

○ VOLUME 8 NUMBER 2, 2009

AFTERWORD

**Oh I do like to be beside the seaside (Now Voyager) ... on
misunderstanding Rancière and Queer Theory**

Adrian Rifkin

Goldsmiths, London, UK.

So what I tried to do is to substitute teleological concepts and historical necessity, by categories that help us to understand the entanglement of different logics (Rancière, 2008).

It seems simple enough, and it sounds a little like the aims of QT, but let's now move on:

What can we learn from the chapters that precede this conclusion?

Or rather put it this way: what have they shown us, given us to see? I don't mean this in the sense of having demanded and then had, or not had, an epiphany; nor in the sense of requiring the miraculous, a conversion or an overturning. Yet the miraculous would indeed be if we had been taught nothing at all yet, after our reading, had set off somewhere else, turned aside or simply drifted off shore. Off shore in the breeze that blows across queer theory's shores, a zephyr named Rancière? (Botticelli's Venus, blood and sperm and foam, some queer beauty came from this mixing yet strange is strong enough; enigma and queer are not the same word. Jean Genet's thief arm in arm with Louis-Gabriel Gauny, treachery and fidelity together, though which is which we may never know? JR and QT side by side could be left enigmatic.)

Beachcombing, to find a message, a bottle washed up with an enigmatic curl of paper bearing the name Rancière; or a footprint that would match our idea of his; queer Cinderellas of the *demos*, hoping our prince has come to these crowded shores, through their turbulent and dangerous currents? As if

either he or we were of the *sans-parts*; we have part enough in the formal, public discourse of the not included, the noise and the babble that is becoming sense or too much sense passes through our privilege.

(After all as a number of these essays point out, QT has never been more popular as a mode of academic procedure - indeed this book is a moment in its separation from gay sexual and gender specificity, and marks a leaning towards a philosophy that has never broached these concepts as its primary or even secondary archive. Queer theory comes to the shores of the workers' dreaming, of Emma Bovary dressing her illusions and desires for the sake of literature, and Western movies; bringing gifts without a future, splintered mirrors of identity, Bruce Lee dressed up as Jacotot, bareback porn and the never forgotten insults of the Church fathers, the travails of the Cities of the Plain.)

Or might we have trekked inland, to cross the plains and foothills and even mountains or deserts of queer theory, refreshed from our moment on the shore, where were the message or the footprint or the breeze, or simply desolated to lose its freshness? (So which will we comb: Bersani's rectum, is it a grave? Or, that of videaste Steve Reinke; he declares that his is not. In Reinke's collection *My Rectum is not a Grave* video art has rarely come odder than this assemblage of folk fantasies, oxymoronic poetics of the vile, the beautiful and the unexpected. It unfolds in the space that QT insistently invokes, the space of separations between self and identity. But even as we see this, it no longer connects with theory, queer or other; beyond and beside the partition of the sensible may not be a concept at all, rather something that happens and that we sometimes see. Shall we wear our trousers rolled, or connect nothing with nothing, on the sandy shore of poetics, of turning aside?) (Bersani, 2000; Reinke, 2007).

This metaphor on shores is extended, but at least it is not mixed. It consistently regards the oddity of a translation, that of *Aux bords du politique* into *On the Shores of Politics*. Of course all translations are odd and this one at least respects the plural. It's true that 'au bord de la mer' does mean beside the sea or on the water's edge, but it is impossible to imagine 'aux bords de la mer,' and, in French, all the other maritime meanings of 'bord' are resolutely singular. On the edges (of the abyss, of politics), beside the edges, alongside, on the brink, just outside, just before - I can multiply the possible translations but it's hard to bring 'shores' to mind. And yet 'shores' it is and because of this title, of Rancière's book in English, queer theory too gets to have its shores. Not shoals, nor reefs, nor shallows, not even edges - just shores, and now what to do on them? What or where are the shores of Rancière, does he too have shores? These, perhaps,

are the questions answered by our volume, from queer theory's point of view.

In a gesture of a necessary and sometimes constructive narcissism the answer seems to be that these shores are in part co-terminus, that they emerge in view indeed only where they are so, and yet they are never identical. Their vistas open up to one another a possibility of reconfiguring if not the self, but then the processes or moments of subjectivation that occur in a being given-to-see one another in any singular moment of coexistence; narcissism, then, in seeing only oneself, but possibly anew.

At the same time there is here, potentially, a wretched irony, for this can all too readily be brought about through two self-defeating modes of political and aesthetic formation; first the formulation of a queer canon and together with it a concomitant canon of Rancière, twinned terrains of mutual visibility that may become fixed as such, frozen as exemplary modes of the freezing of the sensible. Second the freezing of JR and QT in assumptions of their manifest differences, then of entrenching their overcoming as a mode of procedure. For example that QT is often psychoanalytic, and that JR is not, which has here been explored with some complexity. Of course a Q theorist such as Didier Eribon is as far from both Psychoanalysis and JR as one could imagine someone being distant from two such different moments in the turning of contemporary speculations on subjectivation (Eribon 2004); and that this in itself might make them seem closer by a parallax effect. But then again it might split them on the ground of Judith Butler and the insult in drawing our attention to the difference between the insult offered to the gay subject on the one hand and, on the other, the desire of the *sans-part*, the worker poet, to dream, which does not entail an insult *a priori*. The insult is not substitute for exclusion when, as an insult, it is constitutive of the one who offers it. This relation is not quite the same as that of the complex processes of othering and misrecognition that pass between the professional *littérateurs* and the worker poets.

And again, what if we were to switch slightly our assumptions of what it is that psychoanalysis does and what it is that some texts do that might unexpectedly have characteristics of the psychoanalytic. For instance that Lee Edelman's structural recourse to Lacanian concepts constitutes a psychoanalytic discourse could be open to question (Edelman, 2004). It's curious, but when I read some Freud and some Pontalis and some Kristeva, to take but three names, or Lacan himself, I do not see a principle of the foreclosure of the future of a kind envisioned by Edelman as the necessity of the queer disinvestment in the social; nor in this disinvestment can I agree that this one reading of the death drive can allow us to constitute a negation that is the negating power of sexuality as such, as the character of queer that is not, finally, a tautology (Kristeva, 1987).

If I am not sure that Edelman's text does anything that psychoanalysis does as a practice in the world, than I am also more or less certain that his negation as a social practice derives from a formal strategy of the cultural avant-garde as it was once embodied in Italian futurism or Dadaism. That is, it sets out to destroy a particular humanism of completion or of the replete. Possibly it also has something to do with Theodor Adorno's concept of the work of art as distinct from the work of culture and the significance of modern music in figuring the social at the limit of its being comprehensible. This notion gives Edelman's text a certain authority in its exploitation of Lacanian discourse, and the operations that it thus effects, but one that is distinct from its being 'psychoanalytic.'

JR, meanwhile, writes texts that perform some of the functions of psychoanalysis. It's tempting to suggest, without suggesting a rule, that one of the processes with which analytic practice does not engage is that of foreclosure and rule-making and in this it could hardly be more unlike Edelman's *No Future*, or the ensemble of Bersani who makes self-shattering into an epistemological rule of kinds. JR likewise, in his sense of the singularity of events and moments and distributions, evades the foreclosure of methodologies and theoretical preferences while favouring conflict and working through conflicts and, at the same time, holding the reader or the spectator in engaging their autonomy even from his own positions and specific engagements. Jacotisme is possibly the only enduring principle of all his work, together with a poetic mode of seizing upon singularity as well as disagreement (with Braudel, for example in *Les mots de l'histoire*) that leaves his texts open to an affective discharge of the reader, a form of love.

I am almost tempted to say that it doesn't matter if you don't get it; a pity, but there are plenty of other philosophers who do offer rules. In this sense it's proper to think of his writing as having much more in common with an understanding of psychoanalysis as a social practice than anything in the rebarbative prose of Edelman. But this does not necessarily make him any the queerer, more or less, although it might lead to a self-estrangement of some of the methodologies we think as queer.

In his *Thalassa* of 1922-28 Sandor Ferenczi writes of the prepuce as a form of womb, '... a reduced replica of the intra-uterine situation' (Ferenczi, 2002). Inevitably this clinical insight leads to a strange figure of what is in and what is outside of itself and whatever it is that penetration does for or to the one who penetrates. In its old fashioned way, this is a queer set of ideas, just as were and still are those of Freud concerning infantile sexuality. Sometimes I think that these kinds of formulation of a sexual subjectivation are also forms of the distribution of the sensible. Once seen, as figures of a possible enunciation of the subject; a redistributing of the sensible in a way that renders any form of gender specificity queerly improbable and in this enables a means of understanding the possibility of a freer

subjectivation more generally. It is this freedom exactly that grows out of a holding of the past as a capacity to enable the future of a subject out of the exacerbation of the here and now, the moment of seeing, of enunciation. JR and Psychoanalysis in this sense share a sense of the future in a non-speculative and non-humanist discourse, and we might also go on then to say that the future of the worker poets turns out to have been what JR has written about them. In the work of the American social historians of modernisation they appear as a statistical blip in the teleology of class formation, in Rancière they remain to be read. The future is an ineluctable effect of our being alive, though what is the order of occurrence is hard to prescribe, and not a matter of the application of a rule that there is no rule. Deferred action may be as queer a concept of time as we can imagine, the possibility of the next moment, of redistribution.

Where would these two forces, JR and QT, intersect in such a way as to undo their becoming canon in their intersection; to just drift into a new sharing of the fields of theory and philosophy and even action; how will a seeing-wrong occur, how will Rancière and Queer Theory throw one another's gaze aside, to see anew? Can they do it without the help of Lacan, or Derrida, and all the attendant risks of the highly polished use of hyperbole and oxymoron that so often attend their influence? QT, in its typically relentless insistence on its perfected anti-essentialism and non-belonging to identity or, indeed, any pattern of identification, sometimes seems to commit serial Cartesianism in the absolute authority of this self-dispersal. Best to admit that this is not *prima-facie* such a bad thing, this tendency to becoming-Cartesian, no guilt need attach to it, for what is there that cannot be queered? Being at once everywhere and nowhere, the queer illocution is as likely to swing to entropy as to singularity, and while this is difficult to admit, it is obviously tempting to imagine that the one-offness of JR, his non-methodology, could offer a cure or an antidote to the self by which it is inevitably possessed, a self-reconciliation. So as JR and QT are trying to reach an arrangement, in the difficult world of aesthetics and politics that we both inhabit, what more could they want, what more could have been done here, even if it were only to loosen the new liaison just as it has been imagined?

Of course in suggesting these things it is not, I guess, my intention to foreclose on the achievements of this volume, but rather to drift to an elsewhere that they have opened; the meeting of JR and QT is, ideally, also to be a parting of ways, a separation, or an impossible closeness - irritable as we have seen. Cast them both in a role and see how it's been going:

Jerry: Shall we just have a cigarette on it?

Charlotte: Oh Jerry, don't let us ask for the moon, we have the stars.

Now Voyager - of which these lines are drawn from its closing moments - could be an allegory of difficulty of subjectivation in the process that has been undertaken here in matchmaking between JR and QT. An impossible marriage takes place that is not in anyway a legitimate marriage, other than that it is sanctioned by a common love. But of what, as it all turns out? (*Now Voyager*, 1942)

Here the voice of the *sans-part* hardly emerges from a predictable space, that of the proletarian for example, from below. Rather it's from the crème de la crème of Bostonian society, from the prototypical narrative of the ugly duckling, the *sans-part* who indeed owns the greater part of the space that does not allow her visibility; for even that is not enough to be a 'proper' self in the shadow of her mother's tyranny. And if she, Charlotte, wants to be a woman, and have a child, the child is already there, the child of another woman who is not a proper mother. And if she wants to be a beautiful woman and to have a husband, she can be so and do so only if she sets him, Jerry, aside, and, taking the already living child, his, and with her the stars, not the moon, she has to imagine herself more than the limits of her own desires, beside them and beyond. We see this, and that is all. Nor is this an ontology, but a mode of the intrigue, as JR would call it, an intrigue of endless musical innervations against which flicker the minutiae of Charlotte's inner life, stark contrasts of black and white. It is the stifling police of the family drama that is split apart in psychotherapy, the intrusion of a psychoanalytic discourse into the kind of stuffy but violent oppressions that gave it reason in Freud's Vienna. This sundering, splitting of the family and recombination of Charlotte's depression with that of Jerry's child, Tina, generates the perverse generational production of the excluded part as a combination of visibilities where a kind of psychoanalysis and a kind of partition seem to need one another - pretty much!

In writing this I am looking here and there, for something that looks like a partition of the sensible, or a division of the visible – as I sometimes tactically mutate it – but which is not what JR has seen; and I am looking for a perverseness that is not quite in queer theory. Even sometimes when I look at what JR has seen, I don't quite get it. It's not so much the scene at the end of the bus journey in *Europa 51*, where Bergman is undone, that I see as he saw, but rather the very closing shots; here the people whom she has seen at the outset of her journey into pathology have left her in the sanatorium, where she has 'decided' to stay, and where they had come to meet her at her hoped for departure. It is they, not her family, who care, and looking back they can see her standing at the window of the first floor of the building. It is like levitation, a lay sainthood, a relic in a troubled present of an unwanted past, that redistributes the relation between a politics of the social and its manifest desires and purposes. And this is queer enough for me, queerly predicting the end of Pasolini's *Theorem* of 1968 where the maid floats above the earth and weeps, queer enough to make the queer seem normal in its way (Rosseline, 1952; see Rancière, 1992).

(A cartoon, distant, during the gay-blackmail spy scandal of Britain in 1961, the Vassall affair: two middle aged civil servants walk arm in arm and one says to the other 'But didn't you notice anything queer about him?' 'But no my dear', the other replies, 'he seemed perfectly normal to me'.

Now, I wonder, was this conventionally homophobic caricature after all a small splitting in the field of the visible, a moment when the *sans-part* was seen to speak? I recall it with affection, it helped me, but at the time I did not know how, or with what. Until then the word 'queer' and the word 'normal' had never occurred to me as a possible juxtaposition, though I already knew that they had a number of difficult implications for me. Was the insult an ironic redistribution of the see-able?)

So the substitutions go on and on, as our volume has suggested. For me not Rineke Dijkstra and her girl on the beach in *Kolobrzeg Poland, July 26, 1992*, but Wolfgang Tillmans' image of a skinhead peeing on a green office chair; not Mallarmé's involutions, but David Wojnarowicz's unmitigated fury in his *Close to the Knives* (1991); pensive forms of anger and angry thinking through what it is to desire a part; we look in different directions, sometimes and sometimes not, so these are not quite substitutions but other subjectivations, turning away from the letter of the text, touching upon who and where we are in the world, the theatres of a self; discovering a capacity not to have been stultified, and if it is too late for this, then there is nothing queer about it at all. At the same time these spaces of subjectivation, they are a condition of something I would call queer in its gayer sense, invested in or setting out from the specific sexual identities that asked for queer to undo themselves from a self-inducing suffocation. There is no solution.

Oh Jerry, don't let us ask for the moon, we have the stars.

Shall we just have a cigarette on it?

AR is a professor of Art Writing in the Department of Art, Goldsmiths, London. He first edited the work of Jacques Rancière in *Voices of the People* (with Roger Thomas), (Routledge, 1987), and he is author of *Ingres Then, and Now*, (Routledge, 2000). His most recent article is 'Dancing years, or writing as a way out', in *Art History*, 32-4, September 2009. His web site is www.gai-savoir.net

Bibliography

Bersani, L. (1987), 'Is the rectum a grave?' *October*, vol. 43, Winter, pp. 197-222.

Edelman, L. (2004), *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, Durham: Duke University Press.

Eribon, D. (2004) [1999], *Insult and the Making of the Gay Self*, originally *Réflexions sur la question gay*, trans. M. Lucey, Duke University Press.

---. (2005), *Echapper à la psychanalyse*, Paris.

Ferenczi, S. (2002), *Thalassa, Psychanalyse des origines de la vie sexuelle*, Paris: Payot.

Jordan, M. (2000), *The Silence of Sodom: Homosexuality in Modern Catholicism*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Kristeva, J. (1987), *Soleil Noir, dépression et mélancholie*, Paris: Gallimard.

Now Voyager (2002) [1942], dir. Irving Rapper, perf. Bette Davis & Paul Henreid (Charlotte and Jerry), music by Max Steiner, Warner DVD.

Rancière, J. (1992), *Courts voyages au pays du peuple*, Paris.

---. (2008), 'Art is going elsewhere and politics has to catch it: an interview with Jacques Rancière', *Krisis*, no. 1, accessed 11 October 2009, <http://ranciere.blogspot.com/2008/06/sudeep-dasgupta-interviews-jacques.html>

Reinke, S. (2007), *My Rectum is Not a Grave, to a Film Industry in Crisis*.

Rossellini, R. (1952), *Europa 51*.

© borderlands ejournal 2009