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Producing Undecidability: Placing History in the Work of Jacques Rancière

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Graduate Program in Theory and Criticism
A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree in Master of Arts
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PRODUCING UNDECIDABILITY: PLACING HISTORY IN THE WORK OF
JACQUES RANCIÈRE

(Thesis format: Monograph)

by

Scott Herder

Graduate Program in Theory and Criticism

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

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Abstract

This thesis project emphasizes the element of history as an important factor in the concepts of politics and aesthetics that are suggested by Jacques Rancière. Rancière has received a series of criticism that his work operates at too great a remove from the actual materials of experience, and so this discussion acts as an answer to that criticism through a re-examination of his concept of the distribution of the sensible and his writing on politics and aesthetics. The focus of this discussion oscillates between the broader aspects of the aesthetics of politics and the politics of aesthetics, though its primary focus is on literature. By including a recognition for the historical as a material for the political, this discussion is then offered as a helpful suggestion to reposition both Rancière's own thoughts and the criticisms that have been raised towards him.

Keywords

Rancière, History, Politics, Aesthetics, Literature, Literary Criticism, Education.

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Introduction

The project of the following discussion is to introduce a sense of history within the terms of the work of Jacques Rancière. The goal of these chapters is not one of a condemnatory criticism, however; rather, they each seek to trace about the forms of thought that Rancière takes up, and to further the perspectives that are woven within them. Therefore, the approach taken here is suggestive, with an intention toward both those who have already found too many theoretical constraints in his work as well as those who have instead provided examples of its usefulness. While wishing to remain in line with the broader aspects of Rancière's thought, we will be taking a particular look at the particularities of three of the concepts around which much of his writing turns: the distribution of the sensible, the politics of aesthetics, and the aesthetics of politics. Underlying the glossary of Rancière's concepts is an employment and reconfiguration of similar concepts found in Immanuel Kant and Karl Marx. Before we begin the following chapters of discussion, then, it will be helpful to first recognize the traversal of theoretical concepts that have been brought from these two figures and into Rancière's own work.

For Kant, aesthetic experience is an aspect of what he calls reflective judgment. It is not a matter of whether, or how, aesthetics might have a kind of “politics” as we would describe it to have. Rather, it is an issue of taste; the capacity of one’s faculty for reflective judgment is what enables a person to judge things such as levels of beauty, the agreeable and disagreeable, and the sublime. To base a judgment of aesthetics on taste is to rely on the feelings that arise in the subject in relation to the aesthetic object—usually, for something beautiful, the feeling would be one of pleasure. Such a judgment, for Kant, includes both characteristics of individual, subjective experience as well as an appeal to the universality of the feeling that the aesthetic object enables. Put otherwise, aesthetic experience combines both sensible experience and the *a priori* processes of reason, which had been laid out in the first two *Critiques*. The question at the crux of Kant’s third critique could be found in §36, 5:288: “This problem can also be represented thus: How is a judgment possible which, merely from one’s own feeling of pleasure in an object independent of its concept, judges this pleasure, as attached to the representation of the same object in every other subject, *a priori*, i.e., without having to wait for the assent of others?” (Kant, 2000: 168-169). Here, Kant wants to place the individuality of the sensible experience of pleasure in ontological

terms. As he works out the answer to this question, he attempts to show that the subjective experience of beauty, the feeling of pleasure, is an access point to the logic of *a priori* reason which girds the capacity of all forms of experience. Beauty, for Kant, is the primary quality that determines aesthetic worth. Importantly, when he refers to the beautiful, he is not confining his discussion solely to art, but to the experience of a beautiful object, such as can also be found in nature, in a colourful sunset or a crisp mountain range against the horizon. He does not speak much of literature, or of art in general for that matter, as an object of experience that is of another category than the experience of some other object which might be found beautiful. In a different manner, he does discuss aesthetic objects in other of his works, such as in “On the wrongfulness of unauthorized publication of books” (1785) and a short, similarly pointed section in *The Metaphysics of Morals* (1797) titled “What is a book?” (§31, 6:289-91). But in these works, Kant is largely discussing issues of copyright, which had only just become an issue of importance at the time. The content or form of a book, or its aesthetic effect, is not given to discussion, nor are the formal characteristics of different types of literature as they were only just coming into prevalence through the eighteenth century.

The weight of Kant’s philosophy for aesthetics, then, is largely given to the *Critique of Judgment*. The way that Kant positions aesthetics holds it in a place where it does not carry a political force, though the aesthetic is nevertheless included in his ontology of the subject and the capacity for judgmental reasoning. This is not an indictment of Kant's writing, to be sure. Rather, by noting the ways that he situates the status of art, he offers an example of the ways that the field of art has been frequently staked out in accordance with broader philosophical (and, subsequently, political) concepts. After Marxist philosophy took root, writing on the philosophy of art would gradually come to be rephrased as philosophies of the politics of art. “Aesthetics” was no longer a study of the sublime as an aspect of subjective experience, but became instead a study of the aesthetic object as a participant in the production of social life. Following Marx, conversations regarding aesthetics took a sharp turn away from concepts of the universalities of beauty and freedom, and focused instead on the conditions that feed into artistic production. Modern art, rather than representing Beauty or Freedom, sends itself into the sphere of society. It is not a question, then, of whether there is a hidden agenda in a philosophy that designates a role for art, but in how this agenda is able to take up its role and expose the social conditions with which it takes its relation. Such a criticism is one that

approaches not only the field of aesthetics, but similarly affects the way that everyday life is understood. A particular aspect of such an understanding came from new philosophical movements that showed the way that language has a direct influence on the structures of society. This is something that Marx and Engels had already been pointing towards in *The German Ideology*:

In sharp contrast with German philosophy, which came down from heaven to earth, here an ascent is made from earth to heaven. This means that we do not set out from what men say, fancy, represent to themselves, nor yet from man as said to be, thought to be, fancied to be, represented to be, in order thence and by that path to reach man in the flesh; we set out from real, active human beings, and from their actual vital processes we demonstrate the development of the ideological reflexes and echoes of this vital process. Even the phantasmagorias in the human brain are necessary supplements of man's material vital process, of a process that is empirically demonstrable and is linked with material presuppositions. Morality, religion, metaphysics, and ideology in general, with their appropriate forms of consciousness, thus forfeit the semblance of independence. They have no history, no evolution, of their own. Human beings, developing material production and material intercourse, and thus altering the real world that environs them, alter therewith their own thought and the products of their thought. Consciousness does not determine life, but life determines consciousness. (Marx, 1977: 164)

This passage is an example, and a precursor, of the strains of Marxist thought that are based upon thinking life as a production where society decides and renegotiates the availability of possible ways of being. The version of enquiry that Marx and Engels propose in this passage is one that is opposed to the kind of governance over the simplest aspects of life that stakes out the possibilities for how life might be spent. As members of a community, people exist among others through forms of representation in our language, gestures, and other coded signs of expressing ourselves. And, being what people are, language is a thing that both fulfills our vitality and defines or restricts our possibilities for our vitality. The development of this understanding of language and representation are what have resulted in the considerations that the world and its mode of experience are themselves an aesthetic production. For the Marxist tradition of thought, especially, it is an understanding that then

takes hold of aesthetics and turns it toward a political use, driving it in the direction of exposing the constructed character of experience.

It is here that we will situate the way that this project approaches the work of Rancière, at an intersection between Kant and Marx. While he is neither a Kantian nor a Marxist, Rancière's descriptions of aesthetics and politics are an employment of their ideas that we have just outlined. In her article "From Aesthetics to Politics: Rancière, Kant and Deleuze," Katharine Wolfe also identifies the debt that Rancière's work has to Kant's schema. In it, she writes that "Kant's account of the ethical configuration of human experience, begun in the *Critique of Pure Reason* and carried over into the *Critique of Judgment's* account of the aesthetic expression of beauty, can likewise be characterized in Rancière's terms as the very 'distribution of the sensible' at stake for politics" (Wolfe, 2006). The difference between the two is that Rancière's delineation of the distribution of the sensible is given in a way that exposes Kant's schema as one that rigs itself, so that within it there is a necessary organization of what ought to be thought. Because of this, as Wolfe writes, there is a "moment of discord" discovered between actual, sensible experience and "the dominion of common sense" that we read in Kant. "Moreover—and this is key—its discovery by way of a sensible measure entails that this moment is sensible nonetheless" (2006). Even if sensibility is coordinated in a certain way as a measure of ought by Kant, this measurement still does occur within the field of the sensible. It is for this reason that we do not need to follow Tony Bennett's indictment of Rancière through his critical reading of Kant. Bennett writes that the "difficulty...is not Rancière's blindness to the relativity of the framing of artworks effected by the aesthetic regime of art; indeed, his argument is built around this central tenet. The problem is rather that he has no understanding of the ways in which this regime bears the continuing impress of a secular and historicized version of Christian metaphysics" (Bennett, 2010: 268). What Bennett himself seems to miss is a fundamental difference between the two thinkers. The distinction between Rancière and Kant that Bennett misses is that Rancière seeks to describe an interruption to the way that experience is aesthetically distributed, rather than to describe its solidification. As such, the process of this discussion will continue to similarly function with an underlying agreement that there is an aesthetics of experience that occurs within a sensible field—though not one that ought to seek out a particular kind of organization.

The resistant, interruptive aspects of the political in Rancière are what cause this aspect of his thinking to lean closer towards the Marxist tradition than the Kantian tradition. As an example of comparison, Walter Benjamin, in "The Author as Producer," approaches the production of literary art as a potentially disruptive activity. Rather than asking how the content or style of a work is positioned within its surrounding moment of production, he asks how the medium of the work itself functions within and interacts with the possibilities for artistic production. This is seen in the way that he positions newspapers as literature, and how the relatively new medium of photography or film could be used to speak and think in new ways. He continues with this perspective in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." The revolutionary artist is able to pronounce a new relation of artistic production with social production using a new means. Film technology removed the aura that surrounded works of older art forms, like painting and sculpture. For those, the aura was based upon its uniqueness as an object, but there is no such unique film object--all are copies of an original that does not really exist. Because of this, the audience is able to approach the work much more closely, and their closeness enables them to have their consciousness affected much more readily. For him, it is the means that enables the revolutionary aspect of art, not its style and form, as was the Marxist predilection given towards realism. New kinds of artistic production carry in them the ability to "shock" their audience, and to ripple out into society. Benjamin found Bertolt Brecht's epic theatre to be an especially good example of how an existing form can be made to create a shock for its audience and to light up new possibilities for the ways that social relations are produced. It is through the development of new technologies, as well as the refurbishing of old technologies, that the politics of a work may be invigorated.

In this way, aesthetic production does not exist on its own, but helps to revamp the production of our experience. For the Marxist vein of thought, literary art is important because it is able to draw within itself the existing ideologies that provide its raw material, and then push that collection of materials in a way that might open up new political possibilities. Here, rather than simply asking "What is art?" or "What is the beautiful?", we would instead ask the question, "How does art work?" With the idea that the course of language is always unfinished, the mutative functioning of language helps in putting forth and then making most prevalent the notion that meaning is always only tentative—in

experience, as well as in art. That is, art seems to work, not only within the confines of its production, but in accordance with the possibilities that are afforded to it.

From here, the features of the subsequent discussion should now have a conceptual basis that is properly oriented, and so the following chapters will spend their time expanding upon Rancière's own work, with a primary focus on his concept of the distribution of the sensible and the terms of possibility for the political. Throughout, the aim of this project is to recognize and emphasize the importance of historical experience in the possibilities of the political. As mentioned earlier, and as is the overall intention of this discussion, there is historically a mutual relationship between artistic production and the formalizing of aesthetic theories. The first chapter will suggest that it is perhaps Rancière's lack of consideration for the historical that has resulted in the stronger criticisms which he has received. As it progresses, the chapter oscillates between Rancière's presentation of the concepts of politics and aesthetics and the determination of the distribution of the sensible. By introducing the historical as a crucial aspect of politics, we will see the need to reorient each of these main concepts. Moving beyond Rancière's own work, this reorientation will be brought to bear on the notion of the sociology of literature and problem of using inequality as the beginning point in politics. Further, the politics of aesthetics necessitates a critique of the conventional use of the term *text* as it is typically understood. The close of this chapter will refine the way that we would combine the political with the historical by describing politics as something that, in taking equality as a presupposition, does not seek in its own way to determine a specified and restrictive distribution of the sensible. Once thinking about the implications of including a sense of history in the political, the second chapter will ask whether the possibilities of the politics of aesthetics are capable of traversing across different spaces and times, or if they are bound to the sensibilities around which it is produced. The third chapter then takes up the question of education, and asks whether there are certain requirements of those who are audience to the aesthetic object in order for its politics to be accomplished. Similarly, this chapter will ask whether the politics of literature can be shared between different types of readers, or if there is only an immediacy of sense that is required in order for its politics to occur.

It is the issue of how to consider the work of literature (or, potentially, the work of art in general) that runs throughout each chapter here. The focus taken will primarily be an iterative

one: first, we will discuss the way in which the work of literature is produced within a distribution of the sensible; second, we will critique Rancière's employment of style in describing the politics of aesthetics, and will question the possibilities for the politics of literature to remain despite the revolving distributions of sense by which it is surrounded; third, we will look to understand the position of the reader who is audience to the politics of literature, and will ask whether there is a possibility for its politics to be transmitted between the figure of the literary critic and the uneducated reader. In connection with that iterative focus will be the concluding question of how to understand the position of literary criticism in a way that would relate to the politics of literature set out by Rancière. The range of topics within Rancière's work that will be discussed here are placed to interact with those that his work has not yet touched—and in doing so, this project seeks to offer a way of improving on each.

Chapter 1

1 Producing Undecidability

The writing of Jacques Rancière, which has most recently been working to reveal what close similarities exist between the fields of politics and aesthetics, has allowed some important new steps in thinking about art. Rancière first positions politics within the understandings of sensible experience, in a way that draws the political away from under the foundations of state and institutional apparatuses in favour of the very basic presumption of sense which shapes a community: that of equality. As is noted by Hinderliter et. al in *Communities of Sense*, Rancière's work shows that “the philosophical problem of sense is always also a political problem” (Hinderliter, 2009: 6). Rather than maintain an imposition of separation between sense and thought, then, Rancière locates meaning within the way that sense is distributed and expressed so that “aesthetic experience is grounded...in a new division of sense, one that is based on equality rather than on domination. Aesthetics thus delimits a space in which thought and sense coexist in a way that points to new ways of sharing” (2009: 6). The results of Rancière's descriptions of an aestheticization of politics and a politicization of aesthetics have already seen thoughtful responses that display new ways of discussing such topics. Yet, the way that Rancière situates the political as a matter of aesthetics has resulted in a wide array of responses, from an enthusiastic employment of his ideas to a severe criticism. Each are useful, and the discussion that will be put forward here will initially recognize the importance found in both the acceptance and the refusal of Rancière's work, and to likewise—at least from the outset—share our discussion in a relation with both ends of reception. While first highlighting both the potential use and applicability of Rancière's work as well as the reasoning behind his criticisms, what we will further show is that the criticisms given to his work open up a need for rethinking the tools of his concepts with which we are provided. This opening reveals what we will argue here: that the realization of the usefulness of Rancière's work shall only best come about by integrating a concept of history into our understanding of politics and aesthetics. History, in the sense used here, acts as a precedent for the possibilities of the political. In accordance with Rancière's thought, the political is an act of disagreement with the distribution of the

common sense of experience, and so history will here be argued as that which produces the potential for such an act. The intent of this discussion is to show the implications of positioning the historical basis of the sensible and the political—and to further show that through answering to the way that history must necessarily ground the concepts of politics and aesthetics, they are together better organized and activated.

In order to make such a suggestion, this discussion will first lay out the lines of debate and application by which Rancière's work has been received. The methodology of Rancière enables an opportunity for his work to be applied across various fields of scholarship, while in other cases it is precisely that method which deters its viability. This discussion will seek to improve upon both these sides of reception by pointing out the historical basis of a distribution of the sensible. The importance that history has in the way that a distribution of the sensible is shaped is one that is largely overlooked by Rancière, and so we will bring it into emphasis in terms of both politics and aesthetics—with a particular view to literature. At issue in making this emphasis is that we still want to ensure that we do not devolve into a description of politics that maintains the inequality that sociological science describes (as will be seen in the work of Pierre Bourdieu). Further, the concepts in the politics of aesthetics that Rancière presents will be shown to demand a reworking of the understanding of literature and the way that it is often theoretically positioned as a “text.” Rather than placing the meaning of literature as a product of a discursive field, the politics of literature are such that the literature performs a kind of “work” that removes itself from the terms of the “text” by revealing new ways of saying, doing, and being. Finally, we will find that arguing for the importance of history in Rancière's concepts requires a description that does not revert to a determinant logic of emancipation, by which equality would occur out of the inequality that restricts it. Instead, since the political occurs on the basis of equality as a presupposition, it does not seek to concretize an idealized or utopian sense of community—rather, the moment of politics is one that occurs as a moment of undecidability.

1.1 Casts of Light and Shade on Rancière's Work

The transdisciplinary aspects of Rancière's work have been welcomed into several fields

of interest, whether in the study of cinema, literature, history, or otherwise.¹ As an example, Michael J. Shapiro, whose studies are primarily based in topics of political science, has recognized a sense of “the political-as-episodic” (Shapiro, 2004: 24) in Rancière's work, and appreciates that his model “escapes the compass of social and political science's concern for policy” (2004: 26) as a useful way of discussing the fact that scientific concepts of the political subject are unsuitable in understanding the coercive relation between nation-building and indigeneity. By conceiving his own discussions in this way, Shapiro offers important insights regarding the establishment of national identity, and has troubled its relation to the indigenous subject. He has similarly used Rancière to discuss how cities and their architecture inform the way that one is able to gain a sense of their part in their community.² Elsewhere, the applicability of Rancière's writing on cinema has been highlighted by figures such as Tom Conley, who wants to argue that he “may have entered a French pantheon of film theory” with his work (Conley, 2005: 96). Rather than arguing for a pure cinema as Gilles Deleuze does,³ Rancière locates the cinematic art-object in close relation to the world of lived experience. Reading through the positions taken in Rancière's work, Conley agrees that “A sense of the condition of the medium needs to be articulated in a broader field; this cannot be obtained through pure cinephilia, but by careful and selective—often dissensual—analysis that comes through and about cinemas that today the critics see as belonging to a general *malaise*. Rancière's work counts among the few that follow this line and bring us to the quick of the political aesthetics of cinema” (2005: 106). Figures such as Shapiro and Conley are among many whose fields of study have been spirited by looking with Rancière at the way that equality is the primary condition for the political.

¹ The broad application of Rancière's work is no doubt thanks to the scope of his own studies. He has written many essays on film, as well as a book, *The Future of the Image* (2007). Additionally, he has written on historiography in *The Names of History: On the Poetics of Knowledge* (1994); on education in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation* (1991); and on the relationship between the intellectual and society in *The Philosopher and His Poor* (2004). These are listed, not to mention the many writings he has published on politics and aesthetics.

² See *The Time of the City: Politics, Philosophy, and Genre* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010).

³ See Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema I* (Trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam, Minneapolis, MN: U of Minnesota P, 2001) and *Cinema II* (Trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta, Minneapolis, MN: U of Minnesota P, 2001).

In displaying their work as an example of the growth in numbers of those who currently employ the concept of equality with regard to so many fields of study, the wish of this brief initial discussion is only to recognize the potential value and applicability of Rancière's work. However, as with the kind of spotlights that are often awarded to certain thinkers [for he and his friend Alain Badiou, he says it has come “only by virtue of seniority” (Badiou, 2009: 35)], the light passing over Rancière's work has also been sent in a sharply critical fashion for his method and conception of politics and aesthetics, their relationship, and the sense of equality that functions within each. The very same elements of politics that have been seen to inspire more than a few thinkers has similarly raised the contention of others. As one of his more enduring critics, Badiou wonders where there might be any efficacy in the way that Rancière positions politics. His remarks bring about an important counter-reflection of the usefulness of Rancière's work, and it is to these that the length of this discussion will seek to address. Despite the similarities that he finds between his and Rancière's work (stating that it is even difficult to ignore the way that Rancière's seems to bear the impression of ideas that Badiou had already put forward), Badiou criticizes his contemporary for lacking any inclusion of the State in his descriptions of politics, with the assertion that “every real (non-philosophical) politics is first of all to be accounted for in terms of its verdicts on this State. It is quite paradoxical that Rancière's critical thought breaks off just before the qualification, in respect of the political supplement, of the parliamentary State” (Badiou, 2005: 20). For Badiou, the construction of a political subject is already implicated by a culture and a State, and so placing them together would then be a necessary inclusion to a concept of politics. This is a deeply significant difference from Rancière's version of the political. Rancière's writing on politics has very little to do with the State or its apparatuses of governance, and according to Badiou this is a terrific shortcoming in the claim that it might have as a theory of the political. Despite that the relation between subject and State is a “mythical” construction, Badiou insists that it is out of such a relation that politics ought to be conceived. His argument is that there is little strength in declaring an emancipatory politics that does not occur with any kind of relation to a State formation, and so “In dismantling this myth [of mastery and servitude] as a false *telos* of emancipatory politics,

the paradox is that Rancière leads us to nothing in the order of real politics that could serve as a replacement” (Badiou, 2005: 110). What Badiou considers to be most severely missing in Rancière, then, is a kind of practicality necessary for a proper concept of politics.

In addition to this aspect, with the broad replacement of the “worker” in contemporary political philosophy with the “immigrant,” Badiou takes the change in focus as an example of how an establishment of terms is always conditional. With that, the conditional possibilities of speech are important to emphasize, but they are a basis which he finds to be detrimentally missing in Rancière. “We thus find in Rancière the means for taking up political *results* by cutting them off from the processes that give rise to them. This practice ultimately relies upon what he himself highlights as a philosophical imposture: forgetting the real condition of one’s speech” (Badiou, 2005: 121). The switch from the “worker” to the “immigrant” in politics is as a result of a political process that first influenced such a change, but the conditions for how a political event occurs are not given entrance to Rancière's thought. More and more, the value in a theory of the political is necessary to be found in the way it gives reference to the material circumstances of particular events and situations. Pressing upon such a shortcoming, and in what is perhaps a relative to these preceding inefficiencies, Jean-Luc Nancy has laid Rancière with the charge of being a metaphysician, despite the fact that he does set his concepts of politics within the bounds of historical eras and draws his examples from historical events. Nancy's criticism is to do with the extractions that Rancière makes from those examples. The problem he finds is that “Rancière's conception of the nondivided *archē* seems to me to oscillate between something prehistorical moving toward its historical mutation (but how?) and something heterogeneous that exceeds all schemes of political and philosophical thought (but what does this mean?). The philosophical question concerning the “outside” of philosophy persists, then, with an even greater insistence” (Nancy, 2009: 88). Nancy's focus is on Rancière's description of equality and the movement of politics in art. Without setting the expressive speech of the political within the conditions of their particular situation, Nancy argues that Rancière is making an appeal to the metaphysical as an excess of rationality. Here, he finds “at this point that—

necessarily, simply, whether through its critics or its deconstructions—metaphysics once again awakens and reconfigures itself” (Nancy, 2009: 92). Much as those first mentioned above, Eric Méchoulan is supportive of Rancière's repositioning of the concept of politics, though he still wonders “what do we do with two considerable differences between ancient communities and our modern societies?” (Méchoulan, 2009: 58). This is an important question to ask, and finds itself within the premises of the criticisms of Badiou and Nancy. In a further point that functions similarly with Badiou's concern, Jeremy Valentine's article “Rancière and Contemporary Political Problems” finds it difficult to conceive of a politics that functions neither from subjective ontology nor from the representations of community participation. As he writes of Rancière, “For recognition to matter the non-ontological and non-symbolic status of the political must be denied. How then is the political to be thought of in a way which maintains its non-ontological and non-symbolic or aleatory status?” (Valentine, 2005: 48). By denying each of these two components, Valentine is only able to conclude that the political event is a kind of “miracle,” one whose arrival is inexplicable, and is therefore a model which offers no satisfaction for an idea of politics. As we began with the basis of the present discussion, however, the criticisms of a so-called miraculousness, an ungroundedness, or a lack of foundation in Rancière's writing may best be remedied by examining his concepts of the political from the grounds of history from which it occurs.

In doing so, this discussion similarly attends to the types of critical projects which support and employ Rancière's writing in application to other circumstances, as seen in the few examples mentioned above. Strikingly, both the proponents and the critics of Rancière's work base their opinions primarily on the unorthodoxy of his definitions of terms. Those who are critical have put forward important aspects of Rancière's overall scope of work that may be in need of some refinement, but while the movement of their new steps are valuable, they function more as detractions than protractions, limiting themselves to exposing the shortcomings of Rancière's thought as it relates to the traditions of political and aesthetic philosophies without finding ways for such apparent shortcomings to be made into more suggestive critiques. In this way, the criticisms that are directed towards Rancière actually disallow themselves the recognition of the persistent value that his work keeps. By basing the concept of political equality on the

commonality of sense, Rancière discreetly grants a form of politics that occurs at the level of the everyday, and in terms of the materiality of a community and the ways that its members experience their part in a community. As he writes it, the workings of experience are then the foundation of the political. If understandings are drawn from the mesh and variety of experience, what might act as a solvent between the thought of Rancière and those whose fields of study are critically engaged with him is for each to include a stronger emphasis on the effects of history in both aesthetics and politics. In saying so, I want to offer a point of view—not on behalf of Rancière, but as a way of sending what criticisms we have seen into his work—that will seek how these troubles in his thought could be accommodated by an answer given in a way that would actually work alongside both the criticisms and the acclaim which have been doubly awarded to the work of Rancière so far.

1.2 Situating Politics and Aesthetics

As we began, what this discussion intends to portray here is a way of helping the viability of what is important in Rancière's thought by showing that the possibilities for politics and aesthetics take their root as an historical question. Yet, even while there is a great amount of worth in colouring the politics of aesthetics according to the lines of history, this is not something on which Rancière himself spends his writing. Nor is there very substantial work made on the part of his critics or commenters, though several discussions have drawn near to this point from within different contexts. Illan Rua Wall's article "Tunisia and the Critical Legal Theory of Dissensus" engages with Rancière to consider the ways that resistant politics can occur without its "seeming conformity to the ordinary history of revolt and reinstitution" (Wall, 2012: 233) through the example of the Tunisian conflict. Writing on the *Les Révoltes Logiques* (1975-1985) journal, Mischa Suter references how the concept of politics as a rupture in Rancière's project needs to keep a close relationship to history. "For history," Suter writes, "precisely arises when people are dissimilar to their time and make a break with the temporal line that assigns them their place" (Suter, 2012: 83). Elsewhere, Laurent Dubreuil's "What is Literature's Now?" also continues to argue that Rancière's writing is not founded within history, and as a result is unable to truly recognize the important role that historical circumstances

have for literature (Dubreuil, 2007). In the present discussion, however, by bringing the concepts of politics and aesthetics in Rancière's work towards the question of history, the result of doing so should not reshape his core concepts, but will slightly reframe them—particularly the distribution of the sensible, as well as the very potentiality for both politics and aesthetics. I do not mean to discuss history in an epochal sense, which is laid out by Rancière as a periodization of regimes: the ethical, the representational, and the aesthetic.⁴ Neither do I mean history as a broad narrative or a scientific discourse,⁵ though the following threads of discussion might be found to touch upon both of these. Rather, this discussion approaches two, more particularly defined uses of history, and each will also likely be found to always be edging towards the other. The first enquiry into the importance of history seeks to locate the temporal distribution of political possibilities, in order to show that the historicity of such possibilities are in an important way a decisive factor for the politics of aesthetics. The second notion of history takes into regard the basic processes of subjective experience, so as to show that historical experiences are also something that shape the approach one might have to both politics and aesthetics and the way that they are received—to show that, as audience to a work of art, it is out of the precedent of one's experience that a person is availed to a political possibility. Each of these enquiries share in common a certain participation with the terms of what Rancière describes as the distribution of the sensible. The distribution of the sensible is the arrangement of understanding in a community by which politics occurs as “a reconfiguration of the given perceptual forms” (Rancière, 2004: 63). The fields of sensible experience for a society are distributed in a way that determines both the individual and collective understandings by which a community functions. This may initially sound complex, but Rancière means it as a fundamental presumption taken up in the shape of a community. As Rancière defines it, “The distribution of the sensible

⁴ These historical regimes, though having distinct characteristics, are not *epistemes* in that they are not solely limited to their own time periods. In the aesthetic regime, for example, representational and ethical understandings of art can yet exist simultaneously. Such delineations have not themselves gone without some useful discussion. See, for example, Joseph J. Tanke's essay, “What is the Aesthetic Regime?” in *Parrhesia* 12 (2011) as well as Rancière's own “What aesthetics can mean” in *From an Aesthetic Point of View: Philosophy, Art and the Senses* (Ed. Peter Osborne, London: Serpent's Tail, 2000).

⁵ Rancière has discussed history in this sense, most particularly in *The Names of History*, and further in *The Politics of Aesthetics*.

reveals who can have a share in what is common to the community based on what they do and on the time and space in which this activity is performed” (2004: 12). The multiple turns of the term “distribution” in its original French (*partage*) are made as both sharing and separation, designated (policed) as an existing force of governance over the understanding of experience. The police of a community determine the models of available experience and give expression to the distribution of the sensible as a form of consensus. Rancière's idea is of a shared community of sense: common sense. It is through common sense that a shared understanding of the world comes into being, and the distribution of the sensible is brought out of what a community comes to understand about one's world of experience. These are terms with which it is worth keeping a close touch because, while Rancière does not attribute the ways that history informs them, in doing so here we will see that they must be at least slightly reconfigured. In fact, it should be very much worth exploring, on the one hand, the historicity of an individual aesthetic object and, on the other hand, the historicity of the distribution of the sensible. What I argue is that each distribution and re-distribution, made through politics or through aesthetics, is an untethered historical manufacture. History is then always contained within the world of experience, as well as in the aesthetic object existing within that world. This containment is both on account of and despite the function and arrangement of the distribution of the sensible. If we begin here by adding a sense of history to our understanding of the distribution of the sensible, then we are also pushed further towards improving upon its absence that runs throughout the terms and framework within which Rancière places politics and aesthetics. By doing so, we might best be able to further pursue our direction towards improving upon the applicability of Rancière's work.

Implicated by this potential alteration in conceiving the distribution of the sensible, however slight, will be that the version of politics that Rancière outlines is also affected. According to Rancière, “The essence of politics is *dissensus*,” which is defined in terms of the distribution the sensible: dissensus is “not a confrontation between interests or opinions” but “is the demonstration (*manifestation*) of a gap in the sensible itself” (Rancière, 2010: 38). Where an existing distribution of the sensible is one of consensus, and is the force in a community that decides which possibilities are shared and for whom, it actually exists as an opposite of the political. Consensus designates a particular kind of

world with particular ways of being, of seeing, and of acting, and is therefore a designation of how one is given to their participation, or is excluded within the *dēmos*—but, importantly, the distribution of the sensible also designates those who are left out of that level of participation. The organization of consensus is distributed in such a way that it always places a certain kind of being and speaking outside its partitions of visible understanding. So, while the distribution of the sensible is meant to designate and affix roles for the members of a society, in doing so it also allows the possibility for politics to occur as dissensus. Politics is enacted by “Those who make visible the fact that they belong to a shared world that others do not see” (ibid.). Politics, enacted through dissensus (and otherwise termed as “misunderstanding” or “disagreement”), is the act of speaking as those who are unable to speak—when “those who have no right to be counted as speaking beings make themselves of some account” (Rancière, 1994a: 36-37), and who in doing so make an interruption in the sensibilities of their community. That is, the interruption of disagreement brought by the uncoun­ted who make themselves count results in an opening for a redistribution of the sensible. The conflict of disagreement is initially an occurrence of misunderstanding, about how parts of a community share different ideas about the same object of experience. In this way, as Rancière explains, dissensus is “a conflict over homonyms, a conflict between one who says white and another who says white” (Rancière, 2010: 218). The realization of misunderstanding is felt as a violation of the sensible equality which precedes the contingency of the distribution of the sensible and, felt by those who are left out, results in a dissensus that would create a new point of inclusion.

By understanding the world as a matter of aesthetic organization, the political occurs in accordance with such a distribution. To be more concise, then, politics *is* aesthetic. Its occurrence presupposes the world as a sensible distribution. Rancière has touched upon the relationship between the political with regard to the passing of time, though not quite in the terms I am introducing here. He does so, not with reference to the historicity of understanding, but in the way that the distribution of the sensible is a delimitation of both space and time, and is affected into a determined kind of experience for a part of a

community. As with his dissertation work in *Proletarian Nights*,⁶ his example is of nineteenth century day labourers, whose daily routines are put into order for the greater benefit of class economy. Despite that his initial aim was to give a critical comparison between the way that workers identified themselves and the way that they are identified as an object of study, he suggests that the workers were already insistent about thinking themselves as equal members of their society. He writes, “I set out to find primitive revolutionary manifestos, but what I found was texts which demanded in refined language that workers be considered as equals and their arguments responded to with proper arguments” (Rancière, 2009d). The workers that are discussed in *Proletarian Nights* manipulated the way that their time had been decided for them. As depicted by Rancière, workers were expected to be about their tasks between certain hours of the day, after which they should return home for rest enough to repeat the same tasks on the following day and to meet the same daily expectations. But in this case, the sensible was controlled and then politically contested by the innovative uses of time that workers made for themselves, forming a rich archival example of Rancière's positioning of politics. He continues to describe their activities elsewhere, writing that “In order to reframe the space-time of the 'occupation,' the workers had to invalidate the most common partition of time: the partition according to which workers would work during the day and sleep during the night” (Rancière, 2005: 13). Rather than confine themselves to a night of rest, workers would spend their nights writing poetry, novels, and tracts, and offering each other criticisms of their writings. The night of the workers was a disidentification from the limitations given to them under the presumption that their only capacity in their community was as workers. Through their disidentification with that limitation, rather than being only workers, they redefined themselves as artists, writers, scholars, and dreamers. The way they spent their nights, then, was a redistribution of their time. Beyond these figures, Rancière later makes an additional example of Gabriel Gauny through the use of many of Gauny's own personal documents and writings.⁷ Gauny, a

6 First published as *La Nuit des prolétaires: Archives du rêve ouvrier*, and initially in English as *The Nights of Labour*.

7 Rancière has also edited a published a collection of Gauny's writing in *Le philosophe plébéien* (Paris: La découverte-Maspéro, 1983).

labourer who laid floors in upper-class homes, was someone who conducted a disidentification from his role with his own kind of remove. “Believing himself at home, so long as he has not finished laying the floor, he loves the arrangement of a room. If the window opens out onto a garden or commands a view of a picturesque horizon, he stops his arms a moment and glides in imagination [*plane en idée*] toward the spacious view to enjoy it better than the possessors of the neighbouring residences” (Rancière, 2012: 81). Although the time of his days were spent working, this time was doubled through his imagination to reveal the equality of his sensible capacities beyond the limitations of his assigned labour. The heterogenization of time reveals new political possibilities.

Thinking about time in this way leads Rancière to the depiction of the political as anachronistic through its contemporaneity with the assignments of the police as a force of consensus. As he writes, importantly, “The concept of 'anachronism' is anti-historical because it obscures the very conditions of historicity itself. There is such a thing as history to the extent that people do not 'resemble' their times, to the extent that they break with 'their' time, with the temporal line which puts them in their place by requiring them to devote their time to such and such an 'employment'” (Rancière, 1996: 66). But, as we are suggesting, even the anachronism of politics is that it is itself historical, in that its look to history serves to orient the inequalities of the present, the expression of which is only then found in the subsequent anachronism of politics. In a crucial point, this idea of the blend of temporalities is what helps the anachronism of politics and its heterotopic implementation. The “utopian” blend of worlds is made through an “as if” of inclusion; that is, one speaks *as if* they are already allowed to speak. This sense of “as if” is in terms of some present distribution of the sensible and the presumption of the capacity for a particular part of a community. To return to the example that was made above, the figure of Gauny is already capable of imagining, and taking up such an escape of imagination is what removes him from the assignment of his being a mere worker. His thoughts dissociate himself from the restrictions of this assignment, disrupting the distribution of the sensible as if he is already an equal part of the class for which he labours. Still—and taking note of the risk of confusing Rancière's sense of anachronism with mine simply due to our own conflicting homonyms—I would argue towards the anachronism of politics as a disruptive moment that does, in fact, arrive out of a specified

circumscription, and that it does so with a distinct reference to the historicity of its situation. Time is certainly an interesting and underemphasized aspect of Rancière's more recent thoughts, and it is pleasing to find within the content of his work. However, his sense of time and of the anachronism of politics is not so fulfilling as I would wish it to be. If we return further to the example of the nineteenth century worker, then we should still need to ask questions such as, what are the historical processes that have led to Gauny being a worker of his position? What of those for whom he is working? And, most importantly, how have his experiences informed the spark of his imagination, this activity that is a part of the composition of politics? These are questions of historicity, and to understand them as such would continue to function within the way that Rancière pairs the materiality of historical examples with the transcendental instantiation of equality—only that their pursuit would better fill out an understanding of the actual functions of the political.

1.3 The Politics of Aesthetics on the Bases of History

As we have mentioned above, since the disagreement of the political takes place at the level of sense, Rancière describes this disagreement between understandings as an “aesthetics of politics.” The “politics of aesthetics,” an inversion of the phrase, mirrors the processes of the aesthetics of politics in that a work of art disrupts the distribution of the sensible to reveal new possibilities for being, saying, and doing. As he writes, “the question of the relationship between aesthetics and politics” should occur at “the level of the sensible delimitation of what is common to the community, the forms of its visibility and of its organization” (Rancière, 2004: 18). While the politics of aesthetics takes a produced work into account—one of music, literature, sculpture, found art, film, hybrid art forms, and so on—the term “aesthetics” takes on a different definition than has otherwise been traditionally given. Aesthetics is not simply about defining art or the concept of the beautiful; rather, for Rancière the “principle behind an art's formal revolution is at the same time the principle behind the political redistribution of shared experience” (2004: 17). In both cases, the underlying principle is equality. This is a much different way of situating art than is made in the more sociological theories prepared by figures such as Louis Althusser and Pierre Bourdieu, who wrote under the influence of

Marxist theories of social production and class organization. As Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson, Philippe Desan, and Wendy Griswold describe together, “The Marxian division of society into intellectual superstructure and economic base correlated literature and the writer with specific social milieux, with a unique economic system, and with the class relations and the ideologies sustained by that system” (Ferguson, 1998: 426). Literature is then viewed as a reflection of the system within which it is produced. The mirror of literature “supports practically all work in the sociology of literature” (ibid.), such as can be seen prominently within the writing of Bourdieu. In Bourdieu's work, literature is firmly placed within the organization of a “habitus” or a “field” that are driven by capital, in which society and its products, such as literature, take up “a space of positions and position-takings” (Bourdieu, 1993: 30). Accordingly, for him “The meaning of a work (artistic, literary, philosophical, etc.) changes automatically with each change in the field within which it is situated for the spectator or reader” (1993: 30-31). However, as Caroline Pelletier writes, “The problem with scientific Marxism, including Bourdieu's sociology as it is perceived offshoot, is that it starts from a position in which inequality is assumed, and materialized in the distance between science and ideology” (Pelletier, 2009: 142). Arguing further, and on Rancière's behalf, Pelletier points out that “In opposition to this, Rancière's argument is that there is no other means of achieving equality than to assume it, to affirm it, to have it as one's epistemological starting point, and to then systematically verify it” (ibid.). In using inequality as a starting position, a sociology of literature restricts itself to making an observational criticism that will continue positioning inequalities. Rancière's alternative definition of the political as arriving instead out of the presupposition of equality is one to which I am also more inclined to subscribe, though I would do so with the additional need of pursuing it further. As has been so far alluded to, the understanding of his principle of the politics of aesthetics will also be altered somewhat through the refinement of considering it in concert with the historical aspects of an aesthetic work and its possibilities for political meaning. What happens out of this is a seeming paradox, though one that is unavoidable: that a social formation, or a distribution of the sensible, governs in such a way that designates how a work of art is understood, but that while doing so it produces its own fractures, which can then enable the politics of aesthetics to occur. This is a part of what

we are working to point out, in that there is historically a mutual relationship between artistic production and the formalizing of aesthetic theories. In doing so, however, we are not suggesting that the politics of aesthetics arrives out of inequality, as it does for the sociologist, but from the basis of equality. We are suggesting this despite that, among other forms of art, Rancière does not elect to recognize that literature, including a conception of modern literature as that which would wish to eschew tradition and to negate the bounds of history, is itself dependent upon the historical movement of language which makes its politics an available possibility. However latently, whenever literature acts politically and shows new ways of being, it makes an appeal to the history which has enabled it to do so. Such an appeal can be made explicitly, even prescriptively, but even when it is an implicit feature we can know that history is a given factor in any new work that is produced. The sense of “newness,” then, is more like an act of innovation, of reshaping the formulations of understanding. Such an innovation may seem even wildly inventive, but its inventiveness is made out of the materials—perhaps half-buried or undecipherable—that are already there for experience. In this way, the signification of literature requires a distribution of the sensible that enables such an enactment. And so, the politics of literature actually signals two sets of histories which run parallel to each other, and which we have so far been discussing with some slight separation: an enabling distribution of experience in the broader community of sense, and an enabling status within literature itself, in terms of media, form, style, genre, rhetoric, metaphor, diction, or syntax. This is a key relation, and is one to which we will return. For an initial statement, though, we may say that the first would occur on the level of reception, and the second on the level of production. Such a relation is shown most clearly when comparing the ways that the conventional fashions of a written work change over periods of time. Habits of sentence construction and diction are altered, new forms of poetry are produced, and wholly new aesthetic formats develop and mature, as seen with those such as film and video games. And these changes in the habits of aesthetic production are an inevitability as the world that they exist within also changes. In addition to new media, new sensibilities—whether in history and/or in literature—are the basis of bringing about a new field of literature where further new sensibilities are made possible.

This discussion of the historicity of literature or other forms of art has so far been made with reference to the individual work, but it could also be made in terms of a broader scene of historical trends. While it would be much too forceful a wish to say that the influence of history allows us to chart a direct lineage between the directions of (philosophical) thought and its mutuality to aesthetic innovations, there is a strikingly common feature among them. The construction of aesthetics, for each, whether in terms of the subjective experience of the beautiful, or in terms of generic modes or semiotic textuality, is conceptualized strictly in terms of the existing social constructions and political philosophies which hold momentum at their own time. If a thought of philosophy or aesthetic theory is not building onto, or away from, another notion of politics as a way to situate aesthetics, then it is making use of one's own concepts of politics, which are themselves gained under the influences of surrounding occurrences in the world. As an important illustration, then, we might chart several historical movements of aesthetics as a way to show their relation to Rancière's concepts of sense and the aesthetics of the political. Some few examples for illustration may be found in several artistic and philosophical movements over the past several centuries. Romanticism in the late eighteenth to nineteenth centuries functioned in opposition to the unidirectional dialectics of Enlightenment thinking and the establishment of nationalism by emphasizing the individual creative spirit in relation to nature. This emphasis can be seen, for example, in the focus of emotional feeling found in the Romantic painting of Caspar David Friedrich and the poetry of John Keats and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. The unbridled feeling of the artist is meant to be transferred to the making of a work of art, so that the fullness of sensuous experience depicted in a work of art can lead toward a sense of freedom and truth.⁸ Elsewhere than Romanticism, and responsive to it, the later "epic theatre" of Bertolt Brecht was an artistic program meant to decline any sense of the ideal, and instead sought to dialectically draw its audience into a "performance" in a way that avoids the traditional distance held between the stage and its audience. This strategic movement is meant to produce a "defamiliarization effect" (*Verfremdungseffekt*) which

⁸For further reading on Romanticism and its relationship to historical and philosophical contexts, see Isaiah Berlin's *The Crooked Timber of Humanity: Chapters in the History of Ideas* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2013).

would enable a more self-reflective involvement from the audience member. Brecht took this functional turn to political effect.⁹ As he writes, “We need a type of theatre which not only releases the feelings, insights and impulses possible within the particular historical field of human relations in which the action takes place, but employs and encourages those thoughts and feelings which help transform the field itself” (Brecht, 1964: 190). His was a concept of art that was politicized rather than idealized, particularly against the state of early twentieth century Germany. Brecht's theatre was made to function against the forces of Fascism which had developed around him during those decades. If we continue beyond this historical moment, after the modernist departure of epic theatre from the conventions of Romanticism, “postmodern” art was a concept developed later in the twentieth century to function as yet another responsive development, both to preceding ideas of art and to the political, social, and technological changes occurring in the world. Accordingly, postmodern art is often characterized by intertextuality and the self-referentiality of metafiction. Examples of these can be seen in literature such as Umberto Eco's *Foucault's Pendulum*, which drives the process of reading through a vast number of external references, or in Jonathan Safran Foer's *Tree of Codes*, which figures its narrative out of Bruno Schulz's *The Street of Crocodiles* by cutting sections of pages from the printed material of the preceding work. Postmodern art manipulates the concept of the stability of reality and the unity of experience, proposing (in opposition to preceding conventions) that there is no essential being that is able to be represented. Rather, representation is only the divulgence of a constantly shifting spectrum that is primarily informed by outside forces.

If we keep with the implications of these literary examples, the philosophical problem of a sense of reality and its representation in postmodern art and subjectivity has had the most recent hold on aesthetic theorization, and persists throughout much of contemporary literary criticism, which is now most frequently informed by the figures of Karl Marx, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Derrida. In practice, the meaning to be looked for in thinking literature as a text is then applied to the terms of the forces of its production, of

⁹ Brecht was also an influential and favourite thinker of Ernts Bloch, György Lukács, and Walter Benjamin. See Adorno et al., *Aesthetics and Politics* (London and New York: Verso, 2007).

its trajectory as a discursive object, or of the way that it plays with meaning through its trajectory as a linguistic object. But in all cases of approach, the political state of things continually amounts changes over time, and so too do the discussions and definitions attributed to aesthetics. While we have now been showing the importance of periodical convention in the movements of aesthetics, this is something that should be placed in contradistinction to the more localized sense of historicity that we earlier put forward. Still, the idea being paired with it here, that definitions of aesthetics are always informed by a broader philosophical interest, is already one that is not a sudden occurrence. We can read into the way that Plato addresses the role of art in his *Republic*. Overall, the discussion is spent on the question of how to organize a good city, and in order to establish the good a great emphasis is placed upon the importance of education. The result of this focus is an outline of curricula that ought to be provided from childhood, so that the citizens of a city might grow into proper individuals that may best participate in their community. In order to accomplish a good city, there are no meaningful roles afforded to the production of art—rather, its imitation of the world produces an undesirable falseness. There is no place, then, for an artist to function in the city that Plato designs (Plato, 1991: 279-285). While a cabinet-maker builds appearances in the world that are based upon the ideal form of a cabinet, their imitative construction is one of a first-order, because they are at least trying to match the form of a cabinet. For an artist who might make a painting of a cabinet, they are only copying an appearance, and are therefore making an impure image of a form. Not only this, but art, according to Plato, is an illusion that draws a person away from his/her rational impulses (1991: 286). If the best city is to be established, which is the goal of the dialogue of the *Republic*, its citizens must be educated towards rationality so as to best contribute to the city. For him, art causes a degeneration in its citizens, and so the artist is not thought to be a contributing participant in the city.

So, we can see that the history of aesthetics and the lines of thought which prod it along are imbued with the surrounding political constructions of society. However, both Rancière's thought and the modification that we are suggesting here move away from the habits of theorizing the “sociology of literature.” Such a distinction occurs, despite that the sociology of literature does bear some initial resemblance: in accordance with

Rancière, the foundations of communities are aesthetic, in the way that meaning is expressed and in the valuations given to some things over others. Subsequently, the objects, events, and spaces to which art gives reference will only ever be in accordance with the historicity of that same kind of aesthetic production which distributes the possibilities of experience. However, where this tends to be the limit of thinking literature sociologically, it should be emphasized that this approach should not depress the importance of thinking about politics and aesthetics; rather, taking external factors into account solidifies the historical as an integral aspect of engaging with the possibilities of experience as are determined by a community. This integrity has come closest to revealing itself through the last several centuries, in this period that is described by Rancière as the aesthetic regime. Thinking the aesthetics of politics provides an opportunity to think through the politics of aesthetics in a substantive way. And, importantly, this would not be solely fashioned by the mouldings of an aesthetic theory, but by the functions of the work itself.

Although the politics of aesthetics resists a submission to sociology, by describing the political in a way that arrives from the historical we are suggesting a kind of bridge between these two theoretical stances. The purpose of doing so is to better understand how the moment of politics comes about, as well as how it directs itself. For, as Todd May suggests, the presupposition of equality “must arise within the particular situation of political expression; otherwise it becomes a claim placed upon those who are dominated, doubling rather than lifting their domination” (May, 2007: 137-138). The effects of the politics of aesthetics are always dependent upon the status that a community assigns to art and how the work of art reaches beyond the bounds of that status. It is in the way that a work of art reaches beyond its status, in its redistribution of the sensible, that we are making an important distinction from sociology. This brings a germane point: that there is then a doubly productive history in the work, both in the individuality of its production, and in the opportunity for its political reception that is afforded to it by the distribution of the sensible. Such a point is already posited in various ways by aesthetic theorists such as Fredric Jameson, Theodor Adorno, and Badiou, who describe the work of art as having a doubled existence, in which it desires to cross between both the spheres of art and of life. Rancière thinks similarly, saying that “Art's situation today might actually

constitute one specific form of a much more general relationship that exists between the autonomy of the spaces reserved for art and its apparent contrary: art's involvement in constituting forms of common life" (Rancière, 2009b: 26). While in the aesthetic regime there is certainly a politics of aesthetics to be recognized, what I want to emphasize is that the changes that take place for it are largely because the distribution of the sensible enables such a change. This opens up a finer understanding of the relation between the forces of the politics of aesthetics and the political in general as it occurs in redistributing the sensible.

1.4 The Blend of Experience

A frequently cited statement by Adorno reads that "important art works constantly divulge new layers; they age, grow cold, and die" (Adorno, 1997: 4). The processes that affect the divulgence and eventual death of an art work are due to the dependency of its involvement with the life outside of it: "Art and artworks are perishable, not simply because by their heteronomy they are dependent, but because right into the smallest detail of their autonomy, which sanctions the socially determined splitting off of spirit by the division of labor, they are not only art but something foreign and opposed to it. Admixed with art's own concept is the ferment of its own abolition" (1997: 5). The nature of art is such that it tires, outlasted by the changes in sensibilities that are made by the redistributions of the political. Not only this, but the social position of aesthetic objects themselves change just as political possibilities do. Yet, what can be drawn from the "constant divulgence" of art works is that even in dying they are divulging the conditions of a world that deems them to be dead. The layers of an art work are not revealed on its own or for itself. The transitions that it goes through are each dependent on the state of the world within which it is encapsulated. So, as a matter of course, the initial shock of a work of art might fade out. But, initially, there are two co-incidental occurrences: 1) new political distributions enable the possibility for new spaces for art; and, 2) new spaces of possibility allow the production of aesthetics to redefine itself from within. What this means is that in the politics of aesthetics there is a condition of mutual struggle between the production of aesthetics and the way that aesthetics is received.

The movements of such a struggle result to point out that in both a distribution of the sensible and in the politics of aesthetics which interrupts such a distribution, what mutually influences their circumstances are the specific forces of history. History is then also an important component that informs the coming of new distributions of the sensible. The unfolding of a future possibility for politics falls out of what had preceded, an innovation of ways of knowing which will likewise have come from their own precedent, and on, as a series of distinct interruptions. So the political possibilities that might be relayed by a work of art are dependent upon the histories which have informed the world into which it is produced, as well as the field of aesthetics of which it is a part. But now, if we think into that future, what happens to the work that makes reference to a world which no longer exists? Is it possible for a work that has aged, gone cold, and died to be revived if the state of a world is organized in some certain way? The world of eighteenth century France, of nineteenth century Britain, or of Western Europe in the 1930s, is a world which was organized under a terrific number of different precepts than a world which some might see about themselves today. William Faulkner used much of his literature to give a fictional depiction of Yoknapatawpha County in a post-emancipation Mississippi, where many of the characters centered upon were formerly prominent plantation owners whose families find themselves in an existential struggle once the world upon which their sense of subjectivity had relied is lost. Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, set in the early nineteenth century, is a novel which deviated from the contemporary morals of the author's society regarding love and the institution of marriage and, along with the rest of the Brontë's works, helped to form a new and important regard for female authorship at the time. With the setting, the date of publication, the character types, and the syntax and grammar of their language, these works may not seem to carry the same force of political possibility as they once did. This recognition is an important problem that can be brought to bear against Rancière's work on aesthetics thus far. He convincingly discusses how the style of Flaubert's and Proust's writings presented new possibilities for the distribution of the sensible that was currently in place upon their production. He sees in their work a politicization of narrative construction where, rather than making a story about kings and infallible heroes, their narrative modes operate democratically. Proust spends lengthy pieces of time describing the minute objects that

might fill a room and the small aspects that compose a personality, rather than granting a hierarchy of importance to a few key elements or the progression of his protagonist. The disinterest of description grants an equality to elements of the narrative. Stylistically, its equality reveals for its audience some new possibilities for the distribution of the sensible. However, the politics of works such as Proust's are only discussed by Rancière in terms of their own moment of production. It was in the trajectory of literary aesthetics that these works offered new possibilities, and where they showed the capabilities of the politics of aesthetics. But their offering, as is given focus by Rancière, was provided at a specific moment in time. As we will see, some thinkers have argued that this missing insight makes Rancière's thoughts too confined and “ahistorical.”¹⁰ So it is very much worth pursuing further how we might include the opportunities for the politics of aesthetics as they might occur across the spans of other spaces and times. This is a problem of the futurity of the politics of aesthetics to which I will return in the next chapter, but would like to briefly point towards it here. The ability that modern aesthetics has to encourage the condition of equality in the distribution of the sensible is important, and is a concept of Rancière's to be pursued. Rancière's conception brings itself under interrogation, however, when we want to think about an aesthetic work outside the immediate time and space of its initial appearance in the world.

1.5 The Production of a Work

We may feel sure in saying that politics and aesthetics would not occur if it were not for the social formations which act as their precedent. Genealogical accounts discuss how the relationship between art and politics has changed over time so as to emphasize the ability that art has now to perform cultural interventions. There are a good number of these accounts, given by Hegel, Jameson, Adorno, Foucault, Rancière, and more. Just as for Plato there was no such thing as a politics of aesthetics because it did not fit his model of politics in his city, the contemporary world is particularly distributed to allow for a politics of aesthetics. But, as should be emphasized, the potential politics of a work of art

¹⁰ For example, see Jean-Luc Nancy's “Rancière and Metaphysics” and Gabriel Rockhill's “The Politics of Aesthetics: Political History and the Hermeneutics of Art”, both of which are published in the collection of essays, *Jacques Rancière: History, Politics, Aesthetics*.

occur because the work fits the organization of its possibility. The two parallel each other, and the politics of a work are activated. Before the moment of instituting its politics, there was no such possibility. This is what Rancière works to point out as the case in past historical regimes.¹¹ In the ethical regime of Plato, there was no space afforded to aesthetics to have any kind of political role. In the representative regime, art was only devoted to the likes of heroes and kings, securing the hierarchy of their communities and denying any recognition of the commonplace. As new ways of doing and knowing are uncovered, so also occurs a change in the ways that art is made and how it is thought. Changes in ways of doing and knowing can come about through a number of ways, formed by the spoken words of those who have no part, and as a result of technological, cultural, and individual innovations, as revolutions that can move either quickly or slowly, and which can be a result of complex spatial and temporal criss-crossing. What is important to make note of is that an aesthetic work might not itself change: we still have the words of *Antigone*, of *Madame Bovary*, of *A Season in Hell*. These might stay the same, but the travel of an innovation in the politics of aesthetics means that it can always land in a new way when it arrives in different places and times, and can then always take on a new appearance and result in the “shock” of a new political effect. Therefore, the close relation that aesthetics has to the state of the political is worth its emphasis, but it is a relationship where aesthetics is only ever able to determine itself under a particular distribution of the sensible, not merely in accordance with a broad historical regime. To base the potentiality of politics on the generality of a regime is to neglect the particularities of the work of art and of the community in which it exists. Now, in the aesthetic regime of art, the politics of aesthetics is something that does actually exist. Yet, we still cannot say that this opening up has occurred of its own volition.

The importance of this point is not confined only to Rancière's work, but can also be sent towards other concepts of literature and its relation to the political. I have been using the words innovation, invention, or inventiveness, in a way that should be differentiated from

¹¹ Rancière's concepts of the regimes of art are returned to in many of his works, but for a concise explanation see *The Politics of Aesthetics* (2004), pp. 20-4.

the notion of “creation” that functions within other theoretical discussions that would depict a mutual sense between aesthetics and politics. In them, creation is too likened towards the volition of self-movement that would be located in a pure form of authorship, or towards genius and the notion that an aesthetic work contains no derivation from its surroundings. The idea of “creation” is one promoted by literary theorist Derek Attridge, particularly in his book *The Singularity of Literature*. “My interest,” says Attridge, “is in a structural, sequential relation between two states, the nonexistence and the existence within a culture of a particular kind of entity” (Attridge, 2004:18). While Attridge’s arguments are valuable, in that they promote the collaborative production of meaning that happens through the writer and their relation to a community—linked as well through the experience of reading a work of literature—this production of meaning does not happen as creation, a force all on its own and from out of nowhere. The concept of creation, its notion of “something from nothing,” does not work well when, of course, there is always a “something” or “somethings” that feed into the production and subsequent meaning of a work. This “something” is the precedent of experience, the force of a distribution of the sensible. What is important to recognize is that such a precedent is an historical condition, even if it is one that may be only latently present, or one that may be still active. It is an important task to historicize the present, as Jameson famously exclaims. And in doing so, what historicization reveals is that there is no thing as an aesthetic “creation,” an object that exists entirely beyond the circumstances of its production. A work is indeed *produced*. This is not to say that there is always an absolutely deducible “something” that historically feeds into the work itself. In fact, even more important than saying that a work is produced is to recognize that there may always be something indeducible in its production. Politics always carries a kind of indeducibility and undecidability in its cases, because “politics” is essentially an activity that reaches beyond a presently appearing existence. But there is at least a circumstantiation that would need to be noted as a reminder that a work is not simply created. As I will discuss later in the third chapter of this discussion, there are many lines of circuitry that may cultivate the work of reading an aesthetic object—in the object itself, in its reader, and in what the reader might already have learned about the production of a work of art and its movement in a community. But because there are always these available factors, it would

not be right to think of the collaborative experience of a reader and an aesthetic object as a kind of creation. By choosing instead to think in terms of invention rather than of creation, I am allowing the recognition that, as political disruptions, inventiveness and innovation make use of existing materials and present them in new ways so as to form new possibilities.

As we move further with this, though, it bears a significant implication for the understanding of the politics of art and the aesthetic object. Both the reliance an aesthetic object has on history for its political possibilities as well as its ability to intervene in the world within which it exists would mean that it is not a “text” but a “work.” The use of the term “text” is commonplace in criticism, but does not bear the connotations that would best be afforded to understanding the politics of aesthetics in the way it is being presented here. There is a slightly tautological circularity that occurs in much of contemporary criticism, where the givenness of a text is first assumed at the outset of its study, and the criticism that follows it is to show just how, indeed, the object exists as a text. The object, as a text, is thought to exist discursively, in that it matches the economies and methods of discourse within which it sits. The text is then a fabric among a much wider fabric, woven into the structural textures of a larger discourse. This process actually implicates society and its constructions as having much more importance than the aesthetic object itself. But if we do want to fully pursue an understanding of the politics of aesthetics, then we are not able to do so by thinking in terms of the text. A “text” does not bear any political implications in itself if it only says what discourse prescribes as a thing that is able to be said. The text, with the connotations it carries, is unable to show the possibilities for rupture to produce a new distribution of the sensible.

This is all quite distinct from the separation between work and text that is made by Roland Barthes in his essay “From Work to Text,” where his distinctions have held a great deal of influence since his writing them. While the work may indeed be described in the way that he does so, as “a fragment of substance” (Barthes, 1977: 156), his distinguishing this from the text as “a methodological field” (1977: 157) does not suit the way that I am seeking to describe the work. If the text “is that which goes to the limit of the rules of enunciation” (ibid.), I would rather position the work as that which actually

presses past the rules of enunciation, setting new limits and approaching new rules of enunciation. The work is a fragment (in a sense), but it is not its own bounded object. Rather, the work does exist as a part of a broader methodological field, a field that extends beyond its temporality: to the past, as that which informs its production, and to the future, as that which informs the reach of its political possibilities. As such, it is one which is present and available for excavation to show just how the work has worked, or is working still.

What I mean, then, by saying “the work” would actually carry several layers for discernment. The work is first the object itself: a work of literature, or of theatre, a painting, an installation, a piece of music (it is the materiality of the object by which Barthes defines the work, which is also the source of his distinction). But, as I would like to point out, the work of art is called so because the work works. That is, when the aesthetic object is political, it does something. More directly: its political work unveils new possibilities. To describe the meaning of a work would be to show how it works, and to discern both the qualities that it has and the circumstances with which it intervenes in order to do so. And the act of description and discernment is itself an act of work—as if to show that the work of the aesthetic object is then also to spark the availability of its definition as such. If we hope to think about aesthetics as having a disclosed politics, then we would inadvertently be disabling those possibilities with the term “text.” A text does not act, but is woven, passively, among a broader fabric where the critic wishes to place it. A text is passive in this sense, because its textuality is found in its immateriality, in the contexts that surround it, and so it is better to think in terms of the work if we are to allow for the best understanding of the politics of aesthetics. The work of art can be both material and immaterial, in accordance with the layering of its substantiality. Of course, the sense of “work” being used here does not quite fit the conventional understanding of the term. Work, as Rancière describes it, has an “ordinariness” to it that is in common with a distribution of the sensible, while politics and aesthetics have an “exceptionality” to them (Rancière, 2004: 42). There is usually a decisiveness set within the concept work, where its activity does not extricate itself from the circumstances of production. If we

could uncover a new term for our discussion then, it might be the “non-work.”¹² The politics of the aesthetic object works in the exceptionality of its disagreement. Despite that it is produced within a distribution of the sensible, the work is such that it extends beyond itself and that distribution. The history in a work is a determinant for its possibilities, but the work exists outside of ordinariness because its futurity is indecisive, its work is one of undecidability.

Describing the work in this way (whether in politics or in aesthetics) brings together the constructing forces of distribution and the interruption of dissensus. What we have seen in much of contemporary political philosophy, including the work of Rancière, is that politics is future-oriented. Politics reaches towards new languages of inclusion for those outcast, outnumbered, or uncared for. The same orientation is at work in aesthetics as well. The interruption of the political is made with a reach forward—but what should be most surely understood is that politics is an interruption with an undecidable reach. The undecidability of politics is conceptualized now out of the results of the violence of the twentieth century. The struggle to conceive of a politics following the Holocaust, the Cultural Revolution, May 1968, imperfections of communist implementation and the transfer of philosophical focus to democracy have influenced the remodelling of the concept of politics so as to be described in a way that allows for the freedom of another, and in a way that is then indeterminate in its occurrences. In certain forms of aesthetics, too, such as Italian Futurism in the 1910s or Situationism in the 1960s, an orientation toward the future is so prescriptive that it undoes its own attempts at being political. The force of demanding a specific future disallows any possibility for alternative manners of thinking—which, if we return once more to Rancière, is not in accordance with a politics that is only ever determined towards the condition of equality. So, while so far we have indeed been thinking in terms of the weight that history has on the production of the politics of aesthetics, we are doing so with the recognition that politics is a way of

¹² The crowding of terminology must also be recognized here. The notion of “non-work” has actually been opened up already, including a usage in Montag's article mentioned earlier. Here, the term might appear to bear a likeness to the concept of “inoperativity” in Jean-Luc Nancy or the “unavowable” in Maurice Blanchot—yet this discussion wants to be able to use it with reference to the specific aesthetic object.

reaching forward, beyond the circumstances of its production. The struggle for definition in relating politics and art over the last century could well be described as a struggle over how this “reaching forward” ought to operate. To avoid a prescriptive aesthetics, and to maintain the political aspects of the aesthetic, means to hold on to the history of its production. In doing so, it refrains from attempting a precise demand of the future towards which it sends its reach. Allowing for history to tell itself into the politics of aesthetics means still to allow the aspects of its futurity to remain undecidable. This is because undecidability is a requisite of politics. Along with its aspects of futurity, politics has been described over the last decades in terms of *resistance*. Rather than undermine dominance by overtaking it, those who are uncaptured enact a political resistance against their exclusion through an activity of interrupting the conventions of understanding in the name of being counted or enumerated. This is why prescriptive art, like a prescriptive *partage*, cannot fall under the definition of the political. As we have seen, this point takes a place in Rancière’s thought as well, in resistance as disidentification to show new ways of being. But, though undecidable, new ways of being can only be shown in terms of a departure from what is and has been already existent. “Possibility” is a concept determined in Rancière’s work to operate both in terms of the present distribution of the sensible as well as what could be. A certain distribution of the sensible might contain in itself the potential for a new political intervention, however latent the potential might be. This is where we would find that the political is ultimately a matter of historicity, and is an element that would both help to inform the more crucial and potent points of Rancière’s work, in addition to providing an answer to at least a few of his critics. Even in saying so, however, it is also helpful to recognize that, while the politics of aesthetics might work in accordance with the possibilities that lie within a distribution of the sensible, and might then work so as to reveal the possibilities of redistribution, the spark of politics is always conditional, and it can always diminish. This likelihood is also a necessary aspect of a work of art. Even in the way that politics is conducted with a reach forward, it is unable to determine how precisely a new *partage* might be distributed, and whether it might even have a part in that new distribution. Where once an aesthetic work drew a great change, it may eventually come to seem quite agreeable, as peaceful or even antiquated art. So, depending upon the distribution of the sensible, the known ways of

doing, saying, and thinking, there may well be a work that does not work. A certain politics will be baffled and muted. Although it is given a rather brief allusion, this is a point that Rancière's thought seems to accord. He also discusses the politics of aesthetics in terms of possibilities, rather than equating it to politics proper. "[T]here is no criterion for establishing an appropriate correlation between the politics of aesthetics and the aesthetics of politics," he writes. "It is the state of politics that decides that Dix's paintings in the 1920s, 'populist' films by Renoir, Duvivier or Carne in the 1930s, or films by Cimino and Scorsese in the 1980s appear to harbor a political critique or appear, on the contrary, to be suited to an apolitical outlook on the irreducible chaos of human affairs or the picturesque poetry of social differences" (Rancière, 2004: 62). Sometimes, possibilities are not recognized in a work, or are an opportunity that is not fit to be shown. Still, the rootedness in contingency of politics is brought out of the movements of history that make a state of the world, but this aspect of the rootedness of possibility is something that appears to be missing through much of Rancière's writing, and it the present task has been to bring this into emphasis. Although it is indeed "the state of politics that decides" a possibility, as is said in this passage, it is the historicity of a state of politics that is truly the deciding factor. By discussing the politics of literature analogically, the dependency that aesthetics has on the state of politics is one that Rancière has recognized, but is one that he spends little time interrogating. His reinvigoration of conversation regarding the relationship between politics and aesthetics is most welcome, though his thoughts are missing the important role that history has in the political.

If the distribution of the sensible is such that it enables the politics of an aesthetic work, then for a work to take hold it must cast itself into a future that is yet unknown. But what happens as well is that the materials with which it sends itself are derived from those that already historically exist. This is a curious necessity of the politics of aesthetics—decided upon by its historicity, and made undecidable in its futurity.

Chapter 2

2 Jacques Rancière and the History of the Work

In 1856, Gustave Flaubert's novel *Madame Bovary* was first published in serial form to a widely varied, though mostly uproarious, reception.¹³ The work is, in a skeletal description, about a young woman, Emma Bovary, a farmer's daughter who meets a country doctor. The two are married, but Emma takes on a series of extramarital affairs in search of an emotional connection or a physical rush, or in the hopes of fulfilling a desire for a life of luxury. Without becoming actually satisfied by any of her affairs, she commits suicide. According to Rancière, the novel had a deeply political effect, not simply for the way that its controversial content mixed in a resistant manner with the structure of the society that received it, but for the *style* in which Flaubert had written the narrative. He argues that the works of Flaubert were a primary usher for the aesthetic regime of art by democratizing the mode of narrative observation in his writing, allowing focus to all the objects which furnish each of the spaces being represented, and withdrawing from hierarchical modes of narration that were previously common to the writing of works in accordance with the representational regime. Rancière writes that “style is entirely contained within the ‘conception of the subject’” (Rancière, 2011a: 115) and, in the style of Flaubert's writing, the subject is conceived among a broader distribution of objects. Until Flaubert, Rancière argues, writing and art had a much different, hierarchical mode of representation by which the subject is conceived, and the democratization of representation in his writing served to undo that hierarchy. As the style that directs the understandings to be shared in the work of *Madame Bovary* this is, in brief, its politics as a work of literature. This work is a favourite of Rancière's examples, as it lends itself nicely to the way that he situates the politics of aesthetics. However, his view of aesthetics and his derivation of it from a work such as *Madame*

¹³ The novel was also published as a single volume the following year, in 1857.

Bovary greatly differs from the way that many other critics would read Flaubert's work. Rancière is concerned with the style of a work and, through that, with how *Madame Bovary* “blurs the distinction between the world of art and the world of prosaic life by making any subject equivalent to any other” (Rancière, 2011b: 54). But contemporary thought to Flaubert wanted to emphasize the work as an object existing autonomously from life. As Frances Ferguson writes, it was through a conception of autonomy that Flaubert's judicial case for obscenity was dismissed: “the judge essentially affirmed that the novel had developed such internal consistency that no one would take its words as if they meant what they might outside of its pages” (Ferguson, 2004: 101). The obscenity trial was made due to the way that the novel breached the sensibilities of society, which does show its literary involvement in life. Yet, the way that Rancière situates its involvement, by emphasizing style, effectively removes the work from the duration of the sphere of life. What I will show here is that by limiting the politics of aesthetics to style, rather than including the organization of content or form, Rancière sets himself the problem of thinking at a distance from the habits of aesthetic criticism, both as they were at the time of Flaubert's writing and as they are contemporary to himself. By attributing the politics of aesthetics in such a particular way to the element of style, Rancière misses the opportunity to think of how the politics of a work are affected by its temporal traversals. Since history is a fundamentally informing feature of the political, it is worth an attempt to pick up such an opportunity for including it as a primary means to understanding a work of literature, and so also to bring this feature of history towards the style of a work.

2.1 Sense or Criticism

Contemporary literary criticism, near to the writing of this discussion, is mostly concerned with what is outside a work and how that informs what is inside it. Such a critical perspective can be found in the influential work of Terry Eagleton's *The Event of Literature*,¹⁴ Patricia Waugh's *Metafiction*,¹⁵ and bell hooks's “Postmodern Blackness.”¹⁶

¹⁴ “Perhaps literature is definable not according to whether it is fictional or 'imaginative,' but because it uses language in peculiar ways. [...] Literature transforms and intensifies ordinary language, deviates systematically from everyday speech.” (Eagleton, 1996: 2)

That art not only reflects life but also strategically intervenes in it is a view also generally shared by most literary critics today, and especially those who work relatively close to the Marxist tradition of literary criticism (such as Eagleton, Fredric Jameson, or S.S. Praver, including Rancière as well). In this period of Western modernity, having its beginning in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the aesthetic may be considered to have a share in the political as a process of discursively developing and reorganizing a world of sensible experience. Within that idea, Michel Foucault's archaeological studies of modern processes of knowledge and language have had a tremendous effect on literary criticism over the last few decades. In *The Order of Things*, Foucault identifies the liberation of language from Classical orders of representation. And the historical location of a Classical age that Foucault offers is also identified throughout the work of Jacques Rancière in his division of aesthetic regimes. As Foucault writes,

The ever more complete preservation of what was written, the establishment of archives, then of filing systems for them, the reorganization of libraries, the drawing up of catalogues, indexes, and inventories, all these things represent, at the end of the Classical age, not so much a new sensitivity to time, to its past, to the density of history, as a way of introducing into the language already imprinted on things, and into the traces it has left, an order of the same type as that which was being established between living creatures. And it is in this classified time, in this squared and spatialized development, that historians of the nineteenth century were to undertake the creation of a history that could at last be 'true'—in other

¹⁵ “The simple notion that language passively reflects a coherent, meaningful, and 'objective' world is no longer tenable. Language is an independent, self-contained system which generates its own 'meanings.' Its relationship to the phenomenal world is highly complex, problematic and regulated by convention. 'Meta' terms, therefore, are required in order to explore the relationship between this arbitrary linguistic system and the world to which it apparently refers. In fiction they are required in order to explore the relationship between the world of the fiction and the world outside the fiction.” (Waugh, 1984: 3)

¹⁶ “If radical postmodernist thinking is to have a transformative impact, then a critical break with the notion of 'authority' as 'mastery over' must not simply be a rhetorical device. It must be reflected in habits of being, including styles of writing as well as chosen subject matter.” (hooks 1990)

words, liberated from Classical rationality, from its ordering and theodicy: a history restored to the irruptive violence of time. (Foucault, 1973: 132)

This new function of order in understanding, which thinks upon itself in a mode of swift and provocative unpredictability in a way that undoes classical orders of representation, proceeds from the outset that is identified by figures like Foucault and Rancière, and is also transferred to the kinds of perspectives held by critics of modernist aesthetics over the last century. Aesthetics pressed beyond the confines of its restrictive definition, where it was made only to represent the constructed hierarchies of the world. This may be particularly seen in Peter Burger's pillar work, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, where he writes:

The European avant-garde movements can be defined as an attack on the status of art in bourgeois society. What is negated is not an earlier form of art (a style) but art as an institution that is unassociated with the life praxis of men. When the avant-gardistes demand that art become practical once again, they do not mean that the contents of works of art should be socially significant. The demand is not raised at the level of the contents of individual works. Rather, it directs itself to the way art functions in society, a process that does as much to determine the effect that works have as does the particular content. (Burger, 1984: 255)

Fredric Jameson also writes in his description of modernity that it would in turn “describe the way ‘modern’ people feel about themselves; the word would seem to have something to do not with the products (either cultural or industrial) but with the producers and the consumers, and how they feel either producing the products or living among them” (Jameson, 1991: 310). The upset of representation that is discussed in both cultural and aesthetic criticism would not be present without the availability of works to be discussed, such as Duchamp's “manifestations,” as Burger describes them, and the cubists: “A system of representation based on the portrayal of reality, i.e., on the principle that the artistic subject (the artist) must transpose reality, has thus been invalidated. Unlike Duchamp somewhat later, the cubists do not content themselves with merely showing a reality fragment. But they stop short of a total shaping of the pictorial space as a

continuum” (Burger, 1984: 260). This kind of modernist negotiation with preceding systems of representation is often cited by Rancière, as seen in the alchemical works of Rimbaud, the democratizing narratives of Flaubert, and other French writers who, as he describes, shaped *literature* and its practice. Still, much of critical thought regarding modern aesthetics does so with a particular focus on the peculiarity that modern art has in addressing the sphere of life while not quite becoming a 'normal' object within that sphere. The aesthetic work wishes to stand within both art and life.

These thoughts on modern aesthetics are born out of the idea that our modes of everyday experience are themselves designated by the aesthetic distribution of the world. Rather than think of aesthetics in terms of an order of representation, modern aesthetics reflects upon and resists such a mode of representation. Rancière’s ideas of the distribution of the sensible are included in this—what troubles Rancière's theories, however, is that he neglects to recognize that each instantiation of the distribution of the sensible relies on the fact that it is historically situated. The aesthetics of politics is such that it is a force which moves our understanding of our experiences of the world. But the force of politics requires a path of potentiality within a distribution of the sensible for it to occur, and each new potentiality for politics requires a history of preceding distributions that enable the political to occur. This is also the case for the politics of aesthetics. For it to be ignited, the politics of an aesthetic work need to find a place for intervention in a distribution of the sensible. More, when placing into mutual combination the concepts of aesthetics, politics, and history, we must seek an end to the earlier question that was briefly approached: of how, when entered into different spaces and existing so many decades after a work is first produced, the politics of a work of literature may still be at work within its present circumstances. When thought through, this question presents itself as a challenge to Rancière's emphasis on style in the politics of aesthetics. In addition to pointing a critical eye to Rancière's work, the question of the historicity of style and of the politics of aesthetics in general is able to productively press beyond the common situation of contemporary literary criticism. The key points of this emphasis will be returned to below. With it, I do not wish to commit to the ability of a work to carry its politics indefinitely—indeed, Adorno may be quite right when he says that works of art “constantly divulge new layers; they age, grow cold, and die” (Adorno, 1997: 4). What I

intend to do here is to locate in Rancière's scholarship an absence of consideration for the effects of temporality on a work, and how a flow through time might subsequently explore, perhaps, the divulgements of the layers of a work. *Madame Bovary* is certainly one of the more favoured works in Rancière's writing, so we might continue to use it as an example here. With reference to the work, he explains more thoroughly what he means in locating the politics of aesthetics in style:

The writer wants the equivalence to be enclosed in the book. What exactly does this mean? The Flaubertian answer is well known. Since the subject makes no difference between the artistic and the nonartistic, there is only one thing that can make that difference: the writing, which he calls the *style*. Style, he says, is an absolute manner of seeing things. That statement must not be misunderstood. Style does not mean the adornment of language that adds the beauty of the words to the description of common people and prosaic situations. [...] The "absolute manner of seeing things" is the manner of seeing things when you are no longer a personal subject, pursuing individual aims. Consequently, it is the manner of seeing them when they are released from all the ties that make them useful or desirable objects. It is the manner of enjoying sensations as pure sensations, disconnected from the sensorium of ordinary experience. (Rancière, 2008: 241)

This is an important passage, and it gives mention to a few key aspects of the politics of aesthetics. One of them that might be focused on is this last sentence, where the style of sensual enjoyment is toward "pure sensations" in a way that departs from the world. What it means is that there is a certain kind of imaginative feature of the manner of seeing things with equivalence. This would be where its manner of seeing is political, in that it shows the potential for reshaping the distribution of the sensorium of experience. However, I would propose that such an imaginative manner of seeing disregards the preceding imprints of sensibility on experience that make up its historicity. As discussed in the preceding chapter, the political is a matter of innovation, of rearranging the organization of existing materials. The impression of historicity on sensibility keeps the equivalence of sensations tethered to the sensorium of experience.

The absence of the duration of history in Rancière's work comes to the fore through the differentiation he makes between himself and Walter Benjamin. In "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Benjamin argues in favour of the political potential of film (Benjamin, 1969c). As a new mode of aesthetic expression, film is a medium where Benjamin saw the opportunity to create an equalizing political effect for a community. This potential is due to the lack of an origin that a film has, since it is able to be endlessly duplicated through machine processes. But as he speaks of an "aesthetics' at the core of politics that has nothing to do with Benjamin's discussion of the 'aestheticization of politics' specific to the 'ages of the masses,'" (Rancière, 2004: 13), Rancière does not place the politics of aesthetics in terms of machinery, or of the materiality of a work, since it would adhere too closely to the materials of cultural production that might be at hand. But since the style of a work is consistent, so too would be its politics. And so a work of art may be continually studied in terms of its same politics. The implications at hand in this distinction are certainly much more complex than the shape that this initial outline allows, and can already be planted within long held philosophical conversation. One might very quickly say that yes, of course the work has a politics worth studying, particularly as one pairs *Madame Bovary* with a view of the long and perpetually growing series of critical works where it is discussed. This would be to say that the politics of a work of literature are transitive,¹⁷ which would make it inevitably contain a consistent kind of political effectiveness, regardless of its temporal or spatial location. It is a kind of thought that would subscribe to there being a secure, or perhaps even an innate, characteristic of a work which, whenever it is read, brings out its own politics anew. A second perspective is to say that the politics of a work only exist in a way that is dependent upon the way it traverses times and spaces; that is, that the meaning of a work and its political effect are thoroughly dependent upon its surrounding contexts and are a matter of struggle through social construction. These two perspectives shape an important and troubling discrepancy that provides an opportunity to better

¹⁷The materiality of the printed work makes it necessary to undertake an investigation that would be much different from visual art and film, and the materiality specific to their kinds, though such a comparison would no doubt be important for a future enquiry.

understand the intricacies of the politics of aesthetics. I began to point towards this trouble in the previous chapter, and to further an effort in relating together the ideas of history, politics, and aesthetics, all towards an understanding that may best be derived from an understanding of the deep entwining of these ideas. For it is one thing to reach into history for the purposes of recounting and documenting the politics of a work as had occurred at its initial point of production. But this kind of documentation carries within it two movements. One is the affected sensibilities in one's political orientation that are always at work within their method of documentation. One's experience inflects their valuation of a work. When one seeks to excavate the politics of a past work, one does not operate free of their own historical and contextual conditions—they do so with relation to their own sensorium. These conditions, too, feed into the possible aspects that may be perceived of a work and necessarily designate the fields of visibility towards which the politics of a work of literature give potential. One's own sensibilities can be a powerful force by which a work is received, however latent their function. And this reveals the second movement: the question of the continuing politics of a work. What unifies these two movements is the political effectuation of history on the continued negotiation of the understanding of aesthetics. A work accumulates a history that acts upon the present, at which point it is embroiled in, and circumscribed by, the contexts which grow to surround both it and its account.

The first force of perspective described above is the one most commonly followed in contemporary academic practices. Over the past number of decades, the tendency of academic literary studies has been to read a work as it had participated in larger systems of discourse, or how it had worked against structural discourses to reschematize them. For example, Christine Haynes writes less about the work itself and more about the legal trial surrounding *Madame Bovary* to approach her argument, which is that it “seems less to exemplify the author’s emergence as an autonomous subject free from political and social pressures than to reveal his subjection to responsibilities placed upon him by his fellow writers and his ‘accomplices’ in the book trade, as well as by members of the

government” (Haynes, 2005: 21).¹⁸ Scholarship of this sort points toward the immediate reception that Flaubert’s work had within the social contexts in which it was produced. This mode of criticism could rather be described as *literary historicism*: in it, a work is ossified, viewed as if in amber, and its meaning is taken in kind with its contemporary structures of discourse and the ways that the work became immersed in those bygone structures. A literary work is taken as a sign of the past—a “hieroglyph,” as Rancière would call it.

On one hand, literary historicism differs from the way that Rancière describes the politics of aesthetics because it firstly takes into account the direct contexts of production and of reception, while Rancière, in emphasizing style, gives the argument that there is a transitive characteristic in the politics of literature. But on the other hand the two methods bear some intricate similarities worth noting, as we will discuss below. Between the two conceptions of the working politics of literature that were described in the preceding paragraph, and taking into account both Rancière’s thinking about aesthetics and the ways that literature is currently discussed within academic scholarship, we would ask whether the politics of literature offers a momentary political event (a shock), one that is subsequently only ever viewed from some temporal distance, or if it can instead be seen to enact a persistently political redistributive force.

2.2 An Archaeology of the Present

In order to specify our question, we might bring it to approach the way that Rancière discusses the politics of literature, perhaps particularly because much of his discussions have been regarding works that were first produced long into the past, in times and spaces that no longer quite exist. Though this is by no means an exhaustive list, the literary figures that Rancière most often tends toward are French writers, such as Balzac, Hugo, Mallarmé, and Proust, each to varying degrees. So far, *Madame Bovary* has been given a

¹⁸ See also Philippe Corrad’s *Poetics of the New History: French Historical Discourse from Braudel to Chartier* (1992), and Dominick LaCapra’s *Madam Bovary on Trial* (1982) as useful examples of the way that Flaubert’s work is often approached by contemporary scholars.

main focus here among the number of other works that he has discussed. Admittedly, for the purposes of the present conversation the choice of work is rather arbitrary in the question I wish to approach; I am seeking out more generally the role that history has in the political possibilities of a work of literature. Flaubert's work makes a suitable option, however, due to the social and judicial reactions it received, and since it is one with which Rancière has himself engaged. In general, those works that are centered upon in Rancière's writing are largely chosen for the characteristics of style that their writing has in order to define the politics of literature and, certainly, *Madame Bovary* is among them. Although he describes politics as already being aesthetic, Rancière wishes to make clear that the aesthetics of politics are quite separate from the politics of aesthetics. While he has already spent a good deal of his early writing concerned with politics,¹⁹ he endeavours a precise definition in his interview recorded in *The Politics of Aesthetics*. Here, he describes how the political occurs aesthetically, within the distribution and redistribution of the sensible.

The distribution of the sensible reveals who can have a share in what is common to the community based on what they do and on the time and space in which this activity is performed. Having a particular 'occupation' thereby determines the ability or inability to take charge of what is common to the community; it defines what is visible or not. [...] It is a delimitation of spaces and times, of the visible and the invisible, of speech and noise, that simultaneously determines the place and the stakes of politics as a form of experience. 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 spaces and the possibilities of time. (Rancière, 2004: 12-13)

The political redistribution of the sensible occurs in accordance with an antecedent condition of equality. Rancière's thesis is that "the political universal only takes effect in a singularized form. [...] Equality is what I have called a presupposition. It is not, let it be

¹⁹ See especially *Disagreement*, *On the Shores of Politics*, and *Proletarian Nights*.

understood, a founding ontological principle but a condition that only functions when it is put into action. ... Equality is actually the condition required for being able to think politics. However, equality is not, to begin with, political in itself” (2004: 52). When a sensorium prescribes specific ways of being, organizing a *dēmos* with restricted possibilities of doing and saying, it is the effort to establish equality that moves politics to reveal new ways of being, doing, and saying. The fact that this occurs as a redistribution of a given sensorium is the reason why politics is always aesthetic.

Aesthetics, on the other hand, has its own politics (though Rancière does, at times, point out the ways that the politics of aesthetics can come to meet politics). The politics peculiar to literature exist under the term “literature as literature,” which is described in *The Politics of Literature* to have only come about with the onset of the aesthetic regime of art, where the politics of aesthetics actually occurs. Rancière argues that “there is no *one* politics of literature. Such a politics is at least double” (Rancière 2011b: 21). First, the politics of literature causes “the collapse of the system of differences that allowed the social hierarchies to be represented” (ibid.), doing away with the necessity of art in the representative regime to refer to figures in accordance with some syntactical order, such as kings and peasants as the bases of a narrative. In short, it democratizes the narrative, allowing the subjects and objects that fill its spaces to have an equal share. In addition to this side of the politics of literature, however, “it opposes the democracy of writing with a new poetics that invents other rules of appropriateness between the significance of words and the visibility of things. It identifies this poetics with a politics or, rather, a metapolitics, if metapolitics is the right word to describe the attempt to substitute, for the stages and utterances of politics, the laws of a ‘true stage’ that would serve them as a foundation” (ibid.). The double-sidedness of the politics of literature is that, in the first sense, it is concerned with redistributing the social by placing itself into the realm of life, while in the second sense its politics is concerned with itself, literature, *as* literature. In *Aesthetics and its Discontents*, Rancière describes this paradox to be a necessary feature that defines literature as literature: “The politics of art in the aesthetic regime of art, or rather its metapolitics, is determined by this founding paradox: in this regime, art is insofar as it is also non-art, or is something other than art” (Rancière, 2009b: 36). The non-art aspect of art is its connection to the sensible—the world of our everyday

experience—and to the ways that it opens up new ways of being and saying in the world of sensible experience. This is where the politics of literature may be defined, as a matter of unveiling such possibilities. According to Rancière, “what links the practice of art to the question of the common is the constitution, at once material and symbolic, of a specific space-time, of a suspension with respect to the ordinary forms of sensible experience. [...] It is political because of the very distance it takes with respect to these functions, because of the type of space and time that it institutes, and the manner in which it frames time and peoples this space” (2009b: 23). Rancière has devoted a good deal of his writing to discussing different ways that art in the aesthetic regime is capable of instituting new types of space. In *Mute Speech*, he tells of two ways in which the politics of literature can act: “There is the space of representation in which it is drawn in sensuous figures,” for example in the way that Victor Hugo makes stones and cathedrals speak of their particular times, reorganizing the aesthetic space of the city, and there is also “the space of the page where it is identified with the ordinary flow of prose” (Rancière, 2011a: 139). On the page, the politics of literature reveal new ways of saying, resisting syntactical hierarchies of the sentence. In this sense, it is using the idea of Language as a whole to affect the institution of language in the particular. And of Flaubert, he writes that his writing is “a precise formation of literature’s metaphysics.” “By putting the identity of thought and the pebble in the place of the identity of the poem and the cathedral, Flaubert does away with the gap between the poetics of literature and its theology” (2011a: 121). The function of these two manners of the politics of literature serves to show that, unlike the order of the representative regime, there is no absolute order of language or of space. And the hinge upon which the politics of literature swings is the style of the work, in the way that it manipulates and deploys these functions.

Of the various ways that Rancière describes politics—“politics” as it is understood in general, as well as in the specificities of literature, theatre, history, academia, and on²⁰—a common feature to be found throughout is that the form of politics is a matter of

²⁰ For examples of the latter, see *The Names of History*, *The Emancipated Spectator*, and *The Philosopher and His Poor*.

possibility. Possibilities are distributed and redistributed, occurring in concert with conceptions of a sensorium that designates such possibilities. The artist operates as a part of the community in ways that are designated by the regime which shapes and shares the bounds of that community. Therefore, political possibilities of art are enabled in tandem with a distribution of the *dēmos*, and such possibilities have changed depending on which of the three types of the regimes of art is being put into account.

For the purposes of this discussion, the regime that concerns me here is the aesthetic regime. This is the regime where literature as literature occurs, and where the writer of the work, according to Rancière, “is the archaeologist or geologist who gets the mute witnesses of common history to speak. [The politics of literature] is based on deploying a new regime of appropriateness between the significances of words and the visibility of things; on showing the world of prosaic reality as an immense fabric of signs that bear, as written, the history of a time, a civilization or a society” (Rancière, 201b: 15). The writer in the aesthetic regime of art does so with a close engagement with and resistance to history in order to reveal new ways of being, doing, and saying. This act of writing sounds like a radicalized version of the methods of literary historicism, where, rather than the scholarly evaluator, it is the figure of the writer him/herself that seeks to draw out of history and archives the ways that the writer, as an “archaeologist,” might have been able to bear witness to new ways of distributing the sensible through the style of their work. Then, as an archivist, Rancière (and literary historians) looks upon the politics of that work of literature as it was operative in the moment of its production, as a participant in an historical sensorium. However, this seeming version would find itself to be limited. It is one thing to consider the politics of a work in its historical context—in terms of its moment of production and the distribution of the sensible contemporary to it—but it is another to consider the politics of a work while also taking into account the present distributions of one’s own moment of consideration, to be in the same sense an archaeologist of the present. The distinction between the two modes of accounting for the politics of a work of literature (transitive or intransitive, ahistorical or historically bound) is where Rancière may be found to be unusually quiet. If we follow his thought, where literature in the aesthetic regime of art takes on a style of language or of representation that is able to intervene in the distribution of the sensible, then one would think that its

intervention ought to persist, since the style of the work would not change if the work is kept intact. However, as discussed earlier, the politics of a work of art are dependent upon a sensorium that would be ready to receive its politics. And so if a politics of literature is to persist, then the readiness of a sensorium would also need to persist through time, else its politics would fade out and it would indeed only be available to be viewed as a sign of times past. When we say that politics redistributes the sensible, we know that politics changes our understanding of things. With a new redistribution and a new understanding, the political event which brought these about, and which always occurs as an intervention against existing suppositions of understanding, would subsequently become distilled as a part of common sense. The intervening “work” of a work of literature might then cease. But still, the passage of time itself could also open up possibilities for the politics of a work of literature to be newly received. We can describe this as an *aesthetics of time*: time is virtually spaced, it is distributed in concert with a spatial sensorium.²¹ In this way, the politics of literature can be accounted for not only due to its style, but also to the continual accumulation of political contextualizations that have grown to surround it since its initial production—and both of these factors may in fact be considered together, rather than the solely transitive feature of style in the politics of literature that Rancière argues for. This is a delicate dispute, and we should best find our way by thinking it through Rancière’s writing itself. While his ideas are certainly valuable, I would like to offer a helpful approach towards uncovering how the politics of literature can persist or be refurbished beyond the moment of its production and still retain a politics.

2.3 A History of Sense

To reiterate our opening question within the finer contexts of Rancière’s line of thought, the question at stake here is how, with Rancière, to consider the productive treatment of history when engaging, through the present, the politics of a past work of literature, to determine whether the redistributive aesthetics of a work may be taken as a past event or

²¹ As in the previous chapter, I would like to emphasize that this use of the concept of time differs from the account Rancière gives in his work such as *Proletarian Nights*.

a persistent politics. Gabriel Rockhill gives a helpful criticism of this missing aspect of Rancière's thought, describing his approach as an ahistoricism (Rockhill, 2009: 215). In "The Politics of Aesthetics: Political History and the Hermeneutics of Art," Rockhill argues that "[the] fundamental problem with Rancière's approach is that he wants to be able to judge the constituent political forms of a work of art outside of the social struggle over such forms" (2009: 208). Rockhill's is an important criticism to be made, and his assessment of the politics of a past work of literature as requiring a certain hermeneutical approach leans towards a view of history that we may be able to find in Walter Benjamin's writing. For although Rancière often looks at works as they affect a kind of politics (that of stones with speech, or of language), he does not place his considerations in concert with the way that the politics of literature is effected through time. Style is indeed an important feature to consider, but should not be the sole component. Placing the politics of literature in the style of a work seals it within the comprisal of language with which such a style is interacting. However, though the style of a work remains the same so long as the work remains intact, language and its signification of meaning changes across temporalities. We should not make the mistake, however, of arguing that Rancière's insistence on style means that he does not think about temporality at all in his writing. In *The Politics of Aesthetics* he explains that "The aesthetic regime of arts is first of all a new regime for relating to the past. [...] ...it devotes itself to the invention of new forms of life on the basis of an idea of what art *was*, an idea of what art *would have been*" (Rancière, 2004: 25). It is important to portray this relation to the past as a distinct feature of art in the aesthetic regime. "The idea of modernity would like there to be only one meaning and direction in history, whereas the temporality specific to the aesthetic regime of the arts is a co-presence of heterogeneous temporalities" (2004: 26). Although a passage like this one is very near to what we claim to be missing in his writing, it is not something upon which he expands. With these examples, we can see that Rancière thinks of literature as a measure of the way that a history can be told, and as a way to reveal ways to come. Despite statements such as this, though, Rancière does not spend time with the view that modernity has in thinking about temporalities in explicit connection to the politics of aesthetics. Instead, his argument about the ability of literature to provide new ways for thinking about the past seems to be in terms of relating the aesthetic regime of

the arts to the representative regime of the arts. What is particularly missing from his analyses is a discussion of the entrance of the politics of a work of art into subsequent social struggles over its meaning. This may be on account of a potential conflict in the points that he is making, because he also recognizes the necessity of a receptive audience in order for the politics of literature to guarantee itself: “The visibility of a form of expression as an artistic form depends on a historically constituted regime of perception and intelligibility” (2004: 50). The aesthetic regime of art only occurs as a result of the historical redistribution into modernity.

The productive politics of literature as a way of revealing new ways of being seems, in much the same way as we discussed politics, to depend on the desire of the community to already be in place in order to reveal such new ways of being. In other words, the meaning of a work is dependent upon its reception, and the politics of a work of literature may be operative only so long as the society in which it is produced is distributed in such a way as to enable its politics. So, while art under the aesthetic regime provides a new way of thinking about the past, and provides a heterogeneous landscape that mixes history with what could be, the specifics of what is produced by a work is not produced by the work alone; its meaning is contingent upon the possibilities that surround its production and which build about its reception. In this way, history is of the utmost importance to think about in relation to the politics of literature, but these thoughts are missing in Rancière’s work.

Perhaps, then, it is worthwhile to reengage Rancière with some other of Walter Benjamin’s writings to better conceive of the relation that the politics of literature has to time. For while it is so far of little concern in Rancière’s writing, Benjamin on the other hand spends much of his work in thinking about the effects of history. In creating such an engagement, what we are pointing towards here is not something that Rancière himself has seemed to endorse in his own writings. When he does give mention to Benjamin, he refers to the way that Benjamin considers the role that art can play in politics, as he wrote about in “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.” While Benjamin discusses the way that media technology enables new forms of emancipatory politics (specifically in the development of radio technologies and cinematic film), Rancière

argues that it is not in technology itself that politics is enabled, but in the ways that a work of art is able to have a politics through its style. Despite this disagreement, in other of Benjamin's works he bears an intriguing resemblance to some of the arguments that Rancière offers. In "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man," Benjamin discusses the way that the whole of linguistic expression is taken into the specificities of language as a mode of signification in the world. He writes, "The language of this lamp, for example, does not communicate the lamp (for the mental being of the lamp, insofar as it is *communicable*, is by no means the lamp itself), but: the language-lamp, the lamp in communication, the lamp in expression" (Benjamin, 1969a: 316). The objects which furnish spaces are expressed in certain ways, communicated by man *for* man (1969a: 317). Objects and nature speak, they have a voice, but one that is then anthropocentrically manipulated in order to make the object communicable for the particular means of a society. In this way, Benjamin is really describing the way that the distribution of the world is understood aesthetically, through objects and through language. The establishment of the understanding of objects is similar to the mute speech of stones and cathedrals that Rancière describes in the distribution of the sensible. In both cases, with both writers, the world is aestheticized and distributed, made to function through signification by the determinant forces and formations of ways of being. Admittedly, the overall thrust of the later sections of Benjamin's essay contains a religiopolitical tone, which is not found in Rancière's discussion of the ways that objects might speak. But it is not my goal here to argue solely for the similarities that Benjamin's thought has to that of Rancière. Rather, the point of my comparison is to show that, as a consequence to the similarities that can be found with regards to language, it is useful to bring Benjamin's ideas of history towards Rancière's ideas of the politics of aesthetics. In Benjamin's famous "Theses on the Philosophy of History," he spends the length of the work discussing the ways that the past necessarily impacts itself upon the present. For example, he writes: "A chronicler who recites events...acts in accordance with the following truth: nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost for history. To be sure, only a redeemed mankind receives the fullness of its past—which is to say, only for a redeemed mankind has its past become citable in all its moments" (Benjamin, 1969b: 254). As before, we would want to reposition our perspective from the messianism of Benjamin's

passage, and towards the disruption of the political instead. In likening the phrase “a redeemed mankind” to the institution of equality and of new possibilities for being that we see in Rancière (though maintaining caution with regards to the messianic rhetoric in Benjamin), it is worth the attempt to bring Rancière’s concepts of politics into a discussion of time and of the importance of history.

Unfortunately, this attempt has not yet been made, either by Rancière himself or by those whose work intersects with his. Many of those who employ Rancière's work on aesthetics use it to emphasize the ways that a particular work of art is able to intervene in the fields of the everyday. In several special journal issues on Rancière, commenters are primarily focused on offering a sense of how his ideas of the aesthetics of politics functions, or on applying his politics of aesthetics to different types of works. In a special issue of *Parallax* (15.9, 2009), for example, Jodi Dean's “Politics Without Politics” gives a critical consideration to Rancière's criticisms of democracy as a challenge that exposes the actual de-politicization of practicing democracy (Dean, 2009). *Labyrinthe* also published a special issue in 2004, the articles in which are mainly concerned with refining Rancière's terminology, such as the police versus the political, dissensus, and equality. Todd May has written a number of useful articles about Rancière's definition of equality as well as two book-length studies, *The Political Thought of Jacques Rancière: Creating Equality* (2008) and *Contemporary Political Movements and the Thought of Jacques Rancière: Equality in Action* (2010). In his work, May applies Rancière's philosophy to some major political events and movements, in addition to making important comparisons between the way equality is situated in aesthetics or in politics. Of course, these are only several brief examples among many. All such work is of importance, and while there continues to be a swiftly growing conversation surrounding Rancière's work, there have been very few steps towards wondering how his sense of politics needs to recognize the impress of history on the possibility for dissensus. So, with this, it is worth the attempt started earlier, to show and compare the influence that Benjamin’s concepts of history might have in considering the importance of time in the politics of literature. That is, in addition to Benjamin’s ideas of the aestheticization of the world and the way that language (and particularly literature and art) acts as a participant in this aesthetic process, we should also point towards the way that history factors into

the aesthetics of politics. For, just as Rancière is missing an account of the role of history in the politics of literature, such an account is also missing in his discussions of politics. This is despite his remarks in *Parallax*, that much of his writing is inspired by the question, “Where are we now?” (Rancière, 2009a: 114-115)—the answer to which is always informed by a coordination of temporalities. Due to this missing element, we may be able to offer a try at uncovering the importance of the role of history in politics by introducing Henri Bergson’s philosophy of time and experience to Rancière’s theory of politics, even as we have already paired it with Benjamin’s thoughts on aesthetics. As we have shown with Benjamin a way to continue thinking through the politics of aesthetics with regard to history, we may use Bergson to show its importance in the aesthetics of politics. A necessary distinction ought first to be made, however: while Benjamin discusses the importance of history as it impresses upon the present, Bergson discusses the presence of the past *within* the present. And, as we have seen earlier, politics for Rancière is a redistribution of the sensible in the name of revealing alternative ways of being *to come*. Thinking the political in this way releases it from the past so as to send it towards an undecidable future, but political action is much more reliant upon preceding distributions of the sensible in order for it to be enabled. Bergson, then, offers a useful way to think of the role that the past may have in the ignition of the political, particularly due to the rhetoric he holds, which is already an aesthetic one in his use of the image and bodily experience of the world. According to him, the past exists inherently in the present, “constantly pressing forward...so as to insert the largest possible part of itself into the present action” (Bergson, 1988: 168-169). We might consider the political to be dependent on memory as the driver of its event, particularly towards redistributing the sensible along the path of equality if, in “living with a more intense life, contracting, by its memory of immediate experience, a growing number of external moments in its present duration [*durée*], it becomes more capable of creating acts of which the inner determination, spread over as large a multiplicity of the moments of matter as you please, will pass the more easily through the meshes of necessity” (1988: 242-243). To put this back into Rancière’s vocabulary: for the establishment of a sensorium that reveals new ways of being, one would take into its political process an account of the prior restrictions preventing equality and the forms of subjectivization which had previously prevented its

establishment. In surfacing the inequalities of a *demos*, art and politics in the aesthetic regime can indeed provide new ways to think about the past, and it can tend towards the future, but all of this is dependent upon the heterogeneity of the present, where all moments would exist, each pressing into the other.

A useful study of Bergsonian philosophy can be found in Gilles Deleuze's *Bergsonism*, where he writes that "the present *is not*; rather, it is pure becoming, always outside itself. It *is not*, but it acts. Its proper element is not being but the active or the useful. The past, on the other hand, has ceased to act or to be useful. But it has not ceased to be" (Deleuze, 1988: 55). Despite a lack of the persistence of activity by the past, it still exists as a part of the heterogeneity of the present. For the past is always a present that *will have been*: "The past would never be constituted if it had not been constituted first of all, at the same time that it was present. There is here, as it were, a fundamental position of time and also the most profound paradox of memory: The past is 'contemporaneous' with the present that it has been" (1988: 58). What this contemporaneity shapes is a heterogeneity of times that is formative to experience. More than anything, Bergson helps us to see this, the heterogeneity of each moment of time, so that if we consider it with Rancière we can find it necessary to see that the shock of the political, its disruptive redistribution of the sensible, is such that it is woven through with the past. The continued presence of history exists in such a way that informs the distribution that would come, and which politics attempts to reveal. Unfortunately, we lack the space to develop a very deep comparative analysis between Bergson and Rancière—but my primary hope in bringing these two thoughts together here is to put forward a potential answer to the question of the depth of the role that history may have in politics as well as in aesthetics.

While the immediate production of a work of literature politically redistributes (or creates a new) sensorium that is contemporaneous to it, we may not be limited only to thinking retrospectively about the political features of a type of literature as hieroglyphs of the politics they may have held during their time of production—that method described earlier as literary historianism. Now, during a time that is separated by decades and centuries from the many of the literary works which Rancière emphasizes, such as Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, and taking into account both Benjamin's and Bergson's

thoughts of the importance of the past, a way of reading into the politics of a past work of literature that differs from the current methods of academic criticism would be necessitated. Rancière's work on the politics of aesthetics may not very well be strictly described as literary theory or criticism, but the weight of his concepts would need to hold as a model for critical approach. If we want to agree with Rancière about the way that the politics of literature can intervene in the distribution of the sensible, while showing that it is necessary for this politics be transferred from an ahistorical, transitive view to one that is embedded in history, we would have to receive a work of literature in such a way as to take into account the affective politics it has temporally accumulated into the present moment of reading. To avoid reading a work as an ossified object of the past, one would have to take into account whether or not the politics of a work still reveal a redistributive force, or if that force has indeed faded out over time. The politics of a work of literature are very likely to fade if defined only by its style. As a result, Rancière's ahistorical conceptions of aesthetics would benefit from a retooling that is more sensitive to temporality. Alternatively, and in addition to that criticism, if a present sensorium is distributed in such a way as to continue receiving the politics of a work of literature, then present interventions should also need to be taken into account due to the inevitable changes in the language of signification, in addition to the political effects the work may have had when it was first produced. Without accounting for these possibilities both Rancière, in his ahistoricism, and current academic methods, in their ossifying historicism, create an account of the politics of literature *in the face of time*, ignoring its formative necessity in thinking the possibilities of the political.

The trouble that we have been hoping to solve here, to phrase it with more precision, has to do with a hermeneutics of history. More precisely: the problem arises in this way in Rancière's writing because of a distinct verticality in the way that he describes the political distribution of a sensorium.²² The political is a clear cut in time, but as we see in

²² "Vertically" here is with reference to temporality. The vocabulary differs from the occasions that Rancière discusses the political as a horizontal redistribution of the sensible as a matter of destabilizing existing hierarchies.

both Benjamin and Bergson, the political moment is always imbued with the past, just as it leans towards new possibilities to come in the future. As well, politics is a momentary redistribution of the sensible, one which defines new ways of being, saying, and doing, until, of course, a new act of politics that would again redistribute ways of being as a condition of equality. The measure of politics, then, is in the undecidability of its moment. But, as with art, we should not think of this to be occurring sequentially, where each redistribution occurs wholly anew. Instead, the political redistribution that would occur in the present should be reconsidered for its dependence on what might precede it. Since Rancière considers equality, not as an ontological category but as a condition, the “conditioning” of equality is one that happens out of the common sense understandings found in everyday experience. And the understanding of experience is reliant upon a history of sense. Emphasizing the importance of history in schematizing the political does not by any means dismantle the importance of considering politics as it is discussed in the work of Rancière. Rather, it may be helpful towards expanding both Rancière’s aesthetics of politics and the politics of aesthetics.

Chapter 3

3 The Remains of Possibility

With much of the criticism given to Rancière's work being directed towards his concepts and method, there is a resulting confusion about how, exactly, to connect the theoretical potential of politics and aesthetics with their understanding and their application—and how, if possible, to do so in a way that remains particular to how Rancière would address these topics. This sense of confusion is a particular effect of describing Rancière's politics as “ahistorical,” as is said by Badiou, Nancy, and Rockhill. The problem is also given a direct question by Martin MacQuillan in his essay “Paul de Man and Art History I: Modernity, Aesthetics and Community in Jacques Rancière.” In it, he asks, What can we do with Rancière's work (MacQuillan, 2011)? This is a question that we began to lean towards in the previous chapter, in wondering how Rancière's politics of aesthetics can be considered as a model for approaching literature. Following from that, the question of “What can we do?” is one that we should now set ourselves towards answering. Thus far, the critical object of this discussion has been to bring the concepts of politics and aesthetics in Rancière's work towards the conditions of historical experience. As we bring this topic further, we will need to continue emphasizing such an importance, but will do so by thinking through some aspects of Rancière's work that we have not yet approached. Since, as we have mentioned earlier, the possibilities of the political are not only reliant upon the circumstances in which it may be produced but also on those in which politics is received, it is necessary for us to discuss this latter aspect just as fully as the first. The political occurs between multiple ways of doing, saying, and being as an interruption in a distribution of the sensible, and so far we have kept to discussing the political in terms of how it is produced. Yet, the heterogenization of the sensible at work in politics means that there is also a relation of reception to such an interruption, in addition to that of production. What we will now turn towards, then, is the position of the recipient of the political. The way that we will situate the relations between the historical and the political here will therefore be to place the effects of historical experience as the tools of a split, twofold kind of education: one of learning and unlearning a relationship to a distribution

of the sensible so that the possibility of its redistribution may be made available. While we might want to situate politics as occurring between a potential space of the political (one of production) and an existent space of the police (one of reception), we will here be taking a slightly different approach. To describe the position of one who would receive the possibilities of the political, we will do so through an alignment with Rancière's writing on education and spectatorship, in addition to the emphases of history that have already been made in the present discussion. In works such as *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* and *The Emancipated Spectator*, Rancière discusses education and spectatorship in terms of an emancipation from a relation of mastery over whomever is their subject. Instead, the student or the spectator, as audience to the presentation of a way of knowing, should be understood to already share the capacity to take up new ways of knowing. As he writes, emancipation “begins when we understand that viewing is also an action that confirms or transforms this distribution of positions. The spectator also acts, like the pupil or scholar. She observes, selects, compares, interprets” (Rancière, 2009c: 13). It is that position of activity which will be approached here. As we have done earlier, this discussion will continue to move through these thoughts with respect both to the political and to the politics of literature. What we will argue here is that the question of what to do with Rancière's work cannot be answered as a matter of prescription. Instead, an education toward the political is one of undecidability, conditioning possibilities rather than determining ends.

Rancière himself has written that he would wish to clarify the furrowed scrutiny of his work: to “give some clues...as a tool for what is more relevant: trying to reframe the categories through which we grasp the state of politics and the state of art, and through which we understand their genealogy” (Rancière, 2005: 13). His attempt at offering a “tool” is made within the lines of how he orients the political, where he does not wish to actually prescribe a concrete discourse of activity by which one should be made to subscribe. However, by offering the intent of his clarifications in accordance with his own concepts, he has come under further criticism, particularly from Alain Badiou. According to Badiou,

It poses a false dilemma between the assumption of the figure of the master and that of anarchy, where knowledge and nonknowledge are equivalent in the capacity of life. If everyone educates everyone else, then no one educates anyone. This is a canonic example of the struggle on two fronts. We neither accept the knowing master nor the inconsistent multiple of spontaneous knowledge. The struggle continues against the university and the party, but also against the spontaneous vitalists; the partisans of the pure movement or what [Antonio] Negri refers to as “the multitude.” The new conception of the relation between knowledge and politics neither affirms the vision of distinct parties, which is despotic, nor the anarchist vision, which is at the service of opinion; it remains more or less merely the manipulation of the regime of inequality. In both cases, following Rancière’s vocabulary, the polis dissolves under the police. (Badiou, 2009: 49)

That Badiou and MacQuillan may be so stymied is understandable if they are demanding a clear account from Rancière as to the practicability of his writing. Nevertheless, the way that Rancière phrases his statement is quite typical and reflective of how he views education. If it is the case that “Intellectual emancipation is the verification of the equality of intelligence” (Rancière, 2009c: 10), then it would be an unfitting strategy to simply offer directives as to how his work should be employed. We can also apply this to the way that we might describe anew what it is that happens in the practice of reading. This is a needed consideration since, of course, the politics of literature does not occur if a work is not read. By attaching an understanding of the politics of aesthetics to the engagement of an audience to a work of art, we will best enable the use of Rancière’s concepts and further suggest their applicability. The topic of reading literature is not a process that might be explicitly found in Rancière’s own writing, and so it is most helpful for us to think of it along the lines of what Rancière has said about education and spectatorship. Similar to those topics, for the politics of a work of literature to redistribute a sensorium of experience, the order of sensibility for receiving a work is in need of a theoretical model as well.

Despite the familiar presuppositions that we would attribute to it, “reading” might need to carry a specific definition here that is particular to the terms of the politics of literature. Literature is first discerned by Rancière “neither as the art of writing in general nor as a specific state of the language, but as a historical mode of visibility of writing, a specific link between a system of meaning of words and a system of visibility of things” (Rancière, 2011b: 12). As a participant in the making of understanding, then, reading can be a matter of redistributive practice—it is the completion of communicable possibilities as it impresses upon the sensibilities of its audience. This is certainly an idiosyncratic version of reading, but it is in need of such a particular description in order to remain in line with Rancière's insistence upon the rarity of art. If art is rare, then one's engagement with it must only ever be in terms of its rarity. As we have all along been taking the politics of aesthetics with the addition of history, brought by the formative hands of experience, such historicity is itself reliant on a distribution of the sensible that allows it. Up until this point in our conversation, this inflection of history has only been discussed in terms of the activity of the political and the production of a work of art, but the rarity of its production should be matched to the rarity of its reception. To bring about the perspective of one who would receive the politics of literature through the activity of reading, we might stake out this relationship as a parallel to the characterization that Rancière gives to education as something tentative. As Oliver Davis comments in “The Radical Pedagogies of François Bon and Jacques Rancière,” “The teacher no longer dispenses knowledge to the student but rather encourages the student to acquire that knowledge for him- or herself through an encounter with a written text” (Davis, 2009: 183). The acquisition of knowledge here is a matter of the processes of experience. Like in education, then, understanding what is at work in the politics of literature is also a matter of the availability of a kind of reception that results from historical experience. Indeed, what this means, for the distribution of the sensible to be such a determinant for the possibilities of the political, is that as it passes through various spaces and times the status of a work of art is never certain. The recognition of the political requires a participant who is positioned to do so. This is a suggestion that we will take up further, but it can already first be seen in Rancière's own methods. Rancière is himself positioned as a reader who acts as a conduit for the politics at hand in the figures that he writes

about. We saw this earlier in his writing on Gabriel Gauny and the workers presented in *Proletarian Nights*, on the character of Emma Bovary, and on the poetry of Mallarmé. We see now that his method of reading continues in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* through the way that he figures Joseph Jacotot. In this work, he wants to make use of Jacotot as a “philosophico-mythical figure” (Panagia and Rancière, 2000: 121). The fact that a work is produced within an historical nexus means that the depths of its political possibilities remain local to a sense that is shaped by historical experience. And, the community that encounters an aesthetic work—the spectator, the reader, and the pupil alike—must share a sensible understanding by which the potential for politics might be found out. With this undecidable confluence of forces in the experience of the political, the position of the reader of a work of literature deserves to be further highlighted.

3.1 The Capacity for the Political

To strengthen our notion of the position of the reader, we should bring it into comparison with the concepts of the production of politics that have so far been the focus of our discussion. The aesthetics of politics is such that it arrives as a matter of conceiving and re-conceiving (or, “reading”) the objects of experience and taking up the possibility to reveal new distributions of sensibility. Where experience takes one's intuitions into their sensibilities, one's encounter with their own history is the force which brings into emphasis the way that their understanding meets the distribution of the sensible, either consensually or dissensually. As discussed earlier, experience is an accumulation of understandings, of encounters with how one's relation to a distribution is felt to be either restrictive or enabling. In applying this to the possibilities of the politics of aesthetics, the result of this is that, not only is the aesthetic work also dependent upon its own historicity, as we explored earlier in terms of its style, but its potential for politics needs to meet with the external materials of historicity that shape a community which might be changed by its politics. These are the minute aspects of disagreement in the politics of aesthetics that need to be brought to Rancière's work, which only tends to look at disagreement as it occurs within a community, 1) from the confines of a particular moment and, 2) with regard to a broad historical epoch. It is supported here that politics,

according to him, is a rare and brief activity of interruption, defined only by the moment where one speaks despite not being allowed to speak, but the occurrence of that moment is derived from a league of the forces of education and imagination. To show this, we would do well to briefly return to Rancière's description of how politics is instantiated, where we can then insert an understanding of how these forces inform the political. As he writes, "Politics exists when the natural order of domination is interrupted by the institution of a part of those who have no part. This institution is the whole of politics as a specific form of connection. It defines the common of the community as a political community, in other words, as divided, as based on a wrong that escapes the arithmetic of exchange and reparation. Beyond this set-up there is no politics. There is only the order of domination or the disorder of revolt (Rancière, 1994a: 1-2). Politics, then, is an equalizing motion. But, in what I draw from Rancière's outlines, equality is also not such that it only exists for the sensible representations at work in a community. Rather, it is a condition that lies beyond the distributions of the sensible—it lies at the very level of the sensible, as the initiator of politics. Equality is that which enables politics as an interruption in the distribution so as to bring that equality about in a community. We have read earlier where Rancière writes in *The Politics of Aesthetics* that "Equality is what I have called a presupposition. It is not, let it be understood, a founding ontological principle but a condition that only functions when it is put into action. ... Equality is actually the condition required for being able to think politics. However, equality is not, to begin with, political in itself" (Rancière, 2004: 52). By describing equality as "a condition that only functions when it is put into action," we are also recognizing that actions and their conditions are born out of a constellation of historical precedents that make up the contingency of the political. The point of our brief review here is to show that this is the case, not only from the perspective of the production of aesthetics itself—but also in its reception, in experiencing literature through the activity of reading.

Although reading a work may seem to be a simple activity, the politics of aesthetics would need it to be described as a practice whose making is a confluence of forces of experience. Within it there are, primarily, the sensibilities of the one who is audience to the work, and for whom the politics of literature are instantiated. The work that reveals

new ways of knowing, saying, or being, bears upon its reader in an undecidable way, though one that is determined by the possibilities of the reader on their own end. The politics of a work of literature depend upon finding disagreement with the distribution of a community who is audience to it. To show this, we are arguing that the possibilities of the politics of aesthetics do indeed run parallel to the question of education in Rancière's work, or how it is that new ways of knowing are afforded to a part of a community.

We can then discern that there are two types of readers: the “educated” and the “uneducated” (if only described as such for the purposes of differentiation). The difference between each is that there are two different forms of education that become featured in the politics of literature. On the one hand, education can be considered within its more conventional terms, where a pupil is meant to receive and reflect some knowledge that has been passed to them. On the other hand, then, we would consider the characteristics of the “uneducated” to be a matter of historical experience; that is, a person will have attained a kind of education through their situation in a distribution of the sensible. As a result, politics is what occurs from the “uneducated.” Entirely apart from education and its submission to mastery, the uneducated come upon a new way of being because the accumulation of their conditions are inclined towards equality in a way that a distribution of the sensible may not already have enabled. If we consider the political as an activity, then it would seem that the (un)education of historical experience grants some more likely equipment to open upon new ways of being than the directives of conventional education. In what is then perhaps a strange twist upon the intended processes of education, it is the “uneducated” reader—or, perhaps, the uneducated approach of reading—that would be witness to the politics of literature. This is because the uneducated reader experiences the work of literature at the level of sense, rather than as scholarship.

This is a most important point. Because of it, the politics of literature does not occur through study and research outside of the work, whether in terms of authorship, historicization, or inducting theoretical criticism into its study. As a result, the approach

of this point brings a good deal of trouble to contemporary practices of the study of literature, and so we should better describe these differences. In taking what is described above as our model of reading, an important problem frequently occurs when the politics of aesthetics is drawn into a scholarly, academic method of reading that would otherwise describe itself to be politically charged. If we include in literary experience the analogous model of politics (found in what we have roughly described as the “uneducated” experience), then the meaning of a work is produced differently than from a close reading or scholarly approach. The problem is in what we earlier described as literary historianism. The contemporary practice of the study of literature tends to make use of the machinery of literary theory so as to describe what a work meant for a certain period of the world at a particular cross-section of time and space; or, it describes what a work means in a way that is given a transcendent distance from its initial time and space. To do so, it makes the use of sets of theoretical concepts to conduct a reading from a Marxist or New Historicist perspective, a perspective of gender theory, or otherwise, in order to discuss literature within the terms of those theoretical concepts. These perspectives are used to analyze the ways that class, gender, race, desire, ability, et cetera, are encoded within a text. The result is that, while reading is a component of academic practice, additional factors are mounted upon that practice which affect how meaning and understanding are established. These factors are what Jurij Lotman called “extra-texts” (Lotman, 1977: 51), a concept which has become quite widely adopted in approaching literature. For example, as we saw earlier with *Madame Bovary*, the history surrounding the publication of a work of literature may be granted a significance because it may have been surrounded by a great amount of turbulence. Or, with writers such as Virginia Woolf, biographical details of the author producing a work of art are often taken into account as an aid to understanding that work. The two are read closely together so that the biographical details may inform an approach to a work that would (re)produce its meaning. These are methods of study that take a work of literature as a material artifact which belonged to a certain relation of discourses existing at a certain time and space, and so the academic method populates that time and space with further external evidences that would inform how a work of literature is to be read.

The consequence is that this practice of study liquidizes the specific historical distance between the work and its scholar—and this is an aspect of viewing the aesthetic object as a “text” rather than as a “work.” Despite that the historicism directed toward a work of literature is just that—“historical”—it is a method that then forgets history in another, more crucial sense. That is, historicism eliminates the inclusion of the immediate audience of a work and their own historical experience (in this case the scholar) as an element of the production of meaning so as to teach a meaning that is apparently already there, archived and available to be uncovered. This occurs despite the reconfiguration of the location of meaning to emphasize the position of the reader as primary. Even subsequent to the alleged murder of authorial intention, educated literary study actually eliminates that other position of the reader and the possibilities which might arrive from their own relationship to the work of literature. It is for this reason that we need to differentiate the use of history here from the importance that we have been affording it in this discussion. For the function of educated reading, history between the work of literature and its reader is liquidized. The histories of various social factors that contribute to the way that a text is encoded are taken as direct and discernible determinants of meaning. History is emphasized just as much in the present discussion, but in a different way. Instead of there being a direct determinant that is available for recognition, we are suggesting that history does act as a determinant—though, as a matter of the political, history is such that its results are undecidable.

This is not to say that any educated study eliminates the politics of a work. Not necessarily, though if a scholar discusses a work in the moment of its production, and describes all the ways that it interrupted the world of its audience, then as readers they are doing so with a calm agreement towards the work. The practice declines the possibility for disagreement because the common sensibility of the scholarly audience with which the politics of a work might interact is not something that is made available. So, while the politics of a work are not quite eliminated, the work becomes figured in such a way that the sense of its possibilities are left aside and covered over. There is no politics in literary historicism because there is no space for undecidability in the educated approach of reading. Art is closed off from its work of politics by being seized upon and artificially

historicized. In doing so, the work of literature is removed from the sense of historical experience and the sensible experience of reading.

3.2 Uneducated and Educated Reading

The best way to set out these two very different approaches to literature can be shown through the reading of a work, first in a mode of uneducated reading, and second in a mode of educated reading. As an example, we will look upon two of Louis Zukofsky's poems from the collection *Songs of Degrees*:

“With a Valentine (the 12 February)”

Hear, her
 Clear
 Mirror,
 Care
 His error,
 In her
 Care
 Is clear.

“With a Valentine (the 14 February)”

Hear her
 (Clear mirror)
 Care.
 His error.
 In her care—
 Is clear.

Hear, her
 Clear

Mirror,
Care
His error.
In her,
Care
Is clear.

Hear her
Clear mirror
Care his error
In her care
Is clear

Hear
Her
Clear
Mirror
Care
His
Error in
Her
Care
Is clear

Hear
Her
Clear,
Mirror,
Care
His
Error in

Her—
 Care
 Is
 Clear (Zukofsky, 1997)

For a reader, the significance of the words of these poems are already semiotically imbued with a recognizable meaning, but the result of moving them to different lines and placing them into different relations with one another is such that it changes the sense of the words themselves. Through each stanza, the same words are used, and the order of the words remains the same. But with every ordered repetition, words might be paired with each other on one specific line or separated out from each other on the next. Depending on the stanza, a word might be couched next to different marks of punctuation, or no punctuation whatsoever, necessitating a syntactic pause or enabling an easy flow through a section of the work. So, while each stanza is saying the same thing, each time the poem says its words it does so with a different sense. The poems exemplify a negotiation between different ways of saying that are the very basis of the political: that “Disagreement is not the conflict between one who says white and another who says black. It is the conflict between one who says white and another who also says white but does not understand the same thing by it or does not understand that the other is saying the same thing in the name of whiteness” (Rancière, 1994a: x). Disagreement happens on the basis of contingencies: on the understanding of “white,” on the histories behind those who say “white” differently, and on the contingencies of the signification of each word. What this kind of reading tends toward is one that complies with a politics of aesthetics that is based upon sense, just as it is in Rancière's work. And, of course, this is all that is meant by an “uneducated reading”—it is one that is reliant upon how sense is distributed, rather than basing itself on the additives of interpretation and representation that are acquired through an educated reading.

An educated reading, on the other hand, is one that seeks an approach to a work of literature that includes more than the sense of the work itself. It draws upon an

historicization of the work and its extratextual materials, on biographical details of its author, and on the historical circumstances of the world in which the initial production of a work was situated. Resulting from these methods, the writing of Louis Zukofsky might be connected to the settings of his life in the early twentieth century in New York City, as the child of Yiddish-speaking Lithuanian immigrants (Bernstein, 2006: xiv). His writing might be further positioned in relation to the poets that influenced him both personally and in the changes in his stylistic development. Figuring Zukofsky within a tradition of poetry would allow one to say that the line of preceding poets such as Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, T. S. Eliot, and others would show that they were “an important source for Zukofsky, whose response to his modernist predecessors was precise and comprehensive” (2006: xiii) as a participant in the avant-garde and modernism of the first several decades of the twentieth century. The period is shared by Zukofsky with the rest of those who are known as the Objectivist poets, whose writing first appeared during the late 1920s and early 1930s. Despite its “ism,” the primary characteristic of Objectivism is hardly one of unity. In addition to Zukofsky, poets identified with the group are George Oppen, Charles Reznikoff, Lorine Niedecker, Carl Rakosi, and Basil Bunting, though there is no concrete philosophical or stylistic definition to the group—neither is there an official term of membership to their group. “Objectivism” as a kind of identifiable poetics came about by being “gathered under the editorial hand” (Heller, 1985: ix) of Zukofsky in a 1931 issue of *Poetry* magazine. The figures included in the issue were chosen because of their insistence on “sincerity” in poetry, which bears a particular meaning for Zukofsky. Sincerity, a loosely described “objectivism,” does not entail a description of the particularities of the poetics of each figure. Indeed, Zukofsky himself writes in *An “Objectivists” Anthology* that the grouping does not bear the coherency of an “ism”: “The interest of the [*Poetry* magazine] issue was in the few recent lines of poetry which could be found, and in the craft of poetry, NOT in a movement. The contributors did not get up one morning all over the land and say ‘objectivists’ between tooth-brushes” (Zukofsky, 1975: 24-25). Instead, as Oppen describes it, “I believe I thought of these poets simply as the poets I found revelatory” (Oppen, 1990: 284). At work in the sincerity of Objectivist poetry is a desire to treat the poem as a material object in the world (as given in the label itself). Zukofsky defines the concept in his

essay, “Sincerity and Objectification” (1931): “An objective; (Optics)—The lens bringing the rays from an object to a focus. (Military use)—That which is aimed at. (Use extended to poetry)—Desire for what is objectively perfect, inextricably the direction of historic and contemporary particulars” (Zukofsky, 2000: 203). The homonymic characteristic of an objective/objectification is taken advantage of by Zukofsky here, so that it is at once a method of sensibility, an object of sensibility, and a mode of sensibility.

The documentation of elements of study that exist outside of a work of literature itself are all brought into relation with the work as items that are made available as resources for interpretation. These practical examples of two different methods are meant to show that close reading practices are best conceptualized not as a practice of interpretation, or as a refined mode of reception that would explain what literature means, but—as Rancière has always put forward—that they should function at the level of sense. Otherwise, the educated reader is rather conducting a “closed reading” that excludes the possibilities for the politics of literature. The political occurs at the level of sense, but the interpretation of literature or the use of other materials to enhance its representation are at a level of knowledge that has distracted itself from sense and, thus, from politics. We can particularly see this if we return to parallel our concept of reading with the concepts of spectatorship and education. A reading based on the extratextual demands for a less educated reader to better find their way to the meaning of a text, which “perpetuates inequality by leading the student to believe that his or her capacity to understand is dependent upon the teacher's explanations” (Davis, 2009: 184). In the case of the politics of literature, the position of mastery over the meaning of a work of literature is also one that perpetuates a sense of inequality. Arne de Boever argues this on behalf of Rancière in “Scenes of Aesthetic Education: Rancière, Oedipus, and *Notre Musique*.” He writes that “*Literature does not follow the logic of representation, but of presentation*. With literature the question is not about something that the text is saying in addition to itself, something that is hiding beneath the text's surface appearance” (de Boever, 2012: 71). This argument is an echo of Rancière's in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, where he suggests that equality is exercised by asking oneself “what do you see? what do you think about it? what do you make of it? and so on, to infinity” (Rancière, 1991: 23). De Boever regards

the educated practice of reading to be one of a stultifying explication since it asks, “What is the artwork saying?,” and instead favours the uneducated practice of presentation, which asks, “What are we seeing?” (de Boever, 2012: 72). These two ways of approaching a work of art are based upon different distributions of the sensible, and in particular different ways that audiences of a work of art feel themselves to be situated within that distribution.

The educated and uneducated concepts of reading therefore provide for something very different from each other. What results from such a difference between methods of approach to literature is an impasse that would need to be tested. On the one hand: perhaps what this means is that literary historianism does not have any place in literary studies—if, strictly speaking, “literary study” is an engagement with the politics of a work of literature at the level of common sense. Such an assertion would be because the politics of aesthetics relies upon the way that a work of art presses upon one's sensibilities in concert with a distribution of the sensible, while the education of a reader about the circumstances of the production of a work have more to do with its representation than with its presentation to one's sensibilities. Strangely, then, the academization of literary experience operates in opposition to the politics of aesthetics. Under its method of approach, what is taken into view is not art but artifact. This is a rigid declaration, and on the other hand we could argue that existing academic methods of literary study do not warrant any such repudiation, but that it is indeed Rancière's concepts which are unable to find room as a model for literary study. Such a counter would be made despite that there have already been some attempts to include Rancière's work as a basis for literary study. For example, Bert Olivier opens his article “Literature After Rancière: Ishiguru's *When We Were Orphans* and Gibson's *Neuromancer*” by agreeably describing that Rancière does not think “in the naïve manner that reduces artworks and literary texts to the empirical conditions of their production, in this way turning them into a mere document of historical happenings” (Olivier, 2013: 24). However, when conducting his analysis further on, Olivier writes that the events of Ishiguru's novel “exude a distribution of the sensible which confronts the givenness of asymmetrical power relations in human societies without exception” (2013: 34), but his use of Rancière to read the novel relies

upon an educated sense of understanding that Olivier does not recognize, and which then locks the novel into the circumstances that immediately surrounded it upon its production. This is also a complex trouble that runs through Iztok Osojnik's "Kosovel and Kramburger: Between the Avant-Garde and Contemporary Slovenian Political Poetry." Osojnik offers a thorough critique of the poetry of Srečko Kosovel and Taja Kramberger through Rancière's concepts of the politics of literature (Osojnik, 2011). Yet, such an analytical approach removes the politics of literature from sense and replaces it for an interaction placed solely within the external social conditions surrounding Kosovel's and Kramburger's writing. The use of Rancière's work as a source of educated reading runs the risk of transforming a work of literature into a production of representation. The kind of application of Rancière to works of literature that we are seeing here has been made in other studies of art as well, such as in Vered Maimon's "Towards a New Image of Politics: Chris Marker's *Staring Back*." Maimon suggests that Rancière's work can be used to discuss Marker's films, saying that Marker's "recognition of the power of the 'fictions of the real', and his disclosure of the inherent split of the people as a collective political subject, explains his decision to use a number of narrators for *Grim without a Cat* who differ in age and gender and who seem to occupy different points in time in relation to what is shown in the film, speaking both from the historical present and from the future" (Maimon, 2012: 89). According to Maimon, "the inconsistencies and tension in any form of political and social identifications" (ibid.) that Rancière describes make for a helpful approach to Marker's films. Each of these articles are excellent discussions of their chosen topics, but employing Rancière's concepts to analyze a work causes them to stray from However, applications such as these run the risk of drawing a combination between Rancière's thoughts and a work of literature as a kind of representation, in such a way that they keep the work confined to the particular time and space of its production as if to say, "Here, indeed, this is a work of literature, and it is one that had a political impact..." In doing so, the politics of a work of literature are kept confined to a specific moment by distinguishing the historical experiences of its readers, and as a result its politics are left unavailable for any other moment or any other place.

Testing these considerations of readerly approaches is derived from the fact that the center of politics is disagreement: a misunderstanding of expression on the level of sensibility between participants. And the politics of aesthetics, working analogously to political possibilities, should then also have a center to be located at the level of sensibility. As we close, though, what should still be noted is that for the politics of literature there is yet the requirement of a different level of education, where the very basis for a meaningful encounter with a literary work relies upon a certain level of acquired competency, such as an ability to read and a vocabulary to understand what a work is expressing, as well as an acquired sense that the politics of literature may work upon through dissensus. But these are of a kind of education that is gained through experience—it is not an education about the work itself. As with our earlier points that the political occurs undecidably, the same is true for literature. The politics of aesthetics is not a matter of taking up a particular set of means. Rancière recognizes this as well, and writes that “there is no reason why the sensory oddity produced by the clash of heterogeneous elements should bring about an understanding of the state of the world; and no reason either why understanding the state of the world should prompt a desire to change it. There is no straightforward road from the fact of looking at a spectacle to the fact of understanding the state of the world; no direct road from political awareness to political action” (Rancière, 2009c: 75). These are a kind of condition that further enable the possibility of the politics of literature, so that it would happen in a way that meets with the possible ways of knowing that exist on the horizon of the audience.

Conclusion: Remaining Possibility

We can locate two stems of Marxist literary criticism. One is a "sociology of literature," as we have earlier described it, which looks at literature as an industry of production that participates in ways of being. This stem is, I think, what could be described as the general habit of literary criticism today. Terry Eagleton calls this form of criticism a "suitably tamed, degouted version of Marxist criticism, appropriate for Western consumption" (Eagleton, 2002: 3). It is a criticism that might perform a fine job of describing the conditions that surround a work, but it does very little to enter into and discuss the work itself. A second stem then, and one now seems to be more important at the close of our discussion, is to look at a work for how it designates new ways of understanding, new meanings, out of itself. Better than anything else, it is the aesthetic object itself which is able to affect what the conventions of aesthetics are and can be. A new emergence in a work is able to reveal a kind of meaning that is repellent to a distribution of the sensible that might have been an influence or a precedent. By looking at the way a literary work is constructed, we would be able to see how it pushes out beyond the confines of its own materiality. As we have seen, the possibilities for the politics of a work of art first exist on the basis of a distribution of the sensible. In giving recognition to the critics of Rancière who contend that his ideas of the politics of literature are ahistorical, the direct consideration of history that we have been undertaking here has been an effort to answer to their concerns. The phrase chosen for the title of this discussion, "Producing Undecidability," is drawn from Rancière's own writing in *Aesthetics and its Discontents*. There, he writes that "In a society which functions within the accelerated consumption of signs, playing on this undecidability is the only remaining form by which to subvert the meaning of protocols for reading signs" (Rancière, 2009: 54). The critical features of a work of art, to have a politics, are such that they do not set out particular demands of common sense. That is, art does not attempt to solidify a particular way of saying that something is "white"; rather, its politics is found in the fact that it heterogenizes existent ways of saying, with an undecidability that is reliant upon the possibilities which underlie

a distribution of the sensible that is organized outside the work of art. It is for this reason that a persistent uneasiness with the practice of literary criticism has been displayed here, for it is from that position that one would employ and apply Rancière's writing to surround a work of literature. The danger of doing so is that it can close off the possibility for the politics of literature by representing it in a fixed way, and therefore sealing it within a distribution of the sensible existing at a particular historical moment, disallowing the play of subversion and the potential for interruption.

With recognition of that fact, we may yet say that there is a transhistorical potential for the politics of literature, only that its characteristic may always be undecidable for itself. Its politics may engage most immediately with the circumstances surrounding its moment of production, but the work could always hold the potential for sensible redistribution in another time and another place. The function of the politics of aesthetics is such that it relies upon finding disagreement in the sensibility of one who would be receptive to that disagreement. And it is only there that this function becomes the activity of the political. Once having travelled there, the work of literature has a possibility for politics that remains, undecidably.

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