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Davide Panagia, *Rancière's Sentiments*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2018. 142 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$89.95 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9-78-0822370130; \$23.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 9-78-0822370222.

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I would recommend Davide Panagia's *Rancière's Sentiments* without hesitation to any researcher in literature, political science, or philosophy who seeks an articulate presentation of Rancière's very particular manner of thinking and arguing. Panagia does an excellent job of explaining lucidly what to the non-initiate may at first appear to be a rather alien way of writing about aesthetics and politics, describing judiciously how these two conceptual domains are conjoined in Rancière. I do not at all mean to suggest that Panagia's essay is a primer, although it can serve that purpose. It is also, and foremost, a subtle distillation possible only if the practitioner is thoroughly versed in Rancière's thought and in the history of his intellectual development, as well as in how the philosopher's work has entered the English-speaking world. Jacques Rancière was a key thinker in three of Panagia's earlier essays, *The Poetics of Political Thinking* (2006), *The Political Life of Sensation* (2009), and *Ten Theses for an Aesthetics of Politics* (2016). *Rancière's Sentiments* is thus a logical outcome of long practice grappling with the meaning and importance of Rancière's work.

The field of Rancière commentaries has become quite cluttered in recent years, a veritable cottage industry of the sort that tends to grow up around a thinker who has become fashionable. A quick perusal of the most current edition of even a single bibliographic compilation, the one published annually by the Modern Language Association--the *MLA International Bibliography*--yields nearly six hundred entries for a simple search of the term "Rancière." In the States, things began to heat up at the end of the 1990s, and one of the first entries in the *MLA International Bibliography* that brings Rancière into an American context is Davide Panagia's own conversation with the philosopher published in *Diacritics: A Review of Contemporary Criticism* in 2000.[1] The expert knowledge that Panagia now displays began at the beginning of Rancière studies in the U.S. and is due in no small part to how well Panagia masters the modern history of philosophy and critical thinking in France and in Europe more broadly.

English translations of Jacques Rancière's books and essays proliferated after 2000, and his thought became more widely available to an English-speaking reading public. A characteristic of those translations is that certain key terms in Rancière's vocabulary are quite simply untranslatable: *partager*, *dispositif*, *sensible*, *police*, for example. Rancière's Anglophone commentators invariably encounter the moment when they must grapple with words that the

philosopher has consciously chosen to use, rework, redefine as central tenets of his thought. Understanding him ultimately requires that one return to the original French in order to experience a certain kind of very particular and careful wordplay. This is as it should be, because Rancière likes to define his work as an artistic attempt to experiment with words. As I was writing this review, I happened upon a live dialog with Rancière, in real time, which was part of the CUNY Segal Talks series, during which he said exactly that. In answer to Frank Hentschker's question about what artists should do to represent or respond to the Covid-19 pandemic, Rancière replied that he thinks of himself as an artist of words. The discussion begins roughly at the 36-minute mark of the dialog and hinges on the notion that the artist is someone who restates things by using words or images in a new way, not esoterically, but rather to make them resonate differently against the consensus of a community: "I think of myself as an artist, because for me an artist means a researcher. Somebody who tries to restate the ways we perceive things and situations and to create some kind of new possible words. And so, I think I am an artist in that sense, too." [2] He suggests that the artist cannot respond to Covid-19 by trying to represent the current situation, because art is not political in that sense, it is an experiment in rearranging words and images.

This position corresponds quite closely to Rancière's critique of Aristotelian mimesis. Escaping the authority of the order of mimesis, Rancière is free to roam into many different aesthetic fields, enacting the role of the autodidact and the unauthorized interloper, who speaks without field authority and with a sort of impunity, unawed by so-called experts. In certain ways, Rancière's practice of untrammelled foraging resembles the way Michel de Certeau once described Michel Foucault's practice as a historian in the writing of *Surveiller et punir*: "This kind of 'art' is easy to see at work. It is an art of telling: suspense, extraordinary quotations, ellipses of quantitative series, metonymical samples....It also is an art of seizing the opportunity and of making a hit....His reading is a poaching. Hunting through the forests of history and through our present plains, Foucault traps strange things which he discovers in a past literature." [3] Foucault would be a poacher, who ventures onto the dangerous territory of a master to trap and steal strange archival artifacts, escaping just in time to avoid having to answer to the authority of the master. The comparison is alluring, but in the end, it does not quite correspond to Rancière's style of thinking, because Rancière never retreats from the other's territory; rather, he lives there, in the interstices, in spaces that can never be completely framed by those who would impose their order. What Rancière does resembles much more what de Certeau liked to call "tactics," practices that cannot be codified by a theory (or by an overarching strategy). [4] They emerge only from unpredictable encounters with events, phenomena or works.

In his first chapter, Davide Panagia explores this dimension of Rancière's practice in part by describing Rancière's break with Louis Althusser as a choice to abandon Althusser's notion of *appareil*, apparatus, in favor of the notion of *dispositif*, a term that has no easy English equivalent. Althusser saw ideology as a sort of apparatus, a machine producing a framework for social participation that beckons to the individual in ways that are inescapable because they are not visible or apparent. The ideological apparatus powerfully replicates social structures and behaviors by inserting the subject into the social in a way that makes the subject oblivious to the very ideology that governs the structure. To overcome ideology means to critique the ideological apparatus and reveal its operations. In order to do this, one needs to construct a theory, an understanding of ideology. The philosopher must teach the victims of ideology how to see, because on their own they are incapable of understanding and acting against their enslavement.

As Panagia rightly points out, Rancière is drawn instead to the notion of *dispositif*. A *dispositif* is a more punctual conceptual device that arranges and rearranges relations between and among elements and is attuned to the flux that characterizes all relations. In Panagia's formulation, a *dispositif* is "a scenographic techne that is always adjusting and altering, always playing with the unnaturalness of relations" (p. 28). It is a disposition in the etymological sense, says Panagia, an arrangement of things. Moreover, it can be devised by anyone, by any subject who finds a way to restructure a framework that seems natural and given. The activities of workers central to Rancière's formative early essay, *La Nuit des prolétaires* (1981), for example, contest the diurnal organization of capitalist production by creating nocturnal aesthetic *dispositifs* that escape it. Panagia alludes to Foucault's turn toward the notion of *dispositif* in his work as well. And one might also mention Jean-François Lyotard's *Des dispositifs pulsionnels* (1973) to suggest that the term was emerging more broadly in a counter-Althusserian mode challenging the idea that relations are a machine that simply reproduces the same and that the subject is caught in this web, in need of a transcendental theory provided by a philosopher/expert in order to escape it. In fact, the term *dispositif* can also be found in Pierre Schaeffer's important essays on sound from roughly the same period, *Traité des objets musicaux* (1966) and *Machines à communiquer* (1970-72). For Schaeffer, the recording machine was a *dispositif* allowing one to capture sounds and break them apart into their elements. The notion of capture or trap is crucial: "The dispositif can be compared to a trap laid down to capture an animal in order to observe it." [5]

To Panagia's idea that a *dispositif* adjusts and plays with relations, then, it might be fruitful to add the notion of the trap, because in some sense the *dispositif* finds weak points in seemingly unassailable structures, readjusts parameters, and tries out connections to catch us unawares, producing effects that the structure in question could not foresee and foreclose—just as a prey cannot predict when or where a trap will be laid in its path, and to which it will thus inadvertently fall victim. Panagia's third chapter, on Rancière's style, argues very convincingly that *style indirect libre*, free indirect discourse, an anchoring point of Rancière's reflections, is one such *dispositif* for undermining the concept of authority and decorum, for redefining how one is authorized to speak. It is a ready-made language device that allows the writer to explore relations without assuming a position of authority. Flaubert's genius use of the device in *Madame Bovary* furnishes Rancière with a model for what a *dispositif* can actually do. It allows the narrator to refuse to take a position with regard to the thoughts, hopes and desires of Madame Bovary. The narrative thus gives her a ubiquitous voice without judgment, because one can never tell whether the descriptions of her thoughts are her own or the narrator's. If the voice of the narrator were clearly distinct from that of Madame Bovary, then the narrator would inevitably occupy the transcendental position of the cynical critic and would be forced to compare Madame Bovary's aspirations to acceptable norms and behaviors. In short, the narrator would become none other than the sneering seducer, Rodolphe. *Style indirect libre* allows a seemingly insignificant wife of a country doctor to become a literary subject, because she is no longer subject to the modes of action and judgment that govern the Aristotelian mimetic plot or to the censure that mimesis wields to exclude aberrational or insignificant behaviors. The device becomes thereby a *dispositif* of democracy.

It is the fundamental stylistic mode through which Rancière argues in his own essays, as Panagia astutely remarks, because "analytic argumentation is not his preferred mode of theoretical exposition or genre of writing" (p. 64). Instead, Rancière's style is one that mimics *style indirect libre* by constantly slipping the noose of conclusion and judgment, preferring instead to record intuitions about connections, those sentiments to which Panagia alludes in the title of his essay. Readers who seek theoretical and analytical clarity need not apply: "rather than reading

Rancière's theoretical writings for the purpose of conceptual clarification and analytic application...we are best served by reading them through their stylistics, 'as processes of connections...produced by the becoming of (their) terms'" (83).[6] "Terms": we are back to those pesky words with which Rancière so loves to experiment--they are always in a state of becoming and never quite fully defined. One might ask, playfully: are Rancière's essays really theoretical essays at all? The arduous effort necessary to read them productively does not necessarily lead to the rigor and clarity that are the supposed hallmarks of theory. One might observe in passing that one of the reasons for Rancière's growing popularity among American academics and thinkers is precisely the recent academic turn against theory. The backlash in the U.S. against a hermeneutics of suspicion, which began a couple of decades ago, was a tailor-made context for the reception of Rancière's work. The hermeneutic approaches that dominated university criticism at the end of the twentieth century were essentially based on versions of post-structuralism or Jamesonian Marxism. They claimed that the text is a machine to fool the reader into thinking that it works, that it coheres as a whole, thereby reproducing ideology and imposing it on the naïve reader. Post-structuralist or Marxian critics were hell-bent on arguing that this impression about a work--that it actually works--is a textual trap that must be dismantled to liberate the reader. Rancière's way of writing and arguing gives comfort to affect theory and its many avatars in their rejection of this hermeneutics of suspicion.

The backdrop of his insurgence against the authority of consensus is what Rancière calls the *police* of Aristotelian mimesis. Panagia writes a luminous chapter on this, marked by a very suggestive move: he pairs Aristotle's *Poetics* with book seven of the *Metaphysics*. The *Poetics* makes the argument that a well-crafted plot is one in which the proper characters act in the proper way at the proper time. As Panagia puts it: "[I]n the *Poetics* we are given an account of what good behavior is: the doing of a necessary action, at the right time, that makes sense" (p. 46). Emplotment is more than the logic of a plot in an aesthetic representation, it is actually a logic of life more broadly speaking. This is what book seven of the *Metaphysics* suggests. Panagia argues that Aristotle understands the structure of existence itself to be like a plot: "The certain order or arrangement of existence thus requires of the philosopher the capacity to specify which parts precede others in exactly the same way that the poet must determine the order of the plot and the structure of emplotment. In short, existence is structured like a plot" (p. 47). By expanding the scope into Aristotle's broader philosophical thought, Panagia further elucidates the force with which Aristotelian mimesis has dominated reflections about who is empowered to speak, in what order, and under what circumstances. Aristotelian mimesis is a map of decorum, of proper behavior in public settings, as much as it is a literary theory derived from the *Poetics*. Panagia is particularly astute in exhibiting the importance of this broader philosophical question.

Much of the aesthetic liberation of literature is accomplished by the novel. Rancière has argued that the rise of the novel is the major literary event of the nineteenth century and is crucial to undoing Aristotelian mimesis. A literary artifact characterized not by a tight and logical plot or a carefully prescribed form, it consists instead of a string of discrete parts and episodes that can multiply ad infinitum. It is dispersive and ultimately amorphous, as Panagia characterizes it, a stream of words that flows off the page and infects the world of the reader, even as the group of readers grows in the nineteenth century. Panagia compares the visual appearance of a poem printed on a page to that of a page in a novel. In the latter, words are contained only by the margins imposed by the print format, but flow endlessly as pages are turned. Moreover, the novel is the seat of a new realism. Panagia hastens to explain that this is not realism as we have traditionally understood it: "realism is not representational, nor is it prescriptive...Rather it is a

site of contest regarding the nature of the actual. Realism in this instance attends to the practices of ensemble formation, as well as to the ways arrangements of words and significations, of workers and sleep, of films and fables are untethered and disjoined” (pp. 86-87). Panagia cites Michel de Certeau, who makes the same point with extraordinary clarity: “Rather than representing a return to the real, ‘realism’ expresses the release of a population of words that until now had been attached to well-defined facts and that, from this point on, become useful for the production of legends or fictions.”[7] This is a formulation that Rancière would understand quite well, since “untethering” words from existing structures is precisely the artistic freedom to try out new configurations that become new fictions. The aimlessness and reverie that untethered language unleashes are essential characteristics of the novel, since it does not have to answer to a preconceived notion of where it must go and how it must end. This brings us directly back to *Madame Bovary*, which is, when all is said and done, a description of Madame Bovary’s life as an aimless reverie. By refusing to condemn her life because it does not conform to a plot and goes nowhere useful, Flaubert creates the sort of realism that detaches literary description and language from emplotment and, moreover, opens literature to anyone, which is another way of saying that it democratizes literature.

Like the novel, cinema is an aesthetic domain that allows and plays with aimlessness and reverie. One of its core techniques, perhaps its defining technique, is montage, assembling shots across cuts. Montage allows for striking juxtapositions, releasing the image from the burden of carrying a story that unfolds, thus allowing it to wander. Predictably, New Wave cinema, and Jean-Luc Godard in particular, play an exemplary role in Rancière’s thinking. From the beginning of his career, Godard entirely rejected montage for the purpose of plot, turning the *jump cut*, the cut that refuses the smoothness of a transition from one shot to the next, into a technique that untethers shots and images to create other and different assemblages. Panagia summarizes this strikingly: “we cannot come up with good reasons as to why these cuts were assembled as they were. Their intelligibility is unverifiable because there is no common ground for their being together. Each shot is a no-part, a dislocated episode” (p. 61). In many ways, cinema learned the lesson of the novel, where transitions from scene to scene or episode to episode can take any form the author chooses.

In the final collaborative essay published by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari shortly before Deleuze’s death, *Qu’est-ce que la philosophie?* (1991), the two philosophers propose a startling and provocative definition of philosophy: “Philosophy is the art of forming, inventing, and fabricating concepts.”[8] Jacques Rancière would doubtless quarrel with the term “concept,” but if one were to replace it with *dispositif*, the statement might well garner his support. Philosophy is not the arduous task of finding the truth, it is the art of exploring relations; it is punctual, evanescent, in flux. Philosophers investigate clusters of relations and describe the wonder provoked by experiences, but they do not stop there, they move on to still other experimental propositions. In *Rancière’s Sentiments*, Davide Panagia has done a superb job of navigating through and illuminating the various constellations that characterize Rancière’s thought, while maintaining the sense and the feel of a manner of thinking that eludes closure. The philosopher and former dancer, Maxine Sheets-Johnstone, has argued that the truly defining element of life in any form is movement.[9] Emplotment, *pace* Aristotle, would not define existence, but rather, movement itself would be the quintessential component. Jacques Rancière’s philosophy is thinking in motion: he rehabilitates aimlessness just as the nineteenth-century workers, who were forced into soulless tasks by early capitalism, found ways to reclaim their nights in order to think and to feel outside the strictures of repetitive production.

NOTES

[1] In the preface to *Rancière's Sentiments*, Panagia states that his interest in Rancière began when he was a graduate student in 1993.

[2] Jacques Rancière, "Segal Talks: Jacques Rancière," <https://howlround.com/happenings/segal-talks-jacques-ranciere> (transcription of remarks made at 37:06); accessed July 27, 2020.

[3] Michel de Certeau, *Heterologies. Discourse of the Other*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), p. 191.

[4] Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Randall (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984), pp. 29-42.

[5] Pierre Schaeffer, *Machines à communiquer*, 2 vols. (Paris: Seuil, 1972): 2: p. 158 (my translation).

[6] The quotation within this quotation, as Panagia indicates, is from Isabelle Stengers, "Including Non-Humans in Political Theory: Opening Pandora's Box?" in Bruce Baum and Sarah Whitmore, eds., *Political Matter: Technoscience, Democracy, and Public Life* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), p. 14.

[7] Michel de Certeau, *The Writing of History*, trans. Tom Conley (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), p. 42. Quoted by Panagia, p. 87.

[8] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie?* (Paris: Minuit, 1991), p. 8. "[L]a philosophie est l'art de former, d'inventer, de fabriquer des concepts."

[9] Maxine Sheets-Johnstone, *The Primacy of Movement* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Company, 2011).

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