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Nic Fryer –

‘Apart, we are together. Together, we are apart’:

Rancière’s Community of Translators in Theory and Theatre

‘Apart, we are together’. This quotation from Mallarmé is cited by Rancière in his essay ‘Aesthetic Separation, Aesthetic Community’, first published in 2008 and subsequently in *The Emancipated Spectator* collection in 2009 (Rancière 2009a, 51). In coming together as distinct disparate elements around an artwork which is itself an entity comprised of distinct separate elements, Rancière sees the aesthetic community as being together whilst apart. In this chapter I want to explore Rancière’s outlining of this paradox as a desire to identify divisions and ruptures within a notion of community. I will outline ways in which some critics have seen Rancière’s writing on community as being unduly pessimistic and as failing to articulate a clear programme for how a community might realise and sustain political change. However, I will suggest that a notion of community underpins his understanding of theatre and art, and that it is here that he offers a vision of community as a creative activity and political act where individual spectators translate performances in their own way, but within a community of other translators and signs. For me, a vivid example of this is my own experience of watching the play *People, Places and Things* by Duncan Macmillan, where the desire to be part of a community and to break out of it existed within the narrative itself and was mirrored in my own experience as a spectator. I want to argue that this tension created a productive space for the characters in the play and agency for me as a viewer, as I negotiated a complex set of relationships between the characters and between myself and the protagonist.

Rancière – Against Plato, Against Aristotle

When exploring Rancière's relationship to theatre and community it is easier to begin by outline what he is most passionately against rather than what he is for. For Rancière, Plato's *Republic* outlines a society in which everyone's role in the community is predetermined, with differing roles being ultimately unified to form a coherent social whole. The form of this society becomes normalised and ultimately becomes invisible. Such invisibility can be seen as what Rancière calls the 'distribution of the sensible', which is a key idea in Rancière's thought. According to Gabriel Rockhill in his glossary of Rancièrian terms in *The Politics of Aesthetics*, Rancière sees many such distributions. These function as 'an implicit law governing the sensible order that parcels out places and forms of participation in a common world by first establishing the modes of perception within which these are inscribed' (Rockhill 2004, 85). The 'implicit' nature of the distribution of the sensible structures the ways that people see and understand the world around them, without them being aware of it.

For Rancière, Plato's fear of theatre is based on its possibility to make this visible. It does this in at least two ways. Firstly, the dual nature of the actor challenges the stability of one's identity. Writing about the relationship between theatre and politics, Joe Kelleher notes that for Plato, playing a role beyond yourself and your prescribed role in the community 'involves the actor in a division between himself and the character he is imitating or inventing, is a sign of human weakness. It is also a means of provoking weakness in others, and hence a threat to or an infection of the body politic' (Kelleher 2009, 48). There are behavioural ideals to maintain, and the aim for the citizen is to adhere to these ideals. The aim, in a Platonic society, is to know yourself and your identity, not to question it. However, according to Rancière

The mimetician is, by definition, a double being. He does two things at once, whereas the principle of a well-organised community is that each person only does the one thing that they were destined to do by their ‘nature’ [...] 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. (Rancière 2004, 42-43).

The stage thus becomes a place where the community loses the coherence and certainty of its constituent parts, and its attendant ‘invisibility’, through the indeterminacy of acting. Acting means that people’s identities become disturbed, since ‘those who speak on the stage do not speak in their own name and do not identify with or authenticate what they say’ (Hallward 2006, 116). They move beyond the confinement of their predetermined identity.

Secondly for Rancière, the act of performing challenges the distribution of the sensible because it challenges the limitations of one’s social role. Rancière asserts that the “distribution of the sensible both excludes artisans from the political scene where they might do *something other* than their work *and* prohibits poets from getting on the artistic stage where they might assume a character *other* than their own” (Rancière 2009b, 26, original emphasis).

In the act of going on the stage, the artisan would be revealed as more than an artisan. She would become a citizen with other skills. And by going on the stage, the poet or actor is able to ‘become’ other than herself. Both disrupt the stable identity presumed by the distribution of the sensible.

Despite this suggestion that theatre can unsettle the subject’s ‘parcelled out’ place within the community, Rancière supposes that there is often a contrasting ‘presupposition that theatre is in and of itself communitarian’ (Rancière 2009a, 16). In the public nature of the audience coming together and furthermore doing so in a shared space with performers, with clearly defined roles, there can be a notion of theatre as being an ‘exemplary community

form'. Theatre is a unique place 'where the audience confronts itself as a collective' (ibid., 5) as it comes together as a unified community of spectators to witness a community on stage. This is exemplified for him in the classical stage of Moliere and Voltaire. He states that here 'the stage was thought of as a magnifying mirror where spectators could see the virtues and vices of their fellow human beings in fictional form' (ibid., 60). Here, "[b]eing apart' of the stage was enveloped in a continuity between the 'being together' of the signs displayed by the representation, the being together of the community addressed by it, and the universality of human nature. The stage, the audience and the world were comprised in one and the same continuum" (ibid., 61). In this vision, whilst the stage is separated from the community, the community is unified in its presence. The stage reflects the agreed social order it is separated from, and the actors and the spectators agree about what is being represented. Within its narrative space the different elements of the story cohere, and common understanding is concretised through the performance.

Despite this imitative construct, Rancière states that it 'was supposed to prompt specific changes in their minds: Molière's *Tartuffe* supposedly taught spectators to recognise hypocrites; Voltaire's *Mahomet* to fight for tolerance against fanaticism, and so on' (ibid., 60). Similarly, the classical stage's Aristotelian model of tragedy both simultaneously reflects and tries to dissipate Plato's fear of the subversive power of theatre by ensuring that whilst subversive behaviour may be represented, it must have consequences, ensuring that the moral qualities of the man are reflected in his destiny:

It follows plainly, in the first place, that the change of fortune presented must not be the spectacle of a virtuous man brought from prosperity to adversity: for this moves neither pity nor fear; it merely shocks us. Nor again, that of a bad man passing from adversity to prosperity: for nothing can be more alien to the spirit of Tragedy; it

possesses no single tragic quality; it neither satisfies the moral sense nor calls forth pity or fear. (Quoted in O'Toole et al, p.17).

For Aristotle, maintaining the status quo and universalising the intended response is the aim. To invoke Rancière, theatre is a distribution of the 'sensible' supporting the social order, but this process is invisible. This process is not only politically and aesthetically limiting, but limits the heterogeneous possibilities of how a community can be conceived.

Rancière, Ethics and Community

Rancière's ambivalence about a homogenous conception of community extends beyond theatre. Writing about Plato's *Republic* in the chapter 'Aesthetics and Politics', he states that 'Plato simultaneously excludes both democracy and theatre so that he can construct an ethical community, a community without politics' (Rancière 2009b, 26). The term 'ethical' is used by Rancière to reflect a place where democratic debate is stifled in favour of universal morality; a place where political dissent or even negotiation is suppressed in favour of the security of the distribution of the sensible. For Rancière such a stifling is viewed as necessary because of horrific events such as the Holocaust, the horror of which brings a desire to avoid 'anything that threatens the social bond holding the community together' (ibid., 114). There may be a sense of security in the consensus of such an ethical community, but it disavows the possibility of political change. Furthermore the anxiety to preserve the ethical community can be mapped on to the political sphere with lethal consequences. For example, in his essay 'The Ethical Turn of Aesthetics and Politics', Rancière sees George W. Bush's controversial desire for 'infinite justice' as a connected universalizing term 'occasioned by a preventative justice which attacks anything that is sure, or at least likely, to trigger terror, anything that threatens the social bond holding the community together' (ibid., 114).

Rancière sees just such an attraction to ethics as also rearing its head in contemporary artistic practice, where the ‘ethical turn’ springs from the desire to ‘restore lost meaning to a common world or repair the cracks in the social bond’ (ibid., 122). In opposition, Rancière posits the notion of dissensus. For him dissensus is not merely an argument between two points of view. Rather, it is a political ‘demonstration (*manifestation*) of a gap in the sensible itself’ (Rancière 2010, 38). Acts of dissensus reveal the arbitrary nature of what usually appears unchangeable, and thus from an ‘ethical’ perspective become associated with the criminal or deviant. By creating a space of contingency, a sense that things could be ‘other’ than how they usually are, they shatter the stability of Plato’s ‘community without politics’ which needs to be preserved at all costs.

In terms of community, dissensus can be seen in Rancière’s description of the ‘political community’, a ‘community of interruptions, fractures, irregular and local, through which egalitarian logic comes’ (Rancière 1999, 137-38). This logic is based on the ability of all to disrupt the political order, however temporarily. It exists ‘in the often short-lived moment when those who are excluded from the political order or included in it in a subordinate way, stand up and speak for themselves’ (Corcoran 2010, 6). These individuals collectivise on a strategic and temporary basis, knowing their differences. Such collectivisation lies in the assembling of disparate identities who share a common ground, but who are not collapsed into each other. According to Steven Corcoran, citing Rancière, such collectivization happened with nineteenth century workers and women. Corcoran states that ‘through the fact of their speech they showed that they had the rights that they had not, and did not have the rights that they had’ (ibid., 6). It is notable that Corcoran’s apparently paradoxical statement here echoes Rancière’s own writing, where he often sets up apparently contradictory statements that need unpicking, and which resist a simple ‘sensible’ interpretation. Corcoran also reflects here Rancière’s argument regarding universal

intelligence outlined in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* (first published in French in 1987). Such speech asserts the speaker's intelligence, but it also introduces what Corcoran calls 'supplementary speech that is irreducible to the constraints of social space' (6). Through the 'instituting of a dispute' (Rancière 2010, 37) over the distribution of the sensible, they created a new 'political' community. Their speech articulated what they as a group did not have, but did so through them insisting and demonstrating that resistance *was* possible. In this 'staging' of a dissensual moment lies the possibility of agency for the subject, and the revelation of the possibility of contingency through social (re)organisation.

It is this 'separat[ion] of the community from itself' (Rancière 2010, 16) that most interests Rancière, and for him theatre can function as a model of this. Rancière's interest in theatre challenging the distribution of the sensible is evident in his early essay 'Good Times, or Pleasure at the Barriers'. In it, he discusses culture in nineteenth century France. Rancière argues that in this period, across art forms, there was initially a controlling dynamic reminiscent of the Aristotelian model: a provision of a regulated leisure activity which attempted to limit audience response and functioned as social control. As he puts it, 'the passions and energies of the working classes [were given] the means, the forms and the outlets for a regulated satisfaction and optimal use of their leisure' (Rancière 1988, 46). However, Rancière sees a number of more subversive political elements developing over time. The social mix in the theatre, where 'passageways between classes proliferated' (Rancière, quoted in Lewis 2012, 41) meant that the attempt to address the working class became diffused. Artists did not know how to address across the social mix. For example, Rancière states that 'a play which established the dire consequences of working-class immorality in a completely unambiguous way would bring few benefits for public order if by encouraging applause from the stalls it were to provoke 'collisions' with the 'cheap seats'' (Rancière 1988, 56). In this theatre, as Rancière sees it (according to Lewis), three things

happened: workers saw things that were normally prohibited, workers took an active interest in areas normally denied them, and the theatre itself ‘promoted a habit of being where you’re not supposed to be, in ‘uncertain spaces’ (Lewis 2012, 41). Through theatre, dissensus was possible. Therefore, although he opposes the authoritarian basis of Plato’s argument, for Rancière, Plato is right in recognising the subversive power of theatre to unsettle the community. This means, to quote Hallward, that ‘it is Aristotle, rather than Plato, who is Rancière’s most significant adversary’ (Hallward 2006, 124). For Rancière, Aristotle’s attempt to prescribe what theatre should be is doomed to fail and ignores its inevitable dissensual potential. Plato on the other hand recognises that theatre can provide a dissensual challenge to the distribution of the sensible, including unsettling ‘sensible’ notions of communities and individuals’ places within them as they currently exist.

The view of theatre reflects Rancière’s writing elsewhere on community. According to him ‘community’ can be conceptualised in different ways. He states ‘There are two major ways of symbolising the community: one represents it as the sum of its parts, the other defines it as the division of the whole [...] I call the first police, the second politics’ (Rancière 2010, 100). The term ‘police’ here is aligned with the sensible, the institution that institutes the order of things brought together as an indivisible whole. The term ‘politics’ conversely articulates disruption and the possibility of change. Lewis describes Rancière’s (di)vision of the political community as a ‘contingent, sporadic encounter between sense and sense that divides the community against itself’ (Lewis 2012, 34). Rancière’s ultimate preference is for the ‘division of the whole’ and ‘dissensus’ in a short-lived ‘political community’, as people come together to create a ‘staging of a ‘we’ that separates the community from itself’ (Rancière 2010, 16). A creation of community is thus simultaneously a disavowal of a larger community, and it is the latter that particularly interests Rancière.

If The Community Isn't 'Ethical', What Is It?

Such an emphasis means that Rancière has been criticised for failing to present a coherent or long term vision of community. I noted above that with Rancière's views on community in relation to theatre it is often easier to see what he is against than what he is for, and this criticism has been taken up by recent theatre scholars writing from a Left perspective. As Reinelt puts it, 'it is possible that the applauded theatrical and political disruption is just a gesture – a momentary redistribution of the sensible without a follow-up move to consolidate gains' (Reinelt 2015, 246). Such a view of community, for Liz Tomlin, is also visible both in contemporary theatre and contemporary society. It is part of 'a critique of the desirability of co-ordinated mass resistance emerging from a coherent and organised community' (Tomlin 2016, 29). For Tomlin, there is a shift towards 'seemingly leaderless mass movements such as Occupy that have been inspired by and, in turn, have continued to invoke a leaning in radical political philosophy that tends towards a networking of disparate acts of multifarious resistance as opposed to organised and ideologically-coherent revolt or political opposition' (ibid., 29). (For Tomlin such a philosophy can be seen not only in Rancière's work but also in the work of Michael Hardt, Antonio Negri, and Jean-Luc Nancy).

For Tomlin and Reinelt, Rancière prioritises the individual over the communal. There is, for them, little clarity on how to cohere individuals into a movement that can sustain itself. Instead, for some of Rancière's critics he ultimately promotes what Reinelt calls 'neo-liberal individualism' (Reinelt 2015, 247). Reinelt cites Andy Lavender in her article, who states that in Rancière's writing, and in its conception of theatre, 'communities are not so much defined by their *togetherness* as by their facilitation of *difference*, the fact that they enable

individual expression' (Lavender 2012, 310, original emphasis). Furthermore, as Hallward put it in 2006, writing about Rancière's work more broadly, the 'emphasis on division and interruption makes it difficult to account for qualities that are just as fundamental to any sustainable political sequence: organisation, simplification, mobilisation, decision, polarisation, to name a few [...] Rancière neglects many of the more intractable problems of organising and sustaining such a sequence' (Hallward 2006, 128). Reinelt similarly suggests that for Rancière 'the distribution of the sensible cannot be modified or improved; it can only be ruptured so a new possibility can appear' (Reinelt 2015, 246).

Looking through Rancière's writing it is indeed difficult to find clear articulations of a sustainable political community. However, I want to suggest that it is in his writing on art, and perhaps on theatre particularly, that one can find a vision of community that is more tangible. In art, he argues, the community is coming together to try to understand from a range of perspectives, with each person translating the art work in relation to their experience. In the experience of art itself, the subject is trying to understand how they relate to others...

Interlude 1 - Rupturing the Sensible: Emma, Dissensus and the Community in *People, Places and Things*

Watching Duncan Macmillan's 2015 play *People, Places and Things*, I see the main character Emma (who variously also calls herself Nina and Sarah, and who is called Lucy by her mother) in rehab. As part of this she is invited to participate in group therapy. Emma resists the community of 'The Group' for some time, particularly the rules which it requires of its members. Foster tells her 'you have to take part in the Group. I'm afraid we're pretty strict about this. You can't just pick and choose what you take part in. You have to do everything' (Macmillan 2016, 46-47).

Part of what she is expected to take part in is role play:

FOSTER: One of the ways we prepare for life in recovery is to practice certain interactions, important conversations,

EMMA: what, like, *role-play*?

THERAPIST: Would you like to practice Emma?

EMMA: God no. (72, original emphasis).

As she is an actor, performing does not even allow her to move beyond her artisanal role; it reinforces it. She feels it offers no agency for her. But although I also work in theatre, I can't form a community with her. I find her refusal to engage arrogant and irritating. I want her to let her guard down and allow herself to not be a professional but to be a citizen finding an alternative social role through performing.

Instead, she stages an attempt to 'overthrow' the rules established by the Group. One way in which she does this is by supporting a suicidal patient who is told they must leave the clinic after breaking its rules. She attempts to institute a democratic debate about his right to stay by reframing the debate about his potential future: '[W]ho thinks he should stay and get well and who thinks he should be sent to his death?' (65). This dissensual interruption of the rules of the clinic and introduction of an alternative perspective leads the Therapist to accuse her of 'attempt[ing] to demolish it from within' (67). My previous antipathy to her is now challenged. I want to join her community, and challenge the inflexible orthodoxy of the clinic's rules. I am torn between allegiance and antipathy.

Her challenge to the sensible behaviour of the Group is also evident in her lying about her life story by appropriating the plot of Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler*, and when she is asked to play a sister of another character she refuses. This behaviour disrupts the community, and the agreed ethical position it has adopted of curing its participants through role play. Indeed, she suggests that the Aristotelian model of acting is something that might hinder progress in her

real life. She outlines how ‘I played Antigone and every night my heart broke about her dead brother. Then my own brother died and I didn’t feel anything. I missed the funeral because I had a matinee’ (90). The Aristotelian frame of catharsis, via *Antigone*, provided closure and returned her to her emotionally limited state, rather than offering her a vision of a more fulfilled or at least alternative life. Again, my response is complex. I empathise with her grief, whilst finding her disruptive behaviour destructive to the well-being of herself and the others in the Group.

The community of the clinic is disturbed by Emma’s behaviour, which questions the function of role play and acting. However Emma’s outbursts give her a sense of autonomy within the community, and she is able to connect with people within it through her dissensual behaviour, even when destructive. Mark states ‘Emma’s refusal to engage with the process is compromising everyone’s recovery’ (86). She responds, ‘If your progress here can be jeopardised by me being a cunt then you truly are a lost cause’ (88), and calls him a ‘cunt’ in return. He tells her, ‘I might also be your best friend in the world’ (88). Despite their sparring, her dissensual act has created a moment of engagement, a frisson with someone she might otherwise have been in thoughtless ‘ethical’ consensus with.

Watching Emma, I find her intelligent; her outbursts and attempts to subvert thrilling to watch. I am simultaneously attracted to her, yet irritated by her refusal to want to find solutions to her issues. No clear articulation of how she might employ her intelligence to move forward, rather than just disrupt, is yet visible for either me or her. I can’t see how she is moving forward into any kind of community where she can engage constructively with others in a sustainable way.

Art as Community

At first Rancière’s writings on artistic communities might appear to sound similar to his writings on political communities; for example, his assertion that ‘the aesthetic

community is a community of dis-identified persons' (Rancière 2009a, 73). But I will contend that in his writing on art a more complex picture begins to emerge. One such complexity is illustrated by Oliver Davis, who asks how Rancière's insistence 'on the *dissensual* character of the community [...] coheres with his own broadly Kantian vision.' (Davis 2010, 157, original emphasis). Looking at Kant's definition of the universality of aesthetic judgements, one can see a consensual rather than dissensual community being articulated; indeed for him 'a person who can feel neither the solemnity nor the awesomeness of nature lacks [...] the necessary sense of his own limitations' (Scruton 2001, 110). Apart from the arguably consensual nature of 'necessary limitations' and of knowing one's place, there is also a sense of Rancière's 'ethical' in Kant's aesthetic judgements: such judgements are rooted in a judgement all should feel. The Kantian attempt to define 'judgements of taste' (Kant 2007, 35-74) is thus ultimately an attempt to define '*universal*' (Kant 2007, 25, my emphasis) judgements of taste, which would appear a long way from the celebration of dissensus favoured by Rancière.

However Kant also states a paradox about this universality: 'in all judgements by which we describe anything as beautiful we tolerate no one else being of a different opinion, and yet we do not rest our judgement upon concepts, but only on our feeling' (Kant 2007, 70). Kant uses the term 'subjective universality' to define this paradox (ibid., 43). As Rancière points out "'subjective' doesn't mean 'individual', and isn't opposed to 'universal'". The opposite of subjective is 'objective' (quoted in Battista 2017, p.247). In other words, the moment of subjective processing can be seen not so much as an individual moment, but rather as a moment based on feeling. In grasping the importance of feeling in the moment of the subject processing the beautiful object, according to Rancière, Kant allows for the possibility of the aesthetic to 'suspend [...] the power relations which usually structure the experience of the knowing, acting and desiring subject' (Rancière 2009b, 97). Such

‘suspension’ might reveal the arbitrary nature of the distribution of the sensible, and can find common ground with Rancière’s own notion of the aesthetic regime of art, which ‘strictly identifies art in the singular and frees it from any specific rule, from any hierarchy of the arts, subject matter, and genres’ (Rancière 2004, 23). In this ambiguous world, as in Kant’s contemplation of indescribable beauty, there is a tension between the subject and what they encounter. The moment of Kantian aesthetic experience supersedes interpretation. For both Rancière and Kant, albeit in very different ways, such a moment is potentially open to everyone. Kant’s sense of the aesthetic being rooted in a universal sense of what is beautiful is overturned by Rancière into a vision of an egalitarian and communal space where all are able to contemplate the thing presented.

In *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, Rancière sees this aesthetic contemplation as exemplified in the notion of the statue outlined by Schiller in *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*, which is ‘closed on itself’ (Rancière 2009b, 34), meaning that it has a ‘free appearance’ (ibid., 29). The spectator is given space by the autonomy of the work to contemplate it. The artwork is a ‘resistant volume’ (ibid., 34) from which the viewer will always remain at a distance. Because it exists as a bounded entity that is by definition outside the sensible it is resistant (though perhaps not immune) to its influence. This singular volume is combined of a range of elements. Similarly, he says in ‘Aesthetic Separation, Aesthetic Community’ that in an aesthetic community ‘the assemblage of data and the intertwining of contradictory relations are intended to produce a new sense of community’ (2009a, 58). This ‘new sense’ is crucial, and is another place where Kant and Rancière can be seen to differ. Kant’s notion of the aesthetic is about unity, the singularity of the artwork, and therefore it as a reflection of the transcendence of God. Rancière’s however is about the multiplicity of elements it contains. As a heterogeneous experience outside the everyday, the art work offers disparate elements presented in a frame beyond life. This offers an opportunity for the

individual to translate it in their own way, relating it to their own experiences but without it being reducible to those experiences.

Art as a Process of Community

I want to now foreground here the ways in which this sense of the individual apprehension of art might be understood in relation to others and to a sense of community. Like Rancière, Jean-Luc Nancy suggests that the emergence of art ‘is the effect of a general transformation of our commonality, of the conditions for possibility of our being together, and thus of the conditions for the manifestation of this ‘being together’’ (Nancy 2009, 91); a ‘means [...] of understanding our communal existence and the very modes of being-in-common’ (ibid., 92). I mentioned above that Nancy, like Rancière, has been criticised for his refusal to articulate a clear vision for community. However, in Nancy’s idea of ‘being-in-common’, an individual being exists independently from others but also shares a common being with other individuals through the transformative possibilities of art. For Rancière too, art can hold in tension both independence and collectivity. He writes ‘The solitude of the artwork is a false solitude: it is an intertwining or twisting together of sensations, like the cry of a human body. And a human collective is an intertwining and twisting together of sensations in the same way’ (Rancière 2009a, 56). In both his notion of art and his notion of community, then, there is an attempt to value both the fragments and the whole that the fragments constitute.

What Rancière identifies as happening in communities of audiences and art makers is not only a vision of art as something which can dissolve what currently exists, but also a vision of it as constitutive; it is the power of the aesthetic community to forge new communities, made up of people coming together outside their normal social identity, which for him suggests the possibility and crucially the *process* of change through dissensus. In

‘The Misadventures of Critical Thought’, Rancière emphasises the way in which the ‘emancipation’ of the individual links with the notion of community. He states that a ‘collective understanding of emancipation is not the comprehension of a total process of subjection. It is the collectivization of capacities invested in scenes of dissensus’ (Rancière 2009a, 49). The process of freeing up, or ‘emancipating’ the spectator, is not just about returning the spectator to a state of individualism. Rather, by freeing the individual from the ethical community, she is able to collectivise with others in her own way at specific moments.

Drawing on *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, in the 2007 essay ‘The Emancipated Spectator’ (also published in the collection of the same name), Rancière outlined a notion of art as an active process. He states, ‘In the logic of emancipation, between the ignorant schoolmaster and the emancipated novice there is always a *third thing* – a book or some other piece of writing – alien to both and to which they can refer to verify in common what the pupil has seen, what she says about it and what she thinks of it’ (Rancière 2009a, 14-15, my emphasis). He states further, ‘it is not the transmission of the artist’s knowledge or inspiration to the spectator. It is the third thing that is owned by no one, whose meaning is owned by no one, but which subsists between them (ibid., 15). This ‘third thing’ is unknowable, and has the aesthetic power to open up a space for the individual. This third thing is open to all. This third thing *creates a community* through the process of individuals apprehending it; it ‘subsists between them’. I note, for example, the emphasis on *making* the community in a comment by Rancière that might at first appear to emphasise division: ‘There is a political agency when there is the *construction* of a *we* that splits up the community and the *invention* of names for that *we*’ (Rancière 2009c, 284, some emphases added). Like his depiction of politics as ‘a *process*, not a sphere’ (Rancière 2010, 70, my emphasis), Rancière emphasises not a desire to abolish community but to rather see it as being constantly in

process and shifting through time and in different social contexts. It is not a bounded, fixed entity but a dynamic one.

I see Rancière's thinking on art in the essays in *The Emancipated Spectator* (published in 2009) as being a development from those in *Aesthetics and Its Discontents* (first published in French in 2004, and in English also in 2009). In the first book, Rancière's vision of dissensual aesthetics is seen in the shape of the 'resistant volume' (Rancière 2009b, 34) of the art work, whereas *The Emancipated Spectator* brings in a processual element (what Davis calls 'a critical reflection on what it means to be a spectator') (Davis 2010, 153). This extra layer means that for Davis '*The Emancipated Spectator* presents a far more persuasive and more coherently theorised account of political art' (153). Yet I would argue that there is also some recognition of the importance of process in Rancière's earlier book.

Discussing a Mallarmé poem in *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, Rancière states that it has 'the inconsistency of a gesture which dissipates in the very act of instituting a common space' (Rancière 2009b, 34). In its articulation, the poem brings people together as it is simultaneously experienced. However, its indeterminacy and inconsistency means that as it does so it emphasises its inability to provide certainty. A shift can be seen here from art as an aesthetic 'thing' to be contemplated in itself, to an awareness of the importance (as within a Kantian appreciation of aesthetics) of the aesthetic existing in the spectator's process. Its existence is both a material thing and something that instigates a process in human beings. By noting this, it is possible to see Rancière as emphasising not only the artwork itself, but also the importance of how the spectator comes into contact with the art work. Therefore the book can be seen not just as a 'bourgeois survey of some recent works and exhibitions', as Oliver Davis rather belittlingly describes *Aesthetics and Its Discontents* (Davis 2010, 153), but of the process of the perception of art. This process of engaging with the work, of translating it, is what interests Rancière.

A shift towards the apprehension of art as a process of translation between subjectivities can be seen in Rancière's term 'sensus communis', outlined in 'Aesthetic Separation, Aesthetic Community'. According to Rancière this term can be broken down into three elements. The first is the individual elements that are presented in the artwork itself: 'sense data: forms, words, spaces, rhythms and so on' (Rancière 2009a, 57). The second is the 'dissensual figure' (ibid., 58) of the presentation of this data within the entity of the artwork, so the 'sensorium' of the elements of data being 'superimposed [by] another sensorium', creating a 'tension between two sensory worlds' (ibid., 58). (Although Rancière does not define the term clearly, 'sensorium' can be understood here as an amalgamation of the ways different things that are sensed interact to develop an overall way of perceiving). In addition to this, however, as already stated, Rancière suggests something more is involved: the 'assemblage of data [first level] and the intertwining of contradictory relations [second level] also creates 'a new sense of community' (ibid., 58) that is the third level. Artistic practice takes elements of data and reconfigures them, and a similar thing happens within the aesthetic community where people are brought together but as individual constituent elements engaging with the practice in subjective ways. For him such 'aesthetic experience allows for new modes of political construction of common objects and new possibilities of collective enunciation' (Rancière 2009a, 72). Whilst the critiques mentioned above suggest that Rancière does not clearly articulate politics in a programmatic way, he does see artistic practice as offering an ongoing process of dissensus, as people connect and disconnect to communities as they are formed and reformed.

Interlude 2 - People, Places and Things: Constructing Community

For me:

I dip in and out of connecting and disconnecting to the ‘third thing’ of the performance and the character Emma, as I watch her journey through recovery and slip back into addiction. I imagine myself as an addict going through rehab, and think of the difficulty of sustaining the willpower to not slip back into taking drugs. I watch and admire her struggle, but find her irritatingly flippant and wish she could form more sustainable connections with people to enable her to feel more part of a community where she can be in a relationship of listening and being listened to. I discuss her behaviour with the person I am watching the performance with, and we discuss the ‘third thing’ of this ambiguous, not always likeable character. Our community is disrupted by the ‘third thing’, but is also created by it. Emma makes us rethink the ways that therapy and theatre work and how they might work together.

For Emma:

Her resistance to the Group has given her confidence. She begins to work with the Group whilst challenging it from within when she wants to. She allows herself to be vulnerable and asks the Doctor how she can trust the process – ‘I really want to know. I want to try’ (Macmillan 2016, 100). This is not a succumbing to the ethical community, just seeing what in that community she might draw on. She wants to see how she might engage in a process of change, rather than just fit in with her predetermined role. She uses the rehearsal space of the Group to construct a role play of a potential reconciliation with her parents that could be seen to be partially determined by a sensible notion of a happy family structure, but could also be seen as her exploring how she might move beyond what has become her socially agreed role as an addict. The role play might function not just as a distribution of the sensible, but as a ‘third thing’ that will enable her to reflect on her life and to consider how she will create her possible future self.

Art and Theatre as Translation

In *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, Rancière articulates a pedagogical process characterised by a non-hierarchical teacher-student relationship. In this, he suggests that ‘what brings people together, what unites them, is nonaggregation’ (Rancière 1991, 58). They retain their individuality as they come together. Similarly, when discussing politics in *Disagreement*, Rancière suggests that ‘political being-together is a being-between: between identities, between worlds ... between several names, several identities’ (Rancière 1999, 137-38). Rancière calls for people who come together, whether in politics or pedagogy, to retain distinct elements and refuse to ‘aggregate’. For Hallward, this ultimately means a lack of power as ‘crowds come together to stage the process of their own disaggregation’ (Hallward 2006, 117). However, I want to suggest the possibility for this ‘nonaggregation’ of people to be reimagined in a more positive way: as an articulation of what Yves Citton has identified in Rancière’s theory as ‘a collection of singularities, a *chaotic aggregation*’ (Citton 2009, 131, my emphasis), as distinct, ‘apart’ people come together and negotiate their differences.

In *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* Rancière asserts ‘People are united because they are people, that is to say, *distant* beings. Language doesn’t unite them. On the contrary, it is the arbitrariness of language that makes them try to communicate by forcing them to *translate* – but also puts them in a community of intelligence’ (Rancière 1991, 58, emphasis altered). For Rancière, such distance is not to be feared. In ‘The Emancipated Spectator’, which takes the idea of a radical equality in the relationship between teacher and student and applies it to the relationship between performer and spectator, he claims that distance ‘is not an evil to be abolished, but the normal condition of any communication’ (Rancière 2009a, 10). In fact, the separation implied by this notion of distance simultaneously implies a sense of people coming together as they try to translate through their mutual intelligence. Rancière states

further that ‘an emancipated community is a community of narrators and translators’ (ibid., 22).

This notion of distance seems to me to be particularly well illustrated in Rancière’s metaphorical use of the term ‘translation’. By choosing the term ‘translation’ to describe the communication process, Rancière foregrounds a notion of the complexity of the activity of being understood, with different people who are ostensibly speaking the same language system actually thinking, decoding and understanding through their speaking of different ‘languages’. If translation is something that people do as communicating social beings, it is nonetheless intrinsically difficult. Rancière’s choice of the word ‘translation’ to refer to the ambiguity inherent in communication is reflected in other writers’ views on translation. For example, Umberto Eco states that ‘a perfect translation is an impossible dream. In spite of this, people translate’ (Eco 2001, ix). By using the word ‘translation’, Rancière also invokes a concept of communication as taking place within wider cultural structures of language, and not just from individual interpretation. This significance is reflected in Susan Melrose’s statement that translation

always activates a complex relation between complex systems (including systems of values, ethos and attitude) which make up ‘one culture’ and the material real of that culture on the one hand, and *similar* systems (but not necessarily ‘the same’) in their relation to the material real, in the target culture. (Melrose 1994, 26, original emphasis).

By working with another to understand in a context of translation, then, not just individual but also cultural differences are explored and negotiated.

From such a perspective of difference, grasping what someone is trying to say or trying to communicate is universal, and everyone is able to engage in the process of conception. On the other hand, everyone’s ability to communicate experience is partial, and

the quality of communication bears no inherent relation to the quality of the ideas or the depth of feelings the communication springs from. Indeed, in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* Rancière gives the example of a mother whose son returns from a war, whose complexity and depth of emotion is exactly what makes the experience difficult to communicate (Rancière 1991, 68). It is in such situations that one is most present to both the richness of human experience and the equality of intelligence implicit in the universal impossibility of full comprehension of another. As Lewis puts it, the notion of translation 'is essential to Rancière because it operates under the principal axiom of the equality of intelligences' (Lewis 2012, 103). There is a 'polemical verification of equality' (Rockhill 2004, 86) as all involved in the process encode and decode across the distance between their subjectivities, and the universal nature of translation of human beings overrides or at least challenges any educational or social limitation.

In *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* Rancière explores what becomes possible under the assertion of this equality in an educational context, suggesting that 'conceiving well is a resource of any reasonable person' (Rancière 1991, 67). And 'conceiving well' might not necessarily mean 'conceiving accurately', but might rather emphasise the active, communal and ambiguous nature of translation. In 'The Emancipated Spectator', he similarly states that from the 'ignoramus, spelling out signs, to the scientist who constructs hypotheses, the same intelligence is always at work – an intelligence that translates signs into other signs and proceeds by comparisons and illustrations in order to communicate its intellectual adventures and understand what another intelligence is endeavouring to communicate to it' (Rancière 2009a, 10). Rancière is asserting here not a polemic but rather an ontology premised on the ability of all human beings to think as they engage in communication. In his words, 'Man does not think because he speaks [...] Man thinks because he exists' (Rancière 1991, 62).

Reflecting the kinds of journeys and gaps that the translation of the communication process entails, Rancière states that ‘one must learn near those who have worked in the gap between feeling and expression’ (ibid., 68). He sees the artist as his example of someone who from whom the reader can best learn about such ‘gaps’, and he specifically uses the example of Racine. For Rancière, what Racine knows is not skill but rather impotence: ‘[h]e knew the limits of translation and the powers of counter-translation. He knew that the poem, in a sense, is always the absence of another poem’ (ibid., 69). (In their book on Rancière and education Bingham and Biesta put this as ‘knowing that language is never up to the task of such a translation’) (Bingham and Biesta 2010, 119). What becomes important is the creation possible through translation, or what Rancière elsewhere calls the human ‘poetic capacity for translation’ (Lewis 2012, 89). ‘The book’, or the artwork, is the central ‘third thing’ here, since it provides a stimulus for activity that is distant and distinct from the speaker and the listener, a focal point. For Rancière ‘the relation between two ignorant people confronting the book they don’t know how to read is simply a radical form of the effort one brings every minute to translating and counter-translating thoughts into words and words into thoughts’ (Rancière 1991, 63). In this sense it might be possible to argue that in art the process of translation is foregrounded, with even the creator trying to translate the work as it declares itself distant from and independent of her. This would be particularly evident in the aesthetic regime of art that Rancière argues for, which ‘asserts the absolute singularity of art and at the same time destroys any pragmatic criterion for isolating this singularity’ (Rancière 2004, 23).

Across *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* and subsequently ‘The Emancipated Spectator’, pedagogy and theatre are reimagined. Rather than being premised on a hierarchical relationship, where it is the job of the student/spectator to directly decode what the teacher/performer is trying to communicate, a relationship is instigated where the student/spectator finds agency through their individual process of translation. For Rancière,

theatre is a communal activity not because spectators come together as a singular entity, but rather because they interpret what they see and hear as individuals, relating it to other experiences of their own and to those of other spectators. Rancière states that ‘[t]he collective power shared by spectators does not stem from the fact that they are members of a collective body or from some specific form of interactivity. It is the power each of them has to translate what she perceives in her own way [...] This capacity is exercised through irreducible distances’ (Rancière 2009a, 16-17).

If for Rancière, art, including theatre, can be a particularly effective vehicle for the ambiguity of communication and expression, it is important to preserve its autonomy from a claim for efficacy in any simplistic sense. Indeed, it is because the art work stands independently in its own right, retaining its autonomy, that it can ignite a contingent process where the viewer has power to translate it in a model that reinforces their agency. Davis puts it thus:

[T]he community which the artwork under the aesthetic regime envisages is one of individuals whose autonomous capacity to interpret the world in which they find themselves as spectators is recognised; this will necessarily be a ‘dissensual’ community, whose members reinterpret the works they encounter in the light of their own experiences and their knowledge of other works. (Davis 2010, 156).

Crucially, I would emphasise here the co-presence of both autonomous interpretation (or translation) and other translators. This translation happens in a relationship with other translators, and is a democratic understanding which allows people to see new possibilities, and in principle (even if there are social limitations or issues around access that Rancière avoids) it ‘includes those who are not included by revealing a mode of existence of sense experience that has eluded the allocation of parties and lots’ (Rancière 1999, 58). It is open

to everyone because everyone is a translator. It lies beyond what has been socially allocated through the distribution of the sensible.

In this uncertain space, this uncertain community, there are many layers of translation. As Rancière's notion of 'the third thing' suggests, the self is made to encounter the 'other' of the art work. In theatre specifically, however, there is also the performing body that contains the performer him/herself translating his/her role. And this performer/role is in a community of performers, whether present on stage or present through the ghosts of previous performances. In the ambiguous world of Rancière's aesthetic, when we are together, we are apart; trying to translate across subjectivities. The frequency with which Rancière mentions the term 'community', particularly in his more recent writing, emphasises its centrality to his thought. Whilst the criticisms mentioned in this chapter regarding his refusal to articulate a specific strategy for moving forward may be understandable, in his invocation of translation it is possible to see a view of community which resists a purely neoliberal individualistic world view. Translation is only possible through a process of consideration of and engagement with other languages and other subjectivities. So whilst it may be true that Rancière's view of community emphasises the individual as well as the communal, that when we are together we are apart, the converse is also true. It is also impossible to be apart without being together with others in a translating relationship, and this has profound consequences for the individualistic world of the twenty first century.

Coda – People, Places and Things: A Community of Translators

Emma is nervous about having to engage with her family again, and how they will translate the apology she will make to them that she rehearses in *The Group*. And her nervousness is well founded. The performance doesn't match the rehearsal; the translation and response of her parents doesn't match Emma's intention. Her father interrupts her and

tells her ‘thank you for your little speech but it doesn’t mean anything’ (Macmillan 2016, 127). And her mother, in anger, tells Emma ‘drink and drugs were the only things that made you any fun [...] This family is broken. Forever [...] Don’t expect a fucking trophy for trying your best. That’s the bare minimum you should be doing’ (131). Worse, her mother has brought Emma’s collection of drugs into her bedroom in what could be variously perceived as an act of anger, a challenge to her commitment, or following Emma’s wishes when she went into rehab. There is no consensus in the community of this family. The Mother’s act and speech, in particular, disrupts any expectation of her maternal or social role. What is left for the characters is so translate each other’s feelings, actions and words, and to negotiate with each other. This community of difference is not resolved, and may never be resolved, but it is a community where all are forced to confront each other. For me watching it, I can sympathise with Emma when her attempt at reconciliation is thwarted, but I also hear how she stole from her mother and broke her fingers. I am negotiating my own translation of what I have seen in this ‘third thing’.

In itself, it’s an example focused around one person and their small network of relationships, which doesn’t play out around any particular explicit political issue or in a large community. But in this piece Emma can be seen to dynamically engage in processes of translation with the communities she is involved in, and these processes shift dynamically the nature of those communities and the relationships within them. And she is also involved in negotiating possible versions of herself, an entity composed of different elements. This is concretised in several fantasy sequences during the play where other performers who look like her appear on stage and create a multiplication of ‘Emmas’. And in watching the process of translation set up through this production, for me meaning and certainty have loosened a little, my own thoughts and expectations have been challenged, and I have seen, connected to and sometimes felt distanced from the translations across distances shown in the production.

Such translation is also evident in an essay by Jennifer Parker-Starbuck, who draws on Rancière as she outlines a history of watching theatre with her daughter. She relates going to the theatre with learning, quoting Michel Serres' 'No learning can avoid the voyage' (Serres 1997, 8). The voyage of translating, of discussing, of thinking, can indeed also be seen as teaching – a teaching in line with the work on 'will' Rancière outlines in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* that ongoingly creates an openness to learning, rather than a hierarchical passing down of knowledge. The will to keep voyaging and learning is possible because of the multiple distances theatre sets up: quoting Jill Dolan, Parker-Starbuck describes sitting 'bolt upright, caught in the *density* of a *communal* epiphany' (Parker-Starbuck 2014, 130, some emphases added). This density is multiple, but crucially it is also something that is *communal*, it happens with others as people engage with translating across the distances around them. It happens as people try to understand themselves, their world, and the relationship between them.

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