Y. Stamos on D. Panagia’s *The Political Life of Sensation*

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2 *The Political Life of Sensation* is an ambitious work. It attempts not only to develop further some recent and important studies in cultural and visual theory (M. Fried, L. Marin, L. Marks, J. Batler) or to assess their possible contributions to contemporary political thought, but also to intervene and shift the focus of theoretical and political attention beyond what Panagia calls “the rule of narrative” and the commitment to the narratocratic qualities of appearances. According to Panagia the majority of historiography (which "sets the narratocratic standards for theoretical engagement") and of cultural studies today is ruled by a powerful narratocracy. His main argument is that the narratocratic reduction of an aesthetic, cultural or political object to its possibility of making sense, i.e, of being meaningfully expressed/ communicated, written or read according to grammatical and syntactical rules, hides all the other possibilities or potentialities of appearing, and delimits, thereby, access to other democratic forms of political attention and engagement. Panagia’s theory of sensation attempts to extend our conceptions of politics by turning our attention to the heterogeneous world of appearances and by defining democratic political life as the active and constant movement of reconfiguration of the sensible, that is, of the different regimes of perceptual part-taking which determine what can count as common perception, experience or sense.

3 Drawing mainly on the aesthetic writings of Kant, Deleuze and Ranciere, Panagia wants to show and describe the political and “ethopoetic” (Foucault) moment of sensation: far from having to rely on our organoleptic certainties, namely on the supposedly natural correspondences between body organs and acts of perception, sensation is the moment of interruption and reconfiguration of such correspondences, in other words, the moment of interruption of the sensible, “of what makes sense and can be sensed” (3). Taking some examples of the modern life of sensation, from the “viewing effects” of Francis Bacon's paintings to the public displays of chocolate preparation in the piazzas of Italy as a protest to the standardization of taste by the EU, Panagia gives us to
think the following paradox: sensation is dissensual, organolepsis disorganizes the body (146-147). These examples provide us also with some of the modern sites of dislocation or disfiguration of subjectivity. According to Panagia, the concept of sensation comprises both the power of disfiguration and the possibility reconfiguration of modern subjectivity. The experience of sensation is or can always be an inventive experience; it can always set free new and imaginative ways of political action, ways of “breaking fresh ground and acting without precedents” (Arendt) (5). The question posed in this book is above all an ethico-political question: how does one respond to the reconfiguration or emergence of a new political subjectivity?

4 Narratocracy and its politics of recognition is just one way of responding to this question. It is just one perceptual form of knowledge which has become, however, the dominant regime of perception in the theoretical and historical analysis of political phenomena. (Panagia does not tell us how this came to pass; was it only a matter of historical contingency?) As the organization of the perceptual field according to the imperative of rendering the objects of perception readable, narratocracy is, moreover, “an ethnopoetic modality of knowledge” (13): it is committed to give an account or justify the sense of an appearance by providing a narrative or story line, and by constituting the modern democratic subject as a literate or reading subject. In the first chapter, “From Nomos to Nomad,” Panagia follows a line of thought from Kant and up to Deleuze and Ranciere in order to bring to light a “democratic form of nonsense,” i.e., a number of diverse modalities of political expression and part-taking that remain irreducible to the narratocratic or “nomologic imperative of making sense” and to the deliberative mode of communication (38).

5 Panagia locates the ultimate merit of Kant’s aesthetic writings in the democratic and egalitarian character of his Critique of Judgement. The experience of the beautiful is a radical democratic moment in aesthetic judgement. As Kant put it, “there can be no rule to which anyone is to be compelled to recognize anything as beautiful”: anyone can experience beauty because no one can determine normatively the conditions of its existence. Crucial for Panagia’s argumentation is Kant’s reference to the moment (or durational intensity) of immediacy in aesthetic experience as well as to the disinterested interest that arises in the encounter of the beautiful object (31). The claim that there are no a priori rules to legislate a judgement of the beautiful, that beauty is disinterested and egalitarian, has consequences for the Kantian theory of the subject: the experience of the beautiful cannot be grounded on a pre-constituted subjectivity. On the contrary, the immediacy of the aesthetic experience ungrounds this subjectivity since it interrupts an interest-oriented evaluation of the aesthetic object and compels a form of reflection that cannot rely on commonly shared conditions for the distribution of sense (23, 28).

6 One of the most interesting points of Panagia’s argumentation lies in the relation of proximity that he establishes between the thinking of Kant and that of Deleuze, between Kant’s disinterestedness and his claim that “no faculty possesses the authority to legislate taste,” and Deleuze’s “body without organs,” his claim that “no one organ of perception has the authority to legislate sensation” (147). In the rest of the book Panagia attempts to link the Deleuzian “body without organs,” this democratic body in which no organ has any priority or authority over the other, with the question of the constitution of the modern and democratic subject of perception through such diverse practices as that of speaking, eating, viewing and touching. Panagia starts with the affiliation of democracy

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and noise, and he goes on with the link between democratic citizenship and the circulation of images and flavours.

7 In the following chapter “The Piazza, the Edicola, and the Noise of the Utterance” Panagia broaches the possibility of “an aural history of democratic culture,” (46) and reveals the possibility of “a democratic form nonsense” (61). This possibility however does not refer to the content of the utterance but to who gets to decide what a meaningful or a meaningless political utterance sounds like. Hence Panagia’s question: can the preparation of chocolate in the piazzas of Italy be considered a political utterance? The narratocratic model of cultural studies and historiography which puts semantic exchange, the etymologies and the historico-semantic genealogies of political concepts at the center of the investigation, reduces the appearance of a political utterance to the “shape of a sign” (46). By remaining attentive to the conceptual side of the sign, what Saussure called “the signified,” narratocracy ignores an important factor of language: the phonic signifier or the “sound-image” of the sign “that sources our sensory impressions” (48). The narratocratic commitment to the history of concepts results in a de facto partition of the social body of the polity between those who can and cannot speak or write, between appropriate and inappropriate political sounds, etc. In the final analysis what counts as political must correspond to a way of reading typographical inscriptions. With such divisions in place, the baking of chocolate, along with a series of sonorous events taking place throughout the piazzas of Italy (and especially around the edicola, the newsstand), will never be registered as a proper political utterance: but as a “blabber or worse as a cultural extravagance” (79). Given the fact that modern democracy is characterized by the potential simultaneity of diverse forms of perceptual part-taking (49) the question is: should we give normative priority in political communication to one mode of address or utterance (purely linguistic, meaningful, sensible, allowing deliberation, consensus, tact, politesse and harmony) against all others? Pursuing an aesthetico-political account of the utterance that goes beyond its semantic and grammatical limits, beyond the “stability of the written word” (73), Panagia shows what is politically lost in forgetting the sound, the interruptive noise, of the utterance. If there was never a “quiet” and “peaceful” democratic movement or uprising, if the “first pitch” of all revolutionary utterances is “an interruptive noise” this is because democratic politics has always been a politics, a political “art of noise” and nonsense, i.e. interruption of the deliberative, consensual, harmonious mode of communication, of the fiction of a common language of deliberation (52, 62).

8 In the following chapters Panagia passes from the literal subject of narratocracy and the noisy subject of democratic politics to the modern citizen subject who is also a tasting and a viewing subject. Chapter three, “Machiavelli’s Theory of Sensation and Florence’s Vita Festiva,” exposes the narratocratic assumptions which underline the historiographical accounts of festival culture in Renaissance Italy and of Machiavelli’s political thought. The main target here is the Cambridge school of historiography. An historico-theoretical evaluation of Machiavelli’s contribution to the early-modern political thought cannot be exhausted to a conceptual analysis of his republicanism. From the perspective of a political theory of sensation, a hermeneutic approach which is focused on the written letter of Machiavellis’s work remains entirely dependent on the supposedly unalterable and necessary character of certain organoleptic correspondences: for instance between sight and reading, touching and writing (76).
As Panagia argues, it is his commitment to the political life of sensation which leads Machiavelli, in his account of Fortuna and of the *extraordinary virtu* of the Prince, to an effective disruption of those organoleptic configurations that constitute the narratocratic disposition of a sensing body: the eyes give sight, the mouth gives taste etc. Focusing on his “theory of *riscontro*” which informs the Prince and a well-known autobiographical letter to Francesco Vettori, Panagia shows that Machiavelli was sensitive to and actually reported the growing diversity of intensities of *Vita Festiva* impacting on the body, disfiguring and reconfiguring its organs of perception, transforming the mouth, the eyes and the hand into nothing less than political organs of part-taking in *vivere civile* (civic life).

In chapter 4 "The Viewing Subject", Panagia poses the question of the status of the eyes (and of the mouth in the next chapter) as complex organs of political part-taking with respect to the relationship between citizenship, subjectivity and the circulation of images (and flavours.) If it is true that modern societies continue “to be more and more complicit to acts of image-creation and transmission” then “one of the key challenges posed to contemporary democratic theory today is how to engage the image.” With this challenge in mind, it is again by going against the narratocratic commitment to the reading subject and to the “readerly posture of attention” (120) that Panagia poses the question of the modern citizen. “Though the citizen subject may have been a reading subject, the contemporary citizen subject is a viewing subject” ... “the most pernicious political battles are fought at the level of audience ratings and viewership” (99). Panagia describes the political effects of visuality by drawing on the visual studies and aesthetic theory of Marin, Fried and Deleuze. What these authors maintain is that the viewing effects of painting (for example, that of Caravaggio and of Bacon) cannot be reduced to a mere seeing, to an ocular visuality, but they involve a “haptic visuality” as well in which not only the eyes but the entire body is at play in a configuration and reconfiguration of sense experience (109). If the aesthetic experience of those paintings - but also of other visual objects, Panagia refers extensively to the “Abu Graib photographs,” the “Rodney King video,” the film “The Ring” - is a proper political experience this is because the haptic visuality responsible for their perception is interruptive and dissensual, it collapses the rigorous distinction between the experience of seeing and that of touching and lays bare an organoleptic indistinction, a disorganized body, a disfiguration of the body’s organic constitution that Deleuze describes with the term “body without organs.” What we have here is a democracy of organs, and rather an immediate democracy, Panagia speaks of a temporary or provisional engagement, organization of the organs (see 90, 109, 110, 146): it lasts as long as the sensation of haptic visuality. Linguistic representation and narrative come always after the moment or durational intensity of sensation. Haptic visuality is a mode of perception that makes narrativity insufficient to the aesthetic experience of the image. At the moment of the encounter with the visual image storytelling is not an adequate response. Or as the title of the Epilogue to this book puts it: the painting, the photograph or the cinematic film “tell it all” (149). According to Panagia, “the confrontation with the image itself, that is, with the force of representation rather than its referent, is the important theoretical insight of Marin, Fried, and Deleuze” (110). The aesthetic object must be engaged on its own terms, in light of its presentational properties: it is an appearance of a singularity without model of resemblance: the image is its own referent. (But can we not say the same thing precisely for the linguistic utterance or speech act?)
In the last chapter “You’re Eating Too Fast!” Panagia comes again to this anti-aristocratic and democratic “body without organs” of the modern citizen subject who turns his attention from the image to flavour, and from the organ of sight to the organ of taste. The emergence in the 1980s of the Slow Food Movement bears witness to the ambivalence of the mouth as a complex organ of political reflection: it is the locus of the political art of speaking well (of “the democratic noise”) but also of the “art of eating well” (138). According to Panagia, flavor and the pleasure associated with it, is not just an important thematic consideration in the history of political thought (in Plato, Kant and Rousseau, 125-133) but also what is politically at stake today with the ongoing industrialization and standardization of a globalized gastronomy (see for instance McDonald’s slogan “One taste world wide”). Attending to the primacy of sensory experience, and affirming a “dissensual living with the world” that values the divergences and particularities of tastes, textures and flavours, the Slow Food calls us to realize that “our mouths are the loci of an ethico-political battle of geopolitical proportions” (144-145).

How does one respond to the appearance of a new image (flavour, sound, etc,) or of a new subjectivity, especially when its presence and singularity disarticulates our received normative inheritances and provokes our particularities? The narratocratic model of knowledge and its politics of recognition is an inadequate ethical response to the adventience of a new (viewing, tasting, etc modern citizen) subject. The attendance of a new appearance requires an act of admission: an appearance advenes upon us, without foreseeing it or expecting it, without conventions in place that would allow as to recognize its identity, to ask its name, and we admit to it. “I admit to the appearance, to the ‘monstrance’ of a new political subjectivity, not because I am obliged to recognize it and give it a name, but because it is present before me” (152).

But should we limit the attendance or admission of a new appearance, and consequently democratic equality and the democratic politics of sensation, to citizen and fraternity (22, 43), to the human subject who lives always within the borders of some nation-state and who is also my brother and compeer, as Panagia seems to do repeating thereby the most traditional and dominant line of democratic thought? It is Panagia himself, however, who gives us some reasons to resist this limitation, and precisely with his own reference to the modern technologies of the image, as well as to the Christian commitment to narratocracy (122). If citizenship has always been defined by inscription within a nation-state whose body is rooted in a territory (lost, given or promised), and if the circulation of images goes through borders, if that is, the technology of the image (tele-vision) displaces places, then the question both of politics and of democracy should no longer be tied to that of citizenship or to locality. And perhaps it should be dissociated from the question of fraternity as well, which since St Paul has been inscribed within a concept of cosmopolitanism, of world citizen, of human brotherhood as children of the same Father/God.

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