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Which Intelligible Words? Reading Femicide Through Rancière's Concept of 'La Mésestente'

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Abstract: While Jacques Rancière's concept of the political, democracy, emancipation, equality and aesthetic have significantly (re)shaped many recent debates, his notion of dis-agreement—in its French formulation of '*mésestente*', meaning the fact of not hearing, and/or of not understanding—has received relatively little attention. This article argues that if politics, as Rancière suggests, arise from a novel perceptual universe and if dis-agreement entails not-hearing and/or not-understanding, then "speaking politics"—the very act of breaking away from the dominant configuration of the police order—might be perceived as a noisy sound rather than as coherent and intelligible words. Drawing on Rancière's concept of *mésestente*, this article examines the noisy, and largely unintelligible, protests sparked by the violent femicide of Giulia Cecchettin which occurred in Italy in 2023. Ultimately, it raises the following questions: which words are intelligible? Does intelligibility depend on the voice of the speaking subjects? Or does it hinge on the (un)familiarity of the vision they project? How can acts of politics be recognized if the words used are unintelligible?

Keywords: politics; dis-agreement; misunderstanding; speaking subjects; femicide; Italy

1. Introduction

Jacques Rancière's theorising has been a significant source of inspiration across a variety of disciplines, including Philosophy [1–3], Political Theory [4–6], Aesthetics [7,8], Citizenship Studies [9,10], Resistance Studies [11–13] and Education Studies [14–16]. His critical (re)conceptualisation of concepts such as politics, police, disagreement, emancipation and equality has significantly (re)shaped, challenged, and disrupted many accepted meanings. For this work, it is his concept of disagreement, and the way in which it connects with the political, that is particularly relevant.

Politics, for Rancière, emerges through exceptional moments of rupture that reconfigure 'every situation [. . .] in a different regime of perception and signification' [17] (p. 49). In other words, politics consists of 'moments of dizzying acceleration when all of a sudden nothing is what it was' [18] (p. 133). Because Rancière conceptualises politics as moments of rupture, the aim of politics is not, as generally assumed, to reach a 'reasonable agreement between individuals and social groups' [19] (p. 102) but to reconfigure and disrupt the ordinary and the taken-for-granted. Politics emerges not through democratic agreement, but through dis-agreement. As Rancière puts it: 'politics [. . .] is that activity which has the rationality of disagreement as its very own rationality' [19] (p. xii). However, for Rancière, disagreement does not merely involve divergent positions or viewpoints. Disagreement entails the ability to 'alter the field of the possible and the distribution of capacities and incapacities' [17] (p. 49). In other words, politics is about breaking and disrupting the dominant order, which he identifies with the concept of the police, the police order, or



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policing [19]. While policing revolves around maintaining the current (divided) order, politics revolves around disrupting and breaking it.¹

Although part of the current literature has approached the concept of disagreement in its meaning of quarrel and dispute, dis-agreement means much more than this. Disagreement translates the original French term '*la mésentente*' which, as Rancière himself clarifies, lacks a direct English equivalent. It combines two meanings: 'both "the fact of not hearing, of not understanding" and "quarrel, disagreement"' [23] (p. 5). This article focuses on the concept of *mésentente*, as the lack of hearing and/or understanding. This will be analysed through the distinction between emitting incomprehensible (noisy) sounds and using voice to produce meaningful speech. Specifically, it will be argued that politics, in its Rancièrian meaning, is more likely to *emerge*—at least in the moment of its first enunciation—as a noisy sound rather than as a comprehensible *logos*. This appears to be the case because politics, for Rancière, involves producing 'a novel perceptual universe' [23] (p. 5) that breaks away from and 'disturb' [24] (p. 21) the dominant unequal order and projects an alternative police order. This alternative vision is likely to be misperceived because initial vocal emissions that disrupt existing configurations are likely to be perceived as mere noise, as emissions 'signaling pleasure or pain, consent or revolt' [19] (p. 23). This is especially the case as politics, as Rancière suggests, 'exists because the *logos* is never simply speech, because it is always indissolubly the *account* that is made of this speech' (p. 22). Simply put, if we accept that politics 'makes visible what had no business being seen, and makes [...] understood as discourse what was once only heard as noise' [19] (p. 30), then the shift from noise to (meaningful) *logos* will always depend on the *account* made of those verbal emissions. This means that what is made visible and audible might not necessarily be perceived as meaningful and intelligible, at least not when first enunciated.

This article will argue that if politics, as Rancière suggests, involves disrupting the dominant order, the line between comprehensible speech and unintelligible groans is not as clear-cut as often assumed. Moments of disruption—or perhaps of irruption, as Samuel Chambers put it [3]—are likely to be perceived as mere noise. This is particularly true when the so-called 'uncounted'—those excluded from the community count [19] (p. 38)—are the ones uttering those words. History offers many examples of these dynamics. Words like freedom, equality, respect, inclusion, and human rights have always been meaningful to those who already enjoyed them. Conversely, these same words were perceived as incomprehensible when subjugated, silenced, invisible, exploited, and marginalised groups demanded their recognition. The violent battles fought in the name of equality, liberty, and democracy—already familiar concepts for some dominant groups—suggest that radical changes to the police order were resisted not only to protect dominant privileges, but also because the uncounted requests for equal access to freedom and democratic processes were unintelligible to dominant groups. Or rather, these demands were intelligible not as meaningful, rational political requests but as moments of (animal) groans and cries. I will thus suggest that, if the intelligibility of words depends not solely on the speaking subjects whose utterances might be dismissed on the ground that the 'nameless *cannot speak*' [19] (p. 23, emphasis in original) but *also* on the content of their claims, then the line between (noisy) voice and comprehensible speech is more problematic than often assumed.

Drawing on Rancière's articulation of *la mésentente*, as well as the distinction between noisy voice and speech, I will discuss the (noisy) protests triggered by a tragic event that occurred in Italy in November 2023: the violent killing of Giulia Cecchettin, a 22-year-old student, by her former partner, Filippo Turetta. I argue that the words uttered during the protests were not perceived as intelligible, but simply as (animal) noise. The words that Giulia's sister, Elena, expressed soon after the discovery of her lifeless body, did not align with the dominant discourse. Elena urged people not to remain silent, but to make

noise, a noise that would have broken the silence surrounding femicide and disrupted the dominant narrative which interprets gender violence as simply tragic events perpetrated by unstable men. Elena suggested reading femicides not as tragic, exceptional events but as violent outcomes of a sexist, masculinist, and patriarchal Italian society. The debate at that time reflected two irreconcilable interpretations of the event. While the majority interpreted the killing as a tragic event perpetrated by an unstable, obsessed young man, others viewed it as a femicide committed by a healthy young man raised in a masculinist society. These differing perceptions align with Rancière's theorising of *mésentente*: the inability to hear and understand the 'wrong' [25] (p. 560) that one part is experiencing and articulating. Elena's words expressed the dual meaning of *la mésentente*: as a quarrel—as she made visible the wrong of the police order—and a mis-understanding—as her reading of femicide as a phenomenon intimately connected with Italian gender structures was perceived as nonsense.

The argument will unfold in five steps. The first three will focus on Rancière's concept of the political and on the three interconnected prisms through which he analysed *la politique*: politics as disruption, politics as logos and politics as dis-agreement. The theoretical analysis will then shift to the noisy protests and subsequent debates following Giulia's killing. Finally, attention will turn to the distinction between noise and logos, with a focus on the following question: which *words* are intelligible?

2. Politics as Disruption

Rancière has investigated the concept of the political not from an ontological perspective, which examines what politics is, but from its 'practical effects [...] of action and discourse' [26] (p. 139), focusing on how politics operates. Politics breaks, disrupts, interrupts and reconfigures. Chambers articulates this point clearly: 'for Rancière the question of politics is not a question of definition, and it is never [...] a matter of ontology. Politics always involves interruptions, interventions, or effects' [3] (p. 38). To engage with politics means, first and foremost, breaking away from existing configurations imposed by the police order and offering alternative perspectives. While the police order is 'the field of hierarchy and domination' and its 'basic logic is that of inequality', politics is inspired by an 'opposite principle, that of radical equality, the equality of anyone with anyone' [26] (p. 143). As Rancière states, the 'essence of politics [...] is to *disturb*' the dominant order while the 'essence of the police is to be a partition of the sensible' [24] (p. 21). More precisely, politics, for Rancière, is the ability to disrupt dominant 'routinised sensible and sense-making practices' [27] (p. 82). By distinguishing between two opposing rationalities—one maintaining and protecting the *status quo* and the other breaking from it—Rancière separates policing from the proper sphere of the political. As he highlights, the activities of the police are 'antagonistic' [19] (p. 29) to those of the political, as the political seeks to dismantle what the police order aims to protect. To use Rancière's own words:

I [...] reserve the term politics for an extremely determined activity antagonistic to policing: whatever breaks with the tangible configuration whereby parties and parts [...] [have] no place in that configuration [...]. Political activity is whatever shifts a body from the place assigned to it or changes a place's destination [19] (pp. 29–30).

The process of shifting from an assigned, and presumably natural, place to another one is enabled by invoking equality, or more precisely, verifying it. It is the presumption of being equal that drives action for Rancière. In particular, politics highlights dominant inequalities and social hierarchies. As Rancière states: 'Spectacular or otherwise, political activity is always a mode of expression that undoes the perceptible divisions of the police order' [19] (p. 30). By 'perceptible divisions of the police order'—or more generally, *le partage du sensible*

(the partition of the sensible)—Rancière refers to how society is symbolically, socially, and spatially organised and divided [28]. Yet, this division is always a mis-division, or even a wrong division. In Rancière's words: 'Politics arises from a count of community parts, which is always a false count, a double count, or a miscount' [19] (p. 6). It is this process of mis-counting that systematically excludes certain groups, those identified as the 'uncounted' [19] (p. 38). It is their being uncounted, their being excluded from the social and political configuration, that makes them act politically. They are the ones who contest and disrupt existing structures, making visible arrangements that have 'no business being seen' [19] (p. 30). Through the verification of their unequal positioning, the uncounted break away from the existing social and spatial configuration. To use Rancière's own words,

the political is the encounter between two heterogeneous processes. The first process is that of governing, and it entails creating community consent, which relies on the distribution of shares and the hierarchy of places and functions. I shall call this process policy. The second process is that of equality. It consists of a set of practices guided by the supposition that everyone is equal and by the attempt to verify this supposition. The proper name for this set of practices remains emancipation. [...] I shall take the political to be the place where the verification of equality is obliged to turn into the handling of a wrong. [...] we can give to the process of emancipation the name of politics [29] (pp. 58–59).

By distinguishing between the process of governing and the process of equality—that is, separating policing from politics—Rancière also emphasises the distinct rationality underpinning each. While the former works through consensus—a shared vision that maintains and protects dominant hierarchical systems—the latter operates through dissensus—an alternative vision that breaks from the known and the familiar. However, the antagonistic relationship that separates these processes also connects them. Chambers articulates this point effectively. In *The Lessons of Rancière* [3], he highlights not only that politics 'happens on the terrain of the police', but also that a 'new thinking of politics can only start with *la police*' [3] (p. 64). In other words, policing is not only antagonistic to politics, but it is also the space from which politics emerges. As he puts it: '*politics and police meet within the police order itself*. Politics goes on in the only place where it can go on: within the social formation where it occurs, that is, within the space of the police order' (p. 61). By stressing that policing is not, for Rancière, 'a counterweight to politics' (p. 72), Chambers highlights not only that the police order is 'part of politics'—and thus more than 'politics' other' (p. 65)—but also that the goal of policing is not "*that of eliminating politics*" (p. 77) as, for instance, claimed in Todd May's work [30] (p. 43, emphasis in original, quoted in [3] (p. 77)).

In summary, for Rancière, the social order is divided between subjects who count—who are visible and audible—and subjects who do not count—who are, in most cases, invisible and silenced. But it is those who are invisible and silenced who have the ability to break the dominant order; their 'speech, when it occurs, always comes as a surprise, as a dangerous and powerful reminder of precisely what needs to be forgotten—and eventually suppressed—by the hierarchical ordering of the political space' [31] (p. 71). To articulate a *logos* is, therefore, not to articulate 'mere voice, but reason' (p. 74). This is why, for Rancière, articulating the *logos* of equality constitutes an act of politics, i.e., the disruption of imposed categories, identities and spatial constraints. Politics, as Jean-Philippe Deranty puts it, leads to 'radically altered visions of entire fields: the social, the political, the historical, the literary, the aesthetic and so on' [32] (p. 184).

3. Politics as *Logos*

As so far clarified, for Rancière, (in)equality is made evident through the act of speaking. However, not all sounds are recognized as meaningful speech, even if the words used are familiar. The distinction between incomprehensible sounds and meaningful discourse is fundamental to Rancière's theorising. For him, it is the act of 'taking the floor and speaking' that constitutes 'a practical refutation of the hierarchical opposition between argued speech and the noisy voice' [18] (p. 72). To understand how the act of speaking (equality) becomes an 'essential aspect of politics' [31] (p. 71), we must return to chapter one of *Disagreement*, whose title clearly suggests Rancière's starting point: 'The Beginning of Politics' (p. 1). As he states, 'Let's begin at the beginning', that is, from book I of Aristotle's *Politics*, which laid down 'the eminently political nature of the human animal' as well as the foundations of the Greek *polis* (p. 1). Rancière starts with Aristotle's distinction between animal voice and human speech. As Aristotle puts it,

Nature [...] has endowed man alone among the animals with the power of speech. Speech is something different from voice, which is possessed by other animals also and used by them to express pain or pleasure [...]. Speech, on the other hand, serves to indicate what is useful and what is harmful, and so also what is just and what is unjust, etc. It is the sharing of a common view in these matters that makes a household and a state [33] (section 1253a, quoted in [19] (p. 1)).

By distinguishing mere voice from speech, Aristotle highlighted the difference between the animals' sounds that communicate simply pleasure or pain and human emissions that express the useful, the harmful, and the (un)just. According to Giuseppina Mecchia, Rancière's uses of Aristotle's *Politics* as a starting point is 'in itself profoundly ambiguous' [31] (p. 73). This ambiguity arises from whether Rancière aimed to begin with the Greek *polis*, where the concept of democracy was first elaborated, or to highlight 'the shared capacity to speak' that has historically underpinned democracy and democratic debate (p. 73). The two are no doubt connected, and this emerges clearly in an article, 'Introducing Disagreement' [23], published a few years after the book [19]. The article clarifies why Rancière began investigating the concept of democracy in the early 1990s, during a time when the democratic (and capitalist) system triumphed over the Soviet one. Rather than following mainstream trends and investigating democracy through the lens of Strauss's common good, Arendt's social necessity, Rawls's theory of justice, or Habermas's communicative action, Rancière focused his attention on the 'specificity of democracy' as well as 'the specificity of politics as a form of common action' [23] (pp. 3–4). What puzzled Rancière was the general consensus surrounding democracy, as well as the observation that the triumph of democracy was not followed by peace but rather by ethnic and religious conflicts. These conflicts, for him, were the 'consequences of the logic of consensus' [23] (p. 4). In other words, Rancière observed that conflicting ideologies appeared pacificated under a façade of consensus. It was this apparent democratic consensus that made Rancière reinterpret politics, moving away from Aristotle's 'linguistic power of the human animal' and Habermas's 'pragmatics of language' [23] (p. 4). For Rancière, Aristotle's distinction was problematic not because language distinguishes humans from animals, but because 'the possession of language [contra Aristotle] is not a physical capacity' but a 'symbolic division [...] between the order of speech and that of bodies' [23] (p. 5). This symbolic division has historically been used to dismiss the words of the uncounted as non-words, as nonsense, as alogia. As he explains,

Traditionally, it had been enough not to hear what came out of the mouths of the majority of human beings—slaves, women, workers, colonised peoples, etc.—as

language, and instead to hear only cries of hunger, rage, or hysteria, in order to deny them the quality of being political animals [23] (p. 5).

Equally problematic for Rancière is the work of Jürgen Habermas, particularly the predefined rules and subjects included in his ideal speech situations. Communication, in Habermas's framework, is limited to officially recognized interlocutors. The excluded have no space and no voice. Jean-Louis Deotte highlights this point very clearly:

Habermas does not explain how those who do not count are going to gain access to the public forum where the debate takes place, how conflicts other than the probable litigation can appear, how the improbable can occur—the improbable being therefore a way of appearing able to produce an event [34] (p. 79).

The modality of dialogue is also very different. While Habermas's discourse theory rests on consensual communication, which ultimately aims to achieve rational cooperation and agreement, Rancière's approach moves in the opposite direction. For Rancière, there can be no pre-set political scenario, nor any pre-set arguments or subjects. Politics involves breaking away from any pre-established settings and rules. Rancière made this point very clearly in an interview with Davide Panagia:

The Habermasian schema presupposes, in the very logic of argumentative exchange, the existence of a priori pragmatic constraints that compel interlocutors to enter into a relation of intercomprehension [...]. This presupposes further that both the interlocutors and the objects about which they speak are preconstituted; whereas, from my perspective, there can be political exchange only when there isn't such a preestablished agreement—not only, that is, regarding the objects of debate but also regarding the status of the speakers themselves. It is this phenomenon that I call *disagreement* [35] (p. 116).

By highlighting that communication is not as smooth as Habermas assumes and that neither the object of the conversation nor the status of the speakers can be taken for granted, Rancière suggests that communication and dialogue are much more complex. Speakers, along with their voice and/or logos, need to be taken into account. As Rancière reminds us, historically, the primary means of negating political engagement has been silencing people or ignoring their words. As he explains,

If there is someone you do not wish to recognize as a political being, you begin by not seeing them as the bearers of politicalness, by not understanding what they say, by not hearing that it is an utterance coming out of their mouths [24] (thesis 8, para 23).

Rancière ultimately contests the Aristotelian line between noise and logos, as for him, every voice has the potential to be transformed into *logos*. As Deotte articulates, 'the wrong that exists because of the difference between voice and speech can be transformed into litigation, at least ideally, in a world of reason' [34] (p. 80). The key, and unresolved, questions—to which Rancière does not provide clear suggestions—are how this transformation occurs and who decides when verbal articulations become (comprehensible) *logos*.

4. Politics as Disagreement

As highlighted thus far, for Rancière, politics emerges—or better begins [19] (chapter 1)—through the act of speaking, an ability equally endowed to all human beings [36]. Politics arises in rare and exceptional moments because it is not merely about speaking but about saying something radical and unexpected against the dominant configuration of the sensible. As Davide Panagia noted, the 'political efficacy of words' is central in Rancière's work. While in *The Names of History* [37] Rancière refers to 'an "excess of words" that marks

the rise of democratic movements', in *On The Shores of Politics* [38], he connects words with the end of politics; finally, in *Dis-agreement*, he refers to the 'wrong' that 'those who have no part' have voiced in the name of equality [35]. As already mentioned, equality, for Rancière, is the key driver of politics, both because it is equality that makes the uncounted take the floor and speak and because the *logos* of equality is intelligible to all.

However, for Rancière, the uncounted do not shift from a space of marginality and silence to one of visibility and audibility by introducing a new political grammar but by 'using words [...] that already exist, the subversive act being appropriation of those words' [18] (p. 73). By appropriating the principle of equality, the uncounted verbal articulation—earlier perceived merely as noise—is subsequently perceived as meaningful speech. It is thus the articulation of the *logos* of equality—that is any 'forms of reasoned discourse' [39] (p. 17)—rather than physical or non-verbal acts, that constitutes politics for Rancière. In other words, for Rancière, it is the content of the *logos*—that is, the enunciation of claims to equality as much as one's acting as if equal—that transforms mere voice(s) into comprehensible *logos*. The shift from voice to *logos* is possible thanks to the verification of (in)equality, which 'creates situations of speech and dialogue which did not exist previously' [26] (p. 146). Specifically, Rancière illustrates the shift from voice to *logos* by recalling the plebeian secession at Aventin. Through a revisitation of Ballanche's work, Rancière reinterprets the conflict between the patricians and the plebeians as one centred on what it means to speak [23] (p. 5). The patricians could not understand what the plebeians expressed, as they did not recognise the latter as capable of meaningful speech. As Rancière states,

In order to understand what the plebeians said, then, it had first to be admitted that they spoke. And this required a novel perceptual universe, one where—contrary to all perceptible evidence—those who worked for a living had affairs in common with free men and a voice to designate and argue these common affairs [23] (p. 5).

It is these two conditions—the emergence of an equal speaking capacity as well as a radically novel perceptual universe—that make politics. However, making politics also entails a break from the ordinary, the known, and the accepted. Specifically, for Rancière, it is not words *per se* that are central but rather the way in which those words transform political subjects. This verbal 'political exchange' occurs neither with a 'pre-established agreement' nor with a predefined 'status of the speakers' [35] (p. 116). As he explains it,

[the] logic of disagreement [...] is exemplified in the plebeian secession at Aventin [...]: the patricians at Aventin do not understand what the plebeians say; they do not understand the noises that come out of the plebeians' mouths, so that, in order to be audibly understood and visibly recognized as legitimate speaking subjects, the plebeians must not only argue their position but must also construct the scene of argumentation in such a manner that the patricians might recognize it as a world in common. [...] In order to enter into political exchange, it becomes necessary to invent the scene upon which spoken words may be audible, in which objects may be visible, and individuals themselves may be recognized [35] (p. 116).

Rancière uses this passage to illustrate the essence of disagreement. The distinction between noisy voice and meaningful *logos* does not hinge merely on the words used, but on a prior recognition of the speaking subjects. However, the shift from muted subjects to speaking subjects occurs only after first setting up 'the scene of argumentation'. In other words, Rancière recognises that verbal expressions must be constructed so that the interlocutors not only understand what is being said but also recognise that what is said

arises within a ‘world in common’. Although Rancière does not specify how a shared world of experience might be reconfigured, he nonetheless recognises that a ‘linguistic innovation’ is needed in order to transform words into a ‘*generally accessible mode of reasoning* or form of language so that everyone may partake in this creative activity of invention’ [35] (p. 116). This is especially needed because disagreement, as he himself recognises, does not simply refer to the absence of a shared vision but to an impossible dialogue, where the sound produced conveys no comprehensible *logos*, only its absence, only ‘alogia’ [19] (p. 43). The scenario of an impossible dialogue—even if Rancière does not use this expression—is outlined in the preface of *Disagreement*, where he clarifies the following:

Disagreement is not the conflict between one who says white and another who says black. It is the conflict between one who says white and another who also says white but does not understand the same thing by it or does not understand that the other is saying the same thing in the name of whiteness. [...] The interlocutors both understand and do not understand the same thing by the same words. [...] An extreme form of disagreement is where X cannot see the common object Y is presenting because X cannot comprehend that the sounds uttered by Y form words and chains of words similar to X’s own [19] (pp. x–xii).

While Rancière often uses the concept of disagreement as synonymous with dissensus—a ‘conflict between one sensible order and another’ [25] (p. 560)—in the above quotation, disagreement entails not only irreconcilable visions but a complete absence of understanding. The interlocutors utter words that, though known, are either entirely misperceived or differently understood. In this scenario, disagreement is not simply the inability to reach a consensus but the inability to comprehend what the other interlocutors are expressing. The sound heard is merely noise, or unintelligible groans. In this extreme scenario, what emerges is a *mésentente* in its dual meaning: a quarrel—through which another perception of the sensible is suggested—and a mis-understanding of the quarrel itself.

To conclude, if politics, as Rancière suggests, emerges out of ‘a novel perceptual universe’ [23] (p. 5), if it aims at breaking and disrupting, if the rationality of politics is disagreement, and if disagreement presupposes *also* not-hearing or not-understanding, then we should not take for granted that “speaking politics”—including speaking the *logos* of equality—is perceived and heard from the very first moment of its enunciation as intelligible *logos*. Speaking politics—and thus, the very act of breaking away from the dominant configuration of the police order—might *first* emerge as a noisy sound. Thus, the ‘core issue’, as also highlighted in Michael Feola’s work, ‘is not only how speech is lost or gained [...], but also with how it is received, refused, misheard, or (potentially) heard anew’ [40] (p. 501). What Feola highlights is precisely the problematic ‘link between vision and voice’, between seeing and not-seeing, between hearing and not hearing, between ‘speech, silence, and the groans that constitute mere noise’ [40] (p. 505).

5. Giulia’s Killing: A Noisy Protest

By introducing the concept of *mésentente* in its meaning of not hearing or not understanding, Rancière innovatively highlighted the disagreement that speaking politics entails. As an example of the incommunicability between two irreconcilable perceptions, I focus here on the debate that emerged after the violent killing of Giulia Cecchettin in Italy in November 2023. While the majority viewed the killing as a violent homicide perpetrated by an unstable former partner, others saw it as yet another femicide, rooted in the dominant patriarchal narrative which tends to blame women while justifying men.

Giulia was the 105th woman killed in 2023, which amounts to roughly one female killing every three days [41]. Her lifeless body was found in a ditch, wrapped in black plastic bags, on 18 November, after a week of intense searching. The violence inflicted on

her body was evident: 20 deep stab wounds to her head and neck [42]. The last time Giulia and Filippo were seen together was at a shopping mall, where they had gone to purchase her graduation outfit, as she was due to graduate on 16 November 2023 [42]. A few days after their disappearance, CCTV footage showed Filippo beating her repeatedly in a car park near her house and later in an isolated industrial area. At that point, hopes of finding Giulia alive were slim. While the search for both Giulia and Filippo was ongoing—Filippo was later found in Germany—the media focused on his obsessive attitude, particularly his inability to accept the end of their relationship that summer or Giulia’s academic achievements in biomedical engineering. In other words, much of the coverage portrayed Filippo as immature, unstable, and possessive, and Giulia as a brilliant young woman who had excelled in her difficult studies.²

After Giulia’s body was discovered, her sister, Elena, played a key role in reshaping the public debate and encouraging mass demonstrations, especially on the occasion of the International Day Against Gender Violence, 25 November. As she put it, ‘For Giulia, don’t hold a moment of silence, [...] burn everything’ [43].³ Many students in high schools and universities responded by making noise [44]. The noise created during public manifestations involved holding and shaking their house keys, a highly symbolic gesture highlighting the fact that gender violence is often perpetrated by men so close to the victims that they possess the house keys. Noise in opposition to silence was not Elena’s only act of politics. Elena’s statements, which appeared in newspaper interviews and on social media, sparked heated debate, as her messages were not at all in line with the Italian dominant narrative. She highlighted that women’s killings should not simply be connected to unstable and violent men, but to the dominant patriarchal society. Specifically, Elena emphasised that Giulia’s death was the result of ‘a patriarchal culture of violence and control over women that normalises men’s dangerous behaviour’ [42]. This violent culture, she argued, can only be dismantled if men actively participate in the process. Men should not remain silent in the face of gender violence, but should take action in daily life by observing, confronting, and countering other men’s possessive behaviours. As she said,

It is often said, ‘not all men’. But they are always men [...]. It is the responsibility of men in this patriarchal society to call out friends and colleagues. Say something to that friend who controls his girlfriend, say something to that colleague who catcalls passers-by. These behaviours are accepted by society and can be the prelude to femicide [42].

Elena went further, stating that men bear a central responsibility in ‘dismantl[ing] the society that privileges them so much’ [45]. She called for an end to silence about Giulia’s killing and urged people to make noise. By suggesting making ‘noise’, Elena was suggesting not simply going public and protesting but breaking from the silence that surrounds femicides. If silence signifies normality, Giulia’s violent stabbing demanded the very opposite. To be silent meant accepting that women’s violent deaths at the hands of (known) men were simply tragic events against which nothing could have been done. Giulia’s killing was to be read not simply as femicide, but as state murder. Elena suggested that femicide should be considered as state murder because when a state minimises gender violence, blames women for men’s violence, and does little, if anything, to prevent violence against women, then that state is directly responsible: responsible for failing to protect women, for justifying men, for not taking women’s complaints seriously, and for not providing safe spaces. In her words, ‘Femicide is a state murder because the state does not protect us. Femicide is not a crime of passion, it is a crime of power’ [45]. Through these words, Elena directly accused Italian institutions at different levels of being complicit in a dominant sexist, patriarchal and misogynist society. In short, Elena made visible and audible another perception of the sensible, one that was not recognised.

The debate that was generated after the discovery of Giulia's body and Elena's public statements aimed to expose a phenomenon that, although well known, had not been given appropriate attention or had been approached in the wrong way. Gender violence was often seen as a series of tragic events, impossible to predict or prevent. Elena articulated a different perspective. She argued that homicide and femicide are distinct phenomena requiring different approaches, and thus, different responsibilities on the part of the state and society at large. She claimed that Italian institutions were directly responsible for violence against women and, therefore, for introducing radical legal, social, and economic changes. Moreover, she emphasised that femicide is not solely a women's issue. Positive change could only occur if both women and men acted together to reshape the dominant gender narrative.

For example, just months before Giulia's death, cases of rape, sexual harassment, and violent assault against women—often perpetrated by men close to the victims—were treated as if they concerned only women. In many cases, women's behaviour was scrutinised; they were deemed too drunk, too sexy, too provocative, too complacent, or simply too friendly. In other words, it was women who were expected to act responsibly by avoiding or controlling the situations they found themselves in. This was also the message conveyed by the Italian Prime Minister⁴ Giorgia Meloni in defence of a (chauvinist) statement made by her then-partner in September. She reaffirmed that it was women, not men, who needed to stay in control. As she put it, 'Girls, rapists do exist. Do not put yourself in the condition of being attacked' [46].⁵

After months of debate during which women were often blamed for the violence they endured, Elena proposed a different approach. She discouraged silence—the typical sign of respect for the dead—and urged people to make as much noise as possible. She also encouraged men to play a key role in changing the dominant patriarchal mindset. In other words, the goal was not merely to make noise to highlight the tragedy of Giulia's death, but to begin constructing a new perspective. Rather than viewing Giulia's death as a homicide committed by a monster, Elena suggested seeing it as an act of femicide, committed by a healthy member of the Italian patriarchal society. As she put it,

Turetta is often described as a monster, but he is not a monster. A monster is an exception, a person outside society, someone for whom society bears no responsibility. But there is some responsibility. "Monsters" are not unhealthy, they are the healthy sons of patriarchy and rape culture [47].

In short, Elena broke away from the dominant Italian narrative, emphasising that it was not women's behaviour that must change but the prevailing masculinist culture. This perspective has yet to gain widespread acceptance. Acts of femicide continue to be reported, but the interconnection between patriarchy and gender violence remains largely unintelligible. Elena's words were perceived as a noisy voice, signalling pain for the loss of her sister.

6. Which Intelligible Words?

The case of Giulia's violent killing has been selected for a variety of reasons, all of which are connected to the debates that the work of Rancière has solicited. To begin with, femicide is not a new phenomenon. On the contrary, gender violence in its many manifestations is reported nearly on a daily basis. This means that its occurrence is known and visible. Because it is both known and visible, there is a general tendency to take for granted that gender violence is a natural part of our societies. Having become a 'tangible configuration' of the sensible [19] (p. 29), we tend not to see the wrong in the picture. If gender violence tends to be seen and perceived as a tragic, and non-preventable, event, similar to a natural disaster, then gender violence is not seen as a wrong. Rather, it is

perceived as a wrong only to those who experience it. In other words, from my reading of Giulia's violent death and Rancière's theorising, the quarrel that Elena made visible led to a widespread misunderstanding. Her reading of Giulia's killing, as much as the greater social and political responsibility that she connected to femicide, emerged as simply nonsense, as a noisy voice. What is interesting to notice in this specific case is that Elena's words have not been dismissed because expressed by an illegitimate subject—as is, for instance, the case of the many protests of undocumented and sans-papiers—but because they were unintelligible. What was intelligible was simply the violence of the event: a tragic killing perpetrated upon a young female student by her former male partner. There was nothing else to be seen, and thus, argued. The only course of action was to wait silently for the forthcoming work of the court.

The case of femicide introduced here makes Rancière's concept of *mésentente*, in its meaning of not hearing and not understanding, a key concept which requires greater attention. Quite surprisingly, although Rancière devoted a whole book to dis-agreement, his analysis of *la mésentente* is rather thin. He does recognise that there is disagreement when confronted with 'the noise of revolt or speech that exposes a wrong [19] (p. 53); that there are 'polemical situations [...] in which one of the partners [...] refuses to recognize one of its features (its place, its object, its subjects) (p. 56); and that there are also 'areas where the assumption of understanding is in dispute' (p. 57). What is unclear is not that disputes arise, but how to recognize that we are confronted with disputes that break the police order. Under which conditions are we to recognize utterances that engage politically if we are unable to understand what is verbalized? It seems insufficient to claim, as Rancière does, that 'Politics occurs wherever a community with the capacity to argue and to make metaphors is likely, at any time and through anyone's intervention, to crop up' (p. 60).

If dis-agreement 'crops up' due to an alternative perception and vision, then that vision—irrespective of the familiar words used—is likely to be perceived as a noisy voice. If this is the case, then—and this is the core argument of this article—politics, in its Rancièrian formulation, breaks and challenges dominant police order, but it is likely to lead to a misunderstanding, to a *mésentente*. If this is the case, then dis-agreement might not be overcome by 'speaking (and speaking well)' or by developing 'an art of listening', as, for instance, suggested in Feola's work [40] (p. 516). There is dis-agreement because the words articulated express a new, and often radical, partition of the sensible. If what makes words incomprehensible is the act of "speaking" a new partition of the sensible, then our attention should no longer focus *exclusively* on the speaking subjects but on understanding how to transform unfamiliar configurations of the sensible into intelligible ones. This suggests that the traditional (democratic) question, 'Can the subaltern speak?' [48], is not the only question that we should address when investigating marginalisation and voicelessness. We should also ask the following: which words, and which claims, are intelligible? Does (un)intelligibility depend upon the speaking subjects or does it depend upon the new radical vision expressed?

The question of which words are intelligible is a key question, as Western philosophical tradition has mostly focused on the speaking subjects—whether they were allowed to speak and whether their claims toward equality, freedom, inclusion, recognition, etc., were to be taken into consideration. This applied to enslaved people, women, workers, those experiencing poverty and homelessness, Black people, migrants, indigenous people, the colonised, etc. Dominant groups—even when they represented a minority—have historically disregarded the words of the uncounted on the grounds of their inability to speak and to speak meaningful words. Thus, the ground upon which the uncounted were excluded from speaking was based upon their positioning in society, which by itself dictated who could speak. Rancière himself distinguishes between those who count because they are

considered legitimate speakers and those who do not, between the noise of the uncounted and the *logos* of the counted. However, if we were to add Rancière's concept of *la mésentente*, the perspective changes, and it changes radically, even if he has not pushed his argument so far. The inability to hear and/or to understand is not *exclusively* due to the positioning of the speakers—whether counted or uncounted, whether human or sub-human—but to the new, radical vision that they express. Thus, rather than asking whether the uncounted are allowed to speak, we should perhaps *also* ask something completely different: what is the new, and radical, vision that their speaking suggests? What is it that the uncounted are making visible? To whom is their perspective intelligible?

For instance, in her work, Iwona Janicka [49] raises similar questions by examining the issue of signification. By juxtaposing Rancière's 'central political question—how to distinguish speech from mere growl?'—with the work of Bruno Latour, her focus shifts from the subjects to the meaning of the *logos*. 'What is meaning? How is meaning produced and sustained? Who is the designated carrier of meaning?' [49]. What interests Janicka is not simply 'Who can speak?', but how is speech mediated? She introduces the work of Latour because, for him, speech is always related to sense-making. As she explains, for Latour, 'speech is always mediated through other beings, epistemological frameworks, infrastructures, techniques and devices' [49]. Because speech is always mediated, what matters is not simply the identity of the speakers—whether human or non-human—but 'the *place* and the *role* these beings play in the operation of translation' [49]. This suggests that the distinction between noisy voice and *logos* depends not exclusively upon the speaking subjects, or the words used, but mostly upon the 'processes of signification', i.e., how people translate and make sense of what they see, what their words express and how to make others *understand* their words.

The question of intelligibility is also raised in Holloway Sparks' work, in which she asked the following: 'newly intelligible to whom?' [50] (p. 432). Referring to one of Rancière's examples—Rosa Parks's refusal to sit in the segregated section of the bus and the subsequent boycott—Sparks highlights that this act was 'already utterly intelligible [...] to most if not all African Americans living in southern U.S. states' (p. 432). The Black communities did not merely bring attention to 'new "wrongs"' but made the 'white supremacist logic of domination intelligible to many *whites* who had neglected or refused to confront the issue before' (p. 432). I discussed the question of the intelligibility of claims in another work, though from a very different perspective [21]. Drawing upon Olympe de Gouges' statement—'if women are entitled to go to the scaffold, they are entitled to go to the assembly', which Rancière reads as a disruptive claim—I highlights, among others, the limit to intelligibility, that is, the difficult (and long term) shift from the ordinary to the extraordinary [21]. De Gouges' writings—which envisioned an alternative, equal order—were considered by the male dominated society as nonsense. De Gouges' suggestion that 'women, by nature, had all the rights men did' (p. 20) was not simply too radical, but it was interpreted as pure fantasy [51]. Women's equality claims were, at that time, considered totally irrational. As detailed in Joan Wallach Scott's work, it was assumed that de Gouges was affected by a medical pathology, a 'revolutionary hysteria' [51] (p. 55). It took more than a century before de Gouges' claims were accepted as *logos* and another century to grant women equal political rights [21] (p. 38). This long time frame suggests that 'the constitution of a political scene where we see a whole semi-instantaneous transformation of the visible, the thinkable, of the whole universe of the possible' (p. 133) might not be so *instantaneously* perceptible and comprehensible as Rancière suggests [21]. If this is the case, the difference that Kirsi Pauliina Kallio [52] introduced in her work between a 'politics of noise'—that is 'people's everyday engagement', as squatting, graffiti and street occupation—and the 'politics of voice', which entails formal

political engagement, might not help in better identifying which acts should be recognised as properly political. Although she rightly stresses that, for Rancière, ‘noise’ becomes political only once translated into ‘voice’ (pp. 292–293), the key concern here is to question how that transformation takes place. By associating the ‘politics of noise with people’s everyday engagements with their political communities [and the] politics of voice [...] to more explicit involvement, directed towards or at least somehow aware of the formal and ‘known’ world of politics’ (p. 293), Kallio maintains Rancière’s distinction between noise and voice, even if the two represent ‘different modes of political presence, not [...] diverse forms of politics’ (p. 293). Although she interprets ‘the noise generated by the Kiiheli Park young people as political presence’ (p. 296), that very noise is somehow considered marginal. As she put it: that noise ‘takes us to the fringes of politics’ (p. 296).

Thus, rather than starting from the premise that noise and voice are two different modalities of political engagement, I argued that if politics, as Rancière suggests, involves breaking from the police order in a novel way, if politics is not about continuity but its very opposite, then we should ask whether moments of breaking are always already intelligible, and intelligible to whom. If this is the case, then the difference between noise and voice does not run along the content of the words, or the modality through which messages are expressed, but along our ability to understand what is communicated.

7. Conclusions

Using as a starting point Rancière’s concept of politics and its connected concept of *mésentente*, I suggested that moments of rupture are more likely to be perceived as noisy voice rather than meaningful *logos*. The case of Giulia’s femicide was used here to demonstrate that the line between voice and *logos*, between understanding and non-understanding, is more complex than often assumed. This case of femicide has been used as a tool for reflecting and opening up a wider debate, not so much on what makes politics, but also how moments of changes might be introduced. Elena’s words, which encouraged both public and noisy demonstrations and a critical rereading of Italian current debate on femicide, were undoubtedly acts of politics in the Rancièrean sense, aiming at breaking and disrupting dominant gender partitioning. But, were they understood as such? Only by a tiny minority. The vast majority perceived Elena’s words as noise, as simply nonsense.

Thus, if politics, as Rancière suggests, produces ‘a novel perceptual universe’ [23] (p. 5), there is a need to investigate not simply whether that novel perception creates a break but also whether that moment of rupture is intelligible, and intelligible to whom. If intelligibility is not always inherently connected with the speaking subjects, but instead with ‘*la mésentente*’ that emerges out of the political, then new analytical tools need to be considered. As Rancière highlighted when discussing the disagreement between the patricians and the plebeians, in ‘order to enter into political exchange, it becomes necessary to invent the scene upon which spoken words may be audible, in which objects may be visible, and individuals themselves may be recognized’ [35] (p. 116). In other words, the setting up of ‘the scene of argumentation’ (p. 116) is crucial, as is considering the effects of *la mésentente*’ in its dual meaning. In the most extreme scenario, what is made visible and audible might not become *politically* intelligible, at least not in the first instance.

One final point that should be emphasised is that the question of intelligibility, even if not discussed in this article, also applies to the countless varieties of non-verbal modalities through which politics is enacted, modalities that Rancière does not include in his concept of the political. The problem lies precisely in the historical dismissal of these modalities and their associated messages as irrelevant, irrational, inappropriate, unnecessary, insignificant, inapplicable, out of place, out of order, etc.

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Notes

- ¹ Given the focus on the concept of *'la méésentente'*, this article does not engage with the critical analyses highlighting some of the limits of Rancière's concept of the political [11,12,20–22].
- ² On 4 December, Filippo Turetta was sentenced to life in jail. The Court has not, however, recognised the aggravating circumstances such as cruelty and stalking.
- ³ The concept of *'burn everything'* is borrowed from a poem—even though the original is to *'destroy everything'*—written by Cristina Torres-Cáceres, a Peruvian architect and political activist, after the femicide of Mara Castilla, a 19-year-old student killed in Puebla, Mexico, in 2017. The much-quoted sentence circulated in Italy is the following: *'If tomorrow it's me, if I don't come back tomorrow, mother, destroy everything. If it's my turn tomorrow, I want to be the last'*.
- ⁴ For the sake of simplicity, I am referring here to the Italian *'Prime Minister'*—as often done in newspapers articles—even if she is, per Constitution, the President of the Council of Ministers.
- ⁵ The translation from Italian into English is mine.

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