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Departures from postmodern doctrine in Jacques Rancière's account of the politics of artistic modernity

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Reading Jacques Rancière's interventions in art theory can be a disconcerting experience. One recognises the recurrence of established heuristics of modern art while also encountering disruptions of their familiar application. A common response I have received from colleagues unconvinced by Rancière's ideas is that others, whether from the fields of post-structuralist philosophy or postmodern art theory have already trodden the theoretical paths he navigates. While these claims are not entirely without merit, the following seeks to specify how Rancière's thinking of aesthetics converges with, but also departs from postmodernism as a critical and historical paradigm of art. The focus of my remarks will be on the influential brand of postmodern theory developed by writers Hal Foster, Douglas Crimp and others associated with the journal *October* in the early nineteen eighties. These writers tended in theory, if not always in practice, to situate modernist aesthetics and "anti-aesthetic" postmodernism as polarised and historically distinct tendencies of modern art. They also viewed postmodern art as committed to politicised subject matter, while aligning the aesthetic with modernist art invested in formal experimentation that bracketed or obscured social content.

Rancière's writings on aesthetics typically reject the rhetoric of historical rupture between modernism and postmodernism favoured by the abovementioned critics. He has also questioned related claims that aesthetic philosophies taken to underpin modernism were made redundant by developments in post-sixties art. In my view, one of Rancière's most notable contributions to art theory has been to amplify the political significance of aesthetic philosophies developed by thinkers such as Kant and Schiller, which postmodern critics cast as anachronistic. Moreover, unlike sectors of postmodern art criticism, Rancière proposes that ideas of aesthetic autonomy and the avant-garde enlistment of art to transform collective life need to be thought as contending but interrelated tendencies of artistic modernity. The current bearing of this argument will be addressed in the concluding section of this paper. Here I suggest that a recent video work, *Gravesend* (2007) by Steve McQueen prolongs a tensile connection between the twofold politics of aesthetic modernity identified by Rancière. It will also be proposed that the work successfully conveys political significance through both subject matter, and a mode of expression that disrupts immediate conceptual legibility. In other words, McQueen eschews a simple choice between an art of political content and art where politics finds expression through formal experimentation.

Affinities between postmodern art criticism and Rancière's thinking of modern aesthetics

Postmodern art theory has been taken to task by Rancière in a number of contexts, including a recent publication where he suggests that the assertion of an epochal division between

modernism and postmodernism arises from a misunderstanding of what artistic modernity has entailed (Rancière, "Contemporary Art and the Politics of Aesthetics" 33). Yet, I want to propose that in a number of ways his conception of aesthetic modernity recalls the so-called anti-aesthetic allegiances of postmodern theory that emerged in the United States thirty years ago.

One area of compatibility between Rancière's ideas and postmodernist critical frameworks is found in the critical responses of both to medium specificity as a marker of artistic value and a presumed hallmark of modernist aesthetics. An early example of the postmodern rejection of medium specificity is provided by Douglas Crimp's catalogue essay of 1977 titled "Pictures." This essay, revised and published by *October* in 1979, discusses work by a small group of then emerging New York artists, including Jack Goldstein, Sherrie Levine, Cindy Sherman and Robert Longo. Here Crimp seeks to isolate features of a new artistic tendency at odds with the version of modernism defended by critics Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried. Crimp observes, for example, that much innovative art of the seventies had operated across individual mediums, thereby undermining ideas of modernist art as investigating the unique technical properties or limits of individual art forms (Crimp 76). Rather, the "Pictures" artists, according to Crimp, produced works that while all image-based, mixed or invoked multiple cultural forms, ranging across film, photography, painting, performance art, drawing and sculpture. When addressing Sherrie Levine's "Untitled (President Series)," Crimp accents how these collages combine different media and appropriate cultural representations already in public circulation. Levine excerpted photographs of glamorous models and formulaic mother and child tableaux from fashion magazines, recutting their edges in the shape of profiles of famous American Presidents (Lincoln, Washington, Kennedy). The presidential silhouettes, which recall the profiles on U.S. coins, and were filled in with imagistic clichés of femininity, were subsequently pasted onto white sheets of paper. Crimp stresses, however, that Levine experimented with different ways of staging these works, on occasion exhibiting the collaged images as large scale slide projections on the gallery wall. Consequently, pinning down a distinct supporting medium of the works, or indeed any original site of the artwork's presentation became somewhat beside the point.

For Crimp, the generic, non-medium specific conception of the picture operative in the art he discusses marks a "radically new approach to mediums" (Crimp 87). Specifically, the postmodern "picture" abandoned Greenberg's "truth to medium" conception of modernism, where each art was said to project and investigate the literal properties of its material support. As Crimp concludes: "Those processes of quotation, excerptation, framing and staging that constitute the strategies of the work I have been discussing necessitate uncovering strata of representation. Needless to say, we are not in search of sources or origins, but of structures of signification: underneath each picture there is always another picture" (Crimp 87). This passage formulates the postmodern artwork in structuralist terms, as a palimpsest of textual operations, rather than a medium based substratum or locus of tabula rasa creativity.

In subsequent writings, Crimp and like-minded critics affirmed that the postmodern break with modernism witnessed the demise of art's autonomy, whether expressed as the progressive revelation of each art's unique field of concern, or assertions of art's isolation from other domains of modern life. Postmodern art, it was said, broke down barriers between different media, between art and the products of commodity culture, between the formats of fine art and prosaic materials. For critics such as Crimp and Hal Foster, "cross-disciplinary" tendencies in post sixties art signalled the end of established aesthetic categories and values, in particular the idea that the aesthetic exists apart from everyday patterns of experience (Foster xv). Other emerging critics of the early eighties, Craig Owens for example, argued that the "allegorical impulse" of postmodern art created hybrids of a range of practices, including combines of artistic and discursive materials (Owens 75). Such claims were clearly directed against a tradition of Enlightenment philosophy reaching back to Kantian aesthetics and earlier, preoccupied with circumscribing aesthetics as a distinct kind of experience.

Like the aforementioned postmodernist criticism, and as Jean-Luc Nancy has observed, Rancière has consistently sought to undermine the privilege assigned to “the paradigm of aesthetic autonomy” as the single orientating principle of modern art (Nancy 89). Also in keeping with postmodern priorities, he downplays the centrality of technical properties of specific media for determining artistic meaning or value. In this sense, Rancière reprises the postmodern critique of Greenbergian modernism with its emphasis on medium-specificity, and a conception of art as antithetical to manifestations of kitsch within the broader culture of modernity (Rancière, “Contemporary Art and the Politics of Aesthetics” 39).

In studies ranging from the Nineteenth Century to the present, Rancière focuses instead on how modern art has consistently brought together heteroclitic levels of reality, dismantled established boundaries between media, or breached divisions between art and non-art categories. His reading of the art of Stéphane Mallarmé typifies this orientation. Contrary to accounts of the symbolist poet’s oeuvre as exemplifying modernist autonomy, Rancière invokes Mallarmé’s creation of exchanges between different art forms, as well as activities extracted from popular culture and prosaic life in his late poem *Un coup de dés n’abolira le hasard* (“A roll of the dice will never abolish chance”) of 1897. Here forms and signs of poetic language, graphic design, the choreography of dance, and allusions to the chance resting places of dice share the surface of the page. In Rancière’s words, “the typographical/choreographic arrangement of *Un coup de dés*” functions as “the manifesto of a poetry that has become a spatial art” (Rancière, *The Future of the Image* 105). Mallarmé is of course well known for his experiments with poetic presentation, where the form and meaning of words, and their interaction with blank spaces on the page are given equal prominence. Rancière, however, reads the combinatory logic of Mallarmé’s art as epitomising a larger tendency of modern aesthetics, one that authorises the blurring of divisions between different media and genres, or between poetic and vernacular cultural forms. The political reading he produces of this tendency will be addressed later in this paper. For the moment, I want to stress the parallels between Rancière’s interpretation of Mallarmé’s art and the privileging by postmodernist critics of appropriative and hybrid art forms, which were said to overturn notions of aesthetic autonomy. [1]

Having said that Rancière shares with postmodern theory a concern to displace aesthetic autonomy as *the* defining concept of modern art, he nonetheless develops a different genealogy of artistic modernity to that put forward by Crimp, Foster or Owens in the early eighties. Put simply, he sees artistic tendencies identified as postmodern to be continuous with a more long-standing artistic episteme that he names the “aesthetic regime of art.” According to this view, the postmodern turn merely escalates potentials for art already opened up by political, philosophical and artistic developments of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics* 52). Rancière also departs from postmodern frameworks by recovering political significance from aesthetic philosophies of German Idealism and Romanticism that Foster and others considered extraneous to postmodern art.

Like many other scholars associated with French post-structuralism, Rancière locates the philosophical seeds of a modern thinking of art in the aesthetic theories of Kant and Hegel, as well as those developed by the poets and philosophers of German Romanticism. In fact, he insists that we continue today to “engage with art according to the modes of perception forged in the Age of Romanticism” (Guénoun et. al. 10). At the same time, Rancière has produced studies of romantic and realist literature in particular that link these movements to political upheavals and sociological transformations of the Nineteenth Century that challenged the oligarchic structures of the European *ancien régime*. In a recent essay he states for example that the aesthetic regime was “born at the time of the French Revolution” and so was allied to democratic demands for equality and emancipation (Rancière, “Contemporary Art and the Politics of Aesthetics” 36). Yet in the same essay, Rancière insists on the necessity of investigating the *specific* politics of the aesthetic regime of art. Before addressing this specificity, a brief summary of Rancière’s broader

understanding of the aesthetic dimension of politics is called for, since it feeds into his understanding of modern art's critical operations. Events of political praxis for Rancière have an aesthetic dimension in that they dispute or reorganise naturalised systems of perception. He describes these collective, taken for granted ways of perceiving reality as "communities of sense" or the "distribution of the sensible." These modes of organising sensory experience are said to provide "a frame of visibility and intelligibility that puts things or practices together under the same meaning, which shapes thereby a certain sense of community" (Rancière, "Contemporary Art and the Politics of Aesthetics" 31). According to Rancière, political gestures intervene in established communities of sense, rendering contentious what can be seen, said or done within a particular social order. This socially disruptive thinking of politics notably differs from currently prevailing identifications of democratic politics as directed towards consensus building or the strategic management of political dissent by government institutions.

The Politics of Aesthetics

Rancière's account of the politics of the aesthetic regime both narrows and extends the formulations outlined above. As previously mentioned, he identifies two conflicting, yet chiasmatically related ways of framing art that compose the politics of modern aesthetics. Significantly, these two communities of sense that constitute art in the context of modernity comprise two versions of the axiom of democratic equality that for Rancière motivates the socially disordering gestures of politics. The first views art not as a distinct domain, but as dismantling hierarchical divisions between art genres, subject matter, and spheres of concern considered proper to artistic mediation. The second politics of aesthetics draws on the legacy of Kant, and does indeed distinguish aesthetic experience from everyday modes of perception characteristic of modernity.

Returning to the first of these configurations, Rancière proposes, contrary to some postmodern art criticism, that a recognised loss of secure criteria for locating art's proper or unique field of action need not be dated to developments in post-sixties art in the United States. He reminds us, for example, that the activation of slippages between art and prosaic life, or between artistic and other kinds of practice has been central to art's agenda since the emergence of romanticism and realism (artistic and philosophical) in the early nineteenth century. This claim is hardly new. It is widely accepted in art historical circles that realism bestowed artistic validity on subjects and experiences marginalised by aesthetic norms in European art of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Rancière calls this previously ascendant system of the arts the "representative" or "poetic" regime, an artistic episteme that identified fine art as a distinct category of practice, and maintained the differential status of subject matters, styles, and genres considered appropriate to the higher arts. On the basis of these hierarchical gradations Rancière draws an analogy between the poetic regime and an oligarchic vision of society, where inequalities between social groups, and between different human capacities and functions are taken to reflect a natural order (Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics* 22). The aesthetic regime, for Rancière, emerges in dialectical tension with the representative regime. Inflected by changing social, political and economic circumstances it introduces not a simple break with past art, but a reframing of art's resources, possibilities and socio-political significance.

With a strong focus on nineteenth century literature, Rancière has in a number of publications mapped the thinking of art installed by the aesthetic regime. But his aforementioned interpretation of Mallarmé's art distils the political implications of the *chaotic* situation of the arts opened up by this paradigm. I say chaotic because for Rancière, who echoes Hegel in this respect, modern aesthetics emerges in conjunction with a perceived loss of stable standards for what objects, situations, media or types of people deserve visibility and status within artistic practice (Tanke 224). Hence his characterisation of the politics of Mallarmé's art as inventing a mode of writing that sought to express symbolically, formally and materially an egalitarian vision of social arrangements. Mallarmé's aesthetic, for Rancière, composes the "shape of a world without

hierarchy where functions slide into one another" (Rancière, *The Future of the Image* 107). Recasting the symbolist poet's productions thus allows for a practice at times aligned with aesthetic autonomy to be connected to the "instrumental" arts of Soviet avant-gardism. In the same context as his discussion of Mallarmé's art, Rancière references Aleksandr Rodchenko's advertising and propaganda posters, which combined the abstract lexicon of Suprematist painting with linguistic, graphic and photographic forms in order to outline "new forms of life" in tune with communist aspirations (Rancière, *The Future of the Image* 107).

All of this suggests that far from breaking with modernist aesthetics, the hybrid formats and border crossings of postmodernism reprise tendencies opened up by the aesthetic regime from its earliest phases. In critical dialogue with Douglas Crimp's efforts to distinguish modernist aesthetics from postmodern anti-aesthetics, Rancière contends that no postmodern break is necessary to explain artistic developments in post-sixties art: "Far from being shattered by it, aesthetics means precisely this "blurring" of boundaries" between different spheres of experience (Rancière, "Contemporary Art and the Politics of Aesthetics" 35).

The second politics of the aesthetic regime isolated by Rancière seems to contradict that outlined above. Here he concentrates on Kant's contribution to aesthetic modernity, or rather, the translation of Kantian aesthetics produced by German romantic poet and philosopher Friedrich von Schiller in his *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*, first published in 1795. This second incline of the aesthetic regime, according to Rancière, "distinguishes a sensible mode of being specific to artistic products" (Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics* 22). Rancière demonstrates, however, that the differentiation between aesthetic apprehension and other kinds of perceptual experience need not be annexed from politics. For example, Schiller drew political significance from Kant's account in the *Critique of Judgment* of the "free play" of sensory and intellectual faculties that accompanies aesthetic judgment. As Rancière stresses, Kant conceives of aesthetic reception as forestalling the submission of the object of aesthetic contemplation to *both* the categorising operations of conceptual reasoning and the gratifications of sensuous appetite. Aesthetic judgment here comprises a specific kind of thinking where neither mind nor matter, neither reason nor sensibility are situated above each other in hierarchical opposition. Thus, for Kant, the "free appearance" of the object approached aesthetically is withdrawn from the dominating or acquisitive impulses of human will or desire (Rancière, "The Sublime from Lyotard to Schiller" 9).

Rancière points out that Kant's alignment of aesthetic apprehension with a suspension of relations of domination between *passive* sensibility and *active* understanding proved especially attractive to Schiller who was writing in the wake of the emancipatory aspirations and failures of the French Revolution. Extending Kantian precepts, Schiller conceived of aesthetic experience and art as offering a proleptic vision of society that no longer authorised "the power of the class of intelligence over the class of sensation, of men of culture over men of nature" (Rancière, "Aesthetics as Politics" 31). In other words, Schiller turned the specificity of aesthetic experience formulated by Kant towards a repudiation of stratified divisions between human classes, roles and capabilities predominant in social life. According to Rancière's reading, Schiller thus identified the aesthetic with "the promise of equality, the promise of a new way of sharing a common world" (Rancière, "The Sublime from Lyotard to Schiller" 13). Yet Rancière acknowledges that Schillerian aesthetics located two versions of art's political role, the first more commonly attributed to German Romanticism. Here art acts as a utopian model of societal or subjective healing, where the alienation of reason from sensibility, or inequalities between different classes of humanity might ultimately be dissolved. Rancière, however, intensifies the contradiction between this redemptive, socially ameliorative conception of art and the other component of Schiller's argument where art functions as a locus of "disagreement" from which social inequalities (aristocratic or post-revolutionary) might be challenged (Rancière, "The Sublime from Lyotard to Schiller" 12).

The innovation of Rancière's account of the aesthetic regime hinges on his insistence that a tension between assertions of art's independence from governing perceptual co-ordinates of modernity, and avant-garde programs where art participates in the invention of new forms of collective life, has operated from the earliest phases of modern aesthetics, with both being equally motivated by emancipatory concerns. Thus in response to divinations in postmodern art criticism of the historical cessation of modernist notions of aesthetic autonomy, Rancière contends:

We therefore have no need to contrive any pathetic ends for modernity or imagine that a joyous explosion of postmodernity has put an end to the great modernist adventure of art's autonomy or emancipation through art. There is no postmodern rupture. There is a contradiction that is originary and unceasingly at work. The work's solitude carries a promise of emancipation. (Rancière, "Aesthetics as Politics" 36)

On the basis of Rancière's account of modern art's political potentials, John Roberts has identified a commonality between his thinking of aesthetics and the socially transformative ambitions of Soviet Constructivism (Roberts 69). Crucially, however, Rancière rejects any idea of art being indistinguishable from the social field, as popular accounts of the art-life nexus suppose. Nor does he concur with those programs of the historical avant-gardes that called for art's full submission to the pragmatics of social or political utility. Rather, in a number of publications, Rancière presents a formula for sustaining the twofold politics of the aesthetic regime. Successful critical art, he contends, needs to negotiate the two extremes of the politics that characterise aesthetic modernity. This means neither exclusively privileging art's autonomy, nor discounting all differences between aesthetic experience and prevailing perceptual patterns of contemporary life. As previously suggested, postmodern critics tended to view the ontological disorder of post sixties art as announcing the end of aesthetic autonomy. Rancière proposes instead that the political potentials of the aesthetic regime are only endangered if the tension between aesthetic autonomy and art's engagement with life is resolved into a single historical telos or aesthetic formula (Rancière, "Contemporary Art and the Politics of Aesthetics" 40).

Steve McQueen's *Gravesend* and the politics of the aesthetic regime

The previous analysis has largely focused on theoretical components of Rancière's agreement and disagreement with aspects of postmodern art theory. In the space remaining, I want to discuss a contemporary art work that concretises his assertion that critical art "must keep something of the tension that pushes aesthetic experience toward the reconfiguration of collective life and something of the tension that withdraws the power of aesthetic sensoriality from the other spheres of experience" (Rancière, "Contemporary Art and the Politics of Aesthetics" 41). The work in question is a short film (17.58 mins.) transferred to video by Steve McQueen, who has established a high profile in experimental film, video installation and photography in the last two decades. Bearing the title *Gravesend* (2007) the film exhibits the kind of ontological inconsistency that Rancière considers a hallmark of artistic modernity, since it weaves together diverse artistic techniques, documentary procedures, metaphorical forms and social "facts."

More specifically, *Gravesend* may be described as a *collage* of abstract form, actuality footage, documentary type sound effects, black and white animation, and a canonical text of American literature: Joseph Conrad's novella *Heart of Darkness* (1902). The dramatic shifts of register between shots and sonic effects featured in the film also signal McQueen's adherence to the idiom of montage cinema. Critics of this work have been sharply divided over its highly oblique mediation of neo-colonial exploitation in the Democratic Republic of Congo, where some of the film footage was shot. Significantly, however, the geographical context of the Congo is never named in *Gravesend*, nor are we given any exposition of how the economics of mining have fed into the ongoing warfare that afflicts this region. However, McQueen provides a number of clues that these issues inform the political preoccupations of the film.

Visiting the installation of *Gravesend* one enters a darkened room to encounter a large-scale screen that dominates one wall of the gallery space. The opening sequences project numerous close-ups of some sort of mineral extraction process taking place in a laboratory, but with minimal vision of the technicians involved. Memorable early moments of the film include the glowing gold and orange light emanating from a microwave oven where a chemical separation process takes place. Temporally suspended close-ups also isolate circular motifs discovered in the robotic operations of sophisticated machinery and the forms of receptacles that contain the mystery material being refined. The film then cuts to an entirely different setting, displacing us from the high tech world of the laboratory to scenes of rudimentary manual labour. However, like many of the visuals in *Gravesend*, the positioning of the camera and editing techniques impede our perceptual range, creating a sense of uncertainty about what precisely is being viewed or communicated. At first we occupy a point of view inside a hole in the ground looking up, which then shifts to looking down into this earthbound cavity from which shovels of dirt are flung into the air. Only then do images of shirtless black men wielding shovels to dig out deep trenches materialise on screen. Yet McQueen provides no information about the location or agents of this labour, both of which remain shadowy and ill defined throughout. A third startling shift in register follows these scenes as we are assailed by the picture postcard beauty of a blood-red sunset over water, with towering chimneystacks and signs of port activity.

The arrival of this romantic vista conjures up an allusion to the film's title. *Gravesend* refers to a port town on the River Thames in Southern England, but more significantly it is where Charles Marlow, the fictional protagonist of *Heart of Darkness*, recounts his adventures in an unnamed African country to a group of men aboard a boat anchored off the town. Since Conrad's novella has been set in secondary and tertiary education English literature courses over many decades, McQueen's literary reference may be obscure, but perhaps not entirely opaque to some viewers. Either through studying the book or seeing film adaptations of Conrad's story, many viewers would be aware of Marlow's tale of the congruence of civilization and barbarity in Europe's African colonies. Some may also recall hints in *Heart of Darkness* that the events of Marlow's novella are set in what was then known as the Belgian Congo. A further signal that *Gravesend* may be viewed as a non-narrative, filmic vignette of *Heart of Darkness* relates to the time-lapse technique of McQueen's footage of *Gravesend* at sunset. This sequence tracks the glowing orb of the sun in movement as it passes behind clouds and sinks by degrees into the darkness of a black screen. It thus invokes the passages of *Heart of Darkness* where Marlow communicates his tale of colonialism's malevolent side from dusk until late into the night.

The rest of *Gravesend* oscillates between the three different settings outlined above. We witness close up vision and penetrating sounds of African hands chipping at rocks, scraping small black stones from brown river water, and piling this precious booty onto leaves to the ambient noise of the jungle. We are again transported from a world of artisanal labour and basic subsistence to the pyrotechnics of mineral refinement, where the ear piercing cracking sound of minerals under stress accompanies images of rocks being mechanically compressed or precision cut. Sandwiched between these scenes of starkly different stages of contemporary mining is a sequence of black and white animation showing what looks like a topographical view of a sinuous river. The black line flows, splits and shifts its passage from the top to the bottom of the screen, just as the perceptual jumps and opacities of the film overall refuse to consolidate a single, stable perspective.

Art critic T.J. Demos has allied McQueen's video work of recent years with many contemporary art practices that mobilise documentary forms to focus on "zones of economic and political inequality that are normally and tragically unrepresented within the dominant mainstream and western media" (Demos 62-63). Demos has produced some very astute interpretations of McQueen's art, however, I want to suggest that *Gravesend* may not be principally concerned with opening the western media's eyes to current events in Eastern Congo. McQueen's film might be

better viewed as a rejoinder to *how* economic inequalities and political conflict in the region have been represented on our television screens in recent times. As Paul Nash has observed, a significant number of documentary films and television programs of the last decade have explained to western audiences that engagement in illegal mining by militias from Uganda, Burundi and Rwanda has resulted in civil conflict and innumerable deaths in the Democratic Republic of Congo (Nash 123). Many of these documentary investigations also mention the Congo's version of the "blood diamond," a black metallic ore named coltan or columbite-tantalite. An extract from coltan called tantalum is used in the manufacture of consumer electronics goods such as cell phones, computers, and video game systems. Although the Congo region only produces a small portion of the world's tantalum, escalating demand for the mineral in recent decades has seen both western mining companies and militias from neighbouring African countries seek to exploit the Congo's resources, including the local labour.

In reviews of *Gravesend* coltan usually gets nominated as the mysterious mineral at the film's heart, and it may be that McQueen's idea for this work was stimulated by the kind of documentary exposés mentioned above. However, keeping the identity and origins of this resource enigmatic, avoiding the itemisation of precise facts, as well as the use of talking heads or voice over narration, ensures that McQueen's allegory of neo-colonial exploitation both invokes the specific situation in Eastern Congo, and gestures towards manifestations of neo-colonialism in other parts of the world resulting from current economies of globalisation. At the same time, the "withholding aesthetic" that Mark Nash has criticised in McQueen's perverse manipulation of documentary footage in *Gravesend* leaves more open space for the viewer to make the necessary connections, or conduct further research to extract a legible political meaning from the film (Nash 124). In other words, McQueen resists treating spectators as subjects to be instructed in their views and judgments by the artist. Admittedly, this may frustrate audiences seeking immediate or certain knowledge of the current situation in the Congo. However, the elision of factual information or documentary assurance in *Gravesend* arguably enhances the film's affective and mnemonic power. The film's combination of fictional and documentary forms stays with us in different ways to projects that deliver factual information about economic and social inequalities in Eastern Congo. Of course, this is not to say that journalistic exposés do not play an important role in bringing the darker side of globalisation to public attention.

Taken in the context of prevailing media essays on the Congo's "blood mineral," McQueen produces the kind of "alteration" of consensual patterns of perception that Rancière associates with the critical operations of art and politics (Rancière, "Aesthetics Against Incarnation" 185). But importantly this is not a matter of political art unveiling some unvarnished truth behind ideological appearances. Rejecting templates of political art that separate the "reality" of social facts from aesthetic artifice or formal experimentation, Rancière gives great credence to imaginary and fictional operations in the staging of political disagreement. Or rather, he allows us to recognise the political significance of works such as *Gravesend*, which breach conventional divisions between evidentiary and fictional procedures. Speaking in Rancièreian terms this feature of McQueen's art is as political as the contentious subject matter the artist broaches.

While I do not wish to suggest that Steve McQueen is aware of the political reading of modern aesthetic philosophies developed by Rancière, he clearly, through training and sensibility, recognises and acts on the potentials for art that Rancière associates with the aesthetic regime. *Gravesend* maintains a tension between art actively engaging with current social "realities," and of differentiating aesthetic experience from normal media representations of neo-colonial exploitation and injustice. In this respect, McQueen's layering of heterogeneous representational forms and resources does not amount to a postmodern negation of aesthetic autonomy, but rather brilliantly negotiates and prolongs the double politics of modern aesthetics.

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Endnotes

1. It should be acknowledged that Mallarmé makes a brief appearance in Crimp's "Pictures" essay, where a correlation is drawn between the former's symbolist aesthetics and the anti-essentialist, structuralist orientation of the postmodern picture (Crimp 87). This argument, however, remains undeveloped in the "Pictures" text.

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