositional statements. In a documentary, he says, the claim that “This is so” is always attached to the solicitation “isn’t it?”

Moreover, says Nichols, indexicality is insufficient on its own to guarantee sobriety: “Photographic images…re-present the visual field before a lens but they have

\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., 5. Italics in original.
\textsuperscript{25} Ibid.
no ability whatsoever to distinguish, or allow to distinguish, the historical status of that field." For Nichols, there is no such thing as photographic proof since the photographic image is not self-authenticating. Consequently, we must rely on some sort of corroborating evidence, which in documentaries originates from, and is organized by, an expository agent, one who solicits agreement about the historical status of what the images represent. The documentary, it follows, remains uncontaminated by fiction, despite appearances. Because its claims about historical reality are always asserted rather than self-evident it can be said to preserve its sobriety.

These, then, are the terms under which Nichols hopes to redeem the documentary. Contemporary documentary theory has largely followed suit, adopting his premise that the documentary is essentially a sober discourse, that its assertoric status is secured on the back of its representational capacity. As the case of Plantinga and others makes clear, however, doubts about the non-fiction status of the documentary remain, which in turn haunts any effort to both carve out a unique cinematic identity for the documentary (against novelistic fiction, in particular) and to justify its claim to sobriety.

**Sobriety vs. Aesthetics**

We might begin to resolve this conceptual problem by noting how a commitment to a sober understanding of the documentary inevitably involves de-emphasizing its aesthetic dimension. For Nichols and his inheritors, the defining feature of the documentary is that it makes assertions about historical reality. This is what distinguishes

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26 Ibid., 150.
it from the fiction film. By the same token, however, the documentary is construed as something less than, or as something that does not quite achieve the status of, art. In Nichols account, the art of the documentary is discounted in a number of ways. At times, he argues that the documentary operates on the basis of an expository logic rather than an aesthetic one, as when he states that “Expressive forms [in the documentary] attest to qualities of the historical world rather than to qualities of artistic vision.”27 At others, he argues that the documentary serves not an aesthetic but an ethic—the documentarist has an obligation not to the beautiful but to the true as ultimate good. His most extended treatment of this question, which is worth examining in detail, is occasion by his consideration of “realism,” and how the concept applies differently to fiction and non-fiction films.

**Documentary and Realism, or, Documentary Realism**

Realism in fiction…is a matter of an aesthetic. Realism in documentary, marshaled in support of an argument, relates primarily to an economy of logic.28

As Nichols well understands, the distinction between the fiction film and the non-fiction documentary is at its most tenuous in the context of realism. For the documentary to secure an identity distinct from novelistic fiction, it must come to terms with how both can produce “realistic” texts. If, as Nichols says, realism is defined by “its ability to render the impression of reality, a sense of the historical world as we, in fact, experience it, usually on a quotidian basis” then what does it say about the documentary that fiction

27 Ibid., 30.
28 Ibid., 167
films are just as capable of achieving this effect?\textsuperscript{29} For Nichols, the case is at its most confounding when comparing Italian neorealism with observational documentaries, which borrow from each other not only certain stylistic features, such as a reliance on available light, the refusal of montage, a preponderance of long takes, a preference for location shooting, the use of elliptical narrative structures, and an allegiance to compositional strategies that confer objectivity on the image, but also a commitment to historical reality as privileged referent and organizing principle. “Things are,” neorealist director Roberto Rossellini once famously quipped, “why manipulate them?”\textsuperscript{30} Yet despite such kinship, Nichols insists on drawing a border between them on the basis of the fiction/non-fiction film distinction. Neorealism, he says, “remains just the other side of the boundary between fiction and fact, narrative and exposition, story and argument.”\textsuperscript{31}

To justify the barrier he traces, Nichols is forced to oppose the art that organizes novelistic fictions to the logic that organizes documentaries. Nichols is willing to concede that, like the documentary, neorealism “placed its faith in reality.” The difference, however, is that neorealism “sought an aesthetic more than a logic that could serve that faith.”\textsuperscript{32} For Nichols, neorealism might provide “a repertoire of techniques for giving the formal effect of representing a reality that evades the control of the filmmaker,” but that “Such a structure, though aesthetically powerful, does not provide the ‘logic’

\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., 43.
\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 170.
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 167.
documentary requires."\(^{33}\) We might say that Nichols defines the art of neorealism as consisting in the simulation of documentary realism, and that, moreover, it is precisely its status as a kind of art (rather than a kind of argument) that makes its claim to reality ultimately a fiction.

To the extent that Nichols and his inheritors discuss the “art” of the documentary, it is in the narrow sense of a rhetoric. So, for example, each of the categories that comprise the taxonomy of representational modes Nichols initially develops to account for the documentary—expository, observational, interactive, reflexive—refers to a distinct rhetorical strategy for lending structure and suasion to arguments.\(^{34}\) But privileging the documentary’s rhetorical aspect in this way comes at the expense of its other aesthetic attributes. It is, again, a way to assert that the documentary is more a kind of argument than a kind of art.

There are reasons, however, why we should be skeptical of the opposition drawn by Nichols. Most generally, it is not at all controversial to suggest that all instances of a discourse, sober or otherwise, are constituted at least in part artistically: they not only require the application of specific technical skills, they are also often deliberately designed to have a certain aesthetic effect on the reader or spectator.\(^{35}\) With respect to the particular case of the documentary, indexical media confound even further the sober

\(^{33}\) Ibid., 169.
\(^{34}\) This point is argued most forcefully by Carl Plantinga in his *Rhetoric and Representation in Nonfiction Film* (Grand Rapids, MI: Schuler Books, 2015). See, in particular, pp. 37–40 and Chapter 7: Structure.
\(^{35}\) One need not be a poststructuralist to accept that all discourses are, in some sense, artificial, even if they refer us to actual states of affairs, and that, therefore, there is an art to their constitution. It is well known how even Plato, who opposed the truth of reality to the artifice of images, nonetheless delighted in using figures of speech, imaginary scenes, and other embellishments characteristic of art in developing his philosophical style.
distinction between art and history theorized by Nichols. What are we to make of Nanook of the North (Robert Flaherty, 1922), many of whose scenes, along with some its most fundamental premises, were revealed to be staged? There is a documentary quality about the work, one that is tied to the indexical media from which it is composed, that prevails even when its many fabrications are taken into consideration. Likewise, the neorealist style relies extensively on invention, but it seems virtually impossible to fully separate its fictions from its non-fictions. We might know that Ingrid Bergman is not historically identical to Anna, the character she plays in Stromboli (Roberto Rossellini, 1950), but the extended fishing sequence, whatever its narrative or thematic purpose, unquestionably makes a documentary or sober claim on the spectator.

Moreover, such confusion is not limited to neorealism but extends to cinema’s other stylistic extreme: Soviet montage. Consider the film October (Sergei Eisenstein and Grigori Aleksandrov, 1928). In the context of sobriety, the question of the film’s status is perhaps impossible to determine. We might be tempted to treat the film as a historical drama—as an imaginary reconstruction of historical events—but such a reading fails to account for the many ways in which the filmmakers use montage to make assertions directly about the historical world. For example, the famous insert of a peacock during the Kerensky sequence has the effect of referring us as much to historical reality (an argument about the historical Kerensky) as to an imaginary world. The film might also

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36 This confusion is palpable in Roger Ebert’s review of the film, where he remarks that “The movie is an authentic documentary showing the creation of itself. What happens on the screen is real, no matter what happened behind it. Nanook really has a seal on the other end of that line...If you stage a walrus hunt, it still involves hunting a walrus, and the walrus hasn’t seen the script.” Roger Ebert, “Nanook of the North Movie Review (1922),” accessed October 7, 2019, https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/great-movie-nanook-of-the-north-1922.
qualify as a kind of documentary on other grounds. As a committed revolutionary, Eisenstein took cinema-as-montage to be a tool of Marxist science: it had the power to sweep away the illusion of static appearance to reveal the dialectical constitution of history. The “In the name of God…and Country” montage sequence in October is exemplary in this respect. Here, the complex juxtapositions Eisenstein and Alexsandrov contrive between iconic images of state and religious power amount to an argument about the very nature of social history itself. Such films call the fiction/non-fiction distinction into question by refusing to provide a stable point of reference from which to determine whether the film stands, finally, in a metaphorical or metonymic relation to the historical world.

Given the history of film theory, such confusion should not surprise us. From the very beginning, film has been the subject of a protracted debate concerning its relationship to reality. The usual response is to assign film the status of a paradox.37 It both is and is not a language.38 The photographed object both is and is not the model.39 Film constitutes a “moving image of skepticism” that both reconstitutes our connection to reality and assures our ultimate separation from it.40 The fiction/non-fiction distinction

37 As we saw in the previous chapter, Rancière addresses this point by noting the “ambivalence” at the heart of cinema: it is both a passive recording device and a powerful expressive instrument.
38 This claim is advanced by, most famously, pure cinema theorists. See the collected essays in French Film Theory and Criticism, vol. 1.
40 The phrase, if not the sentiment more generally, originates in the work of Stanley Cavell. See the section “More of the World Viewed” in his The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), 183–89. The theme was later developed by David Rodowick in his Philosophy’s Artful Conversation (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2015). In particular, see the sections “Falling in love with the World” (197-203) and “Ontology and Desire” (204-216).
seems to be yet another casualty of film’s paradoxical status. Indeed, a case can be made that film’s greatest contribution to aesthetic theory and the philosophy of art is to upend conventional wisdom on what distinguishes fiction from non-fiction, art from history. Our wish to determine the historical status of the visual field reproduced on film is never quite satisfied, for as many commentators have argued, there is both history and fantasy in it. No wonder, then, that documentary theory continues to struggle with the task of assimilating indexical media to the demands of sobriety. It might be time to consider whether indexical media’s attenuating effect on the sober status of the documentary is intractable. Then again, perhaps sobriety is simply not the most appropriate context in which to discuss the nature, purpose, and value of the documentary.

Beyond Sobriety

I argue that much conceptual clarity and theoretical utility can be achieved by altering our critical approach to the documentary, and in two specific ways. The first is to complicate, in a productive way, the fiction/non-fiction distinction on which current accounts of the documentary are predicated. The second is to embrace the documentary’s status as an art form and direct our critical powers accordingly, while focussing, in particular, on the ways in which the documentary makes use of indexical media and the unique aesthetic possibilities they open up. The objection someone like Nichols would raise to such a scheme is clear enough: in depriving the documentary of sobriety, it is evacuated of all politics, for documentary films would cease to serve as a means for knowing history and harnessing its forces. The documentary would, thereby, lose all
political value and succumb wholly to the force of ideology. In short, it is tantamount to the nihilist’s program. But this is true only if we join Nichols in insisting that the politics of the documentary is irrevocably tied to its sobriety, and in particular the view that history constitutes an absent cause. A different complicity, however, is proposed by Jacques Rancière, who discovers the politics of the documentary, and film more generally, not in its sobriety but in its aesthetics.

**Jacques Rancière and The Politics of Aesthetics**

of the documentary, Rancière says that it is “capable of greater fictional invention than ‘fiction’ film,” a remark that runs so counter to the reigning orthodoxy of documentary theory that, if taken on its own, invites the accusation that he is promoting a radical relativism or skepticism. It is important, then, to place his comments in the context of his wider project on the politics of aesthetics. In this respect it is worth once again taking up his concept of the distribution of the sensible, which along with the principle of axiomatic equality lies at the heart of this project.41

Rancière defines the distribution of the sensible as “the system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it.”42 According to Rancière, communities are sustained in the context of a certain shared “sensibility” or “sensorium” whose function is to make a world in common perceptible and intelligible to its members. At the same time, such a sensible order is “distributed” in

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41 For a more extended discussion of these aspects of Rancière’s project, see Chapter 2 of the present study.  
the sense that a common world inevitably depends for its coherence on a set of implicit laws that allocates tasks and places in the community, which in turn polices one’s social position, status, and role. These distributed, sensible orders establish the hierarchies through which our identities as social subjects (man or woman, student or teacher, reactionary or radical) acquire their intelligibility. Moreover, the logic by which this distribution takes place is fundamentally aesthetic in that a common world is erected only when a con-sensus is reached concerning the ways in which we transform what we experience through our senses into something coherent and meaningful—that is, into a “system of self-evident facts of sense perception.” Aesthetics is the name for this transformation, this act of bringing order and intelligibility to the chaos of our sense perceptions.

Within this framework, Rancière identifies the political as that which disturbs the distribution of the sensible by introducing an egalitarian principle that levels all hierarchies. Axiomatic equality is predicated on universal access to the logos, which does not discriminate between social identities or categories, since all speaking beings possess the capacity for making sensible discourse. Hence Plato’s frustration with the demos, who in claiming to represent THE people on the basis of axiomatic equality confounded the logic that lent Athenian society its order and coherence. The introduction of the demos into the social order brings about dis-sensus—aesthetic confusion—by upsetting the rules that restrict specific bodies to distinct spheres of experience. It is worth repeating that the demos, as Rancière understands it, is not a class within society, nor a specifiable group of empirical individuals militating for more rights or a greater share of
economic spoils. The demos is an impossible idea—a paradox, if you will. It makes no “sense” because it runs counter to “the self-evident facts of sense perception”: its members simultaneously retain their social identity and assert an egalitarian principle that suspends this identity, along the hierarchical ordering it presupposes.

Politics is any instance of such dissensus. Not only the demos of ancient Athens, then, but any public assertion of axiomatic equality, in which the rules that allocate certain bodies to certain places to perform certain tasks are temporarily contested or suspended, qualifies as political. Drawing a relationship between politics and aesthetics in this way—politics as a function of the distribution of the sensible—has the effect of severing the political from its attachment to sobriety (history as absent cause) and shifting it into the orbit of aesthetics (history as a particular way of organizing sensible elements).

Fiction and its Histories

Documentary theory has naturalized the distinction between fiction and non-fiction. But as Rancière reminds us, this distinction has a history. Recall that Rancière identifies three broad ways of distributing the sensible, each with its own aesthetic logic or rules for carving up the sensible environment and imposing intelligibility on our sense perception. In the ethical regime, all images or representations are considered suspect to the extent that they invariably refer to an ideal reality of which they are a more-or-less corrupt version. Because images are fundamentally inadequate to their ideal identity, Plato distrusted their effect on the ethical composition of a society, whose members might be led astray upon mistaking degraded versions of the truth for the real thing.
Consequently, censorship in this regime assumes the status of a regulative principle.

What is important to note is that the concept of fiction has no place in the ethical regime of images. The governing distinction is, rather, between Truth and its simulacrum.

The representative regime of art, however, liberates the representational arts from any ethical obligation, thereby deferring the question of censorship. But this reprieve comes at a price. In order to secure some sort of moral equilibrium as part of a broader effort to appease the Platonists, the representative regime stipulates that a distinction between the imaginative worlds invented by the arts and the real world in which we live must be strictly upheld. This is how it secures a specific domain for fiction. Here is Rancière’s gloss:

[Aristotle’s] *Poetics* declares that the arrangement of a poem’s actions is not equivalent to the fabrication of a simulacrum…To pretend is not to put forth illusions but to elaborate intelligible structures. Poetry owes no explanation for the ‘truth’ of what it says because, in its very principle, it is not made up of images or statements, but fictions, that is to say arrangements between actions.43

According to Rancière, the representative regime accomplishes the dissolution of the world into fictional and non-fictional components via the conceptual pairing of poiesis with mimesis. As a result of this coupling, fiction takes on a very specific meaning in the representative regime. It is not composed of images or statements, which might be confused with non-fiction. Rather, fiction refers to the “intelligible structures” yielded when two activities—the plotting of a story and the theatrical display of imitations or “mimes”—are coordinated with one another. Accordingly, it is in the logic of the

43 Ibid., 36.
representative regime to conflate fiction with art, on the one hand, and non-fiction with history, on the other. This is, of course, the very logic of sobriety that organizes Nichols’ theory of the documentary, and that ultimately justifies the conception of history as absent cause.

There is, however, a third order of aesthetic sensibility identified by Rancière, one whose logic offers an alternative conceptualization of history and, by extension, the documentary. The aesthetic regime of art distinguishes itself by positing the unity of art and prosaic life. In order to be able to think such a unity, the aesthetic regime undoes the poiesis/mimesis couplet on which the representative regime depends. Poetry takes on a new comprehensiveness upon its unshackling from mimesis: it can be found not only in the stories we tell but in the very fabric of the world, to which we can attribute the status of an expressive agent. By the same token, mimesis experiences a precipitous decline. The aesthetic regime collapses the distinction between theatrical space and the space of prosaic life. It is therefore indifferent to the question of imitation. Rancière observes that the aesthetic regime “revokes the privilege of the theatrical space of visibility, the separate space where representation offered itself up to vision as a specific activity. Now there is poetry anywhere and everywhere.” In his follow-up remarks, Rancière notes how sobriety falls victim to such a logic:

What is revoked, at the same time as the poem’s specific space of visibility, is the representative separation between the rationale of fact and the rationale of fictions...It rejects the separation between a specific world of facts pertaining to art and a world of ordinary facts.44

For our purposes, this is the crucial point: the aesthetic regime models intelligibility differently than the representative regime. In extending aesthetics to comprehend the entirety of prosaic life, signs are substituted for actions as the basic unit of meaning. The principle of the aesthetic regime, says Rancière, is not in “reproducing facts as they are.” It is, rather, in “displaying the so-called world of prosaic activities as a huge poem—a huge fabric of signs and traces, of obscure signs that had to be displayed, unfolded and deciphered.”\(^45\) The literary tradition of realism is paradigmatic of this “aesthetic” logic, but we can count all the symptomatic discourses that emerged in the wake of Romanticism, such as Marxism and psychoanalytic theory, as well as reflexivity in art and avant-garde projects more generally, as children of this new sensibility.

**Fiction in the Aesthetic Regime**

Fictional arrangement is no longer identified with the Aristotelian causal sequence of actions…It is an arrangement of signs.\(^46\)

To transfer the documentary from the logic of the representative regime (or sobriety) to that of the aesthetic regime adjusts, in admittedly provocative ways, its relation to fiction. To understand how, we might begin by noting that fiction assumes a greater importance in the aesthetic regime than it does in the representative regime. It retains from the representative regime its sense of an activity whose purpose is to construct intelligible structures. In the aesthetic regime, however, fiction’s powers of arrangement are applied not to actions but to signs. Significantly, these signs can be


recruited from any source, not only the alphanumeric signs of language but visual and other sensible traces, both natural and artificial. The intelligible configurations made in and by fiction in the aesthetic regime are, thereby, closer in form to a “memory” than a plot in the sense that they permit configurations that harmonize otherwise heterogenous sensible elements, such as signs and traces dispersed in space and time.\(^47\)

Working within this framework, Rancière makes the following claim: “The real must be fictionalized before it can be thought.”\(^48\) By this, Rancière is arguing that we should conceive of reality as something that is always and already aestheticized, its sensible elements invariably given over to a regime of meaning. To be sure, Rancière is once again playing a kind of language game in which words are used in eccentric, archaic, or otherwise unconventional ways. In this case, he refers us to the original meaning of fiction, which did not always connote the sense of falsification associated with its current usage. He notes that, etymologically, fiction derives from the Latin fingere, which describes not the act of dissembling but that of constructing:

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[\text{In}] \text{ general, ‘fiction’ is not a pretty story or evil lie, the flipside of reality that people try to pass off for it.} \\
\text{Originally, fingere doesn’t mean ‘to feign’ but ‘to forge.’} \\
\text{Fiction means using the means of art to construct a ‘system’ of represented actions, assembled forms, and internally coherent signs.}\(^49\)
\]

Perhaps the best way to grasp the implications of qualifying the real as a species of fiction, in this sense noted above, is to compare it to the sober or representative

\(^47\) For Rancière’s most extended discussion of his concept of historical “memory,” see Chapter 10 in his Film Fables, trans. Emiliano Battista, Talking Images Series (New York: Berg, 2006).
\(^48\) Rancière, Politics of Aesthetics, 38.
\(^49\) Rancière, Film Fables, 158.
understanding of reality. Unlike the representative regime, the aesthetic regime does not consider reality to constitute a realm outside the various systems we construct for making sense of it. In this respect, reality is no absent cause, nor is history the real’s (finally inadequate) textualization. Rather, for the aesthetic regime, reality is the product of our efforts—both intuitive and deliberate—to organize sensible elements into intelligible structures. On this view, reality does not exist outside of the intelligible structures that constitute it—outside, that is, of its fictionalization.

A stronger version of this argument is that reality is, in fact, identical to those structures. One of the interesting implications of the aesthetic regime’s formulation of reality and history is that it rejects the representative idea that there is a part of reality that is fundamentally resistant to discourse. For the aesthetic regime, nothing is beyond the scope of our powers to represent; it simply does not recognize such limits. For it, everything has meaning, or can be made to mean something. Rancière clarifies the relationship between fiction and reality, as the aesthetic regime conceives it, in the following passage:

There is no “real world.” Instead, there are definite configurations of what is given as our real, as the object of our perceptions and the field of our interventions. The real always is a matter of construction, a matter of fiction…The practice of fiction undoes, and then re-articulates, connections between signs and images, images and times, and signs and spaces, framing a given sense of reality, a given “commonsense.”

What is the real? It is what our fictions frame as real. The intelligible structures that sobriety tells us are merely reality’s shadow are, for Rancière, identical to the real.

**Axiomatic Equality and Fictions of Reality**

Rancière’s claim that there is no “real world” is perhaps his most contentious, for it invites the charge that he is promoting a radical skepticism or relativism, which is precisely the epistemo-political crisis that Nichols hopes to avert in rejecting Baudrillardian nihilism. But it would be inappropriate to associate Rancière with the premise that there is no such thing as a world independent of our experience of it. In making the claim that “there is no ‘real world,’” he is not suggesting our situation is that of the hyperreal, nor is he succumbing to any other variety of skeptical thought. Leaning on the logic of the aesthetic regime, he is, rather, applying the principle of axiomatic equality to the question of historical knowledge. In this respect, his remark that there is no real world targets two specific claims: the representative claim that there are aspects of reality that cannot be assimilated to historical knowledge, which we’ve already touched upon; and the aesthetic claim that appearances are a veil that obscure a more authentic reality. Rancière disputes both claims by referring us to the principle of axiomatic equality.

In the first case, Rancière takes issue with a representative logic that splits reality into discursive and non-discursive spheres. For Rancière, the very premise of a non-discursive reality rehearses inequality, at least to the extent that it pre-emptively places limits on the ways in which historical accounts may be constructed. In particular, such a
premise inhibits the formation of intelligible structures of reality that do not conform to the prevailing common sense. Rancière opposes such an idea of history by drawing on the concept of fiction, as the aesthetic regime conceives it. In the aesthetic order of the sensible, the principle of mimesis that organizes representative logic is revoked. In the absence of the mimetic principle, the condition of reality is transformed, inasmuch as the source of meaning is no longer to be found in imitation or representation but in the proliferation and arrangement, or fictionalization, of signs. It is not the case, then, that aesthetic logic confuses historical reality with fanciful invention. It merely brings history and art under the same regime of meaning, one in which fiction assumes a more comprehensive role. As Rancière explains,

> It is not a matter of claiming that everything is fiction [in the skeptical sense]. The fiction of the aesthetic age defined models for connecting the presentation of facts and forms of intelligibility that blurred the border between the logic of facts and the logic of fiction.\(^{51}\)

Aesthetic logic does not, then, prohibit the premise of a shared world to which we all belong. It asks only that we look to our experience of historical reality as an arrangement of signs and traces, that is, as a kind of fiction.

Furthermore, by adopting fiction as the logic according to which reality assumes the form of historical knowledge, the scope of what counts as history (and, thereby, “reality”) is radically expanded. Such is the power of fiction. From an aesthetic perspective, no aspect of the real is beyond our power to frame. By dint of fiction, all of reality can be transformed into intelligible structures, or is even identical to those

structures. A fictional understanding of history respects the principle of axiomatic equality to the extent that it sets no conditions on how the real can be arranged into historical knowledge. To say there is no “real world” means only that one cannot posit in advance an inaccessible but determining aspect of reality, one that is, at the same time, somehow more “real” than its historicized counterpart. The real is an intelligible structure composed from the material of our sensible experience. To agree that a certain event happened to a certain person at a certain time and place is not to wrest history from reality but to arrange our sensible experience of the real into an intelligible structure—it is to agree to a certain fiction of reality. For Rancière, then, reality is not an absent cause that conditions the ways in which we go about representing it historically. All reality is amenable to fictionalization, and no configuration of the real is preemptively prohibited.

Rancière’s claim that there is no “real world” targets not only skeptical arguments but also those symptomatic discourses (or what he calls “critical thought”) that appropriate for themselves the power to sweep aside the supposed veil of appearances that obscures a more authentic reality. One of the peculiarities of aesthetic logic is that, while it dispenses with the notion that there is an aspect of reality that is unrepresentable or fundamentally non-discursive, it allows for the possibility that appearances may constitute a cipher that obscures the true nature of reality, and that it requires only the proper technique—Marxist science, Freudian analysis, structuralist methods—to solve the cipher. But as Rancière notes, such a logic is at odds with the principle of axiomatic equality, according to which all speaking beings are capable of constructing intelligible structures from sensible experience. It is one thing to suggest that reality is composed of a
“huge fabric of signs and traces, of obscure signs that [have] to be displayed, unfolded and deciphered,” but quite another to then claim to be in possession of a key that will serve to liberate all others by disclosing a more fundamental reality. For Rancière, there is no “real world” hiding behind appearances. There is only the reality we frame by means of our fictions, and the capacity for such framing belongs to each and every speaking being.

The Politics of Fiction

In Rancière’s thought, it is fiction, in the aesthetic sense, that constitutes the source of history’s politics. In the context of axiomatic equality, it makes no sense to speak of a disinterested fiction of reality. Every framing of the real is, at the same time, a distribution of the sensible in which bodies, tasks, and places assume a determined configuration. The political question we should ask of a given account of reality is not whether it sides with labour against capital, or whether it lapses irretrievably into ideology. Following Rancière, we locate the measure of its politics in its status with respect to common sense. As he explains,

[T]here is no fatal mechanism transforming reality into image…What there is are simply scenes of dissensus, capable of surfacing in any place and at any time. What ‘dissensus’ means is an organization of the sensible where there is neither a reality concealed behind appearances nor a single regime of presentation and interpretation of the given imposing its obviousness on all…Dissensus brings back into play both the obviousness of what can be perceived, thought and done, and the distribution of those who are capable of perceiving, thinking, and altering the coordinates of the shared world.52

This is how axiomatic equality finds an ally in fiction, and how history acquires its politics. Rancière sums up the politics of fiction with respect to the construction of historical knowledge in the following passage:

[Fiction] is not a term that designates the imaginary as opposed to the real; it involves the re-framing of the ‘real,’ or the framing of a dissensus. Fiction is a way of changing existing modes of sensory perception and forms of enunciation; of varying frames, scales rhythms; and of building new relationships between reality and appearance, the individual and the collective.\(^{53}\)

To the extent that an account of the real renews the givens of a sensory order, it may be said to appeal to a common sense that, however tacitly, preserves the existing alignments among bodies, tasks, and places. But by the power of fiction—which is available to every speaking being—the possibility exists to re-frame the real into a different configuration. Or in the case of the rare political moment, to oppose common sense with dissensus, which here means framing reality in a way that interrogates, contests, suspends, or defies all hierarchical order.

**Documentary Fiction**

We are now in a position to properly assess Rancière’s heterodox remarks concerning the documentary, as well as to reconsider the relevance of indexical media to the intelligible structures of reality such media construct. Rancière agrees with the claim that the documentary is, as he says, “devoted to the ‘real.’” Nevertheless, he continues, it is also “capable of greater fictional invention than ‘fiction’ film, readily devoted to a

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\(^{53}\) Rancière, *Dissensus*, 149.
certain stereotype of actions and characters.” Clearly, Rancière has no wish to collapse
the distinction between documentary and novelistic cinema. How, then, are we to take his
remarks? For Rancière, to qualify the documentary as a species of fiction is to claim it for
aesthetics rather than sobriety. The documentary is first and foremost a kind of art, an art
whose vocation is to frame reality by arranging the signs and traces of prosaic life into
intelligible structure. To be sure, prioritizing the aesthetics of the documentary over its
sobriety has the effect of bringing it within the orbit of fiction. But fiction here must be
understood from the perspective of the aesthetic regime. It is not a system of represented
actions, as it is for classical thought, but an arrangement of internally coherent signs and
traces. As a form of art, then, it is perfectly legitimate and logical to say that
documentaries constitute fictions of reality, and to call the intelligible structures they
generate “documentary fictions.”

If this is the case, however, how are we to distinguish the fictions of the
documentary from those of, say, Hollywood? Rancière offers some clarifying remarks in
the following passage:

We cannot think of documentary film as the polar opposite
of fiction film simply because the former works with
images from real daily life and archive documents about
events that obviously happened, and the latter with actors
who act out an invented story. The real difference isn’t that
the documentary sides with the real against the inventions
of fiction, it’s just that documentary instead of treating the
real as an effect to be produced, treats it as a fact to be
understood.54

54 Rancière, Film Fables, 158.
Novelistic fiction seeks, at most, to produce an impression of reality, whereas the
documentary takes up the real itself as a problem or question. Following Rancière, we
might say that qualifying the documentary as a kind of fiction is appropriate to the extent
that we accept aesthetics as the ground of our experience of reality. In this respect,
documentaries can be said to frame or re-frame the real, and to do so by means of fiction,
since “to understand a fact” means precisely to impose order on reality’s sensible
elements until they achieve the condition of intelligibility. By contrast, Hollywood does
not attempt to frame reality, even if it often strives to produce the real as an effect. The
fundamental style of the documentary, then, is poorly described in terms of “realism,” as
Nichols suggests. Realism is more appropriately applied to those efforts that provide an
impression of the real rather than attempt its framing. Claiming the documentary for
aesthetics also obliges us to question the value of using figures of speech, like metaphor
and metonymy, to differentiate between novelistic and documentary cinema. Conceived
as a fictional arrangement of signs and traces, the documentary does not so much extend
a metonymical relation to reality as organize its various elements into an intelligible
structure.

To revoke sobriety is not to deny that documentaries advance propositional
statements about reality. It means only that in advancing such statements, the
documentary neither forms representations of reality, in Nichols’ sense, nor works to
dispel false appearances. Rather, the documentary constitutes a means to fictionalize
reality, which is ultimately identical with our ability to think it. In this respect, we might
say that what we perceive in and by a documentary film is, finally, the real itself,
arranged fictionally, rather than its substitute in the form of a representation (that is, absent cause) or cypher. Put simply, the documentary makes reality, or a certain framing of it, sensible.

To suggest that a documentary film is reality itself is not to lapse into a naive empiricism or a Platonic idealism. As fictions, documentary films can diverge from one another and still qualify as legitimate accounts of the real rather than as counterfeits of ideology. If, as Nichols suggests, every documentary film asserts, at minimum, the claim “this is so, isn’t it?”, it is in the sense that alternative and even contradictory accounts of reality can be assembled by anyone from the same sensible material, even in the absence of any motivation to obscure or confound.

A striking recent example is the film *O.J.: Made in America* (Ezra Edelman, 2016). Documentaries on the subject of the O.J. Simpson murder trial tend to work in the tradition of true crime, bringing a forensic logic to bear on the material. On the strength of the incriminating evidence, which is invariably examined in minute detail, the case is made that Simpson is very likely guilty and that his acquittal at the hands of the jury was a profound miscarriage of justice.° Simpson’s ultimate guilt, however, is of secondary importance to the filmmakers of *Made in America*. In this documentary fiction, the Simpson trial is placed in the wider context of, on the one hand, Simpson’s status as a so-called post-racial figure who was able, for a time at least, to exist as if the racial categories of white and black did not apply to him, and, on the other, the history of black experience in the post-civil rights era, particularly the racialized terror perpetrated on the

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° See, for example, *O.J.: The Untold Story* (Malcolm Brinkworth, 2000) and *O.J.: Trial of the Century* (Nicole Rittenmeyer, 2014).
black community of Los Angeles by an endemically corrupt police force. In its deft arrangement of signs and traces, the film refers us to a history marked by a fundamental ambivalence. The reality that is framed by these accounts is that Simpson is at once guilty and not guilty: Simpson is guilty of murder but, at the same time, the decision to declare him not guilty was correct and his acquittal just.\textsuperscript{56} As organized in and by the documentary, both of these accounts may be qualified as legitimate with respect to history, despite their mutual opposition.

The fact that the documentary has the power to frame reality is such complex ways, however, should not be viewed as a drawback. Rather, it should be understood as its most vital feature. Freed from the causal logic that organizes the representative plotting of novelistic cinema, the documentary is at liberty to order and re-order the sensible into any number of intelligible structures. As Rancière notes, this license to bring heterogenous signs and traces together into a fiction of reality constitutes the defining power of the documentary:

Documentary cinema is not bound to the ‘real’ sought after by the classical norms of affinities and verisimilitude that exert so much force on so-called fiction cinema. This gives the documentary much greater leverage to play around with the consonance and dissonance between narrative voices, or with the series of period images with different provenances and signifying power.\textsuperscript{57}

\textsuperscript{56} I owe this reading to essayist Ta-Nehisi Coates, who states that the film brings a certain “reality…into deeply discomfiting focus: that Simpson may well have murdered his ex-wife and her friend, and that the jury got it right in declaring him not guilty.” See Ta-Nehisi Coates, “What O.J. Simpson Means to Me,” \textit{The Atlantic} 318, no. 3 (2016): 80.

\textsuperscript{57} Rancière, \textit{Film Fables}, 161.
Whatever propositional statement is proposed in and by a documentary film, then, assumes the form of fiction—the real as an arrangement of signs and traces.

**Documentary Fiction and the Question of Indexical Media**

For the documentary, the real constitutes an aesthetic problem. Like all fictions of reality, it sets out to arrange the signs and traces of the sensible order into an intelligible structure that frames the real. What is at stake in a documentary is the nature of that arrangement. In this sense, the documentary is not constrained by the “real,” whatever we mean by that term, so much as by the forms of intelligibility the documentary makes possible. The documentary owes its capacity for making fictions of reality largely to moving images and recorded audio—that is, sound cinema. As we’ve seen, there is a sense among documentary theorists that the documentary proves difficult to conceptualize in part because the indexical media of which it is composed makes the fiction/non-fiction distinction problematic. What, precisely, is the status of the indexical image with respect to reality? Is it evidence of history? Identical to it? A diverting spectacle? However, this conundrum arises only in the context of sobriety, which insists on the rigid opposition of fiction to non-fiction. In the context of aesthetics, however, indexical media take on a decidedly different significance.

To be sure, there is, as Rancière notes, an “indecisiveness at the heart of [cinema’s] artistic nature.”58 Film is at once a passive recorder of prosaic life and a powerful instrument of expression. It “raises to the highest power the double resources of

58 Ibid., 11.
the mute impressions that speak for themselves and the montage that calculates their
signifying force and truth-value.” On the one hand, cinema realizes almost perfectly the
dream of the aesthetic age for a kind of self-effacement that lets reality testify on its own
behalf. On the other, cinema has a powerful capacity for montage—the linking and
uncoupling of otherwise heterogenous elements put at the service of an expressive will.

Novelistic cinema revokes the first resource and assimilates the second to its
representational ends. The documentary, however, returns to the mute impressions
recorded automatically by the passive lens (and microphone) and transforms them into
fictions of reality. It does this by putting these impressions into a certain arrangement, by
connecting them to other signs or traces, or by constructing altogether new structures of
intelligibility from their elements. This is true as much for scrupulously expository films,
like those in the tradition of John Grierson and Ken Burns, as for more poetic
documentaries, such as those by Dziga Vertov and Godfrey Reggio. In this, the
documentary serves not the principle of sobriety but the logic of cinema: it puts prosaic
life on display while, at the same time and in the same image, fictionalizing reality. In
other words, it is precisely the paradoxical status of cinema that supports the
documentary’s claim to the real. By means of sound cinema, the documentary makes the
significance of reality available to thought. Indexical media, then, do not confound the
documentary’s claim to the real. If anything, they cement it.

The Politics of Documentary Fiction

59 Ibid.
Claiming the documentary for aesthetics has, finally, implications for how we theorize the politics of the documentary. Recall that Nichols traces the documentary’s politics to its status as a representation of reality. As Nichols uses the term, representation works to decompose reality into textual and non-textual spheres, with the latter exerting a determining influence on the former. Here, the documentary’s politics are identified with the real as absent cause. Alternatively, the politics of the documentary is thought to reside in ideology, here understood as illusions which pass for the real but whose purpose is in fact to obscure the actual workings of reality. In this instance, the documentary is political to the extent that it can be made, for self-serving reasons, to falsify reality even as it identifies itself as an instrument of truth. Conceptually, both representation and ideology share the assumption that there is an aspect of reality that resists, in part or in whole, our efforts to know it or bring it into the workings of our thought. This in turn is believed to place limits on the ways in which reality can be accounted for. For both representation and ideology, there is a more-or-less enigmatic order of reality that determines our experience of the real but that is ultimately inaccessible to thought. Such a view denies that anyone, anywhere, at anytime can create intelligible structures from the fabric of sensible experience—the real as either absent cause or chimerical appearance forbids it.

But the concept of documentary fiction knows no such prohibitions. It assumes that the power to create fictions of reality is universal. Such a view follows logically from the premise that reality must assume a fictionalized form before it can be thought. In this respect, the documentary can be taken up as an instrument of dissensus. By dint of its
capacity for fiction, the documentary can construct structures of intelligibility that run
afoul of common sense, that dis-align bodies with tasks and places, that apply or enact
the principle of axiomatic equality and thereby suspend all hierarchical ordering. For
Rancière, an exemplary case of this kind of political documentary is the cinema of Pedro
Costa.

The Documentary Fictions of Pedro Costa

In an essay that brings together the various threads of Rancière’s thought on the
politics of film—pedagogy and dissensus, the politics of aesthetics, documentary
fictions—Rancière performs an extended analysis of Costa’s documentaries on the plight
of African migrants working in Portugal’s construction industry. Rancière opens the
essay with the following question: “How should we assess the politics of Pedro Costa’s
films?”60 Our reflex, says Rancière, is to expect both to be made to feel the destitution of
these migrants as well as to become aware of how their dire social and economic
situation can be causally traced to policy decisions at the state and corporate level. We
expect, further, for the film to serve as a call to arms to overthrow a such an exploitative
economic system and restore or enact a condition of social justice. We expect, in other
words, “the work’s formal means to obey the general worry of showing causes to the
intellect of the spectator and producing effects on their emotions.”61 Nichols argues that
these are the very qualities that constitute the politics of the documentary, which makes
historical forces legible at the same time that it instrumentalizes our knowledge of these

60 Rancière, Intervals, 127.
61 Ibid.
forces. For Rancière, however, “This is where things go wrong.”\(^{62}\) The problem with advancing a political agenda so directly is that the resulting film amounts to an exercise in pedagogy in which the hierarchies the filmmakers wish to dismantle are recapitulated in the spectator’s encounter with the work.\(^{63}\) Rancière is drawn to Costa’s documentaries precisely because the filmmaker has no apparent interest in transforming his documentary subjects into a explicitly social cause. His films neither make a spectacle of the migrants’ destitution, nor refer us to the struggle for a more just society. As Rancière observes, “The wish to explain and mobilize…seems to be missing from Costa’s project.”\(^{64}\)

How, then, are we to assess the politics of Costa’s documentaries? Most social issue documentaries organize their material with a view to affecting public opinion and applying pressure on policy direction. By contrast, Costa’s cinema “is about marking the proximity of art to all forms asserting a capacity for sharing or a sharable capacity.”\(^{65}\) Costa does this in part, says Rancière, by committing what for most documentarians is considered inappropriate: he aestheticizes the way of life of his destitute subjects. For example, *In Vanda’s Room* (2000) finds Costa adopting the formal structure of the still-life in composing images of the titular subject’s dwelling. In its colour schemes and organization of everyday objects, the décor of the poor migrant’s home is revealed to bear the imprint of a profound aesthetic consciousness. Such images are then set against the framed paintings of the typical art gallery or museum. Through this juxtaposition, an equivalence is suggested: the apparent destitution of Costa’s social subjects turns out to

\(^{62}\) Ibid.

\(^{63}\) I take up the politics of spectatorship in Chapter 5.

\(^{64}\) Ibid., 128.

\(^{65}\) Ibid., 137.
hide a sensory abode as aesthetically rich and vibrant as any professionally curated space. The politics of Costa’s cinema consists in contriving this kind of equivalence, in making manifest what Rancière describes as “the capacity of ordinary beings to express the wealth of common experience.”66 Vanda is not fictionalized as a social problem. Rather, he is equated with the artist, that is, as a being equally adept at making aesthetic judgements.

The documentary is political, then, because it has the power to upset a distribution of the sensible that puts every body in its place. It can put into practice a dissensual logic that suspends or reconfigures the categories that sets limits on what one can say, do, and think. It can do this not on account of its assertorial character, even if it is surely capable of making proposition. It can do this because it is a form of art, with art’s capacity to arrange sensible matter into an intelligible structure. In other words, the politics of the documentary does not consist in the fact that it represents reality. Its politics is tied to its power to transform “reality” into a fiction, which, as Costa’s films remind us, is a capacity that belongs to everyone.

66 Ibid., 125.
Chapter 5

The Politics of Spectatorship

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

Film Theory and the Question of The Spectator

Film theory is often described as a project dedicated to the study of the film object. In this respect, the question of film’s ontology—what film “is,” or its nature or function—is thought to guide all film-theoretical inquiry. But to conceive the project of film theory in these terms is perhaps overly reductive, as it fails to consider what is arguably the more decisive question of spectatorship. When critics and scholars first undertook to account for this strange new medium, it was not so much the intrinsic properties of film that they sought to disclose or rationalize, but rather the novel spectatorial or phenomenological experience it engendered. For many, a theory of film was called for only because the medium seemed to invent a new kind of spectator or precipitate a novel form of spectatorship, here defined not only as a mode of viewing but also, and more significantly, as a mode of being in the world. The search for film’s ontology, then, was not typically an end in itself, but rather a means to an end. The ultimate object of analysis was something more speculative: an experience of

spectatorship so unprecedented its psychological and social consequences were thought to be in urgent need of clarification.

To some extent, this is still the case today. Both film-phenomenologists and post-theorists have retained an interest in spectatorship even as they seek to update and renew, each in their own way, the research program of film theory. For film-phenomenologists, in particular, the question of spectatorship remains paramount, so much so that they virtually identify film theory with it. Filmosophy and its concept of the filmind offers the most vivid example. Alternatively, post-theory wishes ultimately to re-centre film theory on the empirical object of film, however defined, rather than allow itself to be guided by questions of spectatorship, which it considers only of secondary interest. But post-theory successfully assimilates the question of spectatorship by treating it empirically rather than through speculative analysis, drawing on the experimental and theoretical research of cognitive science for support. In this case, the rational agent model of meaning making is the exemplary concept. Where these accounts represent a break with film theory, as it has traditionally been practiced at least, is in positing a concept of the spectator stripped of any social or political meaning. However diverse in other ways, both film-phenomenologists and post-theorists find common cause on this point.

In this chapter, I argue that the philosophy of Jacques Rancière poses a challenge to contemporary accounts of film spectatorship. Drawing on Rancière, I will consider how we might renew our interest in the specifically political dimension of the spectator, which current accounts obscure. With respect to film-phenomenology, I will suggest that it inherits from political modernism, no less than older film theoretical discourses, a
flawed concept of the spectator as chained or otherwise “captivated” by the film image. With respect to post-theory, I will indicate why a speculative approach to the question of spectatorship is eminently preferable to an empirical one so long as the context remains the human sciences. In pursuing these points, I will lean, in particular, on Rancière’s concept of the “emancipated” spectator.

Filmosophy

Nowhere in film theory is the question of spectatorship of more central concern than in film-phenomenology, that constellation of projects devoted to restoring an awareness of and appreciation for the affective or phenomenological experience precipitated by the film image. Film-phenomenologists approach film less as an object of knowledge than as a medium of experience. In this, they revive and repurpose an earlier film-theoretical discourse, exemplified by the pure cinema project of the 1920s, particularly the writings of Jean Epstein. What occupies the attention of film-phenomenologists is the ways in which film 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 mind, as if the film image itself constitutes a kind of thinking with its own unique grasp of reality. The so-called film/mind analogy, which is fundamental to the discourse, serves in turn to justify claims against the politicization of the film spectator. This line of thought culminates in

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2 See my discussion of film theory’s aesthetic tradition in Chapter 3. It should be noted that I take film-phenomenology to be the inheritor of, and current standard bearer for, the aesthetic tradition.

3 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 Munsterberg,” The Journal
work of Daniel Frampton, whose filmosophical project both rehearses the most essential arguments of the film-phenomenology discourse and takes its premises to their logical conclusion. In this respect, the discourse can be understood as addressing three interrelated themes: the opposition to language; the question of ontology; the condition or sensation of immanence.

The Opposition to Language

Perhaps the most essential premise of the discourse of film-phenomenology is that film is opposed to language. That film resists assuming the condition of language was noted almost immediately upon its invention. Russian critic Maxim Gorky set the precedent. In his 1896 review of one of the first film screenings, Gorky’s attention is almost wholly absorbed by the novel phenomenological experience of film spectatorship, rather than the crude dramaturgies of early film experiments. But Gorky encounters some difficulty in attempting to describe this experience. By turns fascinated and terrified, disoriented and mesmerized, Gorky is at pains to synthesize his conflicting and disquieting impressions into a cogent account. Alternatively, he recognizes that there is something in the experience that is fundamentally unaccountable, that resists his efforts to have it translated into verbal language or take discursive form. As he remarks, “The extraordinary impression [the cinematographe] creates is so unique and complex that I

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*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, a mode of knowing that should not be dismissed so out of hand.
doubt my ability to describe it with all its nuances.” In effect, he is unable to identify, much less articulate, the logic that governs the spectatorial experience of the film image as such.

It is tempting to attribute Gorky’s difficulty in accounting for his first, strange encounter with cinema to his inexperience as a film spectator. As a novice, perhaps he is merely unaccustomed to this new medium and the unprecedented spectatorial condition it activates. Perhaps all that is required is for Gorky to take in more screenings and, after giving his gaze time to adjust, gradually discover or invent the descriptive vocabulary that here eludes him. But what weighs against the naive spectator thesis is that Gorky’s account of being overwhelmed and rendered effectively dumbstruck by film is repeated later by those even with a high degree of spectatorial competence. Accomplished film scholars such as Christian Keathley and Daniel Frampton, no less than the movie-mad critics at Cahiers, describe precisely the same experience. The discourse that flowered in Gorky’s wake would identify the source of his confusion and fluster in a property specific to cinema, and indeed its most distinctive trait: its incommensurability with verbal language. It is not that the spectator can, with sufficient exposure, learn to identify what the medium is or what kind of experience defines it. It is, rather, that there is something intrinsic to cinematic spectatorship that renders the experience impervious to the assaults of language.

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Film-phenomenology takes its cue from this anti-linguistic property of film. Contributors to this discourse argue it is impossible to embody the meaning of a film image in verbal language because film expresses itself directly and intuitively. 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. Antonin Artaud, a pure cinema acolyte, suggests that film is meaningful without recourse to the “interpositions or representations” on which linguistic expression depends. Instead, film communicates “by osmosis,” and that it does so with “no sort of transposition in words.”\(^5\) Separately, and from a wholly distinct perspective, 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.”\(^6\) For Münsterberg as for Artaud, language is, in principle, superfluous to filmic expression since there is direct, spontaneous contact between film and mind, a point to which I will return.

In the recent revival of the pure cinema project, the claim that cinema is opposed to language is adopted uncritically. Daniel Frampton states flatly that “Film form conveys without solidly, linguistically communicating.”\(^7\) Yet more radical is the claim made by theorist Jean-Louis Schefer that at least some aspect of the film image is meaningful even in the absence of anything capable of bearing the weight of signification. As he says, “In

\(^6\) Münsterberg, 51.
\(^7\) Frampton, 196.
this artificial solitude [i.e. film spectatorship] a part of us is porous to the effects of meaning without ever being able to be born into signification through language.”8 Film is meaningful but does signify. It embodies a mode of expression that communicates with the spectator directly and intuitively, and in so doing not only circumvents the mediation of language but evades the apparatus of signification altogether.

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 purity. Pure cinema proponents, joining other theorists like Vachel Lindsay, Rudolph Arnheim, and Hugo Münsterberg, believed 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 it composes between reality and the spectator. Very early on it was recognized that film spectatorship consists of an experience that recalls—without ever fully displacing—the experience of being an embodied presence in the real world. What for these critics and theorists links the phenomenological apprehension of reality with that of film spectatorship 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 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 experiences. For Münsterberg, there is no denying that a certain confusion between reality and the film image is intrinsic to the spectatorial experience. “We are there,” he says, “in the midst of a three-dimensional world” and “we have no right” to claim otherwise. But Münsterberg is adamant that this confusion is limited to the level of “immediate impression,” and is thus a strictly phenomenological experience. Epistemologically, on the other hand, we never mistake cinema for reality. Hence Münsterberg will temper his claim with the following remark: “Nevertheless, we are never deceived.” 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 supposedly accounts for the

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9 Münsterberg, 68.
10 Ibid., 65.
11 Ibid., 69. Italics in original.
distinctive experience of film spectatorship. 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. Daniel Frampton sums up the perspective of the discourse as a whole when he states that the value of film lies not only in how it “reveals reality” but how it shows “a distorted mirror of it.”12 This leads him to claim that while film might have revelatory properties it also “challenges our view of reality,” and in a way that forces “a phenomenological realisation about how reality is perceived by our minds.”13 We exit a film screening with the apprehension of reality forefront in our thoughts because film spectatorship recalls, without ever fully coinciding with, our experience of the real world.

Immanence

In the final analysis, film-phenomenologists find the measure of film’s ontology in the sensation of immanence that, they contend, constitutes the distinctive experience of film spectatorship. Often the experience is characterized rather crudely as something like immersion, as if the spectator enters into the imaginary space of the film image and remains co-present with it. Christian Keathley captures this sensation in the phrase

12 Frampton, 3.
13 Ibid.
“subjective projection.” For others, however, such an account does not capture the full complexity of the experience. Moving beyond the concept of immersion, more daring theorists describe how the spectator in some sense dissolves into or fuses with the image on screen. In the perennial attempt by film-phenomenologists to account for the full complexity of film’s ontology, this line of thought undoubtedly represents the culmination of its efforts.

Once again, Gorky provides the template. Struggling to get across the subtleties of the spectatorial experience, Gorky remarks on the curious way his own thought seems to succumb to or be overtaken by the animated figures projected on screen by the cinematographe. “You are forgetting where you are. Strange imaginings invade your mind and your consciousness begins to wane and grow dim.” Here we encounter for the first time an acknowledgement that film spectatorship is characterized by a sensation of immanence. Clearly, however, there is something more to the experience than simple immersion. Given the constraints of the review format, Gorky does not pursue this point further. But there is no doubt that he feels as if his mind loses something of its autonomy as a result of becoming entangled with some unspecified, enigmatic aspect of the film image itself.

Although medium-specificity arguments tend to dominate histories of early film theory, Gorky’s remarks better reflect the direction the theoretical inquiry of film was ultimately to take. Like today’s film-phenomenologists, Gorky sought out film’s ontology not in terms of a metaphysical essence, but in terms of a certain confusion of identities.

14 Keathley, 73.
15 Gorky, 408.
that arises between the spectator and something in or of the film. To be sure, Gorky would prove atypical in one key respect. As a sensation that is not only novel but also spontaneous and involuntary, Gorky found the compulsive incursion of the film into his mind disquieting. But for the most part, his tentative cinephobia would prove anomalous. Those that followed in Gorky’s wake openly embraced and celebrated this sensation of immanence. Proponents of pure cinema, in particular, were in thrall to this uniquely cinematic experience. Artaud is a case in point. His fascination with cinema stems 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.”16 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 spectatorship. Tellingly, he dismisses the notion that the impression of movement characteristic of the film spectator’s experience is the result of the optical illusion we now call persistence of vision. The impression of movement, he says, is

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\text{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}
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together in the unity of a higher act.\textsuperscript{17}

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 “\textit{are present and yet they are not in the things. We invest the impressions with them.}”\textsuperscript{18} 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.”\textsuperscript{19}

Of all the contributors to the discourse of film-phenomenology, it is Daniel Frampton who goes furthest in exploring the conceptual implications of theorizing film’s ontology 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 is the defining trait of film spectatorship. The concept of the filmind allows Frampton to explain how film and mind seem to exchange identities in the spectatorial encounter. Because it, too, is composed of thoughts or enacts a kind of thinking, the film image is not only able to meet the human mind on equal terms but to actually “mingle” with it at

\textsuperscript{17} Münsterberg, 73.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 78. Italics in original.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 129.
the level of thought.\textsuperscript{20} Frampton characterizes this bond as “mutual and organic,” and goes on to suggest that “The 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.”\textsuperscript{21} This third thinking constitutes the filmind. Frampton insists that the experience is not to be understood as the assimilation of one thinking process to 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.”\textsuperscript{22} As a result, “It can sometimes feel like we are thinking the film ourselves,”\textsuperscript{23} or, more strongly, that “We are the film.”\textsuperscript{24}

The idea that ontological moorings are slackened or otherwise compromised by the spectator’s encounter with the film image is a generic aspect of film-phenomenology. In this discourse, to inquire after film’s ontology means inevitably to consider its being in relation to the spectator’s, for film-phenomenologists view them as fundamentally interrelated. To “be” the film, as Frampton puts it, is not only consistent with the logic of film-phenomenology, and the aesthetic tradition more generally, it rather neatly sums up its project as a whole. But there is some irony in this fact, for the concept of the filmind has a precedent in the concept of the cine-subject, which is a product of political

\textsuperscript{20} Frampton, 10.
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 149.
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid.163.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., 160.
modernism, that monumental film-theoretical discourse of the 1970s and 80s that film-
phenomenologists like Daniel Frampton and Christian Keathley hoped to bury and
supplant with their own program. For political modernism, too, film spectatorship is
characterized by a sensation of immanence in which the spectator’s sense of self appears
co-extensive with the image on screen. This is not to deny the degree of estrangement
between film-phenomenology and political modernism. But on the question of
immanence, there is common ground. Their disagreement, in fact, might best be
accounted for in terms of an inversion of value, rather than opposing or incompatible
logics. For political modernism, the cine-subject is an expression of capitalism’s reifying
force, and thus constitutes an obstacle to class consciousness. For Frampton, the filmind
is not only a pleasurable experience with its own intrinsic value, it also inspires a
reappraisal of our very being. But the underlying premise of immanence is the same in
each instance.

**Mediation**

The premise of immanence opens onto the question of mediation. On the basis of
a shared commitment to an imminent conception of film spectatorship, both film-
phenomenology and political modernism discover in cinema an aesthetic mode in which
the gap between the model and its referent, or between the name and the thing, is
apparently annulled. Frampton speaks for a whole tradition when he asserts that in the
experience of film spectatorship “the film and the filmgoer join in thought, and the
process of that encounter provides immediate meaning and knowledge.” Referring to its incommensurability with signifying systems like verbal language, Frampton claims that “film seems to have no delay”—no mediation—“in its understandability.” Keathley classifies this as a kind of revelatory experience: it permits the spectator to access the proverbial “thing-in-itself,” which is to say, things in their pre-semantic state. As he explains, in the marginal details of the film image “we get a glimpse of nature stripped of false or superimposed significance.”

For film-phenomenologists past and present, such an experience neutralizes the hermeneutic impulse, for the lack of mediation precludes the possibility of interpretation. As Keathley remarks in reference to the euphoric experience of what he calls the “cinemphilic” moment: “it seems to draw its intensity partly from the fact that it cannot be reduced or tamed by interpretation.” This brings the discourse once again close to political modernism, which likewise views film spectatorship as an experience in which model and referent appear to coincide. Colin MacCabe, one of the architects of political modernism, argued that film seems to “achieve perfect representation,” that it promises to “let the identity of things shine through the window of words.” For political modernism, film spectatorship consists of an experience in which the existential barriers of language and signification are apparently overcome. What film-phenomenology calls ontology, political modernism attaches the label ideology. But the claim is the same: film promises

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25 Ibid., 149.
26 Ibid., 152.
27 Keathley, 118.
28 Ibid., 9.
to eradicate the distance—that vexing gap between words and things—that serves to regulate and contain meaning.

There is, however, a price to be born for submitting to the spectatorial sensation of immanence. Under a condition of immanence in which meaning is no longer mediated, the spectator is effectively prohibited from reaching beyond immediacy for structures of meaning other than those communicated by the film. Political modernism, in particular, posits a spectator who is enchained by film: the spectator mistakes appearances for reality and thus exchanges knowledge of the symbolic construction of all meaning and subjectivity for an imaginary sense of immediacy and coherence. Film-phenomenologists also acknowledge that the spectator they posit is in some sense captive to the film image. Frampton concedes as much in proposing that film spectatorship consists of an impression that the spectator and film are unified in thought. Here, the spectator loses at least some of his or her autonomy by having the filmind overtake their own thinking process to the point, perhaps, where the ontological distinction between spectator and film no longer holds.\textsuperscript{30} This may seem a startling conclusion to draw, but it follows logically from the premise that film spectatorship consists essentially in a sensation of immanence in which there is no longer a gap to separate words from things, and so longer a need for the mediating process of interpretation.

\textbf{Post-Theory}

\textsuperscript{30} Consider the notorious remark made by George Duhamel that “I can no longer think what I want, the moving images are substituted for my own thoughts,” qtd in Frampton, 159.
Post-theory might appear to share little with film-phenomenology, but as we’ll see they find common ground on the question of mediation. Both view the distance between the word and the thing as a kind of problem to be overcome. Both also propose to renew film theory on the basis of the solutions they advance to address this problem. Yet another point on which they agree concerns interpretation. Like film-phenomenology, post-theory insists that interpretation is inappropriate for addressing the problem of distance and wishes to dispense with the practice altogether. Unlike film-phenomenology, however, post-theory is dedicated to an epistemology of the cinema: it seeks to define film as an object isolated from, and made available to, a knowing subject. In this respect, post-theory’s epistemological commitments offer the widest context in which to grasp its proposed solution to the problem of distance.

**The Missing Spectator**

It is worth reiterating that post-theory is a movement born from a desire to model film studies on the natural sciences, or at least to assimilate it to the logic 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 directly proportional to its capacity for withstanding tests of fallibility. Hence the post-theory emphasis on empirical research, since a claim made with the support of empirical data is considered more impervious to such tests. To the extent that empirical data is incontrovertible or admits to intersubjective scrutiny, it invites universal agreement about its status as real or
true. Moreover, the form that a naturalizing epistemology takes is inevitably causal in that it tends to be composed of regulative norms that aspire to, or approximate the condition of, natural law.

In this context, the concept of the spectator as a mode of being in the world is threatened, and in two ways. First, there is the inclination to isolate film or cinema as the principle, if not sole, object of study for the film theorist. Here, the relationship of film to the spectator or to the condition of spectatorship is ultimately undone in the interest of making the study of film more conducive to empirical research. Isolated in this way, the object of film can finally be theorized in terms of its intrinsic features and functions, rather than become confused with its status as an object of psychological, social, or political significance. For example, Bordwell states simply that “A film theory consists of a system of propositions that claims to explain the nature and functions of cinema.”31 To this admirably succinct definition Noël Carroll contributes the idea that film theory ought to consider the practical side of film: “Let anything count as film theorizing, so long as it involves the production of generalizations or general explanations or general taxonomies and concepts about film practice.”32

But these seemingly benign propositions arguably represent a radical departure for film theory. It bears repeating that the question of film’s nature and function has long been contested in the particular context of spectatorship. The aesthetic tradition in film theory is only the most sustained project in this vein, but there are many others. Recall,

for example, Jane Addams’ 1909 study *Spirit of Youth and the City*, which sought to explain film spectatorship in relation to youth delinquency and a social understanding of the self. Her theory that film constitutes a mimetic stage—that this effectively describes its essential nature or function—was in service to her greater interest in the spectatorial condition specific to film viewing. Addams’ work largely set a precedent. Virtually every film theoretical project of note to emerge thereafter has followed the same pattern: not only figures like Hugo Münsterberg and the pure cinema adherents, but also members of the Frankfurt School, the work of Béla Balázs, Siegfried Kracauer, Edgar Morin, André Bazin, and Stanley Cavell, the discourse of political modernism, among others. In each case, one searches for a theory of film in order to account for something deemed of more importance or of greater interest than the film object itself: film spectatorship and its psycho-social implications. For over a century, film theorizing was largely, if not exclusively, at the service of determining or understanding the mode of spectatorship, and ultimately the mode of being, peculiar to the moving image.

One of the express objectives of post-theory is to sever this connection. In its ambition to confer scientific legitimacy on the claims of film theory, post-theory insists on isolating its putative object of study from any supposedly external phenomena, however proximate. The question of film spectatorship—which is, in the final analysis, a speculative one—is thereby subordinated to or perpetually deferred in favour of the more empirical investigation of film’s nature and function. Consider the stark discrepancy

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33 For an extended discussion of Addams’ project, see Chapter 1 of the present study.
between Bazin’s and Carroll’s account of film’s ontology. For Bazin, who was sympathetic to the phenomenological perspective, the ontology of the photographic image has less to do with the intrinsic properties of the medium than it does with the how the experience of film or photographic spectatorship precipitates a new mode of being in the world.\(^3\) What interests Bazin most about photography and film is, as he says, its “irrational power…to bear away our faith” by confusing or exchanging the identity of the model with that of its referent.\(^4\) Ultimately, the ontology that is the object of Bazin’s essay refers not only to photography or film, but also, and in conjunction, to the spectator, whose mode of being undergoes a transformation from its exposure to the novel aesthetics of the photographic and filmic image. By contrast, Carroll’s epistemological account of film’s ontology remains resolutely fixed on its object throughout. Guided by the protocols of analytic philosophy, his stated goal is to identify the “set of necessary conditions that are jointly sufficient for defining an instance of film.”\(^5\) A marvel of analytic and empirical rigour, the results would satisfy the most severe taxonomist. By design, however, there is no room in this account for more speculative considerations on the nature of spectatorship under photographic or filmic conditions. To the extent that Carroll does refer to the act of viewing, the spectator is reduced to an ocular function or mere bearer of sight, a point to which I will return.


\(^4\) Bazin, “The Ontology of the Photographic Image,” 15.

Poetics and Spectatorship

Perhaps the most prominent way the disjunction between the film object and the condition of spectatorship in post-theory is expressed is in its embrace of poetics, or the study of film craft and related practices. Arguably, poetics offers post-theory its most promising framework for transforming the discipline of film studies, and film theory along with it, into a program that more closely resembles the natural sciences. This is because poetics, as construed by its most capable exponent David Bordwell, is an eminently empirical undertaking. As we saw in Chapter 3, Bordwellian poetics studies the finished work as the result of a process of construction…Any inquiry into the fundamental principles by which artifacts in any representational medium are constructed, and the effects that flow from those principles, can fall within the domain of poetics.

Poetics aligns so neatly with post-theory because it effectively repels from its program anything that resembles subjective reporting or speculative analysis. It defines the work of film first and finally as an “artifact,” which is to say an object of perception that is intersubjectively verifiable. Sharply demarcating the object of research in this way is part of a deliberate attempt to narrow the scope of what can be submitted to analysis. In the case of poetics, this means limiting its claims to attributes that are constitutive of the film artifact or artifacts, a research program that at its most general means providing a description of styles or formal strategies, as well as tracing their historical development. In short, in identifying film narrowly as artifact, it becomes possible to deduce causal explanations related to its nature and function, and thereby advance claims that can be
subjected to tests of fallibility. With poetics, then, film at last becomes amenable to empirical research.

**Spectatorship and Psychoanalysis**

Post-theorists have expressed a desire to retreat from the question of spectatorship in other ways. Consider the respective contributions of Bordwell and Carroll to the volume *Post-Theory*. Much of the critical ire of those essays is directed at the various ways in which spectatorship was being theorized at the time, in both film studies and adjacently in cultural studies. Bordwell, in particular, objected to knowledge organized around theories of subjectivity and, specifically, the subject construed as a product of unconscious forces. Drawing on psychoanalytic theory, the spectator as subject in these accounts is—incoherently for Bordwell—presumed to be something socially or linguistically “constructed,” or more-or-less stripped of independence and agency. Worse, says Bordwell, the film scholar will sometimes commit the logical error of conflating such an idealized phenomenon with the concrete or psychological individual seated in the theatre.

Yet another spurious theory of spectatorship, according to Bordwell, centres on the concept of identification. Aided and abetted once again by psychoanalytic theory, here the spectator is thought to exchange identities with the technical apparatus itself and/or the characters portrayed on screen on the basis of a shared visual perspective. For post-theory, psychoanalytic accounts of the spectator of this kind are inappropriate since

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38 See his introductory essay “Contemporary Film Studies and the Vicissitudes of Grand Theory” for the volume *Post-Theory*, 3–36.
the subject of the unconscious is hopelessly speculative: it cannot be subjected to tests of fallibility and so falls short of scientific legitimacy. Theories of the spectator based on the premise of a subject or of subjectivity are, consequently, epistemically suspect.

The Empirical Spectator

Yet whatever inclination they may have to set aside the question of the spectator, both Bordwell and Carroll remain good dialecticians of knowledge. They realize that they cannot advance a theory of film or of film theorizing without appending to it a theory of spectatorship, albeit one that is directly opposed to then-reigning accounts of the spectator-subject derived from the psychoanalytic tradition. Post-theorist Stephen Prince, in a direct riposte to psychoanalytic accounts of the spectator, puts the matter bluntly when he states that “any theory of spectatorship which fails to deal at some level with the empirical evidence on spectatorship should be suspected of being insufficiently grounded.”

Post-theory adopts the obvious solution to this problem, which is to reclaim the spectator as something empirical rather than speculative. Prince explains that because the concept of the “subject” compromises the scientific legitimacy of claims made regarding the question of spectatorship, it should be replaced with an account based on measurable empirical evidence of psychological effects and experiences: “contemporary theories…deal with ‘subjects’ but not real viewers, with ideal spectators who exist in the theories but who have no flesh-and-blood counterparts.”


40 Ibid.
whole, he argues that “questions about how people process, interpret, and respond to cinematic images and narratives are empirical questions…which can be investigated by observing the behaviour of real viewers.” In sum, spectating is reduced in the post-theory program to the anatomical capacity for viewing and the cognitive function of information processing. In a post-theory context, the spectator dissolves into the biological being of sight and cognition.

It is worth stressing that the post-theory critique of the subject-spectator runs deeper than the doctrine of psychoanalysis. The goal of its adherents is to expel from theoretical inquiry anything that does not originate as, or can be referred back to, empirical evidence or data. By definition, this includes the question of the spectator as a mode of being in the world, beyond even its formulation in psychoanalytic terms. Bazin’s ontology essay is but one example of a theory of spectatorship that owes no allegiance to psychoanalytic doctrine. But to the extent that Bazin posits a speculative spectator, rather than an empirical one, it is unwelcome in post-theory’s program.

A Case for the Speculative Spectator

Before proceeding, it seems worth pausing here to reflect on whether it is worth discarding the concept of the spectator, as proposed by post-theory, or whether doing so comes at too great a cost for the humanities as a distinct sphere of knowledge. To the extent that research conducted in the human sciences is a matter of self-investigation in relation to meaning and value, it addresses not a natural state of affairs that persists even

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41 Ibid.
in our absence but rather the variable processes that together constitute our very being in the world. Being here refers not to biology, but to life under the condition of, as David Rodowick puts it, “multiple, diverse, and conflicting social interactions.”\textsuperscript{42} Research into this sphere is not, therefore, a linear process that yields conclusions commensurate with the epistemic standards of the natural sciences. Rather, self-investigation constitutes an ongoing process of evaluation. It is uneven by nature and fundamentally litigious.

By the same token, it is a speculative mode of inquiry, rather than an empirical one—the criterion of fallibility is irrelevant to the evaluative process of self-investigation. In this respect, the concept of the spectator is invaluable. Such a concept aids in our effort to identify, model, and evaluate our modes of being in the world. The speculative nature of spectatorship is, therefore, a feature of the concept, not a bug. Whereas the empirical being of biology inhabits the natural world, the spectator is a creature of art, language, and culture. One way to think about this is in terms of the distinction between perception and aesthetics, as well as the two-fold understanding of the term “sense.” On the one hand, sense refers to a biological faculty that produces empirical evidence of the natural world in the form of sense perceptions. On the other, sense refers to intelligibility, coherence, and cogency, or the ways in which we organize the sensible environment aesthetically in the interest of assigning it meaning. The first can and ought to be subject to tests of fallibility, but the second remains forever speculative since there is no original and immutable law that determines in advance how we should align words with things—or, for that matter, roles with bodies and places with spaces. This is as much to say that

the gap between the words we use to refer to or describe things and the things themselves—the very domain of aesthetics—is irreducible, and explains why aesthetic matters are subject to an unending process of evaluation and litigation. Despite points of contact and overlap, the biological being of sense perception is ill-suited to stand as the subject of aesthetics, which requires a figure—call it the spectator—that is not only adaptable to shifting contexts of meaning and value, but that is also conceived in relation to, or even as the product of, the irreducible gap between words and things. Some concept of the spectator is necessary even if we frame the problem of meaning in relation to the cognitive capacity for making higher-level inferences on the basis of incoming sense perceptions and stored experience, for such a process must still negotiate the imperfect, unstable, and variable alignment of words and things. Even cognitivist accounts of art and culture must, ultimately, yield to some form of speculative analysis, a point I will revisit in my concluding remarks.

Meaning and Interpretation

In order to better convey the implications for humanistic inquiry of disavowing the spectator, and to better understand the intervention Jacques Rancière stages with respect to the question of spectatorship, I want to examine in more detail how post-theory addresses the problem of meaning and, by extension, aesthetics. Traditionally, it is the theory and practice of interpretation that has guided the humanistic study of how meaning is produced and transmitted. This concept, of course, has a history. There are many schools of interpretation and a diverse set of practices are identified by that name.
Nevertheless, if there is a unifying principle that underwrites these various efforts it is, once again, the concept of mediation. Interpretation arises as the solution to the problem of distance. If sense impressions are immediate, that is, a natural and spontaneous occurrence, the other kind of sense, the one that refers to how we organize the sensible environment into intelligible forms, is a function of distance, of a gap between what is said and what is meant, or between the word and the thing. It is the fundamental vocation of interpretation, as theory and practice, to address this distance by exploring the various ways in which it can or ought to be mediated.

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 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, in essence, the argument David Bordwell advances in his celebrated book *Making Meaning*, 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, a program with a decidedly more empirical bent.

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 for how to renew the practice. On this score, Bordwell makes two notable
contributions. The first is functional: Bordwell argues that responsibility for regulating meaning shift from text to interpreter. Drawing on the rational-agent model of cognition, he argues that meaning does not inhere in the text but is “made” 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 job 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.” 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 Bordwell makes is conceptual and taxonomic. Bordwell observes that the kinds of inferences available to the interpreter of films 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

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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. Like explicit cues, implicit meanings 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.

**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 centre 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.44

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 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 restoring the empirical object of film to the centre of film studies. Bordwell contends that critical interpretation targets not the film object itself 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. 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.”45 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

44 Ibid., 257.
45 Ibid.
potential, then, Bordwell characterizes the practice that goes by the name 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?”46 For Bordwell, turning to these questions would ground the study of film on 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.”47 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.”48 A traditional interpretative critic would assume that “Such meanings determine the films’ use of subject matter, ideas, structure, and style; they also govern the film’s effects on spectators within social contexts.”49 But such an approach would, once again, lack an

46 Ibid., 263.
47 Ibid.
48 Ibid.
49 Ibid., 263-4.
empirical 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 for addressing the meaning of films. 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, and less on what can be inferred through speculative analysis. 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. 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—artist and spectator—whose delivery takes place by means of the formal design of the work. This is as much to say that poetics treats mediation as a process of 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

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50 I discuss this project at greater length in Chapter 3.
51 Bordwell, Making Meaning, 264-5.
to achieve effects on spectators,” who in turn activate the appropriate mental schemata in order to decipher or make sense of the intended effect.\textsuperscript{52} 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.\textsuperscript{53} 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 distance as it relates to meaning. The emphasis on a work’s perceptibility, 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 distance. By limiting analysis to referential and explicit cues, post-theory believes poetics can open meaning up to tests of fallibility, effectively transforming meaning into something that can be validated with empirical certainty. In principle, such a program would virtually eliminate distance, that problematic gap between what is said and what is meant, or between word and thing.

This is most evident in its desire to reduce mediation to a process of transmission. But in

\textsuperscript{52} Bordwell, \textit{Poetics}, 44.  
\textsuperscript{53} Bordwell, \textit{Making Meaning}, 264.
all cases, the elimination of 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 distance. Implicit and symptomatic cues, however, necessarily involve speculative analysis. Rather than adjust its program to account for such cues, it merely insists on their exclusion.

**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 spectatorship. However diverse in other respects, both are motivated, I argue, to radically reduce or eliminate the 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 a process of 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 spectatorship. As we’ll see, his intervention is based on the principle of axiomatic equality, according to which it is within each and every speaking 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 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 her capacity to interpret.

The Fault of Language

Rancière’s defence of interpretation—and of a spectator defined by its capacity for interpretation—emerges in the context of his work on aesthetics. As we’ve seen, Rancière uses the term aesthetics to refer to the theory and practice of how intelligible forms are carved from the fabric of the sensible environment. Or, more briefly, it refers to the relationships we forge and dissolve between words and things. This is the central subject of his study The Flesh of Words, a pivotal work for Rancière in that it marks the first time he seeks to enrich his political philosophy through a deeper consideration of aesthetics.54

Rancière begins his foray into aesthetics 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 was the Word, but its accessibility and circulation among mortals forces it to take material form, and in the transition from the 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, from 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.” Words do not coincide with their bodies; there is invariably a gap between the two. Plato found this prospect alarming, and much of his philosophical project can viewed from this perspective.

But 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. 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.” 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 by 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 as much 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 on those occasions in which we undo a link, or renew it, or forge altogether new relationships between words and things.

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55 Ibid., 3.
56 Ibid.
The Emancipated Spectator

On the basis of an aesthetic or poetic understanding of the constitution of meaning, Rancière elaborates the 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* taken up by, among others, political modernism, but also Antonin Artaud’s theatre 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.\(^{57}\)

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.” 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 for identifying 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.

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

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58 Ibid.
59 Ibid.
stultification: what the student learns is not only that she is ignorant, but that alleviation of her ignorance is dependent on the lessons of the schoolmaster.

**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.⁶⁰

It bears repeating that Rancière’s entire philosophical project stems from his commitment to 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.”⁶¹ 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.”⁶² Rancière will call this activity the “poetic labour of translation,” which, he says, is “at the

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⁶⁰ Ibid., 10.
⁶¹ Ibid.
⁶² Ibid.
heart of all learning.” As a generic example, Rancière takes up the case of the illiterate being. His defence 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.63

The ignorant schoolmaster adopts as axiomatic the self-equality of intelligence in all its manifestations. As such, he understands the learning process as a labour of poetic translation rather than as a transfer or transmission of knowledge from the intelligent to the ignorant. For him, “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.64 What the ignorant schoolmaster does not know, finally, is the inequality of intelligence. Consequently, he is 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.”65

Conceptually, the emancipated spectator is a corollary of the ignorant schoolmaster, and in two specific ways. The first concerns the learning process itself. For

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63 Ibid.
64 Ibid.
65 Ibid., 11.
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, Rancière posits a spectator defined by a capacity for forging new and perhaps unanticipated links between the work and her own aesthetic sensibility. This is a spectator who cannibalizes elements of the spectacle she witnesses to craft, in effect, her 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.  

The concept of the ignorant schoolmaster bears on the emancipated spectator in a second way; namely, with the egalitarian logic of the concept, 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 elevates 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 master and student are purely contingent matters, since both draw on the same kind of intelligence and are hobbled by the same

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66 Ibid., 13.
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. She is also the one who draws on a universal capacity for aesthetic fabulation in her confrontation with the spectacle. In this, claims Rancière, she is no different than 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.” 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 her capacity, which she shares with all speaking beings, to forge her own poem on the strength of the spectatorial encounter.

The Redemption of Distance

Distance is not an evil to be abolished, but the normal condition of any communication.

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.

The arguments of both film-phenomenology and post-theory hinge on the premise that distance constitutes a problem in need of a solution. Filmosophy wishes to eliminate distance by adjusting the spectator’s gaze to the frequency of the film’s so-called organic meaning, which is only possible, goes the argument, in the absence of mediating distance.

67 Ibid.
68 Ibid., 10.
69 Ibid., 17.
This requires the spectator to resist the urge to interpret, that is, to translate that meaning into words. For its part, post-theory believes 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 artist. Here, interpretation is dismissed on the grounds that it is inevitably biased towards implicit and symptomatic cues, resulting in meaning that tends towards the speculative. 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 on the non-identity of the intelligible with the sensible. Put another way, it is the very gap between words and things that lends meaning its rationality. Meaning, then, cannot eliminate distance, for its very possibility depends on the fault of language. Furthermore, and by the same token, 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 word to a thing is self-consciously explored and exploited? Art has coherence only in the context of 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, distance confronts the spectator not as an impediment to communication but as the very source of her emancipation. This is because the spectator can exercise her capacity for poetic fabulation only on 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.”70 As we’ve seen, Rancière describes this interplay of associations and dissociations as a “poetic labour of translation.” But he will often refer 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, 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 “[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.”71 Distance is positive,

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70 Ibid.
71 Ibid., 22.
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.\(^{72}\)

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

**On Realities, Shared and Sharable**

A positive conception of 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 that project’s conception of the spectator as somehow captive or enchained. 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 construction of their own poem. Even if we are persuaded by the argument that there are elements of the film image which transcend the fault of language, this does not necessarily entail 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 spectatorial experiences because it excludes from analysis the activity that is fundamental to, if not constitutive of, all spectatorship:

\(^{72}\) Ibid., 17.
connecting what is seen to something not explicitly present in the film—a concept, a sign, another image. Even assuming we understand a part of the film image intuitively and without mediation, the claim that this alone constitutes the spectatorial encounter with film is ultimately untenable. Filmosophy’s concept of the filmind, for example, embodies the idea that the spectator mingles her thinking with the film’s thinking to the point of ontological confusion. For filmosophy, to “think” or “be” the film in this way circumscribes the experience of film spectatorship. The filmind concept not only disavows the inevitable appropriation the spectator indulges in, it virtually forecloses the possibility of such appropriation. By qualifying spectatorship as an emancipated condition, however, we not only signal a commitment to the self-equality of all intelligence, we are better equipped conceptually to account for the experience of film spectatorship 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.73 While the concept of emancipated spectatorship

73 Consider Stephen Halliwell’s gloss on the poetics of Aristotle: “This means that the ‘intentionality’ of mimetic works is not located simply in the specific designs of the particular artist but also in the shared
does not prohibit the spectator from reconstructing the idea 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.”\footnote{Rancière.} 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 the artist wishes to convey. Accordingly, we cannot do without symptomatic and implicit cues—and the interpretations they inspire—since the emancipated spectator is defined primarily in relation to levels 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—a poet in her own right.\footnote{Collingwood.} An emancipated consideration of spectatorship relieves the artist of the responsibility for determining in advance the effect the work is to have on the spectator. Rancière repeatedly emphasizes

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conventions, traditions, and possibilities of a culture.” See his *The Aesthetics of Mimesis*, 153. Even Aristotelian poetics, it seems, allows for what Bordwell calls implicit and symptomatic cues.\footnote{Ibid., 14.}

\footnote{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. 71-2. 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.}
\end{quote}
how such effects cannot be wholly anticipated, and that the spectator’s appropriation of the work is not only inevitable but unpredictable. Rather than a transmitter of ideas, the artist is more appropriately conceived as a kind of catalyst for the spectator’s fabrication of new and perhaps unexpected associations between words and things.

By the same token, a commitment to the emancipated condition of spectatorship revives the value and utility of speculative forms of analysis when it comes to questions of an aesthetic nature, including, broadly, the study of film and other forms of art and culture. Post-theory’s commitment to a naturalizing epistemology entails the use of fallibility tests as the basis for determining 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 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 distance, a spectator is able to identity the intended effect of the work of art. In so doing, she can verify that a point in common exists between her 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 her individual experiences and interests. In this way, interpretation not only makes a poet of the spectator, it makes a spectator out of the poet, who now regards her 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 the identification of each body 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. On the strength of implicit and symptomatic cues, a blurring of boundaries occurs: the spectator assumes the qualities of a poet, the poet 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 relation between words and things, as between bodies and roles. This requires the critic to complement empirical research with speculative analysis. To confront a film or other form of cultural expression speculatively means precisely to be alive to the tentative nature of the links it forges between words and things, as well as to the critic’s own status as both spectator and poet.

Speculative analysis does not designate a privileged starting point, as does post-theory in regard to composition and functions/effects. As Rancière says, “Everywhere there are starting points, intersections and junctions” in the spectator’s appropriation of
the poem.\textsuperscript{76} 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. The work of the critic of art and culture is speculative precisely to the degree 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 critique, in turn, serves as the basis for someone else’s poem, and so on. Such a mode of inquiry 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.”\textsuperscript{77}

Through speculative analysis, what the critic of art and culture makes manifest is, finally, that reality is more than merely shared—it is fundamentally sharable.

\textsuperscript{76} Ibid., 17.
\textsuperscript{77} Ibid.
I want to open my concluding chapter by restating David Rodowick’s vision of a renewed philosophy of humanities, one which, while seeking to overcome some of the impasses of Theory, nonetheless grounds itself on a set of epistemological criteria distinct from the natural sciences. For Rodowick, the humanities are incommensurable with other branches of knowledge because the object it tries to picture is governed by a temporality that is human in scale, rather than natural or physical. The humanities, it follows, does not acquire its knowledge in a teleological manner, nor is dialectical criticism, in the scientific sense, appropriate as a research model. Propositional claims made in the humanities need not be fallible because such claims are made in the context of self-investigation: they refer to what humans themselves have created, and to modes of being that are, by definition, un-natural. Prioritizing reasons over causes, Rodowick promotes a model of the humanities in which claims require only “suasion and clear, authoritative self-justification.” I would just add that claims of this sort are inevitably more speculative in character than empirical: they confront us as objects sustained in and by thought, imagination, or language, rather than as natural laws external to the human experience.

As I have tried to show, Rancière’s philosophical project is largely consistent with this vision. In his commitment to axiomatic equality, Rancière breaks with the legacy of Theory and its program of ideology critique. The principle of axiomatic equality is predicated on the belief that access to the logos is universal: all speaking beings share in a
capacity for making sensible discourse. Every such being, then, is capable of contributing to the project of erecting a world in common. The principle of axiomatic equality also stipulates that no configuration of the sensible is inevitable or immutable—all are vulnerable to the forces of renewal, subversion, and dissensus. Axiomatic equality is thus opposed to Theory because it neither conceives of the subject as ideologically constituted and shackled, nor casts itself in the role of liberator, and indeed subverts the very notion of liberation.

Alternatively, in appealing to aesthetics as the ground of our social experience or modes of being, Rancière signals a critical distance from the premises of a naturalizing epistemology. For Rancière, the fundamental non-identity between words and things means that the gap between them is utterly irreducible. Meaning is aesthetically constituted because every utterance or instance of expression must, at some level, negotiate this gap. By contrast, those who promote a naturalizing epistemology believe it is possible to virtually eliminate aesthetic distance by adopting, in part or in whole, the protocols of the natural sciences. Following Rancière, there are at least two reasons why we ought to remain skeptical of such a program. In the first place, aesthetic distance defeats the search for causal explanations of art and culture. To the extent that distance is irreducible, it makes no sense to speak of an origin to meaning, that is, of a natural law or first principle to which we can appeal in our efforts to organize intelligible structures from the order of the sensible. In the second place, aesthetic distance enriches the human experience by, on the one hand, making verse possible and, on the other, calling forth the condition of axiomatic equality. All speaking beings have it within their power to adjust
the ways in which words are aligned with things, and this power is a function of the very distance that keeps them apart. The wish to eliminate aesthetic distance is not only futile, then, but undesirable, for at stake is not only the pleasures of art but our very status as emancipated beings.

If the humanities is indeed in crisis, then perhaps the most promising way forward is to embrace aesthetics as the guiding principle of its renewal. Aesthetics emerges as the most promising candidate in this respect because, of all the proposed alternatives, only aesthetics can be said to be adequate to the temporality proper to the human experience. The object that the humanities tries to picture is governed by a temporality whose scale is distinctly human: both it and the being attempting its study are in a state of constant transformation. As Rodowick persuasively argues, the context for humanistic inquiry is one of “multiple, diverse, and conflicting social interactions that require constant reevaluation.” In this respect, it seems reasonable to assume that what precipitates this state of affairs is aesthetic distance. Meaning in the context of the human experience is volatile and conditional because words are not identical to things. The gap between them prevents closure and invites innovation or subversion, and not only with respect to individual utterances but more generally to our modes of being. Aesthetic inquiry, then, is better adapted to the human experience. Other programs tend to direct our attention to the unity effected between words and things. Only aesthetics, in the sense we’ve been discussing it, encourages the scholar and critic to consider the implications of their fundamental disjunction.
It might be argued, thereby, that the humanities should turn to something like film-phenomenology as a model for its renewal, since it restricts itself to the study of an experience we might be tempted to describe as aesthetic, and indeed its purest manifestation. To do so, however, would be inappropriate. The kind of aesthetic inquiry promoted here is openly skeptical of the doctrine that grounds film-phenomenology as a research program: the autonomy of art. More specifically, the premise of irreducible distance is incompatible with the idea that works of art, or cultural phenomenon more generally, are self-sufficient with respect to meaning or significance. Alternatively, aesthetics cannot be reduced to the study of pure affect, as idealized by film-phenomenology, without violating the principle of axiomatic equality. The spectator does not merely absorb the effects of the work of art, nor enters into its hermetic enclosure to become trapped therein. The spectator interprets, or engages in what Rancière calls a poetic labour of translation. In this sense, it may be that affect, in its so-called pure form, constitutes a corruption of aesthetics proper, despite the fact that both refer in some way to our quotidian experience of the sensible. An aesthetic consideration of art and culture that takes the emancipated condition of spectatorship into account is inevitably going to be more adequate to the full range of human experience.

What objections might be raised by privileging aesthetics in this way? In the context at least of film studies we need not speculate. Post-theorists and film-phenomenologists have made their respective distrust of aesthetics, as I’ve been using the term, clear. Both believe, albeit for different reasons, that such a mode of inquiry produces not knowledge but something more akin to ideology, which is to say an image
of its object distorted or obfuscated by political commitments. Irreducible distance, axiomatic equality, the distribution of the sensible—the renewal of the humanities in light of these premises and principles is likely to be characterized by post-theorists and film-phenomenologists as a regrettable return to days of political modernism, when the discipline was hopelessly politicized. To be sure, aesthetics and politics, as Rancière demonstrates, are in some sense mutually constitutive: politics is aesthetic to the extent that it involves dis-sensus, or a disturbance in the order of the sensible; and all works of art imply or embody a distributive logic whose stakes are ultimately, if almost always indirectly, political.

Yet the fear that renewing the humanities on the basis of aesthetics will inevitably lead to its politicization is unwarranted, and for two reasons. In the first place, most instances of cultural expression are not expressly or manifestly political and need not be addressed as such. For example, the political modernist axiom that all films are political does not accord with the aesthetic definition of politics as dissensus; very few films are political, even if a kind of politics is implicated or latent in every aesthetic gesture. In this respect, aesthetics is assuredly compatible with the poetic and phenomenological approaches that currently hold sway in film studies. Aesthetics prohibits neither the study of constructive principles, nor the search after phenomenological explanations of the human experience. In other words, while research projects conducted within the framework of aesthetics may evolve from an explicit commitment to a political understanding of art and culture, they need not. We can agree to the premise that meaning is constituted aesthetically, that is, constituted in light of the fundamental non-identity
between words and things, without necessarily campaigning through our research for
equality or dissensus in either films or modes of spectatorship. In the second place, any
effort to politicize our disciplines by appealing to the philosophy of Jacques Rancière
would inevitably culminate in the very thing his work is dedicated to deflecting:
stultification. Rancière’s philosophy is constitutionally at odds with the very idea of
implacable authority, and even his own work—its meaning and value—must be subject
to litigation. The politicization of our discourses, then, is incompatible with the logic of
aesthetic inquiry.

It is not a question, then, of politicizing either the humanities generally, or film
studies specifically. Moreover, aesthetics can support the kind of work conducted under
the post-theory or film-phenomenology banner. To be sure, shifting to an aesthetic
framework would require revisions to the set of criteria each uses for the assessment of
propositional claims. However, an aesthetic approach would be comparatively expansive
and inclusionary in this respect. As currently formulated, film-theoretical projects like
poetics and filmosophy radically circumscribe what the scholar or critic should attend to;
each limits the study of film to mere constructive principles, on the one hand, and
individual affect, on the other. Yet clearly there are dimensions of experience in our
encounter with art and culture beyond those addressed by these projects. Alternatively,
insisting on so narrow a range of human experience is, frankly, a policing gesture whose
implications are, thereby, not only epistemological but also political. Aesthetics is
expansive in this regard because it does not prescribe in advance how we ought to go
about accounting for our object of study. To the extent that it authorizes anything, it is the search for unsanctioned and innovative explanatory models.

This brings us to Rancière’s novel theory concerning art’s relationship to politics and its implications for the study of film. One of the advantages of his theory is that it provides the conceptual resources for renewing the question of film’s politics, and at a time when this question is widely viewed as exhausted, antiquated, or otherwise inappropriate. By applying the principle of axiomatic equality and his tripartite model of aesthetico-political regimes to the object of film, Rancière both revives and inflects a film-theoretical discourse that reaches back to the earliest days of cinema. This discourse was founded on the belief that cinema was fated to deliver a new social and political order, and that, consequently, the question of its politics—that is, the question of what, precisely its politics consisted in—was thought to be in urgent need of clarification. For some, the popular medium of film performed the function of a mimetic stage, impressing its dubious moral influence on the unsuspecting mass man. For a certain class of materialist thinker, film was an agent of dialectical thought or dispeller of aura. In this case, film neutralized fascist spectacle, or otherwise prepared the way for the revolution. For another sort of materialist, cinema’s politics consisted in its status as an instrument of totalitarian capitalism, a status it supposedly enjoyed on account of its natural inclination to, in the one case, collapse the distinction between work and leisure, and, in the other, confuse material reality with the illusions of ideology. Despite their many disagreements, a shared premise runs through all these projects, namely, that film’s politics originates at
the ontological level. Until Rancière, it was always supposed that film’s politics were determined by the specific properties that constitute it as a medium.

Unlike film theory’s current standard bearers—post-theory and film-phenomenology—Rancière does not dismiss the premise that there is a politics to film. At the same time, he argues that film is not constitutionally political. Rancière’s contribution to the longstanding debate concerning film’s politics is that this question is best raised and examined in the context of aesthetics rather than ontology. To be sure, Rancière applies the critical terms “politics” and “aesthetics” in unconventional ways while, at the same time, rethinking the nature of their association. For Rancière, aesthetics refers not the study or experience of the beautiful, nor to the history of art practices and related movements. Drawing on classical thought, Rancière recovers a meaning of aesthetics which describes the relationship that holds between the orders of the sensible and the intelligible. In Rancière’s thought, aesthetics refers to ways in which our experience of the sensible is given over to a regime of meaning. The term politics is undone and remade in a similar fashion. Where common usage identifies the term with the process of regulating power relations among competing socio-economic interests, Rancière uses it to describe the staging of axiomatic equality, when the organized hierarchies of the social order are temporarily withdrawn. When this happens, there is dis-sensus, or sensory confusion, as bodies, roles, tasks, and places undergo a temporary disalignment. For Rancière, then, there is an aesthetics to politics because the staging of axiomatic equality disables the sensible coordinates that sustain common sense, or the rules that lend coherence to a common world.
The aesthetics of politics is, in turn, complemented by the politics of aesthetics. However, we are not meant to understand by this phrase that all works of art—or all films—are political. In Rancière’s thought, the politics of aesthetics refers not to expressly political or critical art but to the fact that the distribution of the sensible, or set of common sense rules that assigns each body a specific role, is aesthetically constituted. Art is political, then, in same way all forms of expression are: it is within its power to renew, subvert, flout, or contest the rules that govern the distribution of the sensible.

These are the theoretical and conceptual grounds of Rancière’s intervention into the debate over film’s politics. Where prior critical efforts to come to terms with the politics of film identified the medium as a natural incubator for and expression of a certain political force—reactionary or revolutionary, as the case may be—Rancière posits that film is political only to the degree that it has the power to regiment the sensible. For Rancière, to the extent that we may speak of a politics of film, it is as a specific case of a more general politics of aesthetics. Film is not inherently or constitutionally political. Rancière identifies the source of its politics not in the medium itself but in its general capacity for organizing something intelligible from the order of the sensible. Accordingly, the political question to ask in regards to film is not whether it is a natural ally of a specific ideology or political agenda, but rather how individual films confront or engage with the distribution of the sensible, or those commonsensical laws that allocate roles, tasks, and places—laws that are constitutive of our very mode of being—in the interest of framing a world in common.
Film is not political by nature. It acquires its politics when put to work configuring the sensible. In this respect, the political stakes of film are tied to the principle of axiomatic equality, which stipulates that all speaking beings are capable of sharing the wealth of sensory experience. Absent a final authority over meaning, it is within every being’s power to undo or remake the associations that bind words to things, a power that can be called upon to suspend the rules that organize the sensible and so disalign bodies from their assigned task at their assigned place. In this, Rancière’s philosophical intervention opens onto some of the key debates that constitute the field of film theory: the still-unresolved question of film’s aesthetic status; the discourse of sobriety in contemporary documentary film theory; the ongoing deliberations on the nature of film spectatorship. In each case, Rancière’s work and thought can be drawn on to address certain problems or impasses that beset these debates.

Rancière’s most significant film-theoretical statement is contained in his remark that the film fable is a thwarted fable. Film theory is founded on the question of film’s ontology. What is film? A critical consensus has yet to be reached, despite the considerable intellectual resources that have been devoted to it. Invariably, this question is pursued in relation to film’s status as an art, and more specifically in terms of the medium-specificity thesis. Yet the photographic constitution of film proves to be a complicating factor. It has been argued that film is both an art of life (or reality) and an art of signs (or language), with each view nurturing a discourse distinct from the other. Drawing on the principle of axiomatic equality and his innovative taxonomy of aesthetico-political regimes, Rancière argues that the question itself needs to be
rethought. For Rancière, film’s ontology—if we may still call it that—is indistinct: there is, as he says, an “indecisiveness” at its heart. Cinema has the capacity to contain and even integrate two distinct kinds of gazes, which thwarts any effort to assign film a particular aesthetic destiny. Because it is an art of both life and signs, the medium-specificity argument is inappropriate for addressing film. What is of greater consequence is the idea of art—ethical, representative, aesthetic—that organize individual films and the way in which they configure or otherwise engage with the order of the sensible. We might say that the radical suggestion at the heart of Rancière’s remark concerning the thwarted film fable is to reorient film theory around the question of film’s non-identity.

The question of film’s status with respect to reality is taken up by Rancière in the context of the documentary. His comments on the subject reframe the debates occurring in contemporary documentary theory, which finds itself at an impasse over the difficulty posed by indexical media to the documentary’s conceptualization. Because of their unique bond to reality, it is said, indexical media confound the preferred conceptualization of the documentary as a discourse of sobriety comparable to other systems of non-fiction. Rancière’s admittedly provocative solution to this problem is to dispense with the representative logic of sobriety and its cardinal distinction between fiction and non-fiction. According to Rancière, the documentary is more appropriately conceptualized in the context of aesthetics—the documentary as a form of art rather than a kind of argument. The documentary, if follows, is a species of fiction, a characterization which effectively neutralizes the problem posed by its use of indexical media.
Rancière defends the concept of documentary fiction by drawing a contrast between sober and aesthetic conceptions of history. In opposition to the sober argument that history constitutes an absent cause, Rancière argues that all accounts of reality are fictionalized, which is to say composed of a specific arrangement of signs and traces. According to this view, there is no aspect of reality that is beyond thought. All reality is thinkable because the real is effectively identical to the intelligible structures we create in our efforts to account for it. In this sense, the documentary does not dispel raw or misleading appearances to reveal a hidden reality. Its fictions frame reality by transforming the sensible into the intelligible. By contrast, novelistic fiction arranges actions rather than signs and traces. It does not attempt to frame reality, although it often strives to achieve the real as an effect. The concept of documentary fiction, then, does not confuse the documentary with the so-called fiction film. Neither does it fall victim to radical skepticism or relativism. Rather, it looks to the principle of axiomatic equality in affirming that it is within every speaking being’s power to fictionalize reality, that is, to arrange the signs and traces of prosaic life into a fiction of the real.

The conceptualization of the documentary as a species of fiction might seem eccentric or even paradoxical, but it follows logically from the premise of intellectual equality, which both founds and organizes Rancière’s larger philosophical project. It is the same premise in light of which Rancière innovates the concept of the ignorant schoolmaster, which both opposes axiomatic equality to pedagogical stultification and promotes the idea of the self-equality of intelligence, irrespective of disparities in
knowledge between any given intelligences. And it is this same premise that grounds Rancière’s concept of the emancipated spectator.

This concept challenges the prevailing trends in film theory, a field dominated by projects that posit a spectator who merely absorbs the effect of the film and is effectively prohibited from engaging in interpretation. Drawing on the rational agent model proposed by cognitive science, post-theory explains spectatorship as a process of direct transmission between artist and spectator. For film-phenomenology, the spectator is thought to be captive to the film’s organic meaning. In both cases, the spectator is discouraged from pursuing structures of meaning beyond those proposed by these projects. Rancière’s intervention here is to show how interpretation is the very source of the emancipated condition of the spectator. Because aesthetic distance is irreducible, and because all speaking beings are capable of making intelligible discourse, it is inappropriate to construct a theory of the spectator stripped of the power to interpret. Alternatively, interpretation refers to the spectator’s natural proclivity to engage in a poetic labour of translation: the linking of what is seen to elements external to the spectacle, or the making of meaning not explicitly authorized by or embedded in the film.

In renewing the concept of interpretation in this way, Rancière also paves the way for its redemptive return to the centre of humanistic inquiry.

In this time of renewal, I would argue that those of us interested in the study of the human experience would benefit from grounding our practices on the premise of aesthetic distance and the principle of axiomatic equality. Doing so would not only respect our status as emancipated beings, it would also be more adequate to our object of
study. To the extent that the human experience consists of interactions that are mediated through signs and language, as well as conducted in diverse and ever-shifting contexts, it is unpredictable and without a final form. A mode of inquiry commensurate with this object would be litigious rather than competitive, aesthetic rather than scientific. Current practices have proven unsatisfactory in this respect. The difficulties one encounters in seeking to revive the question of film’s politics is indicative of the problem. So, too, is the current state of film theory, whose key debates are stalled or otherwise impaired by conceptual difficulties. However, Rancière offers us a model for moving forward. Drawing on Rancière’s work I have shown how it is possible to productively address aspects of the human experience—the politics of film, in this case—that would otherwise be closed to investigation. Alternatively, Rancière offers us the conceptual resources and philosophical foundation to address the impasses and obstacles that have beset film theory following the rise of post-theory and film-phenomenology. Just as aesthetic distance and axiomatic equality can provide the basis of film theory’s renewal, so too, I suggest, can they serve as the basis of a reinvigorated humanities.
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