

PERFORMANCE PEDAGOGY, RANCIÈRE AND THE AESTHETIC

In *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture* Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron discuss the 'symbolic violence' of the education system. Systems of symbolization and meaning are imposed on groups or classes of people, they say, in a way that "renders them legitimate in the eyes of the beholder" (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977, 5). Pedagogic actions reproduce the values of the teacher, whether in a family or an institution, and are given legitimacy through the discourse of education. This reproduction of cultural values through education is what they call the 'cultural arbitrary' – it passes itself off as the natural order of things rather than as the arbitrary socio-historical construct that it is.

For Bourdieu and Passeron, those being taught are also in a system that focuses on being able to manipulate and reproduce culture rather than *make* it or seek to change it (in their terms 'symbolic mastery' is favoured over 'practical mastery'). In other words, the practical skills involved in making culture are given less weight than the study of it. This reproduces a method of education that suits the teacher, someone who has already mastered the academic discourse around the subject, rather than one that suits someone who seeks to creatively expand the subject. For those involved in teaching the arts this is reflected in the 'heritage' attitude of someone such as Peter Abbs, who emphasises in his book *Living Powers* the value of "inherited culture and a personal sense of cultural solidarity, *of belonging to an historical past which gives depth and meaning to the present*" (Abbs 1987, 3, original emphasis).

As a teacher and practitioner who has taught devised performance at both school and university level, and who would describe myself as someone keen to promote a progressive curriculum where students engage with the world around them, what are the implications of this for my teaching practice? In particular, how might I deal with the *reproduction* implicit in my own “cultural arbitrary” whilst teaching practical work, instead valuing students’ *production* (or, to use a term perhaps more appropriate to art, *creation*)?

In this paper I would like to suggest two theories that might help to illuminate this problem. Firstly, I would like to use Jacques Rancière’s notion of the aesthetic regime of art to suggest an opportunity, through art, of embracing non-reproductive moments that are difficult to define within any discourse other than that of art. Secondly, I would like to suggest that in the social interaction between artwork and spectator lies a relationship which could function as a useful model for the relationship between teacher and student. I will conclude by offering some suggestions as to how the education work of the company Goat Island interacted with these theoretical perspectives.

RANCIÈRE, WILLIAMS AND THE AESTHETIC

I want to start to explore what the arts might posit as their approach to pedagogy by offering an ontological view of the arts through the theories of Rancière and Raymond Williams. I will suggest a connection between these two writers from very different contexts – a connection that I would suggest can offer a way of analysing aesthetics and the function of art. I will argue that both critics agree that there is

both an inherent connection between art and society, and that art is vitally separate from society.

Rancière outlines a vision of what he calls an “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. Yet it does so by destroying the mimetic barrier that distinguished ways of doing and making affiliated with art from other ways of doing and making, a barrier that separated its rules from the order of social occupations. The aesthetic regime asserts the absolute singularity of art and at the same time destroys any pragmatic criterion for isolating this singularity. (Rancière 2004, 23).

For Rancière, the aesthetic’s ‘singularity’ does not separate it from a social function, since via the avant-garde it can invent “sensible forms and material structures for a life to come” (29), moving beyond the technique of the representative and the ‘sensible’ nature of the mimetic into territory beyond mainstream discourse. The aesthetic as defined by Rancière allows for a celebration of aspects of art that are not reducible, not quantifiable, and not able to be mapped on to something else.

At first glance, Raymond Williams’ essay ‘The Creative Mind’ seems to see art in different terms. For Williams art does not exist in a vacuum but as part of a social context. He states that “communication is at the crux of art” (Williams 1961, 46) and that “nobody can see (not understand, but see) the artist’s actual work unless he and the artist can come to share the complex details and means of a learned

communication system" (41). He would therefore seem to see a shared understanding as being essential between artist and audience, with meaning passing directly between the two in contrast to the difficulty of "isolating" the "absolute singularity of art" suggested by Rancière.

However, on closer inspection one can find connections between their writings. To take Williams first, he sees the arts as being beyond the everyday when he describes them as "*developments* from general communication" (40, my emphasis). The artist channels responses to contemporary experience into artistic media with a "substantial number of the offered meanings [becoming...] composed into new common meanings" (49), suggesting that even though the artist may ultimately need to connect with society, he may not do so straight away.

Rancière is actually articulating a similar view of the artist's relation to society in his notion of the aesthetic, since he indicates the aesthetic's radical difference from everyday life as being its ability to comment on it. For him the aesthetic offers new ways of imagining, and this imagining is only possible because it defines its own rules. It is paradoxically both inside and outside the existing order. Its very separation from the everyday is what gives it its social charge.

For both Rancière and Williams, then, social relations are at the centre of art. And yet for neither is this about *subsuming* art to a purely social function. To quote Claire Bishop, "for Rancière the aesthetic doesn't need to be sacrificed at the altar of social change, as it already contains this ameliorative promise" (Bishop 2006, 182).

Rather, it is about recognising art as a social function *in itself* that creates its *own*

parameters. Indeed, Clifford Geertz argues that Western societies are unique in positing a difference between art and the wider social context, and that in other cultures it is part of everyday life. Human beings create, as part of life, moments that can be considered artistic. We can create plates of food that have great visual beauty (and isn't the taste a kind of aesthetic experience too?) When describing Brecht's street accident the witness can reveal an unerring awareness of the driver's arrogance. The song sung during work can bring tears to a listener's eye. All of these contain an element beyond their immediate utilitarian function, of something that lies beyond the everyday. They do not fit with a consciously poetic reflection of the everyday. Such elements *do* fit with Rancière's definition of a "destr[uction of] the mimetic barrier that distinguished ways of doing and making affiliated with art from other ways of doing and making". Whilst being part of everyday life, these moments do more than is necessary, instead creating a moment that is difficult to comprehend in any realm other than the aesthetic realm of art.

This conception of art sees as false any division between the notion of art as either being, to quote John Dewey, "removed from the scope of common and community life" (Dewey 1934, 6 cited in Greene 1995, 146), or on the other hand as needing to be subsumed to a social function. Rather, it suggests that because, to quote Marcuse, art "breaks open a dimension inaccessible to other experience, a dimension in which human beings, nature and things no longer stand under the law of the established reality principle" (Marcuse 1977, 72 cited in Greene 1995, 138), it allows new possibilities to life to be imagined. As Brecht suggested, a distance between art and reality might be crucial if art is to retain a political edge (Brecht 1974, 139).

I want to propose that this notion of the aesthetic is key to arts education. To propose a linking of the aesthetic and artistic may almost seem tautological. But for some educators such an approach poses significant challenges to current thinking. For totally logical and well intentioned reasons the arts' unique ability to stand outside society is increasingly eschewed in favour of requiring it to fulfil social functions. My aim is not to criticise such approaches per se, but to suggest that there may also be a value in teaching art making as an activity that can deliver Bishop's "ameliorative promise" of the aesthetic. Indeed, there may paradoxically be a deeper social impact from work that does not subordinate itself to a solely social purpose.

This opens up some interesting possibilities for the teaching of the arts. Can we reconfigure a concept of socially efficacious education that is embedded in aesthetics? Can we value aesthetic and creative processes that by definition do not evoke easily comprehensible responses, existing as they do in the ephemeral world of Rancière's aesthetic? Can we ask students to make work that is not immediately comprehensible? How could we teach the unknown? What would this mean about our own skills and our function as teachers?

RANCIÈRE AND PEDAGOGY

I want to propose that Rancière's book *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* might answer some of these questions. For Rancière most education is premised on a hierarchical concept of "explicating", where "at every stage the abyss of ignorance is dug again" (Rancière 1991, 21). The focus is on being asked to learn what the

master - the male is assumed throughout - requires. This is a never-ending process since the student can never know everything that their master knows. Like Bourdieu and Passeron's notion of reproduction, there is no encouragement to think outside the box. One merely has to reproduce knowledge that already exists rather than create. This can also be mapped onto Friere's notion of the "banking approach" to education (Friere 2009, 72) where such reproduction is rewarded by the apparent acquisition of knowledge.

Like Friere, for Rancière the solution to this problem lies in changing the relationship between the student and their master. The "ignorant schoolmaster" of the book's title reflects an idealised relationship where the student and also the master join together in a mutual journey of discovery. This egalitarian relationship, rather than the hierarchical one of explication, allows a "circle of emancipation" (Rancière 1991, 15-16) to begin, where the student begins to think for himself. This does not mean that the master is irrelevant. His role is to encourage the students' will by working with them. For Rancière this notion of exploring and discovering with a student, rather than explicating to them, is also an inherent feature of what happens in any attempt to communicate with another human being. Reminding his reader that languages are an "arbitrary" (60) attempt to communicate experience that can never tell the truth, he states that truth "exists independently from us and does not submit itself to our piecemeal sentences" (58). In this sense *any* attempt to communicate is an act of translation from one person's experience to another person understands.

If any human's ability to communicate experience is partial, the success of any communication bears no reflection to the quality of the ideas or feelings it springs

from. Rancière gives the example of a mother whose son returns from a war, whose complexity and depth of emotion is exactly what makes her feelings difficult to communicate (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. Such moments are, for Rancière, best realised through art, and he boldly states “We can thus dream of a society of the emancipated that would be a society of artists” (71). He states

The artist’s emancipatory lesson, opposed on every count to the professor’s stultifying lesson, is this: each one of us is an artist to the extent that he carries out a double process; he is not content to be a mere journeyman but wants to make all work a means of expression, and he is not content to feel something but tries to impart it to others. (70).

This notion of art making as being an attempt to communicate that may fail echoes both his own notion of the aesthetic as articulating beyond existing discourses, and Williams’ notion of the artist in a dialogue with his society. In this analysis the artistic process has much to teach the teaching process. Teaching can be a place where the difficulty of finding truth can be explored, rather than where a limited notion of what has been socially determined as ‘truth’ is passed on.

It also has a wider political significance. Kate Love discusses the experience of a work of art, suggesting that the term ‘experience’ indicates a shifting of perception. She writes

When I've said "I've had an experience" [...] I realise that I have probably used the word because I want to register the precise feeling that *that* which I have just lived through was something like an approach to the world which I *both* recognised, and yet didn't *quite* recognise, a space which was both in language but yet not *quite* in language, at the limit of language but unequivocally not *beyond*. (Love 2005, 169)

Such an experience, artistic or otherwise, is for Love a "negotiation *with* language", and it is this negotiation that enables the individual to both identify a moment as new *and* connected to other events - in its difference from them. If one accepts the poststructuralist notion that language, to quote Chris Weedon, "is the place where actual and possible forms of social organisation and their likely social and political consequences are defined and contested" (Weedon 1987, 21), one can see this negotiation as a political act, an act that functions as a creation of new possible meanings. I note the similarity to Friere's notion of "dialogue", which is for him "central to the liberation of humankind" (Friere 2009, 89), further suggesting a political edge to creating such moments where new meanings are created and explored.

To sum up this section then, in his concepts of the aesthetic regime of art and of an emancipatory pedagogy, Rancière offers art as a potentially politically efficacious model. Art stands outside society, but is profoundly social in its engagement with the intricacies of human communication. Art offers the chance to create moments that slip beyond conventional comprehension, like the everyday moments of cooking, performing and singing I mentioned earlier. I want to suggest that such moments

can function as a model for a non-reproductive education that rather produces, or creates, possibilities for the future.

So what does this proposal for a non-reproductive 'emancipatory' pedagogy mean in the teaching of drama and performance? I want to use the teaching practice of the Chicago based company Goat Island, now sadly no more, to suggest some possibilities.

For this company education was a crucial component of their work, forming 39 pages of the book about them *Small Acts of Repair*. They see their work as profoundly engaged with its social context. Yet this social engagement is made possible through a conceptualisation of their work which I would argue is similar to Rancière's aesthetic. They insist on their practice existing outside the economy of everyday life. By doing so, their small acts of repair can be seen as enactments of the ameliorative promise of Rancière's aesthetic.

The company discuss setting students "impossible tasks" which are then turned into performative moments. For example, "Fly. Draw the world (actual size). Dissolve my body" (Goat Island 2000, 12-13). The teacher has no more knowledge than the student how this might be realised: representing the currently unrepresentable requires imagining beyond what currently exists. However, it is the teacher's role to set creative tasks and to provide an environment and structure within which the student can flourish. In this environment the student is encouraged to think about the limits of representation and how to move beyond it by using skills such as imagination and creativity. Teacher and student are both participants in an attempt

to develop the existing understanding of the world and the frontiers of representation, a development at odds with any requirement for art to be directly utilitarian.

For Goat Island failure is embraced as a necessary part of an unpredictable pedagogical and creative process. As Matthew Goulish has put it, “We seek truth, we encounter error. It is obvious, like truth” (Goulish 2004, 261). This creative logic does not posit creation as an end in itself, but rather accepts its failures as part of a productive process which allows it to constantly redefine its goals. It sees itself as seeping into all areas of life. It creates microcosms of effective praxis. For example, a feature of the Goat Island workshops I have participated in make a virtue of letting go of one’s own ideas and accepting those of others. As with Rancière’s schoolmaster, the pedagogical process is an emancipatory journey that requires generosity and acceptance in its interaction between participants. This journey also has a social significance as the community works together to reach a common goal. To quote Mark Jeffery, “this idea of ownership becomes a wider participation, and one of interaction, circulation, and creativity” (quoted in Bottoms and Goulish 2007, 219). Such an approach to ownership is a direct challenge to a world premised on individualistic success and excess.

The arts are a particularly appropriate vehicle for such a challenge precisely because they do not have to exist in the economy of knowledge that pervades other disciplines. Teachers of the arts can allow students to explore, break social norms and constantly quest for knowledge. In these moments Rancière’s aesthetic can be realised, and the emancipation of both student - and teacher - can begin.

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