

Re-visions: remarks on the love of cinema

An interview with Jacques Rancière by Oliver Davis

This is the edited transcript of an interview with Jacques Rancière which took place before an audience on 23 September 2010 at the EYE Film Institute in Amsterdam. The event was organized by Octavo Publicaties to mark their publication of Dutch translations of *Film Fables* (Rancière, 2006) and *The Future of the Image* (Rancière, 2007). A video recording of this interview is available on the Octavo website: <http://octavopublicaties.nl/Nieuws/jacques-ranciere-boekpresentatie/>. With thanks to Jacques Rancière, Solange de Boer, the EYE Film Institute, Adrian Rifkin and Jo Morra. The final, definitive, version of this interview has been published in *The Journal of Visual Culture* 10, 3 (December 2011), 294-304, by SAGE Publications Ltd, All rights reserved ©. Please see <http://online.sagepub.com>.

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OD: Jacques Rancière, I would like to begin, if you will forgive me, by asking you some intimate questions, by inviting you to talk about the nature of your relationship with film. You have been referred to as a ‘cinéophile’ (Rifkin, 2009) but would you choose to describe yourself as one and, if so, what kind of cinephile are you exactly? What does it mean to be a cinephile today, to *love* film, today? Is cinephilia a pure or a perverse love? I wanted to ask about love because it seems to me that as well as plenty of rigorous analysis there is, so to speak, a lot of love in *Film Fables*, both narratively, or representationally, between characters in the films you analyse (the Orgon-Tartuffe-Elmire triangle; Bowie and Keechie; Ingrid Bergman; the opening of *La Chinoise*), and also in your own softly-spoken desire, which seems to me to suffuse this work, to share a love of film with the reader. What kind of sharing is implied here and is there any danger of ‘consensualism’ in appealing to, or addressing, a preconstituted community of cinephiles? How would you characterize the nature of your relationship with film, or your interest in film, and how has it changed over the years?

JR: Well I think the first point about cinephilia is the specific nature of cinema. Cinema is not only an art; cinema is a specific sensorium, cinema is a way of living the shadows. I think it is very important that a film is never given as a whole. So the film is a sensation, the sensation of an apparition, of shadows, and it lives in our memories. Cinema exists in memories as much as it exists in real shadows. So I think the love of cinema is always at the same time the love of shadows, is the love of this kind of art which is never given as a whole, which in a sense needs to be revived, to be talked about. So the world of cinema is the world of fantasies in that we contribute to its existence. The second point is that cinephilia, specifically French cinephilia of the fifties and the sixties, was not only a kind of love, it was also a kind of polemical intervention because what is specific to cinema is also the uncertainty of the border between high art and popular art, between art and entertainment. And one main point about cinephilia was that cinephilia was a kind of unauthorized intervention, the shattering of a certain form of cultural legitimacy. In the fifties and the sixties there was a kind of cultural legitimacy; certain works had cultural legitimacy because of their aesthetic aspect or their intellectual content, etc.: films such as *Last Year in Marienbad*, *L'Avventura*, *The Seventh Seal*, and so on. But cinephiles decided those films weren't interesting. I remember a friend coming to me after watching *L'Avventura* and saying it's boring and turgid and you should see *The Giant of Marathon* by Jacques Tourneur, this is true cinema. And there was this in cinephilia, asking why we despise westerns and thrillers and adventure films and musicals because *they* are true cinema. And it was a success. I mean cinema is an art in which hierarchy is entirely overturned and cinephilia meant that. So I think when you say it's 'consensual', no, because first this was a dissensual experience and second this community of cinephiles doesn't exist. It's an open community and we don't know who belongs to it. Anybody can join precisely because it is a community based on the breaking of the borders between cultural legitimacy and mere popular entertainment. So I would say in my writings on cinema there are two things: first, the sharing of love for cinema and a certain form of historical experience, and also something which is more reflective. I wrote about, for instance, *Europa '51* or the westerns of Anthony Mann because it was an occasion to see again those films I had seen in the sixties and if you saw a film then you never knew whether you would be able to see it a second time. This was a very important thing about cinephilia: it was based on a work of remembering, with all its alterations, because films were less available. So I tried in a

sense to think again about the meaning of this love of films twenty years later. I was looking again, trying to think about and justify, first of all for myself, this love; and also there was a more reflective aspect, in that I was interested in the place of cinema in the logic of the aesthetic regime. For instance, I did not comment on *Tartuffe* because I love *Tartuffe* but I think it is an interesting case study. It is a silent film made by a canonical filmmaker out of a canonical seventeenth-century French play. So there is this mixing of two interests, or elements: the transmission of a sensory experience of love and second this more reflective interest.

OD: I would like to ask you a rather technical question by inviting you to comment on a word you use in French in your Prologue to *Film Fables*, 'prélever' (Rancière, 2001: 11-13). *Prélever* at its most general means 'to take part of a whole' but I understand you to be also drawing on the medical, or scientific, meaning, 'to take a sample', as in to take a sample of rock, or blood, or tissue, for analysis. You first use the term to talk about the process by which Jean Epstein's purist theory of cinema, from the 1920s, as an artform which had nothing to do with storytelling, sampled its elements from a popular storytelling silent film of the day, *The Honor of His House*. You suggest that this de-figuring work of *prélèvement* and recombination is something Epstein has in common with directors, ordinary spectators, critics, cinephiles and those two authors respectively of filmic and written treatises on the nature of cinema, Godard and Deleuze. I am struck by the materiality, indeed corporeality, of the term and also by its air of medico-scientific impersonality. It almost makes filmmaking and film spectatorship sound like transformative material processes. I am wondering whether the spectator as a subject isn't eclipsed in that analysis.

JR: Really in my mind my use of the term had nothing medical about it. And from a lexical point of view in French *prélèvement* is not first a medical term, it's a financial term, for instance when you take money from one account and put it in another. So I wasn't thinking of medical sampling, biopsy and so on. No, for me *prélèvement* meant a process of extraction and fragmentation, the kind of poetic process which was spelled out first of all in Romantic poetics, for example by the Schlegel brothers when they said that we have to Romanticize the classics. Romanticizing the classics means precisely fragmenting the works of the classics and doing the ancient poems anew. So

fragmentation means taking parts of a whole and combining them into another whole. It is not merely a technical operation; it is always at the same time an aesthetic operation. An aesthetic operation means choosing groups of material and implies a measure of interpretation. That's very important. If you think of Epstein, what Epstein is performing in this case is surely, I would say, an 'inoperative operation'. He has in front of him a film, *The Honor of his House*, which is a melodrama of love, of rivalry, of drunkenness, of poison, of sacrifice, and what he sees is something entirely different; he sees all of these situations open in all directions. If you take what Godard does in his cinema it's a bit different. What Godard does is to take some of the elements, or parts, of a film and not only does he paste them – it's not simply a form of Surrealist collage – it's something different, an interpretive operation which transforms the very nature of those elements. What happens with *prélèvements*... what is the English term?

OD: Samplings?

JR: Samplings? No but that's not the same thing! With Godard it's not just that he takes some shots from films which are shots which belong to a climactic sequence of action and transforms them into icons: the bag in *Marnie*, the bottle of wine in *Notorious*, the glass of milk in *Suspicion*, the brush in *The Wrong Man*, etc. become mere images. The point is that there is an aesthetic transformation; they are no longer parts of a film, they are inhabitants of a kind of kingdom of shadows. Images are no longer elements that you extract from one work and paste into another work. They become shadows in a theatre of memory. And the filmmaker becomes a kind of poet calling the shadows, summoning them from the kingdom of shadows. But what I think is important is that there is nothing medical and nothing scientific about it. In the case of Godard there's a shared world of stories, images, sound, shadows, action. And there is this recomposition which is undertaken by the spectator. And for me this is very important and this is perhaps a link between *Film Fables* and *The Emancipated Spectator*, the idea that cinema is also, for the reasons I tried to spell out very quickly earlier, that cinema is also an art of the spectator. This is an important point about the aesthetic regime: the place of the spectator. The spectator is not only the individual who feels pleasure and pain or the judge who says this is good or not good. The spectator is also summoned into the reinvention of the work and I think this

is really an important element in the aesthetic regime, this transformation of the place of the spectator. The spectator comes to collaborate in the work as he looks at it. And I think this is also the importance of cinema and of the mechanical arts. The importance of the mechanical arts in the aesthetic regime lies not in their reproducibility. A lot has been said about reproducibility but I don't think this is the most interesting aspect of Benjamin's thesis. What is important, I think, about the mechanical arts is precisely this change of balance in art between the skill of the artist and the look which anybody can direct at the work. If you remember the discussions on photography over a century ago, for example in the beginning people said about photography that it's just mechanical and no longer the art of the hand, etc. And some photographers replied that no, that in fact there is no longer any need of the *mechanical* skill of the painter; now art is looking. And photography is first an art of looking. And I think this is something very, very, important about cinema and about photography: this kind of displacement in that now the artist is not so much the person who has a specific skill but the person who has a specific sensitivity to what is happening in the scenery of the perceptible.

OD: So this idea that *prélèvement* is something that the filmmaker does, something that the spectator does, something that the spectator as cinephile, or the critic, does – this is an egalitarian move, is it not, putting them all on the same plane?

JR: Exactly, yes. For me it's not at all the mechanical intervention of the specialist or the scientist. It is the culture of the look. Of course it is a fact that in cinema you are always sampling; there are memories and we have samples in that sense but also there is really a culture of the look and this is available to everybody. Egalitarian at least in the sense that it is no longer a question of technical skill or academic training and so on.

OD: I would like to ask you a question now about this concept of the 'phrase-image', *la phrase-image*, that you talk about in an essay in *The Future of the Image* entitled 'Sentence, Image, History' (Rancière 2007: 33-67). It's an essay I must confess to finding difficult. The question is really to ask you to reelaborate that concept of the phrase-image. If I understand you correctly from that essay it is something like the paratactic syntax, the syntax of juxtaposition, that defines the artwork in the aesthetic

regime of art. Could I ask you to elaborate further?

JR: Basically the point is that in the phrase-image what is at stake is not only a relationship between words and images. I always try to make a distinction between things and functions. So in my view the phrase doesn't only mean the words. What I call the phrase is the existence of a function of continuity, the function which gives the possibility of the homogeneity, the oneness, of the work. So let us say that the phrase is part of the semantic organization and that let us say that the image designates the function of creating a difference in polarity. That's the first point. So a phrase can be an image and an image can be a phrase in that sense. What I said is that in the representational logic, the function of the phrase, or the phrastic function, is performed mostly by the idea of the plot, the story as an arrangement of actions. So the representational logic is based on the privilege of action. This means that in this case the function of images is rather a function of illustration, of addition, so images are a way of portraying the characters, of intensifying the situation, etc. In the aesthetic regime there is a transformation. The point is not to create an organic whole; the point is to create a rupture between two layers of sensory experience. So the representational work is judged by its conformity to certain rules of construction, while the aesthetic work is first considered a kind of destructive intervention creating a difference between levels of sensory experience. In this case images are used to create some difference in polarity, to jump between regimes of the sensible. And this was the role of the multitude of sensory events in the realist novel. The question is about the phrastic function. In *The Future of the Image* at this point I refer to Flaubert (Rancière, 2007: 43-4). Flaubert is often anxious about the risk of losing the thread and says "I see nothing, I see nothing in what I am writing". So what he has to do is to shout out his sentences. Because he says if I shout them out I can hear whether they are well written, whether they ring true or not. So there is this very complicated relationship between a jump beyond the ordinary limits of experience and the question of "Where is the thread?" We are always at risk of losing the thread. And so there is this strange tension between the hand writing, the eye, the blind eye, and the ear with which he hears the sound of the sentence and the sound of truth. The phrase-image is precisely the singular construction which tries to create a specific common measure of the work, with the idea that what characterises the work is that it no longer conforms to consensual logic, to the consensual arrangement of significations and

visual forms. And this was also Flaubert's observation when he said that with just one very small deviation his phrase would become a phrase of Paul de Kock, an author of pulp fiction of that time. On one hand the risk of becoming pulp fiction, of just taking up the consensual arrangement of things and words; and on the opposite side there is the risk of chaos. This is something that Deleuze has commented on: the work is made from a germ of chaos and the question is whether I can construct this phrase-image, this relationship between the destructive power of the image and the phrastic function of continuity, whether it is possible to extract the work from chaos. And if we think of artistic and literary practice at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, there is this struggle of artists who are caught in the risky interval between the work and the absence of work called madness. As for the question of whether the scene from the Marx Brothers' *A Night in Casablanca* which I comment on in that essay is a phrase-image, it is a kind of *allegory* of the phrase-image (Rancière, 2007: 46-7). Flaubert the writer says I can't see so I need this combination of the hand, the blind eye and the ear which hears the truth. It's something like this that is illustrated by the sequence with Harpo. We have the consensual order, the policeman is the man of the consensual order and he stands before this mute man supporting the wall. So the mute man supporting the wall is, in a sense, an allegory of the phrase-image; for the policeman of course it's nonsense but in fact if the mute man doesn't support the wall it will fall down. So the phrase-image lies between consensus and chaos, in a sense. But in that film it takes the form of a logic of nonsense. In a sense I would say this nonsense is chaos in the realm of art.

Just a very quick thing about Godard. The point with Godard is that he is trying to reconstitute a sense of the history of the twentieth century with all those 'samples' that he cuts from a multiplicity of films, with the idea that with these samples we can create a form of artwork which is at the same time a form of connection of the disconnection and a way of perceiving history because if the stories of Hollywood are what prevent us from looking at images of history, the strategy of Godard is to extract those images from their story so that they can make history. So the phrase-image means the conjunction between the power of conjunction and the power of disjunction and this works on two levels: on the level of the visual forms and second on the level of the relationship between the visual forms and the words that we hear. In the extract from *Histoire(s) du cinéma* that I discuss, on first level there is this kind of enigmatic connection summed up in the first image with the very well known photograph of the

little boy with his hands up, an image of the liquidation of the Warsaw ghetto, with the superimposition of this woman with the candle, and after there is an image of the ghost who is Nosferatu and of the audience laughing in a movie theatre. What does this mean? The candle comes from this film by Robert Siodmak (*The Spiral Staircase*) which was made just after the end of the Second World War (in 1946), and tells the story of a killer who systematically kills people with disabilities. So this is a metaphor, cinema speaking in its own way about the extermination of the 'Untermensch'. The image of Nosferatu appears before an image of a cinema audience taken from King Vidor's *The Crowd* (1928). What Godard constructs is this contrast, between the capacity of the cinema to show the extermination of the Jews and at the same time its incapacity because cinema has become a kind of ghost fascinating people. So there is this parallel throughout *Histoire(s) du cinéma* between the way crowds have been captivated by German, Fascist, ideology and the way audiences in movie theatres are captivated. So Godard is constructing a phrase-image, meaning a kind of interpretive grid, a little optical instrument, through which we should be able to look differently at the images of the century. So not the consensualist vision, nor merely chaos, or collage, but a little machine, a little optical instrument, an interpretive grid through which to look at the images of the century. And on the second level we hear a voice speaking about continuity: "I would have liked to have been introduced by this voice, the voice of the one who was here before me", etc. It is part of the inaugural speech by Michel Foucault at the Collège de France and Foucault is of course delivering a eulogy to his predecessor in that Chair, Jean Hippolyte. The point is the function of the voice here, a function of continuity; so the images create a sense of history and the voice creates a sense of continuity, a sense that this chaos of images at the same time makes a world. I would say this is the approach of Jean-Luc Godard; this idea that cinema is the way of creating a common world. So there is this distribution of roles between the destructive power of the image and the construction of a grid conjoining the disconnected, or disconnecting the conjoined at the same time, and in addition this disjunction-conjunction of the images is in a certain way redeemed by the phrastic power of continuity, this voice saying "there was a voice before", that the speech has already been given and that we are continuing the power of human communication, etc. So I hope that was an account of what the phrase-image means.

OD: Yes it's much clearer to me now, thank you. [*Audience laughs.*] I would like to move on to a question about pedagogy. To say the least, pedagogy is problematic in your thought, or so it seems to me. I was thinking of the contrast between the concept you elaborate of emancipated spectatorship and the work of someone like Bernard Stiegler, for whom technical advances have led to a proliferation of these 'short circuits' he speaks of which are inimical to the development of thought, art and culture and indeed ultimately to the survival of the human species. It strikes me that your notion of emancipated spectatorship is decidedly more optimistic than that view. There's a point you make in *The Emancipated Spectator*, and I am quoting here from the English translation, that 'We do not have to transform [...] ignoramus into scholars. We have to recognize the knowledge at work in the ignoramus [...]' (Rancière, 2009: 17). I can see that this is consistent with your *Jacotisme* but I am just wondering whether there is a danger in overemphasising the autonomy of the individual spectator and overlooking the wider socio-economic, indeed political, pressures that conspire increasingly to produce what could be called a lack of cultivatedness.

JR: There are two entirely different questions. There is the question of the value of spectatorship in general and second the question of the capacity of the individual to escape social pressures. The connection between the two aspects is not as simple as it looks at first sight. You all know the old indictment of spectatorship which goes back to Plato; the idea that spectatorship is a bad thing first because the spectator is looking at a mere appearance and second because the spectator is passive. But the question is what does the passivity of spectatorship mean for Plato? The passivity of the spectator means that the spectator will passively catch the theatrical disease, which is the disease of disidentification, of a splitting of identity. For a long time spectatorship was condemned because it meant precisely the possibility of escaping social pressures and it was the same in the nineteenth century when bourgeois thinkers started to be puzzled by the fact that working-class people were looking at images, etc. At that time in fact spectatorship was thought of as the danger that individuals would escape social pressures, meaning the pressure that tells them to remain at their place with their identity. And it's true that Marxism turned everything upside down by saying that spectatorship is a condition of the spectator, who is the victim of the ideological machine which hides from him or her the reality of exploitation, so that he or she has

not only to become active but also to acquire knowledge, must be given knowledge, in order not to be deceived, to be cheated, by images. So there was that old negative thing of the spectator as passive in front of the image which is a lie and you know that we have a very long history of intellectuals disparaging images and telling people what the truth is behind the images. The idea being in the beginning that if we can dismiss the spectator's illusions then the spectator will become conscious of the construction of the work. What we know at the end of this history is that what was supposed to be a propaedeutic to action just became a kind of ratiocination, saying everything is spectatorship, everything is consumption, and all those idiots who are entirely victims of the spectacle, of the image, etc. What I wanted was to think of this reversal of the argument: the way that the fear that people could become capable was turned into the opposite fear, the fear that all those people would become incapable. So I think the point is not being optimistic or pessimistic. I'm not more optimistic than Bernard Stiegler, or Sloterdijk, etc., or Zygmunt Bauman, or people like that, the point is whether you start from the presupposition of equality or the presupposition of inequality. Let us take for instance all that literature about the internet which says that the internet is such a danger because all those people can surf but they don't know how to navigate so they will be lost so we must educate them because if you don't educate them they will be lost. So this is why, for instance, people like Bernard Stiegler invent programmes to educate people about the new media, etc. But I think the real point is not that people are incapable but that they are capable and if they are capable what about the specialists? What happens to all these people who have given all their lives to disparaging the image, to teaching people who are looking, but not seeing, to see the image. I think the most important point about social pressure is the idea that social pressure is accepted through the deception of the image. This becomes less and less pertinent. If you think of consumption today, the consumer is not a stupid consumer of images. Today's consumer is an expert consumer, an intelligent consumer who looks closely at the package, at where it comes from, at how many calories and how much fat it contains, at its carbon cost, etc. We have to rethink not only the method of choosing equality or inequality; we have to rethink what exactly are the means of social pressure today.

OD: I would like to ask you now about your chapter in *Film Fables* on Alexander Medvedkin's *The Last Bolshevik*. It seemed to me that you are very suspicious of

what you seem to think of as the pedagogical voiceover and I am just wondering whether that is because you think of it as a documentary film rather than a film essay. If one were to think of it as a film essay would that lead one to a different view? If one were to see it more as a personal reflection by Marker on his own involvement with this group of filmmakers, le Groupe Medvedkin, would that bring one to a different view? So what role does genre have to play in the aesthetic regime? Genre is so important in the representational regime of art but does genre – whether the film is an essay or a documentary – have any role to play in our experience of works in the aesthetic regime?

JR: At first I must say I love this film because you seem to suggest that I despise it; this is not the case. I commented on the question of the voice, that's true. But for me the point is not to distinguish documentary from essay. I called it a documentary film; I spoke about this film under the rubric of documentary fiction. I think that's important because in fact my first interest in this film came from an exhibition that took place in Paris at the Pompidou Centre in 1995 and the title of the exhibition was 'Face à l'Histoire' ('Facing History'). And alongside the exhibition there was a programme of films. And for reasons of hierarchy and in this case you are right there was a distinction drawn between fiction films and documentary films and Marker was placed among the documentary films. My point was that documentary film is documentary fiction. It is fiction because a fiction is an arrangement of signs, an arrangement of words and visual fragments and different elements. My point was that what is called documentary is in fact a form of fiction. And this fiction can be more inventive than ordinary fiction films because documentary film does not have to worry about verisimilitude. This is also what Aristotle says, for our comfort: if something is real it is possible; with a documentary we do not have to worry about verisimilitude so we can invent more subtle relationships. I prefer documentary fiction to essay because in my view in France especially we have very many people writing essays and most of them are really very bad. In an essay a writer or an artist tells us what he or she has in his or her mind. I am not interested in what people have in their mind; I am interested in what people have in front of their eyes and what they put in front of them, on the page, on the screen or canvas, etc. So I prefer documentary fiction because there is this struggle with what is already given and for me it is an important thing about the aesthetic regime this confrontation in the

material which is already there and my point is that there is no necessary relationship between documentary voiceover and authority. As is well known you can have various kinds of voice in fiction. For instance if you take the French novelist Stendhal, he writes fiction but he always has a voiceover commentary on what his characters are doing so voiceover is not a privilege of documentary. The question for me is about the authority of the voiceover and it is also a question for Marker himself. Marker belongs to what I would call the Brechtian generation, the generation of artists and intellectuals concerned with teaching people how to see instead of stupidly looking. The best of that generation had the same problems; they shared a similar kind of questioning in their work. We can see this in the Barthes of *Mythologies* or Chris Marker in *Letter from Siberia* with this very well known passage where Marker says look this image can be commented on either as Soviet propaganda or as bourgeois propaganda against the Soviet Union. So they are committed to the same form of comment, or voiceover, saying look at the image, don't trust the image, look behind, look for deception in the image. At a certain point they turned away more or less angrily from this attitude. Think of Barthes and the entire reversal in his theory of the *punctum*, the idea of the affect in the photograph which is exactly the reversal of his criticism of the realist ethic. In Marker it is a bit subtler. I think that Marker has a problem with the voice and that this is why here the commentary becomes a letter sent to a friend but at the same time the letter isn't exactly sent to a friend and becomes a commentary and there is the passage which I commented on about Eisenstein and about how Eisenstein cheated people with this famous sequence of the shooting on the Odessa steps. And the voice tells us about the cheating and afterwards Marker shows us images, if I remember correctly, and in this sense the images are redundant and even more so because Eisenstein always boasted about cheating people, about saying all this is art, is artefacts, not reality, artefacts which I have constructed because the artist is an engineer who, as he once said, has to plough the head of the spectator with a tractor. So Marker I think has a problem and a difficulty with the voiceover and this is why in the next film, in *Level Five* (1997), the voice becomes a feminine voice and the feminine voice becomes more or less a fictional character. And one can think also of an installation made at the same time by Marker called *Zapping Zone* (1990-94), a big installation with many TV monitors mixing all kinds of things, clips from TV, from film, etc., a kind of chaos and the exact opposite of the logic of explanation of what is on the screen. So for me there is a problem for Marker, as for Barthes, as for

Godard, of shifting from a certain form of interpretation of the image to a sacralisation of the image and that was my point about Marker. I love the film very much.

OD: That seems like a good note on which to end.

Jacques Rancière is Emeritus Professor of Philosophy at the University of Paris 8. His most recent book on cinema, which has yet to be published in English translation, is *Les Écarts du cinéma* (Rancière, 2011).

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