

# The Power of Political, Militant, ‘Leftist’ Cinema. Interview with Jacques Rancière

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## ABSTRACT

In this interview, Jacques Rancière tackles specific questions about politics, aesthetics and cinema, presenting explanations that may help to orientate readers through the thought of the French thinker. The several periods characterising his work since the 1970s and, mainly from the publication of *Proletarian Nights* in 1981: his supposed ‘aesthetic turn’ – from workers’ history or political theory to aesthetics, which was always present since his first Works, theory, art and politics from the point of view of the ‘gaps of cinema’, the concept of the ‘politics of the amateur’ and its possible application in other arts, the distinction between the Brechtian paradigm (Group Dziga Vertov, Medvedkine) and the post-Brechtian paradigm (Straub-Huillet), as well as the relationship between ‘filmic language’ and the political struggles or the possible distinction between European cinema (the mythological order) and the American one (the order of the legendary), questions that he has addressed in his works of the last years, in which cinema has an increasing importance.

## KEYWORDS

Workers’ history, political theory, gaps of cinema, politics of the amateur, Brechtian paradigm, filmic language, political struggles, Pedro Costa, Straub-Huillet, Dziga Vertov Group.

Jacques Rancière's thought is undisciplined, at least in two different but interlinked senses. On the one hand, in the 1970s Rancière suggested a reading of Marxism that broke with the dominant interpretations of the time, specially with the scientist Marxism imposed by Althusser (see *La leçon d'Althusser*, originally published in 1976 and re-published in 2012 by La Fabrique – and due to come out soon in Spanish). On the other hand, the broad interest that his thought has triggered at an international level seems to be also the consequence of another in-discipline: his reflections are constructed in the cross-over between different disciplines – such as the theory of cinema, literature and contemporary art – from a prism founded in a powerful Reading of the history of workers in the nineteenth century. The texts ensuing from this crossover have not only sparked the interest of philosophers, historians and militants, but also of artists, film and art critics and curators.

We have asked Jacques Rancière general and specific questions about politics, aesthetics and cinema, which are here preceded by some explanations that we hope will help to orientate the readers who are less familiar with the thought of the French philosopher. We also refer to his books in some instances, to invite readers to undertake a more in-depth reading, according to the interests of each reader. All of this because what is at stake in this interview, as in thought more generally, is to trace one's own path, to translate with one's own words and experiences the words that our predecessors have translated and experienced for themselves.

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**Politics and aesthetics: In light of the most recent books that you have published, some readers have claimed that over recent years**

**your thought has focused on aesthetics rather than in workers' history or political theory itself – what has been referred to as an 'aesthetic turn' in your trajectory. However you have dismissed such 'turn' in several occasions, arguing that the aesthetic reflection was already at the centre of your works from the 1970s about the history of workers insofar as, already then, your point of departure was a reflection on what you consider 'the aesthetics', that is, the relation between what can be seen, said and thought. Nonetheless one can't but notice that since the year 2000, and aside collections of interviews and articles, you have exclusively published books on literature, art and cinema in relationship to politics.<sup>1</sup> Following on your first Works on the history of workers, what is it that interests you in these artistic forms? Or, perhaps more precisely, given that you state that political subjectivation can be defined as an interval to be occupied between two identities, do you consider artworks as paradigmatic examples of such 'intervals' in which a political subjectivation is produced?**

First of all, let me start by making clear that I have never written a general theory of subjectivation as an interval between identities, the examples of which would be provided by artistic manifestations alongside political manifestations. My interest rather lies in the phenomena of un-identification and in the material and symbolic intervals that authorise them. In *Proletarian Night*, I focused on the gap that opens up between the being-worker, as an imposed condition and habit, and the subjectivation of the worker produced by the distance taken from that being-worker. I attempted to show the cross-overs between those different universes that produced such intervals – for instance, the appropriation on the part of the workers not only of culture, but also of forms of speaking, looking and of affects that weren't

1. *La Fable cinématographique* (2001), *Le destin des images* (2003), *Malaise dans l'esthétique* (2004), *L'Espace des mots* (2005), *Politique de la littérature* (2007), *Le spectateur*

*émancipé* (2008), *Les écarts du cinéma* (2011), *Béla Tarr* (2011) and the collections of articles and lectures *Aisthesis* (2011) and *Figures de l'histoire* (2012).

made for them. I tried to rethink the figure of the political subject based on those crossovers and those intervals, in contrast with the theories that insisted on citizenship or militancy from the point of view of belonging. It seems clear, then, that this determines an interest in the forms of interference of identities that may be produced by the arts and specially those art forms with an uncertain status given their double character of 'mechanical reproduction' and form of entertainment. In this sense, cinema created an unprecedented form to bring together not only art and entertainment, but also the reproduction of the worlds lived and the pleasure of the shadows. This is why cinema has been subject to interferences of identities. Among the symptoms of May'68 in France, we find manifestations in support of the director of the Cinémathèque Française, whom the Minister of Culture attempted to sack on the basis that he wasn't following the working methods of a good cultural manager. This battle was led by the Nouvelle Vague, which was itself a significant expression of a gap between identities. In the 1960s in France there were two 'nouvelles vagues'. There was a sociological identity constructed by an influential reformist newspaper that identified a new youth, liberal in its way of living, and, at the same time, less marked by ideology, more pragmatic, more open to reformist policies. Now, the Nouvelle Vague appropriated this 'sociological' subject to make something else out of it, to create a figure of ironic distance. I am thinking here of the figure of distance embodied by Jean-Pierre Léaud in particular: the figure of a youngster half-rebel, half-simple, à la Buster Keaton. Godard made him represent, for instance, the posture of the 'Chinese' militant. It might have seemed ludic, but even the ludic side of these political postures corresponded to certain political subjectivity important at the time. In spite of the militant positions that some film-makers of the period may have adopted, the figures they produced played a certain role in the political subjectivations of the period.

Let's talk about your general approach to cinema. In *The Gaps of Cinema* (2011), you state that there

exist gaps between cinema, on the one hand, and theory, art and politics, on the other. I wanted to ask you three questions in relation to these gaps:

**The gap of cinema from theory: you say that you don't see yourself as a philosopher nor film critic and that, instead of film theory, you prefer to speak of cinephilia and of amateurism. You suggest then the 'politics of the amateur' as the position that best defines your particular relationship to cinema (RANCIÈRE, 2011d: 15). You also add that amateurism cannot be reduced to enjoying the existing filmic diversity, but rather constitutes a theoretical position – cinema as a cross-over of experiences and knowledges – as well as a political one – cinema belongs to all, not only to specialists. In that sense, is the politics of the amateur another name for the emancipation of the spectator, which you developed in your previous texts (*The Emancipated Spectator*, 2008)? In light of the emancipation of the spectator and the politics of the amateur, what room is there left for the critics, for the theorists (Deleuze, Bazin, Bergala, etc.), in short, for film specialists?**

The 'politics of the amateur' defines, to begin with, a position in the field of what is called 'theory'. The politics of the amateur opposes the idea that there would be a position – a discipline – that would belong to the literary or film theorist, the social historian or the cultural historian, etc.; and it opposes it because there is no univocal definition of these spheres, there is no reason to consider that the phenomena classified under these names constitute a set of objects that can be defined using rigorous criteria. The idea that they would define specific areas that would depend on their own methods is precisely a way to eschew the most essential problems therein posed and which are, precisely, the problems relative to the distribution of the genres of discourse, of action, of spectacle and, finally, of human beings. In fact, I already applied a politics of the amateur in *Proletarian Night*, placing myself in the territory of the social historian without holding a passport. Obviously, this politics gains a specific resonance

in relation to spectacle, and especially in those spectacles where the pleasure of judgement gets mixed together with pleasure itself. I have insisted on the function of cinephilia as an appropriation of cinema on behalf of the spectators, altering thus the criteria of taste. This is something that already began with Chaplin, who became the icon of an art of cinema opposed to the 'films d'art', and which was very important when the cinephilia of the 1950s and 60s glorified the authors of the westerns, of cinema noir and of musicals, dismissed by the dominant taste of the period. If cinema played the function that we evoked above, it is because during that period it belonged to the spectators alone. There weren't academic departments on film studies. And critic/theorists such as Bazin had a side a bit amateur, self-taught. Nothing to do with the style of the likes of David Bordwell. In any case, the politics of the amateur doesn't prevent specialists from doing their job. Nonetheless, it is useful to remember every now and then that 'cinema' is not in any way the name of a sphere of homogeneous objects that depends on the same form of rationality. What relationship a priori can be determined between theories of movement, the learning of the use of a camera in the different moments of the evolution of the techniques, the poetics of narration developed by this or that film-maker, the feelings that preside the outings on a Saturday evening, the management of the multiplex and the Deleuzian theory of the movement of images? At a certain moment, it was debated whether a theory of 'cinematographic language' could be constructed but, besides the fact that it incredibly restricted what 'cinema' signifies, the basic elements of that language could not be univocally defined. The famous language is slippery in many ways. A language always entails an idea of what makes language and what language makes. Cinema is always, at the same time, a form of entertainment and an art form, an art form and an industry, an art form and an idea of utopia of art, images and reminiscences of those images, words on the images, etc. In short, cinema is an art form only insofar as it is a world. And the 'theories of cinema' are then forms of circulating in that world; they

are investigations on particular segments of that world or the bridges between the different realities that the word 'cinema' encompasses. Such work of building bridges begins already with the need to say with words written on a page what has been perceived in a *défilement*, or a sequence, of images on a screen. The 'theories' of cinema or the 'film reviews' contribute to the production of cinema by remaking films and connecting their different realities, which constitutes the grouping we call 'cinema'.

**Gap between cinema and art: In this sense, what is the relationship between the 'entertainment' side of cinema and the politics of the amateur you are proposing? Can the politics of the amateur be applied to other arts that are, so to speak, less popular and entertaining than cinema (say, for example, opera or a certain form of theatre)?**

The popular or elitist character of an art form is not a fact, a constant. Opera is now a symbol of a form of spectacle reserved for the wealthy ones who can afford it, but it has not always been this way. Without the need to refer to emblematic events such as the representations of *La Muette de Portici* in Brussels in 1830 or *Nabucco* in Milan in 1842, which became truly popular manifestations, there was a time in which many small, provincial cities had their own 'lyrical theatre' and in which opera or operetta melodies circulated broadly and in parallel to the music then called 'of varieties' (in fact, they have continued to circulate since, albeit in the form of a commodity consumed in an inert form, via the soundtracks of films and advertisements). Likewise theatre in the nineteenth century was also a place where popular entertainment and high-brow culture could still be mixed together and where, therefore, the politics of the amateur could question dominant borders and criteria. In an article for the journal *Révoltes logiques*, I analysed the way in which the mixture still present in theatre could alter the meaning and effect of the works. More recently, in two chapters from the book *Aisthesis* (2011) I studied the way in which the poets, the spectators

of the 'little theatres', dedicated to popular entertainment, could elaborate the new artistic sensibility that influenced so strongly the art of theatre and performance later on. And when the public found itself outside of the theatres and the museums, cinema took over and produced the effects that other arts could have produced beforehand. And it could produce them because the border between art and entertainment was not fixed: the authorities that legislated about art didn't worry too much about cinema and didn't really have stable criteria. And so, on the one hand, people could feel a certain emotion without the need to decide if it was art or entertainment; and, inversely, undisciplined spectators could unfold their passion for art in Works that were in principle conceived as entertainment. Such alterations or interferences of legitimacy were essential for the constitution of cinema as an object of passion and, finally, as a world of its own. Obviously, after that, all forms of formatting have been produced, which tend to cancel the power of amateurs by predetermining the relationship of the films to *their* spectators.

**The gap between cinema and politics: The relationship between politics and cinema is not, in any way, a simple, direct and causal relationship. In the chapter titled 'Politics of Films', you differentiate a 'Brechtian paradigm' from a 'post-Brechtian paradigm' (RANCIÈRE, 2011d: 106): the Brechtian paradigm is characterised by a form that unveils the tensions and contradictions of the situations with aim at 'sharpening the gaze and the judgement in order to elevate the level of certitude that backs the adhesion to an explanation of the world: the Marxist explanation'; the post-Brechtian paradigm, conversely, does not offer an explanation of the world that would serve to resolve the tensions, but instead remains in 'a tension without resolution'. Does such shift from one paradigm to the other also represent a change in the practices and the aims of the political struggles in the turn from the 1960s to the 70s? What happened, for instance, between the practice**

**and the filmic language of the Dziga Vertov Group or the Medvedkin Group (Brechtian paradigm) and, on the other, the practice and the language of a film such as Straub-Huillet's *From the Cloud to Resistance (Dalla nube alla resistenza, Jean-Marie Straub, Danièle Huillet, 1979) (post-Brechtian paradigm)?***

The Brechtian paradigm or the other types of paradigms of the politicisation of art that were operating after 1968 (to turn cinema into a medium of communication of the struggle, to break the separation between the specialists and the people by offering cameras to the people participating in the struggle, etc.) were based on the material existence of those struggles and on the Marxist 'horizon' that gave them meaning and intellectually granted their efficiency, without the need to demonstrate it materially. No one has ever verified the extent of the awareness produced by Brechtian distance nor the contribution of *Wind from the East (Vent d'Est, Jean-Luc Godard, Jean-Pierre Gorin, Gérard Martin, Groupe Dziga Vertov, 1970)* or *Vladimir and Rosa (Vladimir et Rosa, Jean-Luc Godard, Jean-Pierre Gorin, Groupe Dziga Vertov, 1970)* to the development of the struggles of the 1970s. When the double support of this politicisation – the materiality of the existing struggles and its ideal convergence in a scheme of interpretation of society and its evolution – crumbled, the critical models orientated by an anticipation of its effect also entered in crisis. On the one hand, criticism was duplicated: the procedure of 'distancing' that were at the core of a Marxist critique of situations, discourses and images were used to interrogate this form of criticism itself. This is what I tried to demonstrate in the way Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet appropriated Pavese's texts and used them to divide the Marxist certitudes that ruled over their film *History Lessons (Geschichtsunterricht, Jean-Marie Straub, Danièle Huillet, 1972)*. This is what can be seen, for example, in the dialogue between the father and the son in *From the Cloud to Resistance*, where the crude sense of injustice and the strategic consideration of the means and the aims oppose



each other without possible resolution. On the other hand, the sense of what is political was displaced: the emphasis shifted from laying bare the reasons of oppression to the manifestation of the capacity of the oppressed. See the difference between *Othon* (Jean-Marie Straub, Danièle Huillet, 1970), in which Corneille's text is recited in a monochord manner by people belonging to the art world, in order to make of that work a lesson on power that will always remain up to date (hence the importance of the sounds of city traffic that can be heard on the background) and *Operai, contadini* (Jean-Marie Straub, Danièle Huillet, 2002), in which Vittorini's text is recited in the midst of the countryside, almost in a liturgical manner by amateur actors, because the story of this ephemeral community is, first of all, a means to show the elevation of thought and of language to which the common people can aspire. The aim of the distance produced by the *mise-en-scène* is not to give a lesson about society, but rather to express the sensible capacity that characterises a period of time. I believe that such a displacement corresponds to a thought movement and to the politics of the last decades: when the Marxist forms of explanation of the world and of the struggle were, on the one hand, disqualified by the collapse of revolutionary hopes and, on the other hand, recovered from the services of the dominant order, the question of the ability of anonymous citizens and of the constitution of a new sensible tissue took over the lead from models of strategic action based upon the explanation of the modes upon which domination works.

**Continuation about filmic language and political struggles: in *The Gaps of Cinema*, you also discuss Eisenstein's *The Old and the New* (*Staroye i novoye*, 1929). There you state that, in that film, one can perceive the faith in a new political and economic system – collectivised agriculture – as well as the faith in a new filmic language. In that sense, which film of our time could be said to correspond to Eisenstein's film in that period? That is, in what new filmic language could we 'believe' today? Or, what filmic language should be avoided by the**

**films being filmed today about current social movements (such as 15M, Occupy Wall Street or Arab Spring) and what filmic language is associated to a new idea of the 'collective' – a collective life and economy?**

We shouldn't expect any correspondence there. Eisenstein, like Vertov, wanted to align the power of a new medium of expression with that of a new society. The aim of 'filmic language' was not to translate communist faith but to construct a social practice that opened up the construction of a communist world. Such identity of saying and doing pretended to suppress the mediation of images. It is clear that we are now witnesses to a completely different relationship. No one can think of making of cinema a communist symphony of coordinated movements à la Vertov, or a tractor that cultivates brain, to use Eisenstein's expression. Cinema exists massively as a technique, as industry, as a consecrated art, as academic discipline, etc. Hence film-makers can hardly imagine the identification of cinema with a new social practice. However they are rather faced with problems such as: how can situations and conflicts be represented today so as to break with the dominant logic of representation, the consensual logic that has previously subjected images to its own ends? These are the problematics – which in themselves do not have a determined relationship to recent movements – that have occupied me in my work: for instance, how to break with the victimist figure of the immigrant, as in Pedro Costa's researches/fictions about the end of a shanty town in Fontainhas and the character of the worker Ventura? How to break with the dominant vision of the pain and the ruins of the Middle East, as attempted both in Elia Suleiman's bittersweet comedies on Palestine and Khalil Joreige and Joanna Hadjithomas's films, in which the images of the destruction brought about by the war are replaced by the modification of the visible and the disappearance of the images produced by the war? We know that such attempts also question the distribution of the genres documentary/fiction, as well as prompt a new reflection on the forms of fiction. We know that

cinema is not only in the work of investigation/fiction about the present, its contradictions and struggles. There is also all that circulates instantly through the internet – the images of Tahrir square or Puerta del Sol yesterday, the images of Taksim today – and all that the form of video and video-installation encompasses today: this all entails a different relationship to technique than the dream of the Soviet avant-garde in the 1920s. New techniques are not used today as a form of constructivist practice that negates the mediation of the image. Internet, social media and the videos that circulate through these channels are rather used as a great common tissue that serves to bring together people and, at the same time, to extend such union via its images.

**In 1976, you responded to the questions asked by Serge Daney and Serge Toubiana in an interview titled ‘The fraternal image’ (RANCIÈRE, 2009: 15). We are interested in the distinctions that you trace therein and that serve to better understand the history of cinema and, more precisely, the political power of images. We will formulate two questions about this. In an interview, you first establish a distinction between European cinema (focused on the mythological order, the effect of the real on the code of representation) in opposition to American cinema (rather focused on the order of legends and their genealogy). You also add that European fiction refers to the impossibility of an origin that unites us (‘we are this way’), whereas American fiction tends towards the unity of a community (‘we come from here’)...**

The distinction that I established then didn't oppose European to American cinema, but was instead focused on the relationship between the figures of the nation, or the peoples, characteristic of traditional American fiction and the French tradition. I didn't speak there as a historian.

**But is that distinction still valid today? Could that distinction be understood as a symptom at a political and social level, and, if so, of what exactly? And also, what could be said about the**

**fiction of the nation in other cinemas (Asian or Latin-American cinemas, for instance)?**

What I aimed to do then was to intervene in a French situation, which was the recycling of the ideas of the Left and of the figure of the people, which eventually led into the official culture of the Left during the Mitterrand period: a culture in which collectivity was thought of as a form of family meeting and of the distribution of types (the Renoir model, to say it bluntly). To this ‘family picture’ I opposed there the American model based on the narrative of a foundation, as the Western narrative, in which collectivity is born out of the conflict between mythological figures rather than realist ones. Obviously, such opposition was rather simplistic and the landscape I then drew quickly changed. The American legend about the birth of the Law was altered, either because of the assimilation of the cynicism of the Spaghetti Western, or because of attempts at violent contestation, such as *Heaven's Gate* (1980) by Cimino. And the American fiction of that time, from Scorsese to Ferrara to Terence Malik and Clint Eastwood, has recreated time and again the defeat of the Law and the cul-de-sac of the community. However it has done so preserving the same figures of epical enlargement. And European cinema, because of the market it wanted to occupy, has often exploited the familiar vein, either under the guise of the comedy of local customs in the French tradition, or Rohmer's tradition, or under the guise of the out-there family tale à la Almodóvar. It seems obvious that the game has become more complex given the emergence of the new Asian cinemas, which have relied in different affects than the dominant distribution: tensions between a dominant urban form of living and traditional cultures (Kiarostami) or between the standardisation of the ‘American’ mode of life and the relationships, temporalities and mythologies from other locations (Hou-Hsiao Hsien, Tsai Ming-liang, Wong Kar-Wai); interferences in the relationship between the imaginary and the real tied to specific forms of religiosity (Weerasethakul), for instance, amongst other tensions.

**Continuing with the interview from 1976, you state that Leftist cinema tends to artificially bring together the people, effaces the contradictions of the struggle and supports a nationalist imaginary through the workers' struggle. Do you perceive a change in the tendency of today's Leftist films (*The Shock Doctrine* [Mat Whitecross, Michael Winterbottom, 2009], *Inside Job* [Charles Ferguson, 2010], *Dormíamos, despertamos* (Twiggy Hirota, Alfonso Domingo, Andrés Linares y Daniel Quiñones, 2012), *Tahrir-liberation square* (Stefano Savona, 2011), Michel Moore's films, or others)?**

In that framework, I also established a distinction between features made for a wide audience, which aimed to put popular and workers' history at the service of a certain Leftist culture, and the films of the struggle which circulate essentially within a militant circuit such as *Un simple exemple* (Cinélutte, 1974), a film about the strike of a printing house in which the problem resided, as far as I understand, not so much on film itself but on the exemplarity given to that for of 'film of the struggle', that is, in the model of Leftist thought that turned particular workers' conflicts not only into 'examples' but also into proofs of existence of a collective process. It is clear, however, that this model fell out of favour with the workers' defeats in the 1980s. Today the dominant form of the political film is that of the documentary, which no longer accompanies a fight, but rather a catastrophe – for instance, the Columbine massacre or the crisis of the *subprimes* – focusing then on an analysis of the system that has produced such catastrophe. As well as vain manifestations of 'critical' self-satisfaction, as is the case of Michael Moore, this genre may produce incisive

analysis of the financial system (*Inside Job*) or original mise-en-scène, such as *Cleveland versus Wall Street* (Jean-Stéphane Bron, 2010), where the effective battle of the inhabitants dispossessed of their dwellings by the insurance companies led to a fictional trial. Now the authors of such analyses know from the start that being aware of the laws of the system is not enough to generate a revolt. This is not say that they are useless. We have seen how a moral sentiment that was seen as useless, indignation, has been able to display a renewed force in recent years. But that means, precisely, that the effect of such analyses of domination is not the unveiling of the laws of the system – which has increasingly become fatalist logic – but rather the constitution of a sentiment of what is intolerable and in the sharing of that sentiment. This is also the framework in which to think about the films made about the recent movements (Tahrir, 15M or Occupy Wall Street). Today these films participate in the constitution of a new collective sentiment, made of intolerance of the dominant order and, at the same time, of communal trust amongst individuals: the sentiment of a world of affects to be shared and not simply the sentiment of injustice or the absurdity of the world. Amongst the videos that contribute to the instantaneous circulation of images of new struggles and the more elaborate films, one has the feeling of a sort of common bet on the union of anonymous peoples and in the power of images. The rehabilitation of images against the so-called critical tradition is perhaps an essential question today. Perhaps such rehabilitation even relegates to the background the idea of a radical use of the cinematographic instrument. •

*Translated by Helena Vilalta.*



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