

Imagining a Dead Hare

A/Prof Brogan Bunt

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Introduction

The title of this conference suggests a general concept of the image, one that extends across disciplines and practices - and that is not restricted to the sphere of art or conceived solely in terms of the discourse of aesthetics.

The final line of the conference provocation charts a relationship between the proliferation of images and the pall of bushfire smoke earlier this year. Now that we are in the midst of the profound social and economic implications of the COVID-19 pandemic, the bushfires of last summer can seem a distant memory, yet both of these disasters - environmental and epidemiological have a common implication. They both underscore the impossibility of neatly separating dimensions of culture and nature. The generality of the image - our recognition of its status as a technical, social and ecological assemblage and its relevance across all aspects of interaction, communication, material exchange and understanding - demands that the image be conceived not only in terms of economies of meaning and experience, but also in terms of economies of thermal energy, circulation and waste.

I want to return to this point, but only by making a long detour.

This involves considering the following question: what is the relation between the general image and the notion of the singular event? At first glance these two seem opposed. Inasmuch as the culture of the image is associated with doubling, reproduction and dissemination, inasmuch as it is linked broadly to a displacement from origin and processes of manual, mechanical and electronic repetition, the general image may seem very distant from what French philosophers Alain Badiou and Jacques Ranciere describe as the singular event of politics. Yet alongside the work of repetition, the culture of the image also contains a central concern with revelation. If the image is endlessly repeated and circulated this is perhaps significantly due to its summoning at a distance of another, more singular space. In its motion of lost origin, the culture of the image reinforces the value of the singular, even while unsettling its possibility.

Folk Culture

But to be clear, my concern is not with the image or the singular event as such, with whatever they mean individually or as a pair. My interest is in what the thinking of the general image and the singular event neglects - for me, another relation to time, event, image and repetition that I associate with oral, folk cultural forms. Very broadly, I recognise in popular systems an

inextricable relation between gestures of cultural maintenance and transformation, a focus on memory, re-performance and cosmological return that is resistive and transformative without the need for either radical revelation or the 'Dark Eden' of profligate imaging.

More specifically, I will consider how this other system is evident within Ranciere's summary conception of three major regimes of art: the **ethical** regime of images, which Ranciere associates with Plato's prohibition of the poets in the ideal Republic, and in which art is judged in terms of its truth value, purposes and effects; the **representative** regime of art, which Ranciere associates with Aristotle's Poetics, and specifically the latter's delineation of an ordered hierarchy of artistic subjects, genres and roles; and finally the **aesthetic** regime of art, which Ranciere links to the historical conditions of modernity and Kant's philosophical conception of a specific aesthetic mode of reflective being, which is characterised by disinterest and cognitive free play. Here popular aesthetics forms are evident less as positive presences than through their omission - an omission that indicates a very traditional gesture of closure, an anthropocentric restriction of the proper space of both event and image.

But before I get to this, I would like to consider a specific thematically relevant example in which a complex relation between event and image is evident.

A Dead Hare

Joseph Beuys 1965 performance piece, 'How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare' happened in a gallery space. The audience were arranged outside, looking into the gallery through a glass door. Beuys, his face covered in gold leaf, cradled a dead hare and moved slowly from picture to picture, seeming to whisper to the hare, seeming to explain the pictures to the hare. The work plays on the very legible gap between the immaterial sphere of art and aesthetics and the organic materiality of the dead hare, as well as the gap between communication and silence, explanation and incomprehension. At the same time, it also suggests the value of attempting some kind of dialogue, however unlikely, between the world of images and the sphere of wider living and non-living processes.



This relates again to the conference provocation that the darkness of 'Dark Eden' might be 'the pall of ash-filled smoke shrouding a burning continent'. Beuys' work links to the contemporary need to think beyond the human and cultural space of images, to recognise their wider implications; most obviously in terms of global warming and environmental devastation.

Beuys' performance appears as a singular event. It demonstrates what Ranciere describes as a 'redistribution of the sensible' - an aesthetic intervention that recasts the relationship between audience, artist-performer and gallery, as well as the world of art and the realm of organic things. It has this currency not only for the literal audience that stood outside the gallery in 1965, but also for anyone who has access to the image of the event. I doubt Ranciere would have any issue with this. The wide circulation of the image does not affect the singularity of the event. Indeed, the two are aligned.

Nonetheless, I wonder about the singularity of this event, not that it happened, not that it lacked a dimension of novelty, but simply the insistence that it is utterly singular and integrally innovative. This work very plainly draws upon other idioms, upon a carnivalesque language of playful inversion, masks and the nuanced exchange between death and fertility (the symbolism of the dead hare). In the sense it represents the interaction between avant-garde and traditional popular cultural forms - the incorporation and sublimation of the latter within art and the discourse of aesthetics. So this singularity is hardly absolute. The work represents both a novel assemblage and an oblique play of repetition. It is this conjunction that interests me and that is lost in our regular alternation between a romanticised singularity and an ironic awareness of the endless circulation of images.

Clearly, the terrain of images is not neatly separate from the terrain of the event. Even before the dead hare is photographed, it is already a symbol - a sign of fertility, fecundity and the blind, mute character of organic life. This performance is full of symbols. The images on the wall represent the wider space of art and aesthetics, and the gold leaf on Beuys face the ambivalent, contradictory space of the human. In this sense, there is no underlying event space that radically resists the supplement of images. I'm not suggesting that the notion of the singular event necessarily implies this assumption. This is simply to explain that in advocating for neglected forms of folk cultural practice, my aim is not to envisage some pure realm utterly unaffected by whatever the image represents. It is, however, to recognise a cultural model that is less focused on radical novelty, spatio-temporal expansion and the elaboration of an essential gap between production and consumption.

Referring to Images rather than Art

I will now to get to the main point, to what prompted this presentation. It was really just a few lines in Ranciere's *The Politics of Aesthetics* (2004), in which Ranciere explains why he employs the term 'image' rather than 'art' when referring to Ancient Greek cultural forms:

With regard to what we call art, it is in fact possible to distinguish, within the Western tradition, three major systems of identification. There is first of all what I propose to call an ethical regime of images. In this regime, 'art' is not identified as such but is subsumed under the question of images. (Ranciere, 2004, p.20)

Ranciere resists the term 'art' because he regards it as anachronistic to consider ancient cultural practices in terms of the modern conception of art, which, as I say, he associates with the contradictions of modernity and with the specific philosophical formation of Kantian aesthetics. The modern conceptual, institutional and sensible-experiential apparatus does not apply in the Ancient Greek context, so Ranciere refers instead to the 'regime of images'. Why images? Because images serve as a metonym for the general work of doubling, displacement, dissemination and social disruption that art and vital aspects of cultural practice can represent. Ranciere describes the ancient theatre as an 'exhibition space for "fantasies" and as a context that disrupts 'the clear partition of identities, activities and spaces' (p.13). Similarly, he regards writing as aligned with the wayward untruth of images (recalling that Plato famously describes images as 'thrice removed from truth'). Writing steals 'away to wander aimlessly without knowing who to speak to or not to speak to' (p.13). In Ranciere's view, only the 'choreographic' aspect of music and theatre escapes the general metonym of the image as figure of dislocation and untruth. The latter represents an immediate participatory context in which 'the community sings and dances its own proper unity' (p.14).

While Ranciere's avoidance of the term 'art' is understandable, the use of the term 'images' presents other problems. Firstly, it neglects that Ancient Greek culture had a primarily oral dimension. There is a difference between the doubling of image simulacra and the re-performance of oral songs, dances and stories. The latter depend upon constant re-performance to exist, whereas the former, like written texts, obtain a more objective and detached form. The other issue is that the notion of 'the ethical regime of images' neglects what is most obvious. Plato prohibition of the poets plainly responds to the extant cultural forms of the day. These are characterised by local festivals, myth, unruly imagery, immoral gods, raucous sounds, excessive spectacle, etc. If Ranciere's aim is to describe the major Western categories of aesthetic cultural value and organisation, why say nothing of these popular systems? Why focus on the proposed prohibition of poetry rather than the rich complexity of Ancient Greek poetic life?

Carnival

Ranciere says nothing of the subaltern systems of culture that run alongside or are sublimated within the three dominant systems that he describes. How, for instance, can we conceive the Medieval ecclesiastical system of art, with its strong sense of 'representative' order, without also conceiving the disorder and inverted forms of the culture of carnival? Similarly, if the modern aesthetic system of art is characterised by a contradictory

relationship between aspects of privatised subjective experience and notions of freedom, play and human community, then surely this is at least partly legible in terms of the bourgeois sublimation of aspects of popular cultural experience.

In any case, despite his deep commitment to social emancipation, Ranciere has very little to say about these other cultural modalities and systems, regarding them as lacking effective cultural agency. They appear instead as mere after images of systems of domination. In a recent interview, Ranciere refers to carnival specifically. He acknowledges that it is akin to the subversive moments “when people do a multiplicity of things: performances, acts or parties whose unruliness undermines the forces of inequality”, yet it is compromised, in his view, by its institutionally sanctioned and regular, cyclical character:

There is a time each year when men or women of the people become kings or queens and subvert the world, turn it around or upside down, but do so in a specific time. And for me that's different from this capacity of people who show up at unexpected moments, without any programme or any schedule. (Ranciere, 2019)

Ranciere proposes then a difference of ‘temporality’. Whereas carnival confirms a regular temporality that is bound by seasonal time and dimensions of inequality, genuinely irruptive cultural moments represent ‘the invention of a new temporality.’

Yet I wonder if the work of repetition in carnival can be neatly opposed to its unruliness? I wonder, as well, whether the notion of a pure subversion that opens on to the new is not also complicit in relations of inequality? What is capitalist modernity after all if not a demonstration of radical, disruptive social, cultural and environmental change. Within this context, perhaps there is a need to think repetition differently, less as opposed to opening and renewal than as a necessary moment of recollection, continuity and burial that enables the new. In this manner, the notion of novelty itself can be reconceived - as something formal, as something that also contains an aspect of repetition. To neglect this complex, indeterminate relation between repetition and renewal in carnivalesque experience is to fail to recognise its genuine, potent relation to temporality and cultural life. To imagine that the new can appear on its own, beyond the play of repetition, is to subscribe to a sense of temporality that obliterates the world, that withdraws from its rhythmic perturbations and conceives an utterly strange and self-present moment. This conception of the singular and profoundly alien character of artistic innovation is closely allied to every imposition of inequality in the modern world.

The issue hinges for me on Ranciere’s modernism - his insistence that the new appear in radical, transformative, avant-garde form. Social conditions, in his view, can only be altered by the absolutely new, not at all through the play of structures and archetypes that popular culture entails. But this is to ignore how change occurs in oral cultural forms. It occurs within the texture of performance and re-performance rather than via singular and external

revolutionary intervention. It occurs without the need for any deliberate strategy or agency. It is an enduring cultural qualitative feature linked to wider contexts of experience and struggle.

Particularly significant in my view that Ranciere resists the mixed social and cosmological character of popular cultural systems. The three systems that he highlights all have a strong anthropocentric focus. Plato's ethical condemnation of poetry constrains the conduct of the gods to the ethical demands of the good human republic. The representative regime has its basis in Aristotle's definition of dramatic plot as 'men in action' and his bracketing of everything that exceeds this human space of closure - the dramatic faults, for instance, of spectacle and the *deus ex machina*. Finally, Kant's aesthetic scheme conceives human identity, community and freedom in terms of an internal and highly private context of contemplative reverie. All three regimes of art describe a specifically human space that wider oral culture regularly questions through cosmological gestures - animal masks, low humour, intoxication and an adherence to cyclical time. Popular oral forms are not simply the subservient double of dominant forms - they have a cosmic focus; they reach beyond the human and narrowly anthropocentric contexts of emancipation.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Ranciere ignores the contours of imperceptible change, which elude singular, essential recognition, which are impure and contradictory, which escape neat delineation as resistance per se. But it is precisely these forms of culture that that have the potential to suggest alternative means of social and cultural transformation. While there is no clear alignment here with the notion of the general sway of images, it is evident that the popular forms of understated resistance, parody and continuity focused repetition, avoid distinct shows of revelation - and the eschatological, image-based logic of novelty and apocalypse that informs them.

If we are to discover effective means of imagining a new ecology of the image and a new ecology of the event that considers wider environmental consequences then we would do well to consider the complex play of repetition and transformation in popular cultural forms.

References

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