

## Dora García's Documentary Film *The Joycean Society* (2013)

Sarah Késenne<sup>1</sup>

Universiteit Gent

**Abstract:** This paper examines Dora García's documentary film, *The Joycean Society* (2013), which chronicles a reading group dedicated to the continuous study of James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* for over three decades. The text questions the film's potential political significance in the visual and interpretative capacities of the depicted readers, beyond the film's narrative of highlighting the obscure collective's perpetual analysis of Joyce's work. By introducing the concept of "figuring" through Jacques Rancière's theories on the politics of cinema, the discussion emphasizes the actors' capacities in manifesting visibility in unconventional ways, diverging from the prescribed script. This dynamic interplay between the anticipated and the unforeseen within the visual narrative allows us to consider marginalized perspectives in the script. By analyzing the group's reading practices against the backdrop of their filmic portrayal as a 'therapeutic' enclave, the paper reveals a visual critique that accommodates multiple interpretations and narratives. The film's representation of the reading group's intellectual endeavors reflects the interpretative freedom championed by Joyce in *Finnegans Wake*, juxtaposing pedagogical with political emancipation. This critical approach is facilitated by a threefold analytical framework, identifying "figurative", "argumentative," and "self-referential" entities within the film.

**Key words:** Jacques Rancière, *Finnegans Wake*, reading group, Dora Garcia, figuring, politics of cinema.

Dora García's Documentary Film *The Joycean Society* portrays a reading group in Zurich that has been immersed in a single book for thirty years: James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* (1939), considered a masterpiece of modernism and written in an idiosyncratic language drawing from sixty different languages (McHugh). The film has a duration of just under an hour and showcases one of the eight reading sessions attended by García herself. *The Joycean Society* is the second/third film of a trilogy, embedded in her extensive research on "deviant language and communities," as she herself indicates (García qtd. in an interview with Késenne). The trilogy began with the first film about the anti-psychiatry movement established by psychiatrist Franco Basaglia in Trieste, the northern Italian city where James Joyce also resided for a while. During the recordings of *The deviant majority* (2010) in Trieste, García stumbles upon a statue of Joyce, recalling that the writer lived there for some time. Through a meeting with some Joyce enthusiasts, she indirectly gets in touch with the Zurich Joyce reading group. In *The Joycean Society*, we don't learn much about the background of this reading group, but it seems to be primarily composed

---

<sup>1</sup> Sarah Késenne is an art historian and researcher, teaching at Universiteit Gent and LUCA School of Arts in the Visual Arts department. In 2021, she earned a PhD from KU Leuven on the topics of pedagogic emancipation, the educational turn, the politics of aesthetics (Jacques Rancière), and the work of the artist Dora García. She is especially interested in principles of appropriation in audience participation, interdisciplinarity, counter-hegemonic perspectives in the arts, feminisms and strategies of unlearning and decolonisation. E-mail: sarah.kesenne@luca-arts.be. Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0009-0004-7790-0493>

of several (retired) Joyce enthusiasts and professors. The second film of the trilogy is *The Inadequate* (2011).

*The Joycean Society* primarily focuses on the conversations within the reading group and, of course, the books themselves: well-worn copies filled with notes and loose pages, secondary literature, editions of the original manuscripts with Joyce's annotations. Images of the Thursday-evening ritual are interspersed with interview excerpts featuring Fritz Senn, founder of the Zurich James Joyce Foundation, and Joyce expert Geert Lernout. We also see Joyce's snow-covered grave with his statue, as if he were listening attentively.

What is remarkable is that in some interview segments in the film, the group members emphasize how they view their literary enthusiasm as therapeutic for their "lack of success in life." This story of the reading club as a "deviant community" outside of society, suggests that the film provides the necessary "visibility" to a therapeutic group of "outsiders."

In the current debate on participation and representation in contemporary art, participative strategies are often seen as a means to give "visibility" to socially excluded groups. *The Joycean Society* does not strictly initiate a participative process by the artist, but the discussion group portrays an idealized image of collectivity.

García also refers to the issue of "giving visibility" in the context of her broader body of work. In another artistic project of the artist, "The Hearing Voices Café" (2014-2018), for example, she collaborated with an association of "voice-hearers." In cooperation with art institutions in cities like Berlin, Hamburg, Toronto, and Barcelona, García established a number of these cafes as open meeting places for people who hear voices, their family members, and other interested parties. García built on her interest in the "voice-hearers movement" within the anti-psychiatry groups of the 1970s.

The idea is to create a win-win situation: I have an interest because I want to understand them and want to learn from them, and they have an interest because they like to break their invisibility. The art world offers a lot of visibility. They are happy to step into something in which they are not immediately categorized as marginal. (García qtd. in an interview with Késenne)

Discourse on collectivity in artworks today often displays suspicion regarding the representation, exhibition, or documentation of supposed social or community-forming processes involving socially excluded target groups. There is a fear that the representation of participation is unethical, for example because it would neutralize the community-

forming process into a work of art within the art market. The issue of “giving visibility” can thus be framed within a broader conversation on participation and representation in contemporary art, and within the impasse in which the debate threatens to be stuck: on the one hand, participative strategies are seen as intrinsically community-forming and critically engaging with art institutional exhibition spaces; on the other hand, these processes are still validated as art and function as such within the theatricality of the art world. Therefore, when such images of collectivity are presented to a “second audience” of museum visitors or film viewers, solace is sometimes found in the idea that these works still “give visibility” to socially excluded groups.

However, this article raises the question of whether the supposed contradictions between representation and a collective dimension of art can be seen in a different way and whether the debate on the representation of collectivity in contemporary art can also be understood from a perspective related to political emancipation, an approach that is quite critical of the idea of “giving visibility.”

To explore this, I examined Jacques Rancière’s ideas about the political power of cinematic images, specifically discussed in his books *La fable cinématographique* (2001) and *Les écarts du cinéma* (2011). This text, therefore, also extensively raises the question of a cinema politics arising from a new approach to the concepts of documentary and fiction. Is it possible to envision a politics of representation that does not approach “giving visibility” as a form of anti-aesthetics?

Taking “The Joycean Society” film as a key reference, I will specifically use French philosopher Jacques Rancière’s concept of the “capacity for fiction” of the actors and, based on that, introduce the concept of “figuring” as a critical strategy within the representation debate. Can this analytical tool shed light on the political tension within *The Joycean Society* as an arena in which different types of images and moments contradict each other?

### **Rancière’s politics of cinema: a paradox of argumentative and self-referential images**

Rancière alludes to the issue of “giving visibility” in his book *Les écarts du cinéma*. He does this through an analysis of the film trilogy by director Pedro Costa, which features Cape Verdean immigrants living in a slum in Portugal that is slated for demolition. In response to criticism that Costa might be guilty of “esthétisme indiscret ou populisme invétéré” (140), as he portrays the slum dwelling of the drug-addicted Vanda in a picturesque manner, Rancière poses the following question: “What kind of politics is

at play here, which sets as its objective the recording of a discourse that seems to merely reflect the world's misery?" (140).

Contrary to the criticism of aestheticizing poverty, Rancière asks, "What politics is this, which makes it its task to record or capture, for months and months, the gestures and words that reflect the world's misery?" ("The Politics of Pedro Costa"). Interestingly, Rancière does not see voyeuristic (and paternalistic) representation of existing social inequality in Costa's films, but rather a strength in filming these places "as they are."

À l'accusation d'esthétisme, on peut certes répondre que Pedro Costa a filmé les lieux comme ils étaient ... Après *Ossos*, il a renoncé à composer des décors pour raconter des histoires. Il a renoncé à exploiter la misère comme objet de fiction. Il s'est installé dans ces lieux pour y voir vivre leurs habitants, entendre leur parole, saisir leur secret. La caméra qui joue en virtuose avec les couleurs et les lumières fait corps avec la machine qui donne à leurs actes et à leurs paroles le temps de se déployer. (*Les écarts du cinéma* 139-140).

Filming places "as they are" might be a cliché of the objectifying documentary movement Direct Cinema, but Rancière seems to be saying something different here. He suggests that Costa's generous camerawork creates a new form of openness for the performance of the actors. According to Rancière, Costa's films are not primarily about the poverty and misery of living conditions but rather about how these actors do not quite fit into the space assigned to them, both in reality and cinematically.

These films are not so much about misery as about people not exactly fitting in their space... people who do not seem to be occupying the space... people who fit and do not fit the space. (Rancière qtd. in Debuysere 278)

It is this tension between the "capacity for fiction" of the actors and, on the other hand, the "fiction" of the author-filmmaker that I want to emphasize within Rancière's broader reflection on cinema and documentary. It represents a complex relationship between representation from the author's perspective and non-representative yet figurative elements linked to the performance of the actors (Rancière qtd. in Debuysere 274).

### **The politics of cinema as a tension between argumentation and self-referentiality**

To better understand this tension, I first highlight what Rancière understands by "the politics of cinema". In books such as *Les écarts du cinéma* and *La fable*

*cinématographique*, the philosopher polemically relates to the big modernist models of political theatre and political film such as those of Bertolt Brecht and Jean-Luc Godard. According to Rancière, Godard, with his dialectical image montages, would be guilty of a “pedagogical” approach, by wanting to convey political ideals through an anti-representational montage, often inspired by a Marxist ideology.

Of note here is that for Rancière, the political potential of art lies in a kind of “open work of art”, where the materiality of a work of art can neutralise the ideas behind it. This potentially enables free thinking on the part of spectators. Essentially, art is political if there is just a tension between form and subject, not if the form has to illustrate the subject, as Rancière believes to be present with Brecht and Godard. But this is not the whole story. With regard to these models of anti-representative modern art, cinema, according to Rancière, assumes a corrective role, and that mainly through the part played by the auto-recording camera. In his essay on Chris Marker’s film *Le Tombeau d’Alexandre* (1992) in *La fable cinématographique*, Rancière argues that the political potential of this film does not lie in pure formal experimentation. Rather, the politics of this film comes from a tension between self-referential image elements related to automatic camera registration, and other images that support the author’s ideas and argument. Political cinema, therefore, in Rancière’s eyes, certainly does not lie in the transmission of the director’s political ideals, but in the contrast between, on the one hand, the authorial intention, narrativity or “argumentation” of a film (often through the editing or commentary voice) and, on the other hand, what he calls the “automatisme cinématographique” or “l’oeil passif et automatique de la caméra” (157). The camera thereby neutralises the director’s ideas. The philosopher defines cinema from there as a conflict of two “poetics”: “Combinaison d’un regard d’artiste qui décide et d’un regard machinique qui enregistre, combinaison d’images construites et d’images subies” (205).

### **The politics of “the documentary”: testimony to the neglected**

But this contradiction between camera and author within the politics of films is always linked with a contradiction to the dominant democratic thinking for Rancière. Before going deeper into the emancipatory value of “a capacity for fiction” within this politics, it is therefore important to stress here now that Rancière articulates the politics of cinema essentially as “a testimony of the neglected”. This, according to him, has to do with the reality construction within the documentary properties of the image. In this context, Rancière seems to assume that the cinematic elements that serve the author’s argument, irrevocably

represent existing social norms, while according to him, machine-generated camera images have the very potential to investigate and rethink this normativity, something that could also be called “documentary” (an issue discussed in more detail later in this article). In general, one could say that the political in Rancière consists in breaking through dominant ideas and (artistic) conventions by an “unclassifiable speech.” According to Rancière, documentaries thus also have more political potential than fiction films, not because they represent reality more “realistically” as people usually think, but quite the opposite:

What is important in a documentary is that it is a kind of fiction in which you don't have to make it as if it were real. This shift is important: the point is not to create credible characters, situations and connections between events, because in a way they are real, so you don't have to prove that they are possible. ... The question is not “Is it real?” but “How is it real?,” “What kind of reality is at play here?” or “What does this kind of reality mean?”. (Rancière qtd. in Debuysere 272)

From this, one can infer that, according to Rancière, documentaries do not depict reality as it is, that they are not concerned with the question “is this the existing-social reality” or “does the film depict reality as it truly is?”. Documentaries are then rather privileged in an *examination* of reality, which for Rancière always seems to come down to the question: is it possible to be equal within the existing exclusionary reality? From this privileged position of the documentary medium, the question then follows not whether there is staging or not, but rather what is neglected or excluded within the constructed reality. Documentaries are then not concerned with accurately representing or not representing social reality (not staging or representing), but rather with investigating and “witnessing” what is actually not represented within it. The political potential of the documentary then lies in how it gives visibility to what and who within social reality is usually forgotten, denied or neglected (*La fable cinématographique* 202). This means that films can bear witness to what is unrepresented within prevailing norms and values, that they “bear witness to the neglected”. Rancière’s politics of film thus certainly does not coincide with the socio-critical positions of directors or screenwriters. Rather, this has to do with the documentary qualities of cinema and performances by actors exploring their deviation from existing normativity.

**“Their own way of being in front of the camera”: “fictionalizing capacities” as emancipation within the political image**

The deeper meaning of this politics of the documentary then has to do with what can be translated as the “fictionalizing capacities” of actors. In relation to the documentary properties of the image, Rancière describes as follows “the capacity of fictionalizing of speaking bodies” as a specific process of fictionalization “that belongs to everyone” (Rancière qtd. in Debuysere 273). These “fictionalizing capacities” of actors contradict “the author’s fiction” (273).<sup>2</sup> Rancière’s notion of “bodies with fictionalizing capacities” again stems from his particular approach to the difference between fiction and documentary: fiction films are more “real” (read: normative) than documentaries because they represent existing social reality through stereotyped characters and socially recognizable identities. Or vice versa: documentaries leave more room for “fictional intervention” because the actors play themselves:

Et le cinéma documentaire, le cinéma voué au “réel” est, en ce sens, capable d’une intervention fictionnelle plus forte que le cinéma “de fiction”, aisément voué à une certaine stéréotypie des actions et des caractères. (*Le partage du sensible* 60)

The bodies of actors in films are therefore for Rancière related to a “capacity for fiction” or “emancipatory capacities,” and this turns out to be a central element in his politics of cinema. According to Rancière, it is not about the question “which body to use to represent a particular thought?” (*Les écarts du cinéma* 12-13). Indeed, this question supports what he calls “pedagogical” logic about how one uses the image to represent a particular ideological thought or political ideal. According to Rancière, it is about the way in which the author and the actors within the image each have an autonomy of their own that is incompatible.

Avec quel corps peut-on transmettre la puissance d’un texte, c’est aussi le problème de Rossellini. ... La difficulté ne tient pas, comme l’opinion en prévaut, à ce que la platitude de l’image est rétive aux profondeurs de la pensée, mais à ce qu’on établisse entre elles un simple rapport de cause à effet. (*Les écarts du cinéma* 12-13)

---

<sup>2</sup> Jacques Rancière used the term “a capacity for fiction” in a public conversation with film programmer Stoffel Debuysere, the English transcript of which can be found in Debuysere’s dissertation. “Capacity” is likely Rancière’s own translation of the French term “*pouvoir*,” which he sometimes mentions in fragments of *La fable cinématographique* and *Les écarts du cinéma*. As is often the case with the philosopher, this is not a fundamental concept that he rigorously deploys and determines. At the same time, the concept of “*pouvoir*” seems implicitly crucial within his thinking about equality and emancipation, for example, in his central book *Le maître ignorant* (2009), where the concept appears (54-58). I follow the Dutch translations of the term in *La fable cinématographique* (2010) and *Le maître ignorant* (2007) by opting for the term “capacities” for Rancière’s term “*pouvoir*” in this text.

The politics of cinema, according to Rancière, receives an important interpretation from the “performance of autonomous bodies” of the actors, which lies in the “power of speech” (*Les écarts du cinéma* 130-31). In the films of Abbas Kiarostami, for example, he sees how non-professional actors “are present in front of the camera in their own way in which one follows one’s own stories.”

We also have a striking example in the films of Abbas Kiarostami. In most of his films there is precisely a kind of tension - sometimes it’s tension, sometimes it’s collaboration - between the design of the filmmaker and this capacity of anyone to build a fiction. ... If you think of the films about the young boys and what happens in the villages after the earthquake, you have always this tension between the work of the filmmaker and this capacity of all the boys and girls of these faraway villages who want to have their characters, their own way of being in front of the camera that follows their own stories. (Rancière in Debuysere 274)

In short, these “fictionalizing capacities” indicate that although the director puts words into the actors’ mouths, their performances always express something else than what the images are trying to tell. What is important here is that “fictionalizing” does not stand for an imaginary world separate from reality, but concerns the abilities that everyone has to express themselves. “Fiction” approaches Rancière as a concept that can be understood as one way or system of ordering reality. From here one can understand “fiction” in two ways: on the one hand as a normative way of thinking or speaking which excludes other ways of expression, but one can also say that on the other hand Rancière also emphasizes the constructive, emancipating meaning of “fiction”, as a new way of thinking and speaking which can break through this first fiction (the existing social order). It is in this second sense that Rancière speaks of what can be translated as “fictionalizing capacities” and the potential for political contradiction and transformation of reality (*La fable cinématographique* 202-201, *Modern Times* 13).

These “fictionalizing capacities” can then be formulated as an emancipatory dimension of the political image. “Playing oneself,” for example within Costa’s trilogy, then means that the actors within these films are able to “reinvent themselves,” “abilities” that could be called “emancipatory.

These characters are restaging themselves, as performance and in doing so, by aesthetic invention and transformation also transform their own life ... In fiction precisely there is an effort of making something of his or her own life. (Rancière in Debuysere 274- 275)



Of interest now for the question of “giving visibility” is that Rancière distinguishes two kinds of “visibility” in films, based on these two meanings of fiction:

À l’inverse, le cinéma, quel que soit l’effort pour l’intellectualiser, a partie liée avec le visible des corps parlants et des choses dont ils parlent. De là se déduisent deux effets contradictoires: l’un est d’intensifier le visible de la parole, des corps qui la portent et des choses dont ils parlent; l’autre est d’intensifier le visible comme ce qui dénie la parole ou montre l’absence de ce dont elle parle. (*Les écarts du cinéma* 117)

In other words, the political potential of film images can be understood as an opposition between two types of fictions: on the one hand, the script gives visibility to the author’s thinking; on the other hand, “emancipatory capacities” that contradict this first visibility can become visible. Both “effects” are part of the politics of film. Rancière sometimes uses in relation to this the metaphor of a “ripple on the surface of the water,” something that can be understood as an image that on the one hand is a surface, mirroring someone’s thinking, but on the other hand is also a ripple, namely a self-referential, almost sculptural form that breaks through the image. Films, according to Rancière, can therefore not only represent existing injustices, but are themselves the realization of an alternative reality.

Le même cinéma qui dit au nom des révoltés “Demain nous appartient” marque aussi qu’il ne peut pas offrir d’autres lendemains que les siens. ... D’un côté le cinéma participe au combat pour l’émancipation, de l’autre il se dissipe en cercles à la surface d’un lac. (*Les écarts du cinéma* 21-22)

In summary, one can conceive the politics of film in this way from this rupture of actors with the “visibility” envisioned by a director, but this political rupture also goes hand in hand with a productive “visibility” of these actors. Based on this ambiguity peculiar to performance and acting, I would now like to propose the concept of “figuring”. This is a concept that represents the dialectics between, on the one hand, performing or interpreting the script or the argumentation of the author-director (“staging”) and, at the same time, performing as “playing oneself” (“self staging”). Importantly, this “playing oneself” does not mean that actors represent their “real,” autobiographical social identity in contradiction to the script, but concerns the experience of the moment of performance itself. In doing so, I want to emphasize the potential of “emancipatory” production of fiction among participants or actors and their commitment to the conditions that a work of art or film places on them.

## **“Is this figuring?” A tool of analysis on a scale of self-referentiality: argumentative, figurative and self-referential bodies**

Rancière further develops his thinking around “a capacity for fiction” within concrete film analysis when he implicitly makes divisions between different kinds of bodies that embody the paradoxical relationship between the script and “speaking” bodies (and that between word and image) in different ways each time. Thus, on this basis, one can develop an analytical tool that can also be used for other films, plays or participatory projects. As different gradations on a scale of self-referentiality, one can almost employ these three categories as a barometer of the political dimension of figurative artworks, and thus here as a tool of analysis for *The Joycean Society*. “Argumentative bodies” are representational visual elements or cinematic moments where the body is almost didactic and illustrative in function of the author’s argument or script. In this sense, they often represent stereotypical characters or recognizable social identities, so that there is “giving visibility” where the “neglected” just remains invisible. With “figurative bodies,” there is a tension between image/body and argumentation, as well as between figurative and non-representational elements within the image, as a form of political emancipation related to the capacities of actors in performance or performance. The functioning of these images consists in a confrontation with what cannot be communicated, allowing a visibility of “the neglected” (*La fable cinématographique* 202).

In “figurative bodies” there is a tension between image/body and argumentation, but also between figurative and non-representational elements within the image, as a form of political emancipation related to the abilities of actors in performance or performance. The functioning of these images consists in a confrontation with what cannot be communicated, allowing a visibility of “the neglected” (*La fable cinématographique* 202). “Self-referential bodies” represent autonomous, almost formalistic images, where nothing is communicated or represented anymore. One can think of them as the opposite of “argumentative bodies,” something Rancière articulates as “la pure performance” (*Les écarts du cinéma* 20).

For example, these may be autobiographical bodies that refer only to themselves. These visual elements slip into a powerless image that is no longer able to address injustice. The neglected also remain invisible here. Such bodies no longer interrupt the dominant regime of visibility of social reality, but only prove “unrepresentable”. In what follows, I implement Rancière’s distinction of bodies and his conception of the political within *The Joycean Society*, more specifically from the central question, “Is there ‘figuring’ in *The*

*Joycean Society*?", and thus not "does the reading circle gain visibility through this film?" In other words, to what extent can one speak of "arguing bodies", "figuring bodies" or "self-referential bodies"? This triadicty makes it possible to show the central question of "is this figuring?" from its political paradoxicality, in other words specifically allowing the tension in the film to surface, as an arena within which different kinds of images and moments contradict each other.

### ***The Joycean Society***

The Joycean Society is a rewarding case to explore a tension between argumentation and self-referentiality. *Finnegans Wake* is probably considered a modernist high point precisely because Joyce drove the idea of self-referentiality within literature to the top. The non-existent, Joyce-invented language has become almost entirely form or signifier. It is detached from conventional and agreed meanings in order to surrender it to total ambiguity. Probably Joyce's aim in doing so was to provide proof of the "poetic" ambiguity of literature. As an experiment in form, *Finnegans Wake* leans towards Godard's utopia of "pure cinema." From the question of "figuring," however, *The Joycean Society* is not approached as a kind of adaptation of *Finnegans Wake*, but rather emerges from the dedication of the reading group to "reading". The tension between *Finnegans Wake*, on the one hand, and García's script or agenda, on the other, plays a role. The artist thus invites us to a table in an old library room in an attic in Zurich, with church bells tolling in the background. In the room there is a warm atmosphere among old acquaintances, and many jokes are made. The camera is close to the books, hands, faces; we do not see the artist herself.

### **Argumentative bodies: faces bent over books**

Many viewers will remember *The Joycean Society* as "a movie about Joyce," the "frozen bodies" of table-clothed readers fascinated by the contents of the masterpiece. The readers are akin to miniaturists, copying and "illuminating" an almost centuries-old book. A first question that clearly arises is to what extent these bodies illustrate the book and to what extent the film emerges as an homage to Joyce and *Finnegans Wake*? At first glance, the film certainly contains imagery that follows the script and places reading in function of *Finnegans Wake* as a literary highlight. The edition is literally in the middle of the table in this film, the pellicule seems almost imprinted with lying around copies of all

manner of literature by and about Joyce. The action of the film is thus essentially focused on the reading of the written text, “following the sentences with the finger.” The film’s narrative quest unwinds as a search for the meaning Joyce himself envisioned. García also depicts the author as a statue, again emphasizing the status the author achieved: Joyce is a monument, part of the cultural heritage. The camera goes around the room toward the end of the film, showing the maps of Dublin on the wall, the bookshelves with biographies of Joyce and all sorts of secondary literature and other forms of documentation on the author’s book. Such accessories illustrate Joyce and modernism almost as a tourist haven and affirm him as an “author,” the writer as an innovative thinker who was ahead of his time and inspired generations of artists and readers. The “argumentative” character is driven to the top here, almost as a kind of formalism of the word.

Therefore, one could argue that *Finnegans Wake* is not even primarily illustrated by this poor aesthetic of “talking heads,” the austere images of talking men and women. It is mainly the moments when one bows one’s head to read in silence in the book that we could talk of argumentative bodies. This relationship between the faces and the pages of the book is very important in the film, and you can see them as a metaphor of the tension between performance and script.

The question of how the text dominates the image in this film poses itself not only at the level of the relationship between the readers and Joyce’s book, but also in terms of the relationship between the readers and Dora García’s intentions as a film *auteur*. What story is she trying to tell through editing, what emotion is she trying to convey? The question that now emerges is no longer whether the readers are “miniaturists,” but to what extent they themselves are “marginalia”. The notes in the margins of thumb-ed manuscripts as we see them a lot in the film are strikingly in line with the vocabulary of García’s long-running “Mad Marginal” research in which she explores the conditions of marginalities’ radicality. If you add the voluminous “Mad Marginal” publications (2010 and 2011), it becomes clear how much Joyce formed a kind of intersection between different interests and lines within Dora García’s research. One can almost sense from there the *trouvaille*, the happy discovery of the reading group. In the figure of Joyce, García’s interests around outsider artists, literature and psychoanalysis come together, and the reading group also fits squarely into the research on the spectator within her oeuvre. Important to consider then, is to what extent do the readers’ bodies illustrate these underlying interests and motifs from the artist’s oeuvre? Certain interview excerpts seem crucial here, as when Fritz Senn, as the driving force behind the reading circle, refers to the “therapeutic effect” of reading *Finnegans Wake*. His statements, as

a commentary on the other images, literally have a strong “argumentative force,” as if they were the author’s own voice-over:

In some sense we’re also a therapy group. I don’t just mean it ironically; maybe this is more helpful than other therapy forms where you have to pay for. Maybe it’s a substitute for people who are not very successful in life, like me. At least you can interact with a text. If we were happier, we would be bankers or have emotionally full lives. ... Maybe culture is, like Freud said, a substitute for pleasures that are denied to some of us for many reasons. (*The Joycean Society*)

This theme of reading as a therapeutic activity for “those who do not succeed in life” may explain García’s interest in the reading circle, as it is also contextualized in the “Mad Marginal” publications: reading on the margins is at the same time a way to get a grip on reality. For example, through these readers, García connects her fascination around “graphomania,” namely the manic writing of outsider authors such as Robert Walser with his “microscripts”, to the avant-gardist Joyce. Here writing emerges as something that starts from a psychological urgency and is seen psychoanalytically as a kind of symptom or substitute for reality, a theme García also engages in her later work, *The Sinthome Score* (2013). In *The Joycean Society*, García relates this writing “from the margins” as a way to avoid falling into psychosis to the “radical writing” of modernist innovators such as Joyce. *The Joycean Society* takes a remarkably clear position within these motifs of García’s research, succeeding in making her thoughts and motives understandable to a potentially wide audience. This observation contrasts with the criticism levied against García’s sometimes hermetic long-running performance projects such as *The Inadequate* (2011) or *Die Klau Mich Show* (2012). The readers’ bodies can thus be called “argumentative” if they represent the identity of “people who deviate”. Thus, while these interview excerpts may make the film read as socially critical, as “argumentative” cinematic elements they just get in the way of the film’s political potential. Moreover, when the film emphasizes the chronological, linear and cinematically structured montage time, this “time of the author” comes to the fore. As readers progress through the book, it is not the time of performance, but the time of Joyce and García’s story.



Figure 1: Fritz Senn and bookshelves in the reading room of the Zurich James Joyce Foundation. *The Joycean Society* (2013), Dora García, Courtesy Michel Rein & Ellen de Bruijne projects.

### **Figuring bodies: faces looking at books**

But these images of bodies bowing to the text are only part of the story. The dominant place of the book in the film, as well as Dora García's motifs, are clearly in tension with the "figuring" of readers and the way the film conceptualizes interpretive freedom. To what extent, in other words, within *The Joycean Society* is there "figuring" as an experience of potentiality related to reading? A structure emerges in the film in which the downward search for meaning in the books, of turning pages, invariably culminates in looking up and freely associating and interpreting. That tension is contained in the image of the open books on the table, which, however, are not being looked at (figure 2).

The sharpness of *The Joycean Society* thus lies in the "interpretive excess" of the text. "The easiest way to answer the question, "what is *Finnegans Wake* about?" is to say "everything." And this is no metaphor, it really is about everything," said García ("A Conversation Anna Daneri" 124). Joyce's constructed language in *Finnegans Wake* is so open in meaning (and incomprehensible) that it allows for an infinite number of interpretations, actually as many as readers exist. This gives the text a performative and repetitive character, like a book without end or a religious text. When the conversation about a word in the reading group ends in silence, after thirty years of reading, translating

and commenting, one still sighs “You can’t prove it,” as if longing for closure from the dead writer Joyce. But the crammed notebooks show how much the manuscript invites personal exegesis.



Figure 2: The unlooked-at book. (*The Joycean Society*)

The “marginalia,” the readers’ blasphemous notes that nearly burst out of the margin of the books, rampantly taking over the pages, are a score of the productivity and endlessness of repeatedly adding new layers of interpretation. Like the equalizing camera movement between books, bodies and hands, the doodles of readers are shown alongside Joyce’s own sloppy handwriting, without visual hierarchy. In the film, this is not just about Joyce’s “fictionalizing capacities,” but also about those of the readers. The readers’ imaginations and interpretations here align with Joyce’s imagination. The indecipherability of Joyce’s texts thus simultaneously represents an open, democratic character. Moreover, the infinite interpretive horizon of *Finnegans Wake* suggests that these are within everyone’s reach.

The almost conversational nature of these notes in the books is an extension of the important part of the voice in *The Joycean Society*; the voices of the readers reading aloud to each other, moving away from those of Joyce and García and carrying the film. “Le plaisir du texte”, to bring up Roland Barthes’ phrase, is central to *The Joycean Society*, and so often this lies in the reading aloud. *Finnegans Wake*’s words, by the way, are pre-language, childlike, primitive jingles with the rhythm of a song or “slang” anyway. The voice, however, is not only an ode to the freedom of interpretation to which the book *Finnegans Wake* invites, but also represents the freedom of interpretation that continues on the level of the documentary *The Joycean Society*.

Dora García herself compares the pleasure of speaking to the “glossolalia” of schizophrenic speech, or speaking foreign languages in ecstasy (“A conversation Anna Daneri” 126). The voice takes on a cognitive, interpretive function that we are not used

to, Emiliano Battista says about this in the publication that came out with the film (*The Reading Voice* 149). So, speaking certainly adds to interpretation; it relegates the author's written text to the background in favor of speaking and interpreting by the reader. Even when readers read verbatim from the book, these are not "argumentative bodies" in function of a representation of Joyce's book; on the contrary, often these are moments when the pleasure of the signifier, the meaningless sound of words, prevails. When someone in the reading group rhythmically reads out a paragraph, Senn welcomes this with delight: "You'd make a good pope, well done!" Against the monotonous images of faces, books and hands, the omnipresent voice embodies this interpretive freedom, some of which may have already been in the book, but whose "execution" cannot be controlled. Consider, for example, the jesting tone, self-deprecation and irony within the reading group. The voice, then, is the instrument par excellence through which readers "figure": speaking gives expression to the words, but at the same time it makes their capacities visible.



Figure 3: Readers in the reading room of the Zurich James Joyce Foundation. *The Joycean Society* (2013), Dora García, Courtesy Michel Rein & Ellen de Bruijne projects.

Based on this "reading as reading," then, it seems possible to speak of "figuring bodies. Reading gains meaning primarily from this engagement with the experience of reading rather than a rejection of the book. Thus it can be said that in *The Joycean*



*Society* we can perhaps speak more of “emancipatory capacities” rather than a ‘political’ critique towards the author. Whereas the voice in documentary cinema as voiceover or commentary voice usually embodies the author’s argument, in *The Joycean Society* the voice confers on everyone “the dignity of fiction” as Rancière would say (“Jacques Rancière and Interdisciplinarity” 1-10). *Finnegans Wake*, as a script, is an occasion for this exegesis, makes it possible to escape the logic of artworks that want you to feel and think the same as the artist. “*Finnegans Wake* is not an ideology, you just have to see how far you can get with it,” emphasizes literary scholar Geert Lernout in the film. And apparently you can get far with it, because while Joyce himself spent seventeen years writing *Finnegans Wake* and Erik Bindervoet and Robbert-Jan Henkes, for example, another seven years to translate it into Dutch (Joyce, 2002), the reading group in Zurich took eleven years to complete a first reading cycle, and has been reading for thirty years. The film thus certainly creates a sense of timelessness, with the attic room as a kind of time capsule in which time seems to stand still. Against the freezing of bodies in cinematic time, rather a “cyclical” time prevails in *The Joycean Society*, where Joyce is read over and over again and where interpretation does not lead to final conclusions. In the face of the narrative linearity implied by the medium of cinema, Joyce’s language just asks readers to dwell on each word; “all small items” sighs someone in the group. For example, many enumerations of proper names appear in the passages read in the film, women’s names, such as “Simpatica Shoan,” or “Snakeshead Lily,” or geographically inspired terms that Joyce “harvested” within encyclopedias about Dublin, as the film says.

This infinitely continuous cyclical time is the time of “figuring,” of a speaking and associating that does not necessarily produce meaning, a reading for the sake of reading, where it is primarily the capacities to read and speak themselves that become visible. Certain cinematic elements prompted a better understanding of the specific relationship between the emancipation and politics of the film. For instance, when this speaking in “loop” is interrupted by the minute of silence requested by Dora García, the reading group teasingly responds, “We still need some silence after all the talking, we have to sit silently. It’s not fair actually”. One has already demonstrated their abilities and must now also “be able to be silent.” However, the statement also suggests that the political contradiction of this film may lie more in an (emancipatory) engagement with the performance of reading, which is also “reading in a film.”

Another intervention that makes representation explicit is the portrayal of the sound technician. However, these two moments do not function here as a Brechtian

revelation of theatrical absorption but rather contradict the fiction of the author with the fiction of the readers, as something necessary for the political functioning of the film. But this contradiction between bodies and script also reveals something other than the “ability to speak,” which has to do with a tension between this “time of reading,” “the time of the author,” and “the time of the viewer.”

The emancipatory “time of reading” means that for some in the reading circle, it is not even about reading the book but rather simply “being present” at the time of the performance without any action, “being in one’s time.” For example, you see an elderly reader peacefully dozing off. This infinite, cyclical time of playful and purposeless reading conveys a relaxed slowness associated with a time for reflection that one appropriates. However, this time becomes clear only because it contrasts with the time brought by Dora García, which is also our time: a hurried time, a lack of time. The ringing bells remind the viewer of the contemporary. At the beginning of the film, a woman talks about the commercial success of the British artist Damien Hirst: “you become disconnected from everything which enables you to create.” This may not only be understood as the artist should not lose contact with daily life but also that he must cherish this “slowness” that provides time for reflection, something that is also the richness and freedom of this reading group.

The politics of *The Joycean Society* lies in the fact that this emancipatory time for reflection can only become visible through the confrontation with the hurried clock time of society, which is also the time of “contemporary art.” The becoming visible of the “neglected,” the “absence,” can only be understandable and palpable to us as something we have forgotten. This has to do with looking at something that simultaneously takes place within and outside our time. The confrontation between something strongly present and something that is not makes “what is not there” visible as a form of presence. The cyclical time of the group only becomes visible because García directs her camera towards it, turning the aimless flipping through the books into a form of directed action.

Laughing at time and one’s own old age is also a significant motif in *The Joycean Society*: “Jesus, I used to run up these stairs forty years ago!” as someone arrives exhausted, “forty years is recent to me,” and “You can’t send them home after eleven years,” says Fritz Senn, describing how long the group has existed. They seem to anticipate the viewer’s gaze but do not experience this old age as a loss because it brings with it a “different” perspective that may be unavailable in other life stages. The political aspect is not the ageless, cyclical time of emancipation but the paused time of reflection and inquiry. The readers’ old age does not illustrate the past; as “old bodies,” they resist “narrative action.”

Joyce's "unconsumable" book thus comes to the forefront as the basis for a potential experience in which the viewer is confronted with a certain absence.

### **Self-referential bodies: faces as closed books**

Ultimately, the question remains whether in *The Joycean Society* there are moments where the tension between argumentation and self-referentiality transitions into purely autonomous, imaginary bodies or images that no longer have anything to share, where nothing becomes visible for a longer period. Instead of open books from which one departs and to which one returns, here it is 'books closed': faces with closed eyes, bodies that we no longer understand, a speech that is about nothing anymore. Can acting as a form of emancipation mean, in other words, that essentially nothing is communicated, that "it stays within the group"? Can an artwork actually be limited to "emancipatory capacities," or is it more "political"?

"What a terrible book this is!" exclaims one of the readers. It is essential, however, to see how the film also portrays a challenging process of interpretation that leads to nothing, and there is no real dialogue or conversation around the table. Ideas are brought up and fade away. Emiliano Battista writes in that sense about "failure" as a significant experience when reading *Finnegans Wake* (*The Reading Voice* 148). In an interview fragment in the film, Geert Lernout says that the difficult and slow reading is provoked by the disrupted syntax, multilingual word structures, and hybrid language forms of *Finnegans Wake* – "as if Joyce wanted to exhaust language." García also readily admits about the film that "to destroy language, that seems like the perfect subject for me" (*A Conversation with Anna Daneri* 124). Perhaps, this is also a way to interpret the statement about Damien Hirst: artists who are cut off from social reality lose their expressive power. Maybe Joyce had this in mind: "pure performance," where playing with the form of language also results in the destruction of language; language as an open wound. So, one can question whether the film, with its focus on reading, is not equally about the failure of reading?



Figure 4: Snow-covered Joyce statue at his grave in the Fluntern Cemetery, Zurich. *The Joycean Society* (2013), Dora García, Courtesy Michel Rein & Ellen de Bruijne projects.

Characteristic here is how the words of *Finnegans Wake* are “open signifiers,” which does not necessarily lead to poetic or existential insights, but how they are often reduced to sexist and ribald clichés in the reading group. In other words, exclusive categories are often established based on the ambiguity of language. As self-referential bodies, they seem to tell us nothing new about our time and devolve into meaningless stereotypes. We can only look from our time’s perspective, no longer in confrontation with that of the readers, and perhaps, we only see an aging men’s club for which empathy can be difficult to muster.

However, a strategy of anticipating and then executing failure is not real failure, and it is not difficult to see the apparent irony with which Joyce’s language experiment was accompanied—an irony that also plays a significant role in García’s film. This is possible because this failure of meaning is not real failure; the play with self-referential language also points to “fictionalizing capacities.”

Ultimately, in this article, we can conclude that, in *The Joycean Society*, the true radicalism of the reading group becomes visible precisely in the deviation from the proposed narrative of a “deviant community.” This ‘new story’ seems to be related to the sometimes undervalued value of interpretive abilities. The analytical tool of argumentative, figural, and self-referential bodies proposed in this article is a way to bring out this kind of paradoxical dynamic within artworks.

## REFERENCES

Battista, Emiliano. “*The Reading Voice: Finnegans Wake and Lacan’s Seminars*”. *The Joycean Society*, edited by Dora García, Monaco, Foundation Prince Pierre, Silvana Editoriale Spa, 2013.

Debuysere, Stoffel. “Figures of dissent. Cinema of politics/Politics of cinema”. *On the Borders of Fiction. Conversation with Jacques Rancière*, Gent, AraMer & Mer, 2016.

García, Dora. “‘...brings us by a commodius vicus or recirculation back to...’ A conversation

between Anna Daneri and Dora García on The Joycean Society”. *The Joycean Society*, edited by Dora García. Monaco, Foundation Prince Pierre, Silvana Editoriale Spa, 2013.

García, Dora. *The Joycean Society*. Auguste Orts, 2013. Duration: 55’.

García, Dora, editor. *Mad marginal cahier #1, From Basaglia to Brazil*. Milan, Fondazione Galleria Civica di Trento Mousse, 2010.

García, Dora, editor. *Mad marginal cahier #2, The inadequate*. Berlin, Sternberg Press, 2011.

Joyce, James. *Finnegans Wake*. Translated by Erik Bindervoet and Robbert-Jan Henkes, Amsterdam, Athenaeum-Polak & Van Gennep, 2002.

Késenne, Sarah. *Interview met Dora García*. Oostende, Vrijstaat O., 21 May 2016.

McHugh, Roland, editor. *Annotations to Finnegans Wake*. Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991.

Rancière, Jacques. *Les écarts du cinéma*. Paris: La Fabrique-éditions, 2011.

Rancière, Jacques. *De fabel van de cinema*. Vert. Aukje van Rooden en Walter van der Star. Amsterdam, Octavo, 2010.

Rancière, Jacques. *La fable cinématographique*. Lonrai, Éditions du Seuil, 2001.

Rancière, Jacques. “Jacques Rancière and Interdisciplinarity”. Vert. Gregory Elliot. *Art & Research*, 2:1 (2008): 1–10.

Rancière, Jacques. *Le maître ignorant. Cinq leçons sur l’émancipation intellectuelle*. Saint-amand-Montrond, Éditions 10/18, 2009.

Rancière, Jacques. *Modern times. Essays on Temporality in Art and Politics*. Zagreb: Multimedijalni institut, 2017.

Rancière, Jacques. *De onwetende meester. Vijf lessen over intellectuele emancipatie*. Vert. Jan Masschelein. Leuven, Acco, 2007.

Rancière, Jacques. *Le partage du sensible. Esthétique et politique*. Paris, La Fabrique-éditions, 2000.

Rancière, Jacques. “De politiek van Pedro Costa”. Vert. Jan Masschelein. *Sabzian*, 2 Feb. 2014, [sabzian.be/article/de-politiek-van-pedro-costa](http://sabzian.be/article/de-politiek-van-pedro-costa). Geraadpleegd op 2 maart 2017.

