

Proceedings of the European Society for Aesthetics

Volume 7, 2015

Edited by Fabian Dorsch and Dan-Eugen Ratiu

Published by the European Society for Aesthetics

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Proceedings of the European Society of Aesthetics

Founded in 2009 by Fabian Dorsch

Internet: <http://proceedings.eurosa.org>

Email: proceedings@eurosa.org

ISSN: 1664 – 5278

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Transcending Equality: Jacques Rancière and the Sublime in Politics

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ABSTRACT. This paper analyses the relation between Jacques Rancière's idea of 'politics as aesthetics' and the Kantian sublime. For Rancière, politics and aesthetics are not simply analogical; they share a common mechanism. Yet despite this virtual amalgamation, Rancière repeatedly rejects both the sublime itself and the Kantian subdivision of the aesthetic into the beautiful and the sublime. I claim that Rancière's explicit rejection of the sublime and his reduction of the aesthetic to the beautiful diminish the relevance of his conception of politics to contemporary political issues and subjectivities and undermine its own logic. In order to establish a feasible link between Rancière and Kantian aesthetics, I trace Rancière's idea of politics back to Hannah Arendt's late political interpretation of Kant's *Critique of Judgement*. While Arendt's idea of politics is usually associated with the Kantian analytic of the beautiful, I demonstrate that Rancière's more dissensual idea can be linked to the analytic of the sublime and that, despite his explicit rejection, it implicitly incorporates some of its aspects. I then link this discrepancy to the conflict Kant identifies between political action and moral judgement in the face of dramatic political events. Arendt's solution of making a distinction between political actors and observers is incompatible with Rancière's fundamentally participatory idea of politics. Neither can he accept Jean-François Lyotard's 'ethical reductionism of politics', the critique of which invariably accompanies Rancière's references to the sublime. His shifting of the political realm from real to symbolical violence intended to free politics from the residual Kantian moralism is justifiable. However, it also needlessly shakes off the sublime. Hence, finally, I argue for an explicit reintegration of the sublime into Rancière's idea of politics, based on his postulate of equality.

i. Introduction

Jacques Rancière's *Disagreement*, is considered by many to be his central work.¹ In it, he cites the following tale by Herodotus about the Scythian

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¹Rancière, 1999.

slave revolt:

The Scythians [...] customarily put out the eyes of those [whom] they reduced to slavery to restrict them to their task, which was to milk the livestock. This normal order of things was disturbed by the Scythians' great expeditions. Having left to conquer Media, the Scythian warriors plunged deep into Asia and were held up there for a whole generation. Over the same period, a generation of sons was born to the slaves and raised with their eyes open. Looking around at the world, they reached the conclusion that there was no particular reason why they should be slaves, being born the same way their distant masters were and with the same attributes. Since the women who remained behind permanently took it upon themselves to confirm this natural similarity, the slaves decided that, until proved wrong, they were the equal of the warriors. They consequently [...] armed themselves, ready to hold their ground when the conquerors should return. When the latter finally showed up with their lances and bows, they thought they could easily clean up this little cowherds' revolt. The assault was a failure. One of the sharper warriors took the measure of the situation and summed it up for his brothers in arms: 'Take my advice, lay spear and bow aside, and let each man fetch his horsewhip, and go boldly up to them. So long as they see us with arms in our hands, they imagine themselves our equals in birth and bravery; but let them behold us with no other weapon but the whip, and they will feel that they are our slaves, and flee before us.' And so it was done, with great success: struck by the spectacle, the slaves took to their heels without a fight.²

My work on this paper began with a certain irritation about the peculiar relation between Rancière's idea of politics and the Kantian sublime. On the one hand, I was attracted by Rancière's very promising approach to politics. He calls it 'politics as aesthetics' and defines it as an appearance on the political stage of social groups which were until then invisible and inaudible. On the other hand, I was confused by his repeated and quite blunt rejection of the sublime—one of the two pillars of the Kantian aesthetics.

²Ibid., 12.

In this paper, I attempt to shed more light on this strange relation, as I suspect that Rancière's rejection of the sublime results in an deficient conception of politics. I do not intend to discredit Rancière's idea of politics by pointing out its theoretical inconsistencies; in fact, the opposite is true. Ultimately, I would like to strengthen it 1) by analysing the possible reasons for his rejection of the sublime, and 2) by discerning and explicating the implicit role it might nevertheless play in his theory.

In my opinion, Rancière's 'politics as aesthetics' is an attempt to walk the middle way between two other attempts to link Kant's aesthetics with politics: Hannah Arendt's and Jean-François Lyotard's. Admittedly, Arendt's and Lyotard's own positions cannot be addressed in a satisfactory manner by this short paper. Instead, I limit myself to analysing the two thinkers only in relation to Rancière, i.e. only insofar as it helps me to elucidate his stance.

I proceed as following. The following section is dedicated to tracing Rancière's idea of politics back to Arendt's political interpretation of Kant's aesthetics. This section will simultaneously serve as an introduction to Rancière's terminology. I then address Rancière's critique of Lyotard's 'aesthetics of the sublime' as an 'ethical turn' of aesthetics and politics. Finally, in the last section, I propose a more positive Rancièrian relation to the sublime based on his own examples of politics.

2. Rancière and Arendt

Rancière offers no direct dedicated analysis of the sublime. His references to this aesthetic category are indirect and accompany in most—when not all—cases his critique of Lyotard. Thus, I was confronted with a question: How to start? How to establish a link between Rancière and the Kantian aesthetics?

Eventually, I decided to trace back Rancière's 'politics as aesthetics' to Arendt's political interpretation of Kant's *Critique of Judgement* in her late writings—primarily to her *Lectures on Kant*.³ There are good reasons to do just that. After all, Arendt and Rancière share a critique of (traditional) political philosophy. They agree that the so-called political philo-

³Arendt 1992.

sophy should rather be described as a conflictual relationship between philosophy and politics or, perhaps, even a form of a philosophical repression of politics.⁴

Kant's political philosophy—if he ever wrote one—represents for Arendt a rare exception in this regard.⁵ Here too, Rancière seems to agree with Arendt on granting Kant this special status. Notably, Kant does not appear in Rancière's "blacklist" of thinkers that stand for the three repressive forms of political philosophy: archipolitics, parapolitics, and metapolitics.

For Rancière, to repress politics is to ground it in an essentially apolitical realm. For example, an attempt to base politics on notions of knowledge and truth threatens to reduce it to the pure calculations of means and ends.⁶ Furthermore, Rancière and Arendt are both opposed to grounding politics in and subordinating its practices to ethics, as it reduces a political dispute to a mere ethical confrontation of good and evil. Rancière rejects the view that 'disasters and horrors would happen when you forget to ground politics in ethics. [...] In the age of George Bush and Osama bin Laden, it appears that the ethical conflict is much more violent, much more radical than the political one.'⁷

Consequently, Arendt and Rancière demand an alternative, more autonomous idea of politics. Arendt elaborates such an idea based on Kant's aesthetics and, in my opinion, this is also Rancière's point of departure. After all, as argued by Oliver Marchart, Rancière stresses 'the necessity to split the notion of politics from within' as an attempt to release 'something essential' in order to overcome philosophy's legacy to repress politics.⁸ I believe this 'something' to be precisely what Arendt called 'a pure concept of the political [which] the occidental philosophy has never had.'⁹

In fact, Rancière shares this feeling of necessity with a wide array of theorists within the French so called post-foundational political thought who attempt to restore politics' specificity, essentiality, and autonomy by

⁴Cf. *Ibid.*, 61 and Arendt 1992, 22.

⁵Cf. Arendt 1992, 25.

⁶Cf. Dikeç 2012, 263.

⁷Rancière 2011, 4.

⁸Cf. Marchart 2007, 7.

⁹Quoted after Marchart 2007, 39.

forging the so-called ‘political difference’, which is often expressed as the difference between politics and the political.

Rancière, however, does not utilise the term ‘the political’. Instead, he sticks to the term ‘politics’ where others have used ‘the political’, while, at the same time, proposing a new term ‘to mark the other side of the political difference.’¹⁰ Rancière writes:

Politics is generally seen as a set of procedures whereby the aggregation and consent of collectivities is achieved, the organization of powers, the distribution of places and roles, and the systems for legitimizing this distribution. I propose to give this system of distribution another name. I propose to call it the police.¹¹

In other words, police is based on an idea of society with no remainders, in which everybody and everything has a proper place. His ‘politics,’ on the other hand, ‘arises from a count of community “parts”, which is and always ever be a false count, a double count, or a miscount.’¹²

Furthermore, he defines politics as a reaction to any given social organisation by those who were left out, those who have ‘no part’ in it. This implies that he sees no possibility for a perfect social organisation, i.e. one without exclusion. One could say that there is no way to politically represent “the whole of society.” Instead, politics is precisely that which resists representation. Furthermore, this unrepresentability of Rancière’s politics can be interpreted as a move from Arendt in the direction of the Kantian sublime.

Rancière is often labelled as ‘the thinker of equality.’ Indeed, his body of work shows an unusual consistency of remaining true to one central idea—his radical presupposition of equality. Indeed, it is, perhaps, the only positive notion he offers. According to Rancière, equality is

simply the equality of anyone at all with everyone else: in other words, [...] the sheer contingency of any social order. Politics exists simply because no social order is based on nature, no divine law regulates human society.¹³

¹⁰Marchart 2011, 131.

¹¹Rancière 1999, 28 (my emphasis).

¹²Ibid., 6.

¹³Rancière 1999, 15.

Accordingly, Rancière locates the primary principle of politics not in organization or representation but in aesthetic ambiguity. Politics challenges what Rancière calls the ‘distribution of the sensible’. It challenges the very mode of visibility and invisibility of political subjects. For him, the problem of inclusion is a more fundamental one. The voices of the excluded are not simply disregarded; often, they are not even perceived as carrying any meaning. This makes it a problem of aesthetics. Politics occurs when the excluded and invisible under the given ‘distribution of the sensible’ claim their belonging to the community on equal basis and demonstrate that their voice too carries a meaning—a meaning that was hitherto deemed mere nonsense. Hence, politics is the appearance of the ‘part of no part’ against the consensual police order which accepts no excess. In Rancière’s own words:

Politics is aesthetics in that it makes visible what had been excluded from a perceptual field, and in that it makes audible what used to be inaudible.¹⁴

Moreover, Rancière admits—and this is another affinity with Kant—to using the term aesthetics in a sense close the Kantian idea of “a priori forms of sensibility.” According to it, aesthetics is primarily ‘not a matter of art and taste: it is, first of all, a matter of time and space.’¹⁵ And for Rancière, these are also and above all our social, common time and space. That is to say, Rancière’s politics is aesthetic insofar as the way we perceive (political) reality is grounded most fundamentally in the a priori forms of our sensibility. Moreover, Rancière’s aesthetics becomes political insofar as it has the potential to change these a priori sensible assumptions.

Arendt and Rancière would agree that politics is about the inclusion into the political sphere of the hitherto excluded from it. However, here we arrive at a first important difference between them. This difference can be demonstrated by focusing on the notions of political community and analysing Rancière’s critique of Arendt’s use of rights in general and human rights in particular.

Arendt stresses the absolute importance of ‘the right to have rights’, i.e. the right to belong to a political community. What she has in mind

¹⁴Rancière 2003, 226.

¹⁵Rancière 2005, 13.

is the so-called ‘naked life’. Contrastingly, by a way of a pun, Rancière remarks that ‘politics is not based on right, but on wrong.’¹⁶ Or, as Andrew Schaap puts it, his ‘politics is fundamentally about politicization, a process of “denaturalizing” oppressive social relations to reveal them as the contingent effect of social organization.’¹⁷ This too confirms my initial intuition that the Kantian sublime is as crucial to Rancière’s idea of politics as the Kantian beautiful is for Arendt’s.

Arendt underlines the political importance of consensual or associative use of aesthetic judgement. She bases it on ‘sensus communis’ and ‘universal communicability (universelle Mitteilbarkeit)’ in order to overcome both the repression by reason and social (and class) segregation. Rancière, on the other hand, seems to opt primarily for aesthetic judgement’s dissensual and dissociative use. He argues that

aesthetic common sense [...] is a dissensual common sense. It does not remain content with bringing distant classes together. It challenges the distribution of the sensible that enforces their distance.¹⁸

Hence, while Arendt’s method is associated primarily with the Kantian analytic of the beautiful, Rancière seems to link his to the analytic of the sublime. The problem is that he only does it implicitly and the question is why.

Evidently, the sublime also poses a problem to Arendt’s aesthetic approaches to politics. Several authors attest to Arendt’s own circumvention of the sublime, her recoiling from it, or even disregarding of it almost entirely.¹⁹ In her Lectures, she puts the emphasis above all on the beautiful and the Kantian judgement of taste.²⁰ Arendt’s brief dealing with the Kantian sublime only comes up in connection with the aporia between political action and moral judgement in dramatic political events such as e.g. war and revolution. As a result, she seems to opt for a separation between spectators and actors in those circumstances.²¹ This tactics, however, would

¹⁶Rancière 1999, 78.

¹⁷Schaap 2012, 159.

¹⁸Rancière 2009a, 98 (emphasis added).

¹⁹Cf. Cascardi 1997, III; Battersby 2007, 202; Dikeç 2012, 267-8.

²⁰Cf. Castardi 1997, III.

²¹Cf. Arendt 1992, 51-8; Arendt 1978, 92-8.

be incompatible with Rancière's fundamentally participatory idea of politics. Besides, as Rancière's characteristic examples of politics will show in the closing section, war and revolution are not the only ways to link the sublime and politics.

3. Rancière and Lyotard

This is a good moment to finally move on to Lyotard. His 'aesthetics of the sublime' is indispensable for approaching the question as to why Rancière takes Arendt's aesthetico-political project further in the direction of the sublime but seems to stop short of dealing with it explicitly and most efficiently for his own purposes.

There is some evident similarity between Lyotard's and Rancière's aesthetic ideas of politics. Both deal with a certain gap in representation—the one is based on the *différend* and the other on disagreement (*mésentente*). However, Rancière's politics is based on disagreement and constituted by attempts to overcome the divisive symbolic violence of police order. On the other hand, Lyotard comes to the conclusion—among others in his book *The Inhuman*—that it is only possible to 'testify' to the gap of the *différend*.²² According to him, any attempt to overcome this gap results in violence, if not in 'disaster'. The testimony is the (only) political role of the sublime for Lyotard.

For Rancière, this is a 'radical re-reading of Kant's *Critique of Judgment*' by Lyotard, in which Rancière claims to identify 'a way of blocking the originary path from aesthetics to politics, of imposing at the same crossroad a one-way detour leading from aesthetics to ethics.'²³ He convincingly argues that this constitutes an 'ethical turn' of Lyotard's 'aesthetics of the sublime,' a turn that altogether disables politics.²⁴

As it seems, the *aporia* between political action and moral judgement proves to have a decisive and limiting effect on both Arendt's and Lyotard's interpretation of the sublime. Arendt opts for a separation of political actors from political spectators. In turn, Lyotard's approach is aptly

²²Cf. Williams 2000, 119; Lyotard 1991, 101.

²³Rancière 2010, 68.

²⁴Cf. Rancière 2009a, 107.

described by Christine Battersby as ‘the beginning of a move that renders the subject either otiose or no more than a set of reactive responses to affects and ideas.’²⁵

Rancière’s politics, however, is able to avoid the limitations of the above-mentioned aporia by a shift it makes from real violence to a symbolic one. For Rancière, the wrong no longer lies in the potentially violent act on the part of the political militant (revolutionary or soldier). Also, in contrast to the wrong that always looms in the meta-narratives of politics and philosophy according to Lyotard’s warnings, Rancière’s wrong is not as absolute and as extraneous; in a sense, it is always already there. It is the wrong of the domination by the order of police, the wrong inscribed by the given ‘distribution of the sensible.’

This move by Rancière justifies political dissension. Political violence thus becomes primarily an aesthetic one—a violence staged on ‘the political scene.’²⁶ Politics is an active assertion of equality to resolve individual cases of its being wronged by the consensual police order. Therefore, political struggle takes place before real violence and, perhaps, precisely in order to prevent it. Real violence no longer belongs, for Rancière, to the realm of political conflict but of an ethical one. In other words, by making this shift, Rancière is able to free political actors from the conflict or incompatibility of morality and politics which troubled Kant, which caused Arendt to recoil from the sublime and opt for the tactics of separation, and which still menaces on the horizon in Lyotard’s conservative ‘aesthetics of the sublime’.

While sharing with Lyotard the suspicion towards the idea of a totalizing consensus, Rancière locates politics precisely in the local attempts to resolve a ‘wrong’. Rancière agrees that it would be impossible to politically overcome the gap altogether (e.g. by creating a perfect society without a miscount of parts), as this would necessarily constitute nothing else but another form of a police-like attempt to distribute the sensible. However, in my opinion, Rancière fails to see that his local attempts to approach the gaps of inequality are inherently characterised by the Kantian sublime.

²⁵Battersby 2007, 193.

²⁶Rancière 1997, 35.

4. Rancière and the Sublime

The distance to the sublime taken by Arendt is, at the very least, comprehensible. After all, she has good reasons to avoid its disruptive elements, as they would be potentially detrimental for her political reading of *sensus communis*. The same, however, cannot be said about Rancière, as his idea of politics lays emphasis on dissensus and disagreement as a radical disruption of the sensual order—a striking resemblance to the Kantian sublime.

This even brings several authors to equate Rancière's politics with the sublime. For Mustafa Dikeç, Rancière's politics simply is sublime.²⁷ Similarly, Davide Panagia claims that 'Rancière treats the sublime as the *sine qua non* of political action', 'the *sine qua non* of democracy.'²⁸ In my opinion, however, such strong claims do injustice to Rancière's clearly reserved—if not utterly rejective—attitude towards the sublime. Nevertheless, they also make it seem all the more startling that he chooses a path similar to Arendt's recoil. Hence, the arguments of Dikeç and Panagia will help me claim instead that Rancière simply fails to explicitly account for an incorporation of the Kantian sublime into his idea of politics thus missing the opportunity to use it in a more constructive manner.

Davide Panagia convincingly argues that Rancière's above-mentioned idea of 'miscount'—so central to his conception of politics—has a direct formal relation to sublime unrepresentability:

The 'miscount' of democracy stands as a condition of unrepresentability constitutive of democratic equality. Democratic politics, in short, is a temporality that prevails if, and only if, there is a failure of representation.²⁹

Again, Rancière's politics has a close relation to the sublime because it is fundamentally dissensual, divisive, and resisting any given representation, any given synthesis, any bringing into agreement of sensible parts with a form, as it would be the case with the beautiful. In the case of both the sublime and Rancière's politics, the parts cannot be counted and a form cannot be constructed.³⁰

²⁷Cf. Dikeç 2012, 262.

²⁸Panagia 2006, 88 and 93 respectively.

²⁹Ibid., 88.

³⁰Cf. Wolfe 2006.

Dikeç too convincingly associates the sublime with the dissensual interventionism of Rancière's politics due to their 'disruption of routinised perception and response.'³¹ There are negative and potentially violent aspects both in the 'wrong' of Rancière's politics, and in pain, displeasure, and anxiety of Kant's sublime. In my opinion, these are not just a few superficial similarities between the two thinkers but essential formal and structural elements of the very same idea.

The overwhelming power or, even, violence that the sublime feeling inflicts upon imagination was interpreted by Kant as an appeal for reason which 'takes us from the domain of aesthetics to that of morality.'³² As mentioned above, this association of the sublime with morality in Kant has been posing problems for its political interpretations. Arendt and Rancière are by all means justified in their reluctance to follow Kant into the domain of morality. But this reluctance also seems to be—and, I claim, unnecessarily so—among the reasons that prevented them from an exhaustive political interpretation of Kant's aesthetics with its both categories—the beautiful and the sublime. It is less critical in Arendt but crucial for Rancière's conception of politics.

As I demonstrated above, Rancière was successful in relieving the political 'wrong' from the burdens of morality by shifting real violence to symbolic one, but his result is, in my opinion, not entirely satisfactory. This shift should leave the sublime behind; it should, as it were, also be transformed accordingly. However, securing the autonomy of his conception of politics from Kant's residual moralism, Rancière seems to also purge it from all the essential positive moments, which morality provided in the Kantian sublime.

I do not argue for a necessity of reintroduction of morality into Rancière's politics. Instead, I claim that the aesthetic transformation of politics remains incomplete as long as the place of its positive moments remains empty. Basing politics exclusively on the 'wrong', as Rancière seems to do, might prove as otiose and lethargic as Lyotard's 'aesthetics of the sublime.'

Furthermore, in his attempt to dispose of the sublime, Rancière seems to conflate the beautiful with the sublime. He claims that 'it is not ne-

³¹Dikeç 2012, 268.

³²Rancière 2009a, 89.

cessary to go looking in the sublime experience of size, power or fear to discern a disagreement between thought and the sensible.³³ Instead, he claims that ‘the experience of beauty [...] is already a double-bind, an experience of attraction and repulsion.’³⁴ Hence, he seems to suggest that beauty itself sufficiently entails the political dynamics of aesthetics—the necessary mixture of ‘agreement and disagreement.’³⁵ His conflation seeks support from Friedrich Schiller. Though, in my opinion, Schiller would be a wrong ally here. After all, he explicitly underlines the necessity of the sublime alongside the beautiful:

Without the beautiful there would be an eternal strife between our natural and rational destiny. [...] Without the sublime, beauty would make us forget our dignity. Enervated – wedded to this transient state, we should lose sight of our true country.³⁶

The terms with which Schiller argues for the necessity of the sublime—‘rational destiny’, ‘dignity’, ‘our true country’—are undoubtedly moralistic. However, it does not necessarily mean that Rancière’s contemporary interpretation must reject these terms completely; it could, instead, transform them. Even Kant himself seems to suggest a possibility of reinterpretation of the transcendent sphere which is pointed at here.

For Kant, in the experience of the sublime, ‘the humanity in our person remains undemeaned.’³⁷ Hence, for him, the experience of the limitation of our bodily or imaginative powers is transformed into a positive gain—the feeling of humanity in ourselves. This sublime discovery is irreplaceable by the beautiful. Can Rancière’s politics not be based on a sublime experience of equality at the face of the inequality of police order?

I side with Rancière’s critique of Lyotard. A mere possibility of violence paralyzes politics and undermines the aesthetic disagreement as a third way between the two disasters, between domination and violence.³⁸ I only doubt that an aesthetic disagreement modelled essentially on the

³³Rancière 2009a, 97.

³⁴Rancière 2004, 12.

³⁵Rancière 2009a, 98.

³⁶Schiller 1895, 148.

³⁷Kant 2000, 145.

³⁸Cf. Rancière 2004, 14.

beautiful—on a double-bind of attraction and repulsion, of ‘agreement and disagreement’—can indeed be a viable alternative for a successful Rancièrean politicization. I agree with Rancière that ‘the sublime disquiet is entailed in the aesthetic rest.’³⁹ I only doubt that this disquiet can be sufficiently described by the double-bind of the beautiful alone, that one can ever avoid sublime aspects of ‘size, power, or fear’ in a politically charged situation. In fact, I believe that Rancière’s examples themselves point to this conclusion.

The tale about the Scythian slaves is intended to demonstrate that their attempt to achieve equality solely by means of a violent armed resistance was doomed to fail from the very beginning. However, Rancière seems to overlook that another aesthetic act had prevailed—namely their masters’ staging of inequality. Would that be profoundly un-Rancièrean for the slaves to hold on to their positions by also dropping their weapons or adopting another, symbolic weapon comparable to their masters’ whips? And wouldn’t that insistence on equality be a sublime insistence? Could the slaves not win the conflict aesthetically, politically, and, perhaps, even without it turning bloody? And would that not be an essentially Rancièrean political victory?

In another example, Rancière recounts the renowned incident involving Rosa Parks.⁴⁰ Parks’ decision to occupy a seat reserved for whites on a segregated bus in Montgomery of 1955 was a private, singular act of disobeying the racist ‘distribution of the sensible,’ the distribution of places based on skin colour. Her act was successful, as it triggered further, momentous protests. I agree with Rancière that Parks’ act entailed a transgression of aesthetic distribution of roles and places. But I also insist that her act was, at the same time, also an act of disobedience that had to overcome a fear of possible consequences to her person and that overcoming that fear needed to be assisted by the awareness of a cause or an idea “higher” than herself.

Rancière claims that the political act of emancipation is ‘the always singular act by which an individual declared him- or herself capable, and declared any other capable, of exercising a capacity belonging to all.’⁴¹ How-

³⁹Ibid., 12.

⁴⁰Cf. Rancière 2009b.

⁴¹Rancière 2012, 211.

ever, he also seems to fail to recognize the true status of Parks' own 'declaration of capability' or of the failure to maintain that declaration on the part of the Scythian slaves in Herodotus's tale. Such declaration—whether actual or potential—is an audacious act of self-transcendence in the name of an idea—the idea of equality between blacks and whites or between the Scythian slaves and their masters—and an act that seems to be informed by nothing else than a feeling of the sublime.

Hence, Rancière's own examples lead one to conclude that his political subjectivation cannot be suitably described in terms of a reduced aesthetics which over-prioritises the beautiful. Instead, it seems plausible that his postulated equality might be a suitable candidate to replace morality in a Rancièrian political act. The sublime, thus modified, would not jeopardize the freedom of his conception of politics, as it would not subordinate it to an ethical dimension. It would, however, contain all the positive moments that morality provided in Kant's sublime and without which Rancière's own political sublime would remain—both conceptually and practically—incomplete.

5. Conclusion

Rancière's rejective attitude to the sublime in aesthetics and politics is inherited from Arendt and a reaction to similar basic difficulties. Lyotard's own interpretation of the sublime as an ethical requirement seems to transfix politics altogether. Accordingly, its critique by Rancière is thus entirely appropriate. However, I argue that this critique seems to prevent Rancière from settling his own relation to the Kantian moralist legacy. Subsequently, Rancière's unnecessarily throws out the sublime with the bathwater of his critique of Lyotard.

Rancière shifts the idea of violence in politics from real violence to symbolic one. This itself provides a tangible solution for keeping the Kantian moralism at bay. Nevertheless, Rancière seems to adopt Lyotard's reduced interpretation of the Kantian sublime—perhaps, precisely in order to be able to reject it more easily. This prevents him, in my opinion, from realising to which extent the sublime is already in use in his own conception of politics and, consequently, from fully utilising its potential there.

Rancière's examples of political acts demonstrate that there is more to them than a simple double-bind of attraction and repulsion, more than a simple disagreement between thought and sensibility. All that would indeed be covered by the beautiful. However, more often than not, a truly Rancièrian politics is always also a transcending subversion of the established representational and often menacing police order. In other words, Rancière's politics is always also about staging equality as a sublime act. Finally, equality seems a suitable candidate to replace Kant's morality as a structurally essential positive component of the sublime. This substitution would guarantee that Rancière's politics remains free from a subordination to ethics.

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