

How does the spectator act?

Benjamin and Rancière on the task of the spectator-translator

João Pedro Cachopo

(CESEM/FCSH-UNL)

*Une communauté émancipée est une communauté
de conteurs et de traducteurs.*

Rancière, *Le spectateur émancipé*

I. Spectatorship as an “art of translation”

Not the least relevant aspect of Rancière’s path-breaking work on aesthetics is his stress on the emancipation of the spectator (cf. *Le spectateur émancipé*, 2008). Questioning both Brecht’s and Artaud’s views of theatre¹, Rancière stresses the autonomy of spectatorship and argues against the assumption that the spectator is tendentiously, if not intrinsically, passive. Despite their huge differences, both Brecht and Artaud would have shared such an assumption, inasmuch as according to them the spectator should either gain distance vis-à-vis the spectacle, in order to become actively critical towards the social situation represented (in the case of Brecht), or (in the case of Artaud) to abolish such a distance once for all so as to get involved in the very action performed. So viewed, they both may be said to have disregarded the peculiar kind of activity at stake in spectatorship. They implicitly assume that the spectator is a priori passive, in a way that suggests that the emancipation of the spectator depends on him/her becoming active (on him/her becoming an active

spectator, or even an active citizen or a true actor instead of a spectator). Their concerns are thus quite close to Debord's invectives against the society of the spectacle². At odds with this critical constellation in which Rancière spots a kind of sin and expiation narrative, and against the enthronization of the spectator's alleged passivity, the French philosopher maintains that the

[e]mancipation [of the spectator] begins when we challenge the opposition between viewing and acting [...], when we understand that viewing is also an action that confirms or transforms this distribution of positions. The spectator also acts, like the pupil or scholar. She observes, selects, compares, interprets.³

So while observing, selecting, comparing, interpreting, the spectator, according to Rancière, is far from being a merely passive bystander. Rather, very simply said, he/she *translates* the spectacle into his/her own terms in the context of his/her own life. This said, the question might arise: How may one lend weight to the autonomy of the spectator – as Rancière does – without falling prey to relativism? For, in other words, if the spectator is thoroughly free to lend meaning to his/her multiple aesthetic experiences, does this freedom not entail the celebrated/infamous assumption that the art object amounts to nothing else but to what the spectator/viewer/reader claims it to be? Is the spectator essentially a traitor? These questions take the form of the problem to which my paper aims to bring, if not a solution, an attempt of response.

In my view, to state it as clearly as possible right from the outset, to claim the autonomy of spectatorship does not lead either to a relativist approach to spectatorship

or to a strict aesthetics of reception (notably in the form of a relational aesthetics). Further, if I am reading him well, these are quite far from being Rancière's aims anyway. And yet, to account for Rancière's explicit aims (which are anything but relativist) is not enough to prove that his works do not lend themselves to such readings. So, to support my argument – and in the wake of Rancière's approach –, I will bring Benjamin's concept of translation, as presented in his essay on "The task of the translator" ["Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers", 1921] to bear on the question of spectatorship. The reasons for this theoretical choice are various and compelling to different degrees. Let me then begin by pointing out that Rancière's references to the notion of translation are too systematic in his essay to be seen as merely rhetorical. He frequently paraphrases the idea that the spectator somehow translates his or her encounter with an art object or practice into his or her own personal experience, and goes as far as to claim, near the end of his essay, that "an emancipated community is a community of narrators and translators."⁴ For this reason, the analogy is legitimate – at least at a general level.

It should be stressed, however, that the parallel between the challenges associated with being a translator, on the one hand, and a spectator, on the other hand, does not turn out to be as crucial as I claim it to be until one sees it specifically in the light of Benjamin's approach to the task of the translator. Let us turn to it now. Particularly relevant is that Benjamin understood the translation as a form (endowed with an autonomous purpose). Accordingly, if a translation is not a mere means to render a text available for readers incapable of reading it in the original language (in which case it would be a non-autonomous form), the task of the translator is not to be equated with that of the poet either (in which case it would be an autonomous – though only at the expense of being a subsidiary – form). In Benjamin's words:

Translation is a form. To comprehend it as a form, one must go back to the original, for the laws governing the translation lie within the original, contained in the issue of its translatability. The question of whether a work is translatable has a dual meaning. Either: Will an adequate translator ever be found among the totality of its readers? Or, more pertinently: Does its nature lend itself to translation and, therefore, in view of the significance of this form, call for it?⁵

Later, he adds:

Just as translation is a form of its own, so, too, may the task of the translator be regarded as distinct and clearly differentiated from the task of the poet.⁶

In that sense, paradoxically as it may sound, one is allowed to say that according to Benjamin the translation owes its specificity as an autonomous task to the primacy of the work translated. Benjamin calls it the original, though he at the same time claims – in order to prevent any confusion between a positivistic approach to translation and his own – that “a translation issues from the original – not so much from its life as from its afterlife”⁷. Accordingly, given that it is also the task of the translator to remain faithful to the “original” – radically seen, to be sure, as an historical entity – the object of this faithfulness is not the “meaning” [die Gemeinte], but rather what Benjamin calls the “way of meaning” [Art des Meinens] of that text.

In so doing, the translation may cause a broadening of the means of expression of the language into which the text is being translated – which is why it should become “literal”, rather than idiomatic – and it is the capacity of a text of prompting such a linguistically pregnant disclosing process that Benjamin names translatability. I will come back to this complex, though absolutely central, notion a bit later.

For now, I would summarize the argument as it unfolded so far as follows: to the extent that a translation simultaneously issues from the source text, and affects so deeply, and in quite unpredictable ways, the target language into which this text is being translated, the task of the translator might analogically shed light not only (firstly) on the very activity involved in being a spectator (the spectator is, to quote Rancière, a practitioner of the “art of translation”⁸), but also (secondly) on the irreducibility to a mere interchangeable pretext of the object/practice/spectacle with which the spectator comes across.

My claim, as a result, might be very simply rephrased as an analogy: just as the autonomy of translation – the fact that it is conceived of as a form, endowed with an autonomous purpose – does not allow the translator to make light of the work translated, so the spectator – seen, according to our hypothesis as a translator – is invited to find in the encounter with an artistic work (be it literary, visual, musical, multi-medial) the touchstone of his/her own, not less independent, aesthetic and intellectual adventure.

The work experienced/translated stands for what Rancière claims in many ways to be the “third thing” – a kind of mediator between the author and the spectator. In *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, Rancière equated this “third thing” with the book – the book which, given its equidistance to both the master and the pupil, granted the

latter's emancipation. This is how Rancière reconceptualises his insights on emancipation with regard to the politics of spectatorship:

There is the distance between artist and spectator, but there is also the distance inherent in the performance itself, in so far as it subsists, as a spectacle, an autonomous thing, between the idea of the artist and the sensation or comprehension of the spectator. In the logic of emancipation, between the ignorant schoolmaster and the emancipated novice there is always a third thing – a book or some other piece of writing – alien to both and to which they can refer to verify in common what the pupil has seen, what she says about it and what she thinks of it. The same applies to performance. It is not the transmission of the artist's knowledge or inspiration to the spectator. It is the third thing that is owned by no one, whose meaning is owned by no one, but which subsists between them, excluding any uniform transmission, any identity of cause and effect.⁹

So, just as the translation, according to Benjamin, finds the ground of its meaningfulness (as way of broadening the means of expression of the target language) in the text translated, so would the experience of the spectator be as surprisingly fertile as he/she turns out to be capable of drawing the most radical consequences from the very experience prompted by nothing else but the work or performance that occasioned it.

II. Translatability – a touchstone for criticism?

Certainly – and I am now entering the second part of my argument – it might be still argued that the simple fact that Rancière, more or less systematically, draws a parallel between spectatorship and translation sufficiently justifies the assumption that the autonomy of spectatorship does not lead to relativism. From this perspective, the reference specifically to Benjamin might be deemed unnecessary, not say redundant. In view of this, and in order to clarify why I have decided to turn to his essay on “The task of the translator”, a closer look at the very notion of translatability is needed. Eventually, I claim, it will even shed light on a peculiar feature of Rancière’s approach to spectatorship: the fact that, despite the relevance of his insights according to which being a spectator “is our normal situation”, rather than “some passive condition that we should transform into activity”, his approach also provides the reader with a framework with which critically to cope, not only with performances in particular, but also with artistic objects and practices in general. Is it not the case that a substantial part of his article on “The emancipation of the spectator” consists in criticizing both Brecht’s and Artaud’s vision of theatre?

So, to come back to my central claim regarding the relevance of Benjamin’s essay on the task of the translator to discuss the politics of spectatorship, let me stress that the very specificity of Benjamin’s approach is indebted to the concept of translatability to a degree that the very claim that the translation has a purpose of its own would be meaningless until one takes the notion of translatability into account. The goal of translation points towards what Benjamin calls “the true language”, one in which “the languages themselves, supplemented and reconciled in their way of meaning, draw together”¹⁰. To be clear, Benjamin’s belief – be it more or less literally perceived – in the purity of such a language, “in whose divination and description lies

the only perfection for which a philosopher can hope”¹¹, interests us here far less than the related idea that a translation has its ultimate goal in the widening of the means of expression of the target language, which only the translatability of the source text is able to prompt. However – and this is a crucial point – not every literary work is translatable to the same degree. Instead, to quote Benjamin once again, “translatability is an essential quality of certain works [my emphasis], which is not to say that it is essential for the works themselves that they be translated; it means, rather, that a specific significance inherent in the original manifests itself in its translatability”¹². By the end of his prose piece, Benjamin comes closer to what this specific significance amounts to in a quite telling manner. According to him

To the extent to which a translation manages to be in keeping with the nature of this form is determined objectively by the translatability of the original. The lower the quality and distinction of its language, the greater the extent to which it is information, the less fertile a field it is for translation, until the utter preponderance of content, far from being the lever for a well-formed translation, renders it impossible. The higher the level of a work, the more it remains translatable even if its meaning is touched upon only fleetingly.¹³

Thus, paradoxically enough, the translatability of a particular work varies in direct proportion to the difficulty of its translation: the greater the challenge faced by the translator, the more the work proves to be translatable. Bearing this in mind – and to give an interrogative form to my hypothesis – what if the translatability of an artwork provided the touchstone for appraising it critically? The fact that Rancière

insists in the autonomy of spectatorship and, by the same token, criticizes a certain theory and practice of theatre suggests the legitimacy of such an assumption. In fact, Rancière suggests that any artwork or performance, which somewhat forcefully enacts the scheme for its own experience inevitably provides the spectator (whom he implicitly sees as being in need of emancipation) with a less fruitful aesthetic experience – which amounts to say, I would risk suggesting, with a less translatable aesthetic experience. So viewed, the greater the challenge posed by the work to the spectator by virtue of the distinction, complexity, translatability of the “language” of that work –, the greater the latter’s arguable capacity to defy the ways in which the spectator perceives the world according the prevalent distribution of the sensible [*partage du sensible*].... And is it not the hallmark of art, in the context of what Rancière calls the aesthetic regime, to reconfigure this, as he puts it, “partage du sensible”? Indeed, and even if he frequently shies away from giving to his aesthetic insights a normative shape, it remains undeniable that his approach is anything but value-free as regards the objects/discourses he choses to address and focus on.

Before coming to my conclusion I would like to point out that such a reading of Rancière’s work, by means of which his insights on spectatorship are brought to bear on issues related to art criticism (though Rancière opts not to address them directly) are not unprecedented. Take, for instance, Claire Bishop’s newest book *Artificial Hells. Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (2012). In fact, and despite the specificity (and complexity) of Bishop’s discussion of participatory art, her concerns are not without relation with the purposes of this paper. She also draws on Rancière’s work in order to counter the dismissal of criticism – specifically, in her case, regarding participatory art. In fact, she criticizes the kind of discourse by which “[c]onsensual collaboration is valued over artistic mastery and individualism,

regardless of what the project sets out to do or actually achieves”¹⁴, and disavows “an ethically charged climate in which participatory and socially engaged art has become largely exempt from art criticism”¹⁵. Similarly, though she is keen to admit her sympathy to the primary ambition of participatory art – that of “repairing the social bond”¹⁶ –, she also rejects the typical discourse “around participatory art, in which an ethics of interpersonal interaction comes to prevail over a politics of social justice”¹⁷.

Against this background it is not surprising that Rancière’s work came to play a crucial role in her approach, if only because, as she puts it:

The binary of active/passive is reductive and unproductive, because it serves only as an allegory of inequality. [...] Rancière’s point is important for drawing attention to the work of art as an intermediary object, a ‘third term’ to which both the artist and viewer can relate. Discussions of participatory art and its documentation tend to proceed with similar exclusions: without engaging with the ‘aesthetic thing’, the work of art in all its singularity, everything remains contained and in its place – subordinated to a stark statistical affirmation of use-values, direct effects and a preoccupation with moral exemplarity.¹⁸

This brief passage by Bichop’s work, though it might lend itself to further developments, incidentally leads to my conclusion. Thus, I would finally claim that crossing Benjamin’s take on translation with Rancière’s approach to spectatorship is theoretically fruitful in a double sense: in that it helps clarify the autonomy of spectatorship (as irreducible to relativism) and, further, in that it suggest that the notion of translatability might provide a kind of plumb line for the exercise of art

criticism. In other words, the “value” of an artwork would be inseparable from its translatability: translatable to the extent that thanks to its ambiguity, complexity, undecidability it challenges the spectator, an artwork would eventually appear as the point of departure of an unpredictable – though not arbitrary – experience, rather than the model which that experience should allegedly conform to.

Endnotes:

1. See Antonin Artaud, *Le Théâtre et son double*, Paris: Gallimard, 2006 [1964], and Bertold Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, ed. John Willett, New York: Hill and Wang, 1992 [1957, 1963, 1964].
2. See Guy Debord, *La Société du Spectacle*, Paris: Gallimard, 2008 [1967].
3. Jacques Rancière, “The Emancipated Spectator”, *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. Gregory Elliott, London and New York: Verso, 2009, p. 13.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 22.
5. Walter Benjamin, “The Task of the Translator”, in *Selected Writings*, gen. ed. Michael W. Jennings, 3 vols., vol. 1: 1913-1926, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings, Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996, p. 254.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 258.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 254.
8. Rancière, “The Emancipated Spectator”, p. 11.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 15.
10. Benjamin, “The Task of the Translator”, p. 259.
11. *Ibid.*
12. *Ibid.*, p. 254.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 262.

14. Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells. Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, London and New York: Verso, 2012, pp. 19-20.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 23.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 13.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 25.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 38.