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# The Political Life of Sensation

By Davide Panagia



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## The Political Life of Sensation By Davide Panagia

The taste of chocolate, the noise of a crowd, the visual impressions of filmic images—such sensory perceptions are rarely if ever discussed in relation to democratic theory. In response, Davide Panagia argues that by overlooking sensation political theorists ignore a crucial dimension of political life. Drawing on Gilles Deleuze's and Jacques Rancière's readings of Kantian aesthetics, Panagia posits sensation as a radical democratic moment of aesthetic judgment. He contends that sensory experience interrupts our perceptual givens, creating occasions to suspend authority and reconfigure the arrangement of a political order.

Panagia claims that the rule of narrative governs our inherited notions of political subjectivity and agency, such that reading and writing are the established modes of political deliberation. Yet the contemporary citizen-subject is a viewing subject, influenced by film, photos, and other perceptual stimuli as much as by text. Challenging the rule of narrative, Panagia analyzes diverse sites of cultural engagement including the visual dynamics portrayed in the film *The Ring*, the growth of festival culture in late-fifteenth-century Florence, the practices of convivium espoused by the Slow Food movement, and the architectural design of public newsstands. He then ties these occasions for sensation to notable moments in the history of political thought and shows the political potential of a dislocated subjectivity therein. Democratic politics, Panagia concludes, involves a taking part in those everyday practices that interrupt our common modes of sensing and afford us an awareness of what had previously been insensible.



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## Editorial Review

### Review

“This smart and ambitious book contributes to a growing body of work in political theory that attempts to illuminate the connections among politics, culture, theory, and aesthetics, thereby broadening our understanding of the kinds of phenomena that count as political in contemporary multicultural politics. . . . [T]his is a very important book that offers valuable ways to better comprehend the imbrications of politics, culture, and aesthetics in contemporary multicultural democracy.” - Robert E. Watkins, *Perspectives on Politics*

“Davide Panagia develops a provocative contribution to democratic political theory. . . . His arguments are persuasive and refreshing. . . . [T]he work on the whole is rich and innovative.” - Parie Leung, *Canadian Literature*

“‘The first political act is also an aesthetic one.’ From this provocative postulate *The Political Life of Sensation* develops a refreshingly innovative theory of the image for which the force of sensation figures as a force for democracy. As interruptive as it is instaurational, both dissensual and convivial, the power of the image is brought by Davide Panagia to a new and original theoretical expression. The book weaves seamlessly between penetrating analyses of key political and philosophical thinkers and of cultural formations from the piazzas of Italy to the Thanksgiving table. A forceful and convincing apologia for an ‘ethics of appearance.’” —**Brian Massumi**, author of *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*

“With this remarkable book, Davide Panagia chops off the head of political theory’s ruling narratocracy. The challenge he thereby raises is nothing less than a call for reconfiguring democracy as a realm of the senses.” —**Jodi Dean**, author of *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies: Communicative Capitalism and Left Politics*

“Davide Panagia develops a provocative contribution to democratic political theory. . . . His arguments are persuasive and refreshing. . . . [T]he work on the whole is rich and innovative.”  
(Parie Leung *Canadian Literature*)

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#### About the Author

Davide Panagia is Canada Research Chair in Cultural Studies at Trent University in Peterborough, Ontario. He is the author of *The Poetics of Political Thinking*, also published by Duke University Press.

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