As far as Jacques Rancière’s works are concerned, I must begin with a confession: I do not find him an easy author to read. Why? Mainly because Rancière offers a very specific way of arguing: he does not analyze authors as such, or even short passages of philosophical works; he makes very few quotations, usually taken out of their immediate argumentative context; he seldom refers to his adversaries’ names and claims. What is peculiar is the sense of the discursive continuity of his texts, creating a space, I would even say a “pace,” for his readers far from our tendencies to analyze texts or contextualize historically. He seems to tell a completely unusual philosophical story, but without the facilities of narratives, since his arguments are put at their most abstract concentration when he sums up a whole bunch of claims and reasons. It is this movement of a “conceptual tale,” so to speak, that may engender misconceptions. His arguments encapsulate reasons offered, brief summaries of plots, and even disagreements (to refer to the possible meanings of the word “argument” according to Webster’s dictionary).
Rancière’s analytical scrutiny does not prevent him from offering vast syntheses about politics or aesthetics. And this is probably what makes him a difficult author—even if his language is very clear, almost without technical or intellectual gadgetry. This strange intertwining between the fluency of a story and the density of philosophical strings gives both a feeling of prosaic continuity and an impression of poetic condensations.

Nevertheless, such an intertwining presents us with a few difficult problems. Rancière has not only worked on the writing of history; he has practiced and experienced what true archival work implies. We cannot, then, assume that his broad summaries of historical development are the simple result of a pure philosophical mind, detached from the sense of contingencies and situations. On the contrary, he insists on attaching to the notion of politics a sense of interruption and eventuality. At the same time, when he writes about political philosophy, and even if he tries to give another meaning to the very concept of politics, he analyzes the same old philosophers we can find in any traditional history of political philosophy: Plato, Aristotle, Hobbes, Marx. Not only are the authors well known, but Rancière seems to stay in the simple limits of the text. He picks up a few passages—never a whole work—and problematizes them in the course of a general analysis. Nothing about the context of production, the figures of the author, the technical apparatuses, or the institutional devices is taken into account. Texts appear in a kind of perfectly autonomous world where the discontinuity of doctrines plays on the background of a historical linking of ages and societies, as if no real difference between the ancient Greeks and us truly mattered.

It is true that Rancière distinguishes evolutions as well as ruptures, and even puts forward three consecutive conceptions of politics: Plato’s archi-politics, Aristotle’s and Hobbes’ para-politics, and Marx’s meta-politics. This division parallels the three regimes in the domain of aesthetics with almost the same actors: Plato’s ethical regime, Aristotle’s representational regime up to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and Flaubert’s and Mallarmé’s aesthetic regime up to now. But history does not run through these displacements in a linear way; two or three of them can and do coexist. The discontinuity of productions does not entail a complete substitution of the ancient regime by the new one, but a complex overlapping of the different regimes. Thus we get both a discontinuity of productions and a continuity of produced orders. His-
tory is not a matter of succession, but of enduring creations. There are obviously hegemonies and dominances in different ages, but the representational regime keeps certain forms of ethical value of arts, and our supposed modern time still offers mimetical and ethical creations.

Yet, is there not a risk of erasing the complexities of situations, the very contingency of history on which Jacques Rancière insists? These broad and schematic figurations might lose the graininess of history. Let us consider two problematic examples.

When Rancière wants to explain, in one of his latest books, what he means by politics and the “partition of the sensible,” he says that politics, in fact, is not the exercise of power and the struggle for power. It is the configuration of a specific space, the parceling out of a particular sphere of experience, of objects we take to be shared and stemming from a common decision, of recognized subjects able to designate these objects and to discuss them. Man, Aristotle says, is political because he can speak and thereby share notions of just and unjust, whereas the animal has only the ability to voice pain and pleasure. But the question is, who has the power of speech and who has only a voice. Politics happens when those who “don’t have” time take the required time to position themselves as members of a common space and to demonstrate that their mouths can articulate speech that states shared realities and not just a voice that signifies pain. This arrangement and rearrangement of places and identities, the parcelling and reparcelling out of spaces and times, of the visible and the invisible, of noise and speech, constitute what I call the sharing of the sensible.1

We see here that we have very crucial definitions of Rancière’s way of thinking about politics and experience in general (I would even say that this is probably the core of a brand-new conception of politics which closes a very long age of equating politics with the problem of power and opens for us new possibilities of thought and action). Nevertheless, we must point out that the core of these definitions resides in the reference to Aristotle, and it is perfectly true that Aristotle makes an explicit difference between the voice, which is only “but an indication of pleasure and pain, and is therefore found in other animals,” and “the power of speech,” which “is intended to set forth the expedient and inexpedient, and therefore likewise the just and the unjust”: good and evil cannot, therefore, be in continuity with pleasure and pain. But if we turn toward someone like Locke, we discover that it is no longer the
Amongst the simple ideas which we receive both from sensation and reflection pain and pleasure are two very considerable ones. . . . [T]o define them by the presence of good or evil is no otherwise to make them known to us than by making us reflect on what we feel in ourselves. . . . Things then are good and evil only in reference to pleasure or pain.” Locke is here paradigmatic of the modern interpretation of the relations between pleasure and pain, the determination of good and evil, and the very humanity of human beings. We should even connect this conception of the relation between the sensible and justice, with politics and the idea of human being.

If equality is of paramount importance for the determination of politics in Rancière’s eyes (and I think that it is, indeed, one of the great merits of his work to have relocated in the center of the philosophical arena the political question of equality), what do we do with two considerable differences between ancient communities and our modern societies? The first concerns the difference between a society that views slavery as a social necessity and conceives of inequality between free citizens and slaves as perfectly natural, versus a model that views equality as the natural state and inequality as a matter of social construction, a stance imposed by our modern feelings. The second difference contrasts the ancients’ idea that freedom begins when need and necessities are outstripped, and that beautiful actions, perfectly well circumscribed, are the lot of political citizens, versus the modern idea that need and necessities form the very structure of modern men, which implies that they are defined as being of desire, an illimitated desire.

What happens, then, to Rancière’s broad characterization of politics and the partition of the sensible if his conception obviously occults the displacement induced by Locke’s Essay on Human Understanding and instead rests on Aristotle’s assumptions as if nothing serious has really been touched? Or am I writing now a kind of “Essay on Human Misunderstanding”?

Let us take another example. In Dis-agreement, Rancière brilliantly shows how the philosophical “return to politics” is the other face of the sociological description of an “end of politics.” He says, “The self-proclaimed ‘restorers’ of politics and of ‘its’ philosophy revel in the opposition of the political and social seen to have unduly encroached on its prerogatives. But, in the modern era, the social has been precisely the place where politics has been played out, the very name it has taken
on, wherever it has not simply been identified with the science of government and with the means of thinking it over.”4 We certainly could find contemporary names to put under these restorers of politics against the social (probably beginning with Hannah Arendt), but Rancière himself, when he describes the kind of hermeneutical procedures of historians, seems to criticize their use of the social: “The historian’s discourse is a measured discourse that relates the words of history to their truth. This is explicitly what interpretation means. But less obviously, it is also what social means. Social designates at once an object of knowledge and a modality of this knowledge. . . . The social becomes this base [ce dessous] or background of events and words that must always be wrested from the mendacity of appearances. Social designates the gap between words and events and their non-factual and non-verbal truth.”5

There is, then, a kind of blindness in the science of history, which postulates that immediate events must be given the depth of meaning and have to be deciphered from their very appearances. To express the truth of certain moments of time implies the ability to apprehend what is under the surface of the events, since meaning cannot be elsewhere but in the social depth hidden beneath events. The good historian, like the fine cook, has to take off the scum of contingency in order to eliminate the bad residues and concentrate the flavors of signification.

Rancière’s position is nevertheless more complex than a simple opposition or contradiction between these two dimensions of the social. Actually, we can find here a profound force of his philosophical reflexion: the necessity to maintain and describe ambivalence and homonymy:

This name [the social] is, it is true, similar to the name of its negation. But every politics works on homonyms and the indiscernable. . . . [The social] has been the police name for the distribution of groups and functions. Conversely it has been the name in which mechanisms of political subjectification have come to contest the naturalness of such groups and functions by having the part of those who have no part counted. Finally, it has been the meta-political name of a true politics that itself has taken two forms: the positive force of the real movement called upon to take shape as the principle behind a new social body, but also the sheer negativity of the interminable demonstration of the truth of falseness. The social has been the common name for all these logics as well as the name for their interlocking.6
It is this kind of intertwining that stimulates Rancière, the kind of intertwining that philosophers try to dismiss or at least clarify. What Rancière wants to do is, rather, to make it visible or readable in all its complexity.

This is where history must play its role. Rancière, far from being blind to historical contexts, explicitly tries to make visible in history what has been muddled and obfuscated by illusory conceptual premises. Concerning, for example, what has been called “modernity,” he has tried to “establish some historical and conceptual landmarks, to help with specific problems that are irremediably muddled by notions which make conceptual a prioris out to be historical determinations, and temporal divisions to be conceptual determinations.”

What kind of contextualisation is implied? Obviously an institutional and technical context: “The idea of modernity is an equivocal notion which attempts to divide up the complex configuration of the aesthetic domain of the arts, maintaining the forms of rupture, the iconoclastic gestures, etc., by removing them from the context that legitimates them: generalized reproduction, interpretation, museum, patrimony.”

It seems, then, that what was complex has been simplified and that the concept of modernity implies a blindness to its own context. What Rancière tries to disentangle in our contemporary debates on politics and aesthetics is precisely this kind of historical confusion. And the way to do so, he advances, is to scrutinize the context which legitimates and permits both the conceptual confusion and the regime of arts which is described: for understanding the aesthetic regime, we must turn our gaze toward technical practices like the modes of reproduction and interpretation, and toward institutional organizations like disciplines (history), established principles even legitimized by the state (patrimony), and a system for the promotion and sacralization of art (museum). This is the kind of investigation which is needed if one wants to avoid oversimplifications and blindesses.

It is true that Rancière’s large historical divisions, a bit like Michel Foucault’s *epistemes*, do not have precise limits in time (no real beginning and no true end). The philosophers he analyzes play more a role of developers of history’s film than originators of a whole regime. Nevertheless, one can wonder what happens if we step aside and choose other names and other ways of making historical intertwinnings visible. Let us try with one brief example.
Plato is supposed to exemplify archi-politics: that is, the supression and replacement of politics (the true mode of interruption of the order of things, the polemical framing of a common world which permits the elaboration of what is audible and visible) by police (the instituted government or the struggle for the control of power). The community is, then, totally placed under the spirit of the law (its arkhē), so that every citizen, having internalized the law as a living logos, finds a strict correspondence between his own ethos and his function and role in the city. Sophrosune takes the place of the polemical freedom of the dēmos. Legislation is therefore a matter of education:

The order of politeia thus presupposes the lack of any vacuum, saturation of the space and time of the community. The rule of law is also the disappearance of what is consubstantial to the law’s mode of being wherever politics exists: the exteriority of writing. . . . The good city is one in which the order of the cosmos, the geometric order that rules the movement of the divine stars, manifests itself as the temperament of the social body. . . . It is a city in which the citizen is won over by a story rather than restrained by a law . . . [I]t is a city in which legislation is entirely resumed in education—education, however, going beyond the simple introduction of the school master and being offered at any moment of the day in the chorus of what is visually and aurally up for grabs.9

Rancière’s brief summary of Plato’s archi-politics is elaborated from The Republic book 2, 369c–370c and Laws book 7, 823a. What happens if we look at another text, still by Plato, that proposes the anti-Platonist “political philosophy” par excellence: sophism.

In Protagoras, the problem is to know whether politics can be a matter of education or not. One answer is to claim that it is indeed a matter of education, and not only education at school, but in everyday life from the very beginning: “As soon as a child can understand what is said to him, his nurse and his mother and his teacher and his father himself strive to make him as good as possible, teaching and showing him by every word and deed that this is right, and that wrong, this good and that bad, this holy and that unholy, ‘do this’ and ‘don’t do that.’ If he obeys voluntarily so much the better; if not they treat him like a piece of wood which is getting warped and crooked, and straighten him out with threats and beatings.”10 One way to understand it is to listen to stories like the one which is told about the origin (the arkhē) of cities, as if

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muthos should especially enhance the persuasive value of reflection. Here is the story, as I sum it up:

Epimetheus distributes to the various species different capacities and means of protection, but when it comes to man's turn, he has used up all the capacities, leaving man unprotected. Accordingly, Prometheus steals from the gods knowledge of the practical crafts, together with the use of fire, but without the knowledge of how to run a community, since the art of politics is well kept in Zeus's palace. Thus equipped, men begin to develop different techniques: religious rituals, language, agriculture, and the provision of food and shelter. When the fear of wild animals drives men into communities, they are unable, from ignorance of the art of politics (the technē politikē), to prevent their mutual antagonisms from driving them asunder, leaving them at the mercy of the animals once again. Zeus then intervenes: Hermes is sent to implant in men aidos (respect, reverence, shame) and dikē (justice). Hermes asks Zeus if he must distribute these gifts to everyone or to a few men only. Zeus tells him to make sure that everyone receives them, for only on that condition is political life possible.

With this story, we seem to be in a perfect archi-politics: the arkhē determines how the law must be incorporated by stories and everyday education, and how politics must become the political technique of government with respect of places and justice of the law in order to live in a harmonious cosmos: “So Zeus . . . sent Hermes bringing respect and justice to mankind, to be the principles of organization of the cities and the bonds of friendship,” more literally: “so that there is harmony in cities [poleôn kosmoi] and bonds of friendship [desmoi philias sun-agogoi].” The problem is that it is not Socrates (Plato's usual spokesperson, unless Plato is Socrates’s spokesperson, but it does not matter here), so it is not Socrates but Protagoras himself who says what I have just quoted. This archi-politics is actually sophism, that is anti-Platonism.

Of course, one could say that actually it is Plato who writes the dialogue, and he can give to Protagoras whatever position he wants for his purpose. But it is well known that Plato broadly respects the thought and the habits of the persons he stages. Protagoras cannot be a simple puppet in the master's hands.

Another solution would be to claim that we have here excellent proof of the fact that archi-politics is truly a certain regime of the sayable and
the visible, since even enemies like Plato and the sophists can share the same references. Such an interpretation would even constitute an explanation of the surprising fact that, at the end of the dialogue, Socrates and Protagoras have exchanged their initial positions: Socrates, who denied that political virtue could be taught, recognizes that it is so, and Protagoras, who claimed that virtue was teachable, ends by assuming that it cannot be. What the dialogue exemplifies would then be a real continuity between philosophers and sophists. They share more elements than they think, or than the philosophical tradition likes to think.

But again, such a solution is not completely satisfactory, since it would stay at the simple level of contents. What about the constant polemical stance between Socrates and Protagoras? The staging of the dialogue is, as usual with Plato, of tacit importance. In a dialogue on education and politics, the very problem of how to speak in order to be heard cannot be skirted round. It is precisely interesting to see how the problem of presentation is itself a crucial matter. When Protagoras is requested to explain how political virtue can be taught, he asks his interlocutors: ‘Would you rather that I showed [epideixo] you by telling a story [muthos] (as an older man speaking to his juniors) or by going through a systematic exposition [logos]?’ Several of those who were sitting around asked him to proceed in whichever way he preferred. ‘Well,’ he said ‘I think that it will be more enjoyable [chariesteron] to tell you a story.’∞≤ We certainly should not think that we find here the usual sophist way of offering something agreeable to the senses instead of presenting something serious to the mind. The Greek chariesteron should be better translated by “more gracious,” since it comes from charis, grace. Moreover, we should not think either that this term is a simple reference to beauty or elegance: charis belongs to the political vocabulary, as Christian Meier, a historian of ancient Greece, has demonstrated. For the Greeks, grace is a consequence of liberty: when people are no longer held in the hands of needs and necessities, they can enter into true political relations.

As Aristotle says, “We must then say that it is in order to make beautiful actions [kalon praxeon] that a political community exists, and not in order to live together.”∞≥ Charis is less the exercise of force than it is the authority of seductive presentation and care for others. When Protagoras uses the word in
order to explain his choice of the *muthos*, he immediately implies a political issue. And such an immediacy is part of his own gracious presentation: he does not want to look ponderous.

*Epideixis* (‘presentation,’ ‘proof,’ ‘public lecture,’ even ‘parade’) puts under the eyes of the interlocutors what is at stake in the issues discussed. The sophistic technique is, above all, a technique of manifestation: how to make visible, how to adopt right perspectives on problems. And this is certainly one aspect of Rancière’s work: not acknowledging appearances, but making possible forms of appearing. The very word “manifestation” is an important word, since in French it can mean both demonstration and expression or revelation. In the streets or in a private house, something is suddenly underscored. “Spectacular or otherwise, political activity is always a mode of expression that undoes the perceptible divisions of the police order by implementing a basically heterogeneous assumption that, at the end of the day, itself demonstrates the contingency of the order, the equality of any speaking being with any other speaking being.”

Now, what exactly is Protagoras’s presupposition about the Athenian polis? This is what he reiterates after his myth and after a logical exposition: “It seems to me, Socrates, that I have now adequately shown that your fellow citizens are right to accept the advice of smiths and cobblers on political matters, and also they regard excellence [*aretè*] as something that can be taught and handed on” (324c). Anybody can talk about politics: the sophist confirms the true equality of anyone with anybody.

Does it mean that we could say that Rancière is the sophist of our days? It is not that easy, because such a presupposition of equality was also Socrates’s point of departure. Equality is taken, by Protagoras and Socrates, in its institutional implications. It is not a polemical space where the portion of the portionless can be claimed. Both look for a harmonious city, not for a dissensual manifestation. But again, we must look closely at the staging of the text. There are, exemplified in the dialogue itself, expressions of struggle, irony, distance: in a word, dissensus. Even if Protagoras and Socrates seem to have exchanged their initial positions, they remain at opposite ends. We have many figures of misunderstanding, or even disagreement on both sides, that lead at certain moments to roadblocks. Nevertheless, we cannot say that the people (the portionless) are truly taken into account: it is less a political litigation than a rhetorical differend. It is another kind of litigation
which appears: the autochtonous against the *xenos*, the stranger. Protagoras explains to Socrates how and why his fellow citizens of Athens are perfectly right to assume equality between anybody, and he explains it from the outside, as a stranger. And Socrates is anxious to see the sophists seducing the young Athenians, because they dare to follow them, far from the city. In the dialogue, there is also this kind of disagreement.

The litigation concerns, then, the immigrant worker: the sophist against the autochtonous. At the very beginning, Socrates’s friend asks him who he has seen who has impressed him more than the beautiful Alcibiades: “Asto è xéno,” he asks, “a citizen or a foreigner?” (309c). For Athenians, *astos* means the city dweller even if he lives in a faraway village.∞∑ The portionless who have no time to come to the city and play their political role of citizens are still *astoi*, while the *xenos* does not belong to the space of the city. Even more, what he says cannot be heard, or should we say, *should not* be heard. With the sophist, we seem to have a reverse *mésentente*: it does not concern the impossibility of acknowledging sounds as words, but the impossibility of recognizing sound expressions instead of what looks like a continuous play on words “logou charin legousin,” says Aristotle in his *Metaphysics* (book gamma, 1011b2) at the end of a long refutation of, precisely, Protagoras. Speaking for the pleasure of speaking, we find here again the word *charis*: “speaking for the grace of speaking.” That is what Plato and Aristotle have to reject in order to assure the right use of language for good citizens. When the sophist speaks for the sake of speaking, Plato and Aristotle try to show that he simply does not know what he is doing, just as the people need philosophers or true citizens to tell them what they must do and know. Sophists seem, then, to occupy the other excessive place, symmetric of the one of the *dèmos*: they speak for the (political) grace of speaking as the *dèmes* speaks for the (political) acknowledgment of speaking.

It is not random, then, that what is at stake in Rancière’s conception of the political manifestation and interpretation incorporates two of the crucial dimensions of the sophists: dramatization and homonymy. I shall now quote two passages from *La mésentente*. Firstly, in order to make visible litigation cases, “the problem is to construct a visible relationship with the nonrelationship, an effect of a supposedly ineffective power. . . . Politics consists in interpreting this relationship, which means first setting up as theater, inventing the argument, in
the double logical and dramatic sense of this form, connecting the unconnected.”  

Secondly, in order to make audible the power (*la puissance*, not *le pouvoir*) of speech of the speechless, “every politics works on homonyms and the indiscernable.”  

Sophistic homonymy is precisely the specter Plato tries to conjure up, but he does so by dramatizing the conjuration, and it is, then, far more difficult and complex to evaluate the exact and rigorous Socratic demonstration. Just as the sophist seems to share Plato’s archi-politics, Plato seems to be haunted by the sophist specter (Jacques Derrida would have said that Plato’s ontology is actually a “hauntology”).  

I would like to add one last element about homonymy and the indiscernible. In his interpretation of Roberto Rossellini’s *Europa 51*, Rancière says that “this practice of egalitarian strangeness imperils everything social and political, everything that represents society, which can only be represented under the sign of inequality, under the minimal presupposition that there are people who don’t know what they are doing and whose ignorance imposes on others the task of unveiling. But it is not a question of unveiling, but rather of circumscribing [*cerner*].”  

Political interpretation has the task of underscoring and understanding misunderstandings and disagreements. And it is always a difficult task, one which implies a scrutiny and an *attention* (almost in Simone Weil’s sense) to precise contingencies. This is why history cannot be put aside. Making litigations visible is a matter of elaborating lines of continuity, drawing circles around people who did not share the same right of expressing themselves, and at the same time showing obvious discontinuities. The political task is ultimately not to present the unpresentable, in the Lyotardian version, but, following Rancière, to dis-cern the indiscernable, *cerner l’indiscernable*. 