

## Σύγκριση

Τόμ. 32 (2023)



### Topologies of Senses: The Aesthetic Practice of Philosophy in Jacques Rancière

Thomas Symeonidis

Copyright © 2023, Thomas Symeonidis



Άδεια χρήσης [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

### Βιβλιογραφική αναφορά:

Symeonidis, T. (2023). Topologies of Senses: The Aesthetic Practice of Philosophy in Jacques Rancière. *Σύγκριση*, 32, 155–173. ανακτήθηκε από <https://ejournals.epublishing.ekt.gr/index.php/sygkrisi/article/view/35752>

THOMAS SYMEONIDIS  
Athens School of Fine Arts

**Topologies of Senses: *The Aesthetic Practice of Philosophy*  
in Jacques Rancière**

**I. Introduction**

The idea for this essay originates in the ever-growing awareness of the importance that the notion of space has in the thought of Jacques Rancière. From his method of scene, the politics of space and the contributions on architecture and design to the admission that discussions about contemporary art revolve primarily around matters of spatialization, there is a connecting and evolving line that brings together in the same territory seemingly diverse domains. My main argument is that this territory is aesthetic in essence; I propose to approach it as a topology of senses. In this context, the use of the notion of topology satisfies a dual necessity: first, to reflect on the conceptual relations that are involved in aesthetic experience and the processes of aesthetic thought. Second, to set the ground for approaching an ontological model of art that will serve primarily the facilitation of a critical thinking in the Kantian sense and as exercised by Rancière, that is, a way of thinking about what renders possible the differences instituted in a sensible domain and furthermore, what “critical operations or dissensuses” produce such domains as that of art or politics (Rancière, *Dissensus* 219, 220).

In what follows, I will provide the general lines for understanding topology from an aesthetic point of view so as to set the ground for approaching aesthetics as a method of thought and for making sense of philosophy as an aesthetic practice, introducing more systematically the idea of topologies of senses as communities of transformed sensation and their shaping according to properties attached to Rancière’s groundbreaking conceptualization of the “aesthetic regime of art”. In the final part of my analysis, I will provide the backdrop for understanding the concept of dissensual ontology as an art of aesthetic ideas.

**II. Aesthetics of Topology**

Topology is the study of the *topos* of heterogeneous elements available to operations of articulating and dis-articulating along multiple lines of time and space. On the other hand, aesthetics is about a specific form of experience, “a way of experiencing a sensory state which has abandoned the hierarchies that normally organize sensory experience” (Rancière and Engelmann 33). An object or a situation can be perceived in a manifold of ways that could take two major forms: de-figuration and re-figuration. This means that the object or the situation at hand are subjected to creative processes that could be imaginary or material in their effect. But the question that arises here is: What is perceived in the process of perceiving an object or situation?

From an aesthetic point of view, the perceived is a sensual design, an assemblage of lines; sensual thread that can be re-assembled in several ways under certain operations. Given the Kantian background of much of the analysis performed by Jacques Rancière, the idea of aesthetic efficacy could be introduced

here as a guiding notion for the type of relations that are proper to an aesthetic topology:

*Aesthetic efficacy* means a paradoxical kind of efficacy that is produced by the very rupturing of any determinate link between cause and effect. It is precisely this indeterminacy that Kant conceptualized when he defined the beautiful as *what is represented as an object of universal delight apart from any concept*. (Rancière, "Aesthetic separation" 7)

Aesthetic efficacy ensures the coherence of an aesthetic assemblage despite a continuous dialectic of connection and disconnection under the categories of aesthetic play and suspension. Based on its etymology, topology involves thinking. *Logos* means a process of reason. In these terms, topology is the process of thought having as its subject a place, a *topos*. But *logos* means also saying and in that sense, topology is the saying of a place. Of course, thinking and saying are not separated processes; they are linked in various ways. Topology thus, is the thought and the saying of a place which in turn is a defined entity in space meaning that there is at least some sense of dimensionality, content and properties.

From the side of contemporary art discourse, artists like Pierre Huyghe or Philippe Parreno have provided the conceptual grounds for the term topology in relation to their work. When for example Huyghe stated that he is interested in 'topological system', he clarified that topology "is about how you use something. It refers to a process of translation. However, when you translate something, you always lose something that was in the original. In a topological situation, by contrast, you lose nothing; it is the deformation of the same" (Baker 90). Responding to another question, Huyghe states that topology is "the fold of a situation. It's a way to translate an experience without representing it. The experience will be equivalent and still it will be different" (Baker, 92). In this case, the predominant aspect in a topological system is the equivalence, the mapping of affinities rather than the resemblances that bears any representational process. This topological turn in artistic practices can be coined with the move from the representational to the aesthetic regime in the thought of Rancière and the emancipation of artistic expression from the restrictions of the hierarchies and the protocols of correspondence between themes of representation and forms of art.

It is worth stating an analogy with Gilles Deleuze's theses in *Difference and Repetition* where modern art is described as "a veritable theatre of metamorphoses and permutations. A theatre where nothing is fixed, a labyrinth without a thread (Ariadne has hung herself). The work of art leaves the domain of representation in order to become 'experience', transcendental empiricism or science of the sensible" (Deleuze, *Difference* 56).

Topology in the case of art is that space where the sensible has not become yet a matter of representation or inversely, is the space where sensible return to a pure state, restored from the imposed formations of representation. For Deleuze, only when there is that withdrawal of the pure sensible from representation it is possible to find "the reason behind qualities and the being of the sensible". It is about the emergence of a world of differences that is the object of a 'superior empiricism' and it is exactly this empiricism that "teaches us a strange 'reason', that of the multiple, chaos and difference" (Deleuze, *Difference*

57). The relations between aesthetics, as a science of the sensible according to Deleuze, and reason are evident here. The aesthetic reason is linked to processes of despecification and experimentation with possible experience. And the work of art is that places where the sensible reveals itself in a way that is open to experimentation.

Topology makes it possible to experiment with the double process of formation and de-formation of spaces, objects and figures. But topology offers itself on a different level as well; it could be considered as a method for thinking the structure, the function and the qualitative properties of a given space; or, in a more creative path, topology could be specified as that method of thinking that supports the contemplation and formation of spaces according to properties that are to be discovered, defined or being introduced in unprecedented combinations. Topology after all, can be seen first and foremost, as a method for producing different logics of measurement and subsequently for producing redistributed topographies of the given.

Topology converges with ontology. They share the same aspiration for depth and foundations. They are both concerned with the tracing of a dissensual path opposing to certain constructions of discourses, forms of visibility and intelligibility. Describing the artistic task in analogy to politics Rancière states that “an artist or a novelist constructs with words and forms the ontological tissue within which his/her forms are visible or his/her words take weight”. And accordingly, an ontological treatise is for the artist “an attempt to construct a common space for those constructions, a form of intelligibility of their play” (Rancière, “A few remarks” 119). When it comes to aesthetics as a distinct form of experience, the aspect of the weaving process, the formation of the *ontological tissue* as noted by Rancière, appears to be central both in the topology and ontology of art. Quite schematically, the topology of art defines that place which operates as a laboratory for the fabrication of sensory tissues and the generation of new forms of relations whereas the ontology of art coincides with an ontology of the dissensual.

### III. Rancière on Deleuze and Aesthetics as mode of thought

Space and time can be considered as design problems. A partition of the sensible is not a solution to a given spatial problem but rather a certain proposition of a space-time. In *The future of the image*, Rancière relates the partition of the sensible to the act of design:

By assembling words or forms, people define not merely various forms of art, but certain configurations of what can be seen and what can be thought, certain forms of inhabiting the material world. These configurations, which are at once symbolic and material, cross the boundaries between arts, genres and epochs. (Rancière, *The future* 91)

From an aesthetic point of view, design refers to the creation of a new topography of experimental associations between senses, thought and what has remained unthought in other configurations. This point can be made more explicit

by taking into account how Rancière approaches aesthetics in an essay devoted to Deleuze:

Aesthetics does not refer to a discipline. It does not designate a branch of philosophy or a knowledge of works of art. Aesthetics is an idea or thought, a mode of thought that unfolds about works of art, taking them as witnesses to a question: a question that bears on the sensible and on the power that inhabits the sensible prior to thought, as the unthought of thought. (Rancière, "Is there" 2)

On these grounds, aesthetics can be seen as a mode of thinking, but also as a crucial dimension in the making of a work. Rancière proposes the concept of the aesthetic regime of the arts in order to capture the landscape of artistic production that moves away from the logic and the restrictions of representation.

In *What is Philosophy?* Deleuze defines the work of art as "a being of sensation and nothing else: it exists in itself"; and the work of the artist as the creation of blocks and affects, specifying that "the only law for creation is that the compound must stand up on its own" (Deleuze and Guattari, *What is* 164). In his confrontation with Deleuze's analysis of the work of Francis Bacon, Rancière investigates the reasons as well the implications of dissociating the law of creation from the participation of the spectator: "The work of art is such that it stands up on its own. It is the object that is before us, that does not need us, but persists by virtue of its own unifying law of form and matter, of parts and their assemblage [...] Deleuze seems to bring us face to face with the work of art in the form of *here is what there is* (Rancière, "Is there" 2). The way Deleuze describes Bacon's painting supports the idea that the unifying law of a work of art is a matter of a *certain grammar of forms* stemming from the history and theory of art: different types of spaces, planes, figures, lines in various forms and arrangements result to the Deleuzian formula of *here is what there is* or as Rancière summarizes it: "A formula of the painting can thereby be defined in a general grammar of forms" (Rancière, "Is there" 3).

Of course, there is a vital question to be raised: What about the syntax, the connections between the forms? A point of departure for contemplating this question is already provided by Rancière, it is a formulation that appears in *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*: "With painting, hysteria becomes art. Or rather, with the painter, hysteria becomes painting" (Deleuze 52). Hysteria is a dis-organizing force, a shattering of organicity, or to be more precise, a shattering of classical forms of organicity. It is a force that prevents individual elements or parts of a whole to be integrated in a unifying process. Taken from the point of view of classical conceptions of the artwork as a regulated set of relations between the parts and the whole, hysteria is a form of anti-work, a kind of an anti-force that suppresses the contact and thus the forming of relations between the parts heading towards a *telos*, the emergence of a well-functioning organicity. According to the Aristotelian *Poetics*, representation is the process that transforms something into a recognizable element of a work of art. In addition, representation is a system that ensures the connection of a sequence of actions. From this point of view, the hysteria is a process of undoing the representational system. According to Rancière, "*To hystericalize* the work of art or make it out of hysteria, means undoing that organicity that is latent in the very definition of the

‘autonomous’ work of art. It means rendering ill that nature which has organic autonomy as its *telos*” (“Is there” 4). Hysteria is a metonym for de-figuration, for inhibiting resemblances to be established between figures belonging to a different plane of reality.

But what is a figure? In its first sense, it is the outside form of something, the representation of something. From a graphic point of view, the figure is a matter of lines. Drawing a figure simply means creating a line or a combination of lines that have the power to produce a certain signification which for its part, is a process of producing connections between a physical or mental entity and its graphical depiction. So, if we are to take in the opposite sense this path, the act of de-figuring is a process of intervening to the mechanism of signification that establishes relations of correspondence between assemblies of lines in the form of figures and meaningful senses (significations). De-figuring thus, can be considered in two ways: as a form of play and experimentation that creates suspension of meaning and indetermination in an aesthetically and perceptually rewarding manner, following the paths paved by Kant and Schiller. And in a more negative undertone, as a process of destruction, as a polemical act against the very ideas of representation and organicity.

De-figuration in its broader sense means transformation. It is a process of becoming that relies, if we are to follow Deleuze’s approach, on negative strategies in its initial phases: *hysteria, rendering ill, disintegrating, becoming-animal, becoming a body without organs*. It is the resetting of a space by means of a cluster of disjunctives, disintegrating action. Here, the concept of *dissensus* in Rancière as the “creation of a different sensible world within an existing one” (Rancière and Jdey 24) seems to share similar stakes. In Deleuze’s descriptions of Bacon’s painting the pictorial space becomes a scene of combat or crisis. A combat between the formal grammar of painting and the new properties attributed to the contours of figuration. According to Rancière, “what this combat engages [...] is the status of thought in general” (“Is there” 5). Throughout his analysis, Rancière manages to trace a path for inscribing Deleuze’s thought to the destiny of aesthetics. Deleuze’s thought is evidently topological; this is why Rancière refers to it as “a figure of thought” (“Is there” 8). But given also Deleuze’s critique of figuration and organicity, his thought is connected directly to the meaning of aesthetics; it is an aesthetic thought as well.

The transition from the representative to the aesthetic regime of the arts marks a change in the aesthetic perspective:

Aesthetics no longer places the work of art at the center, but the *aistheton*, subjective feelings. Whence the paradox that seems originally to mark aesthetics. While the collapse of the norm of representation opens in principle the reign of the work of art and its power, aesthetics, even by its very name, drowns the work of art in a thought about the sensible [...] thought about the work of art no longer refers to an idea of the rules of its production, but is subsumed under other things: the idea of a particular sensible form, the presence within the sensible of a power that exceeds its normal regime, that is and is not thought, that is a thought become other than itself. (Rancière, “Is there” 9)

From these statements, it is becoming clear that aesthetics as a mode of thought refers to the sensible and in line with the Kantian reasoning, the aesthetic thought about the sensible is always a process of multiplying the sensible. The new senses of the sensible creates the conditions for a reverse path; instead of orienting a thought to a sensible state, it is now a new sensible state that requires a thought, that presents the challenge of the unthought.

#### IV. Method, space and the aesthetic practice of philosophy

Rancière's great emphasis on method is manifested in various instances, from titles that summarize the essence of his work, *The method of equality*, *The method of scene* to the self-referential paper *A few remarks on the method of Jacques Rancière* whence we read: "this idea of what 'method' means should never be forgotten when it comes to Jacques Rancière" (114). But what is that idea of method of a thinker? On a first level, it is about the production of a thinker's ideas, "the issues they address, the materials they select, the givens they consider significant, the phrasing of their connection, the landscape they map, their ways of inventing solutions (or aporias)" (114). More precisely,

a method means a path: not the path that a thinker follows but the path that he/she constructs, that you have to construct to know where you are, to figure out the characteristics of the territory you are going through, the places it allows you to go, the way it obliges you to move, the markers that can help you, the obstacles that get in the way. (Rancière, "A few remarks" 114)

Rancière's methodology of thought is evidently topological in a double sense: there is a path under construction that it is charged with a mapping activity. And, there is a systematic search of a set of points from which it would be possible to distribute the things belonging to politics or art or to their respecting theories. From this point of view, the presuppositions of a system, the very forms of distribution that make possible to think a system, is very close to the idea of topology.

In his discussion with Laurent Jeanpierre and Dork Zabunyan, Rancière stresses the fact that his method starts from the thought of this very set of conditions that allows to define domains of competence such as philosophy, politique, art, science and others. These identifications are brought together with "a certain cutting of possible territories" (Rancière, *The method* 51). Here, the notion of the scene is critical for understanding how a topological organization of points is recognized as such. Instead of starting from a fundamental work of setting a topology or a first rationality, Rancière follows the opposite direction; he starts from a number of scenes that functions as laboratories for observing, defining and verifying actions, dispositions and the choices that operate the distributions that permit the identification of performances and the activities of thought. So, speaking of space, for Rancière, is first and foremost speaking of a place that can be material as well as symbolic in terms of disposition, distribution or set of relations. Secondly, space is a form of co-existence, a certain topography that emerges from the disposition and distribution of the possibles.

The idea of distribution has to do with *possibility* and *difference in the sensible*. A topography of possibilities means that, against the model of the strict platonic distributions of places within a community, there are different places and positions that provide the possibility of different sensible experiences. Distribution might be seen as a counter-dynamic action to any hierarchical regime. Rancière developed this idea by reacting to the concept of ideology in Althusser and to some extent to Foucault's thinking and in particular to his idea of a panoptical apparatus. On the other hand, in understanding the differences in the respective approaches in Rancière and Foucault we could notice that they move in the same road but in somehow opposite directions. Foucault is trying to systematize the territories of thought and perception by delineating their borders. Rancière on the contrary, attaches a great value to chance, possibility and multiplicity. His general project has to do with an interest in "the possibilities for re-configuring a field of possibilities" (*The method* 64) which is connected, according to his own words, to his critical stance toward Foucault:

After all, what I've constructed has been both in reference to, and in reaction to, Foucault; I wanted to say that, in any given world of experience, there are several ways of systematizing this experience precisely because that world is made up of several worlds, of several lines of temporality, of several lines of possibilities. (*The method* 65)

For Rancière philosophy is "a chance, supplementary activity" for which is possible to define "a certain dissensual practice", an activity of declassification, dehierarchization and despecification in order to "think the lines according to which boundaries and passages are constructed, according to which they are conceivable and modifiable" (*Dissensus* 226). Philosophy is a name common in several fields but its different meanings do not coincide; this is the idea of homonymy and the conflicts that it engenders, a conflict over homonyms, is a conflict, according to Rancière, "between one who says white and another who says white" (*Dissensus* 226). Against this backdrop, philosophy can be seen as a certain topology that has to invent its proper space in order to think the difference between the homonyms rather than accepting a radical indetermination. In another instance, Rancière again approaches philosophy in terms of space: "What we'll have to do, instead, is think of philosophy as a space in which thoughts lose their specificity, such that thought is no longer identified as the thought of an activist, a politician or worker" (*Dissenting* 319), underscoring the role of chance: "We can think of philosophy, we can cultivate a practice of it, as the space wherein discourses, words and ideas that should never have met, met" (*Dissenting* 320).

Philosophy should be practiced in tandem with an understanding of the composite structure of the world: "A world is made of interpretations, it is composed and held together by a certain structuring between the perceptible, the thinkable and the sayable, and of course, of what is possible as a consequence of these" (Rancière, *Dissenting* 320). Having as a given such a structure, "philosophy draws its importance from the extent to which we think that a world is made of interpretations, and that changing how we interpret it and that struggling over that interpretation is part and parcel of the process of changing the world". The real issue is about



mapping what can be seen, thought and said. Such mapping is indissociable from the process of creating, not just new ideas, but also new perceptions, new affects and new possibilities of life [...]. In sum, what we can imagine, what we can endeavor to produce, is a philosophical practice that can be part of this transformation of the perceptible and this remapping of the possible. (Rancière, *Dissenting* 320)

In his paper “The Aesthetic Dimension. Aesthetics, Politics, Knowledge” Rancière set out from the beginning that “what aesthetics refers to is not the sensible. Rather, it is a certain modality, a certain distribution of the sensible” (3). Admitting that the text “that has framed the space of aesthetics” is Kant’s *Critique of judgment*, Rancière sets out that this text will be as well his “guiding thread in the construction of a tentatively more comprehensive concept of aesthetics” (“The aesthetic dimension” 1). Against this backdrop, the idea of a topology of senses can be understood primarily by the way Rancière extracts from the *Critique of judgment* the constitutive elements of his well-known formula of the distribution of the sensible. The apprehension of a form according to Kant entails the doubling of the sense; there is the sense of the given and a sense produced out of it. This means also a certain relation between the senses which, in a dynamic manner, can take the form of a re-configuration of the given. This is what Rancière calls ‘the aesthetic dimension’ or ‘dissensus’: “It is another kind of relation between sense and sense, a supplement that both reveals and neutralizes the division at the heart of the sensible” (“The aesthetic dimension” 3).

The idea of space in Rancière could be seen firstly as a procedure of a particular framing and by saying *particular* I am suggesting the idea of a wavering framing, that is, a framing that defies fixed boundaries. However, the process of framing cannot be dissociated from the fact that certain intensities might be present, either in the form of thought or in aesthetic terms. In the *Method of equality* Rancière clarifies his conception of space: “Talking about space means talking about a place which might be completely material, but which symbolizes a disposition, a distribution, a whole set of relationships” (58). Rancière privileges space over time for two main reasons. Firstly, it is a tactical move for avoid any preoccupation about thinking the origins of thoughts, politics or knowledge. He rather prefers the idea of scene, a certain framing of a space-time relation, that provides the possibilities of seeing how things are distributed. Scene as a concrete spatial and temporal formation contains the necessary elements that perform a distribution. Secondly, Rancière follows Feuerbach and his critique of Hegel as a philosopher of time. From this point of view, time is mainly a factor of prohibition and exclusion whereas space can serve as a form of coexistence. In fact, space for Rancière is like “a medium of contribution but also of coexistence” (*The method* 58). This approach to space entails another theory of time: “you have to go through a certain idea of topography, of the disposition and distribution of possibilities, to eventually rethink time as coexistence” (Rancière, *The method* 58).

This approach to time and space can be considered also as the background for a certain method of thinking which of course is supplemented by the necessary rhetorical vigor in Rancière’s formulations, something that he admits:

I may have exaggerated the role of time as prohibition to underscore the opposition between thinking that establishes this dividing line between the possible and the impossible, and thinking that focuses on the topography of possibilities. Obviously, it's not a matter of defining the general characteristics of time and space, but of defining ways of dividing the sensible. (*The method* 58)

In Rancière there is no distinction between different kinds of space, there is no aspiration for setting different kinds of space and mapping their assemblages. If the tasks of mapping and orientation in space have distinct pragmatic undertones, as it is the case in Deleuze and Guattari's politics, in Rancière, the closest we could find to the idea of a mapping, is the notion of scene. Of course, it is important to highlight that Rancière does not have any stated goal of developing a philosophy of space, in fact, he is opposing to any idea of elaborating and practicing the philosophy of a given domain or formula: "Philosophy is not an edifice to be built wherein all the various practices are assigned their domain and principles, nor as a historical tradition meditating on its closure, but as an accidental activity" (*Dissensus* 226).

Rancière practices a method of a-disciplinarity which means that he is always in search of escaping the restrictive definitions of the territory of the thinkable offered by the disciplinary divisions. A discipline is "a way of defining an idea of the thinkable, an idea of what the objects of knowledge themselves can think and know. It is therefore always a certain regulation of dissensus" (Rancière, "Thinking" 6). The method of a-disciplinarity is a method of equality, which from an epistemological point of view, is best described, on Rancière's words, as a *poetics of knowledge* ("Thinking" 12). It is a method that presupposes a topological thinking given that it clearly specifies not the abolition of disciplines, but rather borrowing "their presentations of objects, their procedures for interaction and their forms of argument from language and common thought" (Rancière, "Thinking" 11). Rancière specifies an *in-disciplinary thought* as well an *in-disciplinary procedure* both charged with the topological task of creating a textual and signifying space without boundaries, a space of equality in which the relation between different disciplinary narratives of the same story could be visible and thinkable. What is implied here, is an in-disciplinary practice of philosophy that works on the uncertainty of disciplinary boundaries, "forcing the aporia of the absence of final reason from the reasons of the disciplines" ("Thinking" 11). So, it is on these grounds that an aesthetic practice of philosophy acquires its meaning as 'the subversion' of the organized distributions of conditions within a territory of knowledge:

All territories are topoi predicated on a singular form of the distribution of the sensible. A topography of the thinkable is always a topography of a theater of operations. There is no specific territory of thought. Thought is everywhere. Its space has no periphery, and its inner divisions are always provisory forms of the distribution of the thinkable. A topography of the thinkable is a topography of singular combinations of sense and sense. (Rancière, "The aesthetic dimension" 19)

## V. Topologies of senses as communities of transformed sensation

The idea of a topology of senses is modelled primarily on the generic formation of a community of sense which in Rancière is an aesthetic community in general. In “Aesthetic Separation, Aesthetic Community” Rancière unfolds a thought line that begins from the presupposition that a proposition can function as ‘artistic operation’. The proposition chosen by Rancière brings together some of his most important conceptual threads: community of sense, dissensus and ontology of art. This proposition is actually a poetic statement in *The White Water Lily*, a prose poem by Mallarmé: ‘Apart, we are together’. This statement is paradoxical. A starting point for understanding this paradox is that Mallarmé’s proposition designate an aesthetic place, a *topos*, a human community of ‘transformed sensation’.

Describing the artistic work, Rancière provides the necessary ground for the apprehension of the conceptual relations involved in the topological and ontological considerations of art: “What the artist does is to weave together a new sensory fabric by wresting percepts and affects from the perceptions and affections that make up the fabric of ordinary experience. Weaving this new fabric means creating a form of common expression or a form of expression of the community” (“Aesthetic separation” 3). If we are to look for the red thread in these considerations then we have to turn to one of the definitions that Rancière provides for aesthetics which involves the idea of the community: “Aesthetics is not the fateful capture of art by philosophy. It is not the catastrophic overflow of art into politics. It is the ordinary knot that ties a sense of art to an idea of thought and an idea of the community” (“What aesthetics” 33).

The idea of community can be considered as a spacious concept that permits the co-existence of various elements that could be thought as bodies in a larger or metonymical sense providing thus the conditions for plotting spatial and temporal assemblages of human and non-human entities. On the other hand, there is a certain political-aesthetic dimension at play. For Rancière, a community of sense is “a frame of visibility and intelligibility that puts things or practices together under the same meaning which shapes thereby a certain sense of community” (“Contemporary art” 31). This approach is linked to his well-known formula of the partition of the sensible which is a certain form of cutting out space and time that binds together practices, forms of visibility and patterns of intelligibility. On these respects, a community of sense can serve as experimental ground for testing the conceptual horizons of the other and of the heterogeneous, opening thus a productive field for the different relations of sense to sense that permit to re-arrange and re-consider the spatial presuppositions of artistic practices.

In fact, these processes are associated with the ontological premises of art if we take into account Rancière’s proposition that “there is art insofar as the products of a number of techniques, such as painting, performing, dancing, playing music, and so on are grasped in a specific form of visibility that puts them in common and frames, out of their linkage, a specific sense of community”. It is in the same instance that Rancière stresses the ontological, historical and institutional significance that space has for the art and its emergence as a distinct domain:

Humanity has known sculptors, dancers, or musicians for thousands of years. It has only known Art as such –in the singular and with a capital– for two centuries. It has known it as a certain partitioning of space. First of all, Art is not made of paintings, poems, or melodies. Above all, it is made of some spatial settings, such as the theater, the monument, or the museum. Discussions on contemporary art are not about the comparative value of works. They are all about matters of spatialization. (“Contemporary art” 31)

The idea of community in Rancière can be traced back to Kant and Schiller and can be understood in terms of promise and possibility rather than as an actual and existing state of things. In this sense, community is not restricted to an idea of individual being together; it is about a community of sense. In *Disagreement* Rancière provides another concise definition of aesthetics as “partition of the perceptible as well as discourse on the perceptible”; this discourse is autonomous, meaning that there can be “an evaluation of the perceptible that is distinct from any judgment about the use to which it is put” ( 57). Rancière refers to the Kantian reasoning in the *Critique of the Aesthetic Power of Judgment* and the example of the palace employed by Kant for supporting the thesis that the aesthetic satisfaction derived from a mere representation of an object is indifferent with regard to the existence of this representation (Kant 90). It is in this way that the a world of a virtual community is constituted, a *sensus communis* that presupposes a principle of universality: “By ‘*sensus communis*’ [...] must be understood the idea of a communal sense, i.e., a faculty for judging that in its reflection takes account (*a priori*) of everyone else’s way of representing in thought, in order as it were to hold its judgment up to human reason as whole” (Kant 173).

The transcendental foundations alluded here to the idea of communal sense have as effect the demise of the representational norms since the principle of universality can be seen as a force of de-hierarchization. In a crucial passage of “Aesthetic Separation, Aesthetic Community” Rancière clarifies this idea of communal sense: “Human beings are tied together by a certain sensory fabric, a certain distribution of the sensible, which defines their way of being together” (4). Mark Robson provides an incisive reminder regarding the idea of aesthetic community so as not to conflate it with classical conceptions of utopianism as in the work of Thomas More for instance. He points to Rancière’s careful and forward-looking articulations in the *Flesh of Words: The politics of writing* where there is a warning for the very specific sense of the spatial dimension of utopianism that prevails in his work: “Utopia for me is not the place that exists nowhere, but the ability of overlapping between a discursive space and a territorial space; the identification of a perceptual space that one discovers while walking with the *topos* of the community” (Rancière, *The flesh* 18 in Robson 80). Another crucial warning to be made concerns the relation of aesthetics and politics and the avoiding of an entropic form of aestheticization.

## VI. The aesthetic regime of the arts as a generic topology of senses

In “The Aesthetic Revolution and its Outcomes” Rancière works on a mapping of the different forms that aestheticization can take. Having as a reference his reading of Schiller’s *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* and especially the 15<sup>th</sup>

letter, Rancière provides various scenarios woven around a paradox and a promise: “Man is only completely human when he plays” [the paradox], (Schiller 105). This paradox is capable “of bearing the whole edifice of the art of the beautiful and of the still more difficult art of living” [the promise], (Schiller 105). Rancière will reformulate this thought as follows: “there exists a specific sensory experience that holds the promise of both a new world of Art and a new life for individuals and the community, namely the *aesthetic*” (“The aesthetic revolution” 133). By reformulating Schiller, Rancière effectively operates two major displacements that re-design the aesthetic horizon of the community and of everyday life. However, the crucial point here is to set the distance from this horizon, that is, to reflect on the limitations of the work of art as a model for a community and on the other hand, on the divergences between the idea of an art of living and that of an aestheticized life. If we want to summarize the challenge presented here, this could be in the form of the following question: How could the notion of the aesthetic as a specific experience lead to an “aestheticization of common existence” (Rancière, “The aesthetic revolution” 134) that would be in line with both the art of the beautiful and the art of living?

To understand the variation in the meaning and the use of the term ‘aestheticization’ Rancière proposes a reconsideration of the relation between the autonomous–heteronomous axis and the work of arts. In fact, autonomy in what Rancière calls the ‘aesthetic regime of the arts’ is the autonomy of a mode of experience and not of a work of art (“The aesthetic revolution” 134). This experience refers not only to qualities of a work of art but also to qualities that do not belong to it. The manifestation of what is art along with what is not art, that is, what it wasn’t destined to be part of the work of art, is a kind of a ‘free appearance’, an experience of the free play of the aesthetic.

To illustrate this point, Rancière refers to the Greek statue known as the Juno Ludovici, stated by Schiller at the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> letter. It is about a goddess. However, the working of time, the play of its temporality, the distance between, on the one hand, its initial purpose and state and, on the other hand its current becoming and loss of certain attributes, amount to a situation where the goddess “wears no trace of will or aim”. It is about a configuration that emerged freely, out of any intention or planned action: “The statue thus comes paradoxically to figure what has not been made, what was never an object of will. In other words: it embodies the qualities of what is not a work of art”. In this case, ‘free appearance’ is the appearance of what has not been aimed at as art. It is free in the sense that “it ceases to be a suspension of the oppositions of form and matter, of activity and passivity, and becomes the product of a human mind which seeks to transform the surface of sensory appearances into a new sensorium that is the mirror of its own activity” (Rancière, “The aesthetic revolution” 135, 136). From this re-contextualization of the ‘free appearance’ emerges as well a new ground for the free play, or in this context, for the aesthetic play. Thus, aesthetic play becomes ‘a work of aestheticization’.

Correspondingly, Rancière designates that in the aesthetic regime of the art, “art is art to the extent that is something else than art. It is always ‘aestheticized’, meaning that is always posited as a ‘form of life’”. From this point on, the aesthetic as well as the aestheticization process can be seen in relation to operations of framing and constituting a world defined by a specific content given to the art-life axis. In other words, there are different scenarios where aestheticiza-

tion acquires different meanings depending on the politics of aesthetics, that is, on the presuppositions associated with the constitution of a community, the coordinates of a common world, the framing of a new collective ethos. Following the lines of Schiller's aesthetic thought and its political and ethical implications, "matters of art are matters of education" and art, as self-education, "is the formation of a new sensorium – one which signifies, in actuality, a new ethos" (Rancière, "The aesthetic revolution" 137).

The vital questions here, taking into account the various historical projects of 'art becoming life', from Schiller's epoch and onward, concerns art and the political project of dwelling in a common world. There could be a variation of answers, drawing from the historical experience, that extend from aestheticization being a substitution of politics to aestheticization being linked to a certain conception of design that is committed not only to creating objects "but a sensorium, a new partition of the perceptible". The latter case, aestheticization as the generation of sensorium, entails the multiplication of temporalities of art, scenarios of latency and reactualization, attributing to art a metamorphic status, recognizing the aesthetic in co-operation with a 'heterogeneous sensible' (Rancière, "The aesthetic revolution" 140, 142). Of course, there is always the danger of doing too much in either directions. This is a kind of danger that Rancière has given the name of entropy. On the one hand, associated with a generic form of an 'end of art' thesis, there is an entropic situation of 'de-aestheticization'. On the other hand, the procedures of aestheticization in the form of a re-aestheticization could lead to entropic situation where 'everything becomes artistic'.

For the sake of our analysis it is important to trace and highlight the line that links the aestheticization as generating process of a new sensorium, the aesthetic category of play and the aesthetic regime of the arts as a generic topology of senses. Understanding the inner mechanics that ensure the coherence of such a line entails the endorsement of some of the figurations of the working proposition 'Apart, we are together' along with a second proposition, 'apart from any concept' that Rancière isolates from Kant's definition of the beautiful as "what is represented as an object of universal delight apart from any concept" ("Aesthetic separation" 7). Both propositions are foundational for what can be thought as an ontology of Art in Rancière and by extension as an aesthetic topology of a topology of the senses. Both propositions are structured as a disjunctive synthesis; something is forming while something else is being displaced or missing. It is about a dissensual as well as a figural activity, a process of a complex set of connections and disconnections that amounts to a sensory transformation.

It would be useful also to evoke here the difference between the aesthetic and the artistic as introduced by Rancière in his discussion with Mark Foster Gage: "The artistic is about the implementation of an idea [...] Instead the aesthetic means that you don't exactly know what will be the effect of what you are doing" (Rancière, "Politics equals" 17). The difference between the artistic and the aesthetic is a matter of possible states of things. An artistic spatialization is more concrete than an aesthetic one in the same manner that a topography can be considered as a more concrete outcome out of a given topological configuration.

Despite the fact that Rancière do not use the concept of topology, we can detect in his aesthetic approach several operations that are essentially topologi-

cal. It is under this light that can be viewed the reference to operations such as *twist of sensations, dialectic of embracing and splitting* which amount to configuration of 'different senses of sense', of multiple sensory realities stemming from the combination of sense data. This process is part of a larger one that participates in the architecture of the aesthetic community structured around three forms (levels) of community. The first form corresponds to the conceptualization of the community as "a certain combination of sense data: forms, words, spaces, rhythms and so on which according to Rancière is the base for the creation of a chain of sensory realities. The words of a poet are a sensory reality that suggests another sensory reality (such as the material aspects of a landscape, scene, image etc.) which can be perceived in turn as "a metaphor for poetic activity". Each sensory reality is a regime of sense, a sensorium, that is superimposed on another sensorium. It is a conflict that conveys the meaning of dissensus which at the same time provides a specific shape to the community of sense which Rancière calls 'dissensual figure' (Rancière, "Aesthetic separation" 4). In "Community as dissensus" Rancière specifies that a dissensual community inscribes a common world in another (Rancière, *Dissenting* 142).

## VII. Dissensual ontology: the art of aesthetic ideas

In the thought of Jean-Francois Lyotard the *figural* is designated as an intermediary space between the respective spaces of signification and subject. Deleuze in *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation* presents the figural as an opposing pole to the figurative, that is, to the illustrative and narrative character of the Figure (2). The logic of the figural implies that the Figure is a body without organs; a figure freed from the restrictions of representation, of organicity. Rancière from his part, elaborates his conceptualization of the figure in a topological manner; his approach is based on a spatial framing along with a thought concerning the properties of that space. In *Les mots et les torts* Rancière assigns to the concept of figure two contrasting functions: the general and perhaps more widespread one according to which the figure indicates a semantic displacement rather than the invocation of a visual form. And on the other hand, that function where the figural interpretation is an interpretation that reveals an abstract meaning in a sensible presence (Rancière and Bassas 86).

Put in that way, the figure presents a dissensual function in the sense that it does not reinforce the given and somehow evident semantic content of a sensory reality but on the contrary, it performs a dissensus in the form of a semantic displacement and of an interpretation that prevents from a consensus over a definitive and determinate meaning of a sensible reality. The figure, as presented here, contributes to the refinement of the sensible texture of a sense community and the process of figuration is, correspondingly, a process of displacement within a system of relations between similarity and dissimilarity that enriches a given sense by providing different but somehow figuratively equivalent senses of the sense.

In another instance, Rancière provides the lines for understanding the displacement itself in the notion of the figure: "In its classical sense, the figure combined two meanings: it was a sensible presence and it was an operation of displacement that put one expression in place of another. In the aesthetic regime, however, the figure is no longer simply an expression that takes the place of an-

other". In this new status of the figure it is possible "to conjoin two regimes of expression without homogenizing them" (*Emancipated* 122).

In a crucial passage from the *Emancipated Spectator*, Rancière brings together the notion of pensiveness as a resistance to thought and at the same time as an escape line for art, the Kantian aesthetic ideas and the concept of the figure as a thinking ground for the art of 'aesthetic ideas'. But what exactly is an aesthetic idea? Michel Chaouli in his book *Thinking with Kant's Critique of Judgment* provides the necessary intrigue: "One of the strangest conceptions in Immanuel Kant's writing about aesthetics, which, as we have observed, is rich in strange conceptions, is that of aesthetic ideas" (173).

Without deepening our analysis here, it suffices to specify that ideas are the other name for the concepts of reason which are separated from another type of concepts, those that can have an object in experience, namely, the concepts of understanding. Accordingly, Kant states that an aesthetic idea is "a representation of the imagination that occasions thought without it being possible for any determinate thought, i.e. concept, which consequently, no language fully attains or can make intelligible" (192).

This kind of indetermination, which at the same time is a form of inadequacy, is the basis for Rancière's notion of pensiveness. In topological terms, this kind of resistance to thought is produced by the distances between certain artistic functions. A concise and lucid explanation is provided by Rancière himself:

Kant had already pointed to the distance between artistic form, the form determined by the intention of art, and an aesthetic form, the form that is perceived without a concept and declines any idea of intentional purpose. Kant called those inventions of art that are capable of making this connection between two 'forms', which is also a leap between two regimes of sensible presentation, aesthetic ideas. (*Emancipated* 131)

Rancière tried to think further the topos or the art of aesthetic ideas by means of expanding the concept of figure so as to make it "signify not only the substitution of one term for another but the intertwining of several regimes of expression and work of several arts and several media" (*Emancipated* 131).

The importance of the aesthetic ideas in Rancière's thought is becoming even more evident when they are closely related to what he calls ontology of art. In this context, dissensus is supplementary to the notion of figure as presented above; figure assures the intertwining of several regime of expression. On other hand, the dissensual operation "takes the form of a superimposition that transforms a given form or body into a new one" (Rancière, *Emancipated* 66). In two different instances Rancière makes explicit the close link between an ontology of art or an ontology of the dissensual and aesthetics ideas. We read in *Dissensus*: "Aesthetic ideas are inventions that transform the willed and the unwilled, the known and the unknown, the fact and the non-fact. These are the inventions that give art its sensible quality, what we might call its ontology" (219). In the *Emancipated Spectator* the 'play of aesthetic ideas' is referred to as 'ontology of the dissensual' which is actually a fictional ontology' because "the set of relations that constitutes the work operates *as if* it had a different ontological texture from the sensations that make up everyday experience" (67).



Here, ontology of art is the name for a process that generates configurations of sense to sense, of sensible words that replaces other sensible words. The thought generated by the aesthetic ideas creates the conditions for re-configuring the landscape of the given. Such an ontology presupposes a topology of possibles; a space where displacements and re-compositions can be performed as a form of reaction to novel sensible configurations, to novel topographies of the senses.

### Works Cited

- Baker, George. "An interview with Pierre Huyghe." *October*, vol. 110, no. 3, fall 2004, pp. 80-106. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/3397558](http://www.jstor.org/stable/3397558).
- Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. *What is philosophy*. Translated by Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell. Columbia University Press, 1994.
- Deleuze, Gilles. *Difference and Repetition*. Translated by Paul Patton. Continuum, 2001.
- Deleuze, Gilles. *The Logic of Sense*. Translated by Mark Lester and Charles Stivale. Columbia University Press, 1990.
- Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of the Aesthetic Power of Judgment*. Translated by Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews. Cambridge University Press, 2000.
- Michel, Chaouli. *Thinking with Kant's Critique of judgment*. Harvard University Press, 2017.
- Rancière, Jacques, "Fictions of Time." *Rancière and Literature*. Edited by Grace Hellyer and Julian Murphet. Edinburgh University Press, 2016, pp. 25-41.
- Rancière, Jacques, and Adnen Jdey. *La Méthode de la Scène*. Lignes, 2018.
- Rancière, Jacques, and Javier Bassas. *Les Mots et les Torts*. La fabrique, 2021.
- Rancière, Jacques, and Peter Engelmann, *Aesthetics and politics*. Polity Press, 2019.
- Rancière, Jacques. "A few remarks on the method of Jacques Rancière." *Parallax*, vol. 15, no. 3, 2009, pp. 114-121. DOI: 10.1080/13534640902982553.
- Rancière, Jacques. "Aesthetic Separation, Aesthetic Community: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art." *Art & Research. Journal of Ideas, Contexts and Methods*, vol. 2, no. 1, Summer 2008, pp. 1-15.  
<https://www.artandresearch.org.uk/v2n1/ranciere.html>.
- Rancière, Jacques. "Contemporary Art and the Politics of Aesthetics." *Communities of Sense Rethinking Aesthetics and Politics*. Edited by Beth Hinderliter et al. Duke University Press, 2009, pp. 13-33.
- Rancière, Jacques. "Is There a Deleuzian Aesthetics?" Translated by Radmilla Djordjevic. *Qui parle*, vol. 14, no. 2, 2004, pp. 1-14. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/20686174](http://www.jstor.org/stable/20686174).
- Rancière, Jacques. "Politics Equals Aesthetics: A Conversation Between Jacques Rancière and Mark Foster Gage." *Aesthetics Equals Politics. New Discourses Across Art, Architecture and Philosophy*. Edited by Mark Foster Gage, MIT Press, 2019, pp. 9-26.
- Rancière, Jacques. "The aesthetic dimension. Aesthetics, Politics, Knowledge." *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 36, no. 1, autumn 2009, pp. 1-19. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/606120](http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/606120).
- Rancière, Jacques. "The aesthetic revolution and his outcome." *New Left Review*, vol. 14, March-April 2002, pp. 133-152.
- Rancière, Jacques. "Thinking between disciplines: an aesthetics of knowledge." Translated by Jon Roffe. *Parrhesia*, vol. 1, no. 11, 2006, pp.1-12.
- Rancière, Jacques. "What aesthetics Can Mean." *From an Aesthetic Point of View: Philosophy, Art and the Senses*. Edited by Peter Osborne, translated by Brian Holmes, 2000, pp. 13-33.
- Rancière, Jacques. *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*. Translated by Julie Rose. University of Minnesota Press, 1998.

- Rancière, Jacques. *Dissensus. On Politics and Aesthetics*. Edited and translated by Steven Corcoran. Continuum, 2010.
- Rancière, Jacques. *Dissenting words. Interviews with Jacques Rancière*. Edited and translated by Emiliano Battista. Bloomsbury, 2017.
- Rancière, Jacques. *The Emancipated Spectator*. Translated by Gregory Elliott. Verso, 2009.
- Rancière, Jacques. *The Flesh of Words: The Politics of Writing*. Translated by Charlotte Mandeli. Stanford University Press, 1998.
- Rancière, Jacques. *The Future of the Image*. Translated by Gregory Elliott. Verso, 2009.
- Rancière, Jacques. *The Method of equality*. Translated by Julie Rose. Polity, 2016.
- Robson, Mark. "Jacques Rancière's Aesthetic Communities." *Paragraph*, vol. 28, no. 1, March 2005, pp. 77-95. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/43152677](http://www.jstor.org/stable/43152677).
- Schiller, Friedrich. *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*. Translated by Elizabeth Wilkinson and Leonard Ashley Willoughby. Clarendon Press, 1967.

## Περίληψη

Θωμάς Συμεωνίδης

**Τοπολογίες των αισθήσεων: Η αισθητική πρακτική της φιλοσοφίας στον Jacques Rancière**

Σκοπός της ανάλυσής μου είναι η ανάδειξη της έννοιας της τοπολογίας στη σκέψη του Jacques Rancière και η υπογράμμιση της σημασίας της για τις διασυνδέσεις ανάμεσα στην αισθητική ως τρόπο σκέψης, την έννοια του χώρου και την πρακτική της φιλοσοφίας. Προκειμένου να δοθεί έμφαση στη σημασία της τοπολογίας ως εννοιολογικής βάσης για την αισθητική και αντίστοιχα και για την αισθητική πρακτική της φιλοσοφίας στον Rancière, εισάγω τις βασικές γραμμές για την προσέγγιση της αισθητικής της τοπολογίας μαζί με τη γενικευμένη έννοια της τοπολογίας των αισθήσεων η οποία μπορεί να ιδωθεί, σε πρώτο πλάνο, ως μια παραλλαγή της έννοιας της αισθητικής κοινότητας ή ισοδύναμα, της κοινότητας αίσθησης. Το αρχικό πλαίσιο για την προσέγγιση της έννοιας και της λειτουργίας της κοινότητας αίσθησης είναι η κατανόησή της ως ενός σχήματος διαφωνίας. Βασιζόμενος στην *Κριτική της κριτικής δύναμης* του Kant και τις *Επιστολές για την αισθητική παιδεία του ανθρώπου* του Schiller ο Rancière αναπτύσσει την ιδέα της διαφωνίας (dissensus). Η κύρια υπόθεσή μου είναι ότι η ιδέα της τοπολογίας των αισθήσεων είναι σημαντική για την κατανόηση της αισθητικής πρακτικής της φιλοσοφίας και την εγγύτητά της με την οντολογία της διαφωνίας που είναι το οντολογικό μοντέλο που προκρίνει ο Rancière ανάμεσα στις διάφορες οντολογίες της τέχνης.