

On The Passage of the Sensible

Jacques Ranciere, Jean Luc Nancy, and Brian Massumi are thinkers of different temperaments although by a stretch of the imagination all three could be garrisoned together as philosophers of *sense*. The term sense must be understood in its original French meaning that indicates a reversible relationship between the intelligible and the sensible, neither thought nor pure perception as when Merleau-Ponty speaks of the primacy of perception or Husserl of nascent logos. *Sens* also indicates linguistic inflection like in the expression *le sens de un parole* meaning the slant of a word. As Joseph Tanke points out in his *Jacques Ranciere: An Introduction*, *sens* also means direction. (2) What is the common direction in these three philosophers? Do they share a common path, and, if so, what are the breaking points? The relationship between these three thinkers is knotted hence I will attempt a comparative analysis in order to trace possible overlaps and facilitate the sharing of the sensible.

It is my claim that all three thinkers are involved in a *politics of sense* understood as a commitment to thinking/feeling/acting in a shared world of agents/beings/forces. The juncture in the thought of the three thinkers is the notion of possibility as the “essence” of politics, what Massumi calls the “politicality of process” (13). Brian Massumi uses philosophy to call forth a summoning that holds the power to shift what Ranciere calls the *partage du sensible* as the configuration of possibilities available in the inter-relationship of sense/world. For Massumi thought and action are equally dynamic within the sphere of possibility; language shares in the configuration of the sensible as virtual *real*. Accordingly language *should* lead back to *actuality*, connecting language to the “this is” of immanence. (Massumi 119) Massumi breaks from Ranciere’s somewhat Romantic ideas of *alter-sense* grounded in the *aesthetic revolution*; this view is too limited and does not take into account the co-authoring of the event. Jean Luc Nancy, on the other hand, shares ground with both thinkers while skirting around the conversation and proposing a view that *frays* the boundaries between the subject and world in the *transimmanence* of sense. Nancy seems to downplay the Schillerian urgency towards the issue by sidestepping the

implicit call for autonomy in *aesthetic dissensus* and the idea of sense as a *totality* composed of interrelated sense-activities. Nancy moves us to couch the *event* when sense comes forth in *being-towards* the world, as in the moment of coming-to wakefulness.

Ranciere implies the world of *sense* is out there for the taking – no one has special rights over it, and in this *sense* everyone must philosophize. Ranciere’s emancipatory project rests on the notion of a shift in the *distribution of the sensible*, which implies: “A general distribution of bodies and voices, as well as implicit estimation of what they are capable of” and towards “a sharing of the sensible that refers itself to the principles and forms of relation that are part of a common world” (Tanke 2). *Dissensus* is the principle of non-conformity with the way the world is partitioned and made available or, in other words the disruption of institutionalization of the sensible in favor of alternative configurations of sense:

[Dissensus] consists in challenging the very logic of counting that marks out some bodies as political beings in possession of speech and consigns others to mere emitting of noise; some as beings of decision and action, others as consigned to the passive sphere of reproduction; some as capable of refined sentiment and thought, others as brutish and caught up in simple survival; some as capable of thought and keeping up with the times, others as capable only of reacting to change. (Ranciere 5)

Ranciere’s positions himself against the *arkhe*’ understood as the institutionalized principle of order. His radical claim for equality is a universal pre-supposition that allows for the opening up of the sensible field of human agency. This demand for equality, as the voice of the voiceless and the need of the needful, radicalizes Marx’s dictum “From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs” although it is more in line with the anarchism of Proudhon and Bakunin: “Rather than a power of *self* [imposed authority], democracy is the disruption of such a power and of the circularity of the *arkhe*. It is an archaic principle that must

be presupposed for politics [and art] to exist at all and insofar as it is anarchic it precludes the self-grounding of politics, establishing it instead as the seat of division” (61).

For Jean Luc Nancy *making sense* is a paradoxical affair that is not at all self-evident as it would appear from the simplicity of the English expression although, in my view, there is an underlying simplicity in Nancy’s Delphic formulations. Linking up to Ranciere, it is the *circularity* of the mechanism as a re-posing of the “political” question of the legitimacy of sense that interests Nancy; the political can only be a fragment of meaning within the inter-fragmented sense of the world. The philosophical task is daunting: How does the world grant us access to *sense* as we demand sense to *make sense*?

To begin, there is an attention to the *transitivity* of sense in Nancy: “Sense belongs to the structure of the world, hollows out therein what it would be necessary to name better than by calling it the transcendence of its “immanence” – its *transimmanence*, or more simply and strongly, its existence and exposition [...] There is something, there are some things, there is some there is – and itself makes sense, and moreover nothing else does” (55). Sense exceeds our understanding hence we cannot assume to complete it in “transcendence” or otherwise absolve the fragmentary experience into the “nothing” of non-sense. There is no clear subject/object division in Nancy but rather a border of which we sense the *touch of being itself* “whereby the border separates two sides only by being on both sides at once (and on neither)” (xii).

In regards to art both Ranciere and Nancy uphold the value of the “heterogenous sensible” although Nancy does not give into *aesthetic dissensus* on its own terms. (137) He seems to suggest that beyond the challenging rift of art there is a deeper chasm he labels *frayage*, a splitting of sense, which is not exclusive to art (at least not a singular Art). In fact the over-splintering into autonomy of the avant-garde has been exceeding into another form of ideological constitution of sense; in fact, his list of excesses seems like a technical manual for the contemporary artist: “We have done much fracturing, fraying, wounding, crumpling, splintering, fragilizing, shattering, and exceeding that we would seem to have begun to exceed excess itself” (123).

In my view, Nancy suggests that perhaps even artists have become too brutal to sense meaning that sensibility to the event has become hardened and needing theatrical-technological stimulation to touch the nerve. In many ways this sentiment echoes Heidegger's warning of the forgetfulness of being as we are unable to hold the event and unknowingly follow "a flight from the event and its truth" (Nancy 132). The promise of art is the recovery of the sense for the "fractal birth" of the world (127). The coming forth of *presence* in art attest to the primal difference and procreative power of the world itself. The event needs to be welcomed in our hands and Nancy, in the spirit of Montaigne, is suggesting a humble opening to it, a preparation in watchfulness "Does something still remain of (or for) art in this *coming* that no presence could ever *finish*?" (126).

Nancy's *presentation* ties into Massumi's idea of the event, in both cases we have a *happening* in which the "subject" and "object" co-participate in the sense of the world. Massumi introduces the idea of the occurrent event as inter-subjective *worlding* of the world:

Each recognizable body or object available for encounter stands for a potential next step down a world-line. Doubling that step, it stands for a coming expansion of the qualitative universe of directly felt relations through which separate forms of life emerge-together in occurrent affective attunement. From this perspective, a body or object is a self-archiving of a universe of felt relation. Separate forms are a tacit archive of shared and shareable experience. (Massumi 116)

Massumi is bringing Kant's critique forward by investigating the link between sensuous apprehension (sense) and reason (Sense) although he leans more towards the side of Kant's great awakener Hume and less towards Berkeley's "solipsistic" idealism. Thought goes into abstract overdrive (delusion) only when it strays too far from *happenings* of the world. Massumi is radicalizing

Kant's idea that intuition and reason have an equal share in determining the sense of Sense and calls for a questioning of philosophy's structural limitations.

In the introduction of *Semblance and Event* Massumi explains the basic premise of his "process" philosophy: "[Activist philosophy] does not presuppose a subject, only "something" going on. Beginning with event- activity rather than the status of the subject makes activist philosophy a fundamentally non-cognitive philosophy" (6). It is because of the non-cognitive dimension that Massumi uses the term semblance as opposed to the traditional philosophical idea of representation - *Vorstellung*: "Semblances, by whatever name—pure appearances, self-abstracting perceptions, thinking-feelings—occur in so-called natural perception. That's a misleading category if ever there was one—as if seeing a leaf motif were somehow less natural than seeing a leaf" (44). Massumi's semblance captures the *virtuality* of the visual appearance removing it from the habit/idea of a static thought-image: "An objects appearance is an event, full of all sorts of virtual movement" (43).

In conclusion, following the grain of philosophy itself it appears that we have knotted the knot even tighter. By pointing out that the activity-sense-field is virtually limitless, is Massumi saying that an obsolete subjectivist "hubris" confines Ranciere's *aesthetic dissensus*? Conversely, Ranciere might ask how is Massumi bypassing epistemology? Why is Nancy so ubiquitous? Perhaps the "invisible hand" here is the *impossible possibility of the transcendence of sense*.

Ranciere uses *aisthesis* to designate a *poetic* involvement in the world; he is not saying that contact with the real is a philosophical objective or that such a communion is necessarily desirable. In its own right Art should not have to *do* anything, it may stand for a godly refrain or at least the semblance of it. Certainly

“the aesthetic” is not what is *happening right now* unless everything is already comprised in the aesthetic as Ranciere points out with the entropy of the avant-guards. (140) On the other hand, by radicalizing autonomy, what happens when the impossible possibility of transcendence is denied? Nancy proposes an immanent-transcendent Moebius twist on *dis-sensus*: “The sensible or the aesthetic is the outside-of-itself through which and *as* which there is the relation to itself or a sense in general, or which there is the *toward* of sense [...] There is sense only in local difference and differing division” (129). Massumi seems very *green* compared to Ranciere or Nancy and is overshadowed by the connectivist terror that is all too prevalent today urging us to reclaim life in all its multiplicity while keeping art alive as *something* different. Although his book is aiming at “the *politicality* of process” I get the sense there is not much possibility in the *vision* of eventual occurrence. (Massumi 13) At some point one must call for an “end” or at least a provisional framing of sense. Let us remember the ancient wisdom of the Stoics: What if the real art of living was to learn how to die? Passing aside, we are left with a gleam of wonder rattling concurrently.

Works Cited

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