

DAVIDE PANAGIA (2009). *THE POLITICAL LIFE OF SENSATION*. DURHAM & LONDON: DUKE UNIVERSITY PRESS. ISBN: 4780822344747.

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Davide Panagia's *The Political Life of Sensation* transforms the unrepresentability of sensation into a political encounter. For Panagia, sensation is a radical mode of expression which resists the classified domain of politics. It is also an effect of the aesthetic experience that defies the domain of merely the visual, including the total bodily encounter of auditory and appetitive responses. Each marks an aesthetic encounter which poses a challenge to democratic society. It is through this challenge that the broad range of Panagia's project takes shape. The focus of his work adds not only an ethical dimension to this challenge, but a sense of urgency.

The Political Life of Sensation is an extension of Panagia's first book, *The Poetics of Political Thinking* (2006), which traces the role of aesthetic concepts such as mimesis and metaphor in political evaluation. Following in the tradition of Jacques Ranciere (2006), Panagia's second book traces the realm of democratic politics as comprised of a structural encounter with difference. Instead of focusing on the manner in which affect impacts the political realm through influence and propaganda, as is predominant in studies on the topic, Panagia opens up the discussion as to how sense and nonsense shape the realm of social organization. For him, it is within the distribution of these spaces that the aesthetic compulsion to push for change confronts the constructed limits of politics.

For Panagia, the accepted domain of politics is shaped by narrative. Politics becomes less about characterized legislation and more about a particular structural encounter that disrupts established modes of knowledge and organization. In other words, the narrative contours of political life render the domain of politics, the domain of sense. Narratocracy is a conceptual apparatus which marks the privileging of narrative as a genre, making narrative the main regime of

perception in political life. An alternative way to phrase this would be to say that the word is the main referent used and validated to express our political organization. In contrast, unstated politicality is the realm in which sensation takes shape by affecting change in the established realm of politics through disruption. Panagia's analogy of this difference is the relation between a line and a point. One being organized through a conservative causality, while the other erupts like a revolutionary appeal. It is the dynamic between them that shapes democratic life.

Panagia's project in 'From Nomos to Nomad' disrupts the fixed constitution of experience to the biological human entity through a reflection on the particularities in which we establish value. This aspect of Panagia's project involves disrupting the experience of sensation as dependent on the preconstituted construction of individual subjectivity and the sanctioning of the body to a strict organogenesis. In placing Deleuze and Ranciere in conversation with one another with regard to judgment and the appraisal of value, Panagia shows how both thinkers are indebted to the Kantian democratic project of the immediacy of the aesthetic experience. With regards to Deleuze, indistinction is interpreted by Panagia as relying on the Kantian disinterested interest in the aesthetic experience as a realm of freedom. With regards to Ranciere's view of dissensus, it is the unreliability of the defined context of our world in the Kantian project that allows the heterogeneous relations as interruptions which form the basis of dissensus. Consequently, an inability to determine value based on universality creates a micropolitics of appraisal that formulates the conditions for sense making.

The very idea that Kant has a democratic project, especially as Deleuze views it, is not questioned by Panagia. Deleuze views Kant as adhering to a strict philosophy of representation which is opposed to the seemingly democratic project of the philosophy of difference. For Deleuze, it is important to note that the philosophy of representation lacks dynamism. The four concepts – identity, opposition, analogy and resemblance - all work to guide difference into the realm of the known. Through Deleuze's eyes, Kant tries to form continuities through recognition, maintaining his search to what can be known and casting the unknown to the realm of superfluous experiential encounters – which may or may not actually exist and therefore are not given their due import. Kant thus dissolves multiplicity from our lives in favor of conformity. By bringing Kant's transcendence into conversation with Deleuze's

immanence, similarities are of course present, but only in a similar manner to sense and nonsense – which could have very well been Panagia's unstated purpose.

In 'The Piazza, the Edicole, and the Noise of the Utterance,' Panagia argues that democratic culture is expressed through the utterance. Democracy's first pitch is an interpretive noise. The history of the subjunctive is the utterance that gets forgotten by narrative priority. So, instead of being a collection of voices we are transformed into a collection of silent concepts and words. This 'silent production' forces the unintelligible to become 'almost automatically relegated to the domain of the unintelligible... Hence, the noise of the utterance – the tone, pitch and sound that the murmurings of a people could be imagined to make – must belong to a conjectural history of unintelligibility that remains at once without documents and undocumented' (50-1). Only acknowledging the written word ignores the utterance and so disrupts the heterogeneous balance that is the basis of democratic society.

Panagia's project in 'Machiavelli's Theory of Sensation and Florence's Vita Festiva' sets up Machiavelli's theory of sensation and its relation to political thought. He begins by exploring the Cambridge School's strict reliance on organogenesis as the basis of communication, thus denying, Panagia feels, non-linear relations. Panagia argues that the linear narratocratic basis of understanding is but one of many ways to perceive. As Panagia explains, during the Renaissance there was a radical shift in perception: one reflected in Machiavelli's theory of human nature. For Panagia, Machiavelli's theory of 'extra-ordinary virtu' is counter to customary activity by reflecting the changing times. Human nature becomes a reflection of custom and an adaptation to action and circumstance. Machiavelli acknowledges that our perceptive competencies do not always act in the same manner. Since this is the case, it is possible that one person's perception does not reflect linear rationality, but rather a perception that coincides with the interlocution.

In 'The Viewing Subject,' Panagia discusses the reconfiguration of our readerly vision. Without strictly depending on the narratocratic basis of aesthetic appreciation, we open ourselves up to a new mode. Using Caravaggio's paintings and *The Ring*, Panagia invites us back to the moment of encounter with the work of art and asks, 'How can we look at a painting and not have it tell a story?' (98). Connecting two disparate works of art, Panagia's purpose is not to eliminate storytelling from the work of art, but open other forms of

appreciation. When we initially ‘encounter [a] work of art, storytelling is not an available response because the viewer is absorbed into the painting to the point that his or her status as witness is annihilated by that absorption’ (107). The painting has the power of absorption because the immediacy of the aesthetic experience resists the rational construction of storytelling. So, in this moment it is not a priori rationality that is exerting its power, but the aesthetic experience. The force of this breaks down the perception of the viewer and what is viewed.

Lastly, in ‘You’re Eating Too Fast’ Panagia describes the significance of the inability of political philosophy to account for the baseness and divinity of the mouth. Through a series of encounters with Plato, Kant and Rousseau, Panagia links the two functions of the mouth with the care of the self. Panagia’s point is that the crisscrossing quality that accompanies the two functions of the mouth cut across each other in such a way that they are neither completely dissociative nor associative. The peculiarity of this encounter is imbued with sensation that is at once allocated in the depth of tradition and yet at the same time as spontaneous as an inclination. Consequently, the heterogeneous impulses of the mouth at once unite us and carry the seeds of change.

Aesthetics as the realm of representation engages the world as a multiplicity of possible perceptual encounters. Staying true to this fundamental element of change in aesthetics, Panagia introduces us to a world where this can be carried over to social organization. Panagia posits sensation as a radical moment of aesthetic judgment which re-arranges our perceptual givens, allowing for alternative ways of political organization and political sight.

Through an examination of various aesthetic encounters, Panagia bridges the most salient aspect of our human experience – sensation – with the ways in which we function as a community of political beings. With his focus on structure rather than content, Panagia gives us fresh impetus to combat our residual passivity with respect to narrative in favour of a critical and thoughtful view of the necessity of sensation in our political life. Politics has been largely defined by the realm of narratocracy, but this tendency eliminates a wide array of perspectives. Sensation acts as an opposing force to narratocracy and thus constitutes a political act, releasing our perceptual habits from their political bind and opening our life to various ways of seeing.

References:

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Ranciere, J. (2006) *The Politics of Aesthetics*. Trans. Gabriel Rockhill. London: MPG Books.