The Figure Function in Rancière and Heidegger

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[The conflict between earth and world] is fixed in place in the figure of the work and becomes manifest by it.

—Martin Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art”\(^1\)

The art of the aesthetic age has never stopped playing on the possibility that each medium could offer to blend its effects with those of others, to assume their role and thereby create new figures, reawakening sensible possibilities which they had exhausted.

—Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*\(^2\)

The appearance of the term “figure” is of seemingly secondary importance in the works of Jacques Rancière and Martin Heidegger. Although it becomes the title for one of Rancière’s texts, *Figures of History*, it plays a considerably lesser role than his major concepts, such as image, equality, or politics. In “The Origin of the Work of Art,” Heidegger introduces the term (*gestalt*), only to later “reject the concept entirely.”\(^3\) Despite the seemingly marginal appearance of figure in both of these thinkers’ oeuvres, I contend that it nevertheless represents an important linchpin in their respective thinking about art. It also affords the opportunity to read these two philosophers side by side. Drawing on the theorization of figuration in both of these thinkers opens certain pathways that connect greater concerns in their thought: the distribution of the sensible and politics, for Rancière, and art work and poetry for Heidegger. The complementarity of these concepts serves to join Heidegger’s ontological concerns about art with Rancière’s greater investment in concrete, historical social formations. In this combination, or configuration, we can use each philosopher to reveal new elements of the other, drawing a throughline between the ontology of art and the politics of world. The figure is the location of this intersect, the function that makes art work, and that calls into question the rigid frameworks that fail to account for the manifold experiences of art. Thus, both philosophers rely on what I will call the “figure function” in the work of art—the ability for art to hold open an experience that exists in excess of the legislated, everyday mode of experience. Both Heidegger and Rancière are also interested in the role that language plays in the relationship between art work and the world; thus, I will also address the question of context and how we can think the politics of context in relation to the realm of aesthetics and art.

The moment when an artwork or an image, more generally, achieves figuration is also the moment of its opening. By this I mean that the work of art holds open the possibility for multiple expressions and interpretations without the ability to ever be properly defined by any singular understanding. As I will argue, it is the work of the figure that holds art open to such a coexistent multitude of possible reactions. For Rancière, this opening is towards an aesthetic experience of the alterity and undecidability of the image. This aesthetic experience is also one that is political, in that it confronts the distribution of the sensible (a legislated and social way of framing and understanding the phenomena of the world), which is policed as distributed, with a different sensibility. Rancière points to film as the medium most capable of achieving this outsider sensibility; exactly why that is will be elucidated later in this text. For Heidegger, the figuration of art fixes the contestation between the self-closing nature of earth and the revealing light of truth. For Heidegger, “earth” is a force of
concealment; there are beings in the world that we do not know about, or that we can only experience in a certain, reductive way. “Truth,” for Heidegger, is the further revealing of being, the light revealing that coated in darkness, outside of everyday concern and perception. Despite the differences in Rancière’s and Heidegger’s thought, however, the figure performs an essential and similar function in their respective understandings of art. Two parallels between Rancière and Heidegger, then, will guide this essay. First, I am interested here in the analogous structure, or moment, of striving or contestation in art, and in politics for Heidegger and Rancière, respectively. Both philosophers also place a strong emphasis on the relationship of art and images to language—literary and poetic language, in particular. The relationship of the figure to language will be my second focus. The primary purpose of this is to arrive at a different elaboration of how “art” works in Rancière. While Rancière offers a compelling account of the political, and though he connects “politics” to the experience of art, he leaves his definition of the term “art” itself vague. Heidegger’s insight is more concerned with the being of art, and of its work. In this respect, Heidegger is more concerned with metaphysics than politics. And yet, it is only by reading these two conceptions of the figure together that we can arrive at a more holistic understanding of how the work of art can be understood as political (in both Rancière’s sense and further), and of the role figuration plays in that process.

Before entering into further analysis, a brief discussion on translation is warranted. The word that “The Origin of the Work of Art” translator Albert Hofstader translates into the English “figure” is gestalt. Although gestalt does carry the English sense of figure, it also denotes “form” more generally, and as its primary definition. La figure likewise carries the English sense of figure, but is also used to refer to a face. Despite some lexical dissimilarities between these terms, however, there is a shared conception of the figure that transcends these differences. In the work of both Rancière and Heidegger, the figure is something that congeals in the artwork. It is an abstract function that lends art its capability for revelation and variation. Although the figure may be abstract, it is nonetheless essential to and present in the work of art. And here I understand “work” in the active sense of working: the process of art rather than an idea of it as passive substance. For both Heidegger and Rancière, it is the figure that opens the possibility for an experience of art, either as the coming together of the aesthetic and the political, or else as the light of αληθεια.

Two Figures
The concept of the figure emerges most forcefully in Rancière’s thought in The Emancipated Spectator, and does so around his discussion of “the pensive image.” For Rancière, the pensive image is an image that contains “unthought thought,” one in which there is an irreconcilable indeterminacy.

This indeterminacy arises from the gap between an understanding of the image-as-mimetic and the image-as-art, and relies on the function of the figure. In describing how the aesthetic regime differentiates itself from the representative regime (to be further discussed later), Rancière defines his understanding of the figure:

Now, our examples make it possible to conceive a third way of thinking about the aesthetic break; it is not the abolition of the image in direct presence, but its emancipation from the unifying logic of action; it is not a rupture in the relationship between the intelligible, but a new status of the figure...In the aesthetic regime...the figure is no longer simply an expression that takes the place of another. These are two regimes of expression that find themselves intertwined without having a clearly defined relationship.
Rancière identifies his concept of figure as being proper to the aesthetic regime of art. As he makes clear, the aesthetic regime of art is to be understood as distinct from the representative regime. While the representative regime is driven by a largely narrative rationale—and in this way establishes an ineluctable relationship between the spoken and the visual—the aesthetic regime uncouples this same relationship and brings forth abstraction instead. Critical of the idea that something like pure abstraction is ever possible, Rancière proposes instead that the aesthetic regime allows for expressions of thought and feeling that exist outside of the commonplace codes that defined the representative regime. It is also within the aesthetic regime that Rancière locates the possibility of equality. Through changes in artistic production (both technical and conceptual), all things can stand together in the image. Without the necessary privileging of certain objects and characters that comes with the representational regime, the aesthetic regime can allow for the placing of the small and the great side by side without any impetus for differentiation. To use one of Rancière’s examples, Godard, in Histoire(s) du cinéma, is able to co-figure assorted images from the history of film to highlight similarities in composition while also drawing attention to the real world politics that subvert their creation. Even if the images were created in different times and places, there are other stories and histories that allow them to be placed side by side. The history that he constructs is just as much an aesthetic experience of images as it is a story, per se. In contrast, the representative regime requires a story to unite the content of its images; narration necessarily highlights some things more than others, and places the appearance of these things under its totalizing logic. This same representative logic limits what is representable. Only things that are culturally proper to the type of representation can be present within it. Take, for example, Hitchcock’s Vertigo (1958). Near the beginning, we are treated to an assortment of seemingly meaningless details as Scottie tails Madeline around San Francisco (her floral arrangement, her hair, the painting, the necklace). Eventually, all of these things are shown to be of central importance to the storyline; these things are included as part of the unfolding narrative, and find therein their reason for being. Midway through the film, Scottie has a mental breakdown, which is represented, in part, by a segment of film that features abstract designs and strobing colours. While this section has the appearance of an experimental, non-narrative film, the representational logic that drives Vertigo allows no such interpretation. Here, the abstraction represents a fraught psyche. The formal deviance constituted by this moment of abstraction is explained, or made coherent, made representational, by the narrative. Under the rubric of the representative regime, an abstract sequence could never exist without a narrative function. We can say, then, that the representative regime balances, in this very way, the sayable and the visible in order to produce a work of art that maintains a contrived relationship to its subject matter. Rancière writes:

The descriptions of Hell and the angel of evil in Paradise Lost produce a sublime impression because they do not allow us to see the forms they evoke and affect to show us. Conversely, when painting renders the monsters that besiege St. Anthony’s retreat visible to us, the sublime is transformed into the grotesque. This is because speech “makes visible,” but only in accordance with a regime of under-determination, by not “really” making visible. The figure is what will come to allow for things to be presented without being over or underemphasized by the logic of representation. Rancière claims that the figure allows the image to contain two regimes of expression. To make this point, he alludes to these regimes of expression, in The Emancipated Spectator, that he understands as akin to poetry or rhetoric: the what-for of the art work (aesthetic appreciation, argumentation, storytelling, etc.). The image does not stand in for something else; rather, it contains a multitude of possibilities and sensibilities. In this way, the figure allows for rhetorical devices to exist alongside other modes of expression, without the fear of
collapse and homogenization, since every interpretation is insufficient to the alterity that the figure holds open. For this reason, Rancière further adds that:

It is now possible to think the pensiveness of the image positively. It is not the aura or punctum of the unique apparition. But nor is it simply our ignorance of the author’s thought or the resistance of the image to our interpretation. The pensiveness of the image is the result of this new status of the figure that conjoins two regimes of expression, without homogenizing them.8

The figure, then, does not refer to a specific thing captured within the image. Rather it is the function of the image that allows for the intertwining of—and keeping separate within the same space—different modes of expression. This alterity can, perhaps, be described in terms of the tension, or irresolvable situation, which prevents any interpretation of the image from becoming totalizing. A figure works to keep the different modes of expression in check and balance. When one regime of expression shows itself as the most preferable interpretation, the other expression—which has remained until then, the unthought—asserts itself and restores the indecipherability or pensiveness proper to this type of image. For instance, in reading Alexander Gardner’s photograph of Lewis Payne before his execution, Rancière asserts that something in the image always slips. Even if we think that Payne’s eyes might show fear, we cannot be certain of it. And while the photograph is of historical interest and marked by its time, this representation of Payne’s body stands here with us now. The figurative image resists the closing down of interpretation by being uninterpretable. This is not to say that it cannot bear interpretation, but that no interpretation can be adequate to the indeterminacy that it leaves open:

The photograph’s pensiveness might then be defined as this tangle between several forms of indeterminacy. It might be characterized by the effect of the circulation, between the subject, the photographer and us, of the intentional and the unintentional, the known and the unknown, the expressed and the unexpressed, the present and the past.9

The holding together of a contest, then, is the function of the figure for Rancière—a contest that will never reach a state of resolution. We will see that it serves a very similar function in Heidegger’s writing on the work of art.

Indeed, for Heidegger the work of art involves the striving between earth and world. Centrally important to the art work in Heidegger’s essay is the emphasis he places, there, on the active form of the word “work.” Heidegger intends this in verb form rather than the noun form usually associated with the phrase “work of art.” For Heidegger, the work of art is a setting up. What it sets up is the revelation of being, the unfolding of a world, in contrast to the always-concealing nature of “earth.” “Earth,” for Heidegger, names the continuous force of concealment that operates in the world: things are always being occluded, phenomenally hidden and disappearing. The figure allows for the contestation between earth and world to manifest as art work: “The nature of earth, in its free and unhurried bearing and self-closure, reveals itself, however, only in the earth’s jutting into a world, in the opposition of the two. This conflict is fixed in place in the figure of the work and becomes manifest by it.”10 Heidegger’s elaboration of the contest between earth and world in art will be analysed in more detail in the next section, but for now, it is enough to note that the concept of figure can be seen clearly here, even beyond Heidegger’s esoteric language: it is that which allows the tension between appearance and disappearance to remain fixed in indeterminacy. What is expressed by the work, how it comes to presence, is modular; different elements of being can be revealed and
concealed in the work of art. This contestation, which Heidegger refers to as a “striving,” remains unsettled in the work of art.

In setting up a world and setting forth the earth, the work is an instigating of this striving. This does not happen so that the work should at the same time settle and put an end to the conflict in an insipid agreement, but so that the strife may remain a strife. Setting up a world and setting forth the earth, the work accomplishes this striving.¹¹

One of the ways that art works is through the maintenance of this conflict. In Rancière, we saw that the figure functioned, as we see here in Heidegger, to keep two things undecided within the image. The image contains both thought and unthought thought, without every giving way to the possibility of a total thinking (i.e. the appearance of some thoughts or interpretations that close the possibility of others). The striving between earth and world, however, does not quite so easily reduce the relation of appearance and disappearance to a simple dichotomy. Rather, the concept of “world,” as we know it in and from Heidegger’s writings, requires more elaboration before we can grasp the import of the jutting into world of earth. What I will demonstrate is that this particular conception of world can bring us closer to a concept at the core of Rancière’s thought: the distribution of the sensible.

Politics and Art: World and the Distribution of the Sensible

Heidegger begins his discussion of world by investigating its relational character:

The world is not the mere collection of the countable or uncountable, familiar and unfamiliar things that are just there. But neither is it a merely imagined framework added by our representation to the sum of such given things. The world worlds, and is more fully in being than the tangible and perceptible realm in which we believe ourselves to be at home. World is never an object that stands before us and can be seen.¹²

For Heidegger, the world is a medium of being. Dasein’s experience of this world is both total and limited (Dasein here denoting the subject of Heidegger’s early philosophy—a being aware of itself as being, and engaged with its project of being-in-the-world). Since Dasein dwells wholly in the world, there is no outside world that can offer a comparison of world to not-world. Rather, things in the world are revealed or concealed; they appear to us phenomenally or else they remain secret. This relationship modulates and transforms over time. In contrast to world, where things can be revealed and concealed, Heidegger defines earth as a purely concealing force; its process is that which conceals beings. The jutting up of earth into world, then, marks the revelation of a being previously concealed. Or, the holding open of a being that is otherwise concealed. Heidegger elaborates on this revealing/concealing nature of world, for instance, in his notion of the clearing. The clearing is the space where aspects of being are revealed or concealed. In more vulgar terms, it is the realm of the phenomenal:

In the midst of beings as a whole an open place occurs. There is a clearing, a lighting… That which is can only be, as a being, if it stands within and stands out within what is lighted in this clearing. Only this clearing grants and guarantees to us humans a passage to those beings that we ourselves are not, and access to the being that we ourselves are. Thanks to this clearing, beings are unconcealed in certain changing degrees. And yet a being can be concealed, too, only within the sphere of what is lighted.¹³
The clearing of being determines which beings can be revealed to humans. The logic of the clearing is one of total possibility versus realised possibility. In Heidegger’s terms, there is always an excess of concealed things, the earth, while there are a number of beings standing in the light and, in this way, appearing to us as beings (this is how objects are revealed to Dasein). Of note, here, is the role of the figure in configuration; a con-figuration is achieved through the figure, is in fact a context forged through a particular interplay of figuration. This notion, this idea that experience is delimited by a particular configuration aligns closely with Rancière’s thinking of the distribution of the sensible.

For Rancière, the distribution of the sensible refers to a particular configuration of possible experiences, and the role that different beings play in this configuration is related to sensation.

What is common is “sensation.” Human beings are tied together by a certain sensory fabric, a certain distribution of the sensible, which defines their way of being together; and politics is about the transformation of the sensory fabric of “being together.” It seems as if the paradox of the “apart together” has been dispelled. The solitude of the artwork is a false solitude: it is an intertwining or twisting together of sensations, like the cry of a human body. And a human collective is an intertwining and twisting together of sensations in the same way. For Rancière, community shapes and is shaped by its sense experience. This sharing and shaping orders the world in particular ways. The ordering of the sensible necessarily includes and excludes certain beings from its hierarchy, and places certain community members in charge of protecting its order. For example, in a social order that considers homelessness inevitable, the sight of destitute bodies becomes acceptable and tolerated, everyday. Drawing on Aristotle, Rancière discusses politics as a contest between those who can speak—the citizens—and those who can only make the sounds of pain and pleasure, like animals. The problem that presents a distribution of the sensible is the conception of those who cannot speak, those beings that exist in some relation to the order of things, but which are unable to express themselves within it: the speechless, the invisible. In this sense, art does not serve merely an oppositional role to one distributed form of the sensible; rather, art, by way of the figure function, twists together sensations without reducing them, stands simultaneously among and apart from a particular sensibility. This revealing-being-with is the very nature of politics, for Rancière. The distribution of the sensible is confronted with the fact that there are other ways of combining sensation and sharing experience. In this sense it is no mistake that the possibility of mutation and modulation of the shared sensible defines politics for Rancière:

Politics, indeed, is not the exercise of, or struggle for, power. It is the configuration of a specific space, the framing of a particular sphere of experience, of objects posited as common and as pertaining to a common decision, of subjects recognized as capable of designating these objects and putting forward arguments about them. Politics is not a conflict between two groups seeking to expand their power; rather, it is a confrontation between expected and unexpected senses, and of the tension that arises as a result of this conflict. But what do we mean, here, by sense? If sense is the shared and delimited common experience, then there are those things that are beyond sensation, those things partitioned off from the sensible. In this way, then, we enter into a structure not unlike Heidegger’s clearing. Thinking Rancière through Heidegger, we can say that the distribution of the sensible ordains which beings are experienced, how they are experienced, and how this experience is related to other beings. For both Heidegger and Rancière, art work is the thing that is capable of reconfiguring this space, of
revealing and concealing being, and thus changing the relationships they share in the world, “art as a way of occupying a place where relations between bodies, images, spaces and times are redistributed.” That is to say, while Heidegger’s discussion of the clearing can be seen as an ontological metaphor, there is a way that it can also be mobilized as a thinking of politics. If, as for Rancière, the political exists in the making visible of what had been invisible, then the work of art as an unveiling of the hiddenness of beings contained in the possibility of earth does the same thing. What I want to suggest is that the work of art, in the Heideggerian sense, is an act of politics, much like we will see later in Rancière. In combining these thinker’s endeavours, we can see that both Heidegger and Rancière are interested in the possibility for a radically unthought and unanticipated aesthetic experience that reveals beings in their truth (or unconcealed sensations) and through this unconcealing reveals the partitioned nature of the common, social world.

We arrive at a point of synthesis. Rancière’s discussion of “art,” as I mentioned at the outset, leaves the term vague. This is likely due to his philosophical affinity for undecidability, one that makes his own work more difficult to apply with precision. Heidegger’s work has the opposite problem. Although his description of the being of art is lyrical and ontologically rigorous, how this ontology relates to a material and historical world is ambiguous. A strange symbiosis, however, might open a new understanding of art. If, as I suggested above, the work of art and politics are one and the same, then we can begin to think the political ramifications (in the Rancièrian sense) of the work of art (in the Heideggerian sense). Rancière does not need a definition of art if the very nature of art is politics—art, then, is that thing which opens an aesthetic experience otherwise unavailable to the community and its distribution of the sensible. The work of art, the opening of new experiences of being, contains the possibility of challenging entrenched sensations; the confrontation between a delimited system and a new experience that has yet to be folded into its logic requires a revision—and an opportunity for politics. By bringing Heidegger’s ontological assertions to bear on the realm of community, we can see that the being of art itself is always embroiled in a politics of world formation.

For Heidegger, all art work is defined by the jutting up of earth into world and the letting happen of truth. This is, for Heidegger, the very definition of art. Rancière maintains more distinctions within his understanding of the term (different regimes, expressions, etc.). The commonality to be found between these notions of art is to be found in the figure, which names and activates art’s ability to keep open the possibility of multiple, irreducible sensations, of an encounter with being different than that which is proper to a policed distribution of the sensible. It should also be said that this conception of the figure also breaks with its more conventional usage as a representational term, as when we speak of an integrated figure/ground relation in realist aesthetics. I would now like to examine more closely the role of language in the confrontation between the distribution of the sensible and the work of art, as both Heidegger and Rancière emphasize the role that language plays in the experience of art.

Poetry and the Regimes of Art
Both Heidegger and Rancière are concerned with the connection between language and art. In Rancière’s writing, the relationship between language and art changes between the different regimes of art; what the spoken means for the representative regime is contrasted by the sentence-image of the aesthetic regime. For Heidegger, art is essentially poetry: “all art, as the letting happen of the advent of the truth of what is, is, as such, essentially poetry.” I would like to take a moment to define Rancière’s regimes before moving on to a comparison between them and Heidegger’s “poetry.”
Rancière’s representative regime of art is defined by the ability to turn the image into narrative. Representation is, according to Rancière,

…first of all a dependency of the visible on speech. In it the essence of speech is to make seen, to order the visible by deploying a quasi-visibility wherein two operations are fused: an operation of substitution (which places “before our eyes” what is removed in space or time) and an operation of exhibition (which makes what is intrinsically hidden from sight, the inner springs motivating characters and events, visible).\(^{19}\)

Speech, in the representative regime, tells us what is going on and why, as when a character in a novel shares with us his/her thoughts and motivations. This activity coincides with a decorum that dictates the proportion of representation, and determines which things belong together in the art work. The aesthetic regime, for Rancière, reacts violently to both of these axioms. It erases the need for proportion (i.e. it lets unlike things stand together without privilege) and refuses a simple reduction of images to words. Instead, the aesthetic regime relies on what Rancière calls the sentence-image:

the sentence is not the sayable and the image is not the visible. By sentence-image I intend the combination of two functions that are to be defined aesthetically—that is, by the way in which they undo the representative relationship between text and image…The sentence-function is still that of linking. But the sentence now links in as much as it is what gives flesh. And this flesh or substance is, paradoxically, that of the great passivity of things without rationale. For its part, the image has become the active, disruptive power of the leap—that of the change of regime between two sensory orders.\(^{20}\)

The sentence-image produces images beyond the story-based logic of the representative regime; the new function of the sentence in the sentence-image is to flesh out passivity of beings without rationale—things can be spoken and presented without playing an explicit role in the narrative function of the art. In literature, Rancière perennially cites Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* as being exemplary of this logic. By choosing to write details inconsequential to a plot, and by not giving these details a lesser status than details that are motivated by story, Flaubert creates a world that exceeds the representative constraint. Or, as Rancière contemplates:

But what is novelistic realism? It is the emancipation of resemblance from representation. It is the loss of representative proportions and properties. Such is the disruption that critics of Flaubert denounced at the time under the heading of realism: everything is now on the same level, the great and the small, important events and insignificant episodes, human beings and things. Everything is equal, equally representable. And this “equally representable” spells the ruin of the representative system.\(^{21}\)

Thus, the sentence image is committed to something more like capture without explanation, as well as the inclusion of things that would seem insignificant or unimportant in the unfolding of a story. For Rancière, cinema is the medium most capable of achieving the effects of the sentence-image, insofar as the camera’s ability to record with a mechanical eye that is incapable of representative distortion, alongside the capture of things without the use of speech, makes the images of cinema a site of possible equality within the sentence-image. This capability, unique to filmic media, offers a chance for art to reveal in a way different from representative techniques. This manner of revelation might be said to be *poetic*, in Heidegger’s sense of this term.
For Heidegger, as we saw, poetry is the letting happen of the truth of beings. His notion of truth, derived from the Greek \( \alphaληθεια \), is concerned with disclosure rather than a concept of verifiability. Poetry and art, then, are disclosing functions of being; they reveal beings as they are, without framing them within reductive logics. Much like Rancière’s espousal of the passivity of things without rationale, Heidegger locates a need to let being happen without speaking on its behalf: “color shines and wants only to shine. When we analyze it in rational terms by measuring its wavelengths, it is gone. It shows itself only when it remains undisclosed and unexplained.”

Poetry is the language that allows for beings to reveal themselves as themselves. And yet, for Heidegger, poetry is idiomatic. His sense of poetry runs contrary to conventional understandings of the notion:

…poesy is only one mode of the lighting projection of truth, i.e., of poetic composition in this wider sense. Nevertheless, the linguistic work, the poem in the narrower sense, has a privileged position in the domain of arts… language is not only and not primarily an audible and written expression of what is to be communicated. It not only puts forth in words and statements what is overtly or covertly intended to be communicated; language alone brings what is, as something that is, into the Open for the first time.

In Heidegger, then, poetry transcends its popular understanding as a versed form of lyrical writing. Rather, poetry is understood as an ability of language. The poetic use of language can reveal disclosed beings truthfully. Language is not only communication; rather, it is what allows for the encounter with other beings in the first instance. Thus, poetry, for Heidegger, maintains an ability that is not unlike what the cinematic medium does for Rancière: both allow for beings to be revealed without being reduced to the raw communicative operation of language. The cinema of the sentence-image is a poetic cinema.

It is now time to address exactly how filmic media can be seen as political, beyond explicitly political content (“politics” in the vulgar sense, not the Rancièrean politics that I am seeking here). Rancière privileges film because the apparatus is free from the constraints that might inflect an author’s choices. The machine is impartial, and thus captures without distorted perception. This ability to capture complicates the relationship between the spoken and the visual, and confronts the representative regime with a different sensibility. We can see the difference between the literary sentence and the poetry of the image in Michael Snow’s film \( A \) Casing Shelved (1970). I will analyze this film as exemplifying elements of Rancière’s philosophy—much of what Rancière discusses can be read in or against \( A \) Casing Shelved. The tension between speech and the image forms the critical content of the film. The film opens with a shot of a shelf populated with various objects. Freeze frame or static shot, this visual does not change for the entire film. There is no onscreen motion. For its entire 45-minute duration, we simply hear Michael Snow in voiceover as he describes objects on a shelf. Snow tells stories of how he came to possess the empty coffee cups, how many yellow bottles of glue are on the shelf, and notes the aesthetic resemblances between the paint cans. The experience can be described as an erosion of the literary by the cinematic image. No matter how much is said about the image, no words will ever be able to capture the complexity of even the most mundane things. For Rancière, the generation of literary description destroys the unique quality of film—any description is going to necessarily exclude something, and bring something else into sharp relief. “For the filmmaker… there is… the choice between two ways of seeing: the relative, which instrumentalizes the visible in the service of the succession of actions, and the absolute, which gives
the visible time to produce its specific effect.” Only in the silence of an image of equality can things stand unspoken, and always together. While Flaubert begins the project of the aesthetic regime by placing things great and small in equal proportion, cinema realises the purest form of this aesthetic. The location of the film’s poetry, then, is not in Snow’s voiceover, but in the image as art. Over the course of the film we develop a greater understanding of the objects gathered on the shelf, and of how one man’s life has intersected with these things. Although this narrative creates additional meaning, it also subtracts something else: the poetry of the art work. The turning into speech of the image diminishes art’s ability to reveal being as itself, and distributes the experience in the decided sensibility of the author.

In his discussion of cinema in Béla Tarr, *The Time After*, Rancière begins to construct a theory on the relationship between cinema, time and revelation. He arrives at the pronouncement of a “time after” that Béla Tarr’s films are already operating within:

The time after is neither that of reason recovered, nor that of the expected disaster. It is the time after all stories, the time when one takes direct interest in the sensible stuff in which these stories cleaved their shortcuts between projected and accomplished ends. It is not the time in which we craft beautiful phrases or shots to make up for the emptiness of all waiting. It is the time in which we take an interest in the wait itself."
We see here a silent machination of the Rancièrian political. Language, while opening the possibility for aesthetic experience, is also employed in the closing down of experience and the partitioning of the sensible. Stories and histories accentuate certain elements of experience while erasing others. To reach a poetic time beyond that of stories means to exist in the community of sensible things, where these things can be experienced under different auspices, without the instrumental framings and partitions of a rigid distribution of the sensible. In this respect, the “time after” of *A Casing Shelved* would have no voiceover: one would experience the image as itself, alongside the sensation of its duration, without speech transforming the irreducible nature of the image into narration. Yet, while the absence of representative logic seemingly detracts from the work (there is literally less content), it nevertheless multiplies the possibilities of figuration in the art work. Without Snow’s voice to situate and explain these objects, they exist as undetermined, able to become meaningful in a plurality of different scenarios. The pensiveness of the image—free from the representative regime—is also one wherein time loses its coherence. Progression is only notable when there is transformation—when we have a beginning, middle and end. The time after is the time of anxiety, where things become capable of taking on meaning in any number of ways, but never actually do so. Rather, it is the holding together of these various possibilities, these different expressions, that is the work of the figure, the only work occurring in the time after. Of course, art exists in a temporal world, and even if it can show a time after (as in the entropic worlds of Tarr), this different sensibility still must exist within a particular distribution of the sensible.

**Con-text and Poetic Politics**

The figure requires an outside for its proper functioning. Against the homogenous experience of the everyday, the figure is the site of indetermination. For instance, in *A Casing Shelved*, we have a mode of the literary and also something in excess of it. The stories that Snow tells are *stories*, but they also emphasize the mundane objects of the world, give us occasion to reconsider these usually ignored objects, and to contemplate them aesthetically, functionally and historically. Focusing on these objects and their qualities transcends the story that Snow tells of them; they are more interesting as things that exist than as elements in a story, in which case the fullness of their interest is reduced to the significance of a narrative. Of course, we need the story to bring the items to attention, if only to shrug off the story in favour of the object, and the figure—as I’m conceiving of it here—ensures that both are held together, making the unique experience of the film possible. Both the concept of the clearing of being and the distribution of the sensible rely on a spatial metaphor, one that situates being in relation to other beings and experiences. We could call these relationships contexts, and I would like now to discuss the notion of context and how to think it poetically and politically—especially with respect to how such thinking might coincide with poetic revealing. My intention, here, is to dwell a little further on the relationship of Heidegger’s poetry to politics, and to think about how texts, surrounding texts, and con-texts limit or open possibilities for aesthetic experiences, and how these experiences can be said to operate politically. To work through these questions, I turn briefly to Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe’s work on the politics of Heidegger’s engagement with poetry, and extend this to the discussion of Ranciérian politics.

While in the previous sections I discussed the political purchase of the aesthetic experience of art, Heidegger’s insistence on the centrality of poetry in his thinking of art and revealing force us to consider (at least partially) the role of the textual. This necessity also produces a tension. With our previous discussion of the “time after” and the possibility of escaping the representative regime through technical apparatuses like cinema, there glimmered the faint dream of the ineffable as
political. While the efficacy and import of a politics of the ineffable is beyond the scope of this paper, it’s worth questioning the critical assumptions of such a stance: how does such a stance affect the ability of being to speak, and what does it do to a concept of politics founded on the distinction between those who can speak and those who are invisible and mute? Although a certain facet of the comparison between Heidegger and Rancière allows for a reading of the ineffable, Heidegger’s commitment to poetry (and to actual poets, such as Hölderlin) requires that we think through the other resonances that exist between poetry and politics, and the ramifications of these resonances for Rancière’s understanding of the distribution of the sensible and the political.

In both Heidegger and the Politics of Poetry and Heidegger, Art and Politics, Lacoue-Labarthe points towards an obsession with the mythical (or, more accurately, mythos) that underlies Heidegger’s poetic philosophy, writing, “this obsession with the figure is an obsession with myth.” Accordingly, he posits that mythos, for Heidegger, operates as a kind of ur-technē, the gift of language that founds all other technical possibilities:

Here in substance is the whole of the argument Heidegger deploys on the essence of technē defined as a mode—if not the mode—of unconcealing, of αἰθια, in which one can in fact perceive, especially if one remembers that technē is fundamentally language, (Dichtung, Sprache, Sage: Hölderlin’s “words like flowers”) a determination of the apophantic essence of technē. This is why it is in fact permissible to think that mythos is the most “archaic” of the technai and, secondarily, that the mimetic is always linked to the mythic. But it is, firstly, because mythos is “revealing” in respect of the world and the self, or of peoples, instituting the as such of what is (the self-resembling of the essent as essent) or uncovering the that there is of the essent.

Mythos and language constitute a quasi-condition for Dasein. Although Heidegger always shies away from such classically metaphysical language, there exists in his work an undeniable centrality of language. For Lacoue-Labarthe, language and mythos, in Heidegger’s work, cooperate in the process of worlding. In my earlier discussion of the work of art as setting up a world striving against earth, we can say that the context of that work was elided. Although never abundantly explicit, “The Origin of the Work of Art” seems to assume a pre-existing world before the art work sets up its own world. There must be, for Heidegger, some notion of the Grecian world in place before its sculptors can make statues of the gods, or its masons erect temples. This already existing world, the umwelt, serves as the context for the work of art. Furthermore, and recalling the centrality of language to Heidegger’s poetics, the textuality of that context (con-text)—the technical mythos, rooted in language, of the surrounding world—serves as another pole in the work of art. Taking Heidegger’s purely philosophical arguments and placing them into a political framework more familiar to us requires the recognition of the umwelt as another striving: the work of art reveals against the concealing power of earth, but it also shines forth in harmony or dissonance in its context of the social world (or, it revises that world through its revealing).

In situating Heidegger’s philosophy historically, Lacoue-Labarthe points towards the importance he sees in Heidegger’s mythos in the establishment and qualification of social worlds: “Myth—die Sage, in Heidegger’s vocabulary—re-emerged in this way only because it was thought to be originally linked to the being-of-a-people: to ‘peoplehood.’ Myth is the originary Poem (Urgedicht) of every people.”

Through the concept of myth, we begin to see the relationship between poetry and the social;
poetry-as-revealing also serves as the institution of social order, the founding myth of a people. Lacoue-Labarthe situates this notion within a Romantic framework:

For all Romantic politics, this means that a people originates, exists as such, or identifies and appropriates itself—that is, it is properly itself—only on the basis of myth. When Herder, Hegel or Heidegger repeats Herodotus’ statement that “it is Homer who gave Greece its gods,” they mean nothing other than that. 29

For Heidegger, then, as inheritor of a historical legacy both poetically and philosophically, poetry is also the origin of the political. Although I am interested here in drawing on the complementary aspects between Heidegger’s and Rancière’s thought, it is worth mentioning that this type of founding—a mythological one—constitutes what Rancière will call, in critical terms, “archipolitics,” a politics necessarily founded on inclusion and exclusion. 30 Since Rancière is critical of how this kind of archipolitics founds a distribution of the sensible, we must ask: is there anything in Heidegger’s thought that can help us think beyond his archipolitical position? For Lacoue-Labarthe, who is critical of Heidegger’s politics, given his participation in National Socialism, the answer is a resounding no. And yet, while I have no desire to defend the political choices Heidegger made in the context of his own life, I remain interested in testing whether his thought can be taken beyond mythos and people-founding into a way we can think it more productively in tandem with Rancière’s project. I contend that there is a powerful insight to be found in joining Heidegger’s political thought with Rancière’s. After all, a major component of Rancière’s conception of the distribution of the sensible concerns the question of personhood: who counts or does not count. The contestation of this in/exclusion is the exact site of the political for Rancière, and the importance of this site comes even more sharply into relief when read alongside the work of Heidegger. To turn again to a similarity between these two thinkers’ accounts, while Rancière’s conception of politics seems idiomatic and removed from its popular meaning, it finds resonance in the Heideggerian poetry as mythos as founding a people. If all art work is poetic for Heidegger, then all art, in its setting up, contains the possibility of confronting the people’s mythos and reaffirming it, modulating it, or instituting something totally novel. Since the mythos gives contour to the Ranciérían distribution of the sensible, these possibilities for alteration are exactly “the political.” And so, while Heidegger’s Romantic conception of poetry founding a people is perhaps the genesis of the problems Rancière sees in a policed distribution of the sensible, a more heterodox interpretation of Heidegger (alongside Rancière) allows mythos the power to revise the distribution of the sensible—a quasi-political capability that shows the potential of poetry-mythos in transforming the distribution of the sensible. Indeed, the only explicit mention of politics in “The Origin of the Work of Art” obliquely points towards this very possibility: “another way in which truth occurs is the act that founds a political state.” 31 Although Heidegger goes no further in this assertion, then, Lacoue-Labarthe shows us a way in which the poetic becomes the political, and poiesis manifests a mythos that becomes the seed for an organized system that decides who attains personhood under its principles and who is kept invisible: in short, a distribution of the sensible.

**Conclusion**

Art is something that works. Art actively participates in community and individual life by opening new experiences, experiences that the figure-function saves from predetermined or totalizing interpretations. This experience is one at odds with everyday experience; it introduces a new sensation or brings to light some element of being that was previously occluded or unthought (or, perhaps, reaffirms the current order of things). The process of revelation through aesthetic experience opens the possibility for transformation. In sipping the nectar of novel sensation, the
knowledge that sensible possibility could be otherwise emerges. This understanding offers the potential to identify and possibly transform the binds and partitions of the social world; some experiences cannot be forgotten, and the persistence of aesthetic alterity (achieved and held open by the figure) places a pressure between a logic that tries to suppress or exclude elements of the sensible. Art always arrives to challenge the logic of a rigid and limited sensorium. This challenging also opens the possibility for revisions to the founding mythologies that decide certain distributions of the sensible. For both Heidegger and Rancière, art is the opening of a tension and contest between the way things are and the way things could be. This tension is held open by the figure function—that which allows the art work to persist in its alterity, to be immune to a logic that could explain it away. The figure prevents any explanation from being adequate. This inhibition of homogeneity is the source of art’s transformative possibility. The figure, as it turns out, announces itself most clearly in the medium of cinema: not only is the cinema free of the uneven placement of beings that occurs in the representative regime of art, but it also allows being to reveal itself as itself. Nothing writes the appearance of the filmed being. Poetic cinema unconceals beings and their relationships without exaggeration, and thus shows them in their truth (αληθεια). This revealing can exist in excess of the partitions of the sensible, social world, and thus offer a challenge to those very limits: in this sense, the work of art is inherently political, and contains the possibility of transforming the social world through the unthought sensorium that it presents to us.

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Notes

5 Ibid., 121-122.
7 Ibid., 113.
8 Rancière, The Emancipated Spectator, 122.
10 Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art,” 69-70
11 Ibid., 49.
12 Ibid., 44.
13 Ibid., 53.
14 Rancière, The Emancipated Spectator, 56.
16 Ibid., 22.
For Rancière, the aesthetic regime is that which follows the representative regime; it challenges the constraints of representation, and allows for things great and small to be placed side by side with no concern for proportion. The sentence-image is one of its strategies for countering representation: it combines the visual and the sayable, but in a way that undermines the manner in which these things are joined in the representative regime, and which doesn’t say anything or present anything authoritatively. See Rancière, *The Future of the Image*, 46.


Ibid., 46.

Ibid., 120-121.

Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art,” 47

Ibid., 73.


Ibid., 63-64.


Ibid., 89.

Ibid., 63.