

The Emancipated Spectator

Jacques Rancière

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I have called this talk “The Emancipated Spectator.”* As I understand it, a title is always a challenge. It sets forth the presupposition that an expression makes sense, that there is a link between separate terms, which also means between concepts, problems, and theories that seem at first sight to bear no direct relation to one another. In a sense, this title expresses the perplexity that was mine when Marten Spangberg invited me to deliver what is supposed to be the “keynote” lecture of this academy. He told me he wanted me to introduce this collective reflection on “spectatorship” because he had been impressed by my book *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* [*Le Maître ignorant* (1987)]. I began to wonder what connection there could be between the cause and the effect. This is an academy that brings people involved in the worlds of art, theater, and performance together to consider the issue of spectatorship today. *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* was a meditation on the eccentric theory and the strange destiny of Joseph Jacotot, a French professor who, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, unsettled the academic world by asserting that an ignorant person could teach another ignorant person what he did not know himself, proclaiming the equality of intelligences, and calling for intellectual emancipation against the received wisdom concerning the instruction of the lower classes. His theory sank into oblivion in the middle of the nineteenth century. I thought it necessary to revive it in the 1980s in order to stir up the debate about education and its political stakes.

But what use can be made, in the contemporary artistic dialogue, of a man whose artistic universe could be epitomized by names such as Demosthenes, Racine, and Poussin? On second thought, it occurred to me that the very distance, the lack of any obvious relationship between Jacotot’s theory and the issue of spectatorship today might be fortunate. It could provide an opportunity to radically distance one’s thoughts from the theoretical and political presuppositions that still shore up, even in postmodern disguise, most of the discussion about theater, performance, and spectatorship. I got the impression that indeed it was possible to make sense of this relationship, on condition that we try to piece together the network of presuppositions that

put the issue of spectatorship at a strategic intersection in the discussion of the relationship between art and politics and to sketch out the broader pattern of thinking that has for a long time framed the political issues around theater and spectacle (and I use those terms in a very general sense here—to include dance, performance, and all the kinds of spectacle performed by acting bodies in front of a collective audience).

The numerous debates and polemics that have called the theater into question throughout our history can be traced back to a very simple contradiction. Let us call it the paradox of the spectator, a paradox that may prove more crucial than the well-known paradox of the actor and which can be summed up in the simplest terms. There is no theater without spectators (be it only a single and hidden one, as in Diderot's fictional representation of *Le Fils naturel*). But spectatorship is a bad thing. Being a spectator means looking at a spectacle. And looking is a bad thing, for two reasons. First, looking is deemed the opposite of knowing. It means standing before an appearance without knowing the conditions which produced that appearance or the reality that lies behind it. Second, looking is deemed the opposite of acting. He who looks at the spectacle remains motionless in his seat, lacking any power of intervention. Being a spectator means being passive. The spectator is separated from the capacity of knowing just as he is separated from the possibility of acting.

From this diagnosis it is possible to draw two opposing conclusions. The first is that theater in general is a bad thing, that it is the stage of illusion and passivity, which must be dismissed in favor of what it forbids: knowledge and action—the action of knowing and the action led by knowledge. This conclusion was drawn long ago by Plato: The theater is the place where ignorant people are invited to see suffering people. What takes place on the stage is a pathos, the manifestation of a disease, the disease of desire and pain, which is nothing but the self-division of the subject caused by the lack of knowledge. The “action” of theater is nothing but the transmission of that disease through another disease, the disease of the empirical vision that looks at shadows. Theater is the transmission of the ignorance that makes people ill through the medium of ignorance that is optical illusion. Therefore a good community is a community that doesn't allow the mediation of the theater, a community whose collective virtues are directly incorporated in the living attitudes of its participants. This seems to be the more logical

conclusion to the problem. We know, however, that it is not the conclusion that was most often drawn. The most common conclusion runs as follows: Theater involves spectatorship, and spectatorship is a bad thing. Therefore, we need a new theater, a theater without spectatorship. We need a theater where the optical relation—implied in the word theatron—is subjected to another relation, implied in the word drama. Drama means action. The theater is a place where an action is actually performed by living bodies in front of living bodies. The latter may have resigned their power. But this power is resumed in the performance of the former, in the intelligence that builds it, in the energy that it conveys. The true sense of the theater must be predicated on that acting power. Theater has to be brought back to its true essence, which is the contrary of what is usually known as theater. What must be pursued is a theater without spectators, a theater where spectators will no longer be spectators, where they will learn things instead of being captured by images and become active participants in a collective performance instead of being passive viewers.

This turn has been understood in two ways, which are antagonistic in principle, though they have often been mixed in theatrical performance and in its legitimization. On the one hand the spectator must be released from the passivity of the viewer, who is fascinated by the appearance standing in front of him and identifies with the characters on the stage. He must be confronted with the spectacle of something strange, which stands as an enigma and demands that he investigate the reason for its strangeness. He must be pressed to abandon the role of passive viewer and to take on that of the scientist who observes phenomena and seeks their cause. On the other hand the spectator must eschew the role of the mere observer who remains still and untouched in front of a distant spectacle. He must be torn from his delusive mastery, drawn into the magical power of theatrical action, where he will exchange the privilege of playing the rational viewer for the experience of possessing theater's true vital energies.

We acknowledge these two paradigmatic attitudes epitomized by Brecht's epic theater and Artaud's theater of cruelty. On the one hand the spectator must become more distant, on the other he must lose any distance. On the one hand he must change the way he looks for a better way of looking, on the other he must abandon the very position of the viewer. The project of reforming the theater ceaselessly wavered between these two poles of distant inquiry and vital

embodiment. This means that the presuppositions underpinning the search for a new theater are the same as those that underpinned the dismissal of theater. The reformers of the theater in fact retained the terms of Plato's polemics, rearranging them by borrowing from Platonism an alternative notion of theater. Plato drew an opposition between the poetic and democratic community of the theater and a "true" community: a choreographic community in which no one remains a motionless spectator, in which everyone moves according to a communitarian rhythm determined by mathematical proportion.

The reformers of the theater restaged the Platonic opposition between choreia and theater as an opposition between the true living essence of the theater and the simulacrum of the "spectacle." The theater then became the place where passive spectatorship had to be turned into its contrary—the living body of a community enacting its own principle. In this academy's statement of purpose we read that "theater remains the only place of direct confrontation of the audience with itself as a collective." We can give that sentence a restrictive meaning that would merely contrast the collective audience of the theater with the individual visitors to an exhibition or the sheer collection of individuals watching a movie. But obviously the sentence means much more. It means that "theater" remains the name for an idea of the community as a living body. It conveys an idea of the community as self-presence opposed to the distance of the representation.

Since the advent of German Romanticism, the concept of theater has been associated with the idea of the living community. Theater appeared as a form of the aesthetic constitution—meaning the sensory constitution—of the community: the community as a way of occupying time and space, as a set of living gestures and attitudes that stands before any kind of political form and institution; community as a performing body instead of an apparatus of forms and rules. In this way theater was associated with the Romantic notion of the aesthetic revolution: the idea of a revolution that would change not only laws and institutions but transform the sensory forms of human experience. The reform of theater thus meant the restoration of its authenticity as an assembly or a ceremony of the community. Theater is an assembly where the people become aware of their situation and discuss their own interests, Brecht would say after Piscator. Theater is the ceremony where the community is given possession of its own energies, Artaud would state. If theater is held to be an equivalent of the true community, the living body of the community

opposed to the illusion of mimesis, it comes as no surprise that the attempt at restoring theater to its true essence had as its theoretical backdrop the critique of the spectacle.

What is the essence of spectacle in Guy Debord's theory? It is externality. The spectacle is the reign of vision. Vision means externality. Now externality means the dispossession of one's own being. "The more man contemplates, the less he is," Debord says. This may sound anti-Platonic. Indeed, the main source for the critique of the spectacle is, of course, Feuerbach's critique of religion. It is what sustains that critique—namely, the Romantic idea of truth as unseparateness. But that idea itself remains in line with the Platonic disparagement of the mimetic image. The contemplation that Debord denounces is the theatrical or mimetic contemplation, the contemplation of the suffering that is provoked by division. "Separation is the alpha and the omega of spectacle," he writes. What man gazes at in this scheme is the activity that has been stolen from him; it is his own essence torn away from him, turned foreign to him, hostile to him, making for a collective world whose reality is nothing but man's own dispossession.

From this perspective there is no contradiction between the quest for a theater that can realize its true essence and the critique of the spectacle. "Good" theater is posited as a theater that deploys its separate reality only in order to suppress it, to turn the theatrical form into a form of life of the community. The paradox of the spectator is part of an intellectual disposition that is, even in the name of the theater, in keeping with the Platonic dismissal of the theater. This framework is built around a number of core ideas that must be called into question. Indeed, we must question the very footing on which those ideas are based. I am speaking of a whole set of relations, resting on some key equivalences and some key oppositions: the equivalence of theater and community, of seeing and passivity, of externality and separation, of mediation and simulacrum; the opposition of collective and individual, image and living reality, activity and passivity, self-possession and alienation. This set of equivalences and oppositions makes for a rather tricky dramaturgy of guilt and redemption. Theater is charged with making spectators passive in opposition to its very essence, which allegedly consists in the self-activity of the community. As a consequence, it sets itself the task of reversing its own effect and compensating for its own guilt by giving back to the spectators their self-consciousness or self-activity. The theatrical stage and the theatrical performance thus become the vanishing mediation between the evil of the spectacle and the

virtue of the true theater. They present to the collective audience performances intended to teach the spectators how they can stop being spectators and become performers of a collective activity.

Either, according to the Brechtian paradigm, theatrical mediation makes the audience aware of the social situation on which theater itself rests, prompting the audience to act in consequence. Or, according to the Artaudian scheme, it makes them abandon the position of spectator: No longer seated in front of the spectacle, they are instead surrounded by the performance, dragged into the circle of the action, which gives them back their collective energy. In both cases the theater is a self-suppressing mediation. This is the point where the descriptions and propositions of intellectual emancipation enter into the picture and help us reframe it. Obviously, this idea of a self-suppressing mediation is well known to us. It is precisely the process that is supposed to take place in the pedagogical relation. In the pedagogical process the role of the schoolmaster is posited as the act of suppressing the distance between his knowledge and the ignorance of the ignorant. His lessons and exercises are aimed at continuously reducing the gap between knowledge and ignorance. Unfortunately, in order to reduce the gap, he must reinstate it ceaselessly. In order to replace ignorance with adequate knowledge, he must always keep a step ahead of the ignorant student who is losing his ignorance. The reason for this is simple: In the pedagogical scheme, the ignorant person is not only the one who does not know what he does not know; he is as well the one who ignores that he does not know what he does not know and ignores how to know it. The master is not only he who knows precisely what remains unknown to the ignorant; he also knows how to make it knowable, at what time and what place, according to what protocol. On the one hand pedagogy is set up as a process of objective transmission: one piece of knowledge after another piece, one word after another word, one rule or theorem after another. This knowledge is supposed to be conveyed directly from the master's mind or from the page of the book to the mind of the pupil. But this equal transmission is predicated on a relation of inequality. The master alone knows the right way, time, and place for that "equal" transmission, because he knows something that the ignorant will never know, short of becoming a master himself, something that is more important than the knowledge conveyed. He knows the exact distance between ignorance and knowledge. That pedagogical distance between a determined ignorance and a determined knowledge is in fact a metaphor. It is the metaphor of a radical break

between the way of the ignorant student and the way of the master, the metaphor of a radical break between two intelligences.

The master cannot ignore that the so-called ignorant pupil who sits in front of him in fact knows a lot of things, which he has learned on his own, by looking at and listening to the world around him, by figuring out the meaning of what he has seen and heard, by repeating what he has heard and learned by chance, by comparing what he discovers with what he already knows, and so on. The master cannot ignore that the ignorant pupil has undertaken by these same means the apprenticeship that is the precondition of all others: the apprenticeship of his mother tongue. But for the master this is only the knowledge of the ignorant, the knowledge of the little child who sees and hears at random, compares and guesses by chance, and repeats by routine, without understanding the reason for the effects he observes and reproduces. The role of the master is thus to break with that process of hit-and-miss groping. It is to teach the pupil the knowledge of the knowledgeable, in its own way—the way of the progressive method, which dismisses all groping and all chance by explaining items in order, from the simplest to the most complex, according to what the pupil is capable of understanding, with respect to his age or social background and social expectations. The primary knowledge that the master owns is the “knowledge of ignorance.” It is the presupposition of a radical break between two forms of intelligence. This is also the primary knowledge that he transmits to the student: the knowledge that he must have things explained to him in order to understand, the knowledge that he cannot understand on his own. It is the knowledge of his incapacity.

In this way, progressive instruction is the endless verification of its starting point: inequality. That endless verification of inequality is what Jacotot calls the process of stultification. The opposite of stultification is emancipation. Emancipation is the process of verification of the equality of intelligence. The equality of intelligence is not the equality of all manifestations of intelligence. It is the equality of intelligence in all its manifestations. It means that there is no gap between two forms of intelligence. The human animal learns everything as he has learned his mother tongue, as he has learned to venture through the forest of things and signs that surrounds him, in order to take his place among his fellow humans—by observing, comparing one thing with another thing, one sign with one fact, one sign with another sign, and repeating the experiences he has first

encountered by chance. If the “ignorant” person who doesn’t know how to read knows only one thing by heart, be it a simple prayer, he can compare that knowledge with something of which he remains ignorant: the words of the same prayer written on paper. He can learn, sign after sign, the resemblance of that of which he is ignorant to that which he knows. He can do it if, at each step, he observes what is in front of him, tells what he has seen, and verifies what he has told. From the ignorant person to the scientist who builds hypotheses, it is always the same intelligence that is at work: an intelligence that makes figures and comparisons to communicate its intellectual adventures and to understand what another intelligence is trying to communicate to it in turn.

This poetic work of translation is the first condition of any apprenticeship. Intellectual emancipation, as Jacotot conceived of it, means the awareness and the enactment of that equal power of translation and counter-translation. Emancipation entails an idea of distance opposed to the stultifying one. Speaking animals are distant animals who try to communicate through the forest of signs. It is this sense of distance that the “ignorant master” — the master who ignores inequality — is teaching. Distance is not an evil that should be abolished. It is the normal condition of communication. It is not a gap that calls for an expert in the art of suppressing it. The distance that the “ignorant” person has to cover is not the gap between his ignorance and the knowledge of his master; it is the distance between what he already knows and what he still doesn’t know but can learn by the same process. To help his pupil cover that distance, the “ignorant master” need not be ignorant. He need only dissociate his knowledge from his mastery. He does not teach his knowledge to the students. He commands them to venture forth in the forest, to report what they see, what they think of what they have seen, to verify it, and so on. What he ignores is the gap between two intelligences. It is the linkage between the knowledge of the knowledgeable and the ignorance of the ignorant. Any distance is a matter of happenstance. Each intellectual act weaves a casual thread between a form of ignorance and a form of knowledge. No kind of social hierarchy can be predicated on this sense of distance.

What is the relevance of this story with respect to the question of the spectator? Dramaturges today aren’t out to explain to their audience the truth about social relations and the best means to do away with domination. But it isn’t enough to lose one’s illusions. On the contrary, the loss of illusions often leads the dramaturge or the performers to increase the pressure on the spectator:

Maybe he will know what has to be done, if the performance changes him, if it sets him apart from his passive attitude and makes him an active participant in the communal world. This is the first point that the reformers of the theater share with the stultifying pedagogues: the idea of the gap between two positions. Even when the dramaturge or the performer doesn't know what he wants the spectator to do, he knows at least that the spectator has to do something: switch from passivity to activity.

But why not turn things around? Why not think, in this case too, that it is precisely the attempt at suppressing the distance that constitutes the distance itself? Why identify the fact of being seated motionless with inactivity, if not by the presupposition of a radical gap between activity and inactivity? Why identify "looking" with "passivity" if not by the presupposition that looking means looking at the image or the appearance, that it means being separated from the reality that is always behind the image? Why identify hearing with being passive, if not by the presupposition that acting is the opposite of speaking, etc.?

All these oppositions—looking/knowing, looking/acting, appearance/reality, activity/ passivity—are much more than logical oppositions. They are what I call a partition of the sensible, a distribution of places and of the capacities or incapacities attached to those places. Put in other terms, they are allegories of inequality. This is why you can change the values given to each position without changing the meaning of the oppositions themselves. For instance, you can exchange the positions of the superior and the inferior. The spectator is usually disparaged because he does nothing, while the performers on the stage—or the workers outside—do something with their bodies. But it is easy to turn matters around by stating that those who act, those who work with their bodies, are obviously inferior to those who are able to look—that is, those who can contemplate ideas, foresee the future, or take a global view of our world. The positions can be switched, but the structure remains the same. What counts, in fact, is only the statement of opposition between two categories: There is one population that cannot do what the other population does. There is capacity on one side and incapacity on the other. Emancipation starts from the opposite principle, the principle of equality. It begins when we dismiss the opposition between looking and acting and understand that the distribution of the visible itself is part of the configuration of domination and subjection. It starts when we realize that looking is

also an action that confirms or modifies that distribution, and that “interpreting the world” is already a means of transforming it, of reconfiguring it. The spectator is active, just like the student or the scientist: He observes, he selects, he compares, he interprets. He connects what he observes with many other things he has observed on other stages, in other kinds of spaces. He makes his poem with the poem that is performed in front of him. She participates in the performance if she is able to tell her own story about the story that is in front of her. Or if she is able to undo the performance—for instance, to deny the corporeal energy that it is supposed to convey the here and now and transform it into a mere image, by linking it with something she has read in a book or dreamed about, that she has lived or imagined. These are distant viewers and interpreters of what is performed in front of them. They pay attention to the performance to the extent that they are distant.

This is the second key point: The spectators see, feel, and understand something to the extent that they make their poems as the poet has done, as the actors, dancers, or performers have done. The dramaturge would like them to see this thing, feel that feeling, understand this lesson of what they see, and get into that action in consequence of what they have seen, felt, and understood. He proceeds from the same presupposition as the stultifying master: the presupposition of an equal, undistorted transmission. The master presupposes that what the student learns is precisely what he teaches him. This is the master’s notion of transmission: There is something on one side, in one mind or one body—a knowledge, a capacity, an energy—that must be transferred to the other side, into the other’s mind or body. The presupposition is that the process of learning is not merely the effect of its cause—teaching—but the very transmission of the cause: What the student learns is the knowledge of the master. That identity of cause and effect is the principle of stultification. On the contrary, the principle of emancipation is the dissociation of cause and effect. The paradox of the ignorant master lies therein. The student of the ignorant master learns what his master does not know, since his master commands him to look for something and to recount everything he discovers along the way while the master verifies that he is actually looking for it. The student learns something as an effect of his master’s mastery. But he does not learn his master’s knowledge.