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Review

Figures in History

Jacques Rancière. Cambridge, UK and Malden, MA: Polity, 2014.
112pp.

Antonia von Schöning*

The latest publication by the much discussed and broadly received French philosopher Jacques Rancière is actually not that new. *Figures of History* compiles two essays, “The Unforgettable” and “Senses and Figures of History,” which were written on the occasion of the exhibition *Face à l’histoire* at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris in 1996. The first text discusses several documentary films that were shown in a program accompanying the exhibition. The second part is an account on history painting in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries written as a catalogue piece. In both essays, Rancière introduces the idea of an age of history that replaces the established rules of the representation of great individuals and memorable events by the egalitarian appearance of individuals and objects in a common visual space.

Rancière, born 1940 in Algiers, studied philosophy with Louis Althusser at the Ecole Normale Supérieure in Paris. He attended Althusser’s classes performing close-readings of Marx’s *Capital*, which led to the publication of *Reading Capital* in 1965. However, in the course of the student revolts in 1968, Rancière distanced himself from his teacher, whose reluctance to allow for spontaneous resistance within the protests he did not share. In 1969, Rancière was appointed professor by Michel Foucault at the newly founded university in Vincennes, later to be called Paris 8 Vincennes/Saint-Denis, where

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he taught until his retirement in 2000. He later held positions as a visiting professor at several universities abroad and repeatedly taught at the University of California Berkeley.

Figures of History effectively aims for a twofold perspective on two problems: it combines an investigation of the images of history with that of the history of images. On the one hand, Rancière is interested in the figural constitution of history and the role of visual media (film and painting) in the production of history. On the other hand, he considers images as historical objects that themselves generate histories.

Rancière describes this approach as a “poetics of history.” In this sense, *Figures of History* follows his influential study *The Names of History* (1994), which he devoted to historiography. But if *The Names of History* dealt with the balance between storytelling and truth-telling, and the relationship between historiography and literature, *Figures of History* analyzes the specific potential and agency of images for a modern concept of historicity.

In order to understand the apprehension of history in words and images, the philosopher develops a notion of history as the specific form in which an individual appears at a given time and in a given space. Negotiating the conditions of this appearance is a genuinely political act, since what is at stake is that which can be said and is visible. Traditionally, the historical chronicle is the well-ordered narration of names and events worthy to be memorialized because of their greatness. Against this idea of a hegemonial historiography, Rancière introduces a new concept of an age of history: “History is that time in which those who have no right to occupy the same place can occupy the same image” (13).

History here constitutes literally a “common ground,” which can be occupied not only by the important and the powerful, but also by the small, the nameless, and the ordinary. Central to this idea of history as a form of appearance whose conditions are to be negotiated is the question of equality. For Rancière, equality is not only the aim of politics, but also the condition of its possibility. Accordingly, equality does not imply that all and everything is factually equal, but that everything is equally representable. Rancière demonstrates with several examples from film history and art history that

history puts itself on show, matter-of-factly, wonderfully, as the raw material in which light plays on the water and games of seduction play out on river banks, in canoes or on sunny terraces, as the living principle of the equality of every subject under the sun. (70)

Concomitant with this conception of history is a key argument in Rancière's thinking: it is linked to what he will later term, in *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible* (2004), the "aesthetic revolution" at the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century. The aesthetic revolution brings about a rupture with what Rancière identifies as the "representative regime" of the arts, which is characterized by a hierarchical and normative logic of representation. Here art is conceived as a complex system of hierarchies and distinctions of style and genres, which define what is and what is not art and assign different genres to certain types of representable events. For example, history painting is dedicated to the representation of great events and, therefore, nobler than genre painting, which shows the everyday and the ordinary.

This system is interrupted by the so-called aesthetic regime of the arts developed circa 1800. It is distinguished by replacing the hierarchies of representation and the established sequence of an event with the raw presence of things. Things and words, being and representation no longer constitute two separate orders, but are instead elements of the same order. A new "distribution of the sensible" takes place, configured according to an arbitrary and indifferent arrangement of bodies, objects and signs in a common space.

The aesthetic regime also calls for a new poetics of history. At stake for Rancière is nothing less than the question as to how history should appear in the age of democracy. The medium of film, as Rancière argues in the first essay of *Figures of History*, plays an essential role in this respect. Cinema is in part the realization of the demands placed on art by the aesthetic regime insofar as

the machine makes no distinction. It doesn't know that there are genre paintings and history paintings. It takes both the great and the small and it takes them together. (12)

This is made possible by the photographic principle inherent to the camera itself. Nonetheless, the medium of film cannot be regarded as an automatic fulfillment of the aesthetic regime since it can serve representative strategies as well. In narrative cinema, it is the plot that re-imposes a certain normative order on the images as a common ground. Documentary films, on the other hand, often rely on the voice-over of the commentary to tell the viewer where to look, what to see, and how to interpret.

As an example for the overlap between representative and aesthetic strategies, Rancière describes the opening sequence of Chris Marker's film *The Last Bolshevik* (1993). The film begins with an archival document that shows the Russian tsar and the imperial family passing by a crowd in Saint-Petersburg at the turn of the twentieth century. An officer from the tsar's entourage makes a gesture in order to teach the crowd how to behave in front of their ruler: when he passes, his subjects must remove their hats. In the first place, the officer's gesture affirms a hierarchy and a normative order between the ruler and the ruled. However, the glorious emperor and the anonymous crowd share the same image, being equally recorded by the camera eye. Chris Marker's enigmatic voice commentary, "I don't want this image to be forgotten," seems to link these ambiguous aspects of the filmed images together. Two very different functions of history are exemplified in this short sequence: history as the glorious archive of the life and deeds of the great, and history as the equal appearance of anyone and anything. In Rancière's words: "It is the time where anyone and anything at all make history and bear witness to history" (69).

Rancière obviously favors the latter understanding of history where the distinctions and hierarchies between what can be represented and remembered, and what cannot are abolished. In one of the most compelling chapters of the book, Rancière addresses the debate over the problem what cannot be represented and the prohibition of representation that developed around Claude Lanzmann's film *Shoa*. He criticizes

the conclusion is sometimes too easily drawn that the extermination is "unrepresentable" or "unshowable"—notions in which various heterogeneous arguments conveniently merge: the joint incapacity of real documents and fictional imitations to reflect the horror experiences; the ethical indecency of representing that horror; the modern dignity of art which is beyond representation and the indignity of art as an endeavor after Auschwitz. (48–49)

Instead, Rancière argues that in the aesthetic regime, the unrepresentable as a quality or aspect of an event does not exist. The question is rather how the absent can be made present and how the relationship between presentation and withdrawal can be regulated. Lanzmann's film does not represent the horrors of the concentration camps, but it makes the disappearance and the annihilation visible, perceptible, and present.

History and art both face the task to reveal the process by which disappearance is produced. At this point, Rancière refers to a familiar debate.

So we have to revise Adorno's famous phrase, according to which art is impossible after Auschwitz. The reverse is true: after Auschwitz, to show Auschwitz, art is the only thing possible, because art always entails the presence of an absence; because it is the very job of art to reveal something that is invisible, through the controlled power of words and images, connected or unconnected; because art alone thereby makes the human perceptible, felt. (49–50)

Revising Adorno's phrase is intended to rethink the political function of art. It becomes clear that the political impact of an artistic form neither relies on its direct address of a political content nor on the sociohistorical context in which it emerged. Rather, if there is a politics of film or the fine arts, it must be as film or as fine art, and by means of a genuinely aesthetic decision about what is perceivable as part of a common ground, and what is not.

Figures of History brings together two of Rancière's earliest texts on the relationship between aesthetics, history, and politics, and prepares ground for a further elaboration of his influential concepts and analyses of the aesthetic regime. All the same, the slim volume is not suited as an introduction to Rancière's thought, for the reason that following the complex argumentation and grasping the examples and references presupposes a familiarity with later books, especially *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible* (2004) and *Film Fables* (2006). In those books the French philosopher elaborates more extensively and systematically on his understanding of the politics of the aesthetic and provides compelling close readings and analyses of films, novels, and artworks to which he only briefly alludes in *Figures of History*.

This is particularly the case in the second part of the book in which Rancière refers to many of the artworks shown in the exhibition *Face à l'histoire* in 1996 (such as Greuze, Goya, Barnett Newmann, and Zoran Music), but does not take the time to describe and analyze them in detail. Therefore, the reader is compelled to inquire after the paintings in question, only to find that Rancière's argumentation sometimes merely superficially touches on the works' complex art historical context and their respective pictorial specificities and qualities. In view of this difficulty, the question arises why *Figures of History* completely dispenses with any illustrations.

From the point of view of an informed reader, however, this book is a fascinating account of how Rancière drafts his key concepts that unite philosophy, history, politics, and aesthetics, and that make him an exciting and important voice in today's discussions in these fields.