

Looking Without Knowing: Rancière,
Aristotle, and Spectating in the
Representative Regime

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Abstract

This thesis expands Jacques Rancière's critique of theories of political spectatorship through an examination of Aristotle's description of poetry in the *Poetics*, and musical education in *Politics* 8. In *The Emancipated Spectator*, Rancière argues that theories of spectatorship encode a 'paradox of the spectator' by implying that spectators are both passive and ignorant in relation to the artwork. Rancière locates the origins of this paradox in Plato's attacks on art in the *Republic*, arguing that it persists in contemporary theories that seek to 'redeem' spectators from the ills of spectating. In his analysis, Rancière appears to allude to an Aristotelian influence on the paradox, but does not explore it in detail. This thesis undertakes an in-depth analysis of Aristotelian spectatorship in light of Rancière's political and aesthetic framework to demonstrate Aristotle's contribution to the spectator paradox.

I argue that Aristotle 'redeems' spectatorship from ignorance and passivity by distinguishing art from spectacle, and idealised spectatorship from viewership. Rancière's conceptualisation of the 'representative regime of art' describes a paradigm of art-practices predicated on hierarchies of genre found in the *Poetics*. I argue that careful reading of the *Poetics* via the representative regime reveals aspects overlooked by Rancière that are of significance for his critique of spectatorship. Aristotle's subordination of material performance produces an 'anti-optical' relationship that grounds art in the intelligence and 'good activity' of poetic composition. The effect is to establish a pedagogical

relationship whereby good art is recognized by ideal spectators, to the exclusion of 'vulgar' audiences.

The political effects of Aristotelian spectatorship are evident in his division of audiences in Chapter 8 of the *Politics*. An examination of the Athenian theatre, and of Plato's and Aristotle's discussions of democratic spectatorship reveals an opposition between elite critical judgement (*krisis*) and the noise of mass audiences (*thorubos*). I argue that this opposition forms an instance of what Rancière terms the 'distribution of the sensible' by differentiating educated spectatorship from ignorant viewership. In *Politics* 8 this distribution is founded upon wider partitions of time, activity, and labour in the state. I suggest that Aristotle 'redeems' spectatorship by producing political distinctions between the idealised 'good spectatorship' of the educated and the 'bad viewership' of the ignorant. In doing so, Aristotle re-encodes the passivity and ignorance of viewing.

My examination of Aristotelian spectatorship establishes the case for the conceptual expansion of Rancière's representative regime, and critique of spectatorship, and suggests the importance of Rancière's critique of spectatorship for his wider political and aesthetic thought.

Thesis declaration

I certify that this work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in my name in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. In addition, I certify that no part of this work will, in the future, be used in a submission in my name for any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution without the prior approval of the University of Adelaide and, where applicable, partner institutions responsible for the joint award of this degree.

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List of Abbreviations And Notes on the Text

1. Abbreviations

The following will be cited according to their full titles in their first occurrence, after which the following abbreviations will be used:

ES – *The Emancipated Spectator*, Jacques Rancière.

PA – *The Politics of Aesthetics*, Jacques Rancière.

Da – *Disagreement*, Jacques Rancière.

Ds – *Dissensus*, Jacques Rancière.

MS – *Mute Speech*, Jacques Rancière.

IS – *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, Jacques Rancière.

FI – *The Future of the Image*, Jacques Rancière

2. Editions:

References to Aristotle's *Poetics* are from Gerald Else's translation (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1967), unless otherwise specified. Quotations are cited by page numbers in Else's translation, with inclusion of the Bekker system of citation: e.g. (*Poetics* 16; 1447b). In paraphrasing sections or referencing sections, I use only the Bekker system citation.

References to Aristotle's *Politics* are from the translation by T.A. Sinclair and Trevor J. Saunders (London: Penguin, 1992). References are cited by page numbers to Sinclair and Saunders' translation, with the inclusion of Book and Chapter divisions: e.g. (*Politics* 463; 8.5).

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