(Not) Looking at the Picture: Anti-War Protest and Criticism of Class and Gender[1]

Saskia Pieterse

In this paper, I will take Rancière's 'The misadventures of Critical Thinking' as a starting point. My aim is to address both the relationship between criticism and protest (more specifically, anti-war protest), and within this constellation, the relationship between Marxist and feminist criticism.[2] These two elements are underdeveloped in Rancière's text and I want to argue they deserve more attention. At the backdrop of this paper there is the simple fact that to a large extent war structures the culture we are living in. The wars against Iraq and Afghanistan are still major political problems and there seems to be no movement towards a real acknowledgement of the impact these events had on both the domestic lives of civilians world-wide, and the situation that world-politics is in today.[3] Moreover there is still the idea that we are fighting a 'war against terror'. So we are living in a time when war metaphors and a real or imagined war threat is always present but at the same time often not acknowledged as such, and this effects the place and role of both criticism and culture. This paper is a very first sketch and offers some suggestions but not a worked-out argument. I will begin with a – admittedly somewhat long – paraphrase of Rancière's argument.

Rancière opens his article with the statement that within the leftist 'critique of criticism', there is a dominant tendency to think that within late capitalism, there is no solid reality left to be critically analyzed. Rancière states:

'According to them, there would not be anything left for criticism, since criticism implies the denunciation of a bright appearance concealing a dark and solid reality, but there would be no more any solid reality left to oppose to the appearance and no darkness to oppose to the triumph of affluent society. Such was the melancholic assertion of the late Jean Baudrillard, that we can find reasserted to-day in a more aggressive way by thinkers like Peter Sloterdijk.'

Rancière proceeds to argue that this 'melancholy' misses a crucial point: the 'concepts and procedures' of leftist criticism are still very much alive in the present 'but in a way that implies an entire reversal of their supposed ends and orientations.'

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1 This paper is the result of a course I gave with Sven Vitse. I thank Sven for his insights into the argument of Rancière and the inspiring discussion we had on the reading material.

2 J. Rancière, *The emancipated spectator*. (London 2011 (2008)), pp.25-50.

3 As a Dutch citizen, I was confronted with the so-called "Kunduz-coalition", an improvised unofficial coalition of different Dutch political parties that originally found agreement on a "police-mission" in Kunduz, Afghanistan. Later on this coalition made decisions on all sort of issues, mostly limited to domestic politics. Oddly enough, during the intense political campaigning this summer we heard the name of the "Kunduz coalition" over and over again, but the Dutch presence in Kunduz itself (or war in general) was not discussed. This of course is a minor, but at the same telling example of this constant repression of the topic of war.

To explain his reasoning, Rancière opposes two works of art: Martha Rosler 'Bringing war home', made in the late sixties and the beginning of the seventies, and the installations of Josephine Meckseper, specifically series of photographs of the marches against the war in Afghanistan and in Iraq. Rancière argues that both artists use the procedure of the collage to address the relationship between mass-consumption and war.
Collage is a typical procedure of the left-wing critical tradition. Rosler, coming from a Marxist background, used advertisements from women magazines that show American 'petty-bourgeois interiors'. She put images of the atrocities in Vietnam within the space of these interiors: for instance, a picture of war crimes replaced the poster in a children's' bedroom. In the pre-Photoshop era, this was no small achievement. The purpose of this precision is clear: on a first look, the war does not disrupt the order in the room, the war images seem to find a 'natural' place within the framework of the advertisements. It is only when one looks closer, one is shocked to discover the content of these seemingly 'fitting' images within the larger image of the household. Rancière argues that these collages reveled a 'hidden reality' behind the 'false image' of the happy domestic life. Bringing the war home means raising awareness that the seemingly remote reality of imperialist war, is in fact always present in the heart of American happiness.[4]
Meckseper takes a different approach: she has photographed the protests against the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. In one photograph, we see protesters holding banners in the background, while the foreground shows an overfilled garbage-can , the content of which falls to the ground. The point seems clear: the war protest is as much part of the consumerist logic as the war itself is, they both cannot escape from capitalism, in which commodities and images are consumed excessively. But if this is the case, than what is the critical function of this Meckseper's image, Rancière asks. For it adds only on more image onto the already overfilled pile of images we consume everyday; and if there is no escape from a consumerist logic, does this type of art still employ critical procedures? Surprisingly, according to Rancière the answer to this question is 'yes'. The mechanism of Meckseper's art is still that of the critical procedure: it has not been cancelled but has been overturned. The artwork acknowledges its own complicity, but this acknowledgement can only be brought about *by* the critical procedure.
Rancière reads Meckseper photograph as an emblem for the powerlessness of today's leftist criticism. Rancière cites Zygmunt Bauman and Peter Sloterdijk; he concludes that they give us a 'disenchanted gaze on a world in which the critical interpretation of the system has become part of the system itself.' Rancière labels this as 'left-wing irony' or 'melancholy':

It urges us both to confess that all our desires, including our dreams of subversion, obey the law of the market and that we are just indulging , in various ways, in the new game available on the global market : experimenting one's life as a luxury commodity. We are said to be swallowed in the belly of the monster where even the capacities of autonomous and disruptive practice and the networks of cooperative action that we could use against it are exploited by the monster and serve its new power , the power of immaterial production.

4 Rosler's collages are exhibited in the re-opened Amsterdam *Stedelijk Museum.*

So on the one hand we have the powerlessness of 'left wing irony', but, according to Rancière, on the other hand there is the 'right wing rage'. This rage *also* uses the critical procedures first developed by Marx, although it uses these procedures to blame the left. According to Rancière, right-wing cultural critics argue that the traditional institutions and traditional forms of authority (such as the patriarchal family) originally imposed a limit to the power of the market. People did not act as individual consumers that only cared for their own satisfaction, but as members of a larger society, in which they had obligations and rights. However, the protests of the sixties undermined all these traditional institutions and decapitated authorial figures; therefore there was no force left to counter-act the market; democratization therefore lead to the triumph of the market in all the spheres of life. So according to this version of history, it were the Marxists protesters in the sixties that are to blame for the pervasion of a consumerist and capitalist logic in all elements of our lives. Moreover, the right wing reads the 'consumerist rage' of the pillaging youths in France and England as forms of 'terrorism'; thereby suggesting that there is no escape from this world-wide destructive force, unleashed by the democratic, emancipative protest-movements of the sixties.
Rancière states that the left-wing melancholy and the right wing rage are two sides of the same coin. They both point to the inescapability of the predicament we are supposed to be in. And he proposes a very different take on the spectacle, which he sees as a redistribution of the senses and in itself a emancipatory movement.

Rancière does not make explicit why, in his treatment of the 'critique of critique', he discusses two works of art that are engaged with protests against the war. Is this a mere accident, or is there a more meaningful relationship between peace protest and criticism? Although it is not made explicit, the text implies a strong connection between the (im)possibility of *protest* and the (mis)adventures of *criticism*, so much so that the two are sometimes not even really separated in the argument. Although I certainly agree that they are intertwined, protest and critique are not the same, and I think it might be fruitful to question their relationship in much more detail than Rancière does. Moreover, Rancière does not really address if there is something specific about anti-war protest, in contrast to other types of protest.
So how do criticism and protest relate to each other? In Rosler's case, her critical art is in itself a protest and clearly part of the larger protest-movement. Critique and protest go hand in hand. In the case of Meckseper, the marches against the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are the subject of the artwork, but the artwork itself does not protest against the war. So here, critique and protest seem to be separated; the one is employed to deconstruct the other. Rancière argues that today, criticism is powerless but at the same time still very much 'alive in the present' and one wonders if the exact same thing cannot be said for anti-war protest. Alive, but powerless. The protests against the war in Vietnam played a crucial role in the ending of the war, whereas the world-wide mass-demonstrations against the war against Iraq made no difference whatsoever. Peace protest is no longer backed up by a critical tradition as it was in the sixties, and vice versa criticism no longer sees itself as a part of a larger movement of protest.[5]

5[1] The Occupy movement of course seems to give a counter-argument to my statement and indeed criticism and protest seem to be coming closer together when it comes to addressing the political-economical crisis. However, I think ant-war protests cannot be equated to this type of economical protest.

However, the history of criticism and anti-war-protest does not begin in the sixties. When we think of the relationship between criticism and protest there is one important text that should be discussed: Virginia Woolf *Three Guineas* (1938). Its composition is as complex as its subject matter. Woolf writes in response to a letter from a barrister, who asks her opinion about the most effective way to combat war. In response, Woolf considers the relationship between war and masculinity and she comes to the conclusion that they are inseparable. As Morag Shiach summarizes: 'Woolf insists that masculinity, as a socially produced category, is fundamentally implicated in authorianism, in violence and clamour. To challenge the rise of Fascism is thus, for Woolf, to challenge the logic and the history of the patriarchal state: something she can only do as an outsider.' As a woman of the upper middle-class, Woolf is (or has been) denied access to higher education and a profession, is therefore forced into this position of the powerless outsider, but paradoxically exactly this exclusion offers a chance to form a political and cultural movement which could challenge the drive towards fascism and war. The personal and private fear women experience in there lives, are linked to the political domain, or as Woolf states: 'That fear, small, insignificant and private as it is, is connected with the other fear, the public fear, which is neither small nor insignificant, the fear which has led you to ask to help you prevent war.'[6] For Woolf, class and gender always go hand in hand and only when their complex intertwinement is acknowledged, can there function be critiqued.
Rancière does not address the feminist aspect of Rosler's work, but with Woolfs essay in mind, we cannot fail to notice that Rosler has chosen advertisements aimed at women, mainly published in women's magazine. The 'home' in 'Bringing war home' is not only a 'bourgeois' home but also a home still enclosed in a patriarchal logic. Rancière reads these art-works as criticisms of consumerism. But anti-war protest is not only about the relationship between consumerism and aggression, for as Woolf has demonstrated it is also about the relationship between the sexes, the fear and anger that structures relations between men and women, and how in a complex way this fear and anger fuels militarism and war-mongering. If we want to look into the reasons why in contemporary society, both protest and criticism seem to be powerless, we have to take into account this absence of the feminist argument (in both Rancière text and in Meckseper's art), that was still present in Rosler's work.

In conclusion, I think the question what happened to this feminist point of view can also deepen Rancières analysis of the right-wing rage. An influential figure on the conservative side is for instance Theodore Dalrymple. His social and cultural analysis mimics left-wing criticism, as they are always focused on class. He indeed uses the critical procedures of the left-wing tradition to accuse the left-wing of the destruction of the morality and culture of the lower classes.
Dalrymple also writes literary criticisms, and tellingly, he attacked Woolfs *Three Guineas.*[7] He accuses her of being a smug, elitists upper-class woman that had the nerve to say that she was worse of than the women of the working class. Also, he blames her for suggesting that the patriarchy in England is a bigger evil than Nazi-Germany, as she opposed the impeding war and

6 Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own and Three Guineas* (Oxford New York 1998), p. 363

7 Dalrymple, T. 'The rage of Virginia Woolf'. In: *Our culture, what's left of it*. 2005, Ivan R. Dee.

therefore did not support the troops that helped to stop Hitler from conquering her own country. These are all aggressive misrepresentations of Woolf's argument, as her feminist argument is completely ignored and there is instead a clear sexism at work in Dalrymple's discourse. A lot of Woolf scholars showed the dishonesty in Dalrymple criticism, but this did not stop him from being one of the most influential social critics of Europe today.

Besides his employment of polemic strategies, one wonders why Dalrymple at this time in history still feels the need to attack Woolf on the basis of her supposed 'elitist position'. Why would here case for pacifism still arouse so much hostility, and why is it still necessary to silence the feminist argument?

We find a much more subtle silencing of Woolf in Ian McEwan's *Saturday*. That novel mimics the structure of Woolfs *Mrs. Dalloway*. Written in the stream-of-consciousness style, it describes one day in the life of a man a London, the day of the worldwide march against the impending war in Iraq. Like Woolf, McEwan connects the life of his affluent bourgeois main character with that of the less fortunate in the city. However, McEwan uses the grid of the Woolf's modernist novel to give an opposite interpretation of pacifism. The anti-war protest is depicted as a juvenile phenomenon – young people making a lot of noise and garbage – whereas the main character Henry Perowne is a neurosurgeon and has operated on a man that was tortured by the Ba'ath party. Perowne therefore has a very mature and nuanced vision (or at least it is presented as such), as he tries to balance all the complex streams of information. In contrast, the protesters are not given their own voice, but they are depicted as thinking war is a very black and white matter. There can be no doubt the novel asks us to take Perownes reflections serious, whereas the position of the peace-protestors is consequently associated with ignorance and naivety. The domestic life of Perowne is threatened because a lower-class criminal seeks revenge, but tellingly, Perowne uses both violence and benevolence against the aggressor, in the end giving him a new life and therefore a second chance. The allegorical reading seems not far-fetched, Perowne personifies the Western reaction to the threat from outside. The novel ends with the re-installment of Perowne as the Lord of his house, the patriarch that is admired by his wife and children for his bravery.[8]

Saksia Pieterse teaches in the Department of Dutch Studies
at Utrecht University

8 'They might all move in here for a while (…) the house is big (…) and needs the sound of a child's voice. (…) He feels his body, the size of a continent, stretching away from him down the bed – **he's a king**, he's vast, accomodating, immune (…) Ian McEwan, *Saturday* (London 2005), 269.