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Thinking the Unthinkable as a Form of *Dissensus*: The Case of the Witness

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Introduction

The word of the witness enjoys, so to speak, a rapidly increasing recognition in present times. Ranging from political organisations protesting the wrongs of occupations or oppressive governments, through the growing popularity of genres such as doco-activism, various artistic usages in literature, visual arts etc., to all sorts of journalistic practices, and even in several documentation projects dedicated to the gathering of testimonies of Holocaust survivors – the word of the witness is to be found virtually everywhere. If the twentieth century was declared, time and again, as “the century of the witness,” it seems that the twenty-first century is heading in a similar direction. In light of this, several burning questions come to mind, some concerning the political role of the word of the witness, others with regard to the aesthetic aspects of testimony. What kind of political effect can the word of the witness stimulate and by what means? Can the word of the witness be said to represent, or does it attest to something that in principle cannot be represented? It is my claim that the aesthetic-political thought of Jacques Rancière can provide us with most interesting and gratifying answers to these questions.

This article discusses Rancière's position regarding the meaning of bearing witness and the possibility of representation. This discussion, however, is performed here through the rectification of two argumentations that Rancière ceaselessly tries to uproot – Lyotard's notion of complete Otherness and Agamben's analysis of the Holocaust. I maintain that by exposing the unsettling political ramifications, which Rancière detects in both theories, his own stance regarding the aesthetic and political possibilities enabled by the word of the witness will be revealed in its fullest extent.

Unrepresentability and its Discontents

The question of unrepresentability is raised by Rancière in an essay called “Are Some Things Unrepresentable?” However, the initial question is immediately replaced or, rather, refined and posed as follows: “under what conditions might it be said that certain events cannot be represented?” (109). But even after fine-tuning his initial quandary, Rancière is not yet done setting the grounds for his discussion. For this discussion, he openly admits, is anything but neutral, as it results from “a certain intolerance for an inflated use of the notion of the unrepresentable and a constellation of allied notions: the unrepresentable, the unthinkable, the untreatable, the irredeemable” (109). So the task he undertakes, it seems, is that of distinguishing the conditions under which a claim for unrepresentability can be made from those that do not allow for such claims to be stated. For only then can the hidden premise maintained by those upholding the notion of unrepresentability (and thus promoting the “inflated usage” of this

notion and of the aforementioned allied notions), as well as its disturbing repercussions, be unveiled.

In order to tackle the issue at hand, Rancière suggests approaching it through an aesthetic prism, namely to treat representation as a regime of thinking about art. The question is then translated into the query whether there are entities, events or situations that cannot be given an artistic representation. To give a positive answer to this query means to claim that certain things transcend art's ability to represent, elude its capacity to constitute an intelligible relation of representation with them. But if that is indeed the case, how can they still be dealt with after all? The solution often suggested is an appeal to the word of the witness, which is then interpreted not as representing, but rather as attesting to an absolute Otherness that *cannot* be understood, let alone represented. The words of the witness point towards a *there was*, in front of which all one can do is be dumbfounded. This line of reasoning is precisely the one employed by Lyotard. According to him, alongside the thinkable realm of our existence there is also a complete Otherness that can neither be thought nor presented, but nonetheless exists and constitutes a certain part of the whole of our experience. As this Otherness clearly cannot be represented, the artistic form he deems to be suitable to contend with it is *sublime art* (a concept to which we shall later return), namely an art that endeavours neither to represent nor to present, but rather "to present that there is something that is not presentable" (*The Inhuman* 125).

According to Rancière, however, this line of reasoning is problematic, as it indistinguishably mixes together several notions that correspond to two different artistic regimes – the representative regime of art and the aesthetic regime of art. [1] The representative regime of art commences with Aristotle's critique of Plato, and reigns in the aesthetic arena up until the late eighteenth century. This regime formulates a strict separation of the artistic field from any other domain in human life, as works of art are held as belonging to the "sphere of imitation" ("The Aesthetic Revolution and its Outcomes" 135). This separation is accompanied by a set of hierarchical distinctions that all artistic expression must follow: it privileges speech over visual appearance, activity over passivity, knowledge over ignorance and so forth. Most importantly, it poses restrictions both on the topics that are considered proper for artistic representation and on the ways in which these topics can be appropriately represented. Put differently, in the representative regime of art, certain things indeed cannot be represented, and as for those that can be, they can only be represented in an adequate manner, in an artistic form that is held appropriate for them. However, since romanticism, says Rancière, an entirely different rationality holds sway of the aesthetic field, and that is the rationality characteristic of the aesthetic regime of art.

The most significant feature of the aesthetic regime of art is the fact that within this regime representation breaks free from the previous restrictions imposed upon it. There are no longer "proper" subjects to deal with (and subjects that *cannot* be dealt with by artistic means), and there is no longer any demand for compatibility between subject matters and ways of artistic expression. Moreover, the hierarchical pairs set forth by the representative regime undergo a radical change as well, by being equated or identified with one another: the visual is no longer inferior to speech, activity always already includes passivity, and the same is true for knowledge and ignorance.

It is important to realise that within the artistic realm, the characteristics of the aesthetic regime of art come to fruition in theory and praxis alike. That is to say, they influence both the manner in which works of art are interpreted and discussed, as well as the works themselves that are being created. On the theoretical level, works of art are considered through a wide perspective and often in historical context. Such a hermeneutical understanding regards the work of art as an outcome of a large set of historical, social and psychological variants, understood as the conditions for its existence *qua art*. [2] In Rancière's words, "art is defined by its being the identity of a conscious procedure and an unconscious production, of a willed action and an involuntary

process" (*The Aesthetic Unconscious* 28). In this sense, art is considered art on account of being non-art, something different from art, as well. This stands in stark opposition to the representative regime, in which a clear cut distinction was set between art and anything that is "not art." The sharp separation between opposites, typical of the representative regime, is also that which enabled the hierarchical view to be founded at its core. However, under the aesthetic regime, which is far more egalitarian in nature, this premise is rejected and replaced with the notion of "identity of contraries": art and non-art, activity and passivity, conscious and unconscious, intentional and accidental, visible and invisible and so forth.

As far as creative activity is concerned, under the aesthetic regime artists no longer feel compelled to turn to the epic, the religious or the mythical. Every subject is perceived as legitimately treatable, and any sort of treatment is held permissible. Thus, painters abandon the strict rules of perspective and composition, and sculptors experiment with new materials and techniques. The realist novel, often regarded as a paradigmatic example of a new genre enabled by the aesthetic regime, is perhaps best suited to demonstrate this double shift, in themes and style alike. For what it brings forth are neither the tales of great historical figures, nor the stories of widely known men, but the lives of plain and ordinary people. And it does so not by weaving a complicated plot, but rather by means of long and elaborated descriptions of everyday situations and activities. The use of detailed descriptions, often at the expense of an elaborated plot, conveys the identity of contraries characteristic of the aesthetic regime: such descriptions, in which speech and vision become inseparably intertwined, are neither a manifestation of activity nor of passivity, but precisely of both.

This new regime is described by Rancière as a regime of anti-representation: not in the sense that art ceases to make use of representations, but rather in the sense that representations themselves are liberated from the restrictions and limitations that were imposed by the representative regime. Going back to the initial question of unrepresentability, it is now clear that the claim for the existence of things that are unrepresentable could only be stated under the framework of the representative regime. Within the aesthetic regime, however, this notion is vacuous, as "anti-representative art is constitutively an art without unrepresentable things" (137).

Representing the Unrepresentable

To manifest this understanding one can turn, following Rancière, to the event often evoked as exemplary in the discourse of unrepresentability – the Holocaust. If the horrors of the Holocaust are understood as unrepresentable, two possible conclusions can be derived as to the proper way of addressing them: one will contend that no artistic treatment whatsoever can be produced with regard to the Holocaust. What we are left with, therefore, is solely the word of the witness, attesting to the existence of the atrocious things he or she has suffered. However, as the horrors of the Holocaust are undeniably the theme of various works of art whose legitimacy is commonly acknowledged, this conclusion seems highly unfounded. The other possible conclusion that can be drawn here is that it takes a *unique* kind of art – *sublime art* – to properly deal with the Holocaust. Works of art which manage to treat it appropriately, therefore, will make no use of representation, as sublime art never represents, but rather presents by way of "alluding to an unrepresentable" (*The Inhuman* 128).

To refute this conclusion, and along with it the notion of unrepresentability in the aesthetic regime, Rancière suggests reflecting on a work of art that supposedly manages to do the impossible, namely to represent the unrepresentable or to think the unthinkable – Robert Antelme's *L'Espèce humaine* (*The Human Race*). Antelme's book opens as follows:

I went outside to take a piss. It wasn't yet daylight. Beside me others were pissing too; nobody spoke. Behind the place where we pissed was the trench to shit in; other guys were sitting on the little wall above it, their pants down. The trench was covered

by a small roof, but not the urinal. Behind us there were sounds of galoshes, of coughing; that came from others who were arriving. The latrines were never deserted. A steam floated above the urinals at all hours. (9)

The writing tactic employed by Antelme consists of assembling, little by little, fragments of reality, which are then accumulated and transformed into a broader picture of life in the death camps. By stripping human existence to its most basic functions, the incontestable fact of belonging to the human race is asserted. This writing tactic, however, has its roots in the tradition of the realist novel. In other words, it is influenced by similar literary pieces that have nothing at all to do neither with the Holocaust nor with any other subject held as “unrepresentable.” To demonstrate this, one can turn to another well known literary piece – Camus’s *L’Etranger* (*The Stranger*). [3] Gathered with other mourners from his mother’s retirement home, in the room where her dead body is placed, Meursault – the main character and the narrator of the book – gives the following description:

I’d ceased feeling sleepy, but I was very tired and my legs were aching badly. And now I realized that the silence of these people was telling on my nerves. The only sound was a rather queer one; it came only now and then, and at first I was puzzled by it. However, after listening attentively, I guessed what it was; the old men were sucking at the insides of their cheeks, and this caused the odd, wheezing noises that had mystified me. They were so much absorbed in their thoughts that they didn’t know what they were up to. (8-9)

The portrayal offered by Meursault employs a similar strategy to that of Antelme’s: the situation is fractured into the smallest of human actions comprising it; ordinary actions are depicted, sometimes repelling ones – men crouched over the latrines or pissing at the urinal, old men absentmindedly sucking at the insides of their cheeks. And it is these actions that eventually mount up and reveal a segment of life, a fragment of human existence.

The similarities between these two works of art can be traced not only within the works themselves; rather, they expand into their appraisal as well. When discussing Camus’s writing in *L’Etranger*, Roland Barthes defines it as “degree-zero” writing, that is to say as “colourless” and honest writing that manages *to avoid the lie and corruption of literature* (*Writing Degree Zero* 65). Likewise, in his “Homage to Robert Antelme” Edgar Morin refers to *L’Espèce humaine* as “a masterpiece of literature without anything literary” (viii). These corresponding ideas of “degree-zero” writing and “literature that is not literary” are precisely in the spirit of the “identity of contrarities” typical to the aesthetic regime.

Both works of art, therefore, adhere to the conventions of the aesthetic regime. And both narrators – the true survivor Robert Antelme and the fictional character Meursault – serve as witnesses reporting the experiences they have undergone, using similar writing techniques in order to convey them. But while the events disclosed by Meursault, although certainly not everyday occurrences, are definitely not unique or rare ones either, Antelme uses the same literary tools in order to present his readers with an experience that is by all means exceptional – the horrors of the death camps. [4] Using the prevalent means of artistic expression, Antelme reveals an event that is utterly unparalleled. By doing so he opens a gap, an interval, which broadens the boundaries of intelligibility. And at the same time, he provides irrefutable evidence for the barrenness of the notion of unrepresentability in the aesthetic regime.

In light of this, one cannot help but wonder why the discourse of unrepresentability is still so prosperous in our time. The answer suggested by Rancière consists of understanding this discourse not as descriptive, but rather as an articulation of the yearning that even under a regime as unfettered as the aesthetic regime “appropriate forms respecting the singularity of the exception still exist” (137). However, since this desire is contradictory in nature, those who insist

on maintaining it have to ceaselessly reassert the false identification between anti-representation and unrepresentability. At this stage, once the initial quandary concerning the possibility of unrepresentability is settled and the fundamental contradiction that allows it is exposed, one question still begs an answer: *what makes this matter an object for intolerance?* Can scientific accuracy alone be the cause of that, or are the stakes in fact much higher? In order to provide an adequate answer to this question, one should heed the fact that for Rancière, aesthetics and politics are essentially inseparable. Thus, if one wishes to fully comprehend the ramifications of the aesthetic discussion, a necessary detour must be taken through Rancière's political writings.

Aesthetics and Politics: Creating *Dissensus*

The unbreakable connection between aesthetics and politics in Rancière's thought is best demonstrated in the notion of the distribution of the sensible. The distribution of the sensible, according to Rancière, is "a 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" (*The Politics of Aesthetics* 12). Put differently, the distribution of the sensible determines the way in which we interpret and understand our perceived reality; thus, it is that which enables the formation of a sphere of shared meaning. The structure of a given society, the social roles and functions within it, the accepted denotations of words, these are all parts of the distribution of the sensible. It is important to comprehend that the distribution of the sensible always performs a double task – that of including and that of excluding. On the one hand, it determines the way in which we constitute a realm of shared experience, namely the "ways of defining a world that is common" (Tanke 6). In this sense, the distribution of the sensible defines what is included, and in what way it is to be included. On the other hand, by doing so it also sets the boundaries of that shared experience, hence determines what is excluded from it.

Tying this notion to the previous discussion concerning the two artistic regimes, it is now apparent that each of them contains, at its very foundations, a certain distribution of the sensible. What is also apparent from this linkage is the fact that these distributions are unmistakably different from one another. The evident conclusion, therefore, is that the distribution of the sensible is in principle a contingent system; namely, it is subject to various changes and transformations. But despite its contingency, as it is comprised of "*self-evident* facts of sense perception," when perceived from within, the distribution of the sensible is most likely to *appear* necessary. This, to be sure, is by no means accidental. For the appearance of necessity is also the most efficient way to ensure stability.

As it affects the way in which we conduct our existence in common, the distribution of the sensible is in no way exclusive to artistic regimes. It can also be traced at the basis of any particular political regime, what Rancière refers to as *police*. The police order, according to Rancière, is "the law, generally implicit, that defines a party's share or lack of it. But to define this, you first must define the configuration of the perceptible in which one or the other is inscribed" (*Disagreement* 29). The police order, based upon a certain distribution of the sensible, regulates the behaviour of members in a given society. It classifies the various parts and parties in society, assigns them the appropriate roles and defines the appropriate ways for comporting within them. That is to say, it determines the proper ways for participation in the community. At the same time, the police order is also characterised by Rancière as "a 'partition of the sensible' [*le partage du sensible*] whose principle is the absence of a void and of a supplement" ("Ten Theses on Politics"). The endeavour to create a social order free of redundancy is in fact an attempt to construct a social order in which everyone and everything is accounted for; in which the count of the population is equal to the sum of the parts and parties comprising it. Put differently, this is an attempt to *prevent* a situation in which "a part of those who have no part" in the existing distribution of the sensible is to be found. This endeavour often translates into an effort to include everyone and everything under the prevailing distribution. However, as every distribution is unavoidably excluding, just as it is including, this effort amounts, at best, to a deception. The

illusion of an all-encompassing police order is further sustained by the identification of law and fact, which results in an appearance of necessity. And this, according to Rancière, is the meaning of *consensus*.

But what happens once this appearance is compromised, exposing the entire system for the contingent system it actually is? The answer, as maintained by Rancière, would be *politics*. Political action, therefore, is an action that undermines the prevalent police order, by reinstating the supplement it sought to force out. By participation of those who have no part in the existing police – a participation that by its very nature is heterogeneous to the police order – the supplementary part that was previously uncounted forces its way into the sensible and obliges the community to take into account the fact of it being uncounted. Thus, a different distribution of the sensible is revealed and litigiously contrasted with the existing one. Police and politics, therefore, refer “to two distributions of the sensible, to two ways of framing a sensory space, of seeing or not seeing common objects in it, of hearing or not hearing in it subjects that designate them or reason in their relation” (*Dissensus* 92).

The different distribution of the sensible, the one held up against the existing distribution in the act of politics, is of an egalitarian nature. For the true stakes of political action is the demand, posed by an ostracised or marginalised part of the community, to be recognised as *an equal partner* in the general discourse (Žižek 70). The prevailing distribution is always one of inequality, since in every distribution certain objects are seen while others remain invisible; a certain speech is heard as discourse while others are considered as nothing more than mere noise. Thus, the demand to be recognised as a legitimate partner in the public realm, is in fact a demand, as Todd May puts it, “to reject the marginalized position to which one has been assigned, not for the sake of another or different position, but for the sake of nothing at all other than one’s own equality” (May 49). In this sense, “The essence of equality is not so much to unify as to declassify, to undo the supposed naturalness of orders and replace it with the controversial figures of division” (*On the Shores of Politics* 32-3). As argued in the citation by Todd May, it is important to acknowledge that the declassification brought on by political action is not performed for the sake of reclassification. True, political action can certainly result in a reclassification, in a substitution of one distribution of the sensible for another. But as soon as such a replacement has occurred, the realm of politics is once again abandoned for that of the police. The moment of politics, therefore, is “a purely negative moment” (May 50). Breaking with the restrictions and the hierarchies of the police, the moment of politics is an emancipatory and egalitarian moment. And above all, in opposition to the police’s tendency to strive towards a stable state of consensus, the moment of politics is a moment of *dissensus*.

One possible way to create a dissensus, namely to engage in political action, would be through what Rancière calls *political disagreement* (*la mésentente*). According to Rancière, “we should take disagreement to mean a determined kind of speech situation: one in which one of the interlocutors at once understands and does not understand what the other is saying” (*Disagreement* x). The reason the two parties in this exchange understand one another is that both of them operate within the same distribution of the sensible. The fact that at the same time they are unable to understand each other, results from the attempt made by one of them to call attention to a different distribution of the sensible, heterogeneous to the existing one. This borderline position of being both counted and uncounted, both apprehended and misapprehended, is precisely what enables the act of calling into question the prevailing distribution of the sensible. Hence, although essentially a speech act, political disagreement “clearly is not to do with words alone” (xi). The emergence of something that cannot be accounted for, a supplement that can neither be included under the existing definitions nor can it any longer be ignored, creates a gap, an interval that forces us to re-examine the limits of intelligibility and to think our entire sphere of common sense anew.

The Possibility of Resistance: *Mésentente* and *Différend*

Going back to the previous deliberation, Rancière's resentment towards the current "discourse of unrepresentability" can be now understood in political terms. The representative regime of art imposed severe restrictions and set firm boundaries upon representation. That is to say, the distribution of the sensible found at the basis of this regime formulated a clear classification as to what is included in it and what is excluded from it. Precisely because of this, however, the possibility of undermining that distribution was very much present in the representative regime. If the act causing *dissensus* is essentially an act of heterogenous participation, then the clearer the boundaries are set, the easier it is to recognise that which is exterior, hence heterogenic, to them. Thus, the prospect of *broadening* the field of experience, an occurrence that is by all means political, was in fact quite considerable in such a regime. The aesthetic regime of art, however, is a horse of a different colour. Rejecting the restrictions and the limitations of the previous regime, the underlying premise at the base of the aesthetic regime is the complete accessibility of every subject to any form of expression. As such, it gives the impression of being utterly emancipated and egalitarian. However, as all regimes are founded upon certain distributions of the sensible, and as all distributions of the sensible are in some way excluding, the aesthetic regime proclaims to complete openness which in fact it does not possess.

Nevertheless, it is quite easy to be dazzled by its appearance and to believe that within the aesthetic regime, everything that *can* be seen or heard is *in fact* seen and heard. Pursuing this line of thought, however, will inevitably lead to the conclusion that if everything that *can* be understood is *in fact* understood, yet certain things cannot be given any proper meaning or explanation, then they must be unthinkable, unrepresentable in principle. Lyotard's notions of complete Otherness and of sublime art, which bears witness to the existence of something that cannot be grasped or presented, follow this exact logic. Lyotard detects a severe brake between the unarticulable realm of sensibility and the articulable realm (the *logos*). This leads him to the conclusion that "the political can only arise from speaking, which alone can create an articulable event" (Déotte 84). The articulable realm consists of different phrase regimens, and phrases from different regimens can be linked together according to a certain genre of discourse. However, different genres of discourse cannot be assessed by a universal rule, as none of them "enjoys a universal authority" (*The Differend* xii). Thus, to the extent that one of them takes the lead, it necessarily wrongs others by creating a *differend*.

"A case of differend between two parties," writes Lyotard, "takes place when the 'regulation' of the conflict that opposes them is done in the idiom of one of the parties while the wrong suffered by the other is not signified in that idiom" (*The Differend* 9). Although this formulation bears several characteristics that are similar to Rancière's *Mésentente*, the two are essentially different, as they result from two fundamentally different positions. Lyotard's *differend* is restricted to modes of arguing, whereas Rancière's *Mésentente* "is less concerned with arguing than with what can be argued, the presence or absence of a common object between X and Y, . . . the very capacity of the interlocutors to present it" (*Disagreement* xii). As it asserts an unmistakable relation between the possibility of arguing and the realm of sensibility, Rancière's position acknowledges the possibility of re-defining the prevailing discourse, of engaging in an action that would change it by appealing to a different distribution of the sensible. According to Lyotard, however, the very possibility for such an occurrence cannot be entertained. Thus, as the political realm in his view is destined to create wrongs it cannot even properly acknowledge, he turns for answers to sublime art, a form of art that by "approaching presence without recourse to the means of presentation" (*The Inhuman* 139), can at least attest to the existence of a wrong. But by embracing such a view this position rejects, by the same token, any possibility for true resistance. Thus, claims Rancière, in this approach "art no longer carries any promise" (*Aesthetics and its Discontents* 105).

By this, it is now apparent, the emancipatory promise found in the aesthetic regime is shuttered and turned into its opposite. For according to this view, certain things, unthinkable things, are destined to remain ostracised and can only be included by means of exclusion. This notion, claims

Rancière, is paradoxical in nature, since in order to include the excluded, to declare certain things as unthinkable, they have to be rendered entirely thinkable *as unthinkable*. This is why “this inflated usage subsumes under a single concept all sorts of phenomena, processes and notions, . . . and it surrounds them all with the same aura of *holy terror*” (“Are Some Things Unrepresentable?” 109, emphasis mine). The proscription implied by this concept thwarts any prospect of ever expanding the limits of discourse, as it pretends to already account for everything, either as thinkable or as the “forbidden grounds” of the unthinkable. And this, for Rancière, is the core of the problem. For this mechanism, in his view, is in fact perfectly equivalent to the consensual one. By declaring a fundamental incommensurability, in effect it strives to include everything, either as thinkable or as complete Otherness. By doing so, it leaves no opportunity for an interval to be created, for a *dissensus* to occur. Similarly, treating the word of the witness as attesting to the existence of something that is entirely unthinkable also means depriving it of the very ability to bring about any sort of *change* in the present reality. In this sense, this mechanism is *depoliticising*. It shifts the discussion from political grounds to ethical grounds. Ethics, here, means “the kind of thinking which establishes the identity between an environment, a way of being and a principle of action . . . the growing indistinction between fact and law brings about unprecedented dramaturgy of infinite evil, justice and redemption” (“The Ethical Turn of Aesthetics and Politics” 2).

Witnesses and Pseudo-Witnesses: Agamben and the Paradox of Testimony

Lyotard’s notion of complete Otherness, however, is certainly not the only instance of such an ethical turn. A different argumentation altogether, that nonetheless bears similar consequences, is formulated by another prominent thinker in the current ‘political-ethical discourse’ – Giorgio Agamben. Drawing from Schmitt’s definition of sovereignty and from Foucault’s notion of biopolitics, Agamben seeks to analyse our political existence using a combination of both conceptualisations. According to Schmitt, the sovereign “is he who decides on the exception” (*Political Theology* 5). That is to say, the sovereign is the one who decides when the entire juridical system must be suspended. The sovereign power, therefore, is the power to call a state of exception. Foucault’s notion of biopower refers to control mechanisms that regulate the life of the population. In Agamben’s formulation, the two forms of power are associated through a third notion, that of *Homo Sacer*. *Homo sacer*, a juridical term originally found in Roman law, is the one who cannot be sacrificed, yet whose life can be harmed or even taken with no juridical consequences. Once the sovereign power is equated with the power of control over life and death, the figure of *homo sacer* comes to designate the opposite pole of sovereignty. For “the sovereign is the one with respect to whom all men are potentially *homines sacri*, and *homo sacer* is the one with respect to whom all men act as sovereigns” (*Homo Sacer* 53). However, at present times, claims Agamben, the two poles seem to be much closer than one might suspect, to the extent that “we are all virtually *homines sacri*” (68). This means that the state of exception becomes the constant horizon of our entire political existence. A continuous line is then drawn between all forms of political regime, be it democracy or totalitarianism. Each of them, as Rancière puts it, “proves to be already ensnared in the biopolitical trap” (“Who Is the Subject of the Rights of Man?” 301).

Once the state of exception is understood as the rule of modernity, the paradigmatic example for its realisation is that of the camp, the space in which the law is suspended in principle. The camp is thus regarded “not as a historical fact and an anomaly belonging to the past (even if still verifiable) but in some way as the hidden matrix and *nomos* of the political space in which we are still living” (95). In light of this, it is easy to understand why in Rancière’s view, Agamben’s formulation “performs the vice” of an ethical turn. “*The camp*,” says Agamben, “is a hybrid of law and fact in which the two terms have become indistinguishable” (97). This lack of distinction that unifies law and fact into one comprehensive account of human existence is precisely the kind of argumentation that wishes to include everything under the same explanation, and thus ends up leaving no room for political action. This line of reasoning strives to account for everything in a

way that makes sense. But by doing so, it also shuts out and *ignores* the possibility of *dissensus* (which, according to Rancière, is a constant possibility and therefore must be entertained).

Identifying the camp as the “hidden matrix” of modernity, Agamben turns to closely examine the most radical form of the camp – the death camps in the Holocaust. [5] In extreme situations, when the state of exception and the normal situation “show their complicity, . . . they illuminate each other, so to speak, from the inside” (*Remnants of Auschwitz* 50). The death camp, in this sense, is the place in which the inability to distinguish reaches its peak. It is the place in which bare lives are exposed in their very nakedness, to the extent that both victim and tormentor are perceived as ones who have lost their humanity. In order to contemplate life in the death camps, to make them in some form accessible to thought, Agamben turns to the word of the witness. However, when he delves into the testimonies of survivors of the death camp, he soon comes to embrace the paradoxical contention made by Primo Levi, according to which the testimonies at hand are not the words of true witnesses, as the true witnesses are in fact those that have no testimony to offer.

“Testimony,” says Agamben, “contains a lacuna. The survivors agree about this” (33). The witnesses are by definitions those who survived. Yet those who survived are the exception, those who never “touched bottom.” And those who “touched bottom,” either did not return to tell their tale, or “returned mute,” as described by the survivors. “The survivors speak in their stead, by proxy, as pseudo-witnesses; they bear witness to the missing testimony” (34). Who is the true witness, then? “The untestifiable, that to which no one has borne witness, has a name. In the jargon of the camp it is *der Muselmann*” (41). The true witnesses, therefore, are those whose bare lives have been reduced to mere biological existence to such an extent that they are deprived even of language, of thought (39). The only testimony they can provide is their mere silence, the fact that they do not testify. The paradox resides in identifying the *Muselmannen*, the ones who cannot bear witness, as the only true witnesses of the death camps. But this paradox, “Levi’s paradox,” is the only way of “understanding Auschwitz – if such a thing is possible,” maintains Agamben (82).

At the end of his book, however, in a rather surprising note, Agamben brings forth a series of testimonies of the ultimate witnesses to the horrors of the death camps – the *Muselmannen*. The existence of such testimonies, he asserts, “not only does not contradict Levi’s paradox but, rather, fully verifies it” (165). However, is this contention truly apt? According to Levi’s paradox that Agamben willingly endorses, the true witness – the *Muselmann* – is defined by his lack of ability to bear witness or to testify. Correspondingly, testimony is understood by this very definition as a stand-in for the truth, as the words of those who are not the true witnesses. The existence of testimonies of “men who survived the conditions of being *Muselmannen* and now seek to tell of it,” calls at least for a re-examination of the previous definitions. But the theoretical structure posed by Agamben cannot sustain such re-evaluation. Hence, it cannot hold on to both the old definitions and the new testimonies either. We are thus left with a choice of two options, none of which seem quite compelling: we can either accept that these men are *Muselmannen* and reject their testimonies, or accept the testimonies at the price of depriving these men the acknowledgment of their being *Muselmannen*. We might say that they once were *Muselmannen*, namely true witnesses; but by “seeking to tell of it” they have ceased to be true witnesses and inevitably become “pseudo-witnesses.” [6]

Trying to account for everything, thus, leaves us with a theoretical framework that cannot account for what seems to be the heart of the issue at hand – the possibility of *testimonies of the true witnesses*. Looking at this unfortunate disarray from Rancière’s perspective, however, reveals an entirely different picture. For according to Rancière, “political predicates are open predicates: they open up a dispute about what they exactly entail and whom they concern in which cases” (“Who Is the Subject of the Rights of Man?” 303). And such a dispute – which is none other than a form of political action – occurs precisely when a group that was hitherto thought to be deprived of the ability to speak suddenly begins to talk in a way that makes sense. The moment in which the

supplementary part tries to work its way into the existing distribution of the sensible, and by this forces us to reconsider our entire realm of shared perception, is therefore not a moment to refrain from or to resist, but rather to welcome and to embrace. For this is exactly a moment of politics, of *dissensus*.

Conclusion: Words, yet more Words

In an essay called "The Emancipated Spectator," originally given as a lecture at the Summer Academy of Arts in Frankfurt, Rancière concludes with the following words:

I am aware that of all this it might be said: words, yet more words, and nothing but words. I shall not take it as an insult. We have heard so many orators passing off their words as more than words, as formulas for embarking on a new existence; . . . we see so many installations and spectacles transformed into religious mysteries that it is not necessarily scandalous to hear it said that words are merely words. To dismiss the fantasies of the word made flesh and the spectator rendered active, to know that words are merely words and spectacles merely spectacles, can help us arrive at a better understanding of how words and images, stories and performances, can change something of the world we live in. (23)

Understanding the words of witnesses as mere words – not as words attesting to complete Otherness or to the unthinkable, not as manifesting the paradox of the-true-witness-that-cannot-bear-witness, but rather as mere words – is precisely the way in which these words "can *change something* of the world we live in." For the instance in which something that was deemed unthinkable reveals itself to be *merely words*, is also the instance in which we are driven to consider anew the world we live in.

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Endnotes

1. In several different places in his writings Rancière mentions a third artistic regime that in fact chronologically preceded the other two – the ethical regime of images. (See, for example, *The Politics of Aesthetics* 20-21). However, despite being an indispensable part of the complete historical account (hitherto), this regime bears no relevance for this particular deliberation, and will therefore not be discussed here.
2. As maintained by Gabriel Rockhill, it is important to notice that Rancière's own methodology is tacitly in accord with the aesthetic regime ("The Silent Revolution" 56). This is also the case with regards to this particular investigation, as manifested in the

formulation of the question of unrepresentability – “*under what conditions* might it be said that certain events cannot be represented?” For the aesthetic regime is precisely the one in which phenomena are understood by revealing the conditions from which they presumably stem.

3. Rancière does mention Camus's *L'Étranger* as one of the possible sources of influence on Antelme's *L'Espèce humaine*, but neither elaborates on that matter nor demonstrates it. Rather, he turns to a different literary piece – Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*. I believe, however, that comparing *L'Espèce humaine* with *L'Étranger* will prove even more beneficial in further strengthening Rancière's arguments regarding this matter. That said, choosing Camus's *L'Étranger* is more useful to my argument as well, especially in light of the impending discussion of the theme of the witness.
4. In an essay concerning Camus's *The Plague*, Shoshana Felman raises the claim that in his writings, Camus exemplifies what she calls “bearing literary witness to the Holocaust” (*Testimony* 95). While I certainly agree with Felman's contention with regards to literary pieces such as *The Plague*, I do not think that such a definition can be applied as far as *The Stranger* is concerned.
5. Describing the writing of Agamben as dealing with the Holocaust is somewhat problematic, as Agamben himself utterly rejects the use of the term “Holocaust”: “not only does the term imply an unacceptable equation between crematoria and altars; it also continues a semantic heredity that is from its inception anti-Semitic” (31). However, as maintained by Uri S. Cohen in his introduction to the Hebrew translation of *Remnants of Auschwitz*, the very thought that there could exist a word – in any European language whatsoever – that can indicate the event of the systematic extermination of the Jews without being in some way accomplice to that same act of extermination is highly improbable, not to say naive (18).
6. This formulation is quite similar in structure to that posed by Lyotard in *The Differend*: “should the victim seek to bypass this impossibility [to testify] and testify anyway to the wrong done to him or her, he or she comes up against the following argumentation: either the damages you complain about never took place, and your testimony is false; or else they took place, and since you are able to testify to them, it is not a wrong that has been done to you, but merely a damage, and your testimony is still false” (5).

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