



Interview with Jacques Rancière

Jacques Rancière and Nina Power

I'm endlessly fascinated with one particular book by Jacques Rancière, namely *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation* (the original French was published in 1987; the English translation appeared with a fine introduction by Kristin Ross in 1991). The exploration of the assumption of axiomatic equality, of equality as a practice, the focus on the particular anti-pedagogical method of Joseph Jacotot and the brilliant way in which intervention, philosophy and history intersect in the name of a true education of emancipation has been enormously important for me, both in my work and my teaching practice. In the era of feedback forms, endless monitoring and stultifying exams we sadly can't 'teach' as Jacotot did, nevertheless the question of the 'will' to learn has always struck me as the crucial factor in education of any kind, and transforms the idea of teaching from the transmission of knowledge into the attempt to engage the capacity of both the educator and the pupil in the name of a shared understanding in which neither participant has automatic superiority. Although the book that was out around the time I conducted this short interview, *The Emancipated Spectator*, returns to some of the themes of *the Ignorant Schoolmaster*, Rancière has predictably been pounced upon by the art world in recent years, and he returns the favour by focussing on questions of audience, photography, film and art and in this book.

As you can see from the interview, which was rather short, no doubt mostly due to my lack of desire to push sweet old men into difficult territory, I didn't ask Rancière anything much about art, preferring to focus on questions of pedagogy and capacity. The question about pornography was, in retrospect, something of a dead-end, though I continue to believe it does relate to some of the ideas Rancière has about challenging the opposition between viewing and acting, although perhaps not in a particularly elevated way. I wonder if the shortness of this interview is something to do with a stubborn Rancièrian strategy in these situations – the couple of times I'd met him before, at conferences and workshops arranged in his honour, he'd always seemed ill-at-ease with the organisers and much happier talking to the students about what they were interested in. I may well now be on the 'wrong side'. Rancière's attitude, insofar as I've understood it at all, is very much in keeping with his work, of course, where every text is an attempt to undermine hierarchy, but makes it difficult in some ways to get him to 'perform' as the master-figure in an interview situation. Mind you, Rancière has given

plenty of successful interviews in the past, so perhaps something else was going on here, a fatigue at having to sit through half-a-dozen interviews in a row, perhaps. When Rancière is critical, however, he can be brutal. See for example, his attacks on Althusser in *La Leçon d'Althusser* and on sociology as a discipline in *the Philosopher and his Poor*. I once asked him what he thought about Samuel Beckett. He paused for a moment before replying: 'I 'ave no affinity for 'im.' And that was that.

Rancière's answer in the interview regarding the internet struck me as very clear and quite amusing about the republican guardians of knowledge in France, and it's easy to picture the kind of pompous figure Rancière is painting here. If this interview has a highlight, it's his claim that 'I think what we can see on the internet is an erasing of the hierarchical model, of the person who has the authority'. I would like Rancière in future to write a book about the internet, which would perhaps include a chapter about pornography. Hopefully his interest in the new commons, in the opening up of knowledge and autonomous learning will increase in the future, and he'll start to address some of the newer and potentially more universal forms of knowledge-distribution.

Nina Power: A really important thing for me is the link between two of your books, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* and *The Emancipated Spectator*. Obviously you make it clear at the beginning that you want to take up some of the ideas in the earlier book in relation to the paradox of the spectator. You also make it very clear that there are links between what you say about the relationship between the pedagogue and the pupil and the classical image of the performance and the passive spectator: these questions turn around ignorance and passivity. You say of the pupil that it's really a question of the lack of knowledge of ignorance, and here I'm reminded of your critique of Bourdieu – his description of cultural capital and so on – because it's as if he's setting up a new science, but it's a science in predicated on ignorance. Could you talk a little bit about this link between the pupil and the spectator, how you see them and the ways this link is usually conceived?

Jacques Rancière: Basically my interest is neither in pedagogy nor in art, in the pedagogical mode as such – it is in the interpretation of social domination as a matter of knowledge and ignorance. What's basic for me is a general critique of the model in which people are dominated or oppressed because they don't know precisely why they occupy this position. Because of the way things are structured they cannot see; they do not have a global view and so I'm interested in rethinking the relation between domination and an optical model. So what's interesting to me is the way this is working, the presupposition of inequality: there are people who see and people who don't see, and if people are unequal it is because of real inequality, but they are unable to see it. All my work about emancipation was a critique of this presupposition that matters of domination and liberation are matters of ignorance and knowledge. And of course all this for me goes back to the Platonic model of the relation between the people fettered in the cave and the chosen. So what interests me is a strong articulation, a thesis on the relation between truth and visibility, in terms of the question of inequality. I think *The Emancipated Spectator* was for me an occasion to make a point about the optical model

as such, because in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* it was not about this issue of the visible as a place for deception. It was about the presupposition of equality or inequality, and about the logic of explanation. I was asked to speak this summer at this academy of arts by people interested in *The Emancipated Spectator*, so my question was: why are we interested in this? Why would a choreographer – because it was mostly a matter of choreographers – be interested in the model of intellectual emancipation? I was led to the question of performance, this double side of the Platonic model: that the spectator at the same time is one who is ignorant and the one who is passive. What has always interested me about the so-called pedagogical question is how education, the school system, works as an allegory of society. So this relation between an idea of the student and an idea of the people – for instance, in historical teleology – and how the ignorant gain knowledge, become more learned, and therefore equal.

NP: There's an interesting third term in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* where you have the book as the thing that deflects or undermines the question of hierarchy, so in a sense it's the book that equalises. And here you mention briefly about the script, that even if you have a play there's still the script. But I was thinking – I suppose in a sense this is a rather empirical question, because in a way I can see this in my students – that the internet in a strange way allows access to a great deal of information and texts: you can read everything Plato, Marx wrote or whatever, and people really do want to read this stuff. I suppose in a way what I'm asking you is how you conceive the role of the internet given what you say about the book in relation to Jacotot.

JR: Well I think the relation is different because in the case of Jacotot you can say that the book is the third term in the relation between the master and the pupil, the place where both can check. The idea of the book is the one thing in common from which it is possible to learn language, and to learn everything. So with the internet of course the question is different, but I think certainly it makes sense how many people – people in France who call themselves republicans – think that the transmission of knowledge is the only way to liberation. And yet at the same time they are irritated about the internet – because precisely the internet, in a sense, is a refutation of the certifying process. Jacotot describes it: the certifying process is that you must start from this point and go to this point and there is a right way to go from the first point to the last point. We can see the fervour with which people make these incredible statements: 'Why, the internet is horrible! There is all this knowledge but people don't know, they can't know, they need to be guided!' But the point they are entirely able, is that is very easy to go from one link to another link, it's very easy even I think for a beginner after one day on the internet to discern what information is reliable or not. It is very easy to go from the most superficial to the most elaborate. So I think it is an interesting case because the internet is a living refutation of a pedagogical model of 'the good way'. And this is why there is a very strong polemic against the internet in France, in this milieu of so-called republican intellectuals, very strong accusations against Wikipedia, for instance. 'But on Wikipedia, who knows who is writing the information? There is no control etc. etc.' My answer is about Wikipedia is that on Wikipedia you can see the information, but the people are asked to verify it. Of course this never happens in a normal encyclopaedia, in a normal dictionary or encyclopaedia, so the people occupy a position of authority. So I think what we can see on the internet is an erasing of the hierarchical model, of the

person who has the authority. It's obvious to all people that if you are doing research on the internet it's very easy to come very quickly to forms of knowledge which are very serious knowledge, and verified and so on. But the idea that you can get to this so quickly is intolerable for the supposed elite of the 'learned' people.

NP: I'm very glad you think that! Okay, well I have a sort of related question, you don't have to answer this if you don't want to because maybe it's not an area of interest for you, but I was thinking reading *The Emancipated Spectator* not only of the internet. You say that emancipation begins when we challenge the opposition between viewing and acting, and whether there is in a sense a more participatory relation than precisely the things you're saying about the internet. But one of the other things that the internet is infamous for is pornography and I suppose I'm curious about what you think of, if you think anything at all, about pornography as a mode of viewing or acting. Maybe it's not interesting.

JR: I'm not sure I've really something to say about it! Certainly it's a problem, but it's not a problem related to my own research.

NP: No, sure. It just occurred to me because in a way if you're talking about the spectacle what's more of a spectacle than this? Nevertheless, it doesn't have quite the same relation to passivity in the audience as the model you're attacking. The other main area I want to talk about is this question of capacity because I'm very interested in this myself, I do some work on Virno and questions of naturalism, questions of human nature particularly in relation to Chomsky and Virno, trying to look at the ways in which questions of human nature have re-emerged in a post-Marxist way. It's very strange – a lot of these questions are more scientific in their later model but they're the same kinds of questions that were being asked in the 1830s and 1840s. How do you naturalise Hegel? What is human nature? I read somewhere that you started a PhD on Feuerbach, can you tell me a bit about that?

JR: I don't know whether I can really give you something interesting about Feuerbach. Well, I started doing a PhD about Feuerbach, about the concept of man, but it wasn't about the concept of man intended as human nature. I remember my leading thread was this sentence, Feuerbach saying 'Man is the name of all names'. So a new way of thinking about man which can be related as Foucault was trying to do at the same time to a new science of language. But what interested me at the end of Feuerbach is the way in which he was reappropriating the religious figure of man, which became more and more cogent in Feuerbach. The idea of creating a religion of man. So what struck me was his theory of incorporation, so revealing man as an incorporation of language, history, language, history, etc. etc. So that was my point; it was not really related to questions of human nature.

NP: Just on this question of capacity, you make this claim about Virno where you're critical of him but at least, you say, it's not this leftist melancholy. It's really this question of capacity. In the Italian workerist tradition you have this question of what it means to be fully exploited at the level of your basic human capacities, the capacity to speak, and so on. You said that what you're interested in is this question of

‘emancipation as emergence from a state of minority where the incapable are seen as capable’. Now that’s obviously different from Virno, although I think Virno is also interested in incapacity, that his naturalism is an unhappy naturalism, it’s about human nature as a very uncertain and unfinished idea – this idea of neoteny, or an openness to the world that isn’t a positive phenomenological relation. Could you just speak a little bit about what you mean by capacity or capability? You were saying it has no relation to these questions of human nature, so is it simply looking to see where the supposedly incapable are actually incapable? Because obviously in the political register Hardt and Negri would say well, precisely, it’s where our capacities are exploited, we just need to flick the switch and people will realise that actually this is about communism, people will realise that everything they’re doing they’re just selling their capacities but if they just realised that this was on the side of communism then – well, this is simplistic but you know what I mean.

JR: I think there was no direct relation with the theses of Negri or Virno really, it came from my own research about emancipation, both social and intellectual. So the point is not about belief – I think the point is that in any kind of human relation you have the choice between two presuppositions: the presupposition that we are dealing with somebody who is not your equal, or the presupposition that you are dealing with someone who is your equal, meaning that they are sharing the one capacity which is involved in the relation. So that was the problem for Aristotle, that if you give an order to a slave, the slave must be in possession of language and Aristotle provides a kind of Sophist mask, saying ‘Yes, a slave understands language but he doesn’t process language’. And so it is this kind of question that interests me, so when you are dealing with a student or when you are just presenting your argument or making your description in general, do you address to an addressee that is supposed to have the capacity, or do we address an addressee who we suppose has not got the capacity? So I think it is really from the point of view of the pedagogical model; for me it doesn’t imply some kind of global historical process, something like the global reappropriation of the capacity. My current stance is to distance this kind of thinking, so it is not a matter of reappropriating this capacity which has been alienated but that has become the power of capitalism. And the power is really the collectivisation of the capacity that we have already, to create a specific network of egalitarian relationships. So for me that’s the main point, it’s about the way we think the relation between the presupposition between equality and the idea of possible collective intelligence.

Transcribed and Edited by Jon Melling

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