

BOOK REVIEW

The Future of the Image

By Jacques Rancière

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Jacques Rancière the French philosopher and Emeritus Professor of Philosophy at the University of Paris (St. Denis), has devoted considerable energy in recent years to analyzing and interpreting art and its effects. His most recent work on the subject *The Future of the Image* continues this examination by specifically addressing the relations that define images. Rancière's prose is dense but illuminating. Rancière sees the realm of art as inextricably intertwined with the events and concerns in the broader social sphere. He takes the concept of image and image production as a potent force for furthering democratic dialogue, debate, and furthering critical perspectives. This book develops a critique of the current conversation on the labor of art and aims to move the role of art away from the "apocalyptic discourses of today's cultural climate" and towards a more hopeful view. He seeks to understand image it in all its forms, from the televised, filmic, photographic, painted, and designed, from the abstract to the representational, with many specific and relevant historical examples from antiquity to the present.

The heart of the book is his thorough exploration of operations in image creation and in image relations, as well as the further development of his concept of the "regimes of art." He believes that our cultural conceptions of art demonstrate the possibilities for defining the world. He states, "It is the way in which, by assembling words or forms, people define not merely various forms of art, but certain configurations of what can be seen and what can be thought, certain forms of inhabiting the world." This profound notion is not about limitations, it is about the art of the possible within society and in the larger world. It is a hopeful vision of an engaged and invigorated critical art practice.

How is one to translate Rancière's ideas into the pedagogy of foundations level art education? He offers many places to start. For one, his notion of regimes of art explores the ways art has been conceived through history as specific perspectives, perspectives that transcend traditional art historical temporalities. In other words, a specific regime may have had its origins in a particular era, but it is by no means fixed only to that time. For example, what Rancière terms the "representative regime of art" has its origin in Ancient Greece, became a system within the classical age, and extends far beyond either period. For as he explains, in this example, regime is a system of relations between the sayable and the visible in a specifically poetic manner. One could introduce this notion of a poetic representation across the history of art to beginning students. We often see similar categorizations in contemporary art, where diverse artists and ideas are arranged by topical connections.¹ This approach can also introduce the foundations level art student to the common threads of ideas and concepts that transcend traditional art historical categories, and allow for discussions of how these ideas have shifted through the ages.

Beyond his concept of the regimes of art, probably the most useful concept to take from Rancière and bring into foundations level pedagogy is his analysis of operations in image creation and image relations. For example, Rancière discusses what he terms the "dialectical montage" and the "symbolic montage" as two ways of artistic production that reveal something hidden. Whereas the dialectical montage has as its aim the revealing of a secret truth, the symbolic montage assembles the various elements as a mystery or as an analogy. In discussing the dialectical montage he references Martha Rosler's series *Bringing the War Home: House Beautiful*. This example makes plain the aim of the dialectical montage as a strategy, to make a direct visual connection between two distinct worlds. The symbolic montage on the other hand operates as a strategy of visual analogy, or a strategy that specifically creates an air of mystery. One can think of the Surrealist's use of collage to evoke the uncanny as a symbolic montage strategy. These ideas can be approached in a number of ways within the classroom. An obvious assignment would be to create works based on the specific goals of each of these montage strategies.

In many instances throughout the book, Rancière discusses specific strategies for artistic creation, but his aim is never to confine these strategies to a specific medium or working method. In doing so, he explores the range of image creation, how different strategies and media transmit images, and to what effect. With this in mind, one can base projects on conceptual goals derived from the text while leaving the issue of medium open to exploration. This can produce concrete examples of the reception of images across media, and the effect of each technique in conveying broad conceptual goals. Another possibility is basing an assignment on the translation of a specific image using a variety of techniques and approaches, again demonstrating the effect of various media on the reception of an image while also opening up space for the demonstration of a variety of techniques of image production. These kinds of exercises can prepare the foundations level student for more advanced critical discussion about artists' use of a range of materials in the expanded world of contemporary art, while simultaneously instilling the critical skills to evaluate specific techniques to determine which will be most effective to convey intent. Be-

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yond that, exercises such as these will also peak a student's interest in particular modes of image production as they compare and contrast the effects of image translation across a variety of mediums.

This is only a small sample of the possible applications of this book to a foundations level pedagogy dealing with project specific goals. The insights that Rancière offers are vast, and the text requires a close reading to draw out the fine points of his often nuanced arguments. How can a pedagogy of an engaged and democratic art practice shape not only future students of art, but our collective future as well? The notion of art and its relationship to the perception of the possible in our larger society indeed deserves attention, critical debate, and dialogue. This book provides a fresh and engaging perspective on contemporary critical theory about art and the labor of art as practiced today.

Note

1 Most notably in the series of books *Documents of Contemporary Art* published by MIT Press.