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## **Research on Ranciere's Artistic Systems from Aesthetic Theory**

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## Research on Ranciere's Artistic Systems from Aesthetic Theory

### **Abstract:**

This paper mainly discusses three kinds of artistic systems of Ranciere, i.e. the ethical system of image, the reproduction system of art and the aesthetic system of art, revealing that Ranciere's aesthetic system is essentially an equal and democratic politics.

**Key words:** art system, equality, democracy

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## I. Introduction

Jacques Rancière, born in Algeria in 1940, is a French contemporary thinker, philosopher and artist. He is now a professor at the 8th University of Paris. He is the most influential theorist and aesthetician still active in France. Despite his rise to fame abroad, he has repeatedly denied his social role in public. He came to Chinese Tongji University in 2013 and gave a speech, after which he was interviewed by Lu Xinghua, an associate professor from the Philosophy Department of Tongji University. He reaffirmed, “yes, I’m not a philosopher, a historian, a movie theorist, or a contemporary art theorist. I only make use of human intelligence equally shared by all human beings, to work only with my brain.” (Lu,2013:PP.71-72)

Indeed, it is rather difficult to define the identity of Jacques Rancière because he has made important contributions in many fields and is now highly evaluated and labeled in France and even in the international academic world. However, Jacques Rancière doesn’t think much of it. Despite his multidisciplinary attainments, he has devoted his whole life to unblocking barriers between disciplines. “Up to now,” he says, “I’ve deemed in the opposite way that we really shouldn’t be trying to establish an identity. We should be deliberately erasing the boundaries between the so-called philosophers, historians and film theorists. Thus I emphasize the need to constantly break down the philosophical division of specialization, or the division of fields among experts, and we should

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redistribute the emotional domain. I think it is very important to break down the classification of subjects and the boundaries of discourse. Therefore, if a person wants to be a philosopher, we should try to prevent him/her from becoming one. His/her territory should be opened up so that he/she does not know where the boundary is and what his/her identity is, not knowing what he/she has been doing for a long time. Therefore, to call me a philosopher, an art critic, a historian, or a film theorist makes no sense. I'm just using my brain. I'm not doing anything with philosophy or artistic criticism. I'm just using my brain to find and solve problems. When I am looking for it, I have no special identity. I am a normal person, not a distinctive person with unique ability from others. So even if you're a writer or something like that, it doesn't really matter whether you're telling tales, being lyrical, or arguing. You just have to make your subject clear in the best way and that's enough. In fact, that's what artists do. All kinds of separations and boundaries between artists and theorists should be pushed out. When they are broken, there's far more room for research." (Lu,2013:P.72)

Jacques Rancière spends most of his time engaging in theoretical work. Just observing the principle of breaking down disciplinary barriers, smashing authorities, and challenging hierarchies, he spends his whole life putting forward the theory of how to do all kinds of possible routes, swearing to prove the permanent equality existing in the discourses of history, literature, narrative, argument, theory and philosophy.

## II. Three Systems of Arts

It is traditionally assumed that art has two completely opposite artistic paths. One demands art should try to get close to the life world and create a new one. It pursues compatibility and consistency with the life world, so that the principle and blood of life flow in the veins of art at the same time. The other is the suspension of the real life world, that is, to maintain the relative independence of art, which actually requires art to keep a certain distance from the life world. In fact, the former is what we used to call “art for life”, while the latter is “art for the sake of art”. However, in everyday experience, these two thoughts are always coexisting. On the one hand, art is required to get close to the life world; on the other hand, art is required to actively suspend the experience of everyday life, maintaining the elegance of its own field without being polluted by the world.

Of course, in fact, what Rancière is most concerned about is not the approaching between art and life form, or the suspension of art from daily life experience, but the aisthesis that really connects the two. In 2011, Rancière published the book *Aesthetic Theory*, and the title of which was *Aisthesis*, and the subtitle of which was *Century Scene of the Aesthetic System of Art*.

In the book *Aesthetic Theory*, Jacques Rancière discusses the 14 events or fourteen moments, such as Winkelmann's *Hercules Remains*, the farmers in Alabama taken by James Edge, Hegel's visit to the gallery, Emerson's speech in Boston, Mallarmé's sightseeing at the Goddess Amusement Park for a whole night, an exhibition held in Paris or New York, a drama played in Moscow, a factory built in Berlin and so on. Through these famous or hidden scenes, we can explore what is art, and what art can do.

In each chapter, we can find that a system of inspiration and art interpretation is established and transformed by eliminating the specialization of all kinds of art and the boundary between art and daily experience. We can know, “how a broken statue becomes a perfect work; how a portrait of a poor child achieves an ideal presentation; how the tumbling of a group of jugglers flies into the poetic sky; how a piece of furniture is respected as a temple; how a step is molded into a character; how a patch of heavy overalls looks like a prince's feather coat; How the rotation of a light yarn suggests the origin of the universe; how an accelerated montage expresses the sensible reality of communism.” (Ranciere,2016:P.4) This is a history of artistic modernity, which is anything but the orthodoxy of modernism.

In this book, Rancière also strictly distinguishes three identification systems of art: the ethical system of image, the reproduction system of art and the aesthetic system of art. The ethical regime of images is the earliest art system in the west. This model is represented by Plato. For Plato, what poets and craftsmen produce is only images. Plato conducts the image allocation according to the moral thought of the community. In this system, the ultimate goal of video is to civilize the citizens. It should be said that under this system, the sense of art called by the later generations does not exist, and only a variety of ways of making and using of art and its visible forms (i.e. skill and image) exist although there are various types of poetry, painting, sculpture, drama and dance, judged by Plato's thought of the “perceptual distribution”. The art that does not meet the requirements of building a harmonious city-state society, like democracy, should be

banned. The theater and the civic assembly are two mutually dependent forms and two heterogeneous spaces of the same kind of perceptual distribution. "In order to establish an organic community of political exile in the sense of ethics, Plato rejected both the theater and the civic assembly, namely, also rejected art and democracy meanwhile."

( Ranciere,2009:P.26 ) The ethical system of image makes ontological and ethical judgment on images, which is just a tool used by philosophers to civilize the citizens. In Plato's Utopia, poets, artists and democratic political activities were in exile. Therefore, for Ranciere, the ethical system of image is an anti-democratic and anti-political art system.

The poetic reproduction system of art originated from the critique of Plato in Aristotle's poetics and flourished in the classical era. The poetic reproduction system liberates art from the moral, religious, and political standards of the ethical system and, in the name of imitation, separates art from other skills and modes of production. "By defining the essence of production as a fictitious imitation of action and drawing a special category for fiction, the system of reproduction does not establish a simple system of similarity, which does not reproduce reality." ( Ranciere,2008:P.91 ) According to Rancière's summary based on literary characteristics, the reproduction system of art generally observes the following four principles: 1.The principles of fiction (or fictional principle): the essence of art is a kind of imitation, and the representation of the action. The principle of fiction endows the fictional world with its own time and space, thus eliminating the need for the ontological and ethical judgment of the ethical system of art.

Unlike the rules that apply to other arts, fiction has its own rules. In a sense, this is also known as the imitation principle. 2. The principle of genericity: according to Aristotle, the text of a poem depends on the nature of the object it represents. Noble tragedies, historical or formal portraits, are suitable for gods, heroes, kings and noblemen, while the inferior are only suitable for comedies, satires and paintings that depict everyday life. 3. The principle of appropriateness: it is the principle of what is right and proper. The social and ethical position of the artistic genre and the artistic character defines what kind of action and language the author should present in his narrative. 4. The principle of actuality: it mainly refers to the actuality of speech in the reproduction system of art. Discourse actuality is a basic norm of artistic reproduction system, which guides the reproduction of artistic works to actions. It is a norm of the power of speech and the speech of power. In the reproduction system of art, different powerful persons correspond to their own discourse expression, and their discourse is vivid and effective.

Based on the above principles, in the reproduction system of art, although art, as an fictitious imitation of people's various characters, feelings and actions, has its own relative autonomy, that is, it does not need to be reproduced mechanically corresponding to real life, but imitates what people should do according to the law of contingency or the law of probability. But similar to the real world, the fictional world also has to follow its own ranking system and normative order of theme, genre and style. The reproduction system requires that the artistic reproduction (including its genre, theme, language, etc.) and the position of the reproduced object in the real hierarchical society conform to each

other. Therefore, in essence, the reproduction system of art is hierarchical, and the political logic behind it is that the noble, the powerful and the knowledgeable should rule the inferior, the poor and the ignorant, which is an undemocratic and anti-equal art system.

What Rancière really emphasized and promoted is the third art system, the aesthetic regime of art, commonly known as artistic modernity, which has been the dominant art system for nearly two centuries. Rancière asserts that the aesthetic system is an aesthetic revolution against the reproduction system. Rancière traces the aesthetic system back to Vico and Cervantes, and believes that it was formally introduced in the late 18th and early 19th century, when some artists, designers, writers and critics tried to “reinterpret what produces art and what art produces”. (Ranciere,2008:P.25) In terms of time, the aesthetic revolution and the French revolution appeared almost simultaneously, which is not accidental. The stormy political revolution fundamentally changed the public order dominated by the privileged class in Europe at that time, which also changed the perceptual allocation of time. Since then, the third class has stepped onto the stage of history, and its visibility is clearly visible. The change of the perceptual distribution of politics must also affect the existing perceptual distribution of art, which led to the new aesthetic reformation. What is the revolutionary aspect of the aesthetic system of art accompanying the French revolution? The most important manifestation of the revolutionary aesthetic system, according to Rancière, is the introduction of the equal dimension. And this shows up in a lot of ways. One of the important aspects is that the

practitioners of the aesthetic system abandoned the imitation principle that the reproduction system adhered to, crossed the boundary between art and daily life, and advocated that all kinds of matters of daily life could enter into art. According to Rancière, this new aesthetic feeling mechanism is of great significance to the equalization of themes. "It is the basis of the equal view of the aesthetic system that breaks away from the hierarchical reproduction system, a revolution of the habitual form of thinking and the previous classification of various hierarchies, and therefore a kind of liberation of human nature". ( Ranciere,2011:PP.82-83 ) The aesthetic system abandoned the normative requirements of the art reproduction system and reconstructed the perceptual distributive order of the hierarchy in the reproduction system. In this sense, modern art began as a political appearance, which was reflected as a dissident politics. So the modern aesthetic revolution itself is a political revolution.

The aesthetic system has reversed the important artistic principles of the reproduction system. It shows as follows: 1. the principle of fiction is replaced by the principle of language expression. The priority of fiction is replaced by the priority of language. The poetic quality of artistic works is not from the arrangement of action, but from the language itself. Imitation is replaced by the expression of language. Language is no longer regarded as a representation tool and means of truth, but language expression itself turns out to be an end. 2. Under the aesthetic system, any subject and action can be expressed in any genre and style. The previous corresponding relationship is broken, and the former principle of appropriateness is also invalid. 3. Under the

aesthetic system, the vivid and effective discourse required by the art reproduction system, as well as the power discourse and the reality of the power discourse have disappeared. The language itself is now the norm, but in different forms everywhere, no longer the patent of the powerful (Deranty 126). It can be seen that under the new aesthetic principle, the previous hierarchical order of distinguishing the superior and the inferior, such as theme, genre and style, has been dissolved, and the principle of authenticity, which embodies the discourse power of the powerful, is no longer valid. The aesthetic system of art contains ideas of equality and democracy.

### **III. The Embodiment of Aesthetic System in the Aesthetic Theory**

In his book on aesthetics, which was finished in 2011, Rancière focused on the aesthetic system of his art and provided a new perspective on art. Winkelmann, Hegel, Rodin and other famous thinkers and artists are mentioned in the book, as well as more and more under-explored and increasingly topical names, such as the dancer Roy fowler, the theatre director Apia, the film director Wiltov, and so on. In this book, Rancière did not set up a forest of concepts and systems, but constructed 14 famous art scenes, trying to present his western modern art history.

In the so-called orthodox modern art, some works are too often mentioned, such as Manet's *Olympia*, Malevich's *White on White*, and Duchamp's *Fountain*. Some theories are always in flood, such as the theory of art self-discipline and avant-garde theory. This trend has dominated art for a full century, creating endless disturbance and false

reputation. And Rancière is just to go back to the beginning of the trend, to rework the orthodoxy by introducing new forms of artistic exploration that we are not familiar with. Modern art, in his opinion, since the end of the 18th century, has been constantly breaking through norms, forming a new aesthetic system, getting rid of the former system of reproduction, and no longer requiring art to contain the plot or have a harmonious form, such as the defects of the Greek statue, Fowler's minimalist dance, or Craig's simplifying stage arrangement, all of which give birth to an unprecedented artistic new idea and reveal repeatedly that art has always come from the impossible place and updated themselves.

What's interesting about the new art is that it often subtracts and breaks norms. At the end of the 19th century, a group of French young people arranged Ibsen's *Solnice the Architect* to perform the original realistic and specific script in a simple and mysterious way, so as to highlight the drama of the soul. As what Maeterlinck said, simple props and actions are enough to express the soul of the old architect, while those traditional plays at that time, such as Othello's passionate action, had nothing to do with real life. The new art gets rid of the core of the old reproduction art and adopts mimesis, which is to use the corresponding performance to narrate some plot and convey some emotion, so as to keep the creation consistent with the feeling. For example, when Camille cursed Rome in *Horace*, he had to set the scene and express his hatred. On the other hand, Rancière valued mimes, which, though simple and noisy, had fewer concerns or burdens and was more poetic. To borrow the words of the poet Marami, the silent drama is carried out by

association and never breaks the mirror. The most typical subtractive art in *Beauty* is undoubtedly the Fowler's dance seen by Malamey, in which the dancer holds up the long skirt, hides a veil, caters to the unreal light, and waves back and forth, turning into various simple forms. For Mallamey, this is not a display of female posture or dance movements, but more essential poetry. Her Chinese Crepe, fluttering and changing in the darkness of the theater, is like music between nothingness, directly touching people's intuition, just like Maramey's wonderful saying, i.e. compared with music, what can be more like a layer of gauze!

Then there is Evans, the American photographer, best known for his social photography of the Depression Era, who is mentioned in the final chapter of the *Aesthetic Theory*. And Evans will hold this year's full retrospective show at the Pompidou Center in Paris. But what Rancière is more concerned in his book is the writings of Edge, a writer who was traveling with Evans at the time. There is an abnormal agreement between the two of them when they cooperate in reporting, that is, photography and writing do not coincide, what is written is not photographed, and what is photographed is not written. It was certainly a radical move, and Edge was too concerned with writing the truth to let the story fall into any social clichés. As a result, the report broke the rules of the magazine and had to be published in a book.

When Edge visited the farmhouse, he wrote down what he had seen and heard in extreme details including every decoration in every corner of the room. For instance, the little girl's porcelain rabbit was broken into pieces and only put up in a simple way; the

nails in the trunks lost their luster, and the handles turned grey green and so on. But rather than write about the horrors of their lives, Edge wrote about the dignity of the human being in them. Though the farmhouse was made entirely of boards, the boards had a durable sheen, "sometimes like bone, sometimes like silk, sometimes like smooth but unpolished sterling silver; their farm clothes were old, as easily cracked as a handful of snow, and with layers of stitching, the original cloth was no longer there, but like the feathered cloak of a Toltec prince". Edge's account is also reminiscent of Proust gluing a sheet of paper, all small and large, to unfold a sense of continuity derived from refreshments and napkins. They have tapped the unique potential of literature, i.e. "the one-minute wholeness of the world gathers all the connections in time and space, causing the dizziness of any life." (Ranciere,2016:P.263)

Therefore, although Rancière also appreciated the mysterious poetic method of Maramei, he put more emphasis on the direct poetic method in *Aesthetic Theory*, such as Whitman's elaboration and Edge's narration. Edge's sense came from the totality revealed in it, i.e. the distant brilliance of the stars, and other possible lives; the untraceable past, and the unknown abyss facing the weak shell. However, those dignified decorations in poor homes are quickly criticized as kitsch. In the early 20th century, with the influence of the art theorist Greenberg's *Pioneer and Kitsch*, a so-called avant-garde modernism that emphasized the autonomy, exclusion and elitism of art began to take shape. It is in the more complex context of the present day that Rancière seeks to excavate the buried past, introduce art beyond its borders, and continue its appeal.

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