

# Aesthetics, Politics, and Public Pedagogy: let me sing you gentle songs

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## Abstract

*This essay considers artistic modes of subjectification as a requirement of equality and democracy in public pedagogy. Through bearing witness to the childhood of thought, Lyotard explains that like the pupil, writers, artists, scholars, and novices must enter into retreat in order to learn what they will have to say to others. In counterpoint to this, Rancière offers an aesthetics of politics that positions a notion of democracy as the specific ‘mode of symbolic structuring’ of the individual living with a common language. This paper is a brief exploration of the lessons instilled within the thought of these two men, with an ear to an emerging pedagogy that pays attention to what is silenced and forgotten when we turn to educating the child, and ourselves.*

## Introduction: Gentle Songs

This debt to childhood is one which we never pay off. But it is enough not to forget in order to resist it and perhaps, not to be unjust. It is the task of writing, thinking, literature, arts, to venture to bear witness to it.

(Lyotard, 1991, p. 7)

What interests me is how the word makes one see without making one see and the way the image speaks while withdrawing from the visible, how words make one see and live, how images compose the world, and how this world manages to speak itself. It is the matter of equality and inequality that is at stake in these questions of boundaries and passages.

(Rancière cited in Guénoun, 2000, p. 257)

I need to write about these ideas because I have read them, and they compel me to see things differently. I have been wondering about the need for access to artistic modes of subjectification, and why it would be a necessary avenue to pursue in thinking about education<sup>1</sup>. As the title hints at, or asks, this is a gentle song that has been whispering close by as a counter-melody to a larger project of researching the position and function of music education in and outside the classroom. It is no accident either, that the title is directly taken from Linda Olsson’s short novel that uses the analogy of gentle songs as a powerful mode of subjectification to depict a story of love, loss, friendship, and redemption (Olsson, 2005). The main character is a young woman who transcends geographical and emotional borders after the loss of her lover in New Zealand, through the unlikely friendship of an ostracised old woman in a small village in Sweden whose own stories of loss and tragedy bind the two women together in a healing (and ultimately transformative) balm of gentle songs in two lives that are in desperate need of melody (and love). Both characters experience a transformative mode of existence through a crafting of their stories into a ‘poetics’ that extends directly from the radical alteriority of ‘otherness’ that they are both confronted through the violent force of their individual and combined grief. The ‘gentle songs’ are what each woman has to ‘sing’ in order to transcend and cross over boundaries of living and life, to let them constitute themselves in ways that dare to hope for new modes of existence, worlds, and the continuous redemption of everlasting and renewable love.

Thus the shadow is cast over the opening quotes. Lyotard, ironically, seems the most straightforward: we need to write, to paint, to compose, to read, to play music, to think, if we are to honour the child in all of us. Of course ‘childhood’ in this case is loaded with meaning and avenues for exploration, and true to the trace

of the man's thought, is anything but straightforward. As will be discussed in detail further, rather than literarily a child (although there is a tacit acknowledgement, even inspiration, of how young children think and perceive their world) Lyotard is referring to a type of infancy in thought that is wild, untameable and untrained<sup>2</sup>. Lyotard places Art as the privileged site in order to think aside and outside the stultified 'grown-up' world of established, known thought into the un-knowable dimensions of childhood. Further, he reverses the hierarchy of knowledge-bearers from those who possess the authoritative version of knowledge (grown-ups) to those who consider forms of knowledge as toys to be dressed up, cuddled, and have head and limbs ripped off for fun (he does not shy from subversive action). The debt to childhood that is to be witnessed is placed next to an idea of resistance to the trappings and the trap of a metaphysical discourse of development and which is inextricably tied to, with a very broad stroke of both our brushes, modernity.

And then the quote from Jacques Rancière, humming a similar tune which when placed next to Lyotard provides an interesting dissonance – the same song but in a different key. Rancière didn't speak precisely these words at the funeral of his fellow compatriot and colleague. He did mention in passing that with Jean-François Lyotard, things were always going to be difficult, that things should (and could) never be easy (Déotte & Lapidus, 2004). As sensed in the juxtaposition of the two chosen quotes, and in a younger man's tribute to an older man's dissonance, there is an element of struggle that is needed to transcend and pass through boundaries of thought and what is known, to an 'other' ground that exists outside but in relation to this struggle. The distilled passage of Rancière's thought suggests an artistry that belongs to the words, the paint, the camera, and the voice, of the world and its people that forms the boundaries of what is visible, and the passages to what can't be seen but can be reached for and in doing so be made visible. The assumption of equality is Rancière's "remote position" (Méchoulan, 2004, p. 3) from Lyotard (and Foucault) that is applied as an aesthetic strategy that is at its base a political move formed from dissensus that 'gives voice' to those who have no legitimate title or function to have a voice, or be heard. This paper is a brief exploration of the lessons instilled within the thought of these two men, with an ear to an emerging pedagogy that pays attention to what is silenced and forgotten when we turn to educating the young, and ourselves.

Let me sing you a less gentle song.

### **A Neo-Liberal Public Pedagogy**

In his article *Public Pedagogy and the Politics of Neo-Liberalism: making the political more pedagogical* Henry Giroux (2004) calls for a type of pedagogy that forges a mode of agency in public and institutional spheres that offers points of resistance to neo-liberal formations of the 'entrepreneurial self'<sup>3</sup>. According to Giroux, the neo-liberal doctrine of market-based identities is forged specifically and deliberately inside the classroom. Education is the locus for initiating educative selves to the corporate culture of neo-liberalism where "market-driven identities and values are both produced and legitimated" (Giroux, 2004: 494). Instead of producing subjects that contribute to society in democratic ways, Giroux places education squarely and directly complicit in producing a type of cultural politics based on market (as opposed to emancipatory) values. Even more damning, Giroux lambastes a new type of public pedagogy that "has become thoroughly reactionary as it constructs knowledge, values, and identities through a variety of *educational sites and forms of pedagogical address* that have largely become the handmaiden of corporate power, religious fundamentalism, and neo-conservative ideology" (Giroux, 2004: 497 emphasis my own). The vital dimension to Giroux's critique as I see it is his explicit link between institutional forms of pedagogy and what he terms as "*the educational force of the wider culture*" (p. 494 my emphasis). Pedagogy here is to be viewed as a deterministic passage of agency, producing a mode of being in and outside the classroom. He further goes on to extol the needs for a type of pedagogy in schools that contributes to a wider public pedagogy by acknowledging and incorporating a type of cultural politics that works aside of economic rationalism and market-driven ideals.

What seems to me to be most pervasive concerning Giroux's neo-liberal construct of education is that *artistry* is denied the means and forms for pedagogical expression. Instead, even the artistic seems to be

governed by rules and legitimated by economic necessity. Throughout the article, Giroux emphasizes the need for the 'political' to be made more explicit. My point of departure from this is that the 'political' is also the artistic, that is, the political works *artistically* in that the requirement to judge without criteria requires an *artistry of judgment*, or what could also be termed as an ethics of judgment. To my reading, neo-liberalism operates in a manner that removes the necessity for judgment by reducing all meaning and interaction to the underlying meaning of economic rationalism – reducing everything to an exchangeable commodity that has a 'bottom line' of capital value attached to it. Giroux points to the way that pedagogy is a central element in producing a wider culture of neo-liberalism, but also importantly, pedagogy provides the means by which this is to be achieved. It is important to note also, that though Giroux's argument is framed in the negative – pedagogy is producing and upholding neo-liberal ideals; he also emphasizes the way this predicament can potentially provide *hope* through the wider cultural force of pedagogy. Implicit within this hope is the necessity to be able to stand aside dominant neo-liberal ideologies.

Giroux's critique of a neo-liberal manifestation of education resonates strongly with both Lyotard and Rancière when neo-liberalism is cast as the dominant ideology of development and progress in the late modern system that both theorists, in their own way, are trying to resist. In Giroux's very act of yoking together a neo-liberal pedagogy of the institution to a pedagogy of living, an emphasis on progress as a phenomena which requires transparency and mastery emerges. Everything needs to be easily understood and made visible, because the distinctions between knowledge and information are boiled down to fit a normative neo-liberal conception of education and society. Total mastery becomes attainable when education is only about training. Giroux's critique of a neo-liberal construction of education is valuable to me because of the philosophical response that it seems to need as he points out several key problems. These problems arise around the issue of the way that this particular formulation of education seems to enhance its own legitimation through a vortex of neo-liberal ideologies and theories about modern life, and the ethical significance of education as an economic imperative. The philosophical response that this paper is orientated comes from conceptions of living and education that cannot be accounted for with such certainty and knowing.

Every man is a poet says Ranciere. Let me cast the rest of this discussion in that light.

### **The Ignorant Schoolmaster and the Inhuman**

In 'The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation' (1991) Jacques Rancière's pits the pedagogical faith in progress as the gradual accumulation of knowledge against the modern democratic faith in progress towards the eventual utopia that modernity promises, through the story of the renegade nineteenth-century teacher Joseph Jacotot. The 'progressivist' logic of democracy as a journey towards equality through the abolition of current inequalities is turned upside down by Rancière's assertion, through Jacotot's lessons, that this in fact supports and reproduces inequality. Jacotot's vital discovery was that students learn by themselves, and that teachers can teach what they don't know. These two seemingly simple observations of Jacotot's in Rancière's pen and thought "raised a radical provocation to democratic politics" (Rancière in Guénoun & Kavanagh, 2000, p. 3) by transforming the role of equality in democratic societies. Rather than seeing equality as a concept to be attained, Rancière turned it round to a supposition that has to be realised – it "must be seen as a point of departure, and not as a destination" (ibid). Rather than upholding the traditional role of the master as the privileged bearer of knowledge who is compelled to impart his whole knowledge to the student's gradual accumulation of knowledge Rancière, via Jacotot's lessons, instead assumes that the master and student are totally equal. Rather than seeing the master as more intelligent, as more whole, Jacotot insisted that all individuals are equally intelligent. For Rancière then, not only is equality to be affirmed as an 'axiom' and not a goal, it is "also to refuse a partition between intellectual equality and social inequality; to believe that even if egalitarian assumptions are alien to social logic and aggregation, they can be affirmed there transgressively, and that politics consists of this very confrontation" (Rancière in Guénoun & Kavanagh, 2000, pp. 3-4).

Giroux writes of a public that is being denied a mode of agency that would enable and mobilise a critique of a neo-liberal form of public pedagogy, and it is here that Rancière's notion of equality is performed by the anonymous masses - the public - who can actively transgress these boundaries and borders. The example Rancière uses in resonance with Jacotot's pedagogy is his reading of the way nineteenth-century workers refused the natural divisions of their time as being owned and controlled by the virtue of their working status<sup>4</sup>. Rather than allowing the allotment of daytime as 'working' time, and night-time as sleeping time in order to recuperate from the working day, Rancière describes the way many workers set aside time during the night - their 'leisure' time, for the pursuit of thinking and critiquing their position and predicament through writing. Rancière writes of the way that through activities in place of sleeping, the workers were able to emancipate themselves "to give themselves the time that did not belong to them in order to enter into a world of writing and thinking that was not "theirs"" (Rancière in Guénoun & Kavanagh, 2000, p. 5). Instead of the babbling, animalistic roar of a group not granted the right to be heard, and not granted the right to use a common language, the workers instead reconfigured "their" language in order to be heard, understood, and "to reappropriate for themselves a common language that had been appropriated by others, and to affirm transgressively the assumption of equality" (ibid). This new enunciative potential, defined as the 'partition of the sensible' is the political moment of subjectification for Rancière, a moment that is aesthetic in its use of a 'poetics of knowledge' and political in the reconfiguring of the borders of what can be said, how it can be spoken, and to whom it can be addressed. Describing Jacotot's use of equality in pedagogy, and as a type of equality in subject matter the 'partition of the sensible' is defined by Rancière as "that system of sensible evidences that reveals both the existence of a communality and the divisions that define in it respectively assigned places and parts" (Rancière in Guénoun, 2000, p. 250). Here Foucault's genealogical approach resounds strongly in Rancière's enquiry into the politics of "what one sees and what one can say about it, on who has the competency necessary to see and the quality to say; on the properties of spaces and the possibilities of time" (ibid).

For Rancière, knowledge becomes something more, something extra, when it is able to transcend mere information to what he describes as a 'poetics' of knowledge and it is this 'something more' that is of interest here. What Jacotot seemed to be driving toward with his emphasis on equality was a type of resistance that was needed when education systems were too normative, too prescriptive, and too sure of its own absolute infallibility. It is the poetic that Rancière sees as surpassing the merely prescriptive conception of knowledge, and it is the poetic that seems to 'give voice' beyond this. Absolute faith in progress and the eventual manipulation of all knowledge to the benefit of mankind for Rancière via Jacotot's lessons, can be looked upon as a direct critique of the education reforms in France in the 1980's, but vitally, a critique on a type of humanism that resounds alongside Giroux's neo-liberalism at this moment. In critiquing education as a system that upheld and propagated the modern system of liberalism within education, Rancière's critique resonates in a far greater sphere than the purely educational, and like Giroux, Rancière looks to education in order to critique a wider notion of *public* pedagogy. Education must not silence the 'other', if equality and democracy are to be broader societal aims.

In his essay 'The Rights of the Other' Lyotard writes of the partition of the inhuman, of the way that this partition is at the heart of democracy and what are termed as 'human rights'. For Lyotard the rights of humans can only be thought of at the moment those rights are denied and that the split of what is considered human is the acknowledgement of the 'other' of the human - the *inhuman*. The commonality shared between humans is precisely this partition and "the fact that every human being carries within him the figure of the other" (Lyotard, 1993, p. 136). This gives rise to the inhumanity of what Lyotard describes as a transformation of a system similar to Rancière's 'Jacototian' analysis of the continuous faith in progress as the "process of complexification, negative entropy or, put more simply, development" (Lyotard, 1991, p. 5). Lyotard further places the inhuman in direct opposition to 'the system's' formulation of democracy as progress and development, resounding along Rancière's definition of democracy as "the paradoxical government of those who do not embody any title for governing the community" (Rancière in Guénoun &

Kavanagh, 2000, p. 19). A final partition of the sensible occurs in Rancière's analysis of Lyotard's inhuman in the essay 'Who is the Subject of the Rights of Man?' (Rancière, 2006) in which the inhuman is split in two. Cruelty, totalitarianism, and repression are forms of the inhuman that are the result of a betrayal of the part of the inhuman that accounts for the 'other'. It is worth quoting at length here:

That inhuman is Otherness as such. It is the part in us that we do not control. It may be birth and infancy. It may be the Unconscious. It may be the Law. It may be God. The inhuman is the irreducible otherness, the part of the Untamable of which the human being is, as Lyotard says, the hostage or the slave. Absolute evil begins with the attempt to tame the Untamable, to deny the situation of the hostage, to dismiss our dependency on the power of the Inhuman, in order to build a world that we master entirely.

(Rancière, 2006, p. 8)

Lyotard's division of the inhuman is in many ways the focus of his philosophical and political writing that absorbs within its trajectory the importance of art in reminding us of our humanity – of reminding us of the inhuman. What Lyotard describes as the inhumanity of the system "currently being consolidated under the name of development (among others) must not be confused with the infinitely secret one of which the soul is hostage" (1991, p. 2). It is most important not to confuse the differentiation because, Lyotard warns, the inhuman 'other' is what necessarily saves us from ourselves.

### **Childhood and Pedagogy**

The 'other' has a name for Lyotard, referred to variously over the course of his writings as the figure or event, trace or touch, as "the jews", and also, as childhood. Inhumanity manifested as repression and cruelty is the betrayal of the other Inhuman, and it is this betrayal that forgets the inhumanity of childhood. It is the child that reminds us of the inhuman because of its very incapacity to be 'fully' human. The child is thrown into a world of speech, yet cannot speak. The child cannot walk and is not 'sensitive' to reason. Childhood can never be forgotten, because the childhood in us all starts before our human capabilities to remember – what Lyotard refers to as anamnesis – yet the child is still part of humanity, albeit in delay. This delay, Lyotard continues, is what makes the child 'hostage' of the adult world, yet is also "what manifests to this community the lack of humanity it is suffering from, which calls on it to become more human" (1991, p. 4). This call to humanity that the child answers is one of hope and of possibility, and this state is both constant and utterly renewable and indeterminate. The childhood of Lyotard's inhuman then, is what should remind us that silencing the 'other', the child, what is different and dissenting, is a form of terror and injustice. As Lyotard extols in the opening quote of this paper, we must 'bear witness' to this childhood as a debt that will never be paid off completely, but thankfully, to realise the debt in its completion would be exactly what is not needed. Instead, we need to be sensitive to this childhood and open to its demands. The indeterminacy of this situation requires a step outside what is certain and known, and instead into an uncertain state of 'aesthetic being' that testifies to childhood (and it is no accident that this testimony is in the realm of aesthetics). Childhood as the silent 'other' can also be understood in terms of the 'event' in that it is the initial 'touch' of what is happening, without understanding or words, just the pure and singular state of 'being there'. The only way to honour this state is through evoking this inhuman childhood in ways that defy definition and totality as a type of 'ontological destiny' and demand.

It is precisely through this conception of childhood that Lyotard introduces the issue of education specifically. For Lyotard it is education that deals with the split of the inhuman from "the initial misery" (1991, p. 3) of childhood shorn of language, to the gradual acquisition of language that grants the child access to communal life. It is primarily through the institution of education that the literal childhood is left behind, yet the issue for education is whether this leaves any remainder of the first childhood of the inhuman. For Lyotard the 'remainder' is witnessed through the persistence of certain activities grouped in the aesthetic genre of literature, the arts and philosophy because "there too, it is a master of traces of an indetermination, a childhood, persisting up to the age of adulthood" (ibid). That we continue to create is the 'proof' that Lyotard

looks for in formulating his divide of the inhuman as the very disruption of the modern assumption of absolute determination. Further, Lyotard points out that the singular act of attaining knowledge, or of total clarity of understanding, is not what touches us first and it is not what compels us to do things. It is not a total grasp on knowledge that makes us human; it is what transcends conceptual understanding that reminds us, through the inhuman, of our humanity. Knowledge in and of itself does not make us laugh or cry; rather it is in response to the grace of this childhood that we are moved.

The pedagogy that emerges through this conception of childhood very clearly places an emphasis on an aesthetic being that can transcend all knowledge as conceptual understanding in education, that is not confined exclusively to the discreet subject-section defined as Art (music, drama, dance etc). An aesthetic being instead belongs to the educative process itself, always testifying to the inhuman dimension through pointing out a never-ending indeterminacy and “trans-conceptual silence” (Smeyers & Masschelein, 2000, p. 149) in the conceptual itself. A pedagogy that acknowledges the inhuman or childhood is one that redefines what it means to be educated along the lines of a ‘sensitivity’ and openness to this childhood, and one that acknowledges the affect of knowledge as something that incites a need to respond. Art in Lyotard’s sense ‘bears witness’ to the pain of childhood as a being without the means to respond in words, but is able to respond nonetheless, in a way that is all the more powerful due to this very lack of language.

### **Concluding comments**

And this brings me back to the beginning to the consideration of artistic modes of subjectification, and whether access to ‘art’ for the masses can provide a public pedagogy in Giroux’s sense that enables this to happen. Taking on board Lyotard’s notion of the inhuman, it becomes evident that much of his thought on the importance of art as bearing witness to ‘Otherness’ requires a process of withdrawal as a silence from speaking in order to be spoken to, and crucially, to have the legitimacy to respond. Here there are echoes once again of Jacotot’s pedagogy that are evident when Lyotard explains that “like the pupil, writers, artists, scholars, and novices must *enter into retreat* in order to learn what they will have to say to others” (1993, pp. 142, emphasis my own). ‘Entering into retreat’ becomes a style of democracy that enables the reconfiguration of Rancière’s partition of the sensible as an aesthetic appropriation of an other’s language as a special mode of “symbolic structuring of the individual living in common” (Rancière in Guénoun & Kavanagh, 2000, p. 17). The aesthetic dimension is inherent to politics, and to any political and social movement, precisely as the mode for reconfiguring the borders and boundaries between what can be said, seen, and heard. This has implications in the way that we consider pedagogy, very obviously through the example of Jacotot. I have written elsewhere about Lyotard’s notion of performativity as a social and educational construct and the role that art plays in disrupting what is known and accepted as ‘natural’ and beyond scrutiny. In the context of this essay, performativity becomes a mode of terror in its denial of the inhuman and its form of totalitarian mastery of the languages of existence. Performativity doesn’t just silence ideas, it silences *people*, and this is how terror is realised. As Giroux warns, neo-liberalism also creates a public pedagogy that makes commerce students and entrepreneurs of us all, while denying the aesthetic dimension to a politics of the self that restricts what we are and what we could become. Letting me sing gentle songs would then turn to the sorrowful plea of simply,

Just let me sing.

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<sup>2</sup> The group of essays under the guise of 'letters' that deal with the necessity of a postmodern 'childhood' to thought are published under 'The Postmodern Explained to Children: Correspondence 1982-1985' (Lyotard, 1992).

<sup>3</sup> See also Peters (2005) for a specific formulation of this concept.

<sup>4</sup> For two Rancière essays outlining examples of the will of the workers to transgress political boundaries refer to 'Voices of the People: The Politics and Life of 'La Sociale' at the End of the Second Empire' (Rifkin & Thomas, 1998).