

## Acquisto on Bray (2017)

Bray, Patrick, editor. *Understanding Rancière, Understanding Modernism*. Bloomsbury, 2017, pp. 295, ISBN 978-1-5013-1138-3

Joseph Acquisto, University of Vermont

This excellent volume, part of a series that brings individual theorists' work to bear on newly emerging reconceptualizations of modernism, includes thirteen substantial essays and five shorter pieces. Contributors include both established and emerging scholars writing with a remarkably and consistently high degree of clarity and insight about a thinker known for the vast scope of his writings on nearly all branches of aesthetics and their relation to politics. The book is in four parts: "Conceptualizing Rancière," "Rancière and Aesthetics," "Glossary of Key Terms," and an "Interview with Jacques Rancière."

The volume has a double-faceted goal and as such will be of interest to two different sets of readers. For those unfamiliar with Rancière, many of the essays, as well as Bray's introduction, provide a general overview of essential aspects of his thought, and the short "glossary" pieces present key concepts such as the "distribution of the sensible," "mute speech," and "regimes of art." For readers well-versed in Rancière, the essays function as an edited volume engaging with, critiquing, and applying his thought to literature, cinema, theater, and beyond. Readers seeking an introduction to, followed by an application of, Rancière's work would best be served by reading the book out of order, navigating from the introduction to the glossary and interview and then back through the essays themselves. The essays in the first part focus more on presenting and summarizing six key works by Rancière that are of particular importance for those working in literary and cultural studies, while those in the second part generally interpret and apply Rancière's thought to topics such as feminist art, Stendhal, cinema, Pierre Bourdieu's notion of habitus, and beyond. The distinction between the two parts is not always hard and fast. For example, Emily Apter's essay in the first part encompasses a discussion of Hippolyte Taine and Leo Spitzer in the context of a presentation of Rancière's *The Hatred of Democracy*, and Suzanne Guerlac's essay in the second part offers a compelling reading of Marcel Proust while also introducing and summarizing key concepts from Rancière.

Modernism is treated here more as a temporal category than a conceptual one, and the wide range of authors considered suggests either a loose or an expansive take on the concept, depending on one's perspective. Modernism as it is presented in this volume stretches back to Gustave Flaubert and even Honoré de Balzac and as far forward as contemporary art. Rancière addresses this question of Modernism specifically in the interview, noting the "striking moments where art emerges as a form of collective living and as an instrument for the radical transformation of this living. This defines what we can call an historical Modernism, which is to say a moment when there is a will on the part of a certain number of artists to perform an art in synch with its time, in fact, an art that goes beyond the limits of art and thinks of itself as a direct agent in the total transformation of collective living" (264–65). This assertion of a historical approach is not unproblematic, as Giuseppina Mecchia points out in her essay: "The paradox of Rancière's approach resides in the temporal unfolding that he assigns to the very concept of literature while situating it in a vacuum of sorts, detached from other material phenomena that also unfold temporally, such as sociopolitical institutions, technical innovation, the evolution of capitalist modes of production, mass public education, and so forth" (105).

If I have singled out few individual contributions here, it is not only for want of space, but also because of the uniformly incisive nature of the essays, which collectively present a multifaceted engagement with Rancière's approach to aesthetics and its complex intersections with politics. Summaries of Rancière's arguments are accurate and accessible, and readings are consistently richly textured and insightful. Specialists of French literature and culture will find much of great value here, given that the vast majority of contributors are in French studies. Most of the authors considered in the volume, following Rancière's own preferred subjects, are European; exceptions include Tom Conley's essay on American cinema and Silvia López's essay on Latin America, a sphere in which Rancière has had considerable influence. Those who read the volume straight through may find a certain degree of repetition in the exposition of key concepts from essay to essay, and those in search of the original French quotations from Rancière will find that they are sometimes provided in footnotes, but often not. Such quibbles hardly detract from the impressive contribution that this volume makes to Rancière studies for experts and newcomers to his thought alike.

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