

Introduction: a journey in equality

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It has taken several decades for the work of Jacques Rancière to find a wide audience. His first publications, in which he developed an alternative approach to the history of the labour movement, were known only to a few specialists in the mid-1970s. Interest in his writings started to grow with the publication of *Disagreement*, his major book of political philosophy (1995 in France, 1998 for the English translation). Since then, his unflinching defence of a radical version of democratic equality has made him one of the key references in contemporary political thought. Parallel to this work on democracy, his writings on literature and the visual arts, particularly film, have also gained increased attention in the last two decades. Of the more than twenty books he has published, only a handful are not yet translated into English. He now publishes regularly in international journals of politics and aesthetics and receives invitations all over the world from the most prestigious academic and artistic institutions.

Early Marxist years and the rupture of May '68

Rancière was born in 1940 in Algiers. He was therefore a decade younger than the generation of the most famous postwar French theorists, like Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Jean-François Lyotard and Gilles Deleuze. Rancière's generation, of which Alain Badiou is the other very famous figure, was the one that would become engulfed by the revolutionary activism awakened by the events of May 1968.

The years leading to the 1968 conflagration were years of political radicalization. In 1965, at the age of 25, Rancière gave a long presentation in the most famous seminar of the time: the reading group on Marx's *Capital*, organized by the Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser at the Ecole Normale Supérieure in Paris. The intellectual landscape was dominated by the reference to Marx, and Althusser was without a doubt one of the stellar figures in the field. In a rare retrospective note, Rancière has reminisced about the immense aura surrounding Althusser at the time. *Reading Capital*, the book that was published as a result of the Paris seminars, became for a couple years a central reference in Western academia, notably in the English-speaking world. As Rancière writes, he was living then "in the midst of Althusserian certitudes. Althusser had declared the necessity to return to Marx in order to retrieve all the incisiveness of his theoretical and political rupture" (PO 334, my trans.).

Rancière's Althusserian period came to a brutal halt in the agitation of May 1968. The year 1968 was one of revolutionary effervescence all around the world, but particularly so in France. The revolutionary tendencies that burst out in 1968 had been prepared by mounting political antagonisms and social, cultural dissatisfaction, particularly among the youth, in the two decades following the end of the war. Deep social-economic divisions, culminating in recurrent mass strikes (notably in 1945 and 1948; 1963 saw the first occupation of the Sorbonne by students) and brutal police repression, were relayed in the political arena by a sharp antagonism between parties of government and a powerful communist movement. The two decades between 1945 and 1968 also led to the end of the French empire, culminating in a bloody colonial war in Algeria (1954–62) and almost a civil war in the homeland. Algeria gained its independence in 1962, but in 1968 the wounds opened up by this immensely traumatic period were still wide open. The international situation also played a direct role in fanning social and political antagonisms. For an increasingly radicalized youth, the war in Vietnam and the Cuban Revolution represented powerful models. The agitation that began at the end of March 1968 following police violence against anti-Vietnam demonstrations became the spark for a social and political explosion that had been brewing for many years.

While the student rebellion was quashed and state power re-established within a few months, the forces that had paved the way for the joint radicalization of the youth and the proletarian movement were still palpable. A significant part of the student and workers' bodies refused to abandon their hopes for a different future and took a radical leftist turn. The strong *gauchiste* movement that emerged on the

left of the Communist Party was decisively influenced by the Cultural Revolution in China. It drew from its inspiration a series of fundamental demands: a radical rejection of the division of labour, especially between manual and intellectual labour; an emphasis on class struggle, in particular as it is relayed in intellectual production; and an emphasis on (revolutionary) practice as the factor in which antagonistic class lines, as well as the possibilities of collective action, are revealed. The year 1968 and those that immediately followed had a profound impact on Rancière on a theoretical, but also, judging from rare biographical indications, on an existential level. Throughout his writings, we hear the reverberation of the appeal made to intellectuals to “get off their horses” (SVLP 2), as a famous Mao aphorism put it: that is, to overcome class boundaries in real life as much as in thought, an injunction that led many *gauchiste* intellectuals to “establish” themselves in factories (SP 295; see a classic account in Linhart, 1981).

Unlike the great majority of his colleagues, some of whom were to become important official figures in the Fifth Republic’s establishment, Rancière has always remained true to the fundamental ideal of radical equality, which inspired the post-’68 movement. His whole work is characterized by the consistent attempt to scrupulously follow the implications of the idea that human beings are equal in all respects.

The immediate consequence of Rancière’s embrace of radical egalitarianism was a definitive rupture with Althusser and orthodox Marxism, although not, for a while, with Marx himself. An article written in the summer of 1969 documents the sharp antagonism that from then on separated the young leftist intellectual from the official philosopher of the French Communist Party (OTI; see also the self-critical rejection of his 1965 article, in HOW). This early piece shows the immense disillusion, typical of a whole generation, felt by Rancière towards what he saw as the failure on the part of Althusser and the communist organizations to support and relay the hopes and ideals expressed in the 1968 movements. Five years later, *Althusser’s Lesson* (1974) was an entire book dedicated to the account of this failed encounter. These first publications remained unequivocally dedicated to Marx as the central theoretical reference for the analysis of modern society and for the conceptualization of an alternative politics. A few years later, however, Rancière would become increasingly critical of Marx himself.

One of Althusser’s most famous lessons was the radical distinction between science and ideology. According to this view, while bourgeois society justifies its domination through ideological constructs, communist thinkers, enlightened by Marx’s revolutionary discovery of historical materialism, can see through ideological veils and develop a truly

scientific analysis of history and society. Marx is credited with identifying the real structures of society and their interactions, explaining the specific character of given historical social orders. As a result, the revolution in practice is reliant upon Marx's revolution in theory. Rancière rejects this view because of its implications for the classes suffering from social domination. In the Althusserian construct, since the working classes are victims of ideological obfuscation, they are not in a position to see through to the reality of their situation. They need to be led by the Party and trust the Party's intellectuals to realize what their situation is and what kind of political action will liberate them from oppression. Their spontaneous expressions and their actions have no intrinsic value and must constantly be redirected by the Party and its theorists. In this Althusserian vision of the central role of the organization and its thinkers, Rancière finds the same logic at play as in traditional structures of domination and indeed, as he will argue later, in classical philosophy, including Marx: the social hierarchy, established through the division of labour (notably the division between manual and intellectual professions) is translated into a symbolic hierarchy, which amounts to making the working classes passive masses whose words and acts are meaningless. Only the individuals belonging to classes able to afford leisure are deemed able to express valuable thoughts and propose forms of collective action (economic, political, cultural) with real relevance. Already in the early publications, the critique of social domination and the goal of a truly egalitarian politics are intimately linked to questions relating to the transmission of knowledge and the positions of power of those who speak, and so to questions of education, knowledge, and the relationship between social value and meaning.

Logical revolts

From 1969 onwards, Rancière held a position in the newly created Université de Vincennes, just outside Paris (now Paris VIII at Saint-Denis). This university, which started as an experimental centre in the autumn of 1968 and was institutionally recognized in 1969, became the place where academics who had been involved in the post-'68 movements could find employment and experiment with teaching in non-hierarchical ways. Alain Badiou also found a post here. The University at Vincennes attracted some of the most prestigious intellectual leaders of the post-'68 period, like Deleuze, Foucault and Lyotard. Rancière was to spend his entire career at Vincennes, retiring in 2000 as a professor.

The years following 1968 saw an immense disillusion gradually form for all those who had dreamt of an abolition of social hierarchies. This led many of the intellectuals involved in the events of 1968 to substantial reassessments and the development of new arguments and theoretical strategies to make sense of their past (although recent) engagement, explain the state of current disillusionment and map out a new course. By contrast with many of his colleagues, who moved towards entirely new paradigms, or undertook stringent denunciations of their radicalism of yesterday (Lecourt 2001), Rancière's attitude towards the recess of revolutionary hopes was to remain true to the ideals expressed in 1968 and the transformations these demanded in the methods of the social sciences and philosophy (see Giuseppina Mecchia's study of Rancière's critical stance towards philosophy in Chapter 3).

The strike of the Lip factory workers in 1973 acted as a powerful reminder that the working class might not have taken state power, but was still, as always, able to denounce social domination and create new modes of collective life. This example convinced Rancière that it was a mistake to abandon the interest in workers' emancipation and class struggle (PO 337). But this had to be done differently.

Rancière dedicated himself to the concrete history of labour struggles, with particular attention to the specificities of each particular movement, below the theoretical preconceptions of Marxist and other socialist readings. As ever, it was necessary to let the voices and actions of the dominated speak for themselves. On the other hand, the disillusion that followed the immense hope of 1968 pointed precisely to the recurring limitations and contradictions of the labour movement, which one also had to study concretely, again in the specificity of each particular movement.

Several projects engaged in similar directions (Gossez 1968; Perrot 1987) confirmed for Rancière the validity of this approach, in particular E. P. Thompson's influential *The Making of the English Working Class*. For the next ten years, until 1981 and the publication of *The Nights of Labour*, Rancière's activity was wholly dedicated to archival work, aiming to produce a French version of "history from below". The first chapter of this book (by Jean-Philippe Deranty) focuses on this decade and Rancière's first publications following *Althusser's Lesson*.

Rancière's philosophy seminar at Vincennes was in fact "a research group into workers' history". It led to the formation of a research collective that named itself "Révoltes logiques" (Logical revolts), after one of Rimbaud's poems in *Illuminations* entitled "Democracy", in which Rimbaud renders the cruelty and corruption of soldiers planning a "massacre" of "logical revolts". The group published a

journal under the collective's name until 1985 (see SP for Rancière's contributions).

Beside the yearly edition of *Révoltes logiques*, other publications arose from his substantial archival work. In 1975, Rancière edited *La parole ouvrière*, an anthology of workers' texts with Alain Faure, one of his students. In 1981, he published his doctoral thesis under the title "La nuit des prolétaires" (*The Nights of Labour*), a philosophical–historical account of some of the most original figures of the nineteenth-century labour movement. And in 1983, Rancière published an anthology of one the most unusual "plebeian philosophers", the carpenter Louis-Gabriel Gauny (PP).

The encounter with Joseph Jacotot

A significant expression used by the writers of the *Révoltes logiques* collective was that of "thought from below". While referring explicitly to the "history from below" perspective, the expression also contrasts with it in important ways. It points to the idea that human beings are equal not just in legal or moral terms, but also in terms of their intellectual and discursive capacities. This is the fundamental idea that Rancière retained from his involvement in the radical–egalitarian movement of the early 1970s: the dominated do not need masters or leaders to tell them what to think and what to say. Their plight is not due to false consciousness or ignorance, but to a social organization that systematically makes their voices and their achievements invisible and inaudible. This is the constant intuition inspiring Rancière's work. Accordingly, the political commitment to equality must not limit itself to political or historical studies, as in "history from below" writings, but must also include the study of the thoughts and modes of expression of the dominated. Further, these must be registered and studied not from a condescending sociological point of view, but as expressions of human thought as valid and as interesting as those of the socially recognized thinkers, writers and artists.

The fundamental idea that Rancière formed in those years was thus the "radical equality between human beings in terms of their intelligence". A decisive encounter he made during his archival research helped him to definitively establish this core intuition. In *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* (1987, English translation 1991), Rancière gives a thorough exposition and defence of the "method of intellectual emancipation" of the French revolutionary and educational philosopher Joseph Jacotot (1770–1840). The personal tone in which the book is written,

with Rancière's own voice constantly meshing with that of Jacotot, often to the point of indistinction, makes it an extraordinarily revealing source for his deeply held convictions. In Chapter 2, Yves Citton describes the radical, yet thoroughly consistent, view of individual intelligence Jacotot developed. Rancière's work can be seen as a systematic exploration of Jacotot's axiom, according to which "the same intelligence is at work in all the acts of the human spirit" (IS 18). In *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, the axiom is made to apply more specifically to issues in education. But the implications of Jacotot's axiom point in many other directions. In particular, the critical upshot of the radical equality thesis is the explanation of the *fact* of *existing* inequality as a result of hierarchically organized social structures. Rancière shares Jacotot's vision of social orders as being fundamentally structured on a divisive logic, which separates those who know from those who do not, those who work from those who think, adult from child, man from woman, and so on.

The Jacotot axiom also contained the roots of Rancière's shift towards poetics and aesthetics. The idea that "the same intelligence is at work in all the acts of the human spirit" is to be understood not just as a claim about capacities *of* individuals but also about the possibility of communication *between* human beings. Jacotot's method of teaching consisted in asking students to constantly describe and explain what they had read, seen, discovered, in other people's works or in the observation of nature. This was based on his idea that learning is first a matter of will and attention, which force intellectual capacities to find out for themselves how things work. But it was also premised on the idea that thinking is inherently an act of translation: of the words of another into one's own words; but also of external symbolic meanings (the meaning of a word, a mathematical formula, and so on) into internal ones (when one understands them) via their passage through the materiality of language (or other media, for instance a drawing). The materiality of communication media, in particular of language, provides a common resource through which different individuals can share thoughts they only had at first in the privacy of their individual minds. In Jacotot's insistence on the importance of material tools to mediate the learning of new knowledge (like the book he recommended to his students as the start of learning for the most different types of knowledge), Rancière already found the possibility of grounding his radical-democratic thinking in poetic and artistic practices, in particular, in the radical-egalitarian potentialities of word-use, that is, of literature. Jacotot enabled him to link his initial interest in the working class with the idea of equality as a work of radical communication: "in the

act of speaking, man doesn't transmit his knowledge, he makes poetry; he translates and invites others to do the same. He communicates as an artisan: as a person who handles words like tools" (IS 65).

The encounter with Joseph Jacotot encouraged subtle but significant shifts in the direction of Rancière's thought. Whereas his early archival work still aimed to retrieve something like a genuine "workers' voice", he became gradually aware of the pitfalls of an approach that would treat particular forms of expression as representative of a whole class. Increasingly, Rancière was attracted to the singular voices of isolated individuals who had attempted precisely to throw away the iron cast of class categorization. In these individual efforts at transcending class, Rancière gradually saw the most important social and political lesson. *The Nights of Labour* had already drawn attention to the specific ways in which singular voices could contest the logic of the category of "class". Jacotot's view that human intelligences are equal only inasmuch as they are compared individually, and his adjacent vision of social groupings as irreducibly governed by hierarchical logics, confirmed this new direction. This shift towards individual destinies also corroborated Rancière's increasing interest in the overlaps between politics, poetics and aesthetics. Many of those isolated voices of the workers' movement had attempted to transcend their condition by engaging in works normally reserved to the classes able to afford leisure. The structural inequality organizing social orders therefore turned out to be not only related to the organization of production, but also, and perhaps more fundamentally, to the implicit divisions in the realm of discourse, between those whose voices were deemed significant, and those whose voices remained inaudible. Class domination then would be rooted and expressed first and foremost in access to symbolic expression. Conversely, though, this focus on symbolic expression also started to show the emancipatory logic of modern poetics: underneath the social restrictions that seemed to regulate access to language, language itself, in the post-revolutionary ages, turned out to be open to all.

Interventions in political philosophy

The mid-1980s saw the demise of socialist experiments in real politics, culminating in the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. In France, Mitterrand's election to the presidency in 1981 had raised new hope on the Left. Based on a coalition between socialists and communists, it was the first major victory of the Left at the highest levels of power, reminiscent of the great electoral victory of the Popular Front in 1936. Soon,

however, these hopes were dashed as the economic situation deteriorated and the socialist government began to return to the social-liberal orthodoxy of the time.

The rise of social-liberal and neoliberal policy thinking all around the world coincided with great shifts in the intellectual landscape. Marxism rapidly waned as the central conceptual matrix. It was replaced first by the style of normative political philosophy for which John Rawls's *Theory of Justice* represented the paradigm. For European thinkers, Habermas's communicative theory of democracy also presented a major model. Both Rawls's and Habermas's models contained sufficiently robust commitments to social equality to tempt many to embrace these new conceptual languages as appropriate political vocabularies for the times. The third major paradigm that emerged from the collapse of Marxist theory and practice was Foucault's genealogical method. In France, in particular, it became the method of choice for social and political theorists intent on continuing the task of radical critique through new categories.

In the face of these great shifts, Rancière remained constant to his fundamental commitment to equality. From his perspective, the major new paradigms all had something problematic about them. The problem was not their abandonment of Marx and of the rhetoric of the revolutionary years. The encounter with Jacotot showed precisely how one could hold on to the principle of radical equality without recourse to the Marxist rhetoric that was prevalent just a decade earlier. But, just as much as at the time of the struggle against Marxist orthodoxy, the concern to let "the people" speak in their own voices now too provided a critical vantage point on these newly emerging paradigms.

Rancière's interventions in political philosophy in the late 1980s and early 1990s therefore displayed a similar "out-of-left-field" aspect towards the dominant thinking of the day, as did the earlier research in the "logic of revolt". His writings in political theory, especially *Disagreement* (1995, English translation 1998), his major book in this area, started to make his name known beyond the small circles that were reading his work in the previous decade. Rancière developed a conceptual political vocabulary that was not directly antagonistic to, but rather shifted and displaced, the conceptual languages developed at the time, in order to focus specifically on the position of those excluded from political participation. His philosophy of radical equality thus became an explicit defence of radical democracy.

As Samuel Chambers shows in Chapter 4, against the general tendency of the new political philosophy to develop models without raising the problem of participation, Rancière generalized Jacotot's lesson

and showed how what was discussed as politics was in fact mostly the smooth managing of the social order, premised on unquestioned social hierarchies. Thus his famous distinction between the “police” and “politics” emerged. The contrast between “*la police*”, “*le politique*” and “*la politique*” made it look as though Rancière was situating himself within the paradigms and spoke the language developed by key figures in French philosophy at the time, most notably Foucault’s genealogy of the liberal state, and Derridean deconstruction. But the “thought from below” perspective transformed these concepts and made them incommensurable with any of these references.

Similarly, his central concept of “disagreement”, while an explicit critique of Habermas’s politics of consensus, was also subtly critical of Jean-François Lyotard’s “*différend*”. Lyotard’s “*différend*” postulates an incommensurability between types of discourse, whereas Rancière’s stance is predicated on the opposite idea that it is always possible, in principle, and indeed, it is the very definition of democratic politics, to establish the commonality of experience and thinking between people, against the fact of social separation due to hierarchies. Equally, the logic of “heteronomy”, the idea that political agency implies distancing oneself from one’s social identity, sounded similar to the conceptualizations of ethics and politics that were being developed at the time following Jacques Derrida and Emmanuel Levinas (Rogozinski et al. 1983). But Rancière’s “heteronomic” logic of politics is not premised, as these latter accounts are, on an ethics of alterity, itself underpinned by a radical critique of Western metaphysics. Instead, as Todd May demonstrates in Chapter 5, it revolves around the idea that political practice transcends the social destinies and identities imposed by social positions. The political disagreement, emerging on the basis of a hierarchical wrong, therefore creates political subjectivities, via processes of political “*subjectivation*” that are only contingently related to pre-existing social identities.

The first part of *Disagreement* allowed Rancière to make explicit and fully articulate the alternative social and political ontology that inspired his earlier interventions. In an important subsequent chapter, he used the perspective afforded by this alternative view to mount a vast, critical confrontation with the tradition of political philosophy. As Bruno Bosteels shows in Chapter 6, Rancière’s aim in conducting such a confrontation was more systematic than historical. Rancière identified three fundamental strands, “archipolitics”, “parapolitics” and “metapolitics”, initially taking their roots in classical references: Plato, Aristotle and Marx. In each case, he showed how the classical author developed a mode of thinking about politics that still structured

conceptually the contemporary field. The critical exegeses of the classics led to implicit, critical interventions in debates of the time, as well as indirect vindications of his claim that politics is synonymous with radical democracy. What unified these separate strands for Rancière was their attempt to circumvent, each in its own way, the “scandal” of politics, that is, the practical assertion of the axiom of equality. As Bosteels argues, the author to whom Rancière’s thinking is most aptly contrasted here, as in other aspects of his work, is that of Alain Badiou.

From politics to poetics

Intimately linked with this sustained effort in political theory was Rancière’s direct engagement with poetic and aesthetic issues. The conceptual link between the two areas was ensured by the notion of the “sharing”, or “distributing”, of the “sensible”: “*partage du sensible*” (see Davide Panagia’s account of it in Chapter 7). The concept basically names the critical intuition at play in the notion of “thought from below”. As we saw, the central question for Rancière concerns the ways in which the thoughts, voices and actions of the dominated are made invisible and inaudible in the hierarchy of activities underpinning social orders. At the root of inequality therefore is a problem of perception, of “*aesthesis*”, in classical philosophical terms: the question of social domination can be rephrased in terms of which activities, and whose activities, can literally be seen and heard. The “sharing of the sensible” denotes the ambiguous logic whereby society relies on a bringing together of individuals and groups (sharing as having in common), while functioning on the basis of the separation between those whose voices and actions count, are meaningful, and those who remain invisible and inaudible (sharing as separating).

Throughout the 1990s, Rancière’s work increasingly focused on this “aesthetic” aspect of social struggle and politics, to the point where he would soon invert the relationship between the two realms, and turn to the political dimensions implicit in aesthetic models and in artistic works.

The initial avenue for the study of this new dimension was his interest in the status of literature in the post-revolutionary context. Literature already had a privileged place in Rancière’s early work, because of the centrality of speech and expression in his egalitarianism. Equality for him is primarily the equality people are afforded when they are taken seriously, as valid partners in a dialogue, as people who make sense. For instance, his archival research into workers’ voices turned away from

proletarian folklore and toward those proletarians who sought a place on the literary (poetic, philosophical, theatrical) stage of their time.

Conversely, however, the romantic conception of literature also represents, in its own way, a striking illustration of the axiom of equality characteristic of the modern era. This conception is no longer premised on the strict division of genres and styles along the lines of social hierarchy (tragedy about kings for men of high rank versus comedy about everyday folk for people of low rank): it works on the assumption that everything speaks to everyone; that any form of discourse is in principle available to anyone. This converging of equality in the political and the literary explains a central claim already made in *Disagreement*, namely, that “the modern political animal is a literary animal” (D 37). With this turn of phrase Rancière meant to defend the claim that the primary mode through which equality is demanded is via actions whose main ends and means are discursive: by rejecting certain forms of social descriptions (for instance viewing workers, or women, or people of certain “races” as minors, as not being able to take part in certain activities); and by attempting to impose new descriptions (woman as mature citizen; worker as entitled to certain rights; migrant as equal, and so on). Already in his texts of political theory, Rancière connected directly the political and literary revolutions.

The evolution of Rancière’s work in the 1990s corresponded to a more direct engagement with these discursive, “literary” aspects of politics. This shift in his work, from politics to poetics, or rather, the politics of poetics, was anticipated by *The Names of History: On the Poetics of Knowledge*, published in 1992 (English translation 1994). Philip Watts, in Chapter 8, studies this first substantial “poetic” enquiry in Rancière’s work, and its significance for a good understanding of Rancière’s critical intervention in the methodology of the social sciences. In this book, Rancière revisited his long-standing interest in the history of the labour movement and modern democratic struggles, from the new perspective of an interrogation into the stylistic and political decisions that underpin any attempt to write history. Just as he had unveiled, in *The Philosopher and his Poor*, the implicit assumptions about the divisions of the social upon which philosophical discourse relies, he uncovered in *The Names of History* the implicit views of “the people” at work in the writings of some of the major references in modern French historiography. At the end of the book, Rancière gave crucial indications about the literary dimensions of struggles for equality, that is, both how modern literature could provide a resource for these struggles, and how these struggles expressed themselves in literary ways. A study on Mallarmé, published in 1996, confirmed the new orientation in Rancière’s work, that is, his

attempt to find the pulse of radical equality in the very stylistic materiality of even the most sophisticated of modernist writings.

This research into the interrelations between poetics and politics culminated in the publication in 1998 of one of Rancière's most impressive and important books, *La parole muette: Essai sur les contradictions de la littérature*. Despite what the title might indicate, the book proposed not just a theory of modern literature; it effectively laid the foundations for a general theory of aesthetic modernity. The rich detail of this theory is well captured by the concept of "regimes of the arts". In Chapter 9, Jean-Philippe Deranty characterizes the basic features of this key Ranciérian concept, and presents the main differences between the three historical regimes identified by him: the ethical, the representative and the aesthetic.

From poetics to aesthetics

The last section of this book is dedicated to Rancière's writings on different art forms. This corresponds to the main focus of his work in the last decade. Apart from a small book published in 2007 in defence of the idea of democracy (*The Hatred of Democracy*) and the republication of his interviews (*Et tant pis pour les gens fatigués*) and newspaper articles (*Moments politiques*), the bulk of Rancière's activity since 2000 has been dedicated to poetics and aesthetics. He has been invited to deliver keynote addresses to many, increasingly prestigious, international exhibitions and conferences, and has contributed to a number of exhibition catalogues. He has also published lengthy film studies in French cinema journals, notably in *Trafic* and *Cahiers du cinéma*. While initially it was his writings in political theory that attracted interest, today his writings in aesthetics have become hugely influential.

In Chapter 10, Alison Ross focuses on Rancière's studies in literature. As she shows, the key concepts he has advanced in his study of literature also apply by extension to other arts, in particular the visual arts. These concepts, in particular "expressivity", "literarity" and "mute speech", are the aesthetic equivalents to the egalitarian revolutions in politics: they point to the idea that, in the post-Romantic paradigm, coinciding with the post-revolutionary paradigm in politics, it is not just social positions and social forms of expression that can in principle always demand to be treated as equal, but also aesthetic objects and expressions. The principle of radical equality extends to include the objects of representation themselves. For example a building, such as Notre-Dame Cathedral, can become a literary work's main character, as in Victor Hugo's novel.

Toni Ross (in Chapter 11 on painting) and Hassan Melehy (in Chapter 12 on film) detail the implications of this conceptual extension of key concepts and arguments from politics to the visual arts. In recent years, the concept of “*montage*”, borrowed from film technique, has become Rancière’s central metaphor to think of particular art works or the aesthetic worlds of particular artists. The *montage* metaphor allows him to focus on the ways, each time different and specific, with which particular art works or artists deal with the new potentialities offered by the post-Romantic paradigm. Against the tendency of sweeping narratives to frame and contain the expressive potential of art works within predetermined directions, Rancière aims to retrieve in the field of the arts similar powers of creativity to the ones that he had earlier sought in historical social movements.

While so many thinkers of his generation are burning today what they adored yesterday, or the day before yesterday, Rancière’s work proves remarkable for its consistency throughout the decades. His unflinching commitment to the ideas of equality and emancipatory action, first applied to social and political issues, then to literature and the arts, has produced a major body of work now celebrated all around the world. The ambition of the present volume is to present some of the major concepts that punctuate that body of work in order to give a sense of its richness and sophistication.