Literature AfterRanciére: Ishiguro's *When We Were Orphans* and Gibson's *Neuromancer*

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Summary

In this article the implications of Jacques Ranciére's far-reaching notions of "the distribution of the sensible", "dissensus" and the "three regimes of art" (particularly for literature) are explored. Kazuo Ishiguro's *roman noir* entitled *When We Were Orphans* and William Gibson's dark science fiction novel *Neuromancer* are examined to demonstrate the novelty of Ranciére's thought, in terms of which the cherished categories of literary orthodoxy are surpassed. Specifically, Ranciére challenges the usual distinction between premodern "representational literature" and modern selfreferential literature, and introduces a radically historical manner of appropriating the art and literature of an era. His distinction between three regimes of art (the "ethical regime of images", the "representative regime of the arts" and the "aesthetic regime of art") are fundamental in understanding the capacity of art and literature to contribute discursively to the "(re)distribution of the sensible", or the symbolic (re)configuration of social and political space, by disrupting the conventional space of the "sensible" through "dissensus".

Opsomming

In hierdie artikel word die implikasies van Jacques Ranciére se verreikende idees van "die verspreiding van die waarneembare", "dissensie" en die "drie kunsstelsels" (veral ten opsigte van die literatuur) verken. Kazuo Ishiguro se *roman noir When We Were Orphans* en William Gibson se donker wetenskapfiksieroman *Neuromancer* word ondersoek om die nuutheid van Ranciére' se denke aan te toon, waarvolgens die gekoesterde kategorieë van literêre ortodoksie oortref word. Ranciére bevraagteken spesifiek die gewone onderskeid tussen premoderne "verteenwoordigende literatuur" en moderne selfreferensiële literatuur, en stel 'n radikaal historiese manier bekend om sigself die kuns en literatuur van 'n era toe te eien. Sy onderskeid tussen drie kunsstelsels (die "etiese stelsel van beelde", die "verteenwoordigende stelsel van die kunste" en die "estetiese stelsel van kuns") is noodsaaklik om die kapasiteit van kuns en literatuur te begryp om diskursief by te dra tot die "(her)verspreiding van die waarneembare", of die simboliese (her)konfigurering van sosiale en politieke ruimte, deur die konvensionele ruimte van die "waarneembare" deur middel van "dissensie" te ontwrig.

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In this article, I would like to explore the theoretical fecundity of Jacques Rancière's philosophy of art, including literature. A brief characterisation will provide the setting to come to grips with two novels selected to demonstrate his radicalisation of a historical perspective on – or perhaps rather, from within – literature and art, but in such a way that these cultural practices are never seen in isolation from the philosophy or theory that frames them contemporaneously. In this manner the two distinct practices are understood as being related, the one (art) constituting the condition of comprehensibility of the other (philosophy) and vice versa (Rockhill 2011: 5). From this it should already be apparent that Rancière thinks in a novel, historicising manner – not in the naïve manner that reduces artworks and literary texts to the empirical conditions of their production, in this way turning them into a mere document of historical happenings, but in a manner that recognises their historical contingency without relinquishing their intelligibility.

The intelligibility of works of art and of literature is therefore made possible, for Rancière, in the first place, by the "horizontal" relation between these works, on the one hand, and the contemporaneous philosophical-theoretical works discursively articulating their conditions of comprehensibility, on the other. But secondly he recognises another, diagonal plane of historical significance, which cuts across the horizontal plane and instantiates or sets in motion what Rockhill (2011: 6-7) calls a process of "historical cross-fertilisation" – what Rancière "has elsewhere referred to as the complex intertwining of the horizontal and the diagonal dimensions of history". This happens when, for example, Plato's notion of art – which falls within what Rancière labels the "ethical regime of images" – demonstrably intersects with the artworks and literary texts, as well as the philosophical texts of a given period, in this way imparting conceptual forces to the latter that "slant", "tweak" or unsettle their intellectual- and literary-historical specificity. In Rancière's words:

> Opening this dimension that cuts across so-called historical contexts is essential to grasping the war of writing ... and its stakes in terms of the distribution of the sensible, the symbolic configuration of commonality.
>
> (Rancière quoted in Rockhill 2011: 7)

Such cross-historical conceptual disturbance, as well as the relation between art and theory at a certain time, is therefore conceived of by Rancière in terms of what he here refers to as (probably his best-known expression) "the distribution of the sensible" (alternatively: the "partition of the sensible") – a phrase that densely captures what, in his thinking, brings art, philosophy and politics (or the "sayable" and the "visible") together, so that conceiving of a merely "external" relationship between these practices is rendered obsolete. Joseph Tanke provides a useful account of Rancière's "distribution of the sensible" in relation to the arts:

> The distribution of the sensible is the system of divisions that assigns parts, supplies meanings, and defines the relationships between things in the common world. One such part belongs to art, with the larger distribution prescribing how the arts relate to other ways of doing and making. As such, the distribution of the sensible defines the nature of art, along with what it is capable of ... the arts, even those thought far-removed from the political concerns of the day, can play a role in transforming the world. Art challenges what is sensible, thinkable, and hence possible, on the condition that it not surrender its identity as art.
>
> (Tanke 2011: 74-75)

To put it succinctly, in the light of art and literature's transforming capacity,[1] such "re-partitioning of the sensible" happens through the discursive "effects" of art, including literature (and ultimately also philosophy or theory), on social space, which means that these practices are anything but mere "cultural" epiphenomena. Tanke (2011: 73) does not hesitate to draw the conclusion thatRanciére offers one "an account of art's political capacities ... by describing the way art [including literature] alters the distribution of the sensible through the creation of experiences that are opposed to it". Acknowledging their capacity to structure social space also implies that "literature" and "art" are not, for Ranciére, simply a distinct manner of using language or images. They have a purchase on power relations in society, in so far as, together with their theoretical counterparts, they "partition the sensible" in a specific way – either hierarchically or in an egalitarian fashion, for instance – by allocating different social, economic or political placements to people of different class, gender or race. As Ranciére (2011: 31) puts it, "The simple practices of the arts cannot be separated from the discourses that define the conditions under which they can be perceived as artistic practices".

Dissensus and the Three Regimes of Art

Not only in these terms, though; the "partition of the sensible" is also executed regarding axiological imperatives and evaluations, as I hope to show in relation to the novels in question here. The way that Ranciére employs the concept of "dissensus" in his work is illuminating here. According to Ranciére (2007: 560), "dissensus" is an aesthetic matter. It does not only mean disagreement in the sense of a difference of opinion; for him it means a "rupture" in the sensible order – a conflict between one sensible order and another. It seems to me that, if one follows Ranciére

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1. Ranciére is not the first to note the transforming capacity of art, however, although his conceptualisation of it is novel. Before him, figures such as Heidegger, Gadamer and Marcuse articulated this in different terms, with the latter emphasising the political more than the former two (see Olivier 1987).

closely, this should be understood as a clash between one distinct manner of "ordering" or organising the world revealed to us by the senses, on the one hand, and on the other, a struggle between two orders that are "sensible" (meaning a way of organising the world of the senses along commonsensical lines) to its respective adherents, or those people whose apprehension of the world is calibrated and attuned to this particular ordering of the sensible.

This explains why Ranciére (2007: 560) regards "dissensus" as a matter of poetic or aesthetic invention. It also clarifies his understanding of "poetic invention" not as the conjuring up of an imaginary, non-existing topos, but as a rupture or displacement of existing "places and identities" (2007: 560), which, he reminds one, makes of dissensus a political matter. In so far as literature is a – perhaps privileged – site of "poetic invention", as a cultural practice it is subject to dissensus as much as any other. Therefore literature, too, is a political matter. Literature is a way of organising or "distributing", parcelling out, the sensible world, in conjunction with the literary-theoretical discourses which impart to it a kind of quasi-transcendental dimension, by providing a "hermeneutic key" to its intelligibility, describing the historical and epistemic conditions in light of which it is to be understood as "literature".

Needless to say, "established literature", together with conventional literary theories, orders the sensible world in a manner that provides the comfort of recognition to readers. (This is related, although it may not correspond exactly, to what Barthes [1975: 14] calls "texts of pleasure".) Such "established" literature and literary theories comprise what Ranciére sees as the paralysing conventional wisdom concerning "modernism" and "postmodernism", something that he disturbs and dislocates by means of the distinction between three different regimes of art, namely the "ethical regime of images", the "representative regime of the arts", and the "aesthetic regime of art" (2011: 75-85). According to Tanke,

> [t]he notion of the regime of art allows Ranciére to reconstruct the practical and conceptual networks that have defined art [including literature] and situated it with respect to the more general sphere of appearances. One can think of a regime as the system of principles that allows certain practices to be recognized as art. The identification supplied by the regime in turn determines the form of efficacy that art can have vis-á-vis other practices. To analyze a regime of art is to at once examine the identity ascribed to art by the distribution and how art corroborates or contests that distribution.
>
> (Tanke 2011: 75)

Each of the three regimes of art is therefore a different way of practising and conceptualising the arts, and every one of them "structures a specific relationship between words, vision, and affect, indicating how art becomes active or not within the order of appearances more generally" (2011: 76).[2] What do they mean, respectively? The first one – the "ethical regime of images" – goes back to Plato's criticism of art as imitation (2011: 77), twice removed from the archetypal forms, or true objects of knowledge. For Ranciére, however, Plato's model of the city represents a distribution of the sensible that privileges the philosopher's right to create fictions, denying the poet or artist this right. In other words, all "images" have to be proscribed, lest they undermine the "just" partitioning of the polis as determined by the philosopher. This means that the "ethical regime of images" is more about the exclusion of art than about art, at least of a certain kind, that of simulacra. Plato will only allow the kind of art that reinforces the canonical distribution of the sensible, that is, the structure of the community as envisaged by the philosopher. Hence "the ethical regime of images": as soon as artistic or literary images impinge on the philosophically justified social hierarchy, or whenever a discourse or ideology subjects art and literature to the dictates of the community (recall art censorship under apartheid), an ethical relationship with images is established.

The second – the "representative regime of art" – is founded on Aristotle's *Poetics* as the first text which articulated principles for the distinction between various arts, as well as for their relative independence from religious ritual and from the community's dictates (Tanke 2011: 78). It introduced a relationship between the sayable and the thinkable that applied to the "distributions" governing Greek tragedy and still operated in 18th-century European art, in the so-called belles-lettres and the beaux-arts of classicism. Aristotle had, contra-Plato, articulated the conditions under which the "representation of action" does not amount to the ethically unacceptable creation of simulacra, but allows the ethically beneficial catharsis of "harmful emotions". In this way the "representative regime" still maintains the kind of distribution of the sensible that has an ethical effect, but not at the cost of art's relative autonomy as mimesis. In painting, this regime manifests itself in the choice of subject matter that corresponds with Aristotle's valorisation of action – or the element of "fable" in tragedy – such as historical events of note, and the relegation of subject matter deemed unworthy, such as ordinary objects, to the margins of art by, for example, reducing the scale of paintings dealing with common people's lives. In Ranciere's own words,

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[2] If this reminds readers of Foucault's notion of an episteme – the general, tacit, underlying principles that allow something to be thought or "known" in a certain era – it is no accident. As Tanke (2011: 76) observes, Ranciére has affirmed the similarity between this and his own notion of a regime, cautioning readers, however, that a regime does not mark, as an episteme does, "mutually exclusive thresholds", as they can intersect historically with one another.

> [c]lassical poetics [that is, the "representative regime of art"] established a relationship of correspondence ... between speech and painting, between the sayable and the visible, which gave "imitation" its own specific space.
>
> (quoted in Tanke 2011: 81)

The third – the "aesthetic regime of art" (commonly associated with modernity and modernism) – is the most far-reaching of the regimes, precisely because it introduces "equality" into art as a practice. No longer are only historical events of note, involving important personages (in painting), or dramatic tragic action, executed by noble characters, purging the audience cathartically through "pity and fear", admissible objects of artistic creation. From the aesthetic regime's perspective, the partitioning of the sensible via art and literature need not obey and strengthen existing hierarchies, nor create new ones. In a contra-Platonic and contra-Aristotelian gesture, such art ruptures hierarchical, variously subordinating distributions of the sensible by introducing "dissensus" into the sensible (as a rupturing of the prevailing distribution of the sensible; note the ambiguity of "sensible") status quo and transforming it in such a thoroughgoing manner that novel relations of "equality" can emerge, made possible by letting things "speak for themselves" – not necessarily in terms of realism; abstraction also deals with "things" such as shape, line and colour. As a consequence, relations between and among things are rearticulated by, among other practices, descriptive writing (or still-life painting of everyday objects), which has little to do with the valorised dramatic actions of tragic heroes in the mimetic tradition. As Tanke points out,

> [a]bstraction ... becomes possible only through an invalidation of the idea that painting is a vehicle for the transmission of speech. To concern itself with itself, the subject of painting must first become a matter of indifference or, in Rancière's terms, equality, the major innovation of the aesthetic regime.
>
> (Tanke 2011: 81)

As far as literature is concerned, it means that – as Derrida (1978, 1980) has shown in his own way by deconstructively exposing an arché-writing that operates in speech, too – speech ceases to be the reference point to which writing is subordinated. Consequently, the latter is emancipated, with the result that its capacity to (re)partition the sensible discursively, in dialogue with the theories which map out its conditions of possibility, is liberated from the restrictions of the other two regimes, and allowed a certain discursive free-play. "The aesthetic regime of the arts," says Tanke (2011; 81), "is thus, at the most fundamental level, the abolition of the representative regime's normativity". Instead of being bound by a framework of correspondence between artistic "causes" and their "effects" on "spectators", the wide array of arts under the aegis of the aesthetic selects its material, broadly, from everyday life, and, paradoxically, through aesthetically mediated sensory experience and imagination, reaches beyond it. (Barthes's "texts of bliss" come to mind (1975: 14).) Put succinctly by Ranciére (in Chapter 9 of *Dissensus* (2011a)), reformulating Schiller's assurance that the foundation of art and of life is to be found in the aesthetic: "there exists a specific sensory experience that holds the promise of both a new world of Art and a new life for individuals and the community, namely *the aesthetic*".

One of the most far-reaching aspects of Ranciére's novel understanding of the arts through the lenses of the three regimes, is therefore that the aesthetic regime is shown to have revolutionary potential, given the future-directed temporality of art's openness to involuntary sensible and sensory experience (Tanke 2011: 82). Moreover, no subject matter is privileged; everything is equal before the arts (which include literature). The aesthetic regime does not recognise any pre-existing rules for the kind of thing that is a legitimate object of art, and for the way objects can be aesthetically presented (Tanke 2011: 81). In a sense aesthetic art or literature is always probing towards rules and principles that "will have guided them", in retrospect; an insight reminiscent of Lyotard's (1984: 80-81) conception of the postmodern sublime as encountered in art or literature that uses the forms of presentation to suggest the "unpresentable".

Understandably, Ranciére's novel approach to literature as a practice that potentially disrupts the sensible status quo by introducing a kind of dissensus or "rupture" into it (with significant consequences for the reordering of the sensible world), opens the way to a revealing "political" interpretation of literary works, as I shall attempt to demonstrate below. Hence, how can one bring Ranciére's notion of the aesthetic regime of art, and art's capacity of "(re)distributing the sensible", to bear on a novel?

When We Were Orphans as Roman Noir

Kazuo Ishiguro is famed chiefly as winner of the Booker Prize for his novel *The Remains of the Day* (1989), the virtues of which are beyond dispute, but will not be discussed here. Instead I want to concentrate on his novel of 2000 (shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize), *When We Were Orphans* – a masterpiece of the art of *roman noir*. I hope that a film director with a penchant for *film noir* notices the unmistakable *noir* features of this novel sooner rather than later; it lends itself to a remarkable degree to *noir's* trademark mode of visualisation that stresses the intertwinement of light and dark, signifying the impossibility of separating good and evil once and for all in individuals and in society as a whole, contrary to what mainstream Hollywood movies routinely suggest.

The novel's *noir* structure is remarkably close to that of *film noir*, which is not the case with all *roman noir* novels, but which is conspicuously the case with *When We Were Orphans*. There is an "alienated detective" who maintains a rather jaundiced view of the world, no fewer than three femmes fatales, several – in fact, many – characters with dubious morals, and the indispensable feature of *noir*, to wit corruption and a pervasive sense of evil, which one is initially led to believe applies exclusively to the criminals tracked down by our detective in England, and to those involved with the opium trade in Shanghai – including the company that Christopher's father works for. Increasingly, however, one realises that evil permeates society thoroughly, even to the degree that Christopher himself displays signs of moral weakness (when he fails to defend his childhood friend, Akira, against charges of being a war informant to the Chinese by his Japanese superiors).

The narrative enacts what Kant (1960: 30-32, 50-51; see also Olivier 2004) claimed in *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, that evil is rooted in human nature, and is strictly ineradicable, because the very thing that enables one to choose the good above evil, namely freedom of the will, ALSO enables one to choose evil at any time. Kant called this "radical (rooted) evil", as opposed to "diabolical evil", which rests on the assumption that one does not have freedom of will to choose good above evil – a possibility rejected by Kant, but accepted by many instances of *noir* fiction (for example Roman Polanski's *The Ninth Gate* and Alan Parker's *Angel Heart*).

When We Were Orphans – the unfolding events of which are narrated, in true *noir* fashion, by a celebrated British detective, Christopher Banks – is set alternately in London, England, and the Shanghai of the interwar years, when the latter city was the hub of the lucrative opium trade. Christopher is what literary theorists call an "unreliable narrator" who confesses to uncertainty and haziness concerning the memories he is drawing upon in his narration, which means that this is a novel that probes the notion of memory, among other things. Most fundamentally, however, it explores the nature of evil and corruption in individual humans as well as in society, and leaves one with the uncomfortable feeling that evil is ineradicable, although, as a counterweight to this, love seems to be the only thing that endures to an equal extent.

As a young boy, Christopher and his Japanese friend, Akira, play their games alternately in the Banks' house and backyard, and on the property belonging to Akira's family, in the International Settlement in Shanghai. They witness the comings and goings of friends and acquaintances, mainly at the Banks' residence, without grasping their significance, and indulge in imaginary detective investigations and dramatic rescues of people in distress, little knowing, at the time, that future events would strengthen Christopher's resolve to devote himself to becoming a real detective. When first his father disappears, and shortly afterwards his mother, Christopher is sent to England to stay with an aunt, in whose care he completes his school and university education before embarking on a career as detective, and eventually being hailed by London society as the greatest detective of the day.

In the meantime we have met Sarah Hemmings, a London socialite who clearly has her sights set on the "best" man available, but whose charms leave Christopher cold. Instead, having received an inheritance when his aunt died, he has become the foster father to an orphaned girl named Jennifer. When the time comes for him to return to Shanghai, sufficiently prepared to unravel the still unsolved mystery of his parents' disappearance years before, recently married Sarah and her diplomat husband also happen to be there – in the place widely regarded as the "heart of the beast", and everyone seems to harbour a disproportionate expectation that Christopher's successful venture would somehow stem the tide of evil that is likely to engulf the world, should he fail.

To cut a long story short, despite his almost childlike belief that his parents are held in a house in Shanghai, Christopher discovers that this is not the case, and that everything he believed to be the reasons for their disappearance is in fact false. The truth about them turns out to be far more painful, and is revealed to him by a man he used to know as Uncle Phillip, an associate of his mother in the organisation that campaigned against the opium trade, now unmasked as an informer for the Chinese nationalists. When Christopher finally tracks down his mother in a Catholic "home" in Hong Kong after WWII, she does not recognise him. She does, however, respond to his nickname, Puffin, in a manner that leaves no doubt about her continued love for her son, for whose security she paid an unimaginably high price.

The manner in which Ishiguro weaves together narrative strands bearing on economics, politics, education, war, personal ambition and desire, comprises a veritable microcosm of human society, and leaves one in no doubt that he has succeeded in uncovering the paradoxical anatomy of the human condition. Human suffering as well as joy is here, together with nobility of intentions, subverted by greed and the lust for power. The lens of *noir* also reveals the ambivalence as well as the inscrutable nature of human personality. Duplicity is discovered in those from whom one least expects it. Strength of character is counterbalanced by unexpected weakness, and the failures of memory, together with the way that unconscious desire undermines conscious reasoning, unmask human beings as children of a far lesser god than the one they believe they see reflected in their own species, as the following interpretation of the novel will show.

When We Were Orphans and the Partition of the Sensible

In light of the preceding discussion of the novel as *roman noir*, how does Ranciére's notion of the "partition of the sensible" by the discursive convergence between theory and art help one understand the productive relations between these texts, on the one hand, and the extant social world of "the sensible" – that is, the concrete world in which we live? What is striking about *When We Were Orphans* is its apparently *incoherent plot*, which it has in common with *films noir* (where it usually provokes confusion among audience members). Contrary to the probable impression that the author was somehow lacking in his or her ability to structure the narrative coherently, the incoherence in question not only correlates with an incoherent world, but discursively "distributes the sensible" along the axes of a social world that resists attempts at finding an inherent, sustainable order or coherence in it. This should not be understood as the affirmation of a causal relation between the text and the social milieu, where the former actively structures (or disrupts) social spaces to the point of incoherence. Rather, "partitioning the sensible" in this manner amounts to casting a discursive grid over the sensible world which allows for its intelligibility in terms of incoherence. To put it differently, the "incoherence" that is always already there, latently or in actuality, emerges or "morphs" into the spheres of comprehensibility and perceptibility through the partitioning functioning of the novel and its theoretical correlates, such as Kant's distinction between two types of evil and the theory of *roman* or *film noir*.

How are we to understand the fact that such endemic "incoherence" is not readily apparent to most people, at most times? Freud's notion of *Secondary Revision* is useful here. This concept is employed by Freud (1977: 381-465) in *The Interpretation of Dreams* to describe one of the structural characteristics of what he conceives of as the "dreamwork" (otherwise typified by structuring principles such as "condensation" and "displacement"). According to the principle of "secondary revision", what dreamers recall of their (usually nocturnal) dreams is always subject to it in the precise sense of revising the otherwise incoherent succession or concatenation of oneiric images in such a way as to impart coherence to it for the sake of rational comprehension. The primary form of dreams populated by metaphorical and metonymic transformations of repressed, unconscious materials, lacks such coherence for Freud, because they result from the "dreamwork" executed by the preconscious (an agent of reason), with the task of disguising repressed material, rendering dreams the "guardians of sleep". Ishiguro's novel is predicated on the insight that our "normal", waking lives are similar to dreams in this respect. We carry out secondary revision as we go along – and the character of the narrator in the novel (Christopher Banks) is no exception to this rule – to be able to grasp our lives as meaningful and coherent. This explains why traumatic events are so hard to deal with: they rupture the constantly (through the action of the diurnal counterpart of secondary revision) smoothed over symbolic-linguistic fabric of our lives unbearably, with the result that, through the Freudian "talking cure" we have to stitch this fabric together again, interminably. But the point is that, while there are many instances in the narrative where Banks's narration may clearly be seen as smoothing over the inconsistencies and blank spots of his memory, the overall structure of Ishiguro's novel leaves us in no doubt that underneath the ostensible hanging-together of life, there is scant consistency.

The notion of the *unreliable narrator* is intimately connected with the incoherence or inconsistency, and with the tendency to engage in "secondary revision", discussed above. A structural category known to literary scholars[3] as pertaining to novels as far back as Cervantes's *Don Quixote* (2000), it operates in conjunction with the other aspects of the novel which have the overall effect of leaving an impression of incoherence, such as the way in which the temporal sequence of narrated events is scrambled in the narrative, and it is up to the reader to piece them together more or less chronologically. Its specific function in this novel seems to me to be to highlight the role of repression of unbearable, or (to the narrator) irrelevant details of past events, to be able to throw all those aspects of past events into relief in relation to his primary desire: solving the riddle of his parents' (more particularly his mother's) disappearance in Shanghai when he was still a young boy, and uncovering the location of their (or her) "present" whereabouts. The unreliability of his narration mostly takes the form of Banks referring to an event or series of events and then observing that it is vague or hazy in his memory, although one particular recollection stands out. The clarity of such a recollection is a function, not so much of memory working properly in just these instances, but rather of Christopher's "desire" in the precise psychoanalytical sense of that which differentiates between one individual and all others, that which "singularises" a person in the sense that, for every human being, there is one (unconscious) desire which promises "complete" (if unattainable) fulfilment or *jouissance* (Lacan 1997: 311-325). For Christopher Banks[4] it is the desire for his mother – not in a sexual sense, but in so far as his mother marks the site of "the profound lost object" which is embodied in the various "little (other) objects" or "*objects a*", in Lacanian language (Žižek 1993: 206-207), that populate his life in the guise of the different "solutions" to the criminal cases that Christopher focuses on in his career as a detective. Every successive "solution" not only brings him closer to the time when he will feel ready, finally, to tackle the (for him) inaugurating "case", namely, his parents' mysterious disappearance, but metonymically they instantiate the approximation of *jouissance* for him. Needless to emphasise, the unconscious is implicated in the (here, *roman noir*) literary device of the "unreliable narrator", as already intimated in terms of repression of those details pertaining to past events.

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[3] I was reminded of this by scholar of (English) literature, John McDermott.

[4] As indeed for the eponymous hero of Orson Welles's *Citizen Kane* (1941), whose desire for his prematurely "lost" mother is incarnated in his sled, "Rosebud" (as *object a*), which is the last word he utters as he lies dying.

Finally, then, Ishiguro's *noir* novel displays the distributive contours ofRanciére's "aesthetic regime of art" in its uncompromising discursive articulation of a global social space – from West to East – that is subject to "equality" in a radical, but very specific way. In the first place, the "partition of the sensible" reveals Chinese and British (by implication, global) society to be subject to comparable hierarchies of power – think of the class structure of British society, uncovered in London's high society circles, of Christopher's father, who works for a powerful British company in Shanghai, being implicated in the opium trade, of the complicity of the Chinese warlords in this, of the Japanese attempts to subjugate China, and of the outbreak of WWII soon after the culmination, in failure, of Christopher's attempt to find his parents in Shanghai. All of these events exude a distribution of the sensible which confronts the givenness of asymmetrical power relations in human societies without exception.

So where does "equality" feature? One may think of this along the axis of what is conceptualised, in *film noir*, as the pervasive presence of morally compromised characters, or – more abstractly – compromised axiological space and shades of radical evil. Just as Ranciére's characterisation of the "aesthetic regime of art" reflects the equality of its treatment of objects and subjects in the world, contrary to the other two regimes – both of which parcelled out objects and subjects in the world according to entrenched social hierarchies, reciprocally vindicated by art – so, too, *When We Were Orphans*, read as literature or poetics belonging to the aesthetic regime, uncovers a radical *equality* of people and societies in terms of moral degeneracy and corruptibility, finitude, and fallibility. Arguably, no character in the novel is exempt from this, not even Christopher, who fails Akira when he could step into the breach for him – probably with disastrous consequences for the latter. The only characters who may escape, in fact, although not in principle, these charges, are Christopher's mother, who is forced into a compromising situation, and "takes up her desire" (Lacan 1997: 243-287), paradoxically, by sacrificing it – her love of her son, Christopher – and Jennifer, Christopher's ward, who is at the receiving end of morally reprehensible deception, but seems to emerge with her integrity intact. At least these two characters bear out the validity of Kant's insight (referred to earlier) that humans are subject to "radical evil" (where one still has a choice between good and evil), instead of "diabolical evil" (where one has no choice but to submit to the inclination to do evil).

A reading of the novel in terms of "equality" surely takes it beyond the political to the ethical, but nevertheless affirms the ethical "equality" of politically "unequal" classes – the upper classes, no less than the proletariat in any country, are "equally" subject to corruption and the possibility of failing, ethically, in every society. Moreover, the novel exemplifies the paradoxical nature of the aesthetic regime: it is an instance of the art of writing, but it is also more than that, because it anticipates, by projecting, a future society where the "equality" or indifference of evil with regard to social classes, could be embodied in an "equal society", with no illusions about moral foundations for social hierarchies. The following passage from Part Four, Chapter 12, of *When We Were Orphans* (Ishiguro 2000), where Christopher Banks surveys the international "elite" of Shanghai society, captures this "equality" of culpability well (keeping in mind that Christopher also, in the end, failed to "resolve" anything):

> As the dancers proceeded with their floor show, the room seemed to lose all interest in the battle across the water, though the noises were still clearly audible behind the cheery music. It was as though for these people, one entertainment had finished and another had begun. I felt, not for the first time since arriving in Shanghai, a wave of revulsion towards them. It was not simply the fact of their having failed so dismally over the years to rise to the challenge of the case, of their having allowed matters to slip to the present appalling level with all its huge ramifications. What has quietly shocked me, from the moment of my arrival, is the refusal of everyone here to acknowledge their drastic culpability. During this fortnight I have been here, throughout all my dealings with these citizens, high or low, I have not witnessed – not once – anything that could pass for honest shame. Here, in other words, at the heart of the maelstrom threatening to suck in the whole of the civilized world, is a pathetic conspiracy of denial; a denial of responsibility which has turned on itself and gone sour, manifesting itself in the sort of pompous defensiveness I have encountered so often. And here they now were, the so-called elite of Shanghai, treating with such contempt the suffering of their Chinese neighbours across the canal.
>
> (Ishiguro 2000)

Ironically, Christopher does not fare much better, morally speaking, when confronted with a little girl's evident trauma in the face of her family members' horrific death by bombing in the Shanghai house where he anticipated to find his parents, nor when he is in a position to witness to Akira's innocence when accused of being an informer by his superior officers. The moral "equality" of all people, regardless of "civilisation", social class or position, in the face of the "radical evil" Kant identified in humans – their inability, finally, to eradicate the possibility of failing, morally, because of their free will (which is the quasi-transcendental condition of the possibility of *both* good *and* evil) – is mercilessly exposed by Ishiguro. This is a literary "(re)distribution of the sensible", in conjunction with Ranciére's notion of the "aesthetic regime of art", that points to the misguidedness of attributing higher moral standing to the elites of the world (today, the bankers, for instance, who are regarded as being "too big to fail") than to other classes (such as the workers, or the middle classes, whose tax money has to "bail out" the banks). Morally speaking, as well as in every other sense bearing on their humanity, all people are radically equal, or "indifferent".

Gibson's *Neuromancer*: A Novel of the Imagined Future

When William Gibson's science-fiction, "cyberpunk" novel, *Neuromancer*, was published in 1984, ultimately to win the three most sought-after awards in the science fiction world (The Nebula Award, The Philip K. Dick Award and the Hugo Award), few people could anticipate an imaginative projection of such magnitude that it would shape the way an entire new generation thinks, and lives.

There is a strong case to be made that the Wachowski brothers (directors of *The Matrix* and its sequels) and others borrowed the word and the idea of the "matrix" from *Neuromancer*, there, and that our conception of "cyberspace" and the by now utterly pervasive metaphorics of webs and networks have their roots in Gibson's imagined future world of the "Sprawl" (a mega-city around present-day New York), Chiba City in Japan, the space-floating resort of Freeside and, parasitically integrated with it, the domain of the Tessier-Ashpool clan, the Villa Straylight. Some of the imaginings of the elasticity of Dreamtime in Christopher Nolan's *Inception*, too, seem to draw on Gibson's inventiveness regarding temporary "flatline-time". Even the term "microsoft" is ubiquitous in *Neuromancer*, although it does not have the meaning it has in the Microsoft associated with Bill Gates.

Neuromancer's central character is Case, a formerly talented hacker (a "cowboy" in *Neuromancer* parlance), who was neurally impaired by erstwhile employers when he stole from them. For this is a world where cloning, organ replacement and/or enhancement, as well as neural "souping up" (or, in Case's case, neural injury) is commonplace in medical clinics (legitimate and illegitimate) which vie with one another for clients. It also features a character, Molly Millions, a redoubtable, neurally enhanced "razorgirl" from a previous short story by Gibson, *Johnny Mnemonic*.

A skeletal account of the plot will have to do. Case is down, but not quite out when we meet him, barely making a living as a hustler in Chiba, Japan, his computer skills having been destroyed, but he is recruited for the ultimate hacking job by Molly on behalf of a mysterious character, Armitage, who happens to know of a clinic where Case can be neurally repaired. Condensing brutally, the job also entails recruiting Peter Riviera, an impossibly beautiful but perverse projectioneer-illusionist, and the assistance of two colourful Rastafarian "Zionist" characters, who relish combating "Babylon" in every guise – something that becomes somewhat ambiguous when one discovers that the motley team is actually in the "employ" of an AI – Artificial Intelligence – named Wintermute, which (or who?) vastly surpasses anything of mere "PC" stature.

Case also has a hacker "assistant", who died some time earlier in an encounter with a hostile AI in cyberspace, after building an enviable reputation for himself – Dixie, also referred to as "the flatline", or "the construct" – whose electronically transformed consciousness is stolen by Molly from a heavily guarded archive. The flatline (Dixie) proves to be invaluable at the culminating moment, together with a Chinese supervirus, which has to be positioned by Case and Dixie with the use of an advanced computer called a Hosaka.

But this does not happen before a lot has happened – in Chiba (in Japan), in the "Sprawl" on the Eastern Seaboard of America, and, crucially, at a space resort called Freeside, owned and run by the almost mythical Tessier-Ashpool clan, whose patriarch is more than 200 years old, what with genetic rejuvenation and cryogenic spells in deep freeze. The "team" – in particular Case and the flatline – faces the task of getting into the Tessier-Ashpool's lair, known as Straylight, to coax (or force) a secret code out of Lady 3Jane Tessier-Ashpool (a clone of the original Tessier-Ashpool daughter, as indicated by the 3). This code, or word, will effect the merging together of two AIs – Wintermute and Neuromancer – the latter, unlike Wintermute, having been in the background most of the time, and only announcing itself through a puzzling spell in the matrix on Case's part, where he encounters his deceased former girlfriend, Linda Lee. The fusion of these two super-artificial intelligences, if it can be pulled off, will elevate them in quasi-Hegelian fashion to a synthesis of unimaginable, sublime proportions of complexity.

There are many themes in *Neuromancer* (and its "Sprawl" sequels, *Count Zero* and *Mona Lisa Overdrive*) that are significant for understanding our own time, as well as that towards which we seem to be moving (as I shall show below). Anticipating the analysis of the film in terms of Rancière's notion of the "partition of the sensible", consider the following. Most people are aware of smartphones and some of the other "smart" stuff related to it, like smart cars. In Gibson's novel all of this is imaginatively anticipated in the 80s – cars, aeroplanes and houses that talk to you and respond to your requests or instructions, or ghostly companions that come to virtual appearance when you summon them by touching a "remote", like genies from a bottle. And everything is interconnected in and through cyberspace, so that a person could be "tracked" in cyberspace on the basis of, for instance, using your "credit chip" (similar to a credit card).

Most central to *Neuromancer* and its sequels is the endless non-landscape of the "matrix" – of which it is said that "there is no there, there" – in which you can get lost when you're "jacked in", and the virtual fascination of which is such that it is addictive. If this sounds familiar, it is no doubt because today it is part of the cultural environment. And yet, these qualitatively distinct features of a world seemingly, almost, within reach, were conjured out of the science fiction material available to Gibson at the time, and transformed into a novel so novel that commentators penned remarks such as "nobody can out-Gibson Gibson".

One of the themes developed in *Neuromancer* and its sequels, that of "biolab-industries" and their endless supply of organs – new livers, new eyes, new hearts – to anyone who can pay, represents one of the less attractive possibilities of partitioning the sensible in a future that already seems to be taking shape. Why, one may ask – surely it would be great if one could just replace one's worn-out ticker and prolong one's life at will? At first blush this seems reasonable, but think of the context – so persuasively described by Gibson – within which this operates: this futuristic practice not only enables the replacement of a pancreas about to collapse under the impact of years of getting high on drugs; it positively encourages one to become addicted, because any dire consequences for one's body can be biomedically addressed. Moreover, if one considers the planet to be overpopulated today, think of a time when – given the funds – life could be prolonged indefinitely through all manner of genetic interventions. It seems to me Gibson's prodigiously inventive extrapolation of the 1980s into the future is a plausible one.

Neuromancer and the "Partition of the Sensible"

What significant lines could one draw between this imaginatively prodigious, literary projection of a specific "partitioning of the sensible", in the shape of a techno-social realm, and the shape the world has been in the process of assuming since about the time of its writing around 1984? And can one identify theoretical works that would fit the bill of comprising the other pole of the field within which the sensible world is structured or "partitioned" anew? To the latter question one has to answer in the affirmative, of course, given Rancière's own very original theorisation of the ontological status of art and literature in relation to social space. In addition, among the works theorising the structural dynamics of the societies of the 1990s, I would single out Manuel Castells's *The Rise of the Network Society* of 1996 (and its two sequel volumes) for its pertinence regarding the projected world of *Neuromancer*.

From the above brief discussion of *Neuromancer* it should already be apparent that its literary projection of an interconnected, or networked world – where Foucaultian panopticism (Foucault 1995) has morphed into a Deleuzian "society of control" (Deleuze 1992) through modes of surveillance that are no longer limited to "confined spaces" such as factories, hospitals and schools, but are carried out along rhizomatically extended webs of electronic information-communication – is an uncanny anticipation of the networked society in which we already live, although it projects social and technological possibilities beyond this society, too. If Rancière is correct about the relation between literature and social reality, however, it is more than that, to wit, a discursive manner to carve social space up into a novel configuration of social power relations. And the power relations in question do not merely concern human beings, even if cybernetically and biomedically "enhanced" individuals are included among these. The familiar hierarchies of power of the past and the present, such as the church, the modern nation state and the present hegemony of neoliberal corporate power, are amplified (as intimated earlier) by Artificial Intelligence power in *Neuromancer* – not merely artificial intelligence in the shape of "personal computers". Here AI is closer to the eponymous AI in Steven Spielberg's film by that name, namely an intelligent, for-all-practical-purposes perfect robotic simulacrum of a human being, although not *quite* the same,[5] because although an AI like Wintermute or the titular Neuromancer can and does assume human form, it is in the cyberspace of the matrix[6] (which is here a kind of parallel, virtual reality) that this occurs. Within that space an AI has immense power on its own terms, but in the concrete social space of human affairs it nevertheless also wields power, so that one can truly say that it participates in establishing and maintaining hierarchical power relations, in addition to which it occasionally exercises power over life and death – as when Wintermute rescues Case from the cyber police by literally killing them through remote control of flying machines and lawn mowers at the space resort of Freeside.

Sometimes an AI like Wintermute requires some human assistance, however. For Wintermute to ascend to a higher level of AI power, it needs a talented "'cowboy' such as Case to hack into the Tessier-Ashpools" tightly protected databanks with the help of a Chinese military supervirus, and open the way for itself to merge – in what I earlier called a quasi-Hegelian fashion – with its counterpart, Neuromancer. This elevates both AIs, now synthesised, to a hitherto unimagined level of AI power, and in true Hegelian fashion, "sublates" them in the sense of simultaneously cancelling the "identity" of each while preserving it at a higher level and in a new form. For this to happen, it also needs Molly Millions's razorgirl services and talents to clear the way for Case to reach the terminal where the final hacking is to be done. Hence social space in *Neuromancer* is variegated, with humans and machines relating to one another in a strange rhizomatic embrace of mutual dependence.

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[5] See in this regard my paper on Spielberg's *AI* and Proyas's *I, Robot* (Olivier 2008).

[6] The matrix in *Neuromancer*, which probably inspired the Wachowski brothers' film, *The Matrix* (1999) and its sequels (as well as their Japanese anime counterparts), is similar to, and different from the matrix of the latter, which is conceived as a computer programme that human beings are plugged into, and which propels them into a virtual reality that they mistakenly perceive as the only reality. The matrix of *Neuromancer* is similar to this in that it is also virtual, but it differs from it because it is not the only, or primary "reality" that people are aware of. One has to access it by physically "jacking into" it through a computer, and by "jacking out" again one can return to everyday reality. Another similarity is that according to the ontological parameters of *Neuromancer* one can sojourn in the cyberspace of the matrix indefinitely, and could even die physically while continuing one's virtual existence in the matrix, as Bobby, or "Count Zero" (among others) ends up doing in *Mona Lisa Overdrive*, and is eventually joined there by his love, Angela Mitchell, when she dies a "physical" death.

Although this is a science-fictional projection into the future, *Neuromancer's* discursive ordering of the sensible world already finds its counterpart in the contemporary world – without the "informatisation" (Hardt & Negri 2001: 284-289) of a country's economy it simply lags behind those whose economies are fully informatised, that is, restructured according to the logic of computer networks and informational systems. As Hardt and Negri (2001: 288-289) observe, this means that sectors of the economy that are of an earlier historical provenance and denote a "lower" level of development – such as agriculture and industry, both of which represent an economic revolution at a specific historical juncture – become subordinated to the information economy of (in processual terms) "informatisation", even if both sectors continue to exist. In other words, dairy farms still exist, as do motor car assembly plants, but in both cases computerisation has transformed the productivity involved: cows are milked by machines that are computer-controlled, and cars are assembled by robots, not humans. In *Neuromancer* this is perceivable in the fact that biomedical enhancement of the kind Molly has undergone (enhanced reflexes, infrared capacitated eyes, subcutaneous blade implants in her fingers) and organ replacement as a routine operation is right up there with computer technology as the most "developed" level of the economy, which therefore commands huge investment or payments in exchange for enhancement or replacement benefits. This, too, is an instance of "partitioning the sensible", with all the concomitant socially hierarchising consequences, some of which are already perceptible in the present.

Manuel Castells's ([1996]2010) magisterial work, *The Rise of the Network Society*, resonates with *Neuromancer* (as will be apparent from the following). Here he expresses what is virtually a commonplace, that "[a]ll major social changes are ultimately characterised by a *transformation of space and time in the human experience*" (Castells 2010, Introduction, Section IV; italics in original). The reason for this is simply that space (like time) is a notion that is socially "constructed" through experience, and Castells is not alone in asserting this. Henri Lefebvre (1991) said as much, and differentiated among several modes of space ("perceived space", "conceived space" and "lived space") that are rooted in its social production. It could therefore be expected that, with the advent of the network society new modes of spatiality would emerge. Because space has always been the "material support of simultaneity in social practice" – meaning that people occupying the "same" space in, for example, a city, could communicate in the temporal here and now – one might expect this to remain so today and in the future, and what Castells calls the "space of places" or "space of contiguity" appears to indicate that this is still the case in urban spaces of the early twenty-first century. This also applies to *Neuromancer*, in the sense that, at street level in Chiba, or the Sprawl, Case and Molly have to traverse the "space of places" physically, with all the dangers and encumbrances that this entails.

This does not mean, however, that there have not been some fundamental changes in the spatial structure of existing cities, or of the quasi-fictional cities of *Neuromancer*, like Chiba and the Sprawl. The most striking thing about this is the way that these cities' changing spatial structure resembles the architecture of informational networks. Indeed, it is clear from Castells's work that the changed (and still changing) structure of cities and their adjacent areas into *metropolitan regions* (Castells 2010, Introduction, Section IV) is itself a function of what he dubs the "space of flows", or spatial mode introduced by communication technologies such as internet-based e-mail. Of this novel "spatial logic" Castells (2010: Chapter 6) remarks that it is a "new spatial process, the space of flows, that is becoming the dominant spatial manifestation of power and function in our societies". Under the thrust of this "new spatial process", the traditional city, with its identifiable urban centre, surrounded by mainly residential suburban areas, could not remain unaffected. Accordingly, one increasingly witnesses the emergence of rhizomatically structured metropolitan *regions* that surpass mere metropolitan *areas* because they usually consist of several of such dense, interconnected residential metropolitan areas, together with non-metropolitan areas such as open spaces and agricultural land.

Moreover, these metropolitan "regions" are not merely decentred, but multicentred, given various types of functional importance of different metropolitan nuclei, and vastly exceed traditional cities in population. Among the examples provided by Castells are the metropolitan regions of New York/New Jersey, the San Francisco Bay Area, Shanghai and its surrounds, and the largest global metropolitan region that stretches from Hong Kong to Guangzhou – the South China metropolitan region with approximately 60 million inhabitants. To this one can add the metropolitan region of Seoul, Korea, of Johannesburg in South Africa, and many others in America, Europe and Asia. Again, the urban spaces encountered in *Neuromancer* exhibit characteristics similar to those described by Castells – the "Sprawl", for instance, as the name indicates, covers a vast "region" on the Eastern Seaboard of North America, exceeding the confines of a mere city.

What Castells has to say about the "space of flows" appears to apply to the social world found in Gibson's Sprawl trilogy as well, despite these technologies being differently imagined to those of today: what Gibson labels "simstim" (probably from "similarly stimulated"), for instance, resembles a kind of technologically mediated, synaesthetic three-dimensional experience of exactly what the person whose sensations were recorded on the "simstim" one is "plugged into"[7] experienced. "Simstim" can also be combined with a technology that allows one to perceive the world through the senses of someone else, and experience the (pleasurable and painful) sensations of someone else who is engaging in some activity at a distance. Then there is the "space of flows" suggested by the communication between human beings and a variety of machines in *Neuromancer*, which anticipates many of the contemporary developments involving smartphones, iPads, Android tablets, smart cars and robots (regarding the latter, see Turkle 2010). In both cases – Castells's analysis of extant social spaces as well as Gibson's imaginative exploration of fictionally projected spaces – the "partitioning of the sensible" is not restricted to the world(s) projected by the texts in question, but emanates from the interaction between the texts on the one hand, and social reality, on the other. Consider the following excerpt from *Neuromancer* as an indication of Gibson's anticipation of what Castells theorises as the "space of flows":

> Case was twenty-four. At twenty-two, he'd been a cowboy, a rustler, one of the best in the Sprawl. He'd been trained by the best, by McCoy Pauley and Bobby Quine, legends in the biz. He'd operated on an almost permanent adrenaline high, a byproduct of youth and proficiency, jacked into a custom cyberspace deck that projected his disembodied consciousness into the consensual hallucination that was the matrix. A thief, he'd worked for other, wealthier thieves, employers who provided the exotic software required to penetrate the bright walls of corporate systems, opening windows into rich fields of data.
>
> (Gibson 1995: 10)

In this passage, the word "consensual", in particular, sets off a series of resonances between the text and the realm of (the partitioning of) the "sensible". On the one hand, it suggests agreement, but on the other it denotes a "bringing-together of the senses" in a distinct space or domain – one, to be sure, with far-reaching consequences for the "sensible" rearrangement of society, as one has already witnessed in our "networked society". In Ranciére's terms, at a certain historical juncture such "consensual" experience, even if it is hallucinatory, represents the moment of "dissensus", or disruption of (what in the 1980s was) the established, conventional, sensible realm, which paves the way for its redistribution along different axes of power.

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[7] Again, this is similar to, but not exactly the same as, the imagined recording and "playback" technology in Katherine Bigelow's *Strange Days* (1995) and Wim Wenders's *Until the End of the World* (1991), both of which participate in the ongoing present "(re)distribution of the sensible" as conceived of here.

Conclusion

The interpretive analyses of the two novels – *When We Were Orphans* and *Neuromancer* – above, in terms of the philosophy of art (including literature) formulated by Jacques Ranciére, has proved to be highly suggestive, especially in light of his category of the "aesthetic regime of arts", understood in conjunction with the phrase that captures the main thrust of his thinking, namely "the distribution (or partition) of the sensible". This phrase brings together the manner in which Ranciére combines aesthetics and political thinking, which is apparent in his argument that art, or literature, is complicit in the (re)distribution of the sensible according to distinct, usually asymmetrical or hierarchical, cratological lines. Moreover, it is clear that one here encounters the notion of "aesthetic" in a novel sense, no longer subject to the logic of the modern (according to which it is relegated to an "aesthetic" sphere that is separated from those of the ethical and political, as well as the epistemic or cognitive (Habermas 1985, 1987: 190, 207). Ranciére's use of "aesthetic" goes back to the ancient Greek meaning of "aisthesis" (Tanke 2011: 5, 50) as that which pertains to perception and the sensible, and implies that the arts practised under the aegis of the aesthetic regime are always already discursively involved with the social milieu, that is, that the arts are not neutral or innocuous when it comes to structuring and restructuring social relations politically, as power relations. This brings with it, to say the least, a welcome emancipation from the restrictive idea that art or literature is somehow extrinsic to the political domain, and has to "engage" with, or be "applied" to it before it can be seen as having stepped out of its (conveniently) innocuous "aesthetic" sphere. Art, or literature, is always already political.

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