In the recent history of politicized art, two forms are readily identifiable. The first form, which might be referred to as content-based commitment, is founded on the representation of politicized subject matter. The second form, which might be called formal commitment, locates the political dimension of works of art in their mode of representation or expression, rather than in the subject matter represented. In the postwar era in France, content-based commitment is often identified with the work of Jean-Paul Sartre. Roland Barthes’s *The Degree Zero of Writing* (1953), a critical reappropriation of Sartre’s *What Is Literature?* (1948), can be seen as one of the pivotal publications in the turn toward more formal concerns, which eventually led to the work of the French structuralists and “poststructuralists,” the Tel Quel group, the *nouveau roman* circles, and certain members of the French New Wave.

There is, however, a notable difference between these two socially recognized positions on the question of artistic commitment and the specific arguments formulated by the authors and artists who purport-
edly defended them. It is worth recalling, for instance, the following features of Sartre’s position in *What Is Literature?* and other publications from the same time period: he generally restricted the notion of commitment to prose, he affirmed that the very act of writing leads to an inevitable form of commitment independent of the author’s intentions, he insisted on the importance of the literary and stylistic dimension of committed prose, he formulated a distinct conception of poetic engagement, he made explicit reference to a type of reader’s commitment based on the social nature of writing, and he considered that engagement was always bound to a specific situation. Concerning the work of Roland Barthes, it should be remembered that the history of *l’écriture* he proposes in *The Degree Zero of Writing* is not a history of style or language (*la langue*) but a history of the formal signs used by an author to situate his or her writing in relationship to society. In other words, when he claims that Form remains “the first and last instance of [literary] responsibility,” he is not referring to an author’s style, or to language in general, but to a third formal reality, writing, that links literary production to the larger social order. Writing is what he calls an act of historical solidarity by which an author, through a general choice of tone and of an ethos, commits himself or herself to a particular conception of language and its relationship to various sectors of society. Barthes’s work in *Mythologies* (1957) extended this reflection on the social function of signs—irreducible to the standard form-content distinction—outside the domain of literature to include the entire field of cultural production.

It is partially in response to these two positions on commitment and the intellectual communities within which they emerged that Jacques Rancière has formulated an alternative conception of the relationship between art and politics. Instead of searching for the definitive solution to the long-standing problem of the connection between these two realms, he attacks the guiding assumption upon which this problem is based: that art and politics are separate domains in need of being linked together. The notion of the “distribution of the sensible” (*partage du sensible*) succinctly sums up Rancière’s unique position: art and politics are consubstantial insofar as they both organize a common world of self-evident facts of sensory perception. In fact, the very delimitation and definition of what are called *art* and *politics* are themselves dependent upon a distribution of the sensible or a regime of thought and
perception that identifies them as such. Rancière has thus far outlined three principle regimes of identification for the arts (the ethical regime of images, the representative regime of the arts, and the aesthetic regime of art), which very loosely correspond to three regimes of politics (archi-politics, para-politics, and meta-politics). In other words, not only does he reject the idea that there is an a priori separation between art and politics, but he also argues that these are “contingent notions:” “The fact that there are always forms of power does not mean that there is always such a thing as politics, and the fact that there is music or sculpture in a society does not mean that art is constituted as an independent category.”

Rancière’s criticisms of his contemporaries never compel him to simply discard their theories as incorrect. On the contrary, he goes to great lengths to show that their mistaken assumptions are the result of certain systemic conditions produced by a regime of thought. In other words, his polemics are always explanatory or synthetic polemics insofar as he insists on providing a genealogical account of the theories he attempts to refute. In this way, he not only purports to disprove the theories he is arguing against but he simultaneously co-opts them as elements in his own system of explanation. For example, he calls into question Sartre’s distinction between the transitivity of prose writing and the intransitivity of poetry by highlighting the difficulty he had explaining why prose writers such as Flaubert used language intransitively like poets. He then relates Sartre’s assessment of Flaubert’s “petrification of language” to similar critiques that had been formulated in the nineteenth century (most notably by Charles de Rémusat, Barbey d’Aurevilly, and Léon Bloy) and claims that Sartre’s work participates in the same interpretive regime. This means that Sartre’s mistaken position is, in fact, the result of a new set of interpretive possibilities introduced by the aesthetic regime of art, which reconfigured the function of meaning (“a relationship between signs and other signs” rather than a “relation of address from one will to another”), the interpretation of writing (which was no longer considered to be the imposition of one will on another but rather an act of presenting and deciphering symptoms), and the role of politics in interpretation (which became centered on the investigation of the underbelly of society through the symptoms of history instead of on the conflict of wills and interests sharing a common stage of struggle). Rancière refers to this new interpretive model, which attempts
to tell the truth about literary discourse by deciphering its hidden political message, as the “‘political’ or ‘scientific’ explanation of literature.” Although Sartre criticized Flaubert’s “aristocratic assault against the democratic nature of prose language,” he shared the same interpretive framework as the nineteenth-century critics who condemned Flaubert’s disregard for the distinction between high and low subject matter as a symptom of democracy. In both cases, it is a matter of interpreting literary discourse as the symptom of a latent political meaning. This symptomatological approach to literature is, in fact, part of a longstanding tradition that emerged within the aesthetic regime and has spanned at least the last 150 years, from Marx and Freud to Benjamin and Bourdieu. In rejecting its account of the relationship between art and politics, Rancière simultaneously integrates it into his own system of historical explanation.

Roland Barthes’s early work, most notably Mythologies (1957), was heavily indebted to the tradition that held meaning to be latent in works themselves and in need of interpretation. According to the terms he would later use in Camera Lucida (1980), he concentrated on the studium at the expense of the punctum. Whereas the former is a set of decipherable meanings and significations, the latter is an affective force that resists all forms of explanation. The evolution of Barthes’s corpus, for Rancière, attests to an attempt to atone for his early sins as a mythologist who purported to have transformed the spectacle of the sensible into a system of symptoms. He did this by privileging the punctum that escapes all mythological interpretation and remains an insurmountable obstacle to the exchange of meaning. This decision is not unrelated to a conception of art that Rancière has identified most notably with the work of Adorno and Lyotard. Art, in this tradition, is no longer the symptom of a political meaning; rather, it is political precisely insofar as it resists the communicational flow of meaning and the exchange economy of signs. Art, it might be said, is political because it is an obstacle to interpretation rather than a symptom of latent meanings.

In rejecting this second conception of the relationship between art and politics, Rancière once again integrates it into his own system of explanation. Barthes’s primary mistake consisted in failing to recognize that both of these approaches—the symptomatological and the asymptomatic—tological—are based on “a reversible principle of equivalence between the muteness of images and their speech.” In other
words, these two conceptions of the political potential of art correspond to the two sides of what Rancière has theorized under the heading of “silent speech” (*la parole muette*). This expression refers to the contradictory dialectic of signification in the aesthetic regime of art. On the one hand, meaning is a hieroglyph in need of interpretation, a mute sign requiring an interpreter who speaks in its place and reveals its inner truth. On the other hand, meaning is immanent in the things themselves and resists all external voices to the point of sinking into an irretrievable silence. Barthes’s attempt to maintain a strict opposition between *studium* and *punctum* not only tries—unsuccessfully—to resolve this contradiction, but it also has the unfortunate consequence of foreclosing the genealogy of this very opposition.  

It would be a grave mistake to confuse Rancière’s position on the consubstantiality of art and politics with either the notion of committed art or—a slightly more understandable confusion—with the conception of art that affirms its innate political force as a form of resistance to the status quo. In order to further elucidate his position, it is first necessary to dissipate a dangerous and perhaps unnecessary ambiguity. Rancière has recourse to at least two different definitions of politics. More often than not, he refers to politics as the “dissensual reconfiguration of the distribution of the sensible” by intermittent acts of subjectivization that disturb the police order. In his most recent work, however, he has increasingly referred to politics as itself a distribution of the sensible: “What really deserves the name of politics is the cluster of perceptions and practices that shape this common world. Politics is first of all a way of framing, among sensory data, a specific sphere of experience. It is a partition of the sensible, of the visible and the sayable, which allows (or does not allow) some specific data to appear; which allows or does not allow some specific subjects to designate them and speak about them. It is a specific intertwining of ways of being, ways of doing and ways of speaking.” The readers of *Dis-agreement* and *On the Shores of Politics* will have little difficulty understanding this definition of politics because it is strictly equivalent to what Rancière had earlier called the “police”:

“the police is [thus] first an order of bodies that defines the allocation of ways of doing, ways of being, and ways of saying, and sees that those bodies are assigned by name to a particular place and task; it is an order of the visible and the sayable that sees that a particular activity is visible and another is not, that this speech is understood as discourse and
another as noise. As is well known, Rancière maintained, in principle, a rather rigorous distinction between politics and the police: “Political activity is always a mode of expression that undoes the perceptible divisions of the police order [les partages sensibles de l’ordre policier] by implementing a basically heterogenous assumption, that of a part of those who have no part.” Has Rancière abandoned or reformulated this earlier distinction in his most recent work? Is the separation between politics and the police order not as strict as he once claimed it to be?

Eliminating these apparent ambiguities is essential to understanding Rancière’s most recent work. To begin with, the primary link between art and politics is clearly the fact that they are both distributions of the sensible: “art and politics are not two permanent and separate realities about which it might be asked if they must be put in relationship to one another. They are two forms of distribution of the sensible tied to a specific regime of identification.” On numerous occasions he reminds his reader that art is not, in and of itself, an act of political subjectivization. On the contrary, art as a distribution of the sensible often acts as a police order that inhibits political subjectivization, as is the case with the meta-political art of the aesthetic regime. This being said, it is equally clear that Rancière does not simply want to identify art as a police distribution of the sensible that excludes political dissensus. It seems that art is inherently political for him insofar as it acts as a potential meeting ground between a configuration of the sensible world and possible reconfigurations thereof. In other words, the epithet “political” would be better understood neither in terms of what Rancière earlier defined as politics qua subjectivization (la politique) or the police order (la police), but according to what he sometimes calls “the political” (le politique), that is, the meeting ground between la politique and la police. However, this solution does not eliminate all of the difficulties highlighted above.

In an attempt to clear up the remaining ambiguities, it is important to remind ourselves that Rancière’s earlier work on politics (Dis-agreement and On the Shores of Politics) often maintains a rather strict opposition between a consensual order and acts of political dissensus. In spite of his criticisms of his former colleagues, Deleuze and Lyotard, and his welcome critique of “irreducible difference,” his work from this period nonetheless bears the mark of the logic of identity and difference, which continues to dominate one sector of contemporary political theory.
The limitations inherent in this logic are numerous, but there are at least four that should be highlighted: (i) it reduces the dynamism of the social world and the complexity of history to monolithic conceptual constructs that purport to explain the totality of events; (ii) it is anchored in an implicit value system that is never fully justified or questioned, which consists in everywhere privileging the concept of difference over the notion of identity, as if difference was an innate ethical and political good; (iii) since identity and difference are purely relational terms, it freely—if not arbitrarily—fixes the threshold between what is “the same” and what is “different” based on the needs of the situation; and (iv) anything truly different from the logic of identity and difference remains unthinkable, and this logic becomes a universal lens for interpreting the world.

Although Rancière is clearly indebted to the logic of identity and difference, it is arguable that some of his most recent work has led to a slightly more nuanced position, perhaps by foregrounding elements that remained somewhat peripheral in his earlier work. Instead of simply juxtaposing a consensual distribution of the sensible and dissensual acts of political subjectivization, Rancière increasingly uses the terms “politics” and “art” to refer to both distributions and redistributions of the sensible order. In other words, in providing a more detailed account of the conjunction of art and politics, Rancière has been led—at times—to break down the rather strict opposition between an established order and intermittent moments of destabilization. In Malaise dans l’esthétique (2004), the distribution of the sensible clearly refers to both of these elements: “This distribution and redistribution of places and identities, this delimitation and redelimitation of spaces and times, of the visible and the invisible, of noise and speech constitutes what I call the distribution of the sensible.” The note at the end of this sentence refers the reader to Le partage du sensible (2000). However, the primary definition Rancière gives to the distribution of the sensible in this work focuses on only one of the two features highlighted in Malaise dans l’esthétique: “I call the distribution of the sensible the system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it.” A similar change in vocabulary is visible in his use of the term “politics,” which he defines in Malaise dans l’esthétique as “the configuration of a specific space, the
delimitation of a particular sphere of experience, of objects established in common and coming from a common decision, of subjects recognized as capable of designating these objects and arguing about them.\textsuperscript{25} As mentioned above, this definition differs considerably from the description of politics he provided in \textit{Dis-agreement} (1995) and \textit{On the Shores of Politics} (1992/1998), and seems much closer to what he had earlier called “the police.”\textsuperscript{26} In emphasizing—at least implicitly—the police process in politics and the dissensual elements in the distribution of the sensible, Rancière breaks down the rigid opposition between stable structures and intermittent acts of reconfiguration. Politics, in \textit{Malaise dans l’esthétique}, is a distribution of the sensible insofar as every distribution presupposes at least the potential for a redistribution. If art is consubstantial with politics, it is not simply because it is a meeting ground between a police distribution of the sensible and political subjectivization. It is primarily because it is, like politics (\textit{la politique}), at once a distribution and a potential redistribution of the sensible.

**POLITICAL HISTORY**

I have thus far made a concerted effort to remain within Rancière’s conceptual framework in order to emphasize significant recent developments in his work, point to a specific set of problems, suggest solutions to these problems that appear feasible within this framework, and urge him in a certain direction (namely away from the logic of identity and difference). In the remainder of this essay, I will jettison this heuristically constructed internal perspective in favor of a critical evaluation of his project from the outside. In doing so, I will concentrate primarily—but not exclusively—on the more schematic account of the relationship between politics and aesthetics that I have been edging him away from with the help of certain passages in his most recent work.

I would first like to call into question the near absolute lack of any historical approach to politics. Rancière argues that his decision to avoid the historicization of politics is based on a strategic choice complicit with his historical analysis of art. In both cases, he claims, it is a matter of showing that “art and politics are contingent notions.”\textsuperscript{27} This is done through a historical dismantling of the idea of an eternal essence of art, on the one hand, and through a decoupling of the link between specific historical developments and the notion of politics on the other. The
latter move requires a “dehistoricization” of politics and a transhistorical definition thereof: “Politics exists when the figure of a specific subject is constituted, a supernumerary subject in relation to the calculated number of groups, places, and functions in a society. This is summed up in the concept of the démos.” It is interesting to note that, in the same passage, he is quick to add: “of course, this does not prevent there from being historical forms of politics, and it does not exclude the fact that the forms of political subjectivization that make up modern democracy are of an entirely different complexity than the people in Greek democratic cities.” Implicit in these statements is something akin to the philosophic distinction between empirical history and conceptual history, or what we might call, following Heidegger, Historie and Geschichte. While there can be differences in the banal factual configuration of politics through the course of empirical time, the conceptual nature of politics nonetheless remains a historical constant for Rancière. Showing that politics is a contingent notion therefore amounts to severing the proper nature of politics from any specific historical conjuncture. Strictly speaking, however, this does not make the notion of politics “contingent.” It simply makes all historically specific definitions of politics contingent if and when they do not live up to the transhistorical concept of politics proper. Since it is this concept that Rancière himself purports to have access to, this amounts to saying that every definition of politics is contingent if and when it is not identical with Rancière’s definition.

This transhistorical approach to politics has reached its zenith in one of Rancière’s most recent works: La haine de la démocratie (2005). His bête noire throughout the entire book is democratophobia: the perennial fear and hatred of democracy—understood as politics proper—insofar as it disturbs the established police order. Although this hatred has changed through the course of history, as he illustrates with his analysis of a handful of contemporary books criticizing recent forms of cultural democracy, he clearly takes democratophobia to be a historical constant: “The hatred of democracy is certainly not something new. It is as old as democracy for one simple reason: the word itself is an expression of hatred.”

Rancière’s account of democracy suffers from what I call transitive history: the object of historical analysis (democracy, in this case) is assumed to be a historical invariant that simply takes on different external forms through the course of time. Historical transitivity of this sort
loses sight of the fact that there is no “democracy in general,” but only specific sociohistorical practices like “democracy in ancient Greece,” “democracy in modern Europe,” and so on. It succumbs to a form of teleological archeology by which the final historical phase of an idea or a practice is retroactively projected back onto its entire history as a unifying agent. It is only by overcoming such historical myopia that it is possible to bring to light the fundamental structural differences, for example, between *dēmokratia* in ancient Greece and modern democracy, be it at the level of representation, citizenship, the separation of powers, rights, elections, political expertise, or the relationship between the individual and the community. It is important to recall, in this regard, the general disappearance of the term *democracy* from popular vocabulary between antiquity and the eighteenth century (a period during which the term was primarily used by specialists and the practice itself more or less vanished). When the word reappeared during the eighteenth century, it was still very distant from its contemporary meaning and was mainly used as a pejorative synonym for *Jacobin*. It is only very recently that the concept of democracy has met with near universal acclaim, at least within Western polities.

Rancière’s own book is, in fact, a direct product of this historically specific *democratophilia*. It is a perfect illustration of the way in which democracy has become, especially over the last twenty years, a value-concept whose analytic content has been siphoned out and replaced by an inchoate mass of positive moral connotations. *Democracy* has largely become a signal—to use Barthes’s term—used to indicate what is morally condoned by the author using the word. In Rancière’s own case this is quite obvious, because he actually has no need for the term *democracy* in his conceptual arsenal. In fact, if this word does anything, it introduces unnecessary confusion. Since it is more or less an exact synonym for politics (*la politique*) understood as subjectivization (*la subjectivation*), it is questionable whether it plays any analytic role whatsoever. One might assume, following common sense, that Rancière uses it to pinpoint the specificity of democratic developments, particularly within the modern world. However, such commonsense assumptions would be misguided because Rancière goes to great lengths to show that his own personal definition of democracy is extremely far from—and often incompatible with—the common understanding of democracy.
no analytic purchase and which, on the contrary, only seems to introduce confusion? The answer is to be found in the widespread valorization of democracy in the contemporary world: he wants to imbue his own stance on politics with the positive and progressive connotations attached to the term democracy. In other words, he uses the word less as a denotative signifier to indicate a distinct signified (he already has politics and subjectivization at his disposal) than as a connotative signifier that indirectly signals the positive, progressive value of his own political discourse.

This detour into the question of democracy shows to what extent it is necessary to resist Rancière’s political ahistoricism in the name of a sociohistorical analysis of political cultures. Contrary to what Rancière affirms, there is no “politics” in general, and certainly no “politics proper” (even if the properness of politics is to be improper); there are only political cultures—understood as practical modes of intelligibility of politics—that change through the course of history and are variably distributed through social space. As we have seen in the case of his faulty universalist claims regarding democracy, Rancière’s own discourse is dependent upon a socially and historically specific political culture.

THE HERMENEUTICS OF ART

Now let us turn to Rancière’s work on aesthetics. I have had the opportunity elsewhere to discuss some of the shortcomings of his project, including his negative dialectic of modern history, the lack of a genetic explanation that accounts for why the aesthetic regime has emerged, his restricted focus on the modern European world, his unqualified disdain for the social sciences, his tautological definition of art and politics, and his underlying aesthetic ontology. In what follows, I will therefore restrict myself to one central problem in his work: the relationship between art and politics.

The first thing to note is that Rancière jettisons the notion of committed art as being vacuous and undetermined. Since there is “no criterion for establishing a correspondence between aesthetic virtue and political virtue,” artists will use different means at various points in time to try and politicize their work. The art that results from their choices can, however, be interpreted as being politically progressive just as well as it can be judged politically reactionary or nihilistic. Citing the exam-
ple of American films on the Vietnam War from the 1970s and 1980s, such as *The Deer Hunter*, Rancière writes, “It can be said that the message is the derisory nature of the war. It can just as well be said that the message is the derisory nature of the struggle against the war.” Since there are no criteria for properly politicizing art, it is generally the “state of politics” that decides if a work of art is interpreted as harboring a political critique or encouraging an apolitical outlook. Given this lack of absolute reference points, Rancière wants to step back from the social battle over the political meaning of works of art in order to elucidate their inherent *politicité*. It is thereby presumed that each work of art, in spite of whatever motivations might be behind its creation or how it may be received by a public, has an objective political being. This is what I propose to call Rancière’s hermeneutic *epoché*: by bracketing the realm of the political “experience” of art, he purports to isolate its pure political being. It might be said that he is fundamentally interested in the *politics of art* (understood as the politics ontologically inscribed in works of art), and that he therefore excludes the * politicization of art* (the social struggle over the political dimension of art, be it at the level of production, distribution or reception).

I would argue that Rancière here suffers from the ontological illusion. What he perceives as the politics of art is, in fact, only the sedimentation of the politicization of art, much like what Sartre calls the practico-inert is a sedimentation of praxis. Works of art have no political being; there are only sociohistorical struggles over the political dimension of artwork, some of which have led to recognizable formulas of politicized art. Rancière’s own claims regarding the objective political being of art are, in fact, only one more contribution to the ongoing battle over art and politics. By overstating his case and acting as if his own * politicization of art* is coextensive with the true *politics of art*, he of course wants to convince his readership that he has provided the definitive account of the politics of aesthetics. However, he has actually only made one more contribution to an ongoing debate. In resisting these claims, it is important not only to remind ourselves of Rancière’s rhetorical strategies but also to provide an alternative account of the politicization of art.

Let us therefore take a specific example. The film *Lili Marleen* (1981) demonstrates at more than one level the way in which works of art are always *social works in progress*. The focal point of the film is the unique history of the famous song *Lili Marleen*. After being exposed to the
complex motives and circumstances behind the song’s production, the spectator is led through the story of its singular distribution and reception. The first time it is sung, by Willie, the main character, it is in a music hall where a group of Brits get in a fight with a band of German soldiers because they won’t keep quiet. The image of Willie singing as the brawl breaks out and envelopes the entire music hall visually sums up the future of the song: it gave birth to a battlefield with shifting allegiances. Through the course of the film, the song is listened to approvingly by Robert Mendelsson, a classical-music aficionado and Willie’s lover across the border; judged macabre by Goebbels; admired by Hitler; used by the Nazis to torture Robert, discovered to be a Jewish resistance fighter; blacklisted by the German government; sung by a mass of German soldiers when they see Willie, in spite of the fact that “Das Lied ist verboten!”; sung by Willie during a major Nazi spectacle organized after her attempted suicide, where her shadow—as in the song Lili Marleen—bears the trace of Robert’s fedora and trench coat; and heard at the front by Willie’s former pianist, who assumes he has stumbled upon allies, only to get shot by the Russians, who were apparently admirers of Lili Marleen!

It is commonly assumed that there is an ontological opposition between the work of art in and of itself and the appropriation of the work for certain interpretive ends (hence the idea that the song was simply co-opted by various listeners). However, this opposition is founded on a fundamental misapprehension, which is undoubtedly rooted in the practical habituation to individual objects through physical experience and language use. In spite of what its delimited physical nature and title might suggest, a work of art is by its very nature a social object; it is a site of collective meaning production. The creator of a work of art is not an isolated, subjective will that arbitrarily organizes the world according to his or her personal whims. An artist is a participant in socially recognized rituals and institutions that sculpt what is artistically possible. This is one of the reasons why the controversy about authors’ intentions is a false debate. Contrary to what the “anti-intentionalists” claim, it is possible to tap into the production logic of a particular work of art by understanding the historical time period, the social setting, the institutional framework, the poetic norms of the time, the artist’s habitus, the operative modes of distribution and circulation, the spectators’ or readers’ “horizon of expectation” (the system of objectifiable references),
and so on.\(^\text{46}\) However, this does not amount to reducing a work of art to its “context,” as if there were some external monolithic construct determining the totality of artistic production.

The fundamental problem with Rancière’s approach is that he wants to be able to judge the constituent political forms of a work of art outside of the social struggle over such forms. Like Robert Mendelsohn in Lili Marleen, who says to Willie, “I must know what side you are on,” Rancière wants to know once and for all where things stand. Willie’s response to Robert can here be taken as a hint for how we should reply to Rancière: “on your side, as long as I live. . . . But one cannot always choose how to live when one wants to survive.” Fassbinder’s psychopolitics, here as elsewhere, reveal to what extent decisions are always made within a conjuncture of circumstances that preclude simple binary value judgments from the outside. The title of the film can be taken as a synecdoche summing up this gray-zone politics of survival. Just as the song—which is named after two women—has many different social lives, Willie has at least two different sides to her: she is at once Willie, Robert’s lover, and Lili Marleen, the singer of a famous song under the Third Reich. As the film shows, it would be shortsighted to wholeheartedly condemn her for being Lili Marleen, since it is as Willie that she makes the majority of her choices.\(^\text{47}\)

Rather than having a single, fixed political valence that can be determined once and for all by ontological deduction, works of art are sites of contestation and negotiation in which meaning is dynamically produced and reproduced. To use the vocabulary I’ve just introduced, we can be more or less successful in tapping into a work of art’s production logic. This means that we can, without appealing to the “political being” of an artwork, provide better or worse arguments for understanding the political issues at stake.\(^\text{48}\) With this in mind, I’d like to turn to Rancière’s interpretation of three films released in 2003: Dogville, Mystic River, and Elephant.\(^\text{49}\) According to his argument, by presenting average Americans as evildoers equivalent to America’s “enemies” throughout the world, these films reflect the flip side of the global American crusade against the “axis of evil.” In both cases, there is the same basic logic at work: finite evil can only be overcome—domestically or internationally—by recourse to an irreducible, infinite evil. The political dimension of these films is thus to be found in the ways in which they reflect a new era of evil, replete with a novel understanding of good deeds as deeds
to be punished (*Dogville*), a new definition of humanism as the acceptance of the impossibility of justice (*Mystic River*), and a unique brand of neo-hippie nihilism where the naïve solution “make love, not war” is replaced by the utterly inane proposition “make films, not war” (*Elephant*).\(^{50}\)

Although Rancière is a careful interpreter who always sheds interesting light on the works of art he analyzes, there are grounds for believing that his particular account of the supposedly objective political being of these films masks as much as it reveals. In the case of *Mystic River*, for instance, he has obscured the absolutely essential role of religion, community, and family values. As the very title of the film suggests, there is a mystic river linking the cycles of crime and punishment. The entire story takes its root in an event that would forever bind together three childhood friends: Jimmy Markum (Sean Penn), Sean Devine (Kevin Bacon), and Dave Boyle (Tim Robbins). Upon Jimmy’s instigation, the boys decide to write their names in a patch of freshly poured concrete in their neighborhood. When they are apprehended by two men claiming to be undercover policemen, the one boy who doesn’t live in the immediate vicinity, Dave, is escorted back to his home. However, he never arrives at home and is instead sequestered in an isolated location and sexually abused by the two men. Although he finally escapes from “the wolves” and makes it home, he would never be the same again, as symbolized by his unfinished name forever etched in the neighborhood concrete (“DA”) and his inability to ever really be at home again with himself, his family, or the rest of the community.\(^{51}\)

Years later, Sean Devine, who had since become the “good cop,” is called in on a murder case in “the old neighborhood.” When he recognizes the victim to be the cherished daughter of his old friend Jimmy Markum, he murmurs, half aloud, “What the fuck am I gonna tell him? ‘Hey Jimmy, God said you owed another marker. He came to collect.’”\(^{52}\)

And when Jimmy does learn the news, a sea of policemen hold him in a position of near-crucifixion as he screams “Oh, God, no!” beneath a vertical crane shot retracting into the heavens, followed by a second crane shot of his dead daughter in the old bear cage that swoops up to an image of the beyond. The message should be unequivocal: the mystic river linking sin to retribution has caught up with Jimmy. In case it wasn’t clear, Jimmy later mutters to himself in a moment of private rumination on his porch, and prior to yet another helicopter shot of the

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Mystic, “I know in my soul I contributed to your death. But I don’t know how.” And when he eventually becomes convinced that it was Dave who murdered his daughter and decides to finish him off, he declares, prior to hurling his bloody knife into the waters of the Mystic, “We bury our sins here, Dave. We wash them clean.”

The only catch is that Jimmy apparently kills the wrong man. It wasn’t Dave who murdered his daughter but Ray Harris, the mute brother of the boy who was dating Jimmy’s daughter. However, this is not a simple remake of Fritz Lang’s You Only Live Once (1937) or Alfred Hitchcock’s The Wrong Man (1956), nor is it, as Rancière claims, a script based on the promised victim in which Eastwood and his collaborators are calling for us to accept the slipshod—and unjust—work of justice in much the same way as the discourse on the axis of evil. On the contrary, the message is that the Mystic River is doing its work of higher justice above and beyond the free will of the individuals involved (hence all of the helicopter shots of the river and neighborhood). Even though Ray Harris—along with his friend—apparently killed Katie to prevent her from taking his brother away from him, he was unknowingly paying Jimmy back not only for having contributed to Dave’s demise, but also for having killed Ray’s father, “Just Ray” Harris, whose body Jimmy had thrown into the Mystic years ago: “Just Ray” was the just man who had sent Jimmy away to prison and then looked after his family. Jimmy half recognizes this higher truth when he explains how he felt when he killed “Just Ray” Harris, who had himself admitted that Jimmy was “a good man”: “I could feel God watching me, shaking his head, not angry, but like you do if a puppy shat on a rug.” And even though Jimmy apparently killed an innocent man, Dave deserved to die—according to the mysterious logic of the Mystic River—for at least three reasons: (i) he was guilty of the murder of a pedophile (described, but not portrayed, as a violent “wolf”); (ii) his wife had sinned by turning him in for a crime he did not commit, and she thereby deserved to lose her husband and be exiled from the community; and (iii) Dave had, in fact, died years ago and was, according to his own description, a vampire, a werewolf in the neighborhood. These are the reasons why Dave’s sacrifice, as the final shots of the movie illustrate, is for the “good” of the neighborhood.

The moral of the film is that a mystic river holds us in its sway in spite of our intentions, and that it is only through the—voluntary or involun-
sacrifice for past crimes that a community survives. At the end of
the movie, this is made clear at three different levels: (i) “the old neigh-
borhood” where the boys grew up has been “cleansed” of its past crimes;
(ii) the solidity of the family unit is reaffirmed in the juxtaposition
between Jimmy’s “royal” family reunion and Celeste’s bewildered wan-
derings; and (iii) the Devine couple is reunited since Sean, after recog-
nizing and implicitly condoning Jimmy’s act of higher justice, apolo-
gizes to his wife for past sins, an act undoubtedly provoked by his
growing awareness of the “mystic river.”

Dogville also has a deeply religious dimension. Grace, the main char-
acter, wanders into a small town of “good, honest folks” while trying to
escape from her past life as a gangster. After she is apprehended stealing
a bone from the dog, Moses, she decides to follow the advice of the town
luminary, Thomas Edison Junior, and tries to be accepted into the town
as a refuge from her past life (thereby serving, for Edison, as the perfect
moral illustration of the acceptance of a gift). In offering her services to
the townspeople in order to be integrated and atone for her past sins,
she at first meets with resistance because they did not need her help.
However, she soon gets her foot in the door, and the vacuum from the
lack of need is filled by a growing desire. As the police search for Grace intensifies, the town
democratically decides that from a “business perspective” it is more and
more expensive to keep Grace. Therefore, they ask her to work more to
fulfill their nonexistent needs. Through a long series of events, including
several acts of rape and a failed escape, she is eventually transformed
into a modern-day masochistic Christ who becomes the benevolent
pincushion for the community’s deep-seated psychological problems.
She is turned into the unseen dog from which the town takes its name,
replete with Moses’s collar around her neck and unbridled bestial abuse
of her person. Given the paradigmatic nature of this democratic town
of “good, honest folks” (which is intensified by the film’s theatrical
minimalism and its debt to Brecht), the larger commentary on the
twisted and corrupt nature of American democracy in the early twenty-
first century is not difficult to discern: the gift of grace, the manifestation
of God, is “accepted” as a dog to be sadistically abused—partially from a
business perspective—in order to cathartically alleviate the “suffering”
of a community that has no dire needs.
However, in a kabalistic deus ex machina, the dog of the community is given the powers of God with the return of the Father. Following a change in the light, Grace’s masochistic phase comes to a close, and the vengeful power of the God of the Old Testament is released through firepower onto the town. The dog-become-god, seated at the right hand of the Father, gives the town what it deserves for how it treated the arrival of grace: it merits the same rigorous moral judgment that Grace had inflicted on herself. The moral of the story is not simply, as Rancière claims, that it is impossible to be good in an evil world. It is also not—as Luis Buñuel suggests in Viridiana (1961)—that a soft but constant perversion undergirds and withers away the supposed good of religious devotion and social facades. On the contrary, it is that those who don’t recognize grace for what she is, and particularly those who mistake the gift of God for a pitiful dog to be democratically abused from a “business perspective,” those who, in short, act like this good little American town, will be mercilessly punished on judgment day.

Rancière’s interpretation of Elephant is the most egregious. He claims, to begin with, that it situates itself “outside of all considerations of justice and all causal perspectives.” It portrays the world of adolescents as being innocently devoid of reasons, law, and authority, to such an extent that normalcy and monstrosity become equivalent. The final shot reminds us, according to his interpretation, that this is all only a film, and the underlying message in this naïve and nihilistic movie is “make films, not massacres.”

As an explicit reaction to the Columbine shootings and an implicit response to Michael Moore’s Bowling for Columbine (2002), Gus Van Sant’s entire film is constructed on the logic of false leads in order to resist the moncausal determinism that runs rampant in documentaries like Moore’s. The problem with such films is not only that they tend to drastically reduce the complexity of the sociopolitical world by attempting to single out a unique cause behind an entire series of events, but also that they aim primarily at edifying the viewer: by identifying the source of evil and locating it in the external world, spectators are bequeathed with an all-too-welcome dose of self-righteous moral superiority. As Van Sant himself says, “It’s in our interest to identify the reason why so that we can feel safe, . . . so that we can feel that we’re not part of it, . . . it’s demonized and . . . it’s identified and controlled.” It is precisely this moralistic approach to political films that he wants to
This does not, however, mean that he simply takes a headlong plunge into the abysmal pool of nihilism.

It is worth reminding ourselves, to begin with, how carefully and systematically Van Sant has constructed a network of false leads, set as so many traps for those viewers craving the cathartic identification of evil outside of themselves: (i) the opening shots with John’s father drunk-driving him to school and then talking about going hunting with the gun “grandpa” brought back from the South Pacific after WWII; (ii) Nathan’s lifeguard sweatshirt, suggesting that he is going to save someone; (iii) John crying alone, only to be discovered by an apathetic Acadia; (iv) Alex grabbing and shaking his head, as if one could simply say, “he is crazy”; (v) the kitchen help smoking pot; (vi) the elephant drawing in Alex’s room; (vii) Alex’s frustration at not being able to master Beethoven’s “Moonlight” sonata; (viii) the rapid weather changes and the storm coming in, as if one could say “maybe it’s the weather”; (ix) the Nazis on television; (x) the “homosexual” relationship between the boys in the shower; (xi) Alex’s recitation of Macbeth’s first lines in the eponymous play: “So foul and fair a day I have not seen.” Some of these false leads are clearly revealed as such: John is very thoughtful and protective, the “lifeguard’s” cross becomes the cross-hairs for Alex’s gun as Nathan is apparently unsuccessful in saving his girlfriend or himself, Alex and Eric are uninformed and dismissive of the Nazis, and Eric has never kissed anyone before and doesn’t really know what his sexual orientation might be. Others are left more or less hanging, like the passing reference to insanity, the elephant drawing, Alex’s piano playing, the kitchen help, the weather, and the reference to Macbeth. Finally, this long chain of false leads allows Van Sant to introduce what might be false false leads: (i) the discussion of electrons at “Watt High School” and the statement that the electrons farthest from the nucleus—like Alex in the back of the classroom—are “high energy” and can be kicked out of the atom when energy is added; (ii) the spit wads thrown at Alex; (iii) the Gerry-style video game in Alex’s room; (iv) the website “Guns usa”; (v) the general lack of parental presence at Alex’s house. In any case, a single cause is never identified, and the aim of the film is to show that multiple determinants participate in the production of any event. This logic of false leads is combined with a huis clos aesthetic: there is generally one plane of focus with slow, semi-subjective tracking shots in which characters are stalked as if from a zero
point of visibility, a technique borrowed from scenes in Stanley Kubrick’s *The Shining* (1980), as well as Alan Clarke’s *Elephant* (1989). Moreover, there are no establishment shots by which the viewer can grasp all of the spatial relations in the school (there is only Alex’s map, which is part of his “plan”; his exit strategy from the labyrinth of adolescent life), and time doubles back on itself through multiple perspectives on the same event, making film time longer than real time just prior to the moment the shooting begins.\(^{67}\)

This does not add up to nihilistic relativism. It amounts to replacing the determinist monocausality of self-edifying, moralistic political films by a set of overdetermined concatenations and chance relations that don’t allow us to identify a single cause behind each event. Instead of being placed on a moral throne, viewers are thrust into the *huis clos* existence of the labyrinthine and prisonlike hallways of American high schools, where cliques and personas trap everyone in a complex network of social forces beyond their control. In refusing to isolate a single identifiable cause of high school violence, the film forces us to think for ourselves in trying to grapple with the ways in which an overdetermined sequence of events can produce the most extreme forms of violence.\(^{68}\)

This radical change in perspective, which is not—as Rancière claims—a turn toward nihilism, is clearly illustrated in the Buddhist tale that is one of the sources of the film’s title.\(^{69}\) According to the tale, three blind men examine different parts of an elephant, and each one of them thinks he knows its true nature. The one who touches a leg thinks it’s a tree trunk. The one who touches an ear thinks it’s a fan. And the one who touches its trunk thinks it’s a snake. However, none of them realize, from their limited point of view, that it is an elephant. The problem Van Sant is pointing to in a popular brand of political films is the tendency to mistake elephants for trees, fans, or snakes. Instead of trying to reduce the complexity of events to a single edifying cause, he urges his viewers to let the enormity of events stand on their own, even if it’s at the price of our own rational and moral mastery of these events.

In the beginning of this essay I situated Rancière’s account of the politics of aesthetics in relation to his immediate predecessors and emphasized significant developments in his most recent work. In an attempt to clear up certain ambiguities in his project, I presented what I
take to be the most feasible—and textually justified—way of shoring up his account, which is largely based on distancing his work from the franco-française logic of identity and difference. I then went on to examine and evaluate Rancière’s project from an external perspective, and I indicated two central points where our paths diverge. First of all, I questioned his ahistorical approach to politics and his ever-present political ontology. In emphasizing the limitations inherent in Rancière’s schematic account of democracy and his fondness for “transitive history” in the realm of politics, I advocated a truly historical analysis of political cultures. Secondly, I called into question his hermeneutic epoché in the realm of aesthetics and his attempt to philosophically bracket the sociohistorical struggle over the politics of art. In light of this critique, I argued that works of art are never fixed objects that can be judged once and for all from the privileged position of the philosopher of art. Artistic production is a dynamic process that is part of a sociohistorical world. This means that there is no permanent politics of art; there are only various modes of politicization. And these take place in different dimensions: not only at the level of historical regimes (Rancière) but also at the level of production, circulation, and reception. To provide concrete examples of my divergence with Rancière on the politics of aesthetics, I concluded my analysis with a critical evaluation of his interpretation of three recent films. This critique was not simply based on an appeal to the “facts”; it was fundamentally methodological in nature insofar as it broke with the reference to the political being of works of art in the name of an interpretive intervention founded on the production logic of these films and aimed at directly participating in the ongoing battle of the politicization of art.