

**Screening Politics:
The Egalitarian Film Theory of Jacques Rancière**

Abstract

There is a longstanding and rich history of theorizing cinema in terms of its politics. This tendency culminated in political modernism, an avowedly politicized discourse for which Althusserian Marxism and Lacanian psychoanalytic theory served as conceptual touchstones. Since the collapse of this discourse, film theory has fractured into two largely unrelated projects that are, however, united by a shared interest in limiting or deferring inquiries into the politics of film. On the one hand, post-theory draws on the principles of analytic or scientific philosophy in proposing to reconstruct film theory along the lines of a naturalizing epistemology. On the other, film-phenomenology seeks to revive the pure cinema project of the 1920s and its founding premise that cinema fundamentally alters our mode of being in the world. In both cases, the question of film's politics is expressly set aside or suppressed.

In this thesis, I argue that film theory's renewal in the aftermath of political modernism's decline can accommodate the politics of film as a question or concern by turning to the post-Marxist philosophy of Jacques Rancière, whose important writings on cinema, aesthetics, and politics have been largely ignored by contemporary film theorists. I make my argument by examining how Rancière's philosophical framework advances, confronts, or otherwise inflects longstanding debates in film theory. In particular, this thesis brings his work and thought to bear on the following issues: the still-unresolved question of film's aesthetic status; the discourse of sobriety in contemporary documentary film theory; the ongoing deliberations on the nature of film spectatorship. At the same time, this thesis considers how Rancière's philosophical project, as summed up in the principle of axiomatic equality, reframes the political stakes of these debates.