Dissensus in Ali Smith's Seasonal Quartet

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Abstract

In the context of debates on how democracies function in a digital, mediatized and global context, this contribution asks if (and how) the literary novel can be effective in today's public spheres. What role is there for fiction in the neoliberal world in which we are absorbed by commercial social media, attention spilling technological devices, and the dissemination of truth? Drawing on Rancière's ideas on the politics of literature and art's capacity of dissensus, the seasonal quartet (2016-2020) by British author Ali Smith will be analyzed and discussed. The main argument of this hermeneutic project is that Smith creates an opening in fiction to artistic perception, historical materiality, social voices and dissensus, while representing timely controversies in British society.

> *Always be reading something, he said. Even when we're not physically reading. How else will we read the world? Think of it as a constant.*
>
> —Smith, *Autumn* (68)

Introduction

In his fictionalized memoire *Inside Story, How to Write* (2020), British author Martin Amis describes his life as a writer and asks: "What is the good of the novel, what does it do, what is it for?" (96). In answering the question, he distinguishes between aesthetes and functionalists: those who say that the novel serves no purpose at all, and those who claim that fiction is involved in improving the human condition (96). Amis' distinction could be considered a schematization of Rita Felski's (2008) four uses of the novel: enchantment and shock versus recognition and knowledge, the idea being that the aesthetic use can be distinguished from the societal and political use of literary texts. For Amis, neither of these functions of literature is ultimately preferable; the crucial issue is that the novelist cannot be purposeless. It is the writer's drive—that Amis himself, as he explains, has kept for decades—to instruct and to delight in writing.

Amis' point of view relates to a blog post on literary activism on the American website *Poetry Foundation*. The post was mainly written by Amy King, stating that she considered herself an activist first and an activist poet only later when she brought some of her political ideas into her literary work ("What Is Literary Activism?"). For King, activism implies giving voice to "the Other" and recognizing one's own privileges. In the blog post, King gives the floor to various fellow writers in order to let them explain how they think about literary activism, and it becomes clear that most of them see activism as conscious resistance to the male, white, modernist canon. Héctor Ramiréz for instance, in a separate contribution to King's blog post, notes that literary activism means resisting the white supremacist, heteropatriarchal, global capitalist American imagination. It is a matter of rearranging desires, undoing distinctions, and recognizing complicity. To Samiya Bashir, literary activism looks like being willing to be wrong, to be outdated, to learn something new from someone different. Melissa Febos argues that

writing as such is an activist occupation, especially for those who write from a "marginal" experience or about stories of queer people, women and people of colour.

In all these descriptions, activism evokes countercultural statements and underlines the capacity of multiperspectiveness of the literary text. Activism breaks down the distinction between the writer as a historically embedded figure outside of the text and the voices of the narrator and invented characters within. Behrouz Boochani's *No Friend but the Mountains* (2018) is a strong example of literary activism, as the novel retells the experiences of an asylum seeker on the island of Manu (Heynders, "Literary Activism"). Boochani himself was for years imprisoned in this camp and meanwhile found a way to start writing about his experiences. He wrote in Farsi on *WhatsApp*, keeping his mobile phone hidden from the guards. These text messages were sent to a companion, and later composed into an awarded novel. Another intriguing example of what could be considered literary activism is Edouard Louis' essay, *Qui a Tué mon Père* (2018), in which the French author depicts his father's life as an industrial worker and in doing so gives voice to the *gilets jaunes*, who were at the time protesting on roundabouts all over France (Heynders "The Voices"). Activism, we could argue, is a specific genre of literature implementing political, ethical and societal issues rendered or experienced by the writer in the imagined world of the text, thus inviting the reader for accountability, response, and the possibility of enacting social transformation. The explicit message of the activist writer is that conditions in the global world have to change and can be influenced by the text.

Acknowledging these various positions, it is important to underline that not every literary text referring to political topics has to be interpreted as activist, as expressing the personal experiences and political conviction of the writer, as bringing about political change or as inviting the reader to act. The interrelatedness between experience, action, and change on the one hand and the singularity of writing and the aestheticist condition on the other, asks for further reflection and deliberation on what the political capacity of literary fiction can be. In this article,

this reflection will be encouraged by the writings on literature and politics of French thinker Jacques Rancière, who emphasizes that the

> politics of literature is not the politics of its writers. It does not deal with their personal commitment to the social and political issues and struggles of their times. Nor does it deal with the modes of representation of political events of the social structure and social struggles in their books. (*Dissensus* 152)

The politics of modern fiction thus relate to the writing itself and not to the author as an intentional being.

In what follows, I will discuss some of Rancière's ideas and subsequently perform a hermeneutic reading of the seasonal cycle by Ali Smith, one of the most prominent authors of fiction in the UK and Europe today. My argument is that this series of four novels evokes activist strategies and invites political thinking, but simultaneously makes a plea for art as disconnected from representational politics. The question is not whether Smith can be considered a politically committed writer, but what her fiction is doing and how. To further refine some useful concepts, I will first present a reading of Rancière's work, focusing particularly on *Dissensus, On Politics and Aesthetics* (2010), after which I will perform a close reading of passages from Smith's season series. Subsequently, this leads to a conclusion in which I will come back to the idea of the relevance of political themes in today's fiction and why this matters in current public spheres. While these spheres focus on consensus and agreement, dissensus and organizing disagreement can be very effective as well.

On Politics and Literature

The oeuvre on aesthetics and politics of French philosopher Jacques Rancière can help sharpen our thinking about literature and politics. A central point in his work is the distribution of the visible in politics: "Politics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it,

around who has the ability and the talent to speak, around the properties of spaces and the possibilities of time" (*The Politics of Aesthetics* 13). It is in the aesthetic that we can discover a capacity for dissensus.

Rancière offers a broad historical positioning of literature when he discusses what he calls the new regime of writing, which first manifested itself in texts of the German Romantic writer Friedrich Schiller and in the realist fiction of Gustave Flaubert. This new aesthetic regime (as arrangement or set of principles) countered the old representative regime in which literature was considered a speech act that relied on a definite idea of the meaning of "meaning." The writer—just like the rhetorical orator—addressed his work to an appropriate public. Meaning was a relation of address from one's will to another (*Dissensus* 159). From Aristotle's *Poetics* to the Classical Age, there was a clear relationship between the sayable and the visible. In the new regime of writing, however, connected with the birth of modern literature, the writer is not a designated speaker anymore, nor is the public a specifically addressed audience. Both the writer and the reader are *anybody*, and the letter is *mute*, in the sense that it can go its own way, without the speaker guiding it (157).

This opens a space for the sign as sign. Questioning the representative regime transforms the boundaries between art and life. It involves a historical positioning and materialization of writing: all material of everyday life can become the subject matter of art, and that is what the politics of literature is about. Rancière argues:

> In times of literature, mute things speak better than any orator. This is not a matter of political engagement. It is a politics carried by literature itself. […] This new regime and new 'politics' of literature is at the core of the so-called realistic novel. Its principle was not reproducing facts as they are […] It was displaying the so-called world of prosaic activities as […] a huge fabric of signs and traces, of obscure signs that had to be displayed, unfolded and deciphered. (*Dissensus* 162)

Rancière, who deliberately does not identify literature with a specific state or use of language, underlines "the historical mode of visibility of writing, a specific link between a system of meaning of words and a system of visibility of things" (155). His aim is not to construct a strict opposition between representative art in the classical sense and the anti-representational work of modernity; rather, it is to display the character of a time and society.

For Rancière, writing is "deciphering the symptoms of a state of things" (161). It implies revealing the signs of history, delving into the seams and strata of a society's foundation. In an example, this idea becomes clear: Rancière refers to Balzac's *La Peau de Chagrin* (1831), in which the protagonist enters the showroom of an antique shop and then all sorts of objects are described and evoked. Rancière explains:

> The mixture of the curiosity shop made all objects and images equal. Further, it made each object a poetic element, a sensitive form that is a fabric of signs as well. All these objects wore a history on their body. They were woven of signs that summarized an era and a form of civilization. (162)

The realist novelist unfolds the "poeticality, the historicity written on the body of ordinary things" (163). The old representative regime put the focus on the intelligibility of human actions; in the new writing—in which meaning becomes a silent relation of signs to signs—characters are not made intelligible through their actions, but via the materiality of their situation: clothes, the stones of their houses, the wallpaper of their rooms. The underground of society and the symptoms of history can be read on the body of things, on their radical muteness (165). In the rupturing of the representative division between art and life, a form of equality can be found. The mute speech is the creation of a world in which writing is foregrounded and where everything speaks. Central to this thinking is a paradox: the tension of the new regime of writing is that literature is literature in offering materialization. Autonomy and heteronomy are thus bound to one another (Tanke 2011).

Rancière's ideas about the new regime of writing can be related to his ideas on the role of dissensus in addressing social realities. Present-day democratic practices are dominated by the idea of establishing consensus and affirming equality. This consensual vision reduces people as political subjects to the population, and politics to an affair of the government. But for Rancière, the essence of politics is not consensus but "dissensus," revealing the arbitrariness of political participation. Dissensus is the manifestation of a gap in the sensible itself. It transforms the sensible by placing it in conflict with a rival conception of the world (Tanke 86). The arts are uniquely suited for evoking dissensual processes: dissensus can be understood as an activity that cuts across forms of cultural belonging and hierarchies, working to introduce new subjects and heterogeneous objects into the field of perception (Corcoran 2), emphasizing a conflict between a sensory presentation and a way of making sense of it, or between several sensory regimes and/or bodies (*Dissensus* 139). The current democratic community is based on the idea of inclusion, in which dissenters are not supposed to exist. Those who do not fit the consensus are ignored, marginalized or demonized (Brown and Tregida 4). Art, however, can make dissensus visible.

Aesthetic dissensus occurs where new subjects are introduced, new perceptions are invited, and new experiences are offered, all of them different from the everyday ordering of sense (Tanke 83). A counterworld that has a critical relation with the existing world and that gives a stage to marginalized voices is constructed. Art and literature have a political function that is independent from the commitment of the artists, marking a distribution of the sensible as dissensus and a capacity to notice gaps and invisible subjects, to listen to unheard and lost voices, and to remark the sensible in insensitive contexts.

Ali Smith's seasonal quartet, published between October 2016 and July 2020, is an ambitious literary project of four independent novels that form a complex narrative reflection on our times. As such, it can be considered a Rancièrean work, reflecting both politics and art, offering a type of writing—mainly from a free indirect narrative perspective—beyond generic formats and combining poems, rap, app conversations, description and dialogue while evoking young and old characters in

their everyday circumstances with or without political engagement. The novels are about time and the circularity of seasons, they offer "a deeply affecting experience" while "telling future generations what it was to live in these fraught and febrile times, and how, through art, we survived" (Preston). The novels create a space for artistic perception, historical materiality and various social voices and dissenters while simultaneously pointing at political controversies in British society and at the sensibilities that are shared in time.

The Seasonal Quartet

The idea of the four novels that Smith wrote between 2016 and 2020 is that they are intently connected to the time of writing, demonstrating how people act and respond in regard to particular political and social developments. In an interview with *The Guardian*, Smith explains that she had asked her publisher: "Can we do a series of books which we publish really close to the time of their writing—a kind of keeping the novel novel project—returning it to the notion of 'the new'?" ("Ali Smith"). He responded positively and all books were written in short periods of a few months. The novels present politics and aesthetics in connection, by interweaving reality and fiction, historical artists and invented characters and references to timely phenomena and canonical texts. On the one hand, they evoke real political events and topics: *Autumn* (2016) relates to the Brexit referendum, *Winter* (2017) to protests against a nuclear power plant, *Spring* (2019) to the UK detainee scandal, and *Summer* (2020) to the corona crisis. On the other hand, they present art works—made by women artists such as 1960s pop artist Pauline Boty, sculptor Barbara Hepworth, painter Tacita Dean and actress Lorenza Mazzetti—as invitations to dialogue and perception.

Each novel is composed around a few characters, and some of them reappear in the other novels as well. The series is deliberately *serial*, that is: story threads are picked up in the various novels establishing a narrative complex. *Autumn*, the first book of the series, introduces Daniel Gluck, a 101-year-old man living in a care home, who is visited by his 32-year-old former neighbour, Elisabeth Demand. She is a

university lecturer in history of art. His dreams and memories, as well as their conversations and dialogues on books and art, are central to the plot. Memoryscapes and dreams are interwoven with descriptions that could be recognized from contemporary reality: the bureaucracy around getting a new passport, the voting in the Brexit referendum, the plastic debris in the seas, or xenophobia: "This isn't Europe, they shouted. Go back to Europe" (*Autumn* 130). Smith mixes discourses and voices in long streams of monologue and polylogue: in a poetic description the misery across the country is summed up (59-61), there are the impressions of a young girl (231-2) and Daniel's hallucinations. In discourses materialities become visible, such as in a conversation between Elisabeth's mother and her friend on what they have seen in a shop during the shoot for a television programme on antiques:

> The ceramic dogs, her mother says. The inkwells. (Zoe). The engraved silver matchboxes, Anchor and Lion hallmark, Birmingham, turn of the century. (Her mother.) […] The butter churn. (Her mother.) The wallmounted coffee grinder. (Zoe.) The Poole pottery. The Clarice Cliff fakes. The tinplate Japanese robots. (Elisabeth can no longer tell now whose voice is whose.) (*Autumn* 219)

This is a Rancièrian scene with a contemporary twist: all the items are noticed in the context of a television programme, and these, obviously, are today's signs summarizing an era and a form of civilization.

Winter introduces two elderly sisters, Sophia Cleves, a retired businesswoman imagining that she is accompanied by a "disembodied head"—continually invoking the question whether it is a hallucination or a problem with her vision—and Iris, an activist and former protester against nuclear weapons. In the 1980s she chained herself to the fence at Greenham Common and she had recently been in Greece helping out migrants. Their story is interwoven with that of Arthur, Sophia's son, who works for a security company and writes the *Art in Nature* blog (without being interested in nature at all). He visits his mother for Christmas in *Chei Bres*, a country house that is reminiscent of E.M.

Forster's *Howards End*. Because his girlfriend did not join him, Arthur picks up a girl called Lux from the bus stop, who accompanies him on the visit.

Spring is composed around Richard Lease, a television director traveling to the North after his colleague and friend had died (Lease is the biological father of Elisabeth from *Autumn*). He ponders about a new film project on the imagined encounter between the poet R.M. Rilke and the author Kathrine Mansfield. Other characters are Brittany Hall, an officer at a detention center, and Alda Lyons, an out-of-work librarian sleeping in a disused coffee truck. The central role in *Spring* is for 12-year-old Florence, who infiltrates the detention center and then takes the train to the North as well. The pivotal scene is when Florence witnesses Lease's attempt to commit suicide by jumping off the train platform. Just like Lux in *Winter,* Florence is a mysterious character: "like someone […] out of a story […] that isn't really about real life but […] is the only way you ever really understand anything about real life" (*Spring*, 314). She reawakens new feelings in others, opening new perspectives on ingrained habits and points of view. Florence, we could argue, is the central character of the quartet.

In *Summer,* the most optimistic or hopeful novel of the series, the story is built around teenager Sacha (16 years of age) and her younger brother Robert. She is a critical, activist youngster, writing letters to people in detention centers, while Robert is a juvenile nerd trying to get rid of his angriness. They encounter Elisabeth, Arthur and the old Daniel Gluck, who imagines that Robert is an alter ego of his long-lost sister Hannah.

Connecting all the various characters, scenes, political phenomena, individual thoughts and imaginaries, there are descriptions of the seasonal cycle, of how the landscape changes, and how meticulous the use of words should be:

> **November again.** It's more winter than autumn. That's not mist. It's fog. The sycamore seeds hit the glass in the wind like—no, not like anything else, like sycamore seeds hitting window glass. […] All the souls are out marauding.

> But there are roses, there are still roses. (*Autumn* 259, emphasis in original)

Along with everything that is happening in human lives all the time, there is nature and its cyclical and vital rhythm asking for attention and concern, and stories that return and transform. "Story is an ancient form of generosity," Smith wrote in the introduction to the project, "an ancient form that will tell us everything we need to know about the contemporary world" ("Ali Smith"). Story is a porous artform where sympathy and empathy are invited. Story is a response, I would add, to dissensus without dissolving the differences, disharmony and disagreement.

Art in Literature: Dissensus and Resistance

Even when storytelling is inviting and generous, Smith is aware of the violence and obscenity that is part of contemporary culture as well, which is also encapsulated in the stories. *Spring* opens with the screaming and disturbing discourses that we find on social media feeds:

> **Now what we don't want is Facts**. What we want is bewilderment. What we want is repetition. What we want is repetition. What we want is people in power saying THE TRUTH IS NOT THE TRUTH. What we want is elected members of parliament saying KNIFE GETTING HEATED STUCK IN HER FRONT AND TWISTED things like BRING YOUR OWN NOOSE we want governing members of parliament in the house of commons shouting KILL YOURSELF at opposition members of parliament […] We need news to be what we say it is. We need words to mean what we say they mean. We need to deny what we're saying while we're saying it. We need it not to matter what words mean. […] We need the dark web money algorithms social media. We need to say we're doing it for freedom of speech. We need bots we need cliché we need to offer hope. (3-5, emphasis in original)

The Trumpian speech, the stabbing of MP Jo Cox, the anonymous trolling and hate speech; in Smith's quartet everything becomes part of a story, and of stories connected to other stories. The materiality that Rancière took from the description of things is in Smith's project inscribed in the discourses, vernaculars, and nonsense talks of people who have loud and angry voices and feel themselves disregarded and unrecognized. In the age of algorithmic lies they refuse to believe in truths. Giving them a voice in literature is a democratic act, and, simultaneously, establishes the singular capacity of fiction. In a discussion with Scotland's first minister Nicola Sturgeon, Smith explained:

> We are living in a culture that insists on lying as its delivery of how we are living […] It insists on telling us information about which we are left wondering whether it is true or not […] Fiction and lies are the opposite of each other. Lies go out of the way to distort and turn you away from the truth. But fiction is one of our ways of telling the truth. ("Ali Smith")

When people who believe in and spread lies get a voice in fiction, the intricate relation between aesthetics and politics is manifested: the multiplicity of forms of alterity is encapsulated in the literary form that offers a fabric of signs and traces but refuses transcendence.

Dissensus can also be found in the contrasting of the silent and singular voices that speak from the work of the four artists presented in the literary project. All artists created something that strengthens the senses and makes the recipient conscious of reality. Pauline Boty, a 1960s pop art painter, is discovered in *Autumn* by Elisabeth when she is a young student in art history. Boty made paintings, collages, stained glass work and stage sets. She died of cancer at 28, leaving behind paintings that were "witty and joyous and full of unexpected colour and juxtapositions" (*Autumn* 151). When Elisabeth shows pictures of the paintings to Daniel—who used to know Boty as person—he reveals that she taught him how to see: "It is possible […] to be in love not with someone but

with their eyes. I mean, with how eyes that aren't yours let you see where you are, who you are" (*Autumn* 159-60).

In *Winter* there is a scene featuring young Sophia and her lover, who in the 1980s shows her a sculpture of Barbara Hepworth: two stones, one with a hole in it. Hepworth, as it is explained to Sophia:

> puts the holes through what she makes, because she wants people to think about […] time, and ancient things, but also because she really just wants them to want to touch what she makes […] to be reminded about things that are quite physical, sensory, immediate. (*Winter* 272)

The sensitivity of art, the sensation it evokes, the instantaneousness of the aesthetic experience is a kind of resistance to the issues of the day, to the ongoing lies, deceptions and illusions. But this sensitivity of art and of literature is not a transcendence or a final closure; art is confronting and compelling in its invitation of new perceptions. The cycle of time and seasons demonstrates how things exist, disappear and transform, and how dissensus as disharmony is a productive part of life. The two female characters that create the most hope among the realist descriptions of people in their everyday lives in today's Britain are Lux and Florence. They are mythical figures that can only exist in fiction and as such help "to open, to uncover, to make accessible, or to remove whatever stops something from being accessible" (*Spring* 335). These two typical fictional characters underscore the Rancièrian muteness of writing works in confrontation with the loudness of discourses. The fictional characters help the realist ones in understanding what existence is about, connecting fiction and the real world seamlessly.

Conclusive Remarks: Fiction Matters

In activist literature the distance between author and narrator is bridged. The author expresses her ideas and personal experiences in relation to the worlds she evokes in fiction. In Smith's seasonal quartet, however, the voice of the author is *not* explicit and her commitment as

writer not directly communicated. It is the work as such that is political and should be recognized as a complex of signs, traces, connections and sensibilities. The politics of literature is about writing, not about its author.

This is the perspective from which I return to the idea of the relevance of political themes in today's fiction and why this matters in current democratic public spheres. In her seasonal quartet Smith makes clear that politics is *in* the fiction. Politics is in the characters and in their ideas, voices, actions and situated contexts. Politics revolves around what is seen, around who has the ability to speak, around the properties of spaces and the possibilities of time. In the post-truth democracies in which we live today, we should take into account the capacity and consequences of politics in fiction. Experiencing fiction implies that we are aware of imagination, and eventually are willing to go along with the various beliefs presented even when they are abject or immoral. The power of fiction is that we are confronted with ideas that we do not keep ourselves but that are relevant to reflect upon. If we would consider more thoroughly the complexities of literary fiction, the various narrative styles and techniques, the dissensus as sensible gap, then we would have more grip on the mechanisms of lying and the fabrications of truth that disturb democratic procedures today.

It is in this vein that Colin Burrow, in an article in the *London Review of Books*, argues that fiction in the "age of lies" should educate its readers to question their grounds for wanting to believe things, but that fiction as such "has not yet responded to this new kind of lying" ("Fiction and the Age of Lies"). Burrow points at the algo-lie typical for this age: algorithmically created to elicit a particular response from an audience that has been microtargeted. Authors have created autofiction (Karl Ove Knausgaard's *My Struggle*), fiction in which the world of social media is simplified (Jonathan Coe's *Middle England*), or fiction in which there still is a nostalgic desire to consoling literature (Ian McEwan's *Machines Like Me*). To Burrow, although it seems that Smith has tried to create fiction for the age of lies, her "novels are also marred by the anger of the lie-ee by proxy, who is enraged not because she is herself deceived but

because others are" (13). According to Burrow, she has thus not created the "great British technonovel of the 21st century" (13).

In contrast to Burrow, I argue that the technonovel would not be the rigorous option to respond in fiction to the post-truth condition we are in. Smith, in her dissensual fiction, in the muteness of the letter underlining the materialities, in the historical traces and particular discourses of our times, therewith reveals sensibilities and multidimensional human problems and offers a response that invites us to further reflect on the state of things. In 2017 this is what she emphasized in a lecture delivered on the occasion of the Goldsmiths Prize, entitled *The Novel in Times of Trump*. Smith, here again, underlined the aesthetic regime of writing, that it is indeed the novel that has something to say on politics, not the author, reader or reviewer:

> The novel matters because though all the arts are family, related, and I tend to think at their best when they meet up with or cross over into each other, among them the novel is particularly versatile at this crossing-over in that it can borrow from and chameleon with and meet the other forms with immensely fruitful outcome. Where it crosses into the poem, and the short story – where it borrows from these forms' essentiality, concentration and tight edit, where it borrows the short story's indebtedness to our own mortality, and its ability to stretch form, its spatial elasticity; and where it borrows the poem's deep-rooted ancientness of both voice and form, and borrows from both their way of allowing emphasis to work by resonance, like rings in water, as part of the shift of what we call plot—the novel blossoms into intensity. ("Goldsmiths Prize Lecture")

The novel is about continuance and continuity, Smith adds, it tells about "the endless social structure cycle that eventually gets called history" ("Goldsmiths Prize Lecture"). The continuum, I conclude, is in the capacity to demonstrate resistance and dissensus, which in every age is transformed and has to be renewed.

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