

'Poems From Which We Learned: Fragments on Self-Learning About the Sensible and Politics'

I'd like to say a few words in reaction to Ivana Momcilovic's wonderful new film 'Poems From Which We Learned.' This is only a contingent bricolage of sensations and improvised thoughts rebounding from a first viewing; every viewer will construct their own experience and understanding of this rich and complex film; every repeated viewing will itself serve to construct a new film, to discover unsuspected riches in its rich expanse.

In the very first opening image, we see a quote from Darwin out of focus, and a hand passes before these words to gradually bring them in and out of focus. Already, we experience the imperative interrogation that will structure the filmic movement: what is it to know the idea(s) we already have, to see them clearly, to bring them into distinct focus? We must, Rancière tells us, take our true idea and link it to everything!

To this injunction the film's subtitle links the contingency of the sensible regime, its variable degrees of fogginess and clarity, to the another imperative: to 'learn through abstraction.' How to abstract from the overwhelming ideological overload of lived experience clearly to grasp an idea? How to overcome the ideological numbing and chaos and to grasp the eternity of a true idea such as that of communism?

Which idea? Whose idea? With Rancière, we already know the answer: the idea each of us already has. The problem is not to have an idea, but to accept it, recognize it, and to know that idea clearly and deploy its consequences within our own singular conjuncture. We must, as the recurring image from Leger's film tells us, learn to open our eyes and to see clearly.

But above all, we have no need to wait to receive an idea from an Other. It is as though the thrust of Rancière's insight can be captured in a single proposition. To know a just existence in the future, we must, Rancière tells us, go back in the past. And this idea, the idea of a general and universal intelligence shared by all, surely finds its most lapidary and powerful formulation in one of Spinoza's founding axioms: '*Homo cogitat*', 'humans think' (Spinoza, *Ethics* book II, *De mente*, Axiom 2). No ifs, ands or buts, no some of us, sometimes, some places, some races. It is the essential nature of everyone, everywhere, no matter what their situation, to think.

Who thinks? We do! Thinking is not received from without in miraculous donation from some revered, unmoved mover. To think is the eternal essence of our nature. This is the axiomatic foundation of autonomous, universal learning: anyone, anywhere, anytime, is already thinking. The difficulty is to know that we think, that we are entitled to think, and then to struggle to think ever more clearly and adequately. About whatever concerns us.

And here the film again leads us in the direction of the conquest of our own autonomy; in one of its most pressing images, we read, '*Regarder, c'est choisir*.' To look, to open our eyes, is itself already an operation of distinction, a division of the sensible world, a sorting and judging, a taking and leaving, and at the same time, immediately, it is the thought of that world. To every moment, we bring the operation of critique, the sorting of experience and

the clarification, amplification, development, deployment, and dissemination of thought to every articulation of the conjuncture in which we find ourselves. The problem, the struggle 'Poems from which we learned' sets for us is not to think, not to have a true idea, this we have already, but to think and develop that idea clearly, in all its dimensions and ramification, and to link it to the totality of our conjuncture.

And here, the central moment of the film for this viewer is surely the magnificent, eternal citation from Marx's 1857 Introduction to the Grundrisse, for it is a beautiful, Spinozist thought that Marx articulates. The problem, Marx tells us, of the disjuncture between theory and practice, between abstraction and action, is truly a false problem. We must come to realize that to adequately think a true idea (such as justice as universal equality, and the eternal idea of communism is perhaps nothing less), is one and the same thing as the real sensuous deployment of that idea.

Spinoza again reached this point long before us, in perhaps his most magnificent, astounding proposition: 'The order and connection of thought is one and the same thing as the order and connection of things' (E II, P7). There are not two orders of being, thought and extension; Spinoza refuses this Cartesian mystification. There is only one order of being, and we can grasp that order in sensuous extension, and also, immediately, in thought as a true and adequate idea.

This is the idea of Marx's critique, it is not the Hegelian sham of an idealist fabulation, but the 'thought-concrete' that reproduces the real order of the world in the order of thought. This is the powerful imperative we receive from this joyful freedom of thought, that of Spinoza, of Marx, of Rancière, to reject the discourses of mastery, to recognize that we always already think, that we always already have a true idea, but that this is never sufficient: we must struggle, unendingly, to clarify that idea, to think clearly, distinctly and above all *adequately*, and to multiply that true idea to its infinite ramifications, its manifold implications and consequences.

In doing so, we must always remember that the general, universal unfolding of this imperative, the imperative of universal equality, linked and brought to bear upon every articulation of the horrifically unjust conjuncture in which we have been thrown, is one and the same thing as the revolutionary rearticulation of the world in the order and connection of justice as universal equality.

Nothing less is demanded of us by the joyful science of 'Poems from which we learned.'

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