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Volume 15, 2023

Edited by Vítor Moura and Connell Vaughan



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## *On the Different Meanings of Aestheticization*

Thomas Symeonidis<sup>380</sup>

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ABSTRACT. In my paper I would like to explore the different meanings of aestheticization and in particular the way they emerge out of specific aspirations with regards to the relation between art and life. My basic point of departure will be the relevant contributions of Jacques Rancière and more precisely his reading of Schiller's *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*. My argument will be basically informed by the various scenarios explored in Rancière's paper *The Aesthetic Revolution and Its Outcomes* in which the whole analysis starts from the end of Schiller's 15<sup>th</sup> letter. According to Rancière we are confronted there with a paradox and a promise: "Man is only completely human when he plays" (the paradox). This paradox is capable "of bearing the whole edifice of the art of the beautiful and of the still more difficult art of living" (the promise). So, by providing a sketch of the different meanings that the concept of aestheticization can take, my aim will be to clarify the possibilities offered by the aesthetic art and to secure an aestheticized ground for the edifices of the art of beauty and the art of living.

### **1. Introduction**

In this paper I would like to explore the different meanings of aestheticization. My basic point of departure will be the relevant contributions of Jacques Rancière and more precisely his reading of Schiller's *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*. My argument will be basically informed by the various scenarios explored in Rancière's paper *The Aesthetic Revolution and Its Outcomes* in which the whole analysis starts from the end of Schiller's 15<sup>th</sup> letter:

For, to declare it once and for all, Man plays only when he is in the full sense of the word a man, and *he is only completely human when he is playing*. This proposition, which at the moment perhaps

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seems paradoxical, will assume great and deep significance when we have once reached the point of applying it to the twofold seriousness of duty and of destiny; it will, I promise you, support the whole edifice of the art of the beautiful and of the still more difficult art of living (Schiller, 1967, p. 80).

Here, we have a paradox: “Man is only completely human when he plays” and a promise: “this paradox is capable of bearing the whole edifice of the art of the beautiful and of the still more difficult art of living”. Rancière will reformulate this thought as follows: “there exists a specific sensory experience that holds the promise of both a new world of Art and a new life for individuals and the community, namely the *aesthetic*” (Rancière, 2010, p. 115).

By reformulating Schiller, Rancière effectively operates two major displacements that re-design the aesthetic horizon of the community and of everyday life. However, the crucial point here is to set the distance from this horizon, that is, to reflect on the limitations of the work of art as a model for a community and on the other hand, on the divergences between the idea of an art of living and that of an aestheticized life. If we want to summarize the challenge presented here, this could be in the form of the following question: How could the notion of the aesthetic as a specific experience lead to an “aestheticization of common existence” (Rancière, 2010, p. 116) that would be in line with both the art of the beautiful and the art of living?

## **2. The aesthetic and the topological ground for the various forms of aestheticization**

The aesthetic in Rancière is primarily a matter of repartitioning the sensible. On this ground, it is useful to introduce the difference between *aisthesis* and *poiesis*:

The function of *poiesis* is to produce a sensible element that verifies the power of thought immanent to the sensible. The dimension of *aisthesis* is then the relation of the work to its origin and this relation of aisthesis to itself, a redoubling of *aisthesis*” (Rancière 2000, p. 21).

On another instance, Rancière set out from the beginning that “what aesthetics refers to is not the sensible. Rather, it is a certain modality, a certain distribution of the sensible” (Rancière,

2009a, p. 3). This idea of distribution implies a certain intensity of the sensible along with an appropriate space for operations that can support various modalities of the sensible that are aesthetic in essence. The notion of topology can be quite useful in this kind of setting. Topology refers to a spatial condition that permit the thought and actualization of properties and relation among elements such as the senses. As a term, the topological is more suitable to capture the modalities of the aesthetic comparing to the spatial. For instance, the topological permits to think the aesthetics of beautiful in terms of a particular as well paradoxical condition, namely *aesthetic efficacy*, that is a “paradoxical kind of efficacy that is produced by the very rupturing of any determinate link between cause and effect”. For Rancière, it is “precisely this indeterminacy that Kant conceptualized when he defined the beautiful as what is represented as an object of universal delight apart from any concept” (Rancière, 2009a, p. 7).

The repartition of the sensible that produces a certain intensity of the sensible in its simplest and most essential form is a matter of a doubling of the senses. This is a crucial point for understanding on a first instance the relation between Kant and Rancière. In fact, Rancière admitted that the text “that has framed the space of aesthetics” is Kant’s *Critique of judgment*, setting out that this has been as well his “guiding thread in the construction of a tentatively more comprehensive concept of aesthetics” (Rancière, 2009a, p.1). The apprehension of a form according to Kant entails the doubling of the sense; there is the sense of the given and a sense produced out of it. This means also a certain relation between the senses which, in a dynamic manner, can take the form of a re-configuration of the given. This is what Rancière calls ‘the aesthetic dimension’ or ‘dissensus’: “It is another kind of relation between sense and sense, a supplement that both reveals and neutralizes the division at the heart of the sensible” (Rancière, 2009a, p. 3). From this, we can deduce that the relation between the senses can be seen as a generic form of aestheticization. In other words, the aestheticization can be understood as a process of producing or intensifying the aesthetic.

On the other hand, in order to understand the variation in the meaning and the use of the term ‘aestheticization’ Rancière proposes a reconsideration of the works of arts in terms of their autonomy or heteronomy. In fact, autonomy in what Rancière calls the *aesthetic regime of the arts* is the autonomy of a mode of experience and not of a work of art. (Rancière, 2010, p. 116). This experience refers not only to qualities of a work of art but also to qualities that do not belong to it. The manifestation of what is art along with what is not art, that is, what it



wasn't destined to be part of the work of art, is a kind of a 'free appearance', an experience of the free play of the aesthetic. To illustrate this point, Rancière refers to the Greek statue known as the Juno Ludovici, stated by Schiller at the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> letter. It is about a goddess. However, the working of time, the play of its temporality, the distance between, on the one hand, its initial purpose and state and, on the other hand its current becoming and loss of certain attributes, amount to a situation where the goddess "wears no trace of will or aim". It is about a configuration that emerged freely, out of any intention or planned action: "The statue thus come paradoxically to figure what has not been made, what was never an object of will. In other words: it embodies the qualities of what is not a work of art" (Rancière, 2010, p. 117).

In this case, 'free appearance' is the appearance of what has not been aimed at as art. It is free in the sense that "it ceases to be a suspension of the oppositions of form and matter, of activity and passivity, and becomes the product of a human mind which seeks to transform the surface of sensory appearances into a new sensorium that is the mirror of its own activity" (Rancière, 2010, p. 118). From this re-contextualization of the 'free appearance' emerges as well a new ground for the free play, or in this context, for the aesthetic play. Thus, aesthetic play becomes "a work of aestheticization".

Correspondingly, Rancière designates that in the aesthetic regime of the art, "art is art to the extent that is something else than art. It is always 'aestheticized', meaning that is always posited as a 'form of life'" (Rancière, 2010, p. 118). From this point on, the aesthetic as well as the aestheticization process can be seen in relation to operations of framing and constituting a world defined by a specific content given to the art-life axis. In other words, there are different scenarios where aestheticization acquires different meanings depending on the politics of aesthetics, that is, on the presuppositions associated with the constitution of a community, the coordinates of a common world, the framing of a new collective ethos.

Following the lines of Schiller's aesthetic thought and its political and ethical implications, "matters of art are matters of education" and art, as self-education, "is the formation of a new sensorium – one which signifies, in actuality, a new ethos" (Rancière, 2010, p. 119). The vital questions here, considering the various historical projects of 'art becoming life', from Schiller's epoch and onward, concerns art and the political project of dwelling in a common world. There could be a variation of answers, drawing from the historical experience, that extend from aestheticization being a substitution of politics to aestheticization being linked

to a certain conception of design that is committed not only to creating objects “but a sensorium, a new partition of the perceptible” (Rancière, 2010, p. 122). The latter case, aestheticization as the generation of sensorium, entails the multiplication of temporalities of art, scenarios of latency and reactualization, attributing to art a metamorphic status, recognizing the aesthetic in co-operation with a ‘heterogeneous sensible’ (Rancière, 2010, p. 124).

Of course, there is always the danger of doing too much in either direction. This is a kind of danger that Rancière has given the name of entropy. On the one hand, associated with a generic form of an ‘end of art’ thesis, there is an entropic situation of ‘de-aestheticization’. On the other hand, the procedures of aestheticization in the form of a re-aestheticization could lead to entropic situation where ‘everything becomes artistic’. So, given this sketch of the different meanings that the concept of aestheticization can take, my aim will be to further clarify the possibilities offered by the aesthetic and to secure an aestheticized ground for the edifices of the art of beauty and the art of living.

### **3. The concepts of life and beauty under the aesthetic regime of the art**

Now, I will try to analyze further this relation between art and life by asking: what idea of art and what idea of life? I will start from the idea of life; we have to have in mind a certain idea of life. For Rancière this idea of life is an idea under the aesthetic regime of the art which can be opposed to the idea of life under the representational or poetic regime of the arts where the primacy is attributed to an idea of organicity, to an idea of a whole “within which a principle of unity, a principle of proportion and concordance, governs the multiplicity”. In the representational regime of the art, life is the “life of an organism”. And beauty is defined by “the adjustment of the parts of the organism that makes them concur to same end” (Rancière, 2017, p. 598). If I spoke earlier about a paradoxical kind of efficacy, namely, what Rancière calls aesthetic efficacy, we should now consider a reverse operation, Rancière calls it respectively, aesthetic separation. This term or operation facilitates the understanding of the idea of life under the aesthetic regime of the art works; this idea of life is performed,

by disconnecting and rearranging the relation between the notions at play in the definitions of the ends of art and the criteria of beauty; disconnects the power of the form from the implementation of a concept, the appearance of the beautiful from the perfection of an organism and the use of a thing

from its utility (Rancière, 2017, p. 597).

Those disconnections and rearrangements create the unity between two apparently incompatible ideas of the relation between life and art: (a). Life as the inner power animating the autonomous, aesthetic, mode of being of the beautiful. And, (b). Life as the extended reality to the ends of which art must be subdued. The unity of life and art, which is a unity of life and life, is manifested in its full conception in Kant's *third critique* where we find for the first time a problematization of the "contradictions and the paradoxes through which art and beauty, finality and lack of an end are connected in the aesthetic regime" of the art (Rancière, 2017, p. 598).

Life as specified by Kant in the first paragraph of the "Analytic of beauty" is related to a radical disjunction, a form of aesthetic separation: "The representation of the beautiful is not referred to the object; It is referred entirely to the subject, indeed to his or her feeling of life" (Kant, 2000, p. 89). The aesthetic separation means that the unity of art and life "always presupposes a lack or a supplement, something that is aside, imperfect, supplementary, useless, or endless". Aesthetic separation can be related to the opening up of space for the free play of the cognitive faculties. And, according to Rancière,

this is the first formulation of an idea that will return again and again as refrain in Kant's analysis: the finality of the beautiful is to animate the life of the faculties in the subject, to produce a consciousness of their free play, to strengthen this state of animation and allow it to reproduce itself. In short, the subjective finality of the beautiful is to make life feel life. But what kind of life is this? What does this kind of life imply? (Rancière, 2017, p. 598).

Rancière will try to answer these questions by taking as its basis the example of the *flowers as free natural beauties* in Kant. For Kant there are two kinds of beauty: (a). *Free beauty*, which presupposes no concept of what the object ought to be, that is a beauty free of concept. (b). *Adherent beauty*, which presupposes a concept of what the object ought to be and the perfection of the object in accordance with it, that is a beauty adhering to a concept, a conditioned beauty. So, the flowers are free natural beauties and the explanation given by Kant is the following:

Hardly anyone other than the botanist knows what sort of thing a flower is supposed to be; and even

the botanist, who recognizes in it the reproductive organ of the plant, pays no attention to this natural end if he judges the flower by means of taste (that is, to judge its beauty). Thus, this judgment is not grounded on any kind of perfection, any internal purposiveness (finality) to which the composition of the manifold is related (Kant, 2000, p. 114).

So here, “the success of the feeling of life provided by the flowers implies the dismissal of any knowledge or consideration of their constitution and finality as living organisms”. And, “the form that pleases is not the form given to that object by the concept of what it must be. In the free beauty of the flower, life manifests itself as a global power indifferent to the differentiation and harmonization of its functions”. In such a situation, aesthetic finality is a valid form of aestheticization because it is separated from “any kind of objective finality, any perfection of the object” (Rancière, 2017, p. 599). In a more detailed way,

the subjective finality experienced in the aesthetic judgment must not only be distinguished from the external finality, which is utility, but it must also be distinguished from what is readily contrasted with the criterion of utility, namely, the criterion of internal perfection of the work seen as the achievement of an artistic will (Rancière, 2017, p. 599).

Here, once more, we have the manifestation of the aesthetic regime of the art, of an aestheticization process versus the organic considerations of the art in the representational regime. And this is why, beauty, according to Kant, “has nothing to do with internal finality or the perfection of the work”. Rather, there is this kind of aesthetic separation where beauty, on the contrary,

points towards a form of harmony that cannot find its achievement in itself. It points towards an improvement, an intensification of life whose destination is to be communicated, to take part in an improvement of a collective form of life based on the intensification of a capacity to share (Rancière, 2017, p. 599).

A basic principle in the aestheticization process under the aesthetic regime of the art is that *the success of beauty is not the success of art*. Beauty is not dependent on the application or observation of any set of rules. On the other hand, beauty is not dependent either on any artistic will. This point could be easily understood on the basis of the distinction between artistic

beauty and aesthetic beauty. In the latter, the feeling of beauty is independent of any concept determining our judgment. In nature, in the case of the free beauties of nature and the example of the flowers this condition, according to Rancière, “is easily fulfilled since we ignore flowers’ vital organization”. However, in the case of the artwork there is a doubling of the form: “our judgment on the form of the representation is mediated by the consideration of another form, and this is, the form that the artist has wanted to carry out on his medium” (Rancière, 2017, p. 599).

Paradoxically, this doubling of form implies an imperfection rather than a coherent, assured whole. The notion of aesthetic separation as presented above is the sign of an inevitable epistemological loss. Art is the practice in which the knowledge of a thing does not include the capacity of achieving it for the very simple reason that nothing guarantees that knowledge can be translated in a form without any loss or deviation. There is always a form of loss, a kind of aesthetic separation that provides the condition that the artwork,

can only approximate beauty and foster the aesthetic feeling inasmuch as it escapes itself, as it is not defined by its own perfection but by the imperfection and the supplementation that make it the vector of an enhancement of life, which also includes a specific form of socialization (Rancière, 2017, p. 599).

So, the form of aestheticization that is of importance in our analysis is that one that stems out of the “the distinction of three forms of finality – external objective finality, internal objective finality, subjective finality” along with Kant’s dismissal of internal objective finality which has been intended as the proper end of art in the representational regime. Apparently, the basic vector of aestheticization, the principle of aesthetic feeling, is subjective finality. But, according to Rancière,

the very dismissal of internal objective finality, the dismissal of the mode of perfection provided by the paradigm of the organic body, opens the possibility for a form of conjunction between subjective finality and external objective finality or utility. It opens the possibility of a conjunction between the absence of the end of the beautiful and the commitment of art to the production of a collective life (Rancière, 2017, p. 600).

This modification to the system of ends and finalities regarding art, life and the beautiful, points towards the expression of the vitality of a new life, the weaving of a fabric of a new life, “the fabric of a living community” (Rancière, 2017, p. 615), that is the possibility of a conjunction between the art of the beautiful and the art of living.

#### **4. Aestheticization and communities of transformed sensation**

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

Describing the artistic work, Rancière provides the necessary ground for the apprehension of the conceptual relations involved in the topological and ontological considerations of art:

What the artist does is to weave together a new sensory fabric by wresting percepts and affects from the perceptions and affections that make up the fabric of ordinary experience. Weaving this new fabric means creating a form of common expression or a form of expression of the community” (Rancière, 2008, p. 3).

The idea of community can be considered as a spacious concept that permits the co-existence of various elements that could be thought as bodies in a larger or metonymical sense providing thus the conditions for plotting spatial and temporal assemblages of human and non-human entities. On the other hand, there is a certain political-aesthetic dimension at play. For Rancière, a community of sense is “a frame of visibility and intelligibility that puts things or practices together under the same meaning which shapes thereby a certain sense of community” (Rancière, 2009b, p. 31). This approach can be seen as an aestheticization process, a doubling of the senses in the form of a partition of the sensible, that is, a certain cutting out of space and time that binds together practices, forms of visibility and patterns of intelligibility. On these

respects, a community of sense can serve as experimental ground for testing the conceptual horizons of the other and of the heterogeneous, opening thus a productive field for the different relations of sense to sense that permit to re-arrange and re-consider the spatial presuppositions of artistic practices.

The idea of community in Rancière can be traced back to Kant and Schiller and can be understood in terms of promise and possibility rather than as an actual and existing state of things. In this sense, community is not restricted to an idea of individual being together; it is about a community of sense. In *Disagreement* Rancière provides a concise definition of aesthetics as “partition of the perceptible as well as discourse on the perceptible”; this discourse is autonomous, meaning that there can be “an evaluation of the perceptible that is distinct from any judgment about the use to which it is put” (Rancière, 1998, p. 57). Rancière refers to the Kantian reasoning in the *Critique of the Aesthetic Power of Judgment* and the example of the palace employed by Kant for supporting the thesis that the aesthetic satisfaction derived from a mere representation of an object is indifferent with regard to the existence of this representation (Kant, 2000, p. 90). It is in this way that the world of a virtual community is constituted, a *sensus communis* that presupposes a principle of universality: “By ‘sensus communis’ [...] must be understood the idea of a communal sense, i.e., a faculty for judging that in its reflection takes account (a priori) of everyone else’s way of representing in thought, in order as it were to hold its judgment up to human reason as whole” (Kant, 2000, p. 173).

The transcendental foundations alluded here to the idea of communal sense have as effect, the demise of the representational norms since the principle of universality can be seen as a force of de-hierarchization. Rancière clarifies this idea of communal sense: “Human beings are tied together by a certain sensory fabric, a certain distribution of the sensible, which defines their way of being together” (Rancière, 2008, p. 4). On these grounds, aestheticization can be understood as a political and communal process, as a way for elaborating a new ontological tissue for what it means materially and symbolically *being together*.

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