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# The Regimes of Identification of Art and the Political Reconfiguration of Aesthetics

**Abstract:** For the philosopher Jacques Rancière there is no ‘art’ without a specific identification regime that delimits it, makes it visible and makes it intelligible as such. A regime of art defines the specific ways in which a given epoch conceives of the nature and logic of artistic representation, puts certain practices in relation to specific forms of visibility and modes of intelligibility, specifies the ways in which the artistic expressions take place within society, what their functions are within social life in general and in relation to the other social activities in particular.

In this article we briefly resume the contents of the three fundamental regimes of art: the ethical, the poetic or representative, and the aesthetic taking into account that these regimes are not strictly historical, but rather ‘meta-historical’ categories, because although they may determine and define certain periods of ‘art history’, it is also possible to state that two, or even the three regimes, they can coexist in a specific time like ours, for example. To undertake this approach, we will bear in mind that Rancière’s philosophical proposal has both historical and political components that aim to reformulate the traditional way of considering the aesthetic conditions of political experience and the political dimension of aesthetics.

**Keywords:** aesthetics; aesthetical politics; distribution of the sensible; Jacques Rancière; politics of arts; regimes of art.

“I never switched from politics to aesthetics. I always tried to investigate the distribution of the sensible which allows us to identify that we call politics and something that we call aesthetics.”<sup>1</sup>

Jacques Rancière

## The three regimes of identification of art

Aesthetics is assumed by Rancière not as a theory about art in general or a theory of art that circumscribes it to the different effects it may have on sensitivity,

<sup>1</sup> Jacques Rancière, “From Politics to Aesthetics,” *Paragraph. The Journal of the Modern Critical Theory Group* 28, 1 (January 2005): 23–24.

but rather as a specific regime of identification and thought of art. That is to say: “a mode of articulation between ways of doing and making their corresponding forms of visibility, and possible ways of thinking about their relationships (which presupposes a certain idea of thought’s effectivity).”<sup>2</sup>

At the same time, Rancière distinguishes between *aesthetic practices* as a way of visibility of the practices of art, of the place they occupy, and what they ‘do’ in relation to ‘the common’ of a community; from *artistic practices* as specific ‘ways of doing’ that intervene in the general distribution of ways of doing and the relationships that can be established with others ways of being and forms of visibility in a given social area. This is determinant, because it means that ‘art’ cannot exist spontaneously, naturally or predetermined, but exists thanks to a certain identification regime that delimits it, makes it visible and makes it intelligible as such, this is expressed for him in the follows terms:

Founding the edifice of art means defining a certain regime of art identification, that is, a specific relationship of practices, forms of visibility and modes of intelligibility that can be identified their products as belonging to art or one art.<sup>3</sup>

Therefore, there is no ‘art’ for Rancière without a regime of identification<sup>4</sup> and thought that allows distinguishing its forms as common forms. A regime of identification of art is one that puts certain practices in relation to specific forms of visibility and modes of intelligibility. In turn, each type of regime of identification of art allows the different arts to be autonomous from other human activities while linking them to a specific historical order in which there are general ways of doing things and a particular type of occupations that are related to them in terms of artistic practices. In this way, Rancière defines three regimes of identification of what has been called ‘art’ in the Western tradition: the first is the *ethical regime of images*, the second is the *poetic regime*, also called *mimetic* or *representative* and, the last (and in which we are currently) is the *aesthetic regime* of the arts.

Before proceeding to specify them, it is important to clarify that these are not strictly historical regimes, but rather ‘meta-historical’ categories, because although they may reach to determine and define certain periods of the ‘history of art’, it is also possible to verify that two (or even the three regimes) can coexist in a specific time like ours, for example. And it is that although it seems that each of these regimes of

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<sup>2</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics. The Distribution of the Sensible* (London, New York: Continuum, 2004), 10.

<sup>3</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Malaise dans l’esthétique* (Paris: Galilée, 2004), 43.

<sup>4</sup> A regime of identification of art is a system of *a priori* forms of what is felt in terms of the activity of the subjects, and in where both aesthetic and artistic practices coexist; the former being forms of visibility of the practices of art, of the place they occupy, of what they imply in the sense of the common, which depend, in turn, on a way of thinking that unfolds over things of art, and that is what determines in what sense these practices can become objects of thought.

identification and thought of art could be associated to a particular moment of the 'history' of art (in the way, e.g., like Hegel does in his *Lectures on Aesthetics* in where posits three moments of art as a manifestation of the 'Absolute Spirit' in three well-defined artistic periods: the symbolic, the classical and the romantic). For Rancière, the inscription of the arts in a certain 'distribution of the sensible'<sup>5</sup> implies more we'll take into account regarding the common elements from which each historical epoch conceives the world, insofar as it gives meaning to a certain social set.

### The ethical regime of images

In the ethical regime, the origin, the truth and the use of images are the three fundamental factors to be taken into account for their creation and evaluation, which prevents them from being identified as art. Therefore, in this regime the different artistic productions are not grouped or identified by the common denominator 'art', but rather are each subsumed by the value given to them in ontological terms; that is to say, by attributing to them linked characteristics, to a divine origin, and to consider that they are bearers of transcendent truth, related to their being. In addition to their origins, the fate of images is also assessed in terms of the utility assigned to them and the effects that are believed to be generated. Hence, in this regime are important issues related to their relationship with the divine or the sacred, the right of prohibition or authorization of creations of images, the statute and the significance that it is believed to have, but also for its possible usefulness and destiny in the social body.

It is in this framework that, according to Rancière, it is necessary to understand Plato's proscription of certain types of images, and consequently of certain arts, insofar as he, even if he does not intend to subject the arts to the political, considers that some of them are 'true' because they are linked to 'true knowledge' and the imitation of 'valid models', and other arts, on the contrary, that imitate mere appearances. This supposed origin of images is what allows its classification for Plato, and also determines its correlation with the use or, rather, with the educational purpose that images must have for him in the *polis*, as he considers they necessarily, the images, must provide some of the instruction about moral issues and about the assignment of roles and functions in the city to the youngest. For example, Books II and III of the *Republic* are

<sup>5</sup> Occasionally translated as the 'partition of the sensible', *le partage du sensible* refers to the implicit law governing the sensible order that parcels out places and forms of participation in a common world by first establishing the modes of perception within which these are inscribed. The distribution of the sensible thus produces a system of self-evident facts of perception based on the set horizons and modalities of what is visible and audible as well as what can be said, thought, made, or done. Strictly speaking, 'distribution' therefore refers both to forms of inclusion and to forms of exclusion. The 'sensible', of course, does not refer to what shows good sense or judgement but to what is *aisthêton* or capable of being apprehended by the senses.

In the realm of *aesthetics*, Rancière has analyzed three different 'partages du sensible', the *ethical regime of images*, the *representative regime of art*, and the *aesthetic regime of art*. In the political domain, he has studied the relationship between the *police*, a totalizing account of the population, and *politics*, the disturbance of the *police* distribution of the sensible by the *subjectivization* of those who have no part in it. (Cf. Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 85.) (Definition of translator Gabriel Rockhill).

very explicit and detailed in terms of the precautions that must be taken with the lies that can be spread with the works of Homer and Hesiod, which can be a bad influence for youth.

It is in this sense that I speak of an ethical regime of images. In this regime, it is a matter of knowing in what way images' mode of being affects the *ethos*, the mode of being of individuals and communities. This question prevents 'art' from individualizing itself as such.<sup>6</sup>

However, it is also interesting to consider that the ethical regime could refer not only to the past but also to modernity because it could be related to the content of certain images linked to the vanguards, for example. According to this approach, one could mention an 'ethical' attitude in German realistic expressionism and many other avant-garde movements that possess an explicit 'political' content of denunciation, but whose political gesture only remains in the realm of images and does not concern the distribution of the sensible. In addition, this could be extended to a large set of images that seek to denounce or convince in political terms, without questioning the sensitive and material conditions in which they circulate.<sup>7</sup>

On the other hand, with this same perspective, it is possible to understand the parallelism inherent in all of the attempts to deduce the characteristics of the arts from the ontological status of images. For example, the incessant attempts to derive the idea of the 'distinctive feature' of painting, photography, or film from the theology of the icon.

### The representative or poetic regime of art

The second moment established by Rancière is the *representative* or *poetic regime*, which distances itself from the ethical regime. It is it, which identifies the arts under the binomial *poiesis/mimesis*. In this regime, it is isolated, under a pragmatic principle, an artistic doing in terms of imitations that are considered valid, appropriate, adequate, or not. Established divisions between the representable and the unrepresentable, distinctions are made between different genres of representation, as well as the principles of adaptation of the forms of expression to the genres and themes represented, among other functions:

I call this regime *poetic* in the sense that it identifies the arts — what the Classical Age would later call the 'fine arts' — within a classification of ways of doing and making, and it consequently defines proper ways of doing and making as well as means of assessing imitations. I call it

<sup>6</sup> Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 21.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Paula Poblete, "Más acá de lo sublime, aproximación a la idea estética en Jacques Rancière," *HYBRIS. Revista de Filosofía* 3, 1 (2012): 9.

*representative* insofar as it is the notion of representation or *mimesis* that organizes these ways of doing, making, seeing, and judging.<sup>8</sup>

However, here it is necessary to clarify that by *mimesis* Rancière does not understand a procedure that submits artistic productions to a general rule of imitation or similarity, but he considers that is rather the setting of a new regime of visibility of the arts different to the ethical regime. It is a *regime of visualization of the arts* insofar as it grants them autonomy, but, at the same, also is a specific articulation between the distribution of the ways of doing and the social occupations that make the arts visible, according to a different correlation between the ways of making art (*poiesis*) with the different ways people carry out their political and social roles (*praxis*).

In this sense, this representative regime, where narration prevails over description, the hierarchy of genres is imposed according to the importance and dignity of the themes. Also, in this regime, the primacy of the art of the word, of the word in action, and the representation of the action in terms of characters, finds its equivalent in a hierarchical vision of the community.

In the same way, the representative regime of art implies the establishment of a normative model of inclusion that is no longer going to ask itself about the origin of the 'being' of the image, or the relationship between the model and the copy as in the ethical regime. Rather, in this period, the conditions that allow that the imitations are recognized as belonging to a certain artistic expression are those forms that meet the requirements that make its susceptible to acceptance and reception, those that are appropriate, valid or achieved, and those that not. These requirements are based on several principles (thematic, expressive and technical-artistic), that legitimize them as they prescribe certain ways of doing, ways for the creation or production (*poiesis*) of works of art 'accepted' and recognized as such. The representation (or *mimesis*) is the guide of those ways of doing, seeing and judging in this regime that may have its antecedents in the *Poetics* of Aristotle and that has its peak in the period that gives rise to the so-called 'fine arts' that arise in the Renaissance

### The aesthetic regime of art

The aesthetic regime differs from the representative regime in that the identification of art is no longer done by means of its specificity in the ways of doing, but by characterization of a 'sensible way of being' that must distinguish from now on artistic productions:

The aesthetic regime of the arts stands in contrast with the representative regime. I call this regime *aesthetic* because the identification of art

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<sup>8</sup> Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 22.

no longer occurs via a division within ways of doing and making, but it is based on distinguishing a sensible mode of being specific to artistic products. The word aesthetics does not refer to a theory of sensibility, taste, and pleasure for art amateurs. It strictly refers to the specific mode of being of whatever falls within the domain of art, to the mode of being of the objects of art. In the aesthetic regime, artistic phenomena are identified by their adherence to a specific regime of the sensible, which is extricated from its ordinary connections and is inhabited by a heterogeneous power, the power of a form of thought that has become foreign to itself: a product identical with something not produced, knowledge transformed into non-knowledge, logos identical with pathos, the intention of the unintentional, etc.<sup>9</sup>

The aesthetic regime is what makes it possible to identify ‘the art’ in the singular and separates it from any relationship with the techniques, genres, and hierarchy of themes:

The aesthetic regime of the arts is the regime that strictly identifies art in the singular and frees it from any specific rule, from any hierarchy of the arts, subject matter, and genres. Yet it does so by destroying the mimetic barrier that distinguished ways of doing and making affiliated with art from other ways of doing and making, a barrier that separated its rules from the order of social occupations. The aesthetic regime asserts the absolute singularity of art and, at the same time, destroys any pragmatic criterion for isolating this singularity. It simultaneously establishes the autonomy of art and the identity of its forms with the forms that life uses to shape itself.<sup>10</sup>

The aesthetic regime has the same characteristics of what Schiller calls as the ‘aesthetic state’,<sup>11</sup> which putting in suspension of the three main faculties of human being defined by Kant: cognition, desire, and feeling and where the form it proves self.

<sup>9</sup> Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 22–23.

<sup>10</sup> Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 32–33.

<sup>11</sup> The fundamental thesis of Schiller is the ennoblement of the human character, raised in the nucleus of an education of man and humanity, for a truly rational state or society. This ‘aesthetic state’ ideally conceived by reason can only be carried out by the moral man: one whose rational and sensitive faculties are not in contradiction. In this way, Schiller suggests a critique of enlightened reason (which is based on Kant), because it has not yet come to fulfil the ideal of a truly rational state, since such a reason has failed in practice but not in the theory. It is to be noted that Schiller starts from Kantian principles, to overcome them. His idea of synthesis, beauty, is based on his theory of play, a unitive moment in which the human being is free. From the reciprocal action of the material or sensible drive and the rational or formal drive, Schiller conceives the aesthetic impulse or play drive, principle of action of beauty. This aesthetic impulse encompasses the sensible drive and the formal drive in a dialectical movement that suppresses and conserves them at the same time. Schiller defines the object of aesthetic impulse or play drive as living form (*lebende Gestalt*), beauty in the realm of experience.

It is also the conception of art as an activity that depends as much on a conscious process, like as on an unconscious one, in the manner of the Kantian ‘genius’ that ignores the law that allows it to create art.

From all of this there are several things to highlight. In the first place, that the definition of ‘art’, arose in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and that, therefore previously, this definition did not exist as such because we were not in a regime of identification that made it possible. There were different arts, but not a concept, an idea, that would agglutinate them. The other is that this is linked to a form of experience through which they are perceived as belonging to a common element: ‘the art’, a number of things very different from each other, either by their production techniques, their purposes or possible audiences. In this regard, it should be noted that for Rancière this is not due to a matter of ‘reception’ but rather because of a ‘fabric of sensitive experience’ within which works of art are produced:

These are totally material conditions -places of action and exposure, of forms of circulation and reproduction, but also of modes of perception and of regimes of emotion, of categories that identify them, of thought patterns that classify them and interpret. These conditions make it possible by words, forms, movements, at to be felt and thought of as art.<sup>12</sup>

In it, also operate the *schemes of thought* that allow that certain characteristics of a painting, a stroke, the acceleration of musical rhythm, the silence between two words, a variation, are assumed as artistic events and associated with the idea of artistic creation. Likewise, the reflections of art and aesthetics that make it possible to identify the existence of dissimilar and different activities as activities that have artistic characteristics to highlight. But it was above all with the emergence of museums, at the time when galleries of royalty opened their doors to the general public, when art, in turn, was opened to the possibility of being appreciated and valued by anyone, and that anything could come to be considered as art: “Art exists as a separate world in the moment that anything can enter in it.”<sup>13</sup>

The aesthetic regime also implied a radical modification of the system of representation that previously prevailed in the arts, as it removed the pre-eminence of the dignity of certain themes linked to personalities and certain genres of representation (a tragedy for the ‘noble classes’, comedy for the ‘less favored’, historical painting against gender painting, etc.). Because in the representative (or classical) regime the genders, situations and forms of expression that suited the ‘baseness’ or ‘dignity’ of the subject or subjects to be treated were defined specifically, while in the aesthetic regime of the arts this correlation between the theme and the mode of representation is undone.

Thus, the logic of this regime of affection, perception and thought that Rancière

<sup>12</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Aisthesis. Scènes du régime esthétique de l’art* (Paris: Galilée, 2011), 10.

<sup>13</sup> Rancière, *Aisthesis*, 10.

calls the ‘aesthetic regime of art’, encompasses many things, not only examples of the so-called ‘fine arts’ or ‘cultured arts’, but also experiences linked to the ‘minor arts’, because with this heterogeneity its sought to establish a fusion between art and life.

Nevertheless, the most important thing, as far as we are concerned, is that with this approach to the art regimes, what Rancière is doing is to modify the usual way of defining the relationship between art and politics. In the sense that he establishes that there is an aesthetics of politics because the politics: “Builds sensitive worlds by joining words and images to establish particular spaces and times.”<sup>14</sup>; and, at the same time, re-signify what we know as art when he affirms that arts conform an aesthetic of its own: “a cut-out of the places and the times, of the ways of exposing the bodies, the forms, the words, the movements and the images that build common worlds.”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Jacques Rancière, “Il faut prendre du temps pour rendre le monde à nouveau visible,” Interview by Hugues Simard. *Journal des Grandes Écoles* 63, (August 2012): 26.

<sup>15</sup> Rancière, “Il faut prendre du temps,”: 27.