Book Reviews

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REVIEW OF JACQUES RANCIÈRE’S “SEEING THINGS THROUGH THINGS (MOSCOW, 1926),” IN AISTHESIS: SCENES FROM THE AESTHETIC REGIME OF ART

In “Seeing Things Through Things (Moscow, 1926)—a chapter on early Soviet film in Jacques Rancière’s most recent book, Aisthesis: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art—Rancière examines the cinematic technique and aesthetic theory of director Dziga Vertov utilising several concepts from his own theory of modernism. Rancière identifies Vertov’s films as examples of an “aesthetic regime” of art; that is, as art which has ascribed to it the property of “being art” not because of its technical qualifications but because it belongs to a “specific sensorium” and constitutes a “specific form of sensory apprehension.” The work of art which belongs to the aesthetic regime maintains a paradoxical relation to both the sensible world and to art from the ethical and representational regimes. On one hand, as a sensory form, the aesthetic artwork must be “heterogeneous to the ordinary forms of sensory experience” found in the natural world and in representative art, while on the other hand it must exist as an “autonomous form of experience.” It is this quality of autonomy in a work which “constitutes its potential for emancipation” from pre-existent forms of the distribution of the sensible, allowing the work, as a sensory experience, to engage in aesthetic free appearance and free play. If the ‘distribution of the sensible’ is understood as the conditions of possibility for sensory perception, the work which is emancipated from these conditions is capable of challenging the “forms of domination and equality operative within the very tissue of ordinary sensory experience” which are prescribed by pre-existing distributions of the sensible.

Rancière in this chapter applies these concepts to early Soviet cinema in order to outline cinema’s potential, as an autonomous practice “working with the sensible facts of Soviet life,” to be one of the primary means for the

2. Rancière, ibid., pp. 30-32.
3. The concept of ‘play’ to which Rancière is referring finds its origins in the aesthetic philosophies of Kant and Schiller. Rancière discusses how the “traditional sense of play was systematized in the Kantian analysis of aesthetic experience,” as well as Schiller’s appropriation of the term in “Aesthetics as Politics,” Ibid.
4. Ibid., p. 31.
construction of a ‘new sensible world’ in Soviet society and culture.\footnote{5} Conceived by Vertov as a new, universally intelligible language, cinema had the capacity to project the image of the new Soviet society and the new proletariat man who, with movements endowed with the graceful rhythm of machines, would be the worthy subject of Soviet cinema. A work of cinema constructed in accordance with the principles of “Kino-Eye” \footnote{6} would hence have the dual function of, on one hand, capturing what Vertov referred to as “life-facts” \footnote{7} —‘sensible facts’ in Rancière’s terms—and, on the other hand, presenting them as a reconstructed, structural whole, embedded with new meaning and expressing, through the language of cinema, a “film-truth” \footnote{8} [киноправда]; a truth which only became evident through the means of “Kino-Eye.” \footnote{9} In other words, it would communicate to its audience a new model of perception through which the sensible world could be ‘decoded,’ to use Vertov’s language, or using Rancière’s terminology, it would allow for a new distribution of the sensible.

Rancière’s discussion of the process by which a work can achieve a redistribution of the sensible is far from being without precedence in the realm of aesthetic theory. On the contrary, it recalls such concepts as that of “defamiliarisation” \footnote{10} [остранение] introduced by the critic Victor Shklovsky in his seminal paper “Art as Technique” \footnote{11}. Shklovsky, who qualifies works of art as works which have been “created by special techniques designed to make the works as obviously artistic as possible,” defines defamiliarisation as a technique which aims “to make objects ‘unfamiliar’... [and] forms difficult,” in order to “increase the difficulty and length of perception” for the viewer. This is done in order to achieve the aim of art which is, for Shklovsky, the imparting to the viewer of “the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known.”\footnote{12} This process undermining the ‘sensation of things’ as they are known can hence be considered a process involving the redistribution of the sensible. Both Shklovsky’s concept of defamiliarisation and Rancière’s concept of the freely appearing aesthetic work here are seen to have the capacity to challenge dominant forms of the distribution of the sensible. It is because of their capacity for overcoming pre-revolutionary forms of the distribution of the sensible through the use of defamiliarisation that Vertov’s films are able to assert themselves, according to Rancière’s discussion of the phenomenon, as the forms “constituting the sensible fabric of a new world.”

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6. Vertov’s neologism, from the Russian ‘Kino’ meaning ‘cinema,’ and ‘Glaz’ meaning ‘eye,’ denoting both his directorial method and the cinematic movement.
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