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## Introduction to Jacques Rancière's "The Concept of Anachronism and the Historian's Truth"

Tim Stott

*Technological University Dublin*, [tim.stott@tudublin.ie](mailto:tim.stott@tudublin.ie)

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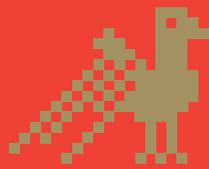
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### Introduction to Jacques Rancière's 'The Concept of Anachronism

and the Historian's Truth' *Tim Stott* Jacques Rancière's 'The Concept of Anachronism and the Historian's Truth,' first published in 1996, continues the inquiry into historicity and historiography begun in *The Names of History* four years previously, in which Rancière sought to show that the practice of modern history writing, especially in France, has occluded the entrance of revolutionary political activity onto the scene of history by denying its status as an event.<sup>1</sup> In other words, history has tended to privilege continuity and homogeneity rather than attend to the violence and unpredictability of historical events. This has served to "liquidate the impropriety and the anachronism by which events in general happen to [historical] subjects," Rancière writes. In response, he demands a "heretical history" that identifies singular and heterodox characters on the historical stage rather than the comforts of social regularity. Whether or not Rancière writes such a history is open to debate, and we might present his 1981 *La nuit des prolétaires: archives du rêve ouvrier* as evidence that he has attempted to do so, but his inquiry into its possibility, continued in the 1996 essay published here, has consequences for how we might understand cultural activity in its many forms as a particularly historical activity.<sup>2</sup>

Of particular interest in 'The Concept of Anachronism and the Historian's Truth' is the structuring function the fear and avoidance of anachronism has in the work of the historians of the *Annales* school, and by extension, the New History more generally. Rancière's claim is that this function, essential though it is, has not received the analysis it requires. The fear of anachronism, described by *Annales* historian Lucien Febvre, with only slight overstatement, as the "worst of all sins, the sin that cannot be forgiven," means that historical inquiry has come to be regulated by the assumption that a particular historical event or character must belong wholly to the time in which it or she is found. To be historical is, therefore, to belong to or to resemble one's time. In the pursuit of historical truth and the establishment of history as a legitimate science, the historian, above all else, must recognise this and never show events or characters to be, so to speak, out of joint with their time. Rancière takes Febvre's *The Problem of Unbelief in the Sixteenth Century: The Religion of Rabelais*, published

1. Jacques Rancière, *Les noms de l'histoire*, (Paris: Seuil, 1992). Translated by H. Mehely as *The Names of History: On the Poetics of Knowledge*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994).

2. Jacques Rancière, *La nuit des prolétaires: archives du rêve ouvrier* (Paris: Fayard, 1981). Translated by John Drury as *The Nights of Labour: The Workers' Dream in Nineteenth-century France* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989).

in French in 1942, to exemplify this approach. Febvre's argument is, in short, that Rabelais could not have been the non-believer that he is often taken to be because to not believe, that is, to not be a Christian, was not possible in sixteenth-century France. To make Rabelais a non-believer would be to commit the sin of anachronism. Such an approach identifies a strong correlation between material conditions, that is, the structures of historical institutions and systems, economic, juridical, legislative, and so forth, and the psychology of historical subjects. This is captured by the Annales historians' concern with historical *mentalities*, an attempt to show how, in the words of Beatrice Gottlieb, translator of *The Problem of Unbelief* into English, "The content of men's minds was affected by the material conditions under which they lived, the ideas they inherited, and the ways in which they organised their thoughts."<sup>3</sup>

3. Beatrice Gottlieb, 'Translator's Introduction,' *The Problem of Unbelief in the Sixteenth Century: The Religion of Rabelais*, translated by B. Gottlieb, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985), xxiii.

4. Marc Bloch, *Apologie pour l'histoire, ou métier d'historien*, Fifth Edition (Paris: A. Colin, 1964), 101.

5. Marc Bloch, cited by G. Duby in Preface to *Apologie pour l'histoire*, 7.

Marc Bloch, one of the founders of this school, insisted upon the reality of such *mentalités*, even asserting that "Historical facts are in essence psychological facts."<sup>4</sup> Such a claim had as its premise that social realities at a given historical moment are unified and total, and it is these realities that determine how historical subjects think, and therefore act, in certain ways, and not in others.<sup>5</sup> For this reason, the Annales historians chose, by and large, to ignore changeable and unpredictable historical events and to look at longer-term developments of economic, juridical, and social structures. The idea of a *mentalité* unifies these mutually dependent social structures with the psychology of those who were subject to them. It follows from this view that, again, Rabelais, because he belonged to the *mentalité* of sixteenth-century France, could not have not believed.

Rancière counters this emphasis upon homogeneous and shared *mentalités* with the claim that historical subjects are only historical in the strong sense, which is to say that they act as historical agents to bring about historical change, insofar as they do not belong to or do not fully resemble their time. This leads Rancière to emphasise the exceptional qualities of persons and artefacts. It is possible that, as Oliver Davis suggest, Rancière might overcorrect the *Annalistes'* historiography, just as the latter overcorrected the narrative history of battles, treaties, and victors, leading Rancière to disregard "the role of longer-term geographical, climatic,

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economic and social factors."<sup>6</sup> At the very least, however, we still might learn from Rancière's attention to the historical role of what is atypical, emergent, and exceptional. As Kristin Ross has pointed out, Rancière's work is replete with figures and works that are anachronic or untimely.<sup>7</sup>

A further argument made by Rancière is that in the attempt to establish history as a science, which would enable it to make legitimate claims for objectivity, historians such as Febvre actually draw upon the resources of poetics, especially its rhetorical modes of disposition (*dispositio*) and elocution (*elocutio*). The former presents the anachronistic detail as one that stands out and clashes with its historical moment. The latter is a means to write of a historical present that is complete and eternal. Both of these modes serve to present, without argument, the truth both of what can be thought at a particular historical moment and, by extension, the thesis that a historical actor cannot but be of his or her time. As a result, Rancière argues, the philosophical question of whether or not thought belongs fully to its time never arises. It has already been resolved poetically.

Rancière's argument is, of course, more developed and more nuanced than this summary suggests. In what remains of this introduction, I want simply to indicate how Rancière's essay might be of interest beyond its immediate context of late twentieth-century French historiography. As should be clear, at stake in Rancière's text is, firstly, how history is made and to be understood. Secondly, it is a question of how historical agents, including actual persons, of course, but also cultural artefacts, relate to the historical moments in which they occur. Thirdly, and perhaps most interesting for us here, there is the possibility that cultural artefacts include different historical times and so appear to perform, again, as historical agents. They are what Rancière calls "anachronic". It is this latter point that I want to develop, briefly, here.

Many of us that teach and study cultural history have welcomed the hard-won historicism that ceaselessly strives to connect "text" with context and to identify what literary scholar Stephen Greenblatt called the "unsettling circulation of materials and discourses" that allows cultural artefacts to accrue meaning.<sup>8</sup> This approach was symptomatic of the new art history or social history of art that emerged in the late 1960s, for which

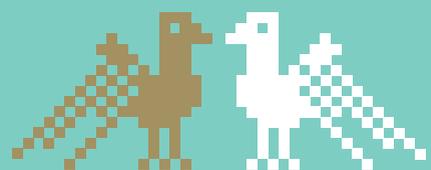
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6. Oliver Davis, *Jacques Rancière* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010), 68.

7. Kristin Ross, 'Historicising Untimeliness,' in G. Rockhill and P Watts, eds. *Jacques Rancière: History, Politics, Aesthetics*, (Durham, NC.: Duke University Press, 2009).

8. Stephen Greenblatt, 'Towards a Poetics of Culture,' in Veenser,





the form of the work of art was taken to be forged from its historical circumstances, and therefore explainable entirely in terms of the same. In relation to the materialist and contextualist emphasis of such an approach, Rancière's claim for anachrony might be provocative, but it has been, for some, productive. Art historians Alexander Nagel and Christopher Wood, for example, have sought to integrate the anachrony of works of art into their interpretation of Renaissance artefacts, including "buildings, paintings, prints, drawings, sculptures, medals, pavements, [and] mosaics." As they claim, to attend to anachrony is, in contrast to historicist and materialist accounts, "to say what the artwork *does*, qua art." As art, a work references variously, sometimes in a way that is contradictory, often temporally dispersed, and always unstable, and can fold these references into the continuity of the work. As a result, a work reaches beyond its time "to symbolise realities unknown to its own makers."<sup>9</sup> If this is the case, it is the anachrony of a work of art that enables it to make history rather than merely belong to it.

Similar arguments have been made before in art history. What else is Aby Warburg's concept of *Nachleben* ('afterlife' or 'survival') than a description of the anachrony of works of art, their ability to not quite fit any one time, and even to include many temporalities? Georges Didi-Huberman has done a great deal to build upon Warburg's insight and to assert the work of art as symptom and dream-work, opaque and never fully intelligible or belonging to the world in which it is made and then reinterpreted.<sup>10</sup> Paul Crowther, too, argues against the reduction of a work of art to a document of the circumstances of its production, suggesting that this is to treat the work of art as "something created for the purposes of art historians, curators and other managerial functionaries. Artistic production becomes, thereby, a mere means to curatorial production."<sup>11</sup> In becoming art, Crowther argues, an artefact transcends its documentary functions and must be understood to have a formative power over time.

As Rancière writes at the end of his essay, "There is no anachronism," if by that we mean that an artefact depends for its conceptualisation upon a secure understanding of the historicity of its form and that the form of the work of art bears witness only to the time in which it was made.

H. A. ed., *The New Historicism* (New York and London: Routledge, 1989), 13.

9. Alexander Nagel and Christopher Wood, *Anachronic Renaissance* (New York: Zone Books, 2010), 13, 14, 17.

10. Georges Didi-Huberman, *L'Image survivante: histoire de l'art et temps des fantômes selon Aby Warburg* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 2002). Also, 'The Surviving Image: Aby Warburg and Tylorian Anthropology,' *Oxford Art Journal*, 25: 1 (2002): 59–70, and 'Artistic Survival: Panofsky vs. Warburg and the Exorcism of Impure Time,' *Common Knowledge*, 9:2 (2003): 273–285.

11. Paul Crowther, *The Transhistorical Image: Philosophising Art and*

<sup>17</sup> Tim Stott Introduction to Jacques Rancière's 'The Concept of Anachronism and the Historian's Truth'

Instead, there are anachronies, “events, notions, significations that are contrary to time, that make meaning circulate in a way that escapes any contemporaneity, any identity of time with itself.” This is a strong claim, open to dispute. To engage with it, at the very least, requires us to take seriously the possibility that artefacts can be historical actors rather than simply witnesses. The question, which Rancière here does not answer, then becomes how this might be so.

Finally, a note on the translation. As translators, Noel Fitzpatrick and I have sought to follow the syntax and rhythm of the original French as closely as possible. Where necessary, we have used the footnotes to clarify possible ambiguities in Rancière’s use of terms and phrases and to add bibliographic references when these were not provided in the original text. These additions are clearly marked by the abbreviation ‘Trans.’ On occasion, within the text itself, we have given the original French, bracketed and in italics, in order to indicate more precisely semantic subtleties and continuities that would not be apparent in English.

This translation has been a labour of love for both Noel and I, and we would like to thank Professor Rancière for his generous and invaluable advice and support. We would also like to thank Alice Galea for her assistance with the translation of some particularly stubborn phrases.

