

The Aesthetics of Social Class in *La Grande Bellezza*

La estética de clase social en La Grande Bellezza

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ABSTRACT

This essay introduces Jacques Rancière's philosophical ideas and analyzes Paolo Sorrentino's *La Grande Bellezza* (2013). It explores the film's cinematic aesthetics and the system of distances, linking Rancière's concept of the sensible world with the film's portrayal of the Italian upper class. The discussion addresses the dual structure of beauty and societal critique, the redistribution of roles and perceptions, and the relationship between aesthetics, ethics, and politics. Through Rancière's lens, the essay delves into the film's imagery, emphasizing the importance of critical art in transforming the spectator into an active participant in society.

Keywords: *La Grande Bellezza*, Jacques Rancière, Paolo Sorrentino, social class, aesthetics.

ABSTRACT

Este ensayo introduce las ideas filosóficas de Jacques Rancière y analiza *La Grande Bellezza* (2013) de Paolo Sorrentino. Explora la estética cinematográfica de la película y el sistema de distancias, vinculando el concepto de Rancière del mundo sensible con la representación de la clase alta italiana en la película. La discusión aborda la estructura dual de la belleza y la crítica social, la redistribución de roles y percepciones, y la relación entre estética, ética y política. A través de la obra de Rancière, el ensayo profundiza en el imaginario de la película, enfatizando la importancia del arte crítico en la transformación del espectador en un participante activo en la sociedad.

Palabras clave: *La Grande Bellezza*, Jacques Rancière, Paolo Sorrentino, clase social, estética.

The following article introduces some of the philosophical and cinematic ideas of the intellectual Jacques Rancière, along with an analysis and interpretation of the film *La Grande Bellezza* (2013) by the Italian director Paolo Sorrentino. Three discursive objectives are established with the intention of guiding the discourse and addressing specific research questions regarding Rancière's philosophy in conjunction with the film's imagery.

The first objective is to analyze the film's cinematic meaning of aesthetics, and the second is to decipher the system of distances. This system allows the analysis of relationships and simultaneously generates a theory of movement about things and thought (Rancière, 2012: 14), as a model of life in the Italian upper class.

To begin with, the notion of aesthetics shared by the French philosopher will be introduced, starting with its definition and allocation of appropriate meaning, followed

by its connection to politics, ethics, and cinema. The philosophical origin and background we are studying come from *Malaise dans l'esthétique*, where Rancière points out: “my purpose is not to defend aesthetics, but to contribute to the clarification of what this word means, as a functional regime of art and as a discursive matrix of speech, as a distinct form of art identification and a redistribution of the relations between forms of sensory experience” (Rancière, 2004: 26). He defines it as “(...) the sophistic discourse through which philosophy and a certain philosophy diverted to taste the sense of art and the judgments of taste” (Rancière, 2004: 9). The term’s introduction is essential to understand and proceed within his philosophy.

Arcos-Palma (2008) reminds us that Rancière presents a clear opposition to the idea of aesthetics being naturally linked to reality, refuting his compatriot Alain Badiou’s stance, and affirming that aesthetics tend to show us essential things in art, denying it as a speculative discipline. This opposition derives from the necessity of understanding and comprehending aesthetics as the regime of the sensible forms of social and political order.

This sensitive world is portrayed as a doubt represented in the staging of *La Grande Bellezza*, through which Sorrentino shows the banality and mundanity of Roman nightlife. This reality contrasts with the monumentality, religion, and tourism characterizing everyday Roman life in summer. However, both scenarios share elements such as cosmopolitanism, mixture, and sensation, linked to the intellect of Jep Gambardella. These two realities frame the life of the protagonist, who is presented as an intellectual but emaciated person. He walks impassively through both realities, eager to build a corporeal and intellectual discourse based on superior morality. At the same time, the director critiques the capitalist system where having a large house with a garden implies having a dog (also tired of the system), spending thousands of euros on Botox treatments, or dignifying the possession of money to be part of the upper class. Therefore, “money has become the criterion for judging a man and his activity” (Ellul, 2009: 20), making it clear that “the ethics work obviously leads to the subordination of being to having” (Ellul, 2009: 20). However, this is a speech and a life that are empty and tend toward a single finite point: death.

Moreover, aesthetics as a philosophical discipline tends to act as a bridge between sensible forms and life, achieving its greatest expression in the social and political spheres. It implies a sense of corporeal nature and multiple relations extending to all human spheres, particularly the socio-political, where the “redistribution of that understood as sensible” must operate to generate another type of experience without being limited to a certain privileged social group (Arcos-Palma, 2008: 4). We must contextualize a theoretical approximation with the intellectual Susan Buck-Morss (2005: 22) regarding this point. While she believes that aesthetics “(...) makes it possible to define some things regarding art”, she insists that the discipline of aesthetics is not limited to the contemplation of art alone but comprises a broad vision of culture itself (Arcos-Palma, 2008: 3). This culture is one of Sorrentino’s focuses, representing the equalizing of visual and cognitive activity while playing with light and shadow as crucial elements

to represent and understand the strength of certain exclusive pieces of art, accessible only to a few lucky ones (Stoichita, 1999: 65).

A remarkable work within Rancière's cinematic field (2012) is *Las distancias del cine*, through which the intellectual analyzes distances or representations. He establishes a relationship between vision, movement, and truth, considering cinema, philosophy, literature, and communism (25). He does this under the premise of considering philosophy as a reunion of thought. He states that "thinking about the art of moving images is to think first of all about the relationship between two movements: the visual development of cinematic images and the process of deployment and dissipation of appearances that characterize in more general terms the 'art of narrative intrigues'" (25). The establishment of distances allows the analysis of relationships and generates a theory of the movement of things and thinking (14). If cinema is shaped by it, it can be presented as an ideological critique, a utopia, or, as Rancière defines it, an interruption of the sensible. Thus, the author proposes intervening in the problem of representation in art to understand the images of cinema and review the appearance (and non-appearance) of the senses, which cinema ultimately experiences.

The links between politics and aesthetics generate the specific purpose of dealing with the problem of representation. The French philosopher identifies three types of film regimes: the ethical regime of images, the representation system of the arts, and the aesthetic art regime. Each includes a network of relationships that shape the interpretation of an object, act, or practice as art. The ethical regime is characterized by images instead of art, meaning they are not recognized as an autonomous domain (Ren, 2015: 157). However, they differ in their historical development and recognition. The ethical regime of images arose in Platonic Greece; the system of representation in the arts emerged in Aristotle's Greece, and the aesthetic regime of art emerged gradually during the nineteenth century. The coexistence of these causes tension between simple shapes and full forms of art (Ren, 2015: 158).

Through the three film model regimes, the French philosopher responds to the complaint filed through his philosophical theory. First, the ethical regime responds to internal change, and the filmmaker adopts the posture of a member of the threatened community represented. In opposition, it presents the representation regime addressed to movement, where the cinematic structure follows a clear division between the filmmaker, as an artist, and the worker as a laborer or proletarian. Finally, in the third place, the aesthetic regime neither comes from within (as the ethical regime) nor from without (such as the representation regime), nor does it establish any hierarchy of artistic forms or distinguished works of art for social or economic value. Instead, the creators of aesthetic cinema produce models of experience that are irreducible to conventions and rules, generating a new creative space that is not reduced to social regulation. Individual roles are beyond the expectations of their behavior and social status, thus eliminating the condition of vulnerability in which members of an unequal society find themselves (Ren, 2015: 176-177).

Through the principle of *Le partage du sensible*, Rancière introduces the importance of creating a “sensitive community” (Didi-Huberman, 2005: 54) to make art fundamental to the social structure, contributing to the transformation and generation of critical art which refutes any hypotheses related to the end of politics, history, and/or aesthetics, based on conservatism that contemplates no possibility of change and transformation within society (Shusterman, 2002: 63). This principle could also be interpreted through different scenes, like the introduction that Gambardella provides to the stripper Ramona (daughter of an old friend immersed in drugs and prostitution) in the upper class or the suffering of a girl who is obliged to create contemporary art because it is a way to “earn millions” as a reward for her weeping. This is undoubtedly the symbol of the perversion of art within the capitalist system.

In this way, Sorrentino creates a Jep Gambardella figure that is intellectually superior to others, more conscious and knowledgeable about the world around him. The spread of his word characterizes his passage through life. Almost all worship it, but few understand it. Thus, the film director draws defined and immutable class boundaries, where leisure and aesthetic reflection seem privileged and proper to the prevailing hierarchy that it describes as “the nothing.” It is at this point that Sorrentino enters into a certain confrontation with Rancière (2010), who proposes just the opposite: the importance of demystifying roles (68) and the principle that “the critical art, in its way, the most generic one, has its purpose placed on the generation of an awareness of the mechanical domination in order to change the role of the spectator to that of a conscious actor aware of the world’s transformation” (Foster, 2001: 65). In other words, it transforms the spectator into an actor, an activist who acts and changes his immediate context through the aesthetic experience. He defends active planning versus passivity, linking it to society’s alienation and the lack of ability to question and confront certain realities in order to change them. He adds that the difficulty regarding critical art is not negotiating between politics and art, but addressing the relation between the two aesthetic logics, considering that art exists independently of the mentioned because they belong to the same logic of the aesthetics regime (Foster, 2001: 66).

Rancière (2006) approaches cinema, within this logic of critical art, as a democratic tool with the ability to transform and create a different sensible world through two fundamental elements: movement and narration (112). These comprise the basis of the representation regime (37), to articulate ways of feeling and thinking, creating the sensible. This proposes the interaction and interpenetration of the common and the singular, where a work of art tends to be a collective type of representation with individual characteristics. An example of this is the nostalgic return to childhood and lost youth in the image of a naked Jep running along the beach towards the sea with a female companion (possibly the representation of love, with all the symbolic and emotional content that this entails). The long-awaited sea arrives at the end of the film and evokes a past where happiness seemed simple and close. At the same time, it represents the individual and collective yearning, experienced by the audience as a nostalgic return to a better past, that of Jep and their own.

The film's initial scene presents several beautiful images of a summer day with the singing of a choir, children's laughter, and people happily enjoying the sun and nature, oblivious to the finality of life. Immediately afterwards, the camera focuses on a group of Asian tourists listening to a tour guide; one of them separates from the group to take a panoramic photograph and, feeling dizzy, collapses, losing consciousness. We can interpret this as an introduction to the sensibility and beauty of the eternal Italian capital (the choir's singing may evoke an idea of eternity). The momentary change of the scene shocks the spectator, who comes to see the mundane reality of the tourist (Jep Gambardella), whose ageing and arrival at the beginning of the end of life appear to become more evident throughout the film, also capturing attention. The relationship between eternal beauty and the brevity of life seems to be represented through these initial scenes, serving as a preview of the film's development.

In this initial instance, the film seems to follow a dual structure where, on the one hand, a beauty (physical or sensitive) in everything stands out, and on the other hand, a critique of the emptiness and baseness of bourgeois society is expressed. Rancière (2010) proposes a question regarding this duality: What is the relationship between aesthetic activity and political activity? (53). He answers that they are separated, though not opposed (67), and proposes the existence of an aesthetic unconscious related to the forces of desire and fantasy, where the image, narrative, and time sequences articulate the experiences of the collective imagination (67). For this, it is important to consider the principle of "(...) subjectivization as the relationship between forms of discourse and capacities" (Rancière, 2008: 55), allowing us to realize the importance of discourse. It develops not only through Gambardella's narrative (personal and professional) but also through images and time sequences articulating the experiences of the collective imagination. Hence, the visual is as important as the discourse, considering cinema's essence as the seventh art. It is for this reason that a critical reading is necessary to understand the film's content and implicit discourse.

To achieve this, the spectator must immerse themselves in the duality of the structure, where personal and collective contents are articulated and linked to the interrelationship between the senses and society, the intellect and the aesthetic perception. It can then be argued that the aesthetics of the seventh art in the film *La Grande Bellezza* represents the sensible manifestation of all human spheres, particularly the socio-political one. This helps to understand and explain the broad vision of culture and the importance of cinematographic analysis to understand the sensible world, and to analyze the relationships generated by the redistribution of roles, perceptions, and aesthetic experiences (Stoichita, 1999: 68).

To conclude, Jacques Rancière's philosophy and cinematic theories are invaluable in analyzing Paolo Sorrentino's *La Grande Bellezza*. The film's portrayal of aesthetics, the dual structure of beauty and societal critique, and the relationship between images, narratives, and political activity all align with Rancière's ideas. By immersing in this film,

we can appreciate its complex discourse, exploring the intersections of aesthetics, ethics, and politics in the modern world.

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