

# Chapter 1

## Introduction

### 1.1 Ranciere and the reevaluation of the notion of modernity

Jaques Rancière in his book *The Politics of Aesthetics* examines the relationship between the concept of modernity and the break from figurative representation in the visual arts. He argues that the departure from representation of images through figurative means is often confused with aesthetic modernity, which is specific to a single regime of the arts. That is, “a specific type of connection between ways of producing works of art or developing practices, forms of visibility that disclose them, and ways of conceptualizing the former and the later.”<sup>1</sup> If we were to think about this confusion that is associated with the concept of *modernism* in the realm of music, some questions come into mind: Does this confusion apply to the musical domain and if so how does it manifest itself? Can we talk about representation in music and if so within what context? Could we compare the breaking from figurative representation to the departure from tonality at the beginning of the twentieth century? Has ‘the musician’ gone through a corresponding redefinition of *what is expected* from him by the community the same way as ‘the fine artist’ has through the process of modernisation?

In the following discussion, I will attempt to read Rancière’s text as applied to music not only with the purpose of tracing parallels and discrepancies between music and the other arts, but to try to find out something particular about music itself. Also, I will venture to examine the limitations of the notion of modernity within music and its relationship to the wider modernist political project.

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<sup>1</sup>Jaques Rancière, ‘The Distribution of the Sensible’, in *The Politics of Aesthetics*, Trans. Gabriel Rockhill, London: Continuum, 2004, p. 20.

### 1.1.1 The distribution of the sensible

Before starting our discussion on the notion of modernity and its political and aesthetic consequences, first I will try to examine the relationship of aesthetics and politics in the work of Rancière. According to Rancière, the political and the aesthetic spheres are intrinsically linked through what he calls ‘The distribution of the sensible’.

I call the distribution of the sensible the system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it. A distribution of the sensible therefore establishes at one and the same time something common that is shared and exclusive parts. This apportionment of parts and positions is based on a distribution of spaces, times, and forms of activity that determines the very manner in which something in common lends itself to participation and in what way various individuals have a part in this distribution.<sup>2</sup>

It is precisely this system of division of spaces, times and forms of activity that defines aesthetics and is also at the heart of politics. Therefore, aesthetics takes part in the political act of governing and in determining who the rulers are and how they come to power; as well as how the commons are distributed within a community. Here though, Rancière points out, that in order to make the relationship between politics and aesthetics, one must understand aesthetics “in a Kantian sense—re-examined perhaps by Foucault—as the system of *a priori* forms determining what presents itself to sense experience.”<sup>3</sup> Aesthetics therefore should be seen here beyond the conventional view as strictly belonging to the confines of art and should not be seen merely as the ‘aesthetic practices’ manifested in different artistic disciplines. In contrast, in order to think of aesthetics in a context that could be applied outside of the arts, it requires its abstraction as modes of action, production, perception and thought; a system of “delimitation of spaces and times, of the visible and the invisible, of speech and noise, that simultaneously determines the place and the stakes of politics as a form of experience.”<sup>4</sup> Therefore, through the work of Rancière, it is possible to think of aesthetics in politics with a broader understanding of aesthetics as the distribution of the sensible. Moreover, for Rancière, ‘aesthetic practices’ that disclose visibility in artistic practices reveal ‘ways of doing and making’ that exist and have visibility within the community. There are different manifestations of this practices that confine an aesthetic distribution.

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<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 12.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

This forms define the way in which works of art or performances are ‘involved in politics’, whatever may otherwise be the guiding intentions, artists’ social modes of integration, or the manner in which artistic forms reflect social structures or movements. . . . In this way, a sensible politiccity exists that is immediately attributed to the major forms of aesthetic distribution such as theater, the page, or the chorus. There ‘politics’ obey their own proper logic, and they offer their services in very different contexts and time periods.<sup>5</sup>

Consequently, it could be argued that there is an inherent political core in the way this artistic forms are constituted and within them lays a political project that renders the distribution of what is known to the community, the way it is organized and what remains visible or invisible.

### 1.1.2 The regimes of art

In order to understand Rancière’s reevaluation of the notion of modernity one must first understand what he calls the three ‘regimes of art’, which are modes of identification and articulation between ‘ways of doing and making’ and forms of visibility, as well as their conceptualization. In other words, the ‘regimes of art’ simply distinguish different ways of making and thinking about ‘art’ and how it is perceived.

#### The ethical regime of images and the poetic regime of art

To begin with, Rancière defines the *ethical regime of images* as the pragmatic Platonic<sup>6</sup> notion of the use and distribution of images in relationship to the community’s *ethos*. This regime therefore uses images as ‘true’ imitations of the original and are distributed and valued by their purpose of educating the community in accordance to it’s social order. Therefore, within this regime ‘art’ is not evaluated by qualities within itself but by their purpose in the community. He goes on to define a *poetic regime of art* (also referred to as *representative regime of art*) as that which breaks away from the *ethical regime of images* and values the arts in terms of their own *substance*.

I call this regime *poetic* in the sense that it identifies the arts—what the Classical Age would later call the ‘fine arts’—within a classification of ‘ways of doing and making’, and it consequently defines proper ‘ways of doing and making’ as well as means of assessing imitations. I call it *representative* insofar as it is the notion of representation or *mimēsis*

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<sup>5</sup>Ibid., pp. 14-15.

<sup>6</sup>As in Plat’s *The Republic*—not sure about this one. . .

that organizes these ways of doing, making, seeing and judging. Once again, however, *mimēsis* is not the law that brings the arts under the yoke of resemblance. It is first of all a fold in the distribution of ‘ways of doing and making’ as well as in social occupations, a fold that renders the arts visible. It is not an artistic process but a regime of visibility regarding the arts.<sup>7</sup>

Here, we come to the first deadlock in reading Rancière’s notion of the ‘regimes of art’ as applied to music. How are we to understand the difference between the *ethical regime of images* and the *representative regime of art* outside the domain of the visual and fine arts? First, we should understand that music not only has different social functions and visibility, but within its unique organization it has particular ‘ways of doing and making’ that are specific to itself. Even though music occupies a different and particular position in the ways of distributing the sensible, I will continue to argue that we can still refer to the *ethical* and the *poetic* regimes in music.

Following Rancière categorization, I will refer to music within the *ethical regime* as music that is made, heard and judged for its purpose within the community. By this, I mean music that is not assessed by its own qualities—or as Rancière would say ‘by its own *substance*’—but by the purpose it performs within the community. Examples of this in western tradition would include church, court and military music, to mention just a few. It is easy to find music that falls within the *ethical regime* in other cultures where in some cases music is not even differentiated from other disciplines, like dance or storytelling, and is performed (in some cultures everyone partakes in music-making) and valued by members of the group by its communal and ceremonial purposes (celebration, mourning, war, etc). Of course, we can still find many examples of the *ethical regime* today in music for theater, dance, television, films and religious purposes. I am also of the opinion that a large quantity of *pop music* is also not appreciated by its own ‘musical’ attributes but is judged by its purpose of making profit within a consumer society (selling records, tickets and other merchandize). That said, I want to make clear that I am not attempting to devalorize or make a value judgment about music that falls within the *ethical regime*. Furthermore, some music might also qualify within more than one regime simultaneously.

I will define music that falls within the *poetic regime* as that which is appreciated for its own *substance* but still follows or imitates a model.<sup>8</sup> Namely, music that is judged by its own ‘musical’

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<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 22.

<sup>8</sup>By model I not only mean the written but also the unwritten rules in music performance and composition. The written rules could be for example treatises of harmony and orchestration whereas the unwritten rules could be performance practices and conventions in composition and improvisation, too name a few.

qualities, and that is made with the main purpose of been listened to and evaluated by it's own subject matter. This music would be *representative* insofar as it imitates or resembles a musical model (for example rules of harmony, counterpoint or sonata form, to mention just a few). A lot of western 'concert music' would follow in this category in that it is made, heard and valued for it's 'musical' qualities and judged as good or bad, adequate or inadequate, satisfactory or not, based on how the performer or composer follows certain models—in the case of the performer, models of performance practice, and in the case of the composer, compositional models such as chord progressions, voice-leading, musical themes, variations, etc.

It is interesting to note that even though in the visual arts, the breaking from the *ethical regime of images* and the establishment of the *poetic regime of art* is what separates the 'fine arts' from other modes and techniques of production (of images, shapes, objects, etc), in music there is not such a change in definition. That is to say, in the visual arts this break between *ethical* and *poetic* regimes identifies the arts as such but in music it does not change its identification. Why is it that on the musical domain we still call the 'ways of doing and making' in both regimes *music*? Why within our culture someone who designs billboards is not considered to be a *fine artist* (it probably would fall into graphic design) while we still call someone who writes jingles for television commercials a *musician*? Later, I will come back to this questions and look at the possible reasons and implications of this difference. However, before drawing any conclusions about the consequences of this disparity, first I will examine the *aesthetic regime of art* to have a better understanding of Rancière's enquiry.

### **The aesthetic regime of art and the shortcomings of the notion of modernity**

Rancière calls the *aesthetic regime of art* that which liberates art from the *representative regime of art* by breaking with its identification as the division of 'ways of doing and making'. The *aesthetic regime* therefore puts an end to the models used by the *representative regime* and breaks the barriers of identification in the arts. It does so by distinguishing art as an occupation that establishes, questions and alters the concept of what art is, it's hierarchies, subject matter and genres.

The aesthetic regime of the arts is the regime that strictly identifies art in the singular and frees it from any specific rule, from any hierarchy of the arts, subject matter, and genres. Yet it does so by destroying the mimetic barrier that distinguished 'ways of doing and making' affiliated with art from other 'ways of doing and making', a barrier that separated its rules from the order of social occupations. The aesthetic regime asserts the absolute singularity of art and, at the same time, destroys any pragmatic criterion for

isolating this singularity.<sup>9</sup>

Hence, the *aesthetic regime* establishes the autonomy of art and at the same time makes art independent of its own forms. As a result, the artist becomes a practitioner of a discipline specific to whatever falls into the category of art.

At this point, we should think of the *aesthetic regime* in the domain of music. I will propose that music that falls within this regime is music that challenges the *poetic regime* and the very notion of *what music is* at a given point in time. It also should be thought as a regime that makes music independent from its own subject matter, rules, conventions and genres, and frees it from specific ‘ways of doing and making’. It changes music’s visibility and makes it autonomous from the very notion of itself, from its expected ‘musical’ and social functions.<sup>10</sup> In the history of music, it is easy to think of examples of music that breaks with musical practices of its time and redefines itself<sup>11</sup>. It is even possible to think of brief historical periods before the twentieth century where we can see some form or manifestation of the *aesthetic regime* in music. Nevertheless, it is difficult to think of music as an autonomous discipline, freed from its own *substance*. That is to say, even though the definition of music has changed and was challenged in several occasions, it was not until the twentieth century that the concept fully emerged of ‘the musician’ as someone who creates whatever he concedes suitable music to be and is not expected to follow traditional formulas of music-making. Even to this day, I think that these concepts of music and ‘the musician’ are not completely widespread within the community.<sup>12</sup>

Rancière, goes further to examine the limitations of the notion of modernity and its relationship to the *aesthetic regime of art*. He describes what we commonly refer to as *modernism* in art as an ‘incoherent’ label designated instead of what truly should be attributed to the *aesthetic regime of art*. There is a sort of simplicity ascribed to the notion of modernity that is viewed as a clear line of transition or rupture from the old to the new and in the case of the visual arts between figurative and non-figurative representation. Rancière argues that the break from figurative representation is a confusion that emerged from the simplistic view that this break would mean a rupture from the *representative regime of art*.

The basis for this simplistic historical account was the transition to non-figurative repre-

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<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p. 23.

<sup>10</sup>Here, I refer to ‘social functions’ not as in the purpose or use of music within the *ethical regime*, but the social functions it performs within the *poetic regime*.

<sup>11</sup>There are too many examples for me to list them here, but if we just look at the different periods of western music, we can see how each of them redefines what music is in relationship to the previous one.

<sup>12</sup>Later, I will propose several possible reasons for this problem.

sentation in painting. This transition was theorized by being cursorily assimilated into artistic ‘modernity’s’ overall anti-mimetic destiny. . . . However, it is the starting point that is erroneous. The leap outside of *mimēsis* is by no means the refusal of figurative representation.<sup>13</sup>

Therefore, the break from figurative representation does not mean the establishment of a new visibility for art nor a break from the mimetic barrier of ‘ways of doing and making’. Moreover, Rancière asserts that the contradiction of the *aesthetic regime of art* which on the one hand establishes the autonomy of art and on the other hand questions the distinction between art and other activities leads to two big misunderstandings of the notion of modernity. The first confusion was to simply associate the modernist movement with the autonomy of art. The modernist project was therefore reduced only to an ‘anti-mimetic’ movement that concentrates on the idealistic concept of stripping away from all references of previous art forms and works in order to reveal art’s ‘purity’ of form and reach it’s ‘essence’. They attempted this by exploring only the formal aspects of art by focusing on the capabilities of it’s own medium. The second big confusion, according to Rancière, is the idea that the forms of the *aesthetic regime of art* were somehow related to other forms that would materialize by accomplishing a task or fulfilling a destiny specific to modernity. In other words, the revolution that rendered autonomy to art became the example for the Marxist revolution. The failure of both the ‘anti-mimetic’ principles of modernism and the political revolution resulted in a ‘crisis of art’ caused by this paradigms of modernism. Modernism in art therefore “became something like a fatal destiny based on a fundamental forgetting.”<sup>14</sup>

### 1.1.3 Musical modernism: misconceptions and misunderstandings

I will propose that a similar confusion has taken place in western music, which leads to analogous misunderstandings regarding the so called modernist project. However, in order to avoid simplifications we should first remember certain aspects about the state of western music at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries. It is important first of all to realize that due to certain developments in western music by the end of the nineteenth century there was a clear specialization of musicians—some were trained specifically as performers and others as composers. This division of occupations in music lead to a greater dichotomy in the ‘ways of doing and making’ music. The specificity of the performer’s creative decisions therefore became mostly linked to the realization of a given score. The composer’s role, on the other hand, was to provide a score

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<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 24.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., p. 27.

to the performers and establish certain directions and instructions on parameters such as in pitch, rhythm, musical form and instrumentation to name a few. During this time, the role of the composer became more prominent concerning music innovation and therefore most of these developments are attributed mostly to composers in western music history. Hence, I will mostly refer to composers in attempting to explain the limitations of the notion of musical modernity. Nevertheless, by no means I am attempting to discredit or ignore the performers' role—I am just referring to the more widespread view of these developments. I will later explain in more detail the complexities of this division of occupations in western music regarding the *aesthetic regime* but in the meantime, in my analysis I will refer mostly to composer's work. To add to the complexity of this problem, I will also mention that it would be slightly reductionist of me to assume that composers at this time were fully aware of the transformation that music was undergoing. When we look at the writings from this period, we can not clearly see an explicit intentionality to give autonomy to music, redefine its visibility or revolutionize its 'ways of doing and making'. Nevertheless, I will argue that even though they were not fully aware of the implications of this transformations, some of their work and writing point towards the establishment of an *aesthetic regime* in music.

At the end of the nineteenth century, composers such as Wagner, Mahler and Debussy, to name a few, were already expanding the tonal system through the so called 'emancipation of dissonance,' signaling what was to become a radical break in music history—that is, Schönberg's moving away from the tonal system altogether and starting to compose freely, without following the tonal system. This radical gesture signals a step towards the *aesthetic regime* in that this action attempts to free music from previous musical models—in this case it frees itself from the tonal system—thus venturing to unleash music from its own *substance*. Schönberg, with his period of so called "free atonality"<sup>15</sup> and later with his twelve-tone method<sup>16</sup>, breaks away from the convention that a composer should follow previous models of composition and starts to define a new notion of the composer as someone who decides what he considers music to be and chooses how it is to be organized. Therefore, the rupture from the tonal system at the beginning of the twentieth century challenges the definition of music in western society and contributes to redefine 'the musician' as someone who does not follow existing models, but can invent his own modes and systems of music-making. However, it is important to note that the break from tonality by no means represents the establishment of an *aesthetic regime* in music nor a leap outside *mimēsis* and the *representative regime*. Stravinski's

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<sup>15</sup>The period between 1908 and 1923 in which Schönberg abstained from using tonality and did not adhere to a systematic method of pitch organization.

<sup>16</sup>Devised by Schönberg in 1921 and first described to his inner circle in 1923.



*Le Sacre du Printemps*<sup>17</sup>, is a clear example of a work that points towards the *aesthetic regime* but does so not by abandoning tonality, but by breaking with other models of concert music. The radicality of *Le Sacre du Printemps* comes from developments in musical parameters such as rhythm, tonality (polytonality, etc), timbre and musical form, but not from a complete renounce from tonality. Stravinsky's use of folk-music, primitive rhythms, asymmetric structures and orchestral textures was music never heard before and stretched the definition of concert music as well as proposed new ways of organizing it's subject matter freeing music from specific 'ways of doing and making'. At the same time Stravinsky invents new rules and defies traditional genres and styles, which are all characteristics of the *aesthetic regime*.

Schönberg's importance in the establishment of the *aesthetic regime* is also not to be discredited and I believe that through his departure from tonality, he certainly redefined *what music is* and questioned music's subject matter. Moreover, through his revolutionary shock on the community's notion of music, he certainly contributed to changing the notion of 'the musician' as someone who produces what *he considers music to be*. It is also compelling to see that Schönberg's use of dissonance was not with the purpose of centering his musical discourse around pitch organization nor being non-referential to previous musical styles and genres. Paradoxically, even though his way of organizing pitches was radically new, he was fairly traditional in his use of other musical parameters such as form<sup>18</sup>, timbre and gesture. For Schönberg, the method by which he organized notes and used atonality were not very important elements in his work.

I personally do not find that atonality and dissonance are the outstanding features of my works. They certainly offer obstacles to the understanding of what is really my musical subject.<sup>19</sup>

This separates him from the next generations of composers that embraced his twelve-tone system and who's main compositional objective focused on the organization of this twelve pitches. It is in trying to understand this next generation of composers' work that Rancière's analysis of the confusion of the notion of modernity comes handy. It is crucial to remember the first confusion, which is to simply seek the autonomy of art through 'anti-mimetic' strategies. In the case of music, this was attempted by focusing on formal aspects of music such as how to organize pitches, rhythms, dynamics and all other possible 'musical' parameters. By giving importance to the formal aspects of the compositional medium they sought to stretch music's capabilities and to seek music's autonomy by striping it away

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<sup>17</sup>Premiered in Paris, 1913.

<sup>18</sup>He constantly used traditional forms such as sonata form, suite and theme and variations.

<sup>19</sup>Arnold Schönberg, *Style and Idea*, Trans. Leo Black, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984, p. 77.

from all references of other musics. It is fascinating to read that when Schönberg showed his twelve-tone method to his associates in 1923, he already could notice the potential problems of looking at music only in terms of the formal techniques implemented to compose it.

What I feared, happened. Although I had warned my friends and pupils to consider this as a change in compositional regards, and although I gave them the advice to consider it only as a means to fortify the logic, they started counting the tones and finding out the methods with which I used the rows. Only to explain understandably and thoroughly the idea, I had shown them a certain number of cases. But I refused to explain more of it, not the least because I had already forgotten it and had to find it myself. But principally because I thought it would not be useful to show technical matters which everybody had to find for himself and could do so. This is also the error of Mr. Hill. He also is counting tones and wants to know how I use them and whether I do it consequently.<sup>20</sup>

Schönberg's use of his twelve-tone method did not have an 'anti-mimetic' purpose, but on the contrary, he devised it to be able to have a systematic approach to musical form and to compose melodies, themes, phrases and chords. Schönberg made clear his abandonment of the tonal system was not more important than other aspects of his work. After the invention of this twelve-tone system, he relied on gestures, orchestration and structures that were related to traditional styles and genres—specially those of the Germanic tradition.

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<sup>20</sup>Ibid., p.214.