

# THINKING TWO WORLDS INTO ONE: THE “DISTRIBUTION OF THE SENSIBLE” AND WOMEN’S RENEGOTIATION

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## 1 Introduction

In this note I reflect on the possibility of women as subjects with the capacity to renegotiate what Jacques Rancière calls the “distribution of the sensible”.<sup>1</sup> I, firstly, explain Rancière’s formulation of the distribution of the sensible and from there use some literary examples as a way of contemplating women’s subjectivity. In other words, it is through the analysis and reading of literature and some literary characters that I reflect on women as subjects with the capacity to break with expected roles and identifications. I refer to an example that Rancière himself uses, namely, that of Olympe de Gouges and also discuss a reading of the character of Lucy in JM Coetzee’s *Disgrace* as well as the character of Philida in André P Brink’s novel *Philida*.<sup>2</sup> The overall concern of the piece may be described as the contestation of the lines of sight and forms of speech determined by material and perceptible societal configurations.<sup>3</sup> I contend that what is brought forth by a Rancièrian reading of events and texts are paradoxical, precarious subjectivities that blur the lines between inclusion and exclusion thereby opening up the possibility of different or alternative ways of being and living. The discussion that follows is a *means* of calling for a shift in focus when it comes to female political subjectivity or when it

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<sup>1</sup> J Rancière *Disagreement* (1999) 29-31

<sup>2</sup> J Rancière “Who is the Subject of the Rights of Man?” (2004) 103 *South Atlantic Quarterly* 298-310; A de Boever “Feminism After Rancière: Women in JM Coetzee and Jeff Wall” (2011) 19 *Transformations: Journal of Media and Culture* <[www.Transformationsjournal.org/journal/issue\\_19/article\\_032.shtml](http://www.Transformationsjournal.org/journal/issue_19/article_032.shtml)> (accessed 14-06-2013); AP Brink *Philida* (2012)

<sup>3</sup> It is important to mention that I do not refer directly to law as I am interested, for the purposes of this note, in the law as much as it forms part of what Rancière calls “the police order”. Law and legal institutions form part of enforcing a society’s “distribution of the sensible” which I explain below. A call for the redistribution of the sensible is therefore also a call for the interrogation of law’s complicity in determining acceptable forms of speech, drawing lines of sight and making assumptions about the capacities of subjects. I take my cue from Rancière here and his insistence on taking a broader view of the aesthetic. See for example JJ Tanke *Jacques Rancière: An Introduction. Philosophy, Politics and Aesthetics* (2011) 73-108 for an explanation of Rancière’s approach to the aesthetic regime.

comes to thinking about women in the current post-apartheid context.<sup>4</sup> The suggestion is a refocus from political ends and concrete results to moments within which the renegotiation of our sensible world takes place.<sup>5</sup>

## 2 The police order and the distribution of the sensible

In his most influential book, *Disagreement*, Rancière states:

“Politics is generally seen as a set of procedures whereby aggregation and consent of collectivities is achieved, the organization of powers, the distribution of places and roles and the systems for legitimizing this distribution. I propose to give this system of distribution and legitimization another name. I propose to call it the police.”<sup>6</sup>

Rancière is describing mainstream politics here or politics as we have come to know it, namely, the hierarchal administration of society that governs its citizens in the name of welfare.<sup>7</sup> The actions of parliaments and assemblies, the decisions of courts, the work of politicians and bureaucratic efforts, Rancière classifies under the non-political heading of “the police”, “policing” or “the police order”.<sup>8</sup> The police order does not only refer to state institutions, but also includes private institutions and an array of social and cultural practices and arrangements. Rancière demonstrates the link between his use of the term police and the work of Foucault in order to explain the broad nature of the term.<sup>9</sup> He notes:

“[I]t is an order of bodies that defines the allocation of ways of doing, ways of being, and ways of saying, and sees that those bodies are assigned by name to a particular place and task. It is an order of the visible and sayable.”<sup>10</sup>

An order of the visible and sayable connects with what Rancière calls “the distribution of the sensible” or *la partage du sensible*. Policing is the means by which a society enforces its distribution of the sensible.<sup>11</sup> Policing denotes an ordering of the parts of society, an ordering “that invents a range of communicative and behavioural norms that is then distributed on the basis of a body’s nature, function and occupation”.<sup>12</sup> It comes down to the perceptual configuration of society. What is sayable, what is visible, what is understood, who counts and who doesn’t? It is, more or less, our automatic perception of

<sup>4</sup> The South African context is marked by persisting violence against women and children and patriarchal attitudes and lines of thinking. I therefore believe that it is vital to ask questions revolving around the political appearance and subjectivity of women. It is from this perspective that I engage and reflect on women’s subjectivity and the renegotiation of sensible and aesthetic configurations.

<sup>5</sup> Tanke Jacques Rancière: *An Introduction* 49-50.

<sup>6</sup> Rancière *Disagreement* 28.

<sup>7</sup> T May “There are no Queers: Jacques Rancière and Post-Identity Politics” (2009) 8 *Borderlands* 3.

<sup>8</sup> SA Chambers “Jacques Rancière and the Problem of Pure Politics” (2011) 10 *European Journal of Political Theory* 306.

<sup>9</sup> Chambers (2011) *European Journal of Political Theory* 306. Foucault argues that the police includes everything to the extent that any police order determines hierarchal relationships between human beings as well as to the extent that it sets up relationships between men and things. It thus also constitutes a material order. See M Foucault *Omnes et Singulatum*, *The Tanner Lectures on Human Values* (1979) as referred to in Chambers (2011) *European Journal of Political Theory* 306.

<sup>10</sup> Rancière *Disagreement* 29.

<sup>11</sup> Tanke Jacques Rancière: *An Introduction* 45.

<sup>12</sup> E Stoneman “Appropriate Indecorum: Rhetoric and Aesthetics in the Political Theory of Jacques Rancière” (2011) 44 *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 143.

status, identity and entitlement. In this regard, the French formulation of the “distribution of the sensible” or *le partage du sensible* becomes helpful. The word *partage* has two elements or senses easily lost in the English translation. In the first sense it describes how partitions and divisions of the sensible structure what is seen and unseen, audible and inaudible, how certain objects and phenomena can be related or not, and also, who, at the level of subjectivity, can appear in certain times and places.<sup>13</sup> It denotes the general distribution of bodies as well as an implicit estimation of what they are capable of. The second sense of *partage* indicates that these distributions are shared.<sup>14</sup> It indicates a sharing of the sensible that refers itself to the principles and forms of relation that are part of the common world. It is therefore the parcelling out of spaces and times to create a shared world containing different allotments.<sup>15</sup> The sensible is important to Rancière. Its distinctions and divisions anticipate what is thinkable and possible.<sup>16</sup> It provides a picture of the world of what can be conceived, discussed and disputed and what can be conceived in turn structures what presents itself as thought and as possibility for further thought.<sup>17</sup> The sensible provides courses of action, forms of relation and what may be regarded as new thought for sensible configuration.<sup>18</sup> The distribution of the sensible thus ultimately defines the field of possibility and impossibility.<sup>19</sup> In French the word *sense* means at once sense, meaning and direction. To redistribute the sensible, therefore, brings into question both the obviousness of what can be perceived, thought and done and the distribution of those who are capable of perceiving and thinking as well as altering.<sup>20</sup> With his analysis of the distribution of the sensible Rancière is interested in the sense that is made of sense.<sup>21</sup> The distribution of the sensible connotes the meanings that are made of what appears to our senses.<sup>22</sup> The task of politics is that of instituting breaches so that other meanings and directions are created.<sup>23</sup> The police order, thus, as the overall name for the distribution of the sensible concerns the material ground of communicability, intelligibility and sensibility and if the police order is concerned with titles and roles, with identification and classification, politics is concerned with breaking the established framework of distribution:

“I propose to reserve the term politics for an extremely determined activity antagonistic to policing: whatever breaks with the tangible configuration whereby parties and parts or lack of them are defined by a presupposition that, by definition, has no place in that configuration – that of the part that has no part ... political activity is always a mode of expression that undoes the perceptible divisions of the

<sup>13</sup> Tanke Jacques Rancière: *An Introduction* 2

<sup>14</sup> 2

<sup>15</sup> 2

<sup>16</sup> 2

<sup>17</sup> 2-3

<sup>18</sup> 2-3

<sup>19</sup> 2-3

<sup>20</sup> K Sellberg “Sublime Gender Transposition: The Reformed Platonism of Jacques Rancière’s Aesthetics as Queer Performance” (2011) 19 *Transformations: Journal of Media and Culture* <[www.transformationsjournal.org/journal/issue\\_19/article\\_032.shtml](http://www.transformationsjournal.org/journal/issue_19/article_032.shtml)> (accessed 14-06-2013)

<sup>21</sup> Tanke Jacques Rancière: *An Introduction* 2

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<sup>23</sup> 2

police order by implementing a basically heterogeneous assumption ... an assumption that at the end of the day, itself demonstrates the sheer contingency of the order, the equality of any speaking being with any other speaking being."<sup>24</sup>

Politics is, according to Rancière, the contestation of our sensible world.<sup>25</sup> It concerns breaching the distribution of the sensible. It is important to mention, however, that not all breaches of the distribution of the sensible are politics. This term is reserved for actions, speech situations, manifestation, practices, arguments and even works of art and literature that inscribe equality into a police situation of inequality.<sup>26</sup> Politics entails the enactment or the presupposing of equality through the staging of what Rancière calls a "scene of dissensus" within the police divisions of inequality.<sup>27</sup> It is the process whereby two heterogeneous worlds can meet, the sensible world of the police order and the equality of anyone with everyone, or, the equality of speaking beings.<sup>28</sup> It is dissensual activity of acting as if one were equal in a context of police inequality. By invoking the equality of everyone with anyone, the contingency of hierarchal societal orders is laid bare. It is important to note here that police inequality only *appears* or becomes perceptible once it is confronted with the logic of equality in a specific situation or context. The meeting of two logics, of equality with inequality, might be best illustrated with the example of Olympe de Gouges that Rancière discusses.

### 3 Olympe de Gouges

De Gouges stated famously during the French Revolution that if women were entitled to go to the scaffold, they were entitled to go to the assembly.<sup>29</sup> Equal-born women were not equal born citizens because they could not fit the purity of political life. Women belonged to the domesticated, private life and the common good had to be kept apart from the activities, feelings and interests of the private life.<sup>30</sup> De Gouges' point was that if women could lose their lives, sentenced to death as enemies of the state out of public judgment based on political reasons, then their private life (their life doomed to death) was political. De Gouges is the author of the text *The Declaration of the Rights of Women and the Female Citizen*. Rancière states:

"If, under the guillotine, they were as equal, so to speak, 'as men,' they had the right to the whole of equality, including equal participation to political life."<sup>31</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Rancière *Disagreement* 29-30

<sup>25</sup> Tanke Jacques Rancière: *An Introduction* 49-50

<sup>26</sup> 51

<sup>27</sup> Rancière (2004) *South Atlantic Quarterly* 303-304

<sup>28</sup> Rancière states:

"There is an order in society because some people command and others obey, but in order to obey an order at least two things are required: you must understand the order and you must understand that you must obey it. And to do that, you must already be the equal of the person who is ordering you." Rancière *Disagreement* 16

According to this formulation, equality must be presupposed on the basis of the equality of anyone capable of hearing and understanding an order. It is a presupposition that belongs to anyone who decides to assert themselves in the name of their own equality. See Rancière *Disagreement* 16

<sup>29</sup> Rancière (2004) *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 303

<sup>30</sup> 303-304

<sup>31</sup> 304

He further explains that the lawmakers of that time could of course not even hear this. Nevertheless, it could be enacted in the construction of a scene of dissensus. Rancière states:

“A dissensus is not a conflict of interests, opinions, or values; it is a division put in the ‘common sense’: a dispute about what is given, about the frame in which we see something as given ... This is what I call dissensus: putting two worlds in one and the same world.”<sup>32</sup>

A political subject for Rancière is a subject with the capacity to stage a scene of dissensus.<sup>33</sup>

As a woman De Gouges had no qualification to make the claims that she did. Yet, she did. Acting as if she were equal to men, De Gouges becomes here the *demos*, representing the part that has no part according to the police order. By constructing a scene of dissensus (making political statements which she is not qualified to do and authoring the declaration) she challenges the overall distribution of the sensible, the distribution of roles, places and tasks. She puts together what Rancière calls “a relation of inclusion and exclusion”.<sup>34</sup> She is excluded from political participation, but yet included as she can lose her life on political grounds. De Gouges is not making a mere claim for inclusion here, but rather embodies the contradictions of the police order arrangements that exclude her. This is where the difference lies in the Rancièrian sense; politics happens when a subject emerges through the meeting of two logics, the logic of the police with the logic of equality. Politics is not the mere inclusion into the police order, but that which disrupts the police order, that which puts the order into question; that which illuminates its contingency and opens up the possibility of reconfiguring the order itself.

Further, in this formulation De Gouges emerges as a paradoxical, precarious capacity or subjectivity. Although she makes her claim under the heading of “woman” and she does this as a woman and to the ends of women, this “identity” operates on two different levels: woman is both associated with the police order that she is challenging and also with the position that marks this challenge.<sup>35</sup> It is associated with both the distribution of the sensible and also with its redistribution. It is associated with the world where women are not qualified to participate in politics and where there are roles and tasks and places designated to them *and* the world where they are equal. The demonstration still operates on the basis of the equality of speaking beings, albeit the equality of women as speaking beings. What is politically relevant in Rancièrian terms is the presupposition of equality in a scene of dissensus that undercuts police categories.<sup>36</sup> De Gouges disidentifies herself with the category of woman as understood and seen within the police order, namely, a privatised, non-political designation (distancing herself from this social category) and appears through the process of what Rancière

<sup>32</sup> 304

<sup>33</sup> 304

<sup>34</sup> 304

<sup>35</sup> De Boever (2011) *Transformations: Journal of Media and Culture* Rancière’s Political Subject

<sup>36</sup> See for example May (2009) *Borderlands* 14-15 for a discussion on identity and the presuppositional nature of equality

calls “subjectification” as a new category of woman, one who has the right to politically participate.<sup>37</sup> De Gouges becomes here representative of the equality of speaking beings, challenging her non-political designation as a woman by making political claims to the ends of a new designation of the female. It is in speaking in a radical form of equality that the possibility of the reconfiguration of the sensible distribution is disclosed.

#### 4 Lucy’s renegotiation

In his essay “Feminism After Ranciere: Women in J.M. Coetzee and Jeff Wall”, Arne de Boever has noted that Rancière’s political subject appears to be precariously situated at the uneasy border between the empty and the specific.<sup>38</sup> De Boever works with Gabriel Rockhill’s definition of Rancière’s political subject:

“[N]either a political lobby nor an individual who seeks adequate representation for his or her interests and ideas. It is an empty operator that produces cases of political dispute by challenging the established framework of identification and classification.”<sup>39</sup>

De Boever refers to JM Coetzee’s *Disgrace* and the disagreement that develops between the character of Lucy and her father after she had been horrifically attacked and raped in the farmhouse they were both living in at the time. David Lurie, Lucy’s father, was also brutally attacked. Lurie wants to call the police and press charges after what happened. Lucy agrees on the condition that he sticks to the story of what happened to him; she will tell what happened to her. When the police take their testimonies, Lucy does not talk about the rape. This angers and confuses her father and he puts questions to her as gently as he can. She, however, responds sharply:

“This has nothing to do with you, David. You want to know why I have not laid charge with the police. I will tell you, as long as you agree not to raise the subject again. The reason is that, as far as I am concerned, what happened to me is purely a private matter. In another time, in another place, it might be held as a public matter. But in this place, at this time, it is not. It is my business, mine alone.”<sup>40</sup>

In the context of De Gouges, whose actions reconfigure the lines drawn between the public and the private and the association of the former with men and the latter with women, Lucy’s statement, as De Boever notes, might strike one as profoundly conservative.<sup>41</sup> It seems like she affirms women’s

<sup>37</sup> Subjectification refers to “[t]he production through a series of actions of a body and a capacity for enunciation not previously identifiable within a given field of experience, whose identification is thus part of the reconfiguring of the field of experience” Rancière *Disagreement* 35 Subjectification therefore requires the disidentification with a police order imposed category and the subsequent identification with a part that is in excess to the already existing social parts within the police order. It refers to the declassifying of social groups or parts associated with the categories of the police. Politics in the Rancièrean sense rejects the hierarchies and social designations of the police order, not in the name of particular identities, such as blackness or the feminine, but in the name of the equality of speaking beings. It confronts the police with what is foreign to it. See for example May (2009) *Borderlands* 7-12 for a more thorough discussion of the process of subjectification.

<sup>38</sup> De Boever (2011) *Transformations: Journal of Media and Culture* Rancière’s Political Subject

<sup>39</sup> G Rockhill “Glossary of Technical Terms” in J Rancière *The Politics of Aesthetics* (2004) 90

<sup>40</sup> JM Coetzee *Disgrace* (1999) 112 as cited by De Boever (2011) *Transformations: Journal of Media and Culture* Lucy’s Politics

<sup>41</sup> De Boever (2011) *Transformations: Journal of Media and Culture* Lucy’s Politics

association with the private life. One has to consider, however, that the novel is written in the context of the South African Truth and Reconciliation processes which established a culture of confession.<sup>42</sup> Within this culture of confession, of opening up, of lying bare and making public, Lucy insists on women's association with the private. Later in the novel she tells her father, after he reproached her again for not laying charges against the rapists:

“This is my life. I am the one who has to live here. What happened to me is my business, mine alone, not yours, and if there is one right I have it is the right not to be put on trial like this, not to have to justify myself – not to you, not to anyone else.”<sup>43</sup>

Lucy therefore disclaims the right she has. In a culture or sensible distribution of confession, she chooses non-confession. If we evoke De Gouges again, and the long history of women's exclusion from the political life, Lucy turns women's association with private life into a revolutionary position. She challenges, as De Boever describes, several distributions of the sensible that are at work in Coetzee's novel. She also challenges the historical context in which the novel is situated, specifically, the aftermath of apartheid and the problematic and complicated relations between black and white within this context.<sup>44</sup> Lucy announces that she will continue to live on the farm where the attack took place. Her decision becomes extremely difficult for her father to understand, especially after Lucy's black assistant Petrus becomes the co-proprietor of Lucy's farm through a land transfer that aims to restore land to the native South African black population. Lucy stays on, deciding to become a *bywoner* (a poor tenant labourer who works for the landowner, but is also allowed to make some profit for him or herself). In order to give Lucy some protection, Petrus asks, *via* Lurie, to marry her. To her father's surprise she accepts the proposal. She explains that he is not offering her “a church wedding followed by a honeymoon on the Wildcoast”, but rather “an alliance, a deal. I contribute from the land in return for which I am allowed to creep under his wing. Otherwise, he wants to remind me, I am without protection, I am fair game”.<sup>45</sup> De Boever notes:

“What Lucy thus realises is the ‘impossible’ community of a white, lesbian woman living under a black man's wing/ of a black man taking a white lesbian woman under his wing. It is neither the future for South Africa that her father imagined, nor the one that Petrus imagined. Her position marks instead the country's radically ‘democratic’ future: a future that would lie beyond the established framework of identification and classification – race (black/white), gender (male/female), class (owner/tenant), and sexuality (straight/gay) – in which South Africa, from Lucy's perspective, is caught up. It is in this sense that Lucy begins to appear as the representative of what Rancière calls ‘the part of those who have no part’: the political subject of a wrong, staging a scene of dissensus from where other ways of living together can become possible.”<sup>46</sup>

*Disgrace* also realises this particular politics at the level of the novel's aesthetic. Spivak has noted that the novel is focalised “relentlessly”, as she

<sup>42</sup> Lucy's Politics

<sup>43</sup> Coetzee *Disgrace* 133

<sup>44</sup> De Boever (2011) *Transformations: Journal of Media and Culture* Lucy's Politics

<sup>45</sup> Coetzee *Disgrace* 203

<sup>46</sup> De Boever (2011) *Transformations: Journal of Media and Culture* Lucy's Politics

puts it, through David Lurie. Spivak draws an important conclusion about the aesthetic:

“The reader is provoked for he or she does not want to share in Lurie-the-chief-focaliser’s inability to ‘read’ Lucy as patient and agent. No reader is content with acting out the failure of reading ... This provocation is the ‘political’ in political fiction, the transformation of a tendency into crisis.”<sup>47</sup>

It is precisely then Lucy’s internally excluded position that becomes *Disgrace*’s aesthetic. As De Boever notes, the novel focuses through Lurie, provoking the reader to counter-focalise and take up Lucy’s cause.<sup>48</sup> While Lucy is thus, according to De Boever, the empty operator, her emptiness “resists”, making its own disappearance impossible.<sup>49</sup> It is Lucy’s insistence on distributing “otherwise” in this specific material and spatio-temporal context that allows for alternative capacities, possibilities and ways of being.

## 5 Concluding remarks

In Andre P Brink’s novel *Philida*, Philida is a young, coloured slave woman in the Cape living on the farm, Zandvliet, in 1832.<sup>50</sup> She walks to the town of Stellenbosch in order to lodge a complaint at the Slave Protector’s Office. She aims to lodge the complaint against the farm owner’s son, Francois Brink, with whom she had four children. Brink promised her that if she “laid” with him, he would buy her freedom from the Government someday. Instead, Brink is marrying a white woman and Philida is to be sold to a neighbouring farm. Beaten, tortured and raped in her short life on the farm, it is still her home and she refuses to leave.

In one part of the novel Francois, who truly seems to care for Philida in his own way, but who obeys his father above all else, recalls how they would sneak into a certain room where a Bible was kept with all the Brink family names written in it. Frans states:

“And that was where Philida became a real pest. She kept on saying she also wanted to get into the Book. The more I told her it was a book for white people only, the more she kept on: ‘It’s just a lot of names, Frans, it says nothing about white people and slaves.’ Philida, it doesn’t work like that, there’s nothing you or I can change about it, it is just the way the world is. ‘Then we got to change the way of the world.’ ... No, I keep telling her, some things *cannot* be changed from the way the Lordgod made them. ‘Then we got to start with changing the Lordgod’, she says. ... ‘I tell you I want to be in that Book.’ ... I am telling you, Philida, I keep insisting, it can’t be done and it won’t be done, and that’s the way it is. ... ‘Then give me the pen.’”<sup>51</sup>

One might say that Frans accepts the given, the way things are. “It is just the way the world is”. Philida puts into question the rules of the Lordgod and the distribution of the sensible. She bore Frans’ children and she wants her name and the names of their children written in the Bible. “If you can’t or won’t do it, I’ll do it myself”. She presupposes her equality (“[i]t is just a lot of names Frans, it doesn’t say anything about whites and slaves”) and dares to

<sup>47</sup> GC Spivak “Ethics and Politics in Tagore, Coetzee and Certain Scenes of Teaching” (2002) 32 *Diacritics* 22

<sup>48</sup> De Boever (2011) *Transformations: Journal of Media and Culture* Lucy’s Politics

<sup>49</sup> Lucy’s Politics

<sup>50</sup> Brink *Philida*

<sup>51</sup> 37

imagine another distribution of the sensible or rather a redistribution. She acts “as if”, straying from her “natural” allotment in order to inhabit a new body, one whose name is equally inscribed. The metaphor that Rancière uses for his politics is indeed theatre, *staging* a scene of dissensus, *presupposing* equality, *creating* equality where there is none. Here another example that De Boever refers to should be invoked. In the closing paragraph of her book *Antigone’s Claim: Kinship Between Life and Death*, Butler’s formulation of the scene almost reads like a summary of Rancière’s political subject and I therefore quote her at length:

“Who then is Antigone within such a scene, and what are we to make of her words, words that become dramatic events, performative acts? She is not of the human but speaks in its language. Prohibited from action, she nevertheless acts, and her act is hardly a simple assimilation to an existing norm. And in acting, as one who has no right to act, she upsets the vocabulary of kinship that is a precondition for the human, implicitly raising the question for us of what those preconditions really must be. She speaks within the language of entitlement from which she is excluded, particularly in the language of the claim with which no final identification is possible. If she is human, then the human has entered into catachresis: we no longer know its proper usage. And to the extent that she occupies the language that can never belong to her she functions as chiasm within the vocabulary of political norms. If kinship is the precondition of the human, then Antigone is the occasion for a new field of human, achieved through political catachresis, the one that happens when the less than human speaks as human, when gender is displaced, and kinship founds on its own founding laws. She acts, she speaks she becomes one for whom the speech act is a fatal crime, but this fatality exceeds her life and enters the discourse of intelligibility as its own promising fatality, the social form of its aberrant, unprecedented future.”<sup>52</sup>

Politics in the Rancièrian sense is an aesthetic operation of world-disclosure.<sup>53</sup> What was once obscured is made manifest and every reconfiguration of the sensible is a reconfiguration of what is possible. His politics can be described as an invitation to divide and distribute otherwise and actively question the frame in which we see things as given in an attempt to recast and reconfigure symbolic and sensible orders. And what is the fate of De Gouges’ or Lucy’s or even Antigone’s redistribution?

“Will the equality that it envisions ever be realised? Or is politics doomed to indefinitely redistribute? Perhaps these are simply the wrong questions. The point may be, rather, to act from the assumption of equality: to take serious the equality that, at various point in history, has been declared, and to act relentlessly from within the sensible mode of being that challenges the distribution of the sensible.”<sup>54</sup>

This challenge might be marked by acting “as if” and by thinking two worlds into one: the logic of the world of Frans’ Lordgod and the logic of the world where Philida’s name is written in a book thereby precariously contesting the lines of sensible intelligibility.

<sup>52</sup> J Butler *Antigone’s Claim: Kinship Between Life and Death* (2000) 82 as cited in De Boever (2011) *Transformations: Journal of Media and Culture* Feminism After Rancière

<sup>53</sup> Stoneman (2011) *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 146

<sup>54</sup> De Boever (2011) *Transformations: Journal of Media and Culture* The Politics of Photography

## SUMMARY

In this note, the author reflects on the subjectivity of women through the lens of Jacques Rancière's formulation of the "distribution of the sensible". The author discusses the French revolutionary woman, Olympe de Gouges, a reading of the character of Lucy in JM Coetzee's *Disgrace* as well as the character of Philida in Andre P Brink's work *Philida*. These characters and events are analysed as a way of calling for the interrogation of orders of sensibility, intelligibility and communicability. It is suggested that a Rancièrian reading of characters and events discloses paradoxical, precarious subjectivities that renegotiate material and sensible contexts. The concern of the piece lies with the capacity and subjectivity to break with established roles and identifications and by assuming equality in order to recast conservative symbolic orders thereby opening up the possibility of alternative spaces, capacities and ways of being. The author suggests refocusing from political ends and results to moments within which the sensible is redistributed.