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Feminism After Rancière: Women in J.M. Coetzee and Jeff Wall

By Arne De Boever

Rancière's Political Subject

In Marx, the revolutionary moment is a moment of false promises. Now that young Euro-US folks want universalism again, I am thinking about this more carefully. (Spivak in Butler and Spivak 120)

In the "Glossary of Technical Terms" that accompanies his translation of Jacques Rancière's *The Politics of Aesthetics*, Gabriel Rockhill defines what Rancière calls a political subject as

neither a political lobby nor an individual who seeks adequate representation for his or her interests and ideas. It is an empty operator that produces cases of political dispute by challenging the established framework of identification and classification. (Rockhill 90)

In this essay, I will be concerned with Rockhill's definition of Rancière's political subject as an "empty operator," specifically in the tension between this empty operator and "the established framework of identification and classification" that Rockhill mentions. The latter is referred to later on in the same definition as the "police order" (90). This is Rancière's name for "an overall distribution of the sensible that purports to provide a totalising account of the population by providing everyone a title and a role within the social edifice" (89). If the police order is associated with titles and roles, with identification and classification, the emptiness of the political subject breaks with this established framework of distribution, thereby marking the birth of politics.

Given Rockhill's characterisation of Rancière's theory of the political subject, one understands why "identity" is not usually a term that is associated with Rancière's work. Rockhill's description of Rancière's political subject reveals instead how Rancière is highly critical of identity, more precisely of the ways in which identity operates within (and appears to become, in Rockhill's definition, identical to) an overall distribution of the sensible that Rancière calls the police. However, such a description risks forgetting the precise ways whereby, in Rancière's work, the political subject's challenge to the police comes about.

As Rockhill notes in the second half of his definition, "the manifestation of politics only occurs via specific acts of implementation" (90). The adjective "specific" appears to return some content to the empty operator that is mentioned in the first part of the definition. Given the tension between this content and the operator's emptiness, however, the relation between the two is bound to remain uneasy. This is why, as Rockhill indicates in the closing lines of his definition, "political subjects forever remain precarious figures that hesitate at the borders of silence maintained by the

police" (90). Rancière's political subject thus appears to be precariously situated at the uneasy border between the empty and the specific.

To make this a little more concrete, I propose to have a closer look at an example of a political subject taken from Rancière's work that mobilises this tension between the empty and the specific particularly well. In a short essay titled "Who is the Subject of the Rights of Man?" initially published in a special issue of *South Atlantic Quarterly* on human rights, Rancière considers Hannah Arendt's propositions about the "Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen" (1789). As Rancière notes, Arendt

makes them [the "Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen"] a quandary which can be put as follows: either the rights of the citizen are the rights of man – but the rights of man are the rights of the unpoliticised person; they are the rights of those who have no rights, which amounts to nothing – or the rights of man are the rights of the citizen, the rights attached to the fact of being a citizen of such or such constitutional state. This means they are the rights of those who have rights, which amounts to a tautology. ("Who is the Subject" 302)

For Rancière, Arendt views the declaration of rights as either "nothing" or "a tautology." However, he then goes on to argue that these two positions need to be supplemented with a third, which he states as follows: "the Rights of Man are the rights of those who have not the rights that they have and have the rights that they have not" (302). What does this mean?

The short answer is that for Rancière, the rights of man are the rights of what he calls a political subject: they are rights that "open up a dispute about what they exactly entail and whom they concern in which cases" ("Who is the Subject" 303). The example that he develops to clarify this third position is also taken from the French Revolution: he refers to the case of Olympe de Gouges. De Gouges' famous point, as Rancière explains, was that "if women were entitled to go to the scaffold, they were entitled to go to the assembly" (303). Although women were supposedly "equal-born," they were nevertheless not "equal citizens" and "They could neither vote nor be elected" (303). Rancière continues:

The reason for the prescription was, as usual, that they could not fit the purity of political life. They allegedly belonged to the private, domestic life. And the common good of the community had to be kept apart from the activities, feelings, and interests of private life. (303)

De Gouges' position revealed that these lines separating private life from political life could not be so clearly drawn. She thus challenged the distribution of the sensible in which women were caught up.

Although the "wrong" that de Gouges as a political subject uncovered could not be "*heard*" by the lawmakers (the subaltern, as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak already knew, can certainly *speak*; but the real question is whether it can be *heard*), it could nevertheless be enacted "in the construction of a dissensus" (304), as Rancière goes on to explain:

A division put in the "common sense" dispute about what is given, about the frame within which we see something as given. Women could make a twofold demonstration. They could demonstrate that they were deprived of the rights that they had, thanks to the Declaration of Rights. And they could demonstrate, through their public action, that they had the rights that the constitution denied to them, that they could enact those rights. So they could act as subjects of the Rights of Man in the precise sense that I have mentioned. They acted as subjects that did not have the rights that they had and had the rights that they had not. . . . This is what I call a dissensus . . . putting two worlds in one and the same world. A political subject, as I

understand it, is a capacity for staging such scenes of dissensus" (304).

Now that we have Rancière's definition of a political subject, let us reconsider it through the lens of Rockhill's definition, specifically through the lens of the tensions between the "empty operator" and "the established framework of identification and classification," and between the "empty operator" and the "specific acts of implementation," that structure it. As the discussion of de Gouges makes clear, one can only with difficulty call Rancière's political subject entirely "empty." Although de Gouges challenges, in line with Rockhill's definition, the overall distribution of the sensible that Rancière calls the police, she does so not as an "empty operator" but as a "woman" – in other words, through what Rockhill in his definition refers to as "a specific act of implementation." Indeed, it is worth keeping in mind that de Gouges is the author of a text entitled "Declaration of the Rights of Women and of the Female Citizen" (1791) – and not of a declaration of the rights of some "empty operator."

It is thus hardly the case in Rancière's work that the "empty operator" completely wins out over "identity." Rather, "identity" operates at two different levels in his theory of the political subject: it is *both* associated with the police order that the political subject challenges, *and* with the position that marks this challenge. It is associated with *both* the distribution of the sensible *and* with its redistribution. In a time in which universalism appears to have made somewhat of a comeback, this forces one to think about universalism more carefully (as Spivak urges her listeners to do in the quote at the beginning of this section). Rockhill recognises this in the second part of his definition. In the next section of this essay, I take my cue from Rancière's discussion of de Gouges to consider how such an understanding of the political subject may open up new possibilities for feminist politics today.

Feminism After Rancière

Rancière's work has found some resonances – not always explicitly acknowledged – in contemporary instances of feminist discourse. Consider, for example, the work of Judith Butler. When Butler in a recent conversation with Spivak discusses Arendt's work on rights, she mentions the street demonstrations by illegal residents in various Californian cities during the Spring of 2006. Butler points out that "the US national anthem was sung [during these demonstrations] in Spanish as was the Mexican anthem" (Butler and Spivak 58). "The emergence of '*nuestro himno*,'" she observes, "introduced the interesting problem of the plurality of the nation, of the 'we' and the 'our': to whom does the anthem belong?" (58) For Butler,

it's not just that many people sang together – which is true – but also that singing is a plural act, an articulation of plurality. If, as Bush claimed at the time, the national anthem can only be sung in English, then the nation is clearly restricted to a linguistic majority, and language becomes one way of asserting criterial control over who belongs and who does not. (59)

For Butler, it is the performative act of the singing, an act that she defines, echoing Arendt's definition of action in *The Human Condition*, as "a plural act, an articulation of plurality," that comes to mark a politics. [1]

Those singing the US national anthem in Spanish thus become an example of what Rancière calls a political subject, challenging the overall distribution of the sensible that he calls the police. In an essay titled "Contemporary Art and the Politics of Aesthetics," he defines the politics of aesthetics as the politics of inventing new distributions of the sensible (see *Communities of Sense: Rethinking Aesthetics and Politics*). Such definitions of the politics of aesthetics recur throughout his work, especially in his most recent publications. I quote here just one other revealing passage from *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*:

Politics consists in reconfiguring the distribution of the sensible which defines the

common of a community, to introduce into it new subject and objects, to render visible what had not been, and to make heard as speakers those who had been perceived as mere noisy animals. This work involved in creating dissensus informs an aesthetics of politics that operates at a complete remove from the forms of staging power and mass mobilization which Benjamin referred to as the “aestheticisation of politics.” (25)

Butler’s example of the illegal immigrants singing the US national anthem in Spanish as well as the Mexican anthem during their demonstrations resonates with this definition.

One arguably also recognises this theorisation of politics in Butler’s earlier discussion of Sophocles’ tragic heroine Antigone. Although Butler does not explicitly mention Rancière here either, the closing paragraph of her book on Antigone reads like a summary of his definition of a political subject. I quote at length to draw out the affinities between their positions:

Who then is Antigone within such a scene, and what are we to make of her words, words that become dramatic events, performative acts? She is *not* of the human *but* speaks in its language. *Prohibited* from action, she *nevertheless* acts, and her act is hardly a simple assimilation to an existing norm. And in *acting*, as one who has no right to act, she upsets the vocabulary of kinship that is a precondition for the human, implicitly raising the question for us of what those preconditions really must be. She speaks *within* the language of entitlement from which she is *excluded*, particularly in the language of the claim with which no final identification is possible. If she is human, then the human has entered into *catachresis*: we no longer know its proper usage. And to the extent that she *occupies* the language that can *never belong* to her, she functions as a *chiasm* within the vocabulary of political norms. If kinship is the precondition of the human, then Antigone is the occasion for a new field of the human, achieved through political *catachresis*, the one that happens when the *less than human* speaks *as human*, when gender is displaced, and kinship founders on its own founding laws. She acts, she speaks, she becomes one for whom the speech act is a fatal crime, but this fatality exceeds her life and enters the discourse of intelligibility as its own promising fatality, the social form of its aberrant, unprecedented future. (Butler, 82, emphasis added)

In this passage, Antigone becomes Butler’s Olympe de Gouges. Like de Gouges, she is a woman who, as a woman, challenges the distribution of the sensible and “puts two worlds in one and the same world,” as Rancière puts it. Note the number of rhetorical constructions that mark this politics of dissensus: “not ... but”; “prohibited ... nevertheless”; “acting, as one who has not right to act”; “within ... excluded”; “occupies ... never belong”; “less than human ... as human”). In making these constructions, she displaces “gender,” and creates a new field of “the human.” Importantly, Butler calls this politics a politics of catachresis and of the “chiasm,” thus linking the particular politics she is interested in to aesthetics. It is from “catachresis” (the inappropriate use of one word for another), and “chiasm” (when the order of words in the first of two parallel clauses is reversed in the second) that Butler’s political subject is born.

Grafting Butler and Rancière together, I am thus characterising the politics that Butler theorises as an aesthetic politics. Given Butler’s earlier work on gender, however, as well as her reference to Antigone’s acts as “performative” acts, one might wonder whether it would not be more precise to refer to the politics she theorises as a “performative” rather than an “aesthetic” politics. The question may be crucial, since it asks whether the performative and the aesthetic can be brought together. If one follows Butler’s definition of the performative and Rancière’s definition of the aesthetic, it seems they can. But such semblance also risks erasing the differences between their positions. How is this difference played out when it comes to their respective feminist politics?

If Butler's performative feminist politics, which she summarises in the subtitle of *Gender Trouble* as "Feminism and the Subversion of Identity," [2] can be characterised as anti-essentialist, Rancière's aesthetic politics and the political subject that comes with it has a peculiar relation to this anti-essentialism. On the one hand, given that Rancière's political subject is an "empty operator" that challenges the police order's distribution of the sensible, his politics is also anti-essentialist. However, as I discussed in the first part of this essay, such an understanding of Rancière's political subject risks forgetting that such a subject is born only from "specific acts of implementation." Although de Gouges is in part an empty operator claiming universal rights, it is important to note that she puts forth this claim as a woman by writing a "Declaration of the Rights of Women and of the Female Citizen." This appears to reinsert some essence into the anti-essentialism of the empty operator. Rancière's *aesthetic* politics thus forces one to think beyond the anti-essentialism of *performative* politics. It enables a feminist politics that would "think, under the name of 'woman,' an essence that is empty but resistant, and that definitively makes its own disappearance impossible" (Malabou). [3] These are the words with which Catherine Malabou has characterised her own feminist politics in the still untranslated book *Changer de différence: Le féminin et la question philosophique*.

Malabou, who has engaged in public debates with Butler [4], calls on her readers "to interrogate what remains of woman after the sacrifice of its being" (Malabou, "Prière"). Such an interrogation "could mark . . . a new era of feminist struggle, and reorient the fight" "beyond *both* essentialism and anti-essentialism [emphases mine]" (Malabou, "Prière"). This means, in Malabou's terms, that one would think woman as *plastic*: woman can *both* give and receive form, and explode it. [5] From a Rancièrian perspective, it does not come as a surprise that Malabou would develop such a position through her work on aesthetics. Indeed, as her earlier book *The Future of Hegel* reveals, she takes the category of plasticity from Hegel's work on the fine arts. It is thus from the aesthetic that a feminist politics beyond, or next to, the performative is born. [6]

Although Malabou's and Rancière's positions are of course also different, Malabou's characterisation of her feminist politics nevertheless enables one to grasp something about an aesthetic feminist politics after Rancière that would be different from Butler's performative feminist politics. Such a shift from the performative to the aesthetic cannot but effect one's reading of the feminist politics of actual works of art.

Lucy's Politics

Both Butler and Rancière have positioned themselves critically *vis-à-vis* the late twentieth-century "ethical turn" in the humanities and the social sciences. [7] Butler worries, in a text titled "Ethical Ambivalence," [8] that such a turn to ethics might constitute an escape from politics. However, in her own work she seems to have shifted back towards ethics after the September 11 terror attacks, perhaps because ten years after "Ethical Ambivalence," politics risks becoming too dominant, and thus ambivalent. [9] Rancière too has struggled with the ethical turn in an essay titled "The Ethical Turn of Aesthetics and Politics." [10] The rising interest in Rancière's aesthetic politics could arguably be understood in light of the post-9/11 "political turn" in the humanities and the social sciences – but of this phrase too, Rancière is, like Butler, critical. [11] Although much is at stake in these debates, I leave them aside in favor of an exploration of the politics of J.M. Coetzee's novel *Disgrace*, and Jeff Wall's photographs *Picture for Women* and *Mimic*. I approach these works through the lens of Rancière's understanding of politics in order to investigate further the relations between feminist and aesthetic politics that I have begun to uncover.

Much has already been written about J.M. Coetzee's novel *Disgrace*, especially within the branch of literary criticism called "ethical criticism." [12] Some of this work has revolved around the ethical philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas and the challenges to Levinas' ethics that *Disgrace* poses. For the purposes of this essay, I would like to explore the connection between feminist and aesthetic politics in *Disgrace*. Such an exploration might strike one as odd, especially given the

problematic position of women in the novel, and arguably within Coetzee's work as a whole. My hope is that by considering one of Coetzee's women characters – Lucy in *Disgrace* – through the lens of my discussion of Rancière's political subject, I might be able to cast another light on the aesthetic politics of *Disgrace*.

Lucy is a white lesbian who lives in the predominantly black Eastern Cape province in South Africa. She makes a living by selling flowers at the market, and by taking care of pets (dogs, mostly) for people who have gone on a holiday. About halfway through the novel, Lucy's father, David Lurie, comes to stay with her after he has resigned from his teaching job in Cape Town because of a sexual harassment scandal. When Lucy and her father take one of the dogs out for a walk one morning, they encounter two black men and a boy. The trio turns out to be waiting for them when they get back to the farm. The men claim to have come from Erasmuskraal, where there is no water or electricity, because they need to make a phone-call: the sister of one of the men is having a baby. Lucy allows the man into the house, but when the other follows by his own initiative a few moments later, her father knows that something is wrong. Finding the front door locked, he works his way into the house via the kitchen, where he receives a blow "on the crown of the head" (Coetzee, 93). While he is locked into the lavatory, his daughter is raped, the house is robbed, and all but one of Lucy's dogs are killed. Before taking off in Lurie's car, the attackers douse him in methylated spirits and set him on fire. He extinguishes the flames with water from the toilet bowl.

I am interested in the disagreement that develops between Lucy and Lurie in the aftermath of this horrifying attack. [13] Lurie wants to call the police and press charges for what happened. Lucy agrees, but on the condition that her father stick to the story of what happened to *him*; *she* will tell what happened to *her*. When the police show up to take Lurie's and Lucy's testimony, Lucy does not talk about the rape. This angers her father. Raising the question with her as gently as he can, he asks: "Lucy, my dearest, why don't you want to tell? It was a crime. . . . You did not choose to be the object. You are an innocent party" (Coetzee, 111). "Can I guess?" he continues. "Are you trying to remind me of something? . . . Of what women undergo at the hands of men?" (111) This implicit reference to Lurie's own trial in Cape Town provokes a sharp reply from his daughter:

This has nothing to do with you, David. You want to know why I have not laid charge with the police. I will tell you, as long as you agree not to raise the subject again. The reason is that, as far as I am concerned, what happened to me is a purely private matter. In another time, in another place, it might be held to be a public matter. But in this place, at this time, it is not. It is my business, mine alone. . . . "This place being what?" [her father asks] . . . "This place being South Africa." (112)

In the context of Rancière's discussion of Olympe de Gouges, whose actions reconfigure the lines that draw the separation between private and public life, and the association of the former with women and the latter with men, this statement might strike one as profoundly conservative, given that Lucy appears to reaffirm women's association with private life. One would need to consider, however, how this association is played out within the particular distribution of the sensible – the framework of identification and classification, or the police-order – in which it occurs.

One way to read Lucy's position, as many have already done, [14] is with reference to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in South Africa, and the culture of confession – which is also a politics of confession, since it contributes to the reconciliation of South Africa's new national sovereignty – that it promotes. In response to this culture and politics of confession, Lucy insists on women's association to the private. At a later point in the novel, Lucy articulates this insistence in the language of rights that I began to discuss above: "Don't shout at me, David," she tells her father, who has once again reproached her for not pressing for any charges with the police for her rape: "This is my life. I am the one who has to live here. What happened to me is

my business, mine alone, not yours, and if there is one right I have it is the right not to be put on trial like this, not to have to justify myself – not to you, not to anyone else.” (Coetzee, 133) Within the loaded context of post-apartheid South Africa, and specifically of the TRC, Lucy claims a “right:” “the right not to be put on trial like this, not to have to justify myself.” Her words recall the lines from Jacques Derrida’s *The Gift of Death*, where Derrida discusses the “tyrannical” and “jealous” refusal “to present [oneself] before the violence that consists of asking for accounts and justifications, summonses to appear before the law of men. It declines the autobiography that is always also auto-justification, *ego-dicée*” (Derrida, 62).

Even more so, Lucy’s claim to “the right not to be put on trial” recalls Rancière’s discussion of rights, specifically the third position with which Rancière supplements Arendt’s discussion of rights: “the Rights of Man are the rights of those who have not the rights that they have and have the rights that they have not.” By claiming the right not to be put on trial, Lucy inscribes herself into this third position, but in a peculiar way: *by disclaiming a right that she has*. Impossibly, in a culture and politics of confession she brings the language of “non-confession” (as one critic has put it) and “politics” together, putting these two worlds into one. [15] Impossibly, given the long history of women’s exclusion from political life that Rancière evokes, Lucy turns women’s association with private life into a revolutionary position.

As a political subject, Lucy thus challenges several distributions of the sensible that are at work in Coetzee’s novel. She also challenges, however, the distribution of the sensible in the historical context in which the novel is situated. The country’s struggle in the aftermath of apartheid is, of course, to work through the violent relations between its white and black populations. This is, obviously, what *Disgrace* is about. It is in this light that the horrifying attack that produces the disagreement between Lucy and her father needs to be considered. This becomes perhaps most clear when Lucy, against the will of her father, announces that she has decided to continue living on the land where the attack took place. The decision becomes particularly difficult for her father to understand when Lucy’s black assistant, Petrus, becomes the co-proprietor of Lucy’s farm through a land transfer that aims to restore South Africa’s land to its native, black population. Nevertheless, Lucy decides to stay on, taking up the position of what is called in the novel a “bywoner” (Coetzee, 204): a poor tenant laborer, who mostly works for the landowner but also makes some profit for her- or himself.

In order to give Lucy protection, Petrus in fact proposes – via Lucy’s father – to marry her. Although Lurie tells Petrus that she will refuse, Lucy surprises her father yet again by accepting the proposal. As she explains, by proposing marriage to her Petrus is not offering “a church wedding followed by a honeymoon on the Wild Coast” (Coetzee, 203) but an “alliance, a deal. I contribute the land, in return for which I am allowed to creep under his wing. Otherwise, he wants to remind me, I am without protection. I am fair game” (203). What Lucy thus realises is the “impossible” community of a white, lesbian woman living under a black man’s wing/ of a black man taking a white, lesbian woman under his wing. It is neither the future for South Africa that her father imagined, nor the one that Petrus imagined. Her position marks instead the country’s radically “democratic” future: a future that would lie beyond the established framework of identification and classification – race (black/ white), gender (male/ female), class (owner/ tenant), and sexuality (straight/ gay) – in which South Africa, from Lucy’s perspective, is caught up. [16] It is in this sense that Lucy begins to appear as a representative of what Rancière calls “the part of those who have no part” (*Disagreement* 30): the political subject of a wrong, staging a dissensus from where other ways of living together can become possible.

The fascinating aspect of *Disgrace* is that the novel realises this particular politics at the level of its aesthetic. In the context of her discussion of *Disgrace*, Spivak has noted that the novel is focalised “relentlessly” through David Lurie. This insight leads Spivak to an important conclusion about the politics of aesthetics (she does not use this phrase, at least not here): [17]

The reader is provoked for he or she does not want to share in Lurie-the-chief-focaliser's inability to "read" Lucy as patient and agent. No reader is content with acting out the failure of reading. . . . This provocation into counterfocalisation is the "political" in political fiction, the transformation of a tendency into a crisis. (Spivak, 22)

It is, precisely, Lucy's internally excluded position of "the part of those who have no part" that becomes the novel's aesthetic: *Disgrace* focalises relentlessly through Lurie, thus provoking the reader into counterfocalisation, into taking up the cause of the internally excluded Lucy. While Lucy is thus an *empty* operator, to recall Rockhill's definition of Rancière's political subject, her emptiness "resists" and "makes its own disappearance impossible" (as Malabou puts it in her definition of a new feminist politics). In this sense, Lucy is also *specific* ("in this place, at this time:" "It is my business, mine alone;" "What happened to me is my business, mine alone").

Lucy is thus inscribed in the novel's aesthetic in a way that conforms with her politics. In other words: the aesthetic of *Disgrace* becomes a "sensible mode of being" (Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics* 22) that is particularly attuned to Lucy. It becomes Lucy's form-of-life. It is in this way that *Disgrace's* aesthetic is political. It is within this insight that one is located at the crossroads of aesthetics and politics in the book, and that the novel challenges its own potential complicity with the police.

Politics of Photography

Although in the case of *Disgrace*, one is of course dealing with a text, the language of focalisation and counterfocalisation reveals that the text's aesthetic politics is perhaps not so much of the order of the sayable but of the visible. How might a more explicitly visual aesthetic practice – such as photography, for example – enable one to further the connection between feminist and aesthetic politics in Rancière? How might the question of the image, to which Rancière has recently dedicated an entire book, [18] contribute to this connection? For this, I turn to two works by the Canadian photographer Jeff Wall – *Picture for Women* and *Mimic*. My discussion of these photographs will refer to Coetzee's *Disgrace*.

As anyone who has seen *Picture for Women* will have noticed, the photograph was taken in a mirror. At first sight, the photograph is deceptively simple. It appears to have been taken in the photographer's studio. It shows, on the left hand side, a woman; on the right hand side, there is the photographer, Jeff Wall. The middle of the image is taken up by Wall's camera. Upon closer consideration, one realises that the camera, because of the image it captures, can only have seen the *mirror*: its scope excludes both the *actual* woman and Wall. Instead, the camera sees only their mirror images. In this sense, Wall's *Picture for Women* is a "pure" picture, a "pure" image that does not include any actual people. It merely captures the reflections of the woman, the camera, and Wall. In a diagram published with his essay on Wall's oeuvre, Thierry de Duve lays out the particular distribution of the sensible that Wall practices in this image (see figure 1). In its geometrical layout, the diagram reveals a field cut up by the camera's scope, so that both the woman and Wall are standing on the outside.

Wall's distribution of the sensible recalls my discussion of Coetzee's distribution of the sensible in *Disgrace*. Both *Disgrace* and *Picture for Women* practice an aesthetic that represents woman without representing her, by leaving the actual woman partly out of consideration (or empty). Coetzee does this by keeping the focalisation of his narration entirely confined to Lurie; Wall by having his camera capture only the image of a woman. Both Coetzee and Wall thus provoke those who are engaging with their works into what Spivak calls "counterfocalisation". (22) It is in this sense that Wall's photograph is crucially not a "picture of a woman" but a "picture for women," a picture that challenges the distribution of the sensible in which women are caught up. Thus, the specific is reintroduced into the emptiness of Coetzee's and Wall's women. Like Rancière's political

subject, these women are empty *and* specific; like Malabou's feminism, they are beyond *both* essentialism *and* anti-essentialism.

Importantly, neither Coetzee's novel nor Wall's photograph remain stuck in the category of "woman." Wall himself enters into the frame of the photograph under almost exactly the same conditions as the woman he is photographing. Of course, there remains one important difference between Wall and the woman: unlike the woman, Wall is holding the shutter release mechanism of the camera. He is still the author of the distribution of the sensible that the camera brings into being. Along these lines, Coetzee has been criticised by feminist readers for authoring women – for speaking in the voice of women – in some of his novels. [19] One can think here, for example, of the woman Susan Barton who is cast away on Robinson Crusoe's island in Coetzee's novel *Foe*. In this novel, Coetzee speaks in Barton's voice, and some critics took him to task for it. It may be, however, that in the case of *Foe*, this particular feminist critique of Coetzee was missing the point: importantly, Barton is *not only* a woman *but also* the heroine of Defoe's novel *Roxana*. By speaking in the voice of Barton, Coetzee is thus not simply speaking in the voice of a woman, but also *in the voice of a character* – and one who suffers from its exposure to authorial power. Indeed, the novel's metafictional play with authorship reveals that Coetzee's concerns might not so much be with the power-relation between man and woman, but between author and character. [20] In both *Foe* and Wall's *Picture for Women*, there thus appears to be more at stake than merely "woman."

Indeed, like Coetzee's *Foe*, *Picture for Women* appears to overcome the identity of woman into broader aesthetic and political concerns. Although the politics of Wall's photograph might start with identity, they develop into something other than that, more similar to the notion of the "empty operator" in Rockhill's definition of Rancière's political subject. As the photograph's title emphasises, however, this "emptiness" cannot be the last word on the politics of Wall's photograph either: "woman" clearly continues to play an important, precarious and uneasy role in *Picture for Women*. Wall's photograph thus practices a peculiar feminist politics beyond both anti-essentialism and essentialism that recalls my earlier discussion of both Rancière and Malabou.

I insist on the importance of the feminist question for Wall's work because it is entirely left out of consideration in a recent essay by Walter Benn Michaels on the politics of Wall's photography. In an article entitled "The Politics of a Good Picture: Race, Class, and Form in Jeff Wall's *Mimic*," Walter Benn Michaels discusses the politics of Jeff Wall's 1982 photograph *Mimic*. [21] As Benn Michaels notes, *Mimic* (like *Picture for Women*) reflects the photographer's interest in social issues in this early period of his career. *Mimic* is a photograph about racism: its "protagonist" (179) is a white male making a racist gesture at an Asian male who he is passing in the street. What puzzles Benn Michaels, however, is that today Wall is no longer interested in these issues. Today, Wall is simply glad that the picture itself is good, and that it does not need any emphasis on social issues in order to be successful. Benn Michaels' question thus becomes "whether the picture's success has nothing to do with any politics" (177), as Wall appears to think, or whether there might not be "a politics of the good picture" (177) as such? Wall might think that it is not the social issues – politics – that make *Mimic* a good photograph; but surely, Benn Michaels seems to be asking, that does not mean that good pictures are entirely devoid of politics? The politics of photography surely does not consist of photography's representation of social issues alone?

Although Rancière is not mentioned in Benn Michaels' text, the questions that Benn Michaels raises about the politics of photography recall the opening paragraphs of an essay by Rancière titled "The Politics of Literature". In it, Rancière writes:

The politics of literature is not the politics of its writers. It does not deal with their personal commitment to the social and political issues and struggles of their times. Nor does it deal with the modes of representation of political events or the social structure and the social struggles in their books. The syntagma "politics of literature"

means that literature “does” politics as literature – that there is a specific link between politics as a definite way of doing and literature as a definite practice of writing. (“The Politics of Literature” 10)

The passage insightfully captures the problem with which Benn Michaels’ article opens. What makes *Mimic* a good picture, Wall states, is not the fact that it engages with social issues; *Mimic* does not need politics to be successful. But, Benn Michaels asks, the question of the politics of photography is surely not answered by photography’s engagement with politics? Might there not be a politics of photography that would mean that photography “does” politics *as photography*? Might there not be a politics of the good picture that would reside in the good picture as such, rather than in its maker’s commitment to political issues, or its representation of social struggle? Might there not be, in other words, a politics of aesthetics?

When Rancière goes on to explain what he means exactly by literature doing politics as literature, the language he uses explicitly recalls photography:

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 politics of literature thus means that literature as literature is involved in this partition of the visible and the sayable, in this intertwining of being, doing, and saying that frames a polemical common world. (“The Politics of Literature” 10)

If Rancière is indeed capturing the politics of *literature* here, and not the politics of *the aesthetic in general* (which would include painting, photography, cinema, video/installation, theatre, and so forth), it is worth noting that his definition of this politics of literature owes much – almost as much as Walter Benjamin’s “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” as Eduardo Cadava in *Words of Light* has shown – to the language of photography, or, more broadly, to the language of the visible rather than that of the sayable (note his use of the words “perception,” “framing,” “the visible,” and “appear”). [22]

In the book version of Rancière’s essay, which was published in the later *Politique de la littérature*, Rancière expands the paragraphs from which I have just quoted with references to both Plato and Aristotle (see *Politique de la littérature* 11-12). The argument developed in these extensions will not come as a surprise to those familiar with his other works: once more, it is the strict division of labor in Plato’s *Republic* that Rancière challenges; once more, it is Aristotle’s division between the human and the animal on the basis of the division between voice (the expression of pleasure and pain) and speech (the expression of what is beneficial or harmful), just or unjust that Rancière draws into question. Literature challenges these types of divisions, this type of “distribution of the sensible.” It is in this sense, he argues, that literature is political.

In his discussion of Wall’s photograph, Benn Michaels does two things. First, he explores the ways in which the photograph is indeed “about racism” (Benn Michaels, 177), noting that its subject matter is more particularly “anti-Asian racism” (177). Situating this particular racism in the social and political history of Wall’s native Canada, Benn Michaels insightfully connects it to the rise of capitalism in its neoliberal form in an increasingly globalised Canada of the 1960s through to the 1990s. He reads *Mimic* as an early artifact of this globalisation. To situate *Mimic* in this context means to argue that not one but two axes of social distinction are at work in Wall’s photograph: “racial difference and class difference” (179). It is these “two axes of social distinction” (183) that in Wall’s view, do *not* turn *Mimic* into a good picture.

Although Benn Michaels spends a significant amount of his time uncovering these issues, the point of his discussion will inevitably be that they do not constitute the politics of a good picture as such. That politics consists, rather, in Wall's aesthetic choice not to choose between racism or anti-racism. Instead – and this is what Benn Michaels considers to be *Mimic*'s particular brilliance – Wall's commitment to the good picture, rather than to a sovereign choice “for” or “against,” displaces these positions and exposes the ways in which any choice that Wall could have made would have decided something that the politics of the good picture leaves open. By not making the choice between racism or anti-racism, and by being committed to the good picture instead, Wall leaves open, rather, the fact that the photograph might just as much be about class and the question of poverty in contemporary society, as it is about race. As Benn Michaels points out, it might be that the photograph is most political in this suggestion: for neo-liberalism *has decided* that race is protected by anti-discrimination law, whereas poverty is not. In Rancière's terms, what *Mimic* thus challenges is the “distribution of the sensible.” The photograph does so by inviting one to divide and distribute otherwise.

Within this optic, however, it is surely worth pausing for a moment to consider the particular way in which Benn Michaels himself re-divides and redistributes the sensible in Wall's photograph. For although the point of his reading is that the politics of the good picture lies in the fact that it “displace[s]” (Benn Michaels, 183) clear-cut positions, the way in which this displacement occurs in Benn Michaels' reading is through a *single* division: that between the figure that he refers to as “the protagonist” (the white male who makes the racist gesture), and between the Asian male to whom the racism is directed. It is between these *two* figures that the narrative of Wall's photograph, in Benn Michaels' view, develops. The social and political axes that he considers to dominate the frame in which these two figures are caught up are equally *two*: race and class. If Wall's photograph had not been reproduced with the article, one would almost not have guessed that there is in fact a *third* figure involved in the narrative: a white woman, walking hand-in-hand with the white male. [23]

Filling the right hand-side of the frame, the woman is lagging behind a little (indeed, it seems as if the white male is making a slightly forced effort to catch up with the Asian male, so as to make sure that the latter can see the racist gesture directed at him), and she appears to be entirely oblivious to the racist violence that her partner is committing. However, the photograph has her staring into the sun, and squinting. Thus, she becomes an essential part of Wall's photograph, and most definitely of its politics: all three of the figures in the image appear to have slanted eyes – but each of them for a different reason (one because of genetics, the other because he is performing a racist gesture, and the third because she is looking into the sun). The presence of the woman in the photograph invites one to add one other axis to the two axes (race and class) that Benn Michaels distinguishes: gender.

Mimic offers the viewer not two but three main characters; it is not dominated by two but three social and political axes. Difference thus accumulates in the image: class difference, racial difference, *and* gender difference. The image's distribution of the sensible is divided between the specifics of these three categories. However, this difference is also overcome by the fact that all three characters are squinting: it is through the squinting, which is performative in the case of the white male and female (but performative in an entirely different way in each case) and genetic in the case of the Asian male, that these three characters unite, and that an odd (precarious and uneasy) alliance is created between them. If difference risks to make the characters appear too specific here, the squinting risks to make them appear too empty. My point is, however, that the politics of Wall's photograph lies somewhere between these two tendencies: one can only appreciate it if one is able to appreciate both. And it is, in my opinion, the third character in the photograph – the woman who is looking in the sun, into the light; a “Lucy” of a kind, who draws out this particular politics.

I do not know what the role is of women in the neo-liberal history of immigration that Benn

Michaels offers in his essay – but the third character in the photograph appears to invite one to find out. My discussion of the photograph has intended to challenge, from the perspective of the feminist aesthetic politics that I have theorised here, the distribution of the sensible that Benn Michaels in his discussion of Wall's photograph (which itself attempts to challenge a certain distribution of the sensible) sets up. Reading Benn Michaels' discussion through the lens of Rancière's work, and focusing on the importance of the category of "woman" for this work in particular, one realises that Benn Michaels' redistribution needs to be redistributed in its turn. What is the future of such redistribution? Will the equality that it envisions ever be realised? Or is politics doomed to indefinitely redistribute? Perhaps these are simply the wrong questions. The point may be, rather, to act from the assumption of equality: to take seriously the equality that, at various points in history, has been declared, and to act relentlessly from within the sensible mode of being that challenges the distribution of the sensible.

Arne De Boever did his doctoral studies at Columbia University in New York and teaches American Studies in the School of Critical Studies and the MA Program in Aesthetics and Politics at the California Institute of the Arts. He has published articles on literature, film, and critical theory and is one of the editors of *Parrhesia: A Journal of Critical Philosophy*. His current research focuses on biopolitics and the novel.

Endnotes

1. See Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition*, in particular 175-247.
2. See Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*.
3. The translation is mine, as in all of the following.
4. In spite of their differences, Butler and Malabou have also published a book together: *Sois mon corps: Une lecture contemporaine de la domination et la servitude chez Hegel*.
5. For Malabou's definition of plasticity, see also: Malabou's *What Should We Do With Our Brain?* Malabou's most sustained investigation of the explosive dimension of plasticity can be found in her book *Les nouveaux blessés: De Freud à la neurologie, penser les traumatismes contemporains*.
6. See Malabou's *The Future of Hegel: Plasticity, Temporality and Dialectic*, in particular the introduction, 1-20.
7. For more on the ethical turn, see Davis, et. al. and Garber et. al.
8. See Judith Butler's article "Ethical Ambivalence,"
9. Consider, for example, the book that Bonnie Honig refers to as Butler's "other" Antigone book: *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (Honig discussed Butler's book along these lines in a talk she gave for the MA in Aesthetics and Politics program at the California Institute of the Arts on Thursday, December 2nd, 2010). Indeed, the title of Butler's book is attributed to the philosopher of ethics Emmanuel Levinas whose work takes up a central place in Butler's book.
10. See Rancière's *Aesthetics and its Discontents*, 109-132. The text can also be found in his

Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics, 184-202.

11. See, for example, Rancière, *Dissensus*, 27-28.
12. See, for example: Derek Attridge's *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading: Literature in the Event*. For a general work on ethical criticism, see: Robert Eaglestone's *Ethical Criticism: Reading After Levinas*.
13. Although I will not go into this here, I choose this word in light of Rancière's theorisation of this notion (in his book entitled *Disagreement*) as a name for the discord that develops over a distribution of the sensible. Disagreement is (one of) Rancière's name(s) for politics. As my analysis shows, the disagreement between Lucy and her father is precisely a discord over the distribution of the sensible: her father wants her to take the case of her rape to court; she, however, insists that it is her private business. It is the lines separating the private from the public, male from female, white from black, father from daughter, and so on that are redistributed here.
14. See, for example Pieter Vermeulen's "Dogged Silences: J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* and the Ethics of Non-Confession." I would like to thank Pieter for our fruitful conversations about *Disgrace* over the years.
15. See Vermeulen, "Dogged Silences."
16. I use this term here with reference to Rancière's discussion of democracy versus ethnocracy in his book *Disagreement*. Whereas ethnocracy marks a form of community that is determined by "identity," by an established framework of identification and classification, democracy ruptures that framework and makes possible other forms of living together. It is oppositions like this one, between ethnocracy and democracy, that make possible Rockhill's characterisation of Rancière's political subject as an "empty operator." As I have discussed, the role of "identity" or "ethnicity" in Rancière's work is actually more complicated than a simple opposition of "empty operator" to "identity" can account for. In this sense, Rancière invites one to "think more carefully" (as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak puts it in the quote that I have chosen as the motto for the first section of this essay) about the relation of universalism to politics today.
17. The term "aesthetic" does appear to be taking up a more prominent position in some of her recent work. See, for example: Cathy Caruth's "Interview with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak: Aesthetic Education and Globalization."
18. See Rancière's *The Future of the Image*.
19. Fiona Probyn nicely summarises the debates in her article "J.M. Coetzee: Writing with/ out Authority."
20. In his recent work, Coetzee explicitly explores this connection. See, for example, his novels *Elizabeth Costello* and *Slow Man*. The connection is also explored in what is arguably the manifesto of Coetzee as a fiction writer: his Nobel lecture "He and his Man."
21. At the time when I wrote this article, Walter Benn Michael's article "Neoliberal Aesthetics: Fried, Rancière and the Form of the Photograph" (available at: <http://nonsite.org/issue-1/neoliberal-aesthetics-fried-ranciere-and-the-form-of-the-photograph>) had not been published yet.
22. See Cadava's *Words of Light: Theses on the Photography of History*.
23. I write "almost," because there is one point in the article at which Benn Michaels indicates

that there are three figures represented in the image (181).

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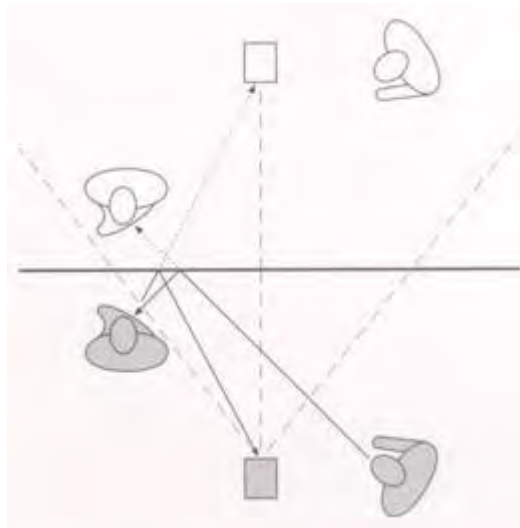


Figure 1. Diagram of *Picture for Women* (de Duve 31).

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