

## BOOK REVIEW

**Davide Panagia** 2009. *The Political Life of Sensation*.  
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Davide Panagia has written a book that is rich of political sensations. Besides experimenting with senses and the political, it includes passages into political philosophy. We might share Panagia's experiences from Italian Piazza, its architecture and sense of space and noise; look at the images from the Japanese Trilogy *Ringu* (*The Ring*), in matters of establishing the viewing subject. *The Ring* is not to be 'read' from left to right like a book or narrative – it is the “heterogeneous convergence of multiple experimental node” (Panagia 2009, 111). In addition, Panagia writes about the taste and slow food ideology and he reflects the ethics of photography in discussing Roland Barthes in connection to Abu Ghraib photographs.

Despite the versatile and in some places rather sporadic discourses on different topics, the book definitely has a core that I add up to the theoretical discussions on aesthetics and politics. Panagia challenges rational political science, in examining “ways in which sensation interrupt common sense” (Panagia 2009, 2). Sensation relates to heterology of impulses that register on our bodies. Besides looking at the very physical senses, the discussion is also related to experience of unrepresentability. We have no fixed strategies for representing a sensation. It is as versatile as its expressions.

## BOOK REVIEW

From my viewpoint, Panagia's core chapter *One From Nomos to Nomad. Kant, Deleuze and Rancière on Sensation* is significant in reconsidering the crossing points between aesthetics and philosophy through *immediacy, indistinction and dissensus*. In the prologue, Panagia brings up plenty of material to draw from. One among many interesting issues is to reflect on the aesthetico-political dimensions of democratic life. However, there is no real chapter in which the 'democratic life' would be coherently discussed. The viewpoint is more philosophical and aesthetic, and as later comes forth, it relates to noticing something called different 'regimes of perception'.

For his main argumentation on the relations between political and sensorium, Panagia's position seems to be rather close to Jacques Rancière. Drawing the lines between political and the sense, he, *firstly*, brings together the different theoretical viewpoints in a manner emerges from reading Kant. Here, Panagia points out that as Deleuze talks about indistinction and Rancière about dissensus in interruptions as the "partitions of the sensible", they both are, indebted to Kant's exposition of the duration, an intensity of *immediacy* in aesthetic experience (Panagia 2009, 23). The 'politics of time' is here connected in the aesthetic experience and its intimate connection to temporality: the intensity and immediacy of the experience. Continuing from this viewpoint, Panagia intends to rethink the role of Kantian aesthetic judgment in political reflection. He discusses the way in which aesthetic judgment is fairly often associated with the sharing of communal values as the basis for judgments.

Taking the three thinkers (Kant, Rancière and Deleuze) as his specific focus, Panagia comes to claim that these three share an insight about the nature of perception. As well, these three share the composition of common sense. Deleuze and Rancière, however, extend the Kantian notions of aesthetic experience and they transfer it to a critical project. *Secondly*, Panagia discusses the ethical viewpoint: the compulsion to legislate judgment and provide a common source of norms for appraisal coincidences. This is the complicated link toward direct political activity that is not necessarily opened up very thoroughly, at least not in this book. This second observation regards the relationship between freedom and experience of value. Kant's ideas are not original as such, and significantly, connected to 18<sup>th</sup> century fascination with aesthetic impact, Kant separates aesthetic judgment from authoritative knowledge.

Thirdly, Panagia defines his aesthetico-political viewpoint. Within any one regime of perception there exists a micro-political of appraisal that formulates the *shared conditions of sense making*. This is also a reflection of what Jacques Rancière has to say about the common sensorium (cf. Panagia 2009, 24). By criticizing Huntington's thesis on the 'clash of civilization', Panagia claims that democratic life in contemporary politics is characterized by diverse cultures of conviction *each of which carries its own regimes of perception*. Thus, instead of looking after a clash or confrontation, Panagia notices the difference - simultaneous and parallel existence of different 'regimes of perception'. That perception governs what does and what does not count as an experience, motivation or intuition. These regimes are supposed to constitute a common world of sensible that also distributes *legitimacy and convictions*. Recognizing the matters of authority and legitimacy in politics is also challenged by the diversity of the regimes of perception that I would add, are not only cultural convictions, they are also *religious convictions*. The visual images of our times are *part of the contemporary shared experience, yet, experienced by the different 'regimes'*. Regimes of perception are here considered as primary source for also building up the sense and distribution of legitimacy. This enables us to reconsider different beliefs partly founded by different senses and perception as here the perception is seen prior to rational or theoretical ways of building up convictions. Constructed from differences of the 'regimes of perception' and senses, beauty is irrational to the extent that it appeals to our sensory perceptions (Panagia 2009, 26). Neither reason no sense (nor clash of cultures) legislates the possibility of our experience of beautiful. If I may add something here, I would be intrigued to think whether this kind of combination of senses and ir/rationality could be expanded to consider the experience of horror, violence, grief of images of torture. It is simultaneously rational and sensorium experience - yet only the moment of possible critique, critical perception that interrupts the sense of the common, and definitely, the 'common word of sensible' (Panagia 2009, 26-28).

Panagia updates the Kantian intentions to the notions off the contemporary aesthetics, in making an important clarification about way in which he understands Kant's idea of 'disinterest'. This means to highlight that the 'disinterested interest' for Kant is not the same as impartial. In fact, Panagia notices that it is the opposite of impartial-

ity. Also, he comes to notice that Kant's definition of judgment of the beautiful relates to idea of beautiful as a kind of hybrid experience that is neither rational, no purely sensorial but it is once both and neither. Kant's impartial subject is the one whose interest at the moment of sensory experience is disarticulated, as are the conditions of subjectivity. Here, we land into an experience of *freedom* in aesthetic experience, since there is no governing principle in the beautiful. As such the freedom escapes also the attributes of common or rational. Freedom here is also a freedom from a certain conceptual frame – since there is not always a subsequent conception or a need to 'frame' the senses, and sensorial experience. The deconstruction of conceptual pairs (in the manner of Derrida) is one step to that direction, but as Panagia is making the addition of the senses the role of spectator / perceiver, means something like 'completing the image'.

According to Panagia's interpretation (2009, 29), Kant's immediacy is not that of speed – but a durational intensity that refers to the moment of impact. It is also a state of attention of the subject engaged with a beautiful object. This is connected to the possibility to contemplate on the beautiful. I would stress the important role of immediacy as the temporal leap in which the matter / whether it is the substance of beautiful or – perhaps – violence, is possible to be contemplated. The subject/ object distinction is of lesser importance than this act of 'contemplation' that has the temporal duration, intensity and character of immediacy.

In aesthetic experience, then, judgment or legitimation happens in the moment. This is one of the most significant matters that make it different from other kind of confrontation with the issues in question. The *a posteriori* issue, and also *a priori* judgment is not a condition for the experience, the experience itself is. I would still bring up one topic that Panagia discusses in the visual experience, namely regarding Koji Suzuki's novel "*The Ring*":

...and as you watch, don't you get an incredible sense of immediacy, as if you're actually a participant in the scene?...There are things we see with our eyes, but there are also scenes we conjure up in our minds. (Japanese Ringu Trilogy, cf. Panagia 2009: 96)

The matter what is viewed, become participant in through this viewing is a mental image imprinted in filmic patina. Pace Panagia, the

insight that follows the main characters of the film is that what they are viewing is not a succession of images only. It is the process of impression as it occurs in the mind of the filmmaker. There is a moment of haptic visuality that differs importantly from mere seeing (Panagia 2009, 96–97). Panagia notices here that in *The Ring*, there is also the aspect of self-referentiality as in e.g. Caravaggio's painting:

the Ring is thus entirely committed to its own self-referentiality to the extent that it is committed to representing cinematic experience – and thus the effects of viewing – as an experience of dissensual immediacy (Panagia 2009, 98).

Here is one fine specific example in which the theoretical discussion on immediacy and dissensus referred to above is connected to the specific example of analysing the cinematic images.

On the other hand, connecting these issues to the wider discussion, I would notice the interesting claim about the political theory as a visual practice. Panagia claims that political theory is actually visual practice, as it includes the movements of or eyes, mouths and hands when reading, speaking, and writing presuppose the attention vis-à-vis the world and the others. He comes to argue that

contemporary democratic citizen-subject is a viewing subject and that the most pernicious political battles in both Europe and North America are fought at the level of audience ratings and viewership. Political theorists continue to engage the regimes of perception that constitute us modern democratic subjects as viewing subjects. (Panagia 2009, 99)

Panagia relates here the discussion to political thinkers and moves between the discussions inspired by visual studies as much as political theory.

In the end epilogues, Panagia seems to move toward his next project, the political of appearances. He reflects the issues and questions of ethics of the appearances and the problematic perception of the images that are both scandalous and in a way, insensible. He shortly relates to Barthes' vocabulary of *punctum* and *studium* in trying to come closer to the appearances that "cannot be fully explained" (Panagia 2009, 151–152). Despite the character of an epilogue, I do think that the issues on sensation that Panagia discusses in connection with Kant and the 'regimes of perception' could have been also

## BOOK REVIEW

possible to join more intimately with the final chapters as well. In this manner, one might continue with discussing ways in which public sense is – or is not – subsequent to aesthetic experience. Further; what aspects of the common, and common sense are present in images such as Abu Ghraib, and whether the issues of the immediacy of aesthetic experience is prior to the formation of the common sensorium? All in all Davide Panagia has succeeded in writing a book that is rich in both political and theoretical discussion; while he theorizes with the regimes of perception, he also challenges his readers to theorize the politics of aesthetics further on the basis of their own experiences.