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FROM AN ONTOLOGY TO A PRAGMATICS OF IMAGES:

A CONVERSATION

A specialist in the philosophy of art, PATRICK VAUDAY is Professor of Philosophy at the University of Paris VIII, where he has taught alongside prominent colleagues such as GILLES DELEUZE, JEAN-FRANÇOIS LYOTARD, ALAIN BADIOU, and JACQUES RANCIÈRE. The author of seven books to date as well as numerous articles, he is considered one of the leading thinkers in France working on aesthetics.

In the discussion that follows, Vauday explains his intellectual trajectory, his relationship to important figures in contemporary French thought (from Sartre and Lacan to Deleuze and Rancière), and the reasons why the status of images has been central to his work. The conversation focuses on one of his most influential publications, *The Invention of the Visible: The Image in Light of the Arts*, which is currently being translated into English by Jared Bly for Rowman & Littlefield International's book series Reinventing Critical Theory. At the core of the exchange is the distinction between an ontology of the image and a pragmatics of images. The former describes the image as a secondary phenomenon, whereby it is always the image of something else (be it real or ideal, external or internal) and thus tends to lead to essentializing definitions. Vauday advocates for parting ways with this longstanding tendency, which he sees as having haunted the history of Western philosophy, in favor of following and developing one of Deleuze's key insights: "What I found interesting in Deleuze's analysis of images was precisely the idea that the image was not the image of something. It did not refer to a model" (see below). Vauday describes pragmatics as the analysis of the multiple effects of images—in the plural—that are understood as entities unto themselves, rather than as secondary representations

of something else. In this sense, the pragmatics of images no longer begins with the quest for an essence—as in the question, “What is an image?”—but instead embarks upon a more complex inquiry motivated by questions such as these: How do images function? How do they produce effects, and within what sensible configurations are such effects registered? This de-essentializing and pluralizing gesture has far-reaching consequences for rethinking how images operate and their political stakes.

What follows is the translation of a discussion that took place at the Critical Theory Workshop/Atelier de Théorie Critique at the Sorbonne in Paris, France, on July 9, 2014.¹

Founded by Gabriel Rockhill with the generous support of Villanova University and its Department of Philosophy, the CTW/ATC is an intensive summer research program that functions as an international forum for interdisciplinary and comparative work in critical social theory. Rather than following the traditional structure of a course or a conference, the Atelier operates as a collaborative platform for the sharing and perfecting of autonomous research projects. Participants—including students, faculty, and independent researchers—are exposed to the work of contemporary thinkers, engage with current debates in the Francophone world, and polish their own projects for presentation in the workshop. Patrick Vauday was invited to participate in one of the *Rencontres* (*Encounters*), in which intellectuals are publicly interviewed on their work to date and their future projects.

GR/ *I would like to begin our conversation with a broad question concerning your intellectual trajectory. What brought you to reconsider the status of images? What is specific about your theoretical development, and why has it led you to engage with certain questions in aesthetic philosophy, particularly around the issue of the image?*

PV/ [In English] Hello, I'm very glad to meet you. My English is so bad that I would prefer to speak in French [laughter]. [In French]

It is true that my work has revolved around the concept of the image for some years. This was not my point of departure. Rather, I found my point of departure—not the destination itself, which I have not yet reached because I am still working toward it—when I was a student in the 1970s. This point of departure was Sartrean existentialism. I was quite late. As you know, in 1968, regarding what is now “French theory,” people would speak of Althusser, Lacan, and structuralism. If you were a Sartrean, you were quite

provincial, which I was. I ended up in Paris to study at the École normale supérieure, and I was also enrolled in this very institution [the Sorbonne], where I attended the classes of Georges Canguilhem, one of the great masters (who is still a source of inspiration to me, even though I am not always aware of this). This is where I was introduced to other students who had had the luck or the opportunity to work with younger professors, who were not Sartrean but Althusserian, Lacanian, Deleuzian, Foucauldian, etc. As a consequence, I had to put my phenomenology on the shelf and become aware of the new schools of thought, and especially of this philosophical displacement largely linked to the reign of the human sciences and of structuralism. Yet I have always maintained a strong relationship with Sartre, and I would even say to Alain Badiou as well, since he claims Sartre to be one of his masters, as well as with [Gilles] Deleuze, even though he was not Sartrean at all (except in his appreciation of Sartre's short piece on "The Transcendence of the Ego"). Deleuze wrote a small piece, printed in *Desert Islands and Other Texts*, which pays homage to Sartre, albeit less for his philosophical work than for his philosophical personality. It was like a current of fresh air in the house of philosophy, which is pertinent here since we are now in an illustrious classical institution [the Sorbonne], which was of course very academic and in which Sartre opened the window to let in the air of the streets, of daily life, of cigarette smoke. He even talked about sexuality. All of this was quite, how can I put it, *new* for the Sorbonne.

Regarding my guiding thread of images, I came to explore this notion quite late, and it happened in a certain sense through the lens of psychoanalysis. I worked a lot on Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis, and on the reign of the famous Lacanian trinity: the real, the symbolic, and the imaginary. In my opinion, the imaginary, as conceived by [Jacques] Lacan, was not sufficient for accounting for images, and more specifically for the artistic practice of images. He reduced the imaginary more or less to fantasy, or something of that order, and not as Freud conceptualized it in his writings about dreams (since dreams occur through sonorous and visual images). Freud metaphorically says that the objective of pure psychoanalysis is to *dry out* the images of the dream in order to transform them into speech. Dream images should eventually resolve themselves and dissolve into speech. Yet, in my opinion, there is a resistance on the part of images, which I find in my personal case as well as in art. I thought that the way the Lacanianism of Lacan's epigones treated this question was quite simplistic.

This is how I encountered Sartre again, since he is also known for having written a beautiful work, *The Imaginary*, which is a phenomenological ontology of images. This was quite new, since German phenomenology had not really developed that theme. As a disciple of Husserl, he had previously written a book entitled *Imagination* that was quite classical—a sort of dissertation that would get him a job. In this, he dismantled empirical theses about images in order to demonstrate that the image

is not a thing—a famous Sartrean theme. In empirical philosophy, such as it has been interpreted, the image was ultimately treated as a remainder of perception, a material remnant, somewhat used up and diaphanous. When dealing with images, Sartre ultimately reused the same operation that [Henri] Bergson had employed in his work on memory. Bergson demonstrated that memory is not what is left over from perception but is rather an entity in itself: something that is not secondary, which is not directed by the present, which is not the slipstream of the present, but is an entity in itself. Memory is not a used up remnant of the present that dissolves, but something that exists in itself and comes to us as it is, in a kind of leap. In *The Imaginary*, Sartre also resorts to this kind of analysis, without referring to Bergson, of course. He demonstrates that the image is not a secondary existence but an existence in itself. For him the images of painting and cinema were only the presupposed realizations of an imaginary instance. The image was produced by what he referred to as an

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imaging consciousness, a way of pointing at something in its absence or inexistence.

Let me provide an example everybody can relate to, but which does not come from Sartre. When [Jean-Jacques] Rousseau talks about the beings in his heart rather than the beings he could encounter in his personal relationships, he is speaking about beings he can reach directly through his imagination without resorting to the real.

Sartre interested me, then, because his investigation in *The Imaginary* starts with a chapter entitled “The Family of Images.” For him, “The Family of Images” meant, as for all good phenomenologists, addressing painting, photography or, of course, cinema (although he does not speak about cinema at all)—images that he termed hypnagogic, that is, those images we experience when falling asleep. Those images referred to what he termed “an imaging intention,” an instantiation of nothingness, the image being for him fundamentally a way to give oneself a world. Actually it is not even a world; it was more about giving oneself—and I am going to use a paradoxical sentence—an *inexistent* world, a world of nothingness. For him, what characterizes an image is its ability to operate the nothingness of the world. In that sense, the image is productive of nothingness.

What I retained from Sartre is his concept of the “family of images.” Throughout my research, travels, and interests, the *concept* of images, to use a big word, allows me to

circulate among the arts. In my books, I never or seldom speak about any one particular art. I discuss photography, painting, cinema, video, etc. This concept of images allows me to circulate. We can also imagine that this concept might extend to theater or to architecture, in which there is also the dimension of the image. I am familiar with the practices of these latter arts, but not with their theory.

So this is why Sartre interested me, on the one hand. On the other hand, what I was a bit disappointed about is that Sartre reduces the image to an intention, that is, a consciousness. Yet artistic practices teach us that the unconscious permeates the image. We can speak of the involuntary when the image does not respond to an intention. This is obviously what psychoanalysis says about images, regarding the fact that they bear within themselves an unconscious signification (“why did you see this or that?”; “we can tie this to that signifier”; etc.).

This is not what I want to talk about, however. Rather, I want to talk about artistic images, the images produced by artists. Here one wonders where and how we can start talking about an image in the arts: was [Mark] Rothko still a painter who dealt with images? Was [Jackson] Pollock still a painter who dealt with images, or not? What interested me, and what Sartre was not concerned about at all, was the fact that the artistic practice of giving birth to images was confronted by certain materials, and involved images in future possibilities and forms, that could not be reduced to intentions.

Artists negotiated with their material. I strongly position myself as a Deleuzian here. For instance, in *What Is the Creative Act?*—a short piece [Deleuze] published based on a conference presentation at La Fémis for students in cinema, and during which he asked, “what is an idea in cinema?”—the *idea* in cinema is not just any general idea, but one that is inscribed in some material, in some expressive material. This could be cinema or painting. Sartre did not take this into account. For him, there was always an imaging instantiation, an imaging intentionality which, for a variety of reasons, was linked to the particular story of the painter, sculptor, photographer, or movie director who appropriated a certain medium but did so as if that medium had no bearing on the image, was not directing it elsewhere, not perverting it, not diverting it. . . . The French use the word “image” to denote an image we have in our heads, a literary image, like a metaphor, whereas English has two words: image and picture. If I am not wrong, a picture refers to a materialized image. Am I correct or not?

GR/ Yes, most of the time.

PV/ In French, there is no such distinction. This raises questions that have to do with semantics and language differences. This is also what led me to work on the image. The original title of my dissertation was *The Image and the Real*. I had an idea, perhaps a somewhat far-fetched one, that the image did not refer solely to the imaginary, nor was the image reducible to a symbolic interpretation, but that the image approached the real. How was

this so? It is hard to say. The real is the concrete material; a painted image is not at all the same thing. There are philosophers who have demonstrated this, and here I think in particular of the American philosopher Stanley Cavell. Though he is not the only one to have theorized it, he did it in an original way by showing how a photograph is totally different from the art of painting. It engages in an utterly different relationship to space, time, and the self. Yet all of this had been neglected by phenomenology, at least by Sartrean phenomenology. I have to say that since then other authors, such as [Mikel] Dufrenne and [Jean-François] Lyotard in France, who belonged to the phenomenological tradition, have taken these differences in materials into account.

To come back to what I was saying before, the real was the real of the material or, should I say, of matter. In philosophy, particularly in the Aristotelian tradition, *matter* refers to an undifferentiated substance you can transform into anything based on an idea. *Material* is a bit more technical. The carpenter and the joiner use material, and there is a specificity to this material, but it is designated for a certain usage. I will thus use the word “matter” [matières] in the plural sense, if you will. The title of my dissertation did not remain *The Image and the Real*, which was too big a topic and quite hard to take responsibility for. I renamed it *The Matter of Images*. This is the title I used for my published book.² It’s about matter, but specific matter: there can be photographic matter, cinematographic matter, pictorial matter. This

was, how can I put it, the optic I pursued. I was tipped off by what I might, in retrospect, consider a hint, perhaps not an especially solid one, about the idea that there was a certain link to temporality. Presence is inscribed in painting, an idea Deleuze explores in his work on [Francis] Bacon. Photography, according to both Stanley Cavell and Roland Barthes, is linked to the past. Cinema has to do with the future. Here we can play on the French word *avenir*—à-venir, what is to come. One of the famous movies by the Lumière brothers is *The Arrival of the Train in La Ciotat*: there is a camera on the platform and you see the train coming. I used a formula by Pascal Bonitzer, who, as you might know, is a great cinema critic and a movie director himself. (He probably is a better cinema critic and theoretician than a movie director, at least in my opinion, but that is another topic.) In one of his works, he says that we go to the movies in order to see something happen. Unfortunately, something does not always happen. Movies are not always great, so something does not always necessarily happen.

So this was the direction I took. I have not given up the idea that images are not simply the products of imagination, and that working with matter often yields more ideas than imagination does. Imagination reproduces; it makes snapshots [clichés]. What helps the painter, the photographer, and the movie director to depart from clichés is the fact that they *wrestle* with matter. They engage in a dialogue with their materials. They accept the fact that these materials lead them somewhere

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else than where they may have wanted to go. We might think here of [Marcel] Duchamp who, during a famous conference in Houston in 1956—which was a rather small conference—referred to the artist as a *medium*, a medium that does not necessarily understand the things that are happening to him, and whose initial intention drifts away through the association of ideas as well as through the matter he is working with, the objects with which he is working.

GR/ *The way you have just talked about Sartre is very revealing since in your book, The Invention of the Visible, we actually encounter a totally different reading of Sartre. There is a rather profound critique of the Sartrean analysis of the image in which you claim that Sartre essentializes it and falls into the trap of pursuing the essence of the image. This is a subjective essence, as you say, rather than an objective one, which you see at work in Plato. There is nevertheless a basic essentialization of the image that you identify in Sartre and to which you oppose your own work. The question I would like to*

ask is the following: by proposing what you call a pragmatics of the image, which is directly opposed to an ontology of the image, as well as to the essentialization of images, don't you run the risk of creating in turn an image of history—and, notably, of the history of philosophy—that is quite homogeneous? From Plato to Sartre, there has been one dominant mode of thinking, which has searched for what an image is, rather than studying what images do. Could you unpack these distinctions? I also want to underscore one last thing. Don't you run the risk of a clandestine essentialization of your own? When you say that we should not address the question of what the image is but rather the question of how images work, what they do, don't you presuppose either the existence of an implicit definition of the image or a pragmatics that would be able to define the “essence” of the image? Does the displacement to the question of ‘how’ really allow us to avoid all forms of essentialism if it's a matter of examining how the image functions?

PV/ For me, the idea of a movement from ontology to pragmatics is linked to the

movement from my Sartrean reference-point to my Deleuzian reference-point. I will explain this. It is true that in *The Invention of the Visible* I take up the history of philosophy a bit arrogantly, or even very arrogantly, in its relationship to the image—its theorization of the image. I explore two opposing poles, which is quite convenient for me [laughter] and which might be a bit too Hegelian. It looks like a contradiction at first and then yields a sort of *Aufhebung* in the form of what might be called a pragmatics. This is a bit strange, but oh well. So on the one hand, there was something that I called a Platonic ontology; on the other hand, there was Sartre. This opposition functioned as a set of pincers, a pair of pliers: on the one hand there is Plato and the beginnings of Western metaphysics; on the other hand there is Sartre, the last philosopher, as people said back then, just as American literature has its *Last of the Mohicans*. Of course, people thought philosophy would no longer exist and that the human sciences would prevail. To speak about ontology with regard to Plato is fairly commonsensical. To speak of the ontology of the image is less common,

since he reproaches the image precisely for not having an ontology, for pretending to be and yet being nothing, if I may. Yet this evaluation of the image, this way of treating the image, is nonetheless linked to an ontology. It is thought within the frame of an ontology. As a consequence, it is thought as lesser being. It is precisely in the ontological moment that the image is declassified and devalorized by Plato. This is the objective version of ontology: the image is defined as the image of something else, be it the real or the ideal. Yet for Plato the image is declassified, devalorized, even stigmatized because it pretends to be something and yet does not refer to any model in particular. It pretends to be something and yet does not exist. I interpreted Sartre in the same fashion. He allowed for the recuperation of the ontology of an image and endowed it with subjectivity. This is not the image of an external reality, which might be ideal—as in Plato, where you find a realism of the intelligible in opposition to an empirical realism. At times there is an image of something—say, a photograph of this room—whereas at others there is an image of a transcendent reality. This is still

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I wanted to ask a different question than ‘What is the image? Is it false being? A secondary reality? A substitute? A representation? A symbol?’ I was more interested in the effects of the image than in its meaning or cause. The image is a kind of trial, an experiment [expérience].

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realism; there are simply two versions, empirical and transcendent/transcendental. Sartre recuperates the image from a subjective standpoint and says that the image always reflects a desire. We can see here how the concept of the imaginary is relevant for psychoanalysis and was likewise of interest to Lacan. The image is the expression of a subject and is thus no longer the expression of either an empirical or an ideal reality. But it was still the image of a subject. In the case of Platonism or Neoplatonism, it was the image of a reality; in Sartrean existentialism, which was saturated with the imaginary, it was the image of a subject, of his desire. Thus in both cases we encounter the idea of the image as “the image of” something.

This is how I came instead to deal with Deleuze, although I am quite reticent about the way he recuperates Bergson’s idea that the real is the multiplicity of images. What we commonly refer to as ‘reality’ is only a certain picture, taken from a certain perspective, of the human brain at a specific time. Yet for Deleuze reality is composed of an infinite multiplicity of simulacra. He is Epicurean on this point. The thing itself does not exist outside of its relations with other things. The brain is a sort of sensitive card that retains certain images in which we are interested. What I found interesting in Deleuze’s analysis of images was the idea that the image was not the image *of* something. It did not refer to a model. It was a production that was more the result of its effects than of its origin. For when we ask “what is an image?” “what does

the image do?” or “what is the image made of?” we inscribe the image as a secondary effect in a causal chain. On the other hand, I refer to the pragmatics of the image—pragmatics understood in the sense of American pragmatism, as in the work of William James. I wanted to ask a different question than “What is the image? Is it false being? A secondary reality? A substitute? A representation? A symbol?” I was more interested in the *effects* of the image than in its meaning or cause. The image is a kind of trial, an experiment [expérience]. I think in particular of John Dewey’s *Art as an Experience*. The image is envisioned as an experience of something and not as its substitute. The image makes an invisible or not-yet-visible thing come into being and renders it visible.

Another question remains, a question that bears its own response—that is: Sartre. By situating Sartre on the one hand and Plato on the other, do I not run the risk of homogenizing the history of philosophy with regard to the image? I certainly do, especially with this bipolar gap between a Platonic ontology and phenomenology. This phenomenology is motivated by the lack of something. This is what Lacan found in Sartre. The image comes in to supplement this lack. To take the example of someone both Gabriel and I know, [Jacques] Rancière is absolutely uninterested in the ontology of the image. He instead asks how the instantiation of the image comes into play according to what he calls “regimes,” the regimes of art, and how its affect, meaning, and significance change through the different

apparatuses or regimes. There is an ethical regime, which is mostly religious. Here he takes the example of Plato. There is also a representational, poetic regime, which extends from Aristotle to Hegelian philosophy, or a bit before. Finally, there is the aesthetic regime.

My aim was to inscribe my work within a philosophy of images. To give a brief summary: I evolved from the singular to the plural, that is, from a philosophy of *the* image (Plato, Sartre, etc.) to a philosophy of images. The main idea is that *the* image does not exist but that there are instead images. These images are linked together, contradict each other, and mutually articulate each other. The idea of the essence of the image is not consistent. On the contrary, the proliferation of images offers the proof of the nonexistence of the image's essence. This is what I call a pragmatics of images.

GR/ *It seems to me that this displacement from an ontology of the image in the singular to a pragmatics of plural images might provide the grounds for exploring the political consequences of your work. For you, the politics of art and the image does not consist in simply identifying the content of artistic practices and then valorizing them or not with regard to their political implications. For you, the politics of art is not reducible to something like the artist's intentions. What you insist on instead is the capacity or noncapacity for images to unhinge a given situation, to reconfigure a sensible world. The question I would like to pose is the following: what are the concrete consequences of this kind of*

displacement, that is, what are the effects of thinking the politics of art as a displacement and reconfiguration of the sensible? In your reflection on the politics of art and images, what is the role played by material and institutional structures in the production of images, in the social circulation of art, and also in its reception by spectators and readers? I can see how you take reception into consideration. But do you take into account all of the material and concrete relations that lie behind the production, circulation, and reception of images? Moreover, if this is the case, how do you link all these relations to what seems to be a position of autonomy held by images and art with regard to their material circumstances? Is art something detached? Does the image function in a zone of its own?

PV/ Thank you; this is a difficult situation [laughter]. I am going to refer to the dissertation title I invoked previously, which was a long time ago. When I spoke about the relationship between the image and the real, and even without knowing it, I was unconsciously touching upon politics. The imaginary too is, in a sense, part of politics. Literary utopias also gave birth to images. In the late eighteenth century, the French architect [Claude Nicolas] Ledoux designed architectural utopias and designed the Royal Saltworks at Arc-et-Senans, which were never built. It is quite literally utopian architecture. It involves a sort of social honeycomb with a hierarchy organized architecturally and distributed spatially in a semicircular space with headquarters, work spaces, spaces for hobbies, etc. It already

drew a little on the panopticon system. What [Jeremy] Bentham did was close the circle. Ledoux's design was similar to a classroom with the professor facing the students, and in which you do not see what is behind you. Bentham imagined a 360-degree panopticon. But let's come back to the initial question. This is how I approached the question of politics. If there is a political dimension in images, it is precisely because it touches on the assemblage of images, but not all images—"pas tout," which is an expression Lacan enjoyed using as a way of de-completing a totality.

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What I am interested in is what I call the resistance of images, the fact that discourse does not win out over images, that a painting never ceases to come back to itself, to insist on and resist meaning.

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The images that interest me, notably artistic images—if we take “art” in its indetermination, incorporating popular arts and not just those found in museums—are images that resist because they are seared by the real, to take [Walter] Benjamin's expression in “Little History of Photography” in which he defines the emotions that populated certain early photographic images. He notably evokes David Octavius Hill's nineteenth-century

photograph of the New Haven fishwife and speaks about images that still had taste, photographs that were not yet part of mechanized reproduction, which would impress upon the status of the daguerreotype. He speaks of an image that was seared by the real. There is almost the mystical dimension of a revelation here. What I am interested in is what I call the resistance of images, the fact that discourse does not win out over images, that a painting never ceases to come back to itself, to insist on and resist meaning. This is also Lyotard's thesis in *Discourse/Figure*. You try to seize art through discourse, and yet it resists it. It is this very resistance to discourse that will actually nourish discourse in turn. There is thus a capacity for resistance and insistence in certain images, in both public and private spaces. I think this already has to do with politics, to the extent that something has happened, something that belongs to the event. This event can be a personal one, since all of us have encountered images that linger like scars.

There are also images in private and public spaces and, of course, in art. So all of this has for me a political dimension in the sense of an event. This is where I share an affinity with Rancière, since when we talk about the politics of art we both mean the politics of the event. The event itself is not at all common, and it is something that evolves or, as Gabriel mentioned, operates an individual or collective displacement. Rancière is more interested, though, in the effects of collective displacements and the effects that engender collectivity.

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As for the autonomy of art, I do not believe in such a thing.

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To respond to another aspect of your question: on the one hand there is this dimension of the event. For instance, we have all been forever marked by certain films or film sequences, certain cinematic images or even details of images that have marked in us a point that *looks at us*, to invoke Barthes. By saying this, I am obviously putting aside the structures of the production and reception of images. This is not really my object of study, and it's possible that I might not deal sufficiently with the historical dimension of images. But I am not an art historian. This is why I have such a complex relationship with Rancière. I am interested in Rancière because, like Foucault, he thinks the modalities of images, the modalities of reception, and the modalities of the efficacy of images through a given episteme, or in terms of what he calls regimes. And yet, on the other hand, I also remain Deleuzian: what Rancière does not mention is the fact that there are images that come from very far away and which may be taken up anew by such regimes. We might think about an image from prehistory or from another civilization. Rancière omits this dimension, but at the same time this is not his object of study. It thus falls on us to take into account this sense of the historicity of images, the heterogeneity of epochs. [Denis] Diderot's discourse about art is very different from what would happen 50 or 150 years later with [Charles] Baudelaire,

for instance. This is quite clear. Rancière argues that the aesthetic regime is a regime of re-reading. It is a regime that invents itself through a re-reading of the past. Perhaps every artistic period re-reads its past and reproduces it in another way.

As for the autonomy of art, I do not believe in such a thing. The artists—and they might be anonymous artists, street artists, popular artists, those who are very often never officially recognized—are autonomous from politics and yet this autonomy is relative, since the contemporary art market today is completely saturated with financial fluxes and social structures. Who creates this market? Who creates the circulation of art? This autonomy is relative. There is still an autonomy within artistic creation. By “autonomy” here, we understand what Rancière fustigates in his criticism of modernism as it was thematized by Clement Greenberg: this was the idea that art was motivated by itself, that art dealt only with itself as a sort of self-sufficient planet. I position myself as a Rancièrian here because I think that art has to do with the real, and that its function is to raise questions, to reveal certain visibilities within what was not previously visible, as well as to depose certain regimes of visibility and to establish others. Every construction of a visible scene builds up another, invisible, scene at the same time, to which those who are not part of

the scene are nonetheless linked. So all of this is a relative autonomy.

GR/ I will formulate one last question, since we just touched upon Rancière but also did so as we were preparing this discussion. There are at least two things we should point out with regard to the differences between your work and Rancière's. On the one hand, there is the pride of place accorded to the image, whereas Rancière privileges literature and the text, even if there is still a reflection on the distinction between words and images. So my first question, to put it in terms of a schematic mise-en-scène in the interest of time, is whether Rancière is a thinker of the text whereas you are a thinker of the image. My second question concerns the relationship between politics and aesthetics. Rancière might well say that aesthetics and politics are consubstantial, but he also insists on the fact that there are never determined relations between them. You say that there is a "police" of images and a politics of images. One immediately recognizes Rancière's vocabulary here, although what you articulate is very critical of him, even if it is not an anti-Rancièrean discourse. I would like you to address these two points, then: what is the relationship between the image and the text, and what is the relation between aesthetics and politics?

PV/ We have to remind ourselves here that Rancière is interested in the image only through the discourse of the image. Let's take for instance his *Aisthesis*. A lot of Rancière's work consists of collections of articles or

lectures, which he compiles in book form. *Aisthesis* was, by contrast, written specifically to delineate a scene of the visible. In *Aisthesis* he talks about images only through texts. These are usually critical texts. For me, this is what differentiates me from Rancière.

Gabriel and I participated together at a conference in Lyon, France, during which I gave a talk that I illustrated with an example from Édouard Manet, a painter who marked the beginning of Modernism.³ This is how [Georges] Bataille and Greenberg think of him. As you pointed out, Rancière draws greatly on literature to define his aesthetic regime. This is not a matter of history for him, but a question of principle. Is it always discourse that allows you to see images? Thus for the aesthetic regime he goes back to [Eugène] Delacroix, to [Gustav] Courbet, to Impressionism, and even to Americans such as Pollock. His attention to materiality makes him interested less in the story than in the intensity of color or a tiny detail, like a boater hat or a waft of steam in Manet's painting (the reflection of a top hat, for instance). For Rancière, literature is the first to focus on such tiny details. Before that, people would tell stories, which had signification, a moral signification, a critical signification conforming to the politics of a given period. Literature at that point dealt with how one might see things. This is also linked to politics, to the Revolution, but they are not totally synchronous.

Thus it seems that for Rancière paintings could be complete even before they were painted.

They are already there, present as potentialities in literature. It is literature that builds the scene that will render visible the paintings of modernity. This shocks me quite a bit. In *The Future of Images*, Rancière takes the example of [Jean-Baptiste-Simeon] Chardin, who lived during the second half of the eighteenth century. Diderot was completely astonished by Chardin's skill at conveying impressions, which he focuses on rather than talking about the palette or the materiality of the painting. "Chardin is a magician!" Diderot says. You could believe that the thing itself *was there*: the rabbit that had just been killed, the bottle of wine, the flowers, the apple. Rancière picks up on the Goncourt brothers, who still dealt with the same paintings by Chardin, though using a very different terminology. For them the question of representation no longer had to do with a reality-effect, but with a materiality that constructed a sort of composition through the play of strokes and colors. For Rancière, this is proof that what we see in modern paintings is not the consequence of a change in painting but a change in ways of looking that were informed and constructed by literature. Literature is the school for new ways of looking at things. Because painters were also readers, we can assume that they read the people we have just been mentioning.

Yet I cannot adhere to such ideas. I took the example of [Édouard] Manet, who was supported and defended by novelists like [Émile] Zola. Manet painted the portraits of a number of novelists. He also painted portraits as a form of revenge against certain people—such as the

art critic [Théodore] Duret, who was very critical of the painter early in his career—who excoriated his work. For Duret, Manet's paintings were incomplete and badly made because they weren't finished. Manet then made a portrait of Duret that was a direct attack on the art critic. I also brought attention to the fact that Chardin was of interest and was being collected even before the Goncourt brothers started talking about him. The fact that his still lifes were of interest, albeit in a discreet way, helped bring his visibility to the fore. There were people who bought Chardin's paintings even before the Goncourt brothers took him up, and who could see that Chardin was the precursor of pictorial Modernism.

I want to insist on the idea that painters do things that novelists might not think about. It is because some painters took the risk of creating new types of paintings that new discourses arose. These were not discourses that necessarily preceded or anticipated painting, as in the example of Manet. This is where I diverge from Rancière and what we might call his Hegelian position. After all, Hegel deals with painting not in its details but in its material ideality—in its light and shadows, colors, etc.—which Kant did not do at all. In Rancière's aesthetic regime, literature always comes before painting. There is a sense that if words were not directed toward painting, painting would not exist. Yet there are paintings that leave you speechless, without words.

Your second question is more complex. This has perhaps something to do with Rancière's

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Politics is on the side of those who create new things, who introduce a new way of looking at things, and who shatter the formatted gaze.

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distinction between the police and politics. It is true that there is a policing of images. You can see this every day in the media, which show some images and not others; you can see it in advertisements and movies, which show a specific type of image. For Rancière, policing does not mean “repression” but is understood instead in the Foucauldian sense of “construction,” the formatted formation of a certain type of image that occupies the stage and pushes others into the shadows. In a brutal and rapid way, I use the word “police” to identify a *standardized* production of images. Politics is on the side of those who create new things, who introduce a new way of looking at things, and who shatter the formatted gaze. This is a legitimate question to ask today. We may wonder if films such as Antonioni’s *L’Avventura* or Fellini’s *Giulietta Degli Spiriti* would be shown in theaters today. This has also to do with the fact that media play a large part in the construction of a dominant type of image. I do not know if I have answered your question, but I tried.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: *You first talked about the concept of the image, which allowed you to circulate from one art to another. Does this*

nevertheless not raise a concern about the origin of the image? What does it entail to speak in the same way about different types of images, such as musical or literary images? My second question deals with the relationship between painting and literature. How can we talk in a similar fashion about images that belong to different domains?

PV/ The first question is of course very pertinent, and also very impertinent at the same time [laughter]. As we say in French, my ass is stuck between two chairs [laughter]. On the one hand, I retain the concept of the image—or as Sartre would say, the “family of images.” On the other hand, I kind of contradict myself because I insist on the specificity of images. I do not mix up painting and photography. Yet contemporary artistic practice also gives us intermediality. Let’s take the example of Godard, who creates paintings in *Passion* (1982), or at least images that rival painting, and almost reproduces works by Ingres, Delacroix, etc. Yet this is still cinema! But it is a cinema in tension with the rules of painting. When Jeff Wall displays his monumental pictures, he reproduces and artificializes the real as if it were a scene of war [*Dead Troops Talk*, 1992]. I remember I once saw pictures taken during the Crimean war, not the one last year, but the one in Sebastopol during the nineteenth century. It’s astonishing. He reproduces bivouac settings, places with canals, etc. These are monumental photos that rival the great painting machines of the nineteenth century, such as *The Raft of the Medusa* or *Napoleon Visiting the Plague Victims at Jaffa*.

What justifies this are all the imagistic continuations we find in contemporary installation art. Once we've seen them, contemporary installations can be displaced, reproduced elsewhere; but often, as we see in the case of an artist like [Robert] Irwin, they live in situ and survive only through the image. Some of them are perennial, but most of them are dismantled and archived as images. Artists use images. Delacroix used photography for his painting, yet without acknowledging it: it was a low, mechanical art. So on the one hand there is this concept of the image, but considered relationally, with a fluctuating diversity.

When I started working on these questions, I had my triptych, with painting at its center, photography on its left, and cinema on its right. Each of them had its own territory. Since then, I have been introduced to contemporary art, as well as to the artists themselves. We must look at the work! We must also consider the fact that the photographers of the

here, but I've drawn it from my observation of specific practices. There is a productive circulation between the different media. This produces new types of images and new ways of looking at things. Movies are an example of this as well.

GR/ *Is the image only visual?*

PV/ That is a good question. I started my thesis on the *Material of Images* with a short piece on [Claude] Debussy's wonderful sound images. Indeed, there are sound images. When [Ferdinand de] Saussure talks about the linguistic sign, he means a sound-image, with the signifier and the signified. The signifier is a sound image as well as a visual image. One of my students is working on the creation of musical platforms, which is very much about listening and not about seeing. We can indeed broaden the notion of the image, though I have to confess that I am not especially interested in music.

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nineteenth century were very often painters. Nadar was originally a painter, and his gaze is that of a painter even when he was making photographs. People make pictures of paintings, but from the point of view of photography. My answer might seem a bit shaky

I might add something else here, coming back to the discussion about painting and literature. In French you can play on the words *peindre* (to paint) and *dépeindre* (to depict). Up until the eighteenth century, which marked a rupture between a representational regime

and an aesthetic regime, there was still an aesthetic of boundaries, to recall [Gotthold Ephraim] Lessing's expression. That is, there were poetic arts and there were plastic arts. For Lessing, plastic art had to do with bodies and spaces, but it was not able to tell stories. Stories belonged to poetics. Lessing would nevertheless contradict himself later on. Thus an aesthetic—an aesthetic regime—was established. But for Rancière there was no longer the same identification of the arts. You can say that "this is photography," "this is a photo"—but there is no essence of photography. For example, some photographers can be sculptors. Just yesterday I attended an exhibition on Robert Mapplethorpe, whose photography is very sculptural. He does not work at all like [Henri] Cartier-Bresson, or [Robert] Doisneau, or people like that. The German photographers Bernd and Hilla Becher received a Leone d'Oro prize for sculpture, not photography. This is because in a certain way photography came from sculpture. So you can see the play and displacement between artistic disciplines.

AUDIENCE MEMBER/ *What is the role of language in your reflection on the image? Is there always a grammar, a syntax, or a rapport with language?*

PV/ This is a delicate question. There is no such thing as a naked image. We are speaking beings and we receive images in the context of speech. Images have long been—are always—part of the production of discourse, the visual *mise-en-forme* of discourse. I often

refer to the beginning of Foucault's *The Order of Things*, in which he talks about an infinite tangent between language and images. Discourse is never able to grasp images and yet, at the same time, this very discourse is predisposed to and necessary for dealing with images. For Rancière, things are more complex. The pattern is not that of language on the one hand and images on the other. In a certain regime—in the representative regime, for instance—images are akin to literature, which tells tales. Diderot was an art critic for a newspaper read by princes, not to mention by Catherine the Great, in which he described paintings for an audience that might possibly buy the paintings but who would never actually see those paintings. There always had to be a story. This is why he was disconcerted by Chardin's still lifes, which did not tell stories at all. It might tell a certain story of France, of certain of its practices, of what we eat.

Rancière speaks of an isomorphism in the treatment of the image and the treatment of the text. In his aesthetic regime, literature is the first to deal with insignificant details, in a certain way even before psychoanalysis. The great malaise of the aesthetic is also that of psychoanalysis, in that it did not invent everything, but instead drew on what was already there. Medicine and pathology are interested not simply in basic facts about how things are going, but in a regime of breath—in the little signs that indicate a regime of life.

Whereas Rancière talks about an isomorphism between image and text, Foucault

instead sees a displacement between the two. Foucault tells you to renounce the ready-made discourse about images, and invent a new discourse not in order to grasp images but to approach them. I position myself as a Foucauldian here, though I am still open to Rancière's ideas. What is it that makes a beautiful painting a beautiful painting? In the representative regime we have the example of the Annunciation scene. You have countless paintings of the Annunciation. There is a story to be recounted. The great painter is not simply the one who tells nice tales. There is already a story, a well-known, well-defined story that is told by the painter and that has been related multiple times.

I remember a very comical debate at the Royal Academy of Arts about Poussin's *Eliezer and Rebecca at the Well*. It is a story about finding a suitable companion for the son of Abraham. The son goes to the neighboring county, since it is not about finding a wife in his own environment. These are political marriages through which one forms allegiances with other families. He pays a dowry for that: ten camels, I think. You had to represent the ten camels. Some of them would be represented in their entirety, others only by their faces, etc. Poussin shocked the audience when he painted the scene without any camels at all. And yet he made an absolutely extraordinary painting, one of his most beautiful paintings. This is a moment of grace. Just as if you were to meet someone important without actually knowing who they were, in a way that could not have been predicted.

On the agenda of the political regime, there is always a story but some painters appeal to it in an unprecedented fashion. You might think of Leonardo Da Vinci's or Fra Angelico's *Annunciation*. Rancière does not talk about that dimension. [Georges] Didi-Huberman talks about it. He takes the text into account. But is it the image he is talking about? Maybe not.

AUDIENCE MEMBER/ *As you were talking I was thinking, in reference to the arts and politics question, about an essay by W. E. B. Du Bois from the late 1920s on art and propaganda. Generally, the question it raises for me is one of propaganda and the idea that the art-politics relation seems to take place in the realm of high art, at least in the texts we have been discussing. Du Bois himself was trained in German Romanticism and is very much aware of this tradition; he begins his essay by working through it a bit, posing some critical possibilities for this idea of high art. For him, politics ultimately takes place on the level of propaganda, at the level of the creation of images that are not just for a general public, but which have a specific meaning that impresses itself through public circulation. Eventually he comes down on the side of propaganda. What we need to be doing, we who care about politics, is making propagandistic works. It's sort of saying "yes it's nice, art, and we should continue to do it, but if we really want to talk about politics, it is in propaganda, it's not in art." I'm giving you a somewhat brutal summary. Isn't there then a type of propaganda in fine art itself?*

PV/ Does the Russian avant-garde, that is, artists like [Alexander] Rodchenko and [Sergei] Eisenstein, fit within the frame of your question? The function of propaganda is to pass a message on to people, to make it triumphant, to repeat it. The principle of propaganda is to impose itself. When I visited the exhibition of a young Tunisian woman artist named Nicène Kossentini, which I really liked, I encountered her photographs. This was still under [Zine El Abidine] Ben Ali's rule. When we arrived in Tunis, we saw his picture everywhere. You would go into someone's house and Ben Ali was there. You would go into a shop and Ben Ali was there. This reminds me of a terrific Tex Avery movie in which you see the same dog everywhere. This was pure propaganda. It gave the impression that everything Tunisia achieved was thanks to Ben Ali. It was thanks to Ben Ali that you had grocery shops. It was thanks to Ben Ali that you had roads. In her photographic work, this artist, Kossentini, showed bodies that were under water. Were they drowning or trying to avoid drowning? Instead of talking, their mouths would release bubbles. There was a play on speech, on the suppression of speech.

The function of propaganda is to articulate a message. Yet propaganda can be achieved through very interesting forms of art. This is where we find relevant the works of [Alexander] Rodchenko, [Kazimir Severinovich] Malevitch, and other Russian artists. I insist more on Rodchenko and his photographic work, which served the party line by creating new artistic forms that were

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very different from socialist realism, which became the state doctrine for art. These new forms introduced a dynamism in photography and provided an alternative to Futurism, and they did not harm art. What became very interesting was the *form* of artistic expression and creation. Is this formal creation or not? Does the message match the form? In propaganda, the form does not correspond at all to the message. The message is revolutionary but the form is reactionary. For instance, the literature forged during the Soviet regime was reactionary in its style in contrast with other literary forms that had already been invented or which they were inventing themselves.

AUDIENCE MEMBER/ *But what happens in the inverse case, when the message is reactionary and the form revolutionary? This is the problem that Du Bois addressed.*

PV/ This is similar to [György] Lukács's question. [Honoré de] Balzac, for example, was revolutionary as a writer but reactionary as a man. To take another French example: [Louis-Ferdinand] Céline's writing was revolutionary,

but it would be quite euphemistic to say that he was reactionary [laughter].

Thank you very much; I was delighted to engage in discussion with such attentive and smart students, even though I couldn't really communicate with them because of my English. But thanks to Jared Bly [the translator] we could understand each other. Or perhaps misunderstand each other [laughter]. Misunderstandings are always productive.

Translated by Aurélie Matheron

/ Notes /

¹ For the sake of clarity, the discussion has been adapted from its recorded form. Jared Bly provided translations of Patrick Vauday's statements during the course of the live discussion; these have been excised here to eliminate redundancy in translation. The original conversation can be viewed here: <<https://criticaltheoryworkshop.com/videos/>>. The Critical Theory Workshop/Atelier de Théorie Critique can be found online at <https://criticaltheoryworkshop.com>.

² Patrick Vauday, *La matière des images. Poétique et esthétique* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2001).

³ The conference proceedings have been published as *Jacques Rancière et la politique de l'esthétique*, eds. Jérôme Game and Aliocha Wald Lasowski (Paris: Archives Contemporaines, 2009).

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