

The Politics of Aesthetics

The Distribution of the Sensible

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Translated with an Introduction by Gabriel Rockhill



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The Distribution of the Sensible

Foreword

The following pages respond to a twofold solicitation. At their origin was a set of questions asked by two young philosophers, Muriel Combes and Bernard Aspe, for their journal, *Alice*, and more specifically for the section entitled 'The Factory of the Sensible'. This section is concerned with aesthetic acts as configurations of experience that create new modes of sense perception and induce novel forms of political subjectivity. It is within this framework that they interviewed me on the consequences of my analyses—in *Disagreement*—of the distribution of the sensible that is at stake in politics, and thus of a certain aesthetics of politics. Their questions, prompted as well by a novel reflection on the major avant-garde theories and experiments concerning the fusion of art and life, dictate the structure of the present text. At the request of Eric Hazan and Stéphanie Grégoire, I developed my responses and clarified their presuppositions [8] as far as possible.⁴

This particular solicitation is, however, inscribed in a broader context. The proliferation of voices denouncing the crisis of art or its fatal capture by discourse, the pervasiveness of the spectacle or the death of the image, suffice to indicate that a battle fought yesterday over the promises of emancipation and the illusions and disillusion of history continues today on aesthetic terrain. The trajectory of Situationist discourse – stemming from an avant-garde artistic movement in the post-war period, developing into a radical critique of politics in the 1960s, and absorbed today into the routine of the disenchanting discourse that acts as the 'critical' stand-in for the existing order – is undoubtedly symptomatic of the contemporary ebb and flow of aesthetics and politics, and of the transformations of avant-garde thinking into nostalgia. It is, however, the work of Jean-François Lyotard that best marks the way in which 'aesthetics' has become, in the last twenty years, the privileged site where the tradition of critical thinking has metamorphosed into deliberation on mourning. The reinterpretation of the Kantian analysis [9] of the sublime introduced

into the field of art a concept that Kant had located beyond it. It did this in order to more effectively make art a witness to an encounter with the unrepresentable that cripples all thought, and thereby a witness for the prosecution against the arrogance of the grand aesthetico-political endeavour to have 'thought' become 'world'. In this way, reflection on art became the site where a *mise-en-scène* of the original abyss of thought and the disaster of its misrecognition continued after the proclamation of the end of political utopias. A number of contemporary contributions to thinking the disasters of art or the image convert this fundamental reversal into more mediocre prose.

This familiar landscape of contemporary thought defines the context in which these questions and answers are inscribed, but it does not specify their objective. The following responses will not lay claim yet again, in the face of postmodern disenchantment, to the avant-garde vocation of art or to the vitality of a modernity that links the conquests of artistic innovation to the victories of emancipation. These pages do not have their origin in a desire to take a polemical stance. They are inscribed in a long-term project that aims at re-establishing a debate's conditions of intelligibility. This means, first of all, elaborating the very meaning of [10] what is designated by the term aesthetics, which denotes neither art theory in general nor a theory that would consign art to its effects on sensibility. Aesthetics refers to a specific regime for identifying and reflecting on the arts: 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). Defining the connections within this aesthetic regime of the arts, the possibilities that they determine, and their modes of transformation, such is the present objective of my research and of a seminar held over the past few years within the framework provided by the University of Paris-VIII and the *Collège International de Philosophie*. The results of this research will not be found in the present work; their elaboration will follow its own proper pace. I have nevertheless attempted to indicate a few historical and conceptual reference points appropriate for reformulating certain problems that have been irremediably confused by notions that pass off conceptual prejudices as historical determinations and temporal delimitations as conceptual determinations. Among the foremost of these

notions figures, of course, the concept of modernity, today the source of all the jumbled miscellany that arbitrarily sweeps [11] together such figures as Hölderlin, Cézanne, Mallarmé, Malevich, or Duchamp into a vast whirlwind where Cartesian science gets mixed up with revolutionary parricide, the age of the masses with Romantic irrationalism, the ban on representation with the techniques of mechanized reproduction, the Kantian sublime with the Freudian primal scene, the flight of the gods with the extermination of the Jews in Europe. Indicating the general lack of evidence supporting these notions obviously does not entail adhering to the contemporary discourses on the return to the simple reality of artistic practices and its criteria of assessment. The connection between these 'simple practices' and modes of discourse, forms of life, conceptions of thought, and figures of the community is not the fruit of a maleficent misappropriation. On the contrary, the effort to think through this connection requires forsaking the unsatisfactory *mise-en-scène* of the 'end' and the 'return' that persistently occupies the terrain of art, politics, and any other object of thought. [12]

The Distribution of the Sensible: Politics and Aesthetics

In Disagreement, politics is examined from the perspective of what you call the 'distribution of the sensible'. In your opinion, does this expression provide the key to the necessary junction between aesthetic practices and political practices?

I call the distribution of the sensible the system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it.⁵ A distribution of the sensible therefore establishes at one and the same time something common that is shared and exclusive parts. This apportionment of parts and positions is based on a distribution of spaces, times, and forms of activity that determines the very manner in which something in common lends itself to participation and in what way various individuals have a part in this distribution. Aristotle states that a citizen is someone who *has a part* in the act of governing and being governed. However, another form of distribution precedes this act of partaking in government: the distribution that [13] determines those who have a part in the community of citizens. A speaking being, according to Aristotle, is a political being. If a slave understands the language of its rulers, however, he does not 'possess' it. Plato states that artisans cannot be put in charge of the shared or common elements of the community because they do *not have the time* to devote themselves to anything other than their work. They cannot be *somewhere else* because *work will not wait*. The distribution of the sensible reveals who can have a share in what is common to the community based on what they do and on the time and space in which this activity is performed. Having a particular 'occupation' thereby determines the ability or inability to take charge of what is common to the community; it defines what is visible or not

in a common space, endowed with a common language, etc. There is thus an 'aesthetics' at the core of politics that has nothing to do with Benjamin's discussion of the 'aestheticization of politics' specific to the 'age of the masses'. This aesthetics should not be understood as the perverse commandeering of politics by a will to art, by a consideration of the people qua work of art. If the reader is fond of analogy, aesthetics can be understood in a Kantian sense – re-examined perhaps by Foucault – as the system of *a priori* forms determining what presents itself to sense experience. It is a delimitation of [14] spaces and times, of the visible and the invisible, of speech and noise, that simultaneously determines the place and the stakes of politics as a form of experience. Politics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of spaces and the possibilities of time.

It is on the basis of this primary aesthetics that it is possible to raise the question of 'aesthetic practices' as I understand them, that is forms of visibility that disclose artistic practices, the place they occupy, what they 'do' or 'make' from the standpoint of what is common to the community. Artistic practices are 'ways of doing and making' that intervene in the general distribution of ways of doing and making as well as in the relationships they maintain to modes of being and forms of visibility. The Platonic proscription of the poets is based on the impossibility of doing two things at once prior to being based on the immoral content of fables. The question of fiction is first a question regarding the distribution of places. From the Platonic point of view, the stage, which is simultaneously a locus of public activity and the exhibition-space for 'fantasies', disturbs the clear partition of identities, activities, and spaces. The same is true of [15] writing. By stealing away to wander aimlessly without knowing who to speak to or who not to speak to, writing destroys every legitimate foundation for the circulation of words, for the relationship between the effects of language and the positions of bodies in shared space. Plato thereby singles out two main models, two major forms of existence and of the sensible effectivity of language – writing and the theatre –, which are also structure-giving forms for the regime of the arts in general. However, these forms turn out to be prejudicially linked from the outset to a certain regime of politics, a regime based on the indetermination of

identities, the delegitimation of positions of speech, the deregulation of partitions of space and time. This aesthetic regime of politics is strictly identical with the regime of democracy, the regime based on the assembly of artisans, inviolable written laws, and the theatre as institution. Plato contrasts a third, good *form of art* with writing and the theatre, the *choreographic* form of the community that sings and dances its own proper unity. In sum, Plato singles out three ways in which discursive and bodily practices suggest forms of community: the surface of mute signs that are, he says, [16] like paintings, and the space of bodily movement that divides itself into two antagonistic models (the movement of simulacra on the stage that is offered as material for the audience's identifications and, on the other hand, the authentic movement characteristic of communal bodies).

Here we have three ways of distributing the sensible that structure the manner in which the arts can be perceived and thought of as forms of art *and* as forms that inscribe a sense of community: the surface of 'depicted' signs, the split reality of the theatre, the rhythm of a dancing chorus. These forms define the way in which works of art or performances are 'involved in politics', whatever may otherwise be the guiding intentions, artists' social modes of integration, or the manner in which artistic forms reflect social structures or movements. When *Madame Bovary* was published, or *Sentimental Education*, these works were immediately perceived as 'democracy in literature' despite Flaubert's aristocratic situation and political conformism. His very refusal to entrust literature with any message whatsoever was considered to be evidence of democratic equality. His adversaries claimed that he was [17] democratic due to his decision to depict and portray instead of instruct. This equality of indifference is the result of a poetic bias: the equality of all subject matter is the negation of any relationship of necessity between a determined form and a determined content. Yet what is this indifference after all if not the very equality of everything that comes to pass on a written page, available as it is to everyone's eyes? This equality destroys all of the hierarchies of representation and also establishes a community of readers as a community without legitimacy, a community formed only by the random circulation of the written word.

In this way, a sensible politicized existence exists that is immediately attributed to the major forms of aesthetic distribution such as the theatre, the

page, or the chorus. These 'politics' obey their own proper logic, and they offer their services in very different contexts and time periods. Consider the way these paradigms functioned in the connection between art and politics at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth. Consider, for example, the role taken on by the paradigm of the page in all its different forms, which exceed the materiality of a written sheet of paper. Novelistic democracy, on the one hand, is the indifferent democracy of writing such as [18] it is symbolized by the novel and its readership. There is also, however, the knowledge concerning typography and iconography, the intertwining of graphic and pictorial capabilities, that played such an important role in the Renaissance and was revived by Romantic typography through its use of vignettes, culs-de-lampe, and various innovations. This model disturbs the clear-cut rules of representative logic that establish a relationship of correspondence at a distance between the sayable and the visible. It also disturbs the clear partition between works of pure art and the ornaments made by the decorative arts. This is why it played such an important – and generally underestimated – role in the upheaval of the representative paradigm and of its political implications. I am thinking in particular of its role in the Arts and Crafts movement and all of its derivatives (Art Deco, Bauhaus, Constructivism). These movements developed an idea of furniture – in the broad sense of the term – for a new community, which also inspired a new idea of pictorial surface as a surface of shared writing.

Modernist discourse presents the revolution of pictorial abstraction as painting's discovery of its own proper 'medium': two-dimensional surface. By revoking the perspectivist illusion of the third dimension, painting was to regain [19] the mastery of its own proper surface. In actual fact, however, this surface does not have any distinctive feature. A 'surface' is not simply a geometric composition of lines. It is a certain distribution of the sensible. For Plato, writing and painting were equivalent surfaces of mute signs, deprived of the breath that animates and transports living speech. Flat surfaces, in this logic, are not opposed to depth in the sense of three-dimensional surfaces. They are opposed to the 'living'. The mute surface of depicted signs stands in opposition to the act of 'living' speech, which is guided by the speaker towards its appropriate addressee. Moreover, painting's adoption of the third

dimension was also a response to this distribution. The reproduction of optical depth was linked to the privilege accorded to the *story*. In the Renaissance, the reproduction of three-dimensional space was involved in the valorization of painting and the assertion of its ability to capture an act of living speech, the decisive moment of action and meaning. In opposition to the Platonic degradation of *mimēsis*, the classical poetics of representation wanted to endow the 'flat surface' with speech or with a 'scene' of life, with a specific depth such as the manifestation of an action, the expression of an interiority, or the transmission of meaning. Classical poetics established [20] a relationship of correspondence at a distance between speech and painting, between the sayable and the visible, which gave 'imitation' its own specific space.

It is this relationship that is at stake in the supposed distinction between two-dimensional and three-dimensional space as 'specific' to a particular form of art. To a large extent, the ground was laid for painting's 'anti-representative revolution' by the flat surface of the page, in the change in how literature's 'images' function or the change in the discourse on painting, but also in the ways in which typography, posters, and the decorative arts became interlaced. The type of painting that is poorly named abstract, and which is supposedly brought back to its own proper medium, is implicated in an overall vision of a new human being lodged in new structures, surrounded by different objects. Its flatness is linked to the flatness of pages, posters, and tapestries. It is the flatness of an interface. Moreover, its anti-representative 'purity' is inscribed in a context where pure art and decorative art are intertwined, a context that straight away gives it a political signification. This context is not the surrounding revolutionary fever that made Malevich at once the artist who painted *Black Square* and the revolutionary eulogist of [21] 'new forms of life'. Furthermore, this is not some theatrical ideal of the new human being that seals the momentary alliance between revolutionary artists and politics. It is initially in the interface created between different 'mediums' – in the connections forged between poems and their typography or their illustrations, between the theatre and its set designers or poster designers, between decorative objects and poems – that this 'newness' is formed that links the artist who abolishes figurative representation to the revolutionary who invents a new form of life. This interface is

political in that it revokes the twofold politics inherent in the logic of representation. On the one hand, this logic separated the world of artistic imitations from the world of vital concerns and politico-social grandeur. On the other hand, its hierarchical organization – in particular the primacy of living speech/action over depicted images – formed an analogy with the socio-political order. With the triumph of the novel's page over the theatrical stage, the egalitarian intertwining of images and signs on pictorial or typographic surfaces, the elevation of artisans' art to the status of great art, and the new claim to bring art into the décor of each and every life, an entire well-ordered distribution of sensory experience was overturned.

[22] This is how the 'planarity' of the surface of depicted signs, the form of egalitarian distribution of the sensible stigmatized by Plato, intervened as the principle behind an art's 'formal' revolution at the same time as the principle behind the political redistribution of shared experience. The other major forms, among which there are those of the chorus and the theatre that I mentioned earlier, could be considered in much the same way. A history of aesthetic politics, understood in this sense, has to take into account the way in which these major forms stand in opposition to one another or intermingle. I am thinking, for example, of the way in which this paradigm of the surface of signs/forms entered into conflict or joined forces with the theatrical paradigm of presence, and with the diverse forms that this paradigm itself has taken on, from the Symbolist figuration of a collective legend to the actualized chorus of a new humanity. Politics plays itself out in the theatrical paradigm as the relationship between the stage and the audience, as meaning produced by the actor's body, as games of proximity or distance. Mallarmé's critical prose writings stage, in an exemplary manner, the play of cross-references, oppositions or assimilations between these forms, from the intimate theatre of the page or calligraphic choreography to the new 'service' performed by concerts.

[23] In one respect, these forms therefore appear to bring forth, in very different contexts, figures of community equal to themselves. However, they are susceptible to being assigned to contradictory political paradigms. Let us take the example of the tragic stage. It simultaneously carries with it, according to Plato, the syndrome of democracy and the power of illusion. By isolating *mimēsis* in its own proper space

and by enclosing tragedy within a logic of genres, Aristotle – even if this was not his intention – redefined its politics. Furthermore, in the classical system of representation, the tragic stage would become the stage of visibility for an orderly world governed by a hierarchy of subject matter and the adaptation of situations and manners of speaking to this hierarchy. The democratic paradigm would become a monarchical paradigm. Let us also consider the long and contradictory history of rhetoric and the model of the ‘good orator’. Throughout the monarchical age, democratic eloquence à la Demosthenes denoted an excellence in speaking, which was itself established as the imaginary attribute of the supreme power. It was also always receptive, however, to the recovery of its democratic function by lending its [24] canonical forms and its consecrated images to the transgressive appearance of unauthorized speakers on the public stage. Let us consider as well the contradictory destinies of the choreographic model. Recent research has evoked the metamorphoses undergone by Laban’s notation of movement. It was developed in a context favouring the liberation of bodies and became the model for the large Nazi demonstrations before regaining, in the anti-establishment context of performance art, a new subversive virginity. Benjamin’s explanation via the fatal aestheticization of politics in the ‘era of the masses’ overlooks, perhaps, the long-standing connection between the unanimous consensus of the citizenry and the exaltation of the free movement of bodies. In a city hostile to the theatre and to written law, Plato recommended constantly cradling unweaned infants.

I have evoked these three forms because Plato conceptually charted them out and because they maintain a historical constancy. They obviously do not define all of the ways that figures of community are aesthetically designed. The important thing is that the question of the relationship between aesthetics and politics be raised at this level, the level of the sensible delimitation of what is common to the community, the forms of its visibility and of its organization. [25] It is from this perspective that it is possible to reflect on artists’ political interventions, starting with the Romantic literary forms that aimed at deciphering society, the Symbolist poetics of dreams or the Dadaist or Constructivist elimination of art, and continuing up to the contemporary modes of performance and installation. From this

perspective, it is possible to challenge a good many imaginary stories about artistic 'modernity' and vain debates over the autonomy of art or its submission to politics. The arts only ever lend to projects of domination or emancipation what they are able to lend to them, that is to say, quite simply, what they have in common with them: bodily positions and movements, functions of speech, the parcelling out of the visible and the invisible. Furthermore, the autonomy they can enjoy or the subversion they can claim credit for rest on the same foundation.

Artistic Regimes and the Shortcomings of the Notion of Modernity

Certain of the most fundamental categories used for thinking about artistic creation in the twentieth century, namely the categories of modernity, the avant-garde and, for some time now, postmodernity, also happen to have a political meaning. Do these categories seem to you to have the slightest interest for conceiving, in precise terms, what ties 'aesthetics' to 'politics'?

I do not think that the notions of modernity and the avant-garde have been very enlightening when it comes to thinking about the new forms of art that have emerged since the last century or the relations between aesthetics and politics. They actually confuse two very different things: the historicity specific to a regime of the arts in general and the decisions to break with the past or anticipate the future that take place within this regime. The notion of aesthetic modernity conceals – without conceptualizing it in the least – the singularity of a particular regime of the arts, that is [27] to say of a specific type of connection between ways of producing works of art or developing practices, forms of visibility that disclose them, and ways of conceptualizing the former and the latter.

A detour is necessary here in order to clarify this notion and situate the problem. With regard to what we call *art*, it is in fact possible to distinguish, within the Western tradition, three major regimes of identification. There is first of all what I propose to call an ethical regime of images. In this regime, 'art' is not identified as such but is subsumed under the question of images. As a specific type of entity, images are the object of a twofold question: the question of their origin (and consequently their truth content) and the question of their end or purpose, the uses they are put to and the effects they result in. The question of images of the divine and the right to produce such images or the ban placed on them falls within this regime, as well as the

question of the status and signification of the images produced. The entire Platonic polemic against the simulacra of painting, poems, and the stage also falls within this regime.⁶ Plato does not, as it is often claimed, place art under the yoke of politics. This very distinction would have made no sense for Plato since art did not exist for [28] him but only arts, ways of doing and making. And it is among these that he traces the dividing line: there are true arts, that is to say forms of knowledge based on the imitation of a model with precise ends, and artistic simulacra that imitate simple appearances. These imitations, differentiated by their origin, are then distinguished by their end or purpose, by the way in which the poem's images provide the spectators, both children and adult citizens, with a certain education and fit in with the distribution of the city's occupations. 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.⁷

The poetic – or representative – regime of the arts breaks away from the ethical regime of images. It identifies the substance of art – or rather of the arts – in the couple *poiēsis/mimēsis*. The mimetic principle is not at its core a normative principle stating that art must make copies resembling their models. It is first of all a pragmatic principle that isolates, within the general domain of the arts (ways of doing and making), certain particular forms of art that produce specific entities [29] called imitations. These imitations are extricated, at one and the same time, from the ordinary control of artistic products by their use and from the legislative reign of truth over discourses and images. Such is the vast operation carried out by the Aristotelian elaboration of *mimēsis* and by the privilege accorded to tragic action. It is the *substance* of the poem, the fabrication of a plot arranging actions that represent the activities of men, which is the foremost issue, to the detriment of the *essence* of the image, a copy examined with regard to its model. Such is the principle guiding the functional change in the theatrical model I was speaking of earlier. The principle regulating the external delimitation of a well-founded domain of imitations is thus at the same time a normative principle of inclusion. It develops into forms of normativity that define the conditions according to which imitations can be

recognized as exclusively belonging to an art and assessed, within this framework, as good or bad, adequate or inadequate: partitions between the representable and the unrepresentable; the distinction between genres according to what is represented; principles for adapting forms of expression to genres and thus to the subject matter represented; the distribution of resemblances [30] according to principles of verisimilitude, appropriateness, or correspondence; criteria for distinguishing between and comparing the arts; etc.

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 *representative* insofar as it is the notion of representation or *mimēsis* that organizes these ways of doing, making, seeing, and judging. Once again, however, *mimēsis* is not the law that brings the arts under the yoke of resemblance. It is first of all a fold in the distribution of ways of doing and making as well as in social occupations, a fold that renders the arts visible. It is not an artistic process but a regime of visibility regarding the arts. A regime of visibility is at once what renders the arts autonomous and also what links this autonomy to a general order of occupations and ways of doing and making. This is what I evoked earlier concerning the logic of representation, which enters into a relationship of global analogy with an overall hierarchy of political and social occupations. The representative primacy of action over characters or of narration over [31] description, the hierarchy of genres according to the dignity of their subject matter, and the very primacy of the art of speaking, of speech in actuality, all of these elements figure into an analogy with a fully hierarchical vision of the community.

The aesthetic regime of the arts stands in contrast with the representative regime. I call this regime *aesthetic* because the identification of art 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. This idea of a regime of the sensible that has become foreign to itself, the locus for a form of thought that has become foreign to itself, is the invariable core in the [32] identifications of art that have configured the aesthetic mode of thought from the outset: Vico's discovery of the 'true Homer' as a poet in spite of himself, Kantian 'genius' that is unaware of the law it produces, Schiller's 'aesthetic state' that suspends both the activity of the understanding and sensible passivity, Schelling's definition of art as the identity between a conscious process and an unconscious process, etc. The aesthetic mode of thought likewise runs through the specific definitions that the arts have given to themselves in the Modern Age: Proust's idea of a book that would be entirely planned out and fully removed from the realm of the will; Mallarmé's idea of a poem by the spectator-poet, written 'without the scribe's apparatus' by the steps of an illiterate dancer; the Surrealist practice of producing work that expresses the artist's unconscious with the outdated illustrations in catalogues or newspaper serials from the previous century; Bresson's idea of film as the film-maker's thought withdrawn from the body of the 'models' who, by unthinkingly repeating the words and gestures he lays down for them, manifest their proper truth without either the film-maker or the models knowing it; etc.

It is pointless to go on with definitions and examples. We need to indicate, on the contrary, the heart of the problem. The aesthetic regime [33] 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. Schiller's *aesthetic state*, which is this

regime's first manifesto (and remains, in a sense, unsurpassable), clearly indicates this fundamental identity of opposites. The aesthetic state is a pure instance of suspension, a moment when form is experienced for itself. Moreover, it is the moment of the formation and education of a specific type of humanity.

From this perspective, it is possible to understand the functions served by the notion of modernity. The aesthetic regime of the arts, it can be said, is the true name for what is designated by the incoherent label 'modernity'. However, 'modernity' is more than an incoherent label. It is, in its different versions, the concept that diligently works at [34] masking the specificity of this regime of the arts and the very meaning of the specificity of regimes of art. It traces, in order either to exalt or deplore it, a simple line of transition or rupture between the old and the new, the representative and the non-representative or the anti-representative. The basis for this simplistic historical account was the transition to non-figurative representation in painting. This transition was theorized by being cursorily assimilated into artistic 'modernity's' overall anti-mimetic destiny. When the eulogists of this form of modernity saw the exhibition-spaces for the well-behaved destiny of modernity invaded by all kinds of objects, machines, and unidentified devices, they began denouncing the 'tradition of the new', a desire for innovation that would reduce artistic modernity to the emptiness of its self-declaration. However, it is the starting point that is erroneous. The leap outside of *mimēsis* is by no means the refusal of figurative representation. Furthermore, its inaugural moment has often been called *realism*, which does not in any way mean the valorization of resemblance but rather the destruction of the structures within which it functioned. Thus, novelistic realism is first of all the reversal of the hierarchies of representation (the primacy of the narrative over the descriptive [35] or the hierarchy of subject matter) and the adoption of a fragmented or proximate mode of focalization, which imposes raw presence to the detriment of the rational sequences of the story. The aesthetic regime of the arts does not contrast the old with the new. It contrasts, more profoundly, two regimes of historicity. It is within the mimetic regime that the old stands in contrast with the new. In the aesthetic regime of art, the future of art, its separation from the present of non-art, incessantly restages the past.

Those who exalt or denounce the 'tradition of the new' actually forget that this tradition has as its strict complement the 'newness of the tradition'. The aesthetic regime of the arts did not begin with decisions to initiate an artistic rupture. It began with decisions to reinterpret what makes art or what art makes: Vico discovering the 'true Homer', that is to say not an inventor of fables and characters but a witness to the image-laden language and thought of ancient times; Hegel indicating the true subject matter of Dutch genre painting: not in stories or descriptions of interiors but a nation's freedom displayed in reflections of light; Hölderlin reinventing Greek tragedy; Balzac [36] contrasting the poetry of the geologist who reconstructs worlds out of tracks and fossils with the poetry that makes do with reproducing a bit of agitation in the soul; Mendelssohn replaying the *St. Matthew Passion*; etc. The aesthetic regime of the arts is first of all a new regime for relating to the past. It actually sets up as the very principle of artisticity the expressive relationship inherent in a time and a state of civilization, a relationship that was previously considered to be the 'non-artistic' part of works of art (the part that was excused by invoking the crudeness of the times when the author lived). The aesthetic regime of the arts invents its revolutions on the basis of the same idea that caused it to invent the museum and art history, the notion of classicism and new forms of reproduction... And it devotes itself to the invention of new forms of life on the basis of an idea of what art *was*, an idea of what art *would have been*. When the Futurists or the Constructivists declared the end of art and the identification of its practices with the practices that construct, decorate, or give a certain rhythm to the times and spaces of communal life, they proposed an end of art equivalent to the identification of art with the life of the community. This proposal is directly dependent on the Schillerian and Romantic reinterpretation of Greek art as a community's mode of life, while also communicating, [37] in other respects, with the new styles introduced by the inventors of advertising who, for their part, did not propose a revolution but only a new way of living amongst words, images, and commodities. The idea of modernity is a questionable notion that tries to make clear-cut distinctions in the complex configuration of the aesthetic regime of the arts. It tries to retain the forms of rupture, the iconoclastic gestures, etc., by separating them from the context that allows for their

existence: history, interpretation, patrimony, the museum, the pervasiveness of reproduction... The idea of modernity would like there to be only one meaning and direction in history, whereas the temporality specific to the aesthetic regime of the arts is a co-presence of heterogeneous temporalities.

The notion of modernity thus seems to have been deliberately invented to prevent a clear understanding of the transformations of art and its relationships with the other spheres of collective experience. The confusion introduced by this notion has, it seems to me, two major forms. Both of them, without analysing it, rely on the contradiction constitutive of the aesthetic regime of the arts, which makes art into an *autonomous form of life* and thereby sets down, at one and the same time, the autonomy of art and its identification with a moment in life's process of self-formation. The two [38] major variants of the discourse on 'modernity' derive from this contradiction. The first variant would have modernity identified simply with the autonomy of art, an 'anti-mimetic' revolution in art identical with the conquest of the pure form of art finally laid bare. Each individual art would thus assert the pure potential of art by exploring the capabilities of its specific medium. Poetic or literary modernity would explore the capabilities of a language diverted from its communicational uses. Pictorial modernity would bring painting back to its distinctive feature: coloured pigment and a two-dimensional surface. Musical modernity would be identified with the language of twelve sounds, set free from any analogy with expressive language, etc. Furthermore, these specific forms of modernity would be in a relationship of distant analogy with a political modernity susceptible to being identified, depending on the time period, with revolutionary radicality or with the sober and disenchanting modernity of good republican government. The main feature of what is called the 'crisis of art' is the overwhelming defeat of this simple modernist paradigm, which is forever more distant from the mixtures of genres and mediums as well as from the numerous political possibilities inherent in the arts' contemporary forms. [39]

This overwhelming defeat is obviously overdetermined by the modernist paradigm's second major form, which might be called *modernatism*. I mean by this the identification of forms from the aesthetic regime of the arts with forms that accomplish a task or fulfil

a destiny specific to modernity. At the root of this identification there is a specific interpretation of the structural and generative contradiction of aesthetic 'form'. It is, in this case, the determination of art qua form and self-formation of life that is valorized. The starting point, Schiller's notion of the *aesthetic education of man*, constitutes an unsurpassable reference point. It is this notion that established the idea that domination and servitude are, in the first place, part of an ontological distribution (the activity of thought versus the passivity of sensible matter). It is also this notion that defined a neutral state, a state of dual cancellation, where the activity of thought and sensible receptivity become a single reality. They constitute a sort of new region of being – the region of free play and appearance – that makes it possible to conceive of the equality whose direct materialization, according to Schiller, was shown to be impossible by the French Revolution. It is this specific mode of living in the sensible world that must be developed by 'aesthetic education' [40] in order to train men susceptible to live in a free political community. The idea of modernity as a time devoted to the material realization of a humanity still latent in mankind was constructed on this foundation. It can be said, regarding this point, that the 'aesthetic revolution' produced a new idea of political revolution: the material realization of a common humanity still only existing as an idea. This is how Schiller's 'aesthetic state' became the 'aesthetic programme' of German Romanticism, the programme summarized in the rough draft written together by Hegel, Hölderlin, and Schelling: the material realization of unconditional freedom and pure thought in common forms of life and belief. It is this paradigm of aesthetic autonomy that became the new paradigm for revolution, and it subsequently allowed for the brief but decisive encounter between the artisans of the Marxist revolution and the artisans of forms for a new way of life. The failure of this revolution determined the destiny – in two phases – of modernatism. At first, artistic modernatism, in its authentic revolutionary potential for [41] hope and defiance, was set against the degeneration of political revolution. Surrealism and the Frankfurt School were the principal vehicles for this counter-modernity. The failure of political revolution was later conceived of as the failure of its ontologico-aesthetic model. Modernity thus became something like a fatal destiny based on a fundamental forgetting:

the essence of technology according to Heidegger, the revolutionary severing of the king's head as a severing of tradition in the history of humanity, and finally the original sin of human beings, forgetful of their debt to the Other and of their submission to the heterogeneous powers of the sensible.

What is called *postmodernism* is really the process of this reversal. At first, postmodernism brought to light everything in the recent evolution of the arts and possible ways of thinking the arts that destroyed modernism's theoretical edifice: the crossing-over and mixture between the arts that destroyed Lessing's conventional set of principles concerning the separation of the arts; the collapse of the paradigm of functionalist architecture and the return of the curved line and embellishment; the breakdown of the pictorial/two-dimensional/abstract model through the return of figurative representation and [42] signification as well as the slow invasion of painting's exhibition-space by three-dimensional and narrative forms, from Pop Art to installation art and 'rooms' for video art;⁸ the new combinations of painting and language as well as of monumental sculpture and the projection of shadows and lights; the break-up of the serial tradition through new mixtures between musical systems, genres, and epochs. The teleological model of modernity became untenable at the same time as its divisions between the 'distinctive features' of the different arts, or the separation of a pure domain of art. Postmodernism, in a sense, was simply the name under whose guise certain artists and thinkers realized what modernism had been: a desperate attempt to establish a 'distinctive feature of art' by linking it to a simple teleology of historical evolution and rupture. There was not really a need, moreover, to make this late recognition of a fundamental fact of the aesthetic regime of the arts into an actual temporal break, the real end of a historical period.

However, it was precisely the next episode that showed that postmodernism was more than this. The joyful, postmodern artistic license, its [43] exaltation of the carnival of simulacra, all sorts of interbreeding and hybridization, transformed very quickly and came to challenge the freedom or autonomy that the modernist principle conferred – or would have conferred – upon art the mission of accomplishing. There was thus a return from the carnival to the primal scene. However, the primal scene can be taken in two senses, either as the starting point of a

process or as an original separation. Modernist faith had latched on to the idea of the 'aesthetic education of man' that Schiller had extracted from the Kantian analytic of the beautiful. The postmodern reversal had as its theoretical foundation Lyotard's analysis of the Kantian sublime, which was reinterpreted as the scene of a founding distance separating the idea from any sensible presentation. From this moment onward, postmodernism came into harmony with the mourning and repenting of modernist thought, and the scene of sublime distance came to epitomize all sorts of scenes of original distance or original sin: the Heideggerian flight of the gods, the irreducible aspect of the unsymbolizable object and the death drive as analysed by Freud, the voice of the Absolutely Other declaring a ban on representation, the revolutionary murder of the Father. Postmodernism thus became the grand threnody of the unrepresentable/intractable[44]/irredeemable, denouncing the modern madness of the idea of a self-emancipation of mankind's humanity and its inevitable and interminable culmination in the death camps.

The notion of the avant-garde defines the type of subject suitable to the modernist vision and appropriate, according to this vision, for connecting the aesthetic to the political. Its success is due less to the convenient connection it proposes between the artistic idea of innovation and the idea of politically-guided change, than to the more covert connection it establishes between two ideas of the 'avant-garde'. On the one hand, there is the topographical and military notion of the force that marches in the lead, that has a clear understanding of the movement, embodies its forces, determines the direction of historical evolution, and chooses subjective political orientations.⁹ In short, there is the idea that links political subjectivity to a certain form: the party, an advanced detachment that derives its ability to lead from its ability to read and interpret the signs of history. On the other hand, there is another idea of the avant-garde that, in accordance with Schiller's model, is rooted in the aesthetic anticipation of the future. If the concept of the avant-garde has any meaning in the aesthetic regime of the arts, it is on this side of things, not on the side of the [45] advanced detachments of artistic innovation but on the side of the invention of sensible forms and material structures for a life to come. This is what the 'aesthetic' avant-garde brought to the 'political' avant-garde, or

what it wanted to bring to it – and what it believed to have brought to it – by transforming politics into a total life programme. The history of the relations between political parties and aesthetic movements is first of all the history of a confusion, sometimes complacently maintained, at other times violently denounced, between these two ideas of the avant-garde, which are in fact two different ideas of political subjectivity: the archi-political idea of a party, that is to say the idea of a form of political intelligence that sums up the essential conditions for change, and the meta-political idea of global political subjectivity, the idea of the potentiality inherent in the innovative sensible modes of experience that anticipate a community to come. There is, however, nothing accidental about this confusion. It is not the case, as today's doxa would have us believe, that artists' ambitious claims to a total revolution of the sensible paved the way for totalitarianism. It is rather that the very idea of a political avant-garde is divided between the strategic conception and the aesthetic conception of the avant-garde. [46]

Mechanical Arts and the Promotion of the Anonymous

In one of your texts, you establish a connection between the development of photography and film as 'mechanical' arts and the birth of 'new history'.¹⁰ Can you explain this connection? Does it correspond to Benjamin's idea that the masses as such acquired visibility at the beginning of the century with the help of the 'mechanical' arts?

Perhaps first I should clear up a misunderstanding concerning the notion of 'mechanical arts'. The connection I established was between a scientific paradigm and an *aesthetic* paradigm. Benjamin's thesis presupposes something different, which seems questionable to me: the deduction of the aesthetic and political properties of a form of art from its technical properties. Mechanical arts, qua *mechanical* arts, would result in a change of artistic paradigm and a new relationship between art and [47] its subject matter. This proposition refers back to one of modernism's main theses: the difference between the arts is linked to the difference between their technological conditions or their specific medium or material. This assimilation can be understood either in the simple modernist mode, or in accordance with modernatist hyperbole. The persistent success of Benjamin's theses on art in the age of mechanical reproduction is, moreover, undoubtedly due to the crossing-over they allow for between the categories of Marxist materialist explanation and those of Heideggerian ontology, which ascribe the age of modernity to the unfurling of the essence of technology. This link between the aesthetic and the onto-technological has, in fact, been subjected to the general fate of modernist categories. In Benjamin, Duchamp, or Rodchenko's time, it coexisted with the faith in the capabilities of electricity and machines, iron, glass, and concrete. With the so-called 'postmodern' reversal, it has kept pace with the return to the icon, which presents the veil of Veronica as the essence of painting, film, or photography.

It is thus necessary, in my opinion, to take things the other way around. In order for the mechanical arts to be able to confer visibility on the masses, or rather on anonymous individuals, they [48] first need to be recognized as arts. That is to say that they first need to be put into practice and recognized as something other than techniques of reproduction or transmission. It is thus the same principle that confers visibility on absolutely anyone and allows for photography and film to become arts. We can even reverse the formula: it is because the anonymous became the subject matter of art that the act of recording such a subject matter can be an art. The fact that what is anonymous is not only susceptible to becoming the subject matter of art but also conveys a specific beauty is an exclusive characteristic of the aesthetic regime of the arts. Not only did the aesthetic regime begin well before the arts of mechanical reproduction, but it is actually this regime that made them possible by its new way of thinking art and its subject matter.

The aesthetic regime of the arts was initially the breakdown of the system of representation, that is to say of a system where the dignity of the subject matter dictated the dignity of genres of representation (tragedy for the nobles, comedy for the people of meagre means; historical painting versus genre painting; etc.). Along with genres, the system of representation defined the situations and forms of expression that were appropriate for the lowliness or loftiness of the subject matter. The aesthetic regime [49] of the arts dismantled this correlation between subject matter and mode of representation. This revolution first took place in literature: an epoch and a society were deciphered through the features, clothes, or gestures of an ordinary individual (Balzac); the sewer revealed a civilization (Hugo); the daughter of a farmer and the daughter of a banker were caught in the equal force of style as an 'absolute manner of seeing things' (Flaubert). All of these forms of cancellation or reversal of the opposition between high and low not only antedate the powers of mechanical reproduction, they made it possible for this reproduction to be more than mechanical reproduction. In order for a technological mode of action and production, i.e. a way of doing and making, to be qualified as falling within the domain of art – be it a certain use of words or of a camera –, it is first necessary for its subject matter to be defined as

such. Photography was not established as an art on the grounds of its technological nature. The discourse on the originality of photography as an 'indexical' art is very recent, and it is less a part of the history of photography than of the history of the postmodern reversal touched upon above.¹¹ Furthermore, photography did not become an art by imitating the mannerisms of art. Benjamin accurately demonstrated this regarding [50] David Octavius Hill: it is with the little anonymous fishwife from New Haven, not with his grand pictorial compositions, that he brought photography into the world of art. Likewise, it is not the ethereal subject matter and soft focus of pictorialism that secured the status of photographic art, it is rather the appropriation of the commonplace: the emigrants in Stieglitz's *The Steerage*, the frontal portraits by Paul Strand or Walker Evans.¹² On the one hand, the technological revolution comes after the aesthetic revolution. On the other hand, however, the aesthetic revolution is first of all the honour acquired by the commonplace, which is pictorial and literary before being photographic or cinematic.

We should add that the honour conferred on the commonplace is part of the science of literature before being part of the science of history. Film and photography did not determine the subject matter and modes of focalization of 'new history'. On the contrary, the new science of history and the arts of mechanical reproduction are inscribed in the same logic of aesthetic revolution. This programme is literary before being scientific: it shifts the focus from great names and events to the life of the anonymous; it finds symptoms of an epoch, a society, or a civilization in the minute details of ordinary life [51]; it explains the surface by subterranean layers; and it reconstructs worlds from their vestiges. This does not simply mean that the science of history has a literary prehistory. Literature itself was constituted as a kind of symptomatology of society, and it set this symptomatology in contrast with the clamour and imagination of the public stage. In his preface to *Cromwell*, Hugo called for a literature based on the story of the customs of everyday life that would be opposed to the story of events practised by historians. In *War and Peace*, Tolstoy contrasted the documents of literature, taken from narratives and testimonial accounts of the action of innumerable anonymous actors, with the documents of historians, taken from the archives – and from the imagination – of those who

believe to have been in charge of battles and to have made history. Scholarly history took over this opposition when it contrasted the history of the lifestyles of the masses and the cycles of material life based on reading and interpreting 'mute witnesses' with the former, history of princes, battles, and treaties based on courts' chronicles and diplomatic reports. The appearance of the masses [52] on the scene of history or in 'new' images is not to be confused with the link between the age of the masses and the age of science and technology. It is first and foremost rooted in the aesthetic logic of a mode of visibility that, on the one hand, revokes the representative tradition's scales of grandeur and, on the other hand, revokes the oratorical model of speech in favour of the interpretation of signs on the body of people, things, and civilizations.¹³

This is what scholarly history inherited. However, its intention was to separate the condition of its new object (the life of the anonymous) from its literary origin and from the politics of literature in which it is inscribed. What it cast aside – which was reappropriated by film and photography – was the logic revealed by the tradition of the novel (from Balzac to Proust and Surrealism) and the reflection on the true that Marx, Freud, Benjamin, and the tradition of 'critical thought' inherited: the ordinary becomes beautiful as a trace of the true. And the ordinary becomes a trace of the true if it is torn from its obviousness in order to become a hieroglyph, a mythological or phantasmagoric figure. This phantasmagoric dimension of the true, which belongs to the aesthetic regime of the arts, played an essential role in the formation of the critical paradigm of the human and social sciences. [53] The Marxist theory of fetishism is the most striking testimony to this fact: commodities must be torn out of their trivial appearances, made into phantasmagoric objects in order to be interpreted as the expression of society's contradictions. Scholarly history tried to separate out various features within the aesthetico-political configuration that gave it its object. It flattened this phantasmagoria of the true into the positivist sociological concepts of mentality/expression and belief/ignorance. [54]

*Is History a Form of Fiction?*¹⁴

You refer to the idea of fiction as essentially belonging to the domain of empirical reality. How exactly is this to be understood? What are the connections between the History we are 'involved' in and the stories told (or deconstructed) by the narrative arts? And how are we to make sense of the fact that poetic or literary locutions 'take shape', have real effects, rather than being reflections of the real? Are the concepts of 'political bodies' or a 'communal body' more than metaphors? Does this reflection involve a redefinition of utopia?

There are two problems here that certain people confuse in order to construct the phantom of a historical reality that would solely be made up of 'fictions'. The first problem concerns the relationship between history and historicity, that is to say the relationship of the historical agent to the speaking being. The second problem concerns the idea of fiction and the relationship between [55] fictional rationality and the modes of explanation used for historical and social reality, the relationship between the logic of fiction and the logic of facts.

It is preferable to begin with the second problem, the 'actuality' of fiction analysed by the text you refer to.¹⁵ This actuality itself raises a twofold question: the general question of fiction's rationality, i.e. the distinction between fiction and falsity, and the question of the distinction – or the indistinction – between the modes of intelligibility specific to the construction of stories and the modes of intelligibility used for understanding historical phenomena. Let's start from the beginning. The specificity of the representative regime of the arts is characterized by the separation between the idea of fiction and that of lies. It is this regime that confers autonomy on the arts' various forms in relationship to the economy of communal occupations and the counter-economy of simulacra specific to the ethical regime of images. This is what is essentially at stake in Aristotle's *Poetics*, which safeguards the forms of poetic *mimēsis* from the Platonic suspicion concerning what

images consist of and their end or purpose. The *Poetics* declares that the arrangement of a poem's actions is not equivalent to the fabrication of a simulacrum.¹⁶ It is a play of [56] knowledge that is carried out in a determined space-time. To pretend is not to put forth illusions but, to elaborate intelligible structures. Poetry owes no explanation for the 'truth' of what it says because, in its very principle, it is not made up of images or statements, but fictions, that is to say arrangements between actions. The other consequence that Aristotle derives from this is the superiority of poetry, which confers a causal logic on the arrangement of events, over history, condemned to presenting events according to their empirical disorder. In other words – and this is obviously something that historians do not like to examine too closely – the clear division between reality and fiction makes a rational logic of history impossible as well as a science of history.

The aesthetic revolution rearranges the rules of the game by making two things interdependent: the blurring of the borders between the logic of facts and the logic of fictions *and* the new mode of rationality that characterizes the science of history. By declaring that the principle of poetry is not to be found in fiction but in a certain arrangement of the signs of language, the Romantic Age blurred the dividing line that isolated art from the jurisdiction of statements or images, as well as the dividing line that separated the [57] logic of facts from the logic of stories. It is not the case, as is sometimes said, that it consecrated the 'autotelism' of language, separated from reality. It is the exact opposite. The Romantic Age actually plunged language into the materiality of the traits by which the historical and social world becomes visible to itself, be it in the form of the silent language of things or the coded language of images. Circulation within this landscape of signs defines, moreover, the new fictionality, the new way of telling stories, which is first of all a way of assigning meaning to the 'empirical' world of lowly actions and commonplace objects. Fictional arrangement is no longer identified with the Aristotelian causal sequence of actions 'according to necessity and plausibility'. It is an arrangement of signs. However, this literary arrangement of signs is by no means the solitary self-referentiality of language. It is the identification of modes of fictional construction with means of deciphering the signs inscribed in the general aspect of a place, a group, a wall, an article of clothing,

a face. It is the association between, on the one hand, accelerations or decelerations of language, its shuffling of images or sudden changes of tone, all its differences of potential between the insignificant and the overly significant or overly meaningful [58], and on the other hand, the modalities of a trip through the landscape of significant traits deposited in the topography of spaces, the physiology of social circles, the silent expression of bodies. The 'fictionality' specific to the aesthetic age is consequently distributed between two poles: the potential of meaning inherent in everything silent and the proliferation of modes of speech and levels of meaning.

The aesthetic sovereignty of literature does not therefore amount to the reign of fiction. On the contrary, it is a regime in which the logic of descriptive and narrative arrangements in fiction becomes fundamentally indistinct from the arrangements used in the description and interpretation of the phenomena of the social and historical world. When Balzac places his reader before the entwined hieroglyphics on the tottering and heteroclitic façade of the house in *At the Sign of the Cat and Racket*, or has his reader enter an antique dealer's shop, with the hero of *The Magic Skin*,¹⁷ where jumbled up together are objects both profane and sacred, uncivilized and cultured, antique and modern, that each sum up a world, when he makes Cuvier the true poet reconstructing a world from a fossil, he establishes a regime of equivalence between the signs of the new novel and those of the description or [59] interpretation of the phenomena of a civilization. He forges this new rationality of the obvious and the obscure that goes against the grand Aristotelian arrangements and that would become the new rationality for the history of material life (which stands in opposition to the histories of great names and events).

The Aristotelian dividing line between two 'stories' or 'histories' – poets' stories and the history of historians – is thereby revoked, the dividing line that not only separated reality and fiction but also empirical succession and constructed necessity. Aristotle established the superiority of poetry, recounting 'what could happen' according to the necessity or plausibility of the poetic arrangement of actions, over history, conceived of as the empirical succession of events, of 'what happened'. The aesthetic revolution drastically disrupts things: testimony and fiction come under the same regime of meaning. On

the one hand, the 'empirical' bears the marks of the true in the form of traces and imprints. 'What happened' thus comes directly under a regime of truth, a regime that demonstrates the necessity behind what happened. On the other hand, 'what could happen' no longer has the autonomous and linear form [60] of the arrangement of actions. The poetic 'story' or 'history' henceforth links the realism that shows us the poetic traces inscribed directly in reality with the artificialism that assembles complex machines of understanding.

This connection was transferred from literature to the new art of narrative, film, which brought to its highest potential the double resource of the silent imprint that speaks and the montage that calculates the values of truth and the potential for producing meaning. Documentary film, film devoted to the 'real', is in this sense capable of greater fictional invention than 'fiction' film, readily devoted to a certain stereotype of actions and characters. Chris Marker's *Le Tombeau d'Alexandre (The Last Bolshevik)*, the object of the article you refer to, fictionalizes the history of Russia from the time of the czars to the post-communist period through the destiny of a film-maker, Alexander Medvedkin. Marker does not make him into a fictional character; he does not tell fabricated stories about the USSR. He plays off of the combination of different types of traces (interviews, significant faces, archival documents, extracts from documentary and fictional films, etc.) in order to suggest possibilities for thinking [61] this story or history. The real must be fictionalized in order to be thought. This proposition should be distinguished from any discourse – positive or negative – according to which everything is 'narrative', with alternations between 'grand' narratives and 'minor' narratives. The notion of 'narrative' locks us into oppositions between the real and artifice where both the positivists and the deconstructionists are lost. It is not a matter of claiming that everything is fiction. It is a matter of stating that the fiction of the aesthetic age defined models for connecting the presentation of facts and forms of intelligibility that blurred the border between the logic of facts and the logic of fiction. Moreover, these models were taken up by historians and analysts of social reality. Writing history and writing stories come under the same regime of truth. This has nothing whatsoever to do with a thesis on the reality or unreality of things. On the contrary, it is clear that a model for the

fabrication of stories is linked to a certain idea of history as common destiny, with an idea of those who 'make history', and that this interpenetration of the logic of facts and the logic of stories is specific to an age when anyone and everyone is considered to be participating in the task of 'making' history. Thus, it is not a matter of claiming that [62] 'History' is only made up of stories that we tell ourselves, but simply that the 'logic of stories' and the ability to act as historical agents go together. Politics and art, like forms of knowledge, construct 'fictions', that is to say *material* rearrangements of signs and images, relationships between what is seen and what is said, between what is done and what can be done.

It is here that we encounter the other question that you asked, which concerns the relationship between literarity and historicity. Political statements and literary locutions produce effects in reality. They define models of speech or action but also regimes of sensible intensity. They draft maps of the visible, trajectories between the visible and the sayable, relationships between modes of being, modes of saying, and modes of doing and making. They define variations of sensible intensities, perceptions, and the abilities of bodies.¹⁸ They thereby take hold of unspecified groups of people, they widen gaps, open up space for deviations, modify the speeds, the trajectories, and the ways in which groups of people adhere to a condition, react to situations, recognize their images. They reconfigure the map of the sensible by interfering with the functionality of gestures and rhythms [63] adapted to the natural cycles of production, reproduction, and submission. Man is a political animal because he is a literary animal who lets himself be diverted from his 'natural' purpose by the power of words. This *literarity* is at once the condition and the effect of the circulation of 'actual' literary locutions. However, these locutions take hold of bodies and divert them from their end or purpose insofar as they are not bodies in the sense of organisms, but quasi-bodies, blocks of speech circulating without a legitimate father to accompany them toward their authorized addressee. Therefore, they do not produce collective bodies. Instead, they introduce lines of fracture and disincorporation into imaginary collective bodies. This has always been, as is well known, the phobia of those in power and the theoreticians of good government, worried that the circulation of writing would produce 'disorder in the established

system of classification'. It was also, in the nineteenth century, the phobia of 'actual' writers who wrote in order to denounce the literarity that overflows the institution of literature and leads its products astray. It is true that the circulation of these quasi-bodies causes modifications in the sensory perception of what is common to the community, in the relationship [64] between what is common to language and the sensible distribution of spaces and occupations. They form, in this way, uncertain communities that contribute to the formation of enunciative collectives that call into question the distribution of roles, territories, and languages. In short, they contribute to the formation of political subjects that challenge the given distribution of the sensible. A political collective is not, in actual fact, an organism or a communal body. The channels for political subjectivization are not those of imaginary identification but those of 'literary' disincorporation.¹⁹

I am not sure that the notion of utopia takes this into account. It is a word whose definitional capabilities have been completely devoured by its connotative properties. Sometimes it refers to the mad delusions that lead to totalitarian catastrophe; sometimes it refers, conversely, to the infinite expansion of the field of possibility that resists all forms of totalizing closure. From the point of view that concerns us here, i.e. the point of view of the reconfigurations of the shared sensible order, the word utopia harbours two contradictory meanings. Utopia is, in one respect, the unacceptable, a no-place, the extreme point of a polemical reconfiguration of the sensible, which breaks down the categories that define what is considered to be obvious. However, it is also the configuration of a proper place, a [65] non-polemical distribution of the sensible universe where what one sees, what one says, and what one makes or does are rigorously adapted to one another. Utopias and forms of utopian socialism functioned based on this ambiguity. On the one hand, they dismissed the obvious sensible facts in which the normality of domination is rooted. On the other hand, they proposed a state of affairs where the idea of the community would have its adequate forms of incorporation, a state of affairs that would therefore abolish the dispute concerning the relations of words to things that makes up the heart of politics. In *The Nights of Labor*, I analysed from this perspective the complex encounter between workers and the engineers of utopia. What the Saint-Simonian engineers proposed was a new, real

body for the community where the water and rail routes marked out on the ground would take the place of paper dreams and the illusions of speech. The workers, for their part, did not set practice in contrast with utopia; they conferred upon the latter the characteristic of being 'unreal', of being a montage of words and images appropriate for reconfiguring the territory of the visible, the thinkable, and the possible. The 'fictions' of art and politics are therefore heterotopias rather than utopias. [66]

*On Art and Work*²⁰

The link between artistic practice and its apparent outside, i.e. work, is essential to the hypothesis of a 'factory of the sensible'. How do you yourself conceive of such a link (exclusion, distinction, indifference...)? Is it possible to speak of 'human activity' in general and include artistic practices within it, or are these exceptions when compared to other practices?

The first possible meaning of the notion of a 'factory of the sensible' is the formation of a shared sensible world, a common habitat, by the weaving together of a plurality of human activities. However, the idea of a 'distribution of the sensible' implies something more. A 'common' world is never simply an *ethos*, a shared abode, that results from the sedimentation of a certain number of intertwined acts. It is always a polemical distribution of modes of being and 'occupations' in [67] a space of possibilities. It is from this perspective that it is possible to raise the question of the relationship between the 'ordinariness' of work and artistic 'exceptionality'. Here again referencing Plato can help lay down the terms of the problem. In the third book of the *Republic*, the mimetician is no longer condemned simply for the falsity and the pernicious nature of the images he presents, but he is condemned in accordance with a principle of division of labour that was already used to exclude artisans from any shared political space: the mimetician is, by definition, a double being. He does two things at once, whereas the principle of a well-organized community is that each person only does the one thing that they were destined to do by their 'nature'. In one sense, this statement says everything: the idea of work is not initially the idea of a determined activity, a process of material transformation. It is the idea of a distribution of the sensible: an impossibility of doing 'something else' based on an 'absence of time'. This 'impossibility' is part of the incorporated conception of the community. It establishes work as the necessary relegation of the worker to the private space-time of his occupation, his exclusion from participation in what is common

to the community.²¹ The mimetician brings confusion to [68] this distribution: he is a man of duplication, a worker who does two things at once. Perhaps the correlate to this principle is the most important thing: the mimetician provides a public stage for the 'private' principle of work. He sets up a stage for what is common to the community with what should determine the confinement of each person to his or her place. It is this redistribution of the sensible that constitutes his noxiousness, even more than the danger of simulacra weakening souls. Hence, artistic practice is not the outside of work but its displaced form of visibility. The democratic distribution of the sensible makes the worker into a double being. It removes the artisan from 'his' place, the domestic space of work, and gives him 'time' to occupy the space of public discussions and take on the identity of a deliberative citizen. The mimetic act of splitting in two, which is at work in theatrical space, consecrates this duality and makes it visible. The exclusion of the mimetician, from the Platonic point of view, goes hand in hand with the formation of a community where work is in 'its' place.

The principle of fiction that governs the representative regime of art is a way of stabilizing the artistic exception, of assigning it to a *technē*, which means two things: the art of imitations is a technique and not a lie. It ceases to be [69] a simulacrum, but at the same time it ceases to be the displaced visibility of work, as a distribution of the sensible. The imitator is no longer the double being against whom it is necessary to posit the city where each person only does a single thing. The art of imitations is able to inscribe its specific hierarchies and exclusions in the major distribution of the liberal arts and the mechanical arts.

The aesthetic regime of the arts disrupts this apportionment of spaces. It does not simply call into question mimetic division – i.e. the mimetic act of splitting in two – in favour of an immanence of thought in sensible matter. It also calls into question the neutralized status of *technē*, the idea of technique as the imposition of a form of thought on inert matter. That is to say that it brings to light, once again, the distribution of *occupations* that upholds the apportionment of domains of activity. This theoretical and political operation is at the heart of Schiller's *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*. Behind the Kantian definition of aesthetic judgement as a judgement without concepts – without the submission of the intuitive given to conceptual

determination –, Schiller indicates the political distribution that is the matter at stake: the division between those who act and those who are acted upon, between the cultivated classes [70] that have access to a totalization of lived experience and the uncivilized classes immersed in the parcelling out of work and of sensory experience. Schiller's 'aesthetic' state, by suspending the opposition between active understanding and passive sensibility, aims at breaking down – with an idea of art – an idea of society based on the opposition between those who think and decide and those who are doomed to material tasks.

In the nineteenth century, this *suspension* of work's negative value became the assertion of its positive value as the very form of the shared effectivity of thought and community. This mutation occurred via the transformation of the suspension inherent in the 'aesthetic state' into the positive assertion of the aesthetic *will*. Romanticism declared that the becoming-sensible of all thought and the becoming-thought of all sensible materiality was the very goal of the activity of thought in general. In this way, art once again became a symbol of work. It anticipates the end – the elimination of oppositions – that work is not yet in a position to attain by and for itself. However, it does this insofar as it is a *production*, the identification of a process of material execution with a community's self-presentation of its meaning. Production asserts itself [71] as the principle behind a new distribution of the sensible insofar as it unites, in one and the same concept, terms that are traditionally opposed: the activity of manufacturing and visibility. Manufacturing meant inhabiting the private and lowly space-time of labour for sustenance. Producing unites the act of manufacturing with the act of bringing to light, the act of defining a new relationship between *making* and *seeing*. Art anticipates work because it carries out its principle: the transformation of sensible matter into the community's self-presentation. The texts written by the young Marx that confer upon work the status of the generic essence of mankind were only possible on the basis of German Idealism's aesthetic programme, i.e. art as the transformation of thought into the sensory experience of the community. It is this initial programme, moreover, that laid the foundation for the thought and practice of the 'avant-gardes' in the 1920s: abolish art as a separate activity, put it back to work, that is to

say, give it back to life and its activity of working out its own proper meaning.

I do not mean by this that the modern valorization of work is only the result of the new way for thinking about art. On the one hand, the *aesthetic* mode of thought is much more than a way of thinking about art. It is an idea of thought, linked to an idea of the distribution [72] of the sensible. On the other hand, it is also necessary to think about the way in which artists' art found itself defined on the basis of a twofold promotion of work: the economic promotion of work as the name for the fundamental human activity, but also the struggles of the proletariat to bring labour out of the night surrounding it, out of its exclusion from shared visibility and speech. It is necessary to abandon the lazy and absurd schema that contrasts the aesthetic cult of art for art's sake with the rising power of industrial labour. Art can show signs of being an exclusive activity insofar as it is work. Better informed than the demystifiers of the twentieth century, the critics in Flaubert's time indicated what links the cult of the sentence to the valorization of work, said to be wordless: the Flaubertian aesthete is a pebble breaker. At the time of the Russian Revolution, art and production would be identified because they came under one and the same principle concerning the redistribution of the sensible, they came under one and the same virtue of action that opens up a form of visibility at the same time as it manufactures objects. The cult of art presupposes a revalorization of the abilities attached to the very idea of work. However, this idea is less the discovery of the essence of human activity than a recomposition of the landscape of the visible, a recomposition of the [73] relationship between doing, making, being, seeing, and saying. Whatever might be the specific type of economic circuits they lie within, artistic practices are not 'exceptions' to other practices. They represent and reconfigure the distribution of these activities.

Notes

- 1 Without excessively multiplying the examples, it is worth highlighting the unique logic of translation operative in the work of the French *belles infidèles* in the seventeenth century. They brazenly adapted *les Anciens* to the poetic norms of *les Modernes* and often changed what were seen to be the inadequacies of the original work (including anything from vocabulary and stylistics to plot structure and organization, which sometimes necessitated significant omissions). It is a grave but nonetheless common mistake to impose a teleological model on the history of translation, denigrating the *belles infidèles* and extolling the scientific superiority of contemporary translation practice, which began approximately with the Romantics. The logic of signification at work in specific historical communities cannot be readily translated into one single overarching logic of meaning that would define the trans-historical nature of translation. For more on the history of translation, see the work of Antoine Berman, Henri Meschonnic, George Steiner, and Henri Van Hoof.
- 2 I am not arguing in favour of what Schleiermacher referred to as a method of translation that brings the author toward the reader. I am pragmatically advocating the use of a relational logic of signification in a specific socio-historic situation and with a particular type of discourse.
- 3 An earlier, abbreviated version of this essay appeared in the *Encyclopedia of Modern French Thought* (New York and London: Fitzroy Dearborn, 2004).
- 4 The numbers in square brackets refer to the pagination of the original French edition (Paris : La Fabrique – Éditions, 2000) and correspond to the beginning of each page indicated. – Trans.
- 5 *Le commun* – alternately translated as ‘something in common’, ‘something common’, ‘what is common’, or ‘what is common to the community’ – is strictly speaking what makes or produces

a community and not simply an attribute shared by all of its members. The adjectival form of the same word, *commun*, is translated as ‘common’, ‘shared’, or ‘communal’ depending on the context. – Trans.

- 6 Rancière uses the word ‘poem’ (*le poème*) in reference to the Greek term *poiēma*, which means ‘anything made or done’ as well as ‘a piece of craftsmanship’, ‘a poetic work’, or ‘an act or deed’. He also sometimes prefers ‘the stage’ (*la scène*) over ‘theatre’ or ‘drama’ (*le théâtre*), undoubtedly in order to emphasize the public aspect of theatrical performances on the *skēnē*. – Trans.
- 7 From this perspective, it is possible to understand the paralogism 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). This attempt establishes a relationship of cause and effect between properties of two regimes of thought that are mutually exclusive. The same problem is raised by Benjamin’s analysis of the aura insofar as he establishes a questionable deduction from the ritual value of the image to the value of the unicity of the work of art: ‘It is a fact of decisive importance that the existence of the work of art with reference to its aura is never entirely separated from its ritual function. In other words, the unique value of the “authentic” work of art has its basis in ritual, the location of its original use value’ (‘The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction’. *Illuminations*. Ed. Hannah Arendt. Harry Zohn, trans. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968, p. 225 [translation slightly modified in order to maintain an overall coherence between the quotation and Rancière’s commentary – Trans.]). This ‘fact’ is in reality only the problematic adaptation between two schemata of transformation: the historicizing schema of the ‘secularization of the sacred’ and the economic schema of the transformation of use value into exchange value. However, when sacred service defines the purpose of the statue or painting as images, the very idea of a specificity of art and of a property of unicity inherent in its ‘works’ cannot come to light. The erasure of the former is necessary for the emergence of the latter. It by no means follows that the idea

of art's specificity is an altered form of the definition of images by sacred service. The 'in other words' assumes two propositions to be equivalent that are not in the least and allows for all of the crossing-over between the materialist explanation of art and its transformation into secular theology. This is how Benjamin's theorization of the transition from cult value to exhibition value today supports three competing discourses: the discourse that celebrates the modern demystification of artistic mysticism, the discourse that endows the work of art and its exhibition-space with the sacred values of the representation of the invisible, and the discourse that contrasts the buried ages when the gods were still present with the age of abandonment, the age of man's 'being-exposed'.

- 8 Cf. Raymond Bellour. 'La chambre'. *L'Entre-images 2*. Paris: P.O.L., 1999. 281–317.
- 9 'Subjective' here refers to the political process of 'subjectivization' as it is explained in Appendix 1. – Trans.
- 10 'L'inoubliable'. Jean-Louis Comolli and Jacques Rancière. *Arrêt sur histoire*. Paris: Centre Georges-Pompidou, 1997. 47–70.
- 11 The anti-modernist, polemical vocation of this late discovery of the 'origin' of photography, modelled on the myth of the invention of painting by Dibutades, clearly appears in the work of Roland Barthes (*Camera Lucida*) as well as in the work of Rosalind Krauss (*Le Photographique*).
- 12 Rancière uses 'the commonplace' (*le quelconque*) to refer to both the ordinary and everyday as well as to the insignificant, i.e. the mass of anonymous objects or people that lack any specific quality or value. – Trans.
- 13 Here as elsewhere, Rancière uses the word 'body' (*le corps*) in the largest possible sense of the term in order to refer alternately – and sometimes simultaneously – to physical forms (anything from the bodies of human beings to objects or buildings), communities (social bodies), political configurations (the body politic), units of discourse (bodies of writing), and even geographic formations (bodies of land and water). – Trans.
- 14 The French term *histoire* means both 'history' and 'story'. Although the context often provides clear indications for deciding between

these two alternatives, Rancière occasionally plays off of the ambiguity in French (rendered in English as ‘history or story’). – Trans.

- 15 Jacques Rancière. ‘La fiction de mémoire: à propos du *Tombeau d’Alexandre* de Chris Marker’. *Trafic* 29 (Spring 1999): 36–47. [A revised version of this article was later published as a chapter in *La Fable cinématographique* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2001. 201–16). An English translation of this work is forthcoming. – Trans.]
- 16 On Rancière’s use of the word ‘poem’, see note 6. Rancière uses the term ‘poetry’ (*la poésie*) in the following pages to refer to the Greek term *poiēsis*, which means ‘the art of poetry’ or ‘a poem’ as well as ‘a making, a forming, a creating’. – Trans.
- 17 Balzac’s *La Peau de chagrin* has also been translated into English as *The Wild Ass’s Skin*. – Trans.
- 18 On Rancière’s use of the term ‘body’, see note 13. – Trans.
- 19 Regarding this issue, I take the liberty of referring the reader to my book, *The Names of History: On the Poetics of Knowledge* (Hassan Melehy, trans. Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1994).
- 20 Rancière is concerned with the relationship between *l’art et le travail* in this chapter. The general term ‘work’ was appropriate in most cases as a translation of *le travail*. However, certain contexts and expressions required using ‘labour’ to translate the same term in French. – Trans.
- 21 On Rancière’s notion of *le commun*, see note 5. – Trans.
- 22 This interview was originally conducted in French on October 18th, 2003 and was later reviewed by Jacques Rancière. – Trans.
- 23 *The Names of History: On the Poetics of Knowledge*. Hassan Melehy, trans. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1994, p. 52 (*Les Mots de l’histoire*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1992, p. 109). Translation slightly modified. – Trans.
- 24 On Rancière’s use of the word ‘poetry’, see note 16. – Trans.
- 25 Rimbaud’s *Alchimie du verbe* contains an implicit reference to Lemaître de Sacy’s translation of the Gospel according to St. John: ‘*Au commencement était le Verbe*’. The King James version and other major English translations prefer to render *logos* as

- 'Word' ('In the beginning was the Word'), thereby leading to the English translation of Rimbaud's poem as 'The Alchemy of the Word'. For this reason, the term 'word' has been used here as a translation of '*verbe*'.
- 26 Rancière frequently adopts the standard vocabulary of other writers in order to implicitly reference their work instead of making explicit references or using quotations. This type of lexical appropriation can often be transferred directly into English due to a similar network of intellectual or cultural connotations (for instance, *spectacle* and spectacle both evoke, in certain contexts, the work of Guy Debord). However, whereas *désœuvrement* immediately conjures up the work of Maurice Blanchot in French, Ann Smock's standard translation of this term as 'inertia' does not have the same effect in English. Hence the decision to supplement it with the term 'non-work' and add the present commentary. – Trans.
- 27 Whereas the 'plastic arts' (sculpture, ceramics, etc.) are often opposed to the art of drawing and painting in English, *les arts plastiques* include any of the arts that elaborate concrete aesthetic forms (sculpture, ceramics, architecture, drawing, painting, etc.). The use of the term 'plastic', both here and elsewhere, refers to this larger semantic field. – Trans.
- 28 'A child kills himself'. *Short Voyages to the Land of the People*. James B. Swenson, trans. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003. 107–34. *Europa '51* was released in 1952 in the United Kingdom as *No Greater Love* and in 1954 in the United States as *The Greatest Love*. – Trans.
- 29 To avoid any confusion, it is worth noting that the French tradition tends to translate John 3:8 ('*to pneuma hopou thelei pnei*') as '*l'Esprit souffle où il veut*', whereas the English translators generally prefer something closer to 'the wind blows where it wills'. *Pneuma* refers equally to the wind and to spirit. – Trans.
- 30 Some of the information compiled in this bibliography is dependent on databases and existing bibliographies that, on more than one occasion, proved to be less reliable than one would hope. For this reason, a concerted effort was made to directly consult all of the works cited in order to correct any errors. Nevertheless,

certain works were not available in the numerous libraries I have at my disposal, and it was therefore occasionally necessary to rely on bibliographical information from other sources. – Trans.

- 31 In selecting among the numerous articles published by Jacques Rancière (he is a regular contributor to journals such as the *Cahiers du cinéma*, *Lignes*, and *Trafic*), privilege was given to major research publications and those articles that have been translated into English. Many of Rancière's early essays have recently been collected in *Les Scènes du peuple*. – Trans.