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Bray, Patrick M. *Understanding Rancière, Understanding Modernism*. (Understanding Philosophy, Understanding Modernism). London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017. xv + 295 pp. Figures, notes, and index. \$35.95 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9781501311376

Review by Caitlyn Doyle, Northwestern University.

Patrick Bray's collection *Understanding Rancière, Understanding Modernism* brings together some of the foremost scholars engaging with the work of Jacques Rancière today. What is perhaps most notable about it, however, is that reading it is akin to finding oneself in the "unpredictable" library that Rancière laments the loss of in the volume's concluding interview. If the old *Bibliothèque Nationale's* "heterogeneous books...grouped together side by side," enabled Rancière to write as he does, crossing disciplinary borders and thinking around singular problems in the mode of discovery rather than mastery, the volume's approach to Rancière operates on a similar principal (p. 277). Allowing the reader unfamiliar with Rancière's work to find footholds in the definitions of key concepts found in the volume's third section, the collection also offers unexpected new directions—from Apter's elaboration of the deeper significance of the "perfunctory" reference that Rancière makes to Hippolyte Taine's *Graindorge*, to the conversation that Chanter initiates between Rancière and the activist feminist art collective the Guerrilla Girls (p. 12).

The collection is particularly notable for the sheer scope of the works by Rancière that are referenced. Seminal books, such as *Mute Speech*, *Flesh of Words*, *Politics of Literature*, and *Film Fables*, which usually form the touchstones for scholarship treating Rancière's claims regarding the politics of aesthetics, are treated in depth in chapters by Mecchia, Bell, Flinn, Ross, and Guerlac. But the volume also addresses works that precede Rancière's aesthetic turn, including *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* (Sachs, Hollinshead-Strick), *The Nights of Labor* (Lerner) and *The Philosopher and His Poor* (van Zuylen), weaving them into explorations of the intersection of his work with art history, performance art, and literary and film criticism. The volume further includes considerations of the aesthetic politics at stake in explicitly political works such as *The Hatred of Democracy*, which, as Apter points out, "makes scant reference to literature and unlike other works of Rancière ...offers no concerted politics of the aesthetic" (p. 12). Moving between these diverse reference points in order to consider the broad problematic of modernity (the volume's ostensible commitment to "understanding *modernism*" seems too modest a claim, given the breadth of what is covered within), the book is able to do what many previous collections have failed to do: maintain the integrity of Rancière's cross- or un-disciplinary style.

The first section of the collection offers a series of close-readings of some of Rancière's major works. While these chapters are flagged by Bray as offering "an introduction to Rancière for the uninitiated," they also delve into challenging new territory (p. 3). Flinn, Hollinshead-Strick, Mecchia, and Bell contribute the chapters that most explicitly form the core of the volume's engagement with Rancière's critique of modernism, but each of these essays goes well beyond offering an introduction to the particular work under consideration. Flinn's examination of Rancière's use of the concept of the "fable" not only treats this concept in relation to its most familiar appearances in his work on cinema, but also traces its significance back through his thinking on literature. Hollinshead-Strick puts *The Emancipated Spectator* into conversation with *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* in order to explore the "link between what Rancière sees as a modern lack of writerly condescension to the reader and his refutation of passive spectatorship" (p. 85). She demonstrates Rancière's fraught relationship with the category of modernism as well as its rich reservoir as she, like him, passes seamlessly between figures such as Loïe Fuller and Pedro Costa. Mecchia's analysis of *Mute Speech* delves into the key terms of Rancière's politics of aesthetics, but she also succinctly yet provocatively situates his critique of modernism within the various terrains in which it intervenes: French criticism, philosophy, and the question of "what is literature?" Bell traces the concerns of Rancière's recently translated book, *Le fil perdu: Essais sur la fiction moderne* (2014), back to *Nights of Labor*, challenging Rancière's failure to engage Marxism beyond Sartre and pointing to some of the nuances lost in his refusal of the modernism/postmodernism distinction.

The three chapters that make up the rest of this section (Apter, Lerner, Sachs) go farther afield in their choice of corpus, looking to texts that either precede or seemingly refuse to engage with Rancière's aesthetic concerns. Apter enters Rancière's work through one of his less known references, Hippolyte Taine, but far from carrying readers into distant obscurities, she not only finds in Taine a precursor to match.com, Facebook and Grindr, but also what enables Rancière to arrive at a politics of literature "'operative' as a non-necessitarian concept of milieu, in which emancipatory particles are quite literally in the air..." (p. 32). Lerner's analysis of Rancière's *Nights of Labor*, among other works from the 1970s, leads to a discussion of his failure to adequately cope with certain voices, such as that of the female Saint-Simonian Voilquin, an argument that speaks productively to Chanter's feminist critique in the second section of the collection. In Sachs's chapter on the *Ignorant Schoolmaster*, the reader is not only introduced to the emancipatory pedagogy that Rancière constructs in reference to the nineteenth-century education reformer Joseph Jacotot, but the ways in which it speaks directly to modern education and society.

It is perhaps appropriate that at the end of *Understanding Rancière, Understanding Modernism* readers may feel as though they understand less of what any stable definition of modernism would entail. The volume does not only reflect upon Rancière's own critique and expansion of the category of modernism, which he reconsiders as part of his aesthetic regime of art, it also performs a similar destabilization of its terms and boundaries. The second section of the volume considers his work in relation to aesthetic objects that are drawn from the modernist canon, but also Hollywood cinema, and contemporary activist and performance art.

The chapters by Guerlac and Ross are central to the volume's treatment of Rancière's work in relation to modernist works of art. Guerlac's subtle discussion of the complicity between Rancière and Proust delivers faithfully on the promise made by the volume's title. She not only concisely introduces Rancière's thought on modernism, exploring his resistance to the belatedness

inherent in the “post” of “post-Marxism, post-democracy, post-history, post-politics and postmodernism” (p. 163), but also looks to Proust in order to put pressure on his account of the “time of modernity” (p. 177). Ross’s chapter walks the reader through Rancière’s critique of Greenberg’s definition of modernism, before turning to a particularly nuanced analysis of his use of Stendhal, Ibsen and Freud. In doing so, she considers the ambiguous promise of Rancière’s aesthetic regime of the arts, looking to the “contradictions that elude modernist detection and constitute the features of the art that belongs to this regime” (p. 182). In van Zuylen’s chapter Rancière’s readings of Flaubert, Mallarmé and Proust become the means of understanding his work as a “way out” of the defeatism that he diagnoses in Bourdieu’s concept of habitus (p. 200).

The other chapters in this section (Conely, Chanter, López) depart rather radically from anything that might traditionally be considered modernist art. These chapters do not explicitly set out to expand or complicate this category. Instead, they turn to works that, while not strictly modernist, fit Rancière’s definition of the aesthetic regime of art. These chapters in particular exemplify the fact that the volume is less a rehearsing of the terms of Rancière’s critique of modernism, than a concrete enactment of the ambiguity of boundaries that is a cornerstone of his work. With his usual elegance, for example, Conley deploys Rancière as the springboard for his own deft analysis of the egalitarian potential of the humor in the 1940s Hollywood movie *They Drive by Night*. Chanter, on the other hand, delves into feminist and race theory, considering works by Guerrilla Girls, Cox and 2Fik, in order to “acknowledge that Rancière’s own understanding of what is self-evident is liable to be constituted in such a way as to emphasize certain factors as salient, while ignoring, disregarding, or failing to see others as salient” (159). Finally, López puts Rancière into conversation with Latin American performance artists, pointing to the advantages that his thought offers for “understanding modern aesthetic production beyond the problematic division inherent in modern dichotomous conceptions of culture, such as high versus low culture, modern versus traditional, foreign versus national, indigenous versus European among others” (p. 221).

The volume’s third section offers a glossary of key terms including: Distribution of the Sensible, Fable, Intellectual Equality, Mute Speech, and Regimes of Art. These entries are particularly useful to the new reader, but also offer some more subtle tracings of the terms as they mutate over the course of Rancière’s work. Some concepts, such as dissensus and misunderstanding, are perhaps striking in their absence, as is the counterpart of the included “Distribution of the Sensible,” the *re*-distribution of the sensible, although it is suggested in the “framing” and “reframing” of the field of perceptibility that Brant’s entry speaks to. However, the book does not attempt to offer an exhaustive glossary, but rather so many points of entry into the thought of a determinedly non-systematic thinker.

In the interview between Rancière and Bray that concludes the collection, Rancière offers one of the most cogent summaries that he has yet given of his critique of modernism and postmodernism. He traces the development of historical modernism into what he calls Clement Greenberg’s “retrospective modernism,” which then (problematically for Rancière) becomes the foil for postmodernism. The interview lives up to both promises contained in the title, as Rancière then goes on to reflect at length on his own cross-disciplinary approach. His description of “dragging texts from one time period into another, of launching the provocative force of these past texts into the present” is a compelling description of what is achieved by the volume itself in relation to his own works (p. 281). The interview ends with Rancière’s reflection on the graduate students, particularly in the United States, who now study his work on literature. “From

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what I hear,” he relates, “it helps them write their own theses or dissertations...” (p. 289). This volume will certainly do the same.

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#### Part three, Glossary of Key Terms

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Patrick M. Bray, translator, "'Understanding Modernism, Reconfiguring Disciplinarity,' interview with Rancière"

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