
WHY 'PLAIN SIGHT' IS NEVER PLAIN

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This paper tries to explain my own curious and bothersome failure to see. About ten years ago, I lived in a small apartment in Tel Aviv, Israel just a few minutes walking distance from the beach. The short road from my apartment went up a small hill and through a laid-back park filled with tourists, local families, surfers, dog owners and more. I visited the park very often, at certain times even every day. Like most parks, it had all sorts of slides and swings for children, an area for dogs, picnic tables and more of the kind. And, since it was located on a hill, the view was great, and one could watch the sea for miles in every direction. It was and still is one of my favorite places to visit.

But, besides the sea, the visitors and the nearby luxurious Hilton hotel, I was completely blind to another site that was in the park: an old Palestinian cemetery. Only a few years after moving to the area, a friend casually told me that right at the center of the park, practically on the very path I walked almost every day, there were the remains of a Muslim cemetery. I was certain that this information was either wrong, or, that if the ruins do exist, then they must be somehow covered or carefully hidden. In other words, I assumed that seeing the cemetery was either impossible or that it required special efforts. This was not the case. It took me just another walk in the park to clearly see what had eluded me. The old cemetery was in plain sight, surrounded by a wall no taller than three feet and right on the main path I had taken countless times before. Searching information on the place also proved much easier than I thought. I found out that the cemetery belonged to a small Palestinian village by the name of Summayl, whose residents evacuated in December 1947, fearing a Jewish attack, which indeed arrived not long after the evacuation.¹

In this paper, I search the reasons for my failure to see what was literally right in front of my eyes and the mental and political mechanisms that enabled both my blindness and eventually my clearer sight. Specific attention is given to problematizing the role of ideology in affecting one's vision and registration of objects. Firstly, I present and draw upon Jacques Rancière's concept *the distribution of the sensible* and its specific link to the political.² Then, reading in Rita Felski's recent work on the concept of critique,³ I suggest that the key to a

¹ Benny Morris, *The Birth of the Palestinian Problem Revisited* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 126. The village was also known by the name Al-Mas'udiyya.

² Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. and intro. Gabriel Rockhill (London and New York: Continuum, 2004).

³ Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

clearer sight is rejecting the “hermeneutics of suspicion,”⁴ according to which knowledge is necessarily hidden and must be exposed by the critic. With regards to education, I will ask whether clearer sight can be taught, and suggest a direction for education to facilitate an alternative mode of spectatorship, one that could hopefully lead to better-informed political stands based on a renewed sensible recognition of the excluded. Here again I show that Rancière’s concept of *emancipated spectatorship*⁵ is useful and can help in directing education towards better political awareness without predetermining its objectives. Finally, I argue that moving from suspicion to *attention*, the landscape—no longer an object to be viewed passively on the one hand or to be vertically analyzed in the sense that reality lies *beneath* appearance—can open up to alternative interpretations, actions, and political sensibilities.

So why didn’t I see the cemetery? In the critical tradition, the simple and neat explanation would point to the harmful influence of ideology, in this case nationalism or Zionism. According to the ideology explanation, having been educated in the Israeli education system, I was brought up to believe—or better said, to *know*—that the land of Israel was practically empty before the Jewish people had come back from their long exile, as the famous Zionist saying goes: “a people with no land to a land with no people.”⁶ Palestinian existence, if considered at all, is thus understood as minimal, sporadic and rural. Not exactly what one would expect to find in heavily Jewish populated cities, especially in Tel Aviv, which celebrates itself as the first Hebrew city, the essence of Jewish modernization, a city whose very name is a sign of renewal and novelty (Aviv means spring). Under the influence of ideology, when I walked in the park, not coincidentally named *Independence Park*,⁷ my eyes were covered with the veil of Zionist ideology. I simply could not see anything that contradicted what I knew about reality. Trapped within my so-called “false consciousness,” I could not acknowledge the evidence of past expulsion and suffering of the Palestinians.

There are two main problems with the ideology/false consciousness explanation. First, while convincing, it still does not really explain the mechanisms through which my partial and selective blindness was achieved. Yes, there is a good chance a Palestinian or even a tourist walking in the park would have become aware of the cemetery right away since they were not

⁴ Paul Ricœur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation* (1970; repr. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008).

⁵ Jacques Rancière, *The emancipated spectator* (London: Verso, 2009).

⁶ The phrase is often incorrectly attributed to Theodor Herzl. It was coined, however, by English Christian Zionists, and was later adopted by early Jewish Zionists. Israel Zangwil was the first Jewish Zionist to explicitly use the term in the meaning we understand it today. See: Adam M. Garfinkle, “On the Origin, Meaning, Use and Abuse of a Phrase,” *Middle Eastern Studies*, 27, no. 4 (1991): 539–550.

⁷ I later learned that in both Jerusalem and Haifa (the two other biggest cities in Israel) public parks were built over Palestinian cemeteries. Perhaps not surprisingly, they are also named *Independence Park*.

subjected to the Zionist ideology that seeks to erase the memory of the Nakba. But the question remains: even if we accept ideology as the main factor for this blindness, we should still ask how exactly it works. The comparison between ideology and a veil around one’s eyes or covering objects to be ignored is a useful one, yet we must remember that this is still only a metaphor. The only thing covering my eyes were perhaps sunglasses. Although the remains of the cemetery appeared in my retina, they were not registered in any way. Said differently, my selective political “world view” can indeed be explained by ideology, but my actual view of the world cannot. Moreover, eventually seeing the cemetery was not that difficult. It was, in fact, surprisingly easy—I was told about it and then I went there and saw it. There was no need for a tedious process of critical consciousness raising—perhaps no need for education of any sort. There was in fact nothing hidden.

The second problem with the ideology explanation and especially with “overcoming” ideology is the challenge it poses before educators who seek equality and emancipation. What is implied in the metaphor of the veil is that in order to achieve real understanding of the world or true political sensibility, one’s veil has to be removed from outside, preferably by a critical educator (or any other sort of avant-garde)—that is, by someone who is already at a better or higher state of consciousness. Although ideology can be fought against in this approach, inequality persists and is reconstituted time and again.

In dealing with this problematic of ideology, Jacques Rancière’s concept—*distribution of the sensible*—becomes useful. The distribution of the sensible is “the system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it. . . . [It] reveals who can have a share in what is common.”⁸ All that we perceive through our senses is later distributed with only some of these facts registered as common, becoming then part of the “common sense.” Aesthetics, for Rancière, is tightly connected to politics, not because the latter could censor the former or due to art’s potentially emancipating force, but because aesthetics is “the system of a-priori forms determining what presents itself to sense experience. . . . [and] politics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it.”⁹ Where Aristotle indicated at the beginning of the *Politics* the differences between voice and speech—the first found among animals, the second unique to humans; the former signals just pain and pleasure, the latter indicates what is useful and what is harmful, what is just and unjust¹⁰—Rancière sees only the fact of sound perception as self-evident but not its particular registration as voice or speech. The registration itself is aesthetic and political. Or as philosopher of education Tyson Lewis puts it:

⁸ Rancière, *Politics of Aesthetics*, 12–13.

⁹ Rancière, 13.

¹⁰ Aristotle, *Politics*, book I: part II.

There is an aesthetic organization at the heart of social life—an aesthetics that defines the spaces, places, and modalities of visibility, audibility, and so forth. This partitioning of the sensible means that certain voices are heard as expressing viable political disagreements while others are heard as mere noise . . . In other words, a commonsense hierarchy of the audible and the inaudible, the seen and unseen is constitutive of any given social body.¹¹

As for the case I have just presented, we can say that the cemetery walls and the tombstones were not seen as such. Not paying attention, I indeed saw them, but, for me, they were merely stones lacking any intention or logic, something natural with no particular meaning, blending into the landscape itself and not a properly defined and unique part of it. The existence of a Palestinian cemetery at the very heart of Tel Aviv went against the common sense and was not sensually inscribed within members of my community. It made no sense for a cemetery to be located right in the middle of a place dedicated to leisure, it made no sense for Muslim evidence to be placed in the first Hebrew city, and it did not make any sense for something old to appear where everything was supposed to be new. And it made it to such an extent that my actual sense—vision, in this case—was selectively distributed in a way that conformed to the common sense and “blinded” me from knowing of anything that may challenge it.

Rancière’s analysis enables us to address questions of knowledge, politics, and recognition from outside the critical paradigm of the hidden, outside what was called by Paul Ricœur the “hermeneutics of suspicion.” For Ricœur, what unites the work of Freud, Marx, and Nietzsche is their conviction that radicalism and critique are not just matters of action or argument but mainly of a particular kind of interpretation. In general, he argued that they all shared a view in which the task of the critic is to expose hidden truths and draw out unflattering and counterintuitive meanings that others fail to see.¹² The text, or, in our case, the landscape, is never to be taken at face value but is to be understood as a symptom, mirror, index, or antithesis of some larger social structure, which the critic is supposed to dig up or uncover. In her recent book, literary scholar Rita Felski suggests that this critical suspicion is not only a method of argumentation but a style, a tone or even a mood driven by a spirit of disenchantment. It is a state of mind: “this entrenching of suspicion in turn intensifies the impulse to decipher and decode. The suspicious person is sharp-

¹¹ Tyson E. Lewis, “Jacques Rancière’s Aesthetic Regime and Democratic Education,” *The Journal of Aesthetic Education* 47, no. 2 (2013): 51, 49–70.

¹² Paul Ricœur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation* (1970; repr. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008).

eyed and hyper-alert; mistrustful of appearances, fearful of being duped, she is always on the lookout for concealed threats and discreditable motives.”¹³

The dominant spatial metaphor for this kind of critique is that of a two-level vertical phenomenon (or, in some cases, a multi-level one): appearance and reality, symptom and cause, manifest and latent. Felski: [Critical] reading is imagined as an act of digging down to arrive at a repressed or otherwise obscured reality. Like a valiant archaeologist, the critic excavates a rocky and resistant terrain in order to retrieve, after arduous effort, a highly valued object.¹⁴

Under such conditions, digging is an ethical and political imperative; the role of the critic is not to augment or amplify a text’s apparent meaning but to draw out whatever it refuses to own up to. Appearance is no longer a gateway to a deeper reality but a tactic for screening that reality from view.¹⁵

In their classic analysis of metaphorical language, Lakoff and Johnson address vertical metaphors and, specifically, the important conceptual metaphor “more is up.” Ascending vertically, according to Lakoff and Johnson, is associated with a rise in quantity, in substance and often with a positive value attached to this increase.¹⁶ In critical research, on the other hand, it seems that the dominant conceptual metaphor takes a similar structure yet at an opposite direction and takes the form of “down is more real” or “deeper is truer.” We are asked to dig deeper and therefore reach a better understanding and “get to the bottom” of an issue to truly master it.

Educationally, the critical teacher, like the literary critic, needs to look beneath appearances, uncover truths, and raise his students’ consciousness. The student’s speech is understood as symptomatic of a larger political or social structure, and it is an object for interpretation and remediation. There exists a state of inequality that, in principle, is to be overcome only once the student’s consciousness is raised to the same level as the educator’s. However, the point in time when this is supposed to happen is not clear, as well as the ability of the educator to truly hold a critical position outside the very social order he seeks to find and counter in the student’s speech. In their call for post-critical pedagogy, Hodgson, Vlieghe, and Zamojski rightly stress the problematic position of the educator who exerts “utopian critique, driven from a transcendent position,” unaware of, or perhaps just indifferent to, the fact that his critique itself is a part of the social order.¹⁷ This does not mean that avoiding the critique of ideology or replacing it with something else automatically rids it of the inherent hierarchy between teacher and student. It is important, however, to see that in addition to

¹³ Felski, *Limits of Critique*, 33.

¹⁴ Felski, 53.

¹⁵ Felski, 58.

¹⁶ George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *The Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 23.

¹⁷ Naomi Hodgson, Joris Vlieghe, and Piotr Zamojski, *Manifesto for a Post-Critical Pedagogy* (Punctum Books, 2017), 17.

this built-in hierarchy the practice of symptomatic critique adds a layer of hierarchy according to mastery or proximity to the truth that is not necessary.

There certainly are cases where truth is covered up and calls for this sort of archeological or vertical critique are useful. Some conspiracy theories have proven to be true and sometimes consciousness can indeed be raised by critique of hegemonic beliefs. In other words, sometimes our suspicion is completely justified. However, identifying critique in general or critical education in particular solely with suspicion is misguided. In the “missing cemetery” case, for example, there was absolutely no cover up, no lies or deception, and one need dig up anything. The vertical cover-up paradigm simply does not apply. This does not mean that the education I received, or in general, Zionist education and Zionist landscaping are not fraught with half-truths, cover-ups, decontextualization of historical and present events, and, in some cases, flat-out lies. All of these, however, cannot fully explain my particular inability to see an object which was not covered-up. Yes, the ideology was certainly in the background of my partial and selective sight. Yet, more than believing a lie or being deceived, the exclusion here works through disregard and ignorance.

The second problem with the hermeneutics of suspicion—inequality and unjustified authority—is not Felski’s main concern, and she mainly takes issue with the fact that when critique becomes almost synonymous with suspicion, other forms of reading are excluded. For her, it specifically cuts us off from the genuine strangeness and otherness that a work of art may provoke. However, Felski does question the position of the expert implied in hermeneutics of suspicion. Following Ricœur, she claims that critical suspicion and the practice of unconcealment are putting the everyday consciousness of meaning at odds with a much preferred science of meaning.¹⁸ By “everyday consciousness,” Felski refers to the belief that we look into ourselves and understand ourselves, and that we can read words and absorb the meaning gleaned from them. Simply speaking, it is the belief that by looking at things and at words we can fully understand what they mean—the belief that we are not constantly fooled. The science of meaning rejects this belief:

The task of the social critic is to reverse the falsifications of everyday thought, to ‘unconceal’ what has been concealed, to bring into daylight what has languished in deep shadow. Meaning can be retrieved only after arduous effort; it must be wrested from the text, rather than gleaned from the text. . . . Radical thought is now tied to painstaking acts of interpretation. . . . Meaning must be actively deciphered via the scrutiny of signs . . . Apparent meaning and actual meaning fail to coincide; words disguise rather than disclose; we are entangled and held fast in sticky webs of language whose purposes we barely perceive and dimly comprehend. The

¹⁸ Felski, *Limits of Critique*, 31.

complacency of consciousness—our belief that we can look into our own souls and discern who we really are—is rudely shattered; we remain, it turns out, strangers to ourselves. As Ricœur puts it, the science of meaning is now at odds with the everyday consciousness of meaning.¹⁹

But if true meaning and proper understanding become a scientific question, then experts are needed. Suspicion calls for the authority of the one who knows, and teaching may take on an authoritative form or as Rancière puts it: “where one searches for the hidden beneath the apparent, a position of mastery is established.”²⁰ He goes against Bachelard’s famous claim that “there is no science but the science of the hidden”²¹ and argues that distinctions between mere appearance and concealed truth reflect only the needs of those who benefit from these distinctions—that is, social critics, social scientists, and critical educators. For Rancière, not only does the science of the hidden contribute to mastery and inequality, it is also unnecessary. In fact, the poor, excluded, or oppressed do not need it, and in his book *The Philosopher and his Poor*, he provocatively asks whether “the great mystification of equality of opportunity and inequality of ‘giftedness’ ever existed other than in the trenchant discourse of the demystifiers?”²² From a pedagogical perspective the implications of this seemingly naïve questioning are vast, and indeed Rancière, in the book that followed *The Philosopher and his Poor*, presented what can be seen as a radically egalitarian education. In *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*, Rancière rejected the idea that understanding requires explication and called for a different conception of teaching, one that is not based on a necessary gap of knowledge between teacher and student, or more specifically, one that disconnects the authority of the teacher from his or her knowledge-advantage over the student. For Rancière, all it takes to understand a text is the ability to pay attention to it, imitate and repeat it. What is embodied here is a possible new concept of the very meaning of understanding and the assumption that there is in fact nothing hidden behind the text; there are no “words behind the words, and there is no language that says the truth of language.”²³ In other words, it is not necessary to provide an explanation, and all are equal in their access to the text. It is exactly the social facts of explication, mastery, “false consciousness,” and the assumption of hidden truth to be revealed by expert language that constitutes intellectual inequality. Rancière’s pedagogy,

¹⁹ Felski, 31.

²⁰ Rancière, *Politics of Aesthetics*, 49.

²¹ Jacques Rancière, *The Philosopher and his Poor*, trans. Andrew Parker (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 170.

²² Rancière, *The Philosopher and his Poor*, 250.

²³ Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*, trans. Kristin Ross (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), 24.

or, better said, rejection of pedagogy, raises many problems and interesting paradoxes that are outside the scope of this article. However, it suffices at this point to say that Rancière's view of both education and aesthetics are based on a rejection of "vertical" critique and a science of meaning. Therefore, they can be considered egalitarian in the sense that they allow for equal access to meaning which is not externally mediated or controlled.

If nothing, or, at least, not everything, is hidden, then what should the critical educator do? I suggest that a call for attention is more open and less authoritative than the tendency towards suspicious critique. We can say, at least, that it is authoritative in a different way, a way that is not based on "real" understanding or a higher state of critical consciousness. Ultimately it has a better chance than "consciousness raising" of bringing about knowledge and awareness without creating the same inequalities it wishes to fight.

In *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, Rancière has a strange paragraph that I believe is not cited much if at all, perhaps because it seems that it concerns primarily method. In the paragraph, he describes an egalitarian way to teach painting:

A few days before putting a pencil in his [the student's] hand, we will give him the drawing to look at, and we will ask him to talk about it. Perhaps he will only say a few things at first— for example, "The head is pretty." But we will repeat the exercise; we will show him the same head and ask him to look again and speak again, at the risk of repeating what he already said. Thus he will become more attentive.²⁴

As we see, spectatorship, for Rancière, is not passive but an action. The teacher who wishes to encourage this notion of active spectatorship does two things: he demands speech and he verifies what has been said. What would have happened if someone had asked me, like the ignorant schoolmaster did, to look at the park and describe it? Would I have noticed the cemetery? I believe that even if my "blindness" would have persisted for some time, eventually, maybe only after a few repeated exercises, my spectatorship would have ceased to be passive, and I would have paid attention to what I saw. A call for attention, then, can problematize the act of viewing itself (as well as other sense perceptions) and bring about sight which is never plain but always contested and deeply political. Although in my example proper teaching was not required, it still brings forward two complementary principles that can be applied to teaching: rejecting the vertical characteristics of critique, the idea of the hidden, and the symptomatic reading of students' speech, as well as a call for attention that is practiced through continuous demand for speech and its verification.

But is not a "call for attention" quite similar to "consciousness raising"? Or, perhaps the former is merely a method serving the latter. In both there may still be at least some measure of imposition and both seem to maintain a hierarchy, at least temporarily. I believe, though, that both imposition and inequality that are indeed involved in attention-directed teaching are still very

²⁴ Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, 65–66.

different from the common notion of consciousness raising to be found in critical pedagogy. To begin with, the underlying assumptions of calling for attention and consciousness raising are different. In the critical approach, the student (or the worker “unaware” of the reasons for his own exploitation) is viewed as “not there yet,” his consciousness as deficient and in need of correction. Alternatively, calling one to pay attention does not assume any individual deficiency but an acknowledgement that our attention is always limited and politically shaped. There is no future state in which attention will be deemed “correct” in a similar sense to achieving critical consciousness or becoming “woke.” A redistribution of the sensible that can happen through sensual attention and speech that follows it is important and may have political effects, but it does not constitute a new state of mind. This means that the goals of the two approaches and the teacher’s position respectively are also different—where the critical pedagogy aims at specific knowledge to be gained, the teacher who is calling for attention need not direct towards the “correct” insights or conclusions, and often he does not even need to ask the student to pay attention to a specific object. He could alternatively ask the student to pay attention and talk about his or her surroundings, any piece of art in the museum, or a random book from the library.

Relinquishing control over the object of attention does not take from the teacher’s authority or flatten the inherent hierarchy of the situation. It does, however, change it. Where the authority of the critical pedagogue derives from better knowledge, more experience, and ultimately a higher state of consciousness, or at least a less “false” one, the authority of the teacher who calls for attention is arbitrary and not justified in itself. It stems only from the position of the teacher and not from any of his or her characteristics. In this particular sense, this hierarchy is weaker than the rational and justified authority of the critical pedagogue. Also, while the structural inequality between teacher and student remain intact, there is, or at least should be, absolute equality between them with regards to the phenomenon in question, whether it is the news, a work of art, life in the city, or a poem.

Finally, another difference between the approaches can be found in their view of progress. While Rancière explicitly rejects the idea of Progress,²⁵ critical pedagogy embraces it even though it can view the process of progression as endless and not necessarily linear. Because the process of consciousness raising is progressive and to a large extent incremental, it also reproduces inequality despite the educator’s declared intention. As Rancière showed in the ignorant schoolmaster, it is through the practice of explication that the distance between student and teacher, ignorance and knowledge, and falsity and reality is reconstituted the moment that it seems to be overcome.

Although Rancière emphasizes immediacy over incremental progression, both in its temporal sense and as rejection of a knowledgeable mediator, this does not mean that acquiring knowledge and skills is not

²⁵ Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, 101–139.

important. Formal education is still irreplaceable. As for my own experience, my surprising finding cannot be entirely attributed to my newly given attention as there is plenty of knowledge and skill I had to have in order for the new information to register as it eventually did. I had to know some history of the area, I had to identify both languages, and I had to be able to decode the meaning of at least some of the signs inscribed on the tombs and the cemetery's walls. And it is traditional education that provided me with this necessary background. My aim here is not to claim that "attention" can replace more structural and goal-oriented modes of teaching and learning, but, more modestly, to argue that attention as part of a redistribution of the sensible is a necessary supplement to traditional teaching.

To conclude, we should ask what happens after attention is given and, hopefully, the sensible is redistributed. Of course, there is no direct connection between seeing an injustice and committing to fight it. In the case I discussed here, one could certainly see the cemetery yet remain oblivious to the Palestinian tragedy or even justify it (unfortunately, not an uncommon position in Israel). In that sense, we can certainly regard the state of Israel and its current dominating ideologies as "a particular aesthetic-political regime."²⁶ The important thing is that through attention, this regime can be questioned and undermined. A redistribution of the sensible does not guarantee that further political actions will follow it. It is, however, a necessary first step. Once the limits between the visible and the invisible are questioned so are the limits between the thinkable and the unthinkable, and sensual attention to the actual landscape could then change our political "landscape" of the possible. In the case of Israel/Palestine, the visibility of the Palestinian cemetery and its inclusion in the actual landscape, could perhaps move the viewer to an expansion of the landscape of what is politically possible—a future reality in which the existence of one people does not have to come at the expense of another, a future landscape—visual as well as social—where the old is not hidden or disregarded but is viewed, attended to, morally reflected on, and taken into account. Perhaps then the rise of a new common sense—with an emphasis on it being truly *common* to and shared by all—will no longer be seen as impossible.

²⁶ Gabriel Rockhill, "Translator's Introduction: Jacques Ranciere's Politics of Perception," in *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 1.
