Reviews


Reviewed by Eve Wiederhold, University of North Carolina at Greensboro

In the introduction to _The Poetics of Political Thinking_, Davide Panagia notes that “thinking politically' is tantamount to a personal insult, immediately challenging one’s moral rectitude” (2). One could substitute “speaking rhetorically” and get a comparable response. Both indicate a cultural wariness regarding the strategic use of language to achieve desired audience reactions. Expressions of this mistrust abound on cable news programs wherein media commentators, who might be typified by Joe Scarborough (the self-styled “regular Joe”), applaud political speeches to the extent that they are delivered “from the gut,” deploying a calculator that depicts emotions as core, elemental phenomena able to register individual and collective truth. To be strategic, on the other hand, is to be coercive and manipulative, as if one is interfering with the free adjudication of ideas in an imagined space of authentic and honest deliberation. This orientation emerges from nuanced conceptions of the relationship between embodied sense and language practices. Our understanding of each of these domains and how they interact shapes our conceptions of ethical debate and democratic participation.
Panagia's study of aesthetics can help identify how emotion came to be positioned as a barometer of truth underwriting morally sound political judgments. Historically, the study of aesthetics has been concerned with the role of the senses in acts of evaluation, and has considered, for example, how objectified beauty promotes the experience of attraction and affection. Like rhetoric, however, the domain of aesthetic inquiry is expansive; it also can be described more loosely as a tradition that draws together analyses of apprehension, reception, evaluation, and judgment. Such analyses do not purport to be empirically verifiable. Rather, aestheticized theories are understood to be narrative constructions that assign images to domains of inquiry that cannot be definitively rendered by any linguistic representation. In exploring how aesthetic concepts inform the political writings of a range of authors, Panagia demonstrates how political theory has depended upon an aesthetic tradition even when positing standards of evaluation that seem to be concrete and divorced from the imaginative powers of poetics. Differences between the empirical and the poetic are obscured when theorists rely upon an aesthetic tradition that has naturalized conceptions of how the senses assist and enable political judgment.

Giving a language to the nonlinguistic can raise ethical dilemmas, as when political theorists describe how private reactions are transformed into a majority view. How to enact and understand such conversions was of primary importance to Thomas Hobbes for example, who endeavored to explain how public opinion can be translated into knowledge about political life (22). Hobbes has a reputation as an authoritarian who favored determinism and expressed an interest in quelling the threat of disorder posed by "barbarous speech" of the mob. However, Panagia points out that Hobbes was also fluent in four languages and fascinated with the complexities of translation. Hobbes' regard for distortion and temporality in perspective situates his work within a rhetorical tradition that produced methods for sorting through multiple opinions to show how unification of perspective follows diversity. He devised a democratic aesthetic that not only acknowledged the
importance of the views of the individual, but also advised that any act affecting the collective be held up to public scrutiny. To scrutinize is to instigate a critical faculty that requires political subjects to both compare and distinguish their individual reactions to those of others (34–35). By developing a discriminatory competence, political subjects do not passively adopt another’s perspective; rather, they actively participate in determining what should constitute the majority view.

This paradigm continues to have political salience, and part of Panagia’s aim is to demonstrate how it has been adapted within subsequent theories that propose methods for adjudicating public controversies. He does so by examining the role of aesthetics in the political writings of several other influential thinkers including Gilles Deleuze, John Rawls, Jürgen Habermas, Jacques Rancière, and William Hazlitt. Rhetoricians and compositionists can build upon his analyses to more generally critique languages that purport to represent the democratic experience. After all, what is scrutiny? How precisely are disparate acts of scrutinizing gathered together to form collective perspectives (which, when articulated, are also narratives)?

In the current political milieu, “the majority view” is represented by the results of public polls that appear to provide comprehensible, concrete evidence of shared attitudes. Whether they accurately reflect any majority perspective is debatable; however, they are referenced within media reports as real and ethical measurements of “the voice of the people.” Indeed, polls tend to be regarded as enactments of public participation. There is a slippage past the fundamentally unstable and problematic nature of what any representation references that goes unremarked in media analyses of the political climate. After the 2004 presidential election, media analysts attributed the victory of George W. Bush to his stance on “moral” issues, a conclusion reached after voters responded to exit polls. Rather than think through the ways in which pollsters’ questions set the terms of discussion, responses were taken at face value, as if they directly revealed the concerns of the electorate. Two years later, Bush attempted to return to the
imagined site of victory by proposing a ban on homosexual marriage, a proposition that was interpreted by media analysts as a political ploy to bolster his "base." Significantly, his pronouncement of a ban was ridiculed because it appeared to be orchestrated, a critique that effectively extinguished further public discussion about the merits of his proposal and its significance to the nation. Even more importantly, there was little public discussion about how it could be possible for a president to advocate a policy that would openly discriminate against members of the citizenry. Instead, media critiques were limited to a repetition of the idea that politicians need to avoid the appearance of political strategizing to convince voters that their policies are legitimate. Scholars can try to change the terms of discussion by analyzing how media commentators blur the analytical with the ideological when they suggest that political judgments can step past the ambiguities of representation and tell us something true about what has collective value. If ambiguity and undecidability are intrinsic to interpretation, then we are called upon to contend with embedded cultural narratives that both enable us to articulate ideas but also regulate ways of speaking (seeing and interpreting). Would it be possible, for example, to devise a method for critiquing political pandering without resorting to a dualistic logic that would distinguish authenticity from artifice, truth from rhetoric?

While not quite a genealogy, *The Poetics of Political Thinking* exposes the legacy of two prominent aesthetics that support the idea that political thought should get beyond imagery and reach a domain of truth that is universally recognizable. We've inherited the idea that truth should present itself without rhetoric's assistance from Plato's endorsement of a mimetic account of representation, which envisions representation as a process in which a referent substitutes for an original object. This implies a method for determining value: because resemblance is of primary importance, meaning appears to exist independently from its mode of expression, while expressions seem to have less importance than original meaning itself (7). Further, the quality of similarity is deemed to have more value than difference (52-
The mimetic account of representation also implies a methodology: one should attempt to make one’s representation as similar as possible to an already established domain of truth. Evaluations of a representation’s credibility and integrity will be based upon whether resemblance is attempted and achieved.

Conceptions of what constitutes ethical public thought have also been influenced by Kant’s treatise on beauty, a quality that incites sensory responses that, in Kant’s view, serve no utilitarian purpose. A judgment of beauty is devoid of all interest because the qualities of aesthetic objects exist independently from the contexts in which they emerge. Our individual responses to such objects may differ, and may be influenced by the particularities of our experiences; however, the general idea of beauty is separate from whatever individual responses are made in specific cases. When we discuss the qualities of beautiful objects, we argue from a neutral space of disinterest that underwrites what Kant calls reflective judgment (70). This kind of judgment allows us to enter a space in which individual predilection meets obligation to the collective. Kant maintained that when we experience pleasure from the apprehension of a beautiful object, we develop sensibilities that incline us towards the experience of sympathy, which, by definition, involves concern for others. Indeed, justifications for aesthetic evaluations imply a commitment to sociability. As Panagia explains: “If we can speak of an aesthetic interest in Kantian terms, then it can only be . . . an inter-est, a principle of sociability where a judgment of beauty invites an other’s response” (73–74).

Kant’s treatise on disinterested reflective judgment has elicited a variety of responses from contemporary political thinkers who disagree about the ethical consequences of invoking it as an equitable mechanism of political adjudication. Panagia highlights these disagreements by dividing the authors in his study into two camps: those who believe that democratic inquiry entails the formation of disinterested communities to instigate ethical evaluation of political controversies, and those who read signifiers such as “disinterest” and “community” as unreliable, for they
reference not material reality but a never fully realizable potentiality that need not pay allegiance to already established rules and definitions.

Advocates of what Panagia calls a liberal perspective acknowledge the importance of difference in individual perceptions, but maintain that such differences should be ameliorated through the work of representation. Rawls and Habermas are chief exemplars, equally interested in building a communicative ethics that incorporates Kant’s notion of autonomy in perspective to generate disinterested contemplation of political arguments. Each maintains that political judgment can be aided by the application of reason, which, like beauty, is of a quality that carries no bias or personal interest. According to Panagia, Rawls conceptualizes reason as “an ideal public vocabulary guaranteeing understanding among participants” (77). Habermas also valorizes deliberation that can be characterized as reasonable, suggesting that citizens who deploy public reason allow the force of the better argument to determine merit. When political subjects engage in debate that can be identified as reasonable, they demonstrate that they are arguing with sincerity and in good faith. Panagia analyzes how a mimetic logic informs this conclusion because it suggests that reason is both representable and reproducible. As with Plato’s theory, a methodology is implied that requires interlocutors to copy preestablished forms of reason when engaging in public debate. The point of public review is to encourage others to use familiar and recognizable forms to prompt others to see the reasonableness of one’s perspective. Speakers are expected to aim for mutual recognition, and in the process, demonstrate a willingness to apply already established rules that reaffirm conceptions of how representation works.

The second group of writers in Panagia’s study attempts to dismantle the rule of resemblance by denaturalizing the idea that working towards interpretive unity is always morally just. These writers do not bind accounts of representation to determinations of whether a copy resembles an original and do not advocate on behalf of a discursive process that purports to deliver objective and
fair results. Instead, theorists such as Deleuze and Rancière propose alternative models for conceiving of the human capacity to discriminate and judge by envisioning political ethics as a perpetual potentiality of representational reconfigurations. Each suggests that representation be “understood as a process by which the intensity of difference in itself is acknowledged as an associational force in political life” (Panagia 6). Representations do not resolve difference. The work of representation is always aesthetic because any chain of associations is always constructed. This alternative model considers the ways in which representation need not reference the familiar to be regarded as morally sound and also implies that settling on mutuality in perspective can stultify critical debate by silencing contradiction and undecidability. Rancière maintains that democratic inquiry be understood as breaking with what is already known, particularly what is known about procedures of representation. In seeking to offer counternarratives that do not assume, for example, the value of a logic of coherence or the clear exposition of arguments, the authors labeled as postmodern valorize interpretive disruptions that encourage multiplicity and difference in ways of imagining and describing acts of political reflection.

The idea of breaking with known procedures of representation to enact democratic inquiry is suggestive for rhetoricians and compositionists who are interested in expanding conceptions of what constitutes critical engagement on the part of students. Panagia’s book can inspire analyses of what constitutes the status of representation within theories that seek to explain what constitutes work in the fields of rhetoric and composition. We might also consider how aestheticized conceptions of interactions between the senses and narrative have influenced conceptions of democratic classroom practices. Most of us, for example, hope that students will develop their own voices and would agree that no person’s perspective is inherently superior to any other. What may not provoke agreement, however, is how the possibility of difference should be represented and evaluated—both textually and conceptually. Should students shape their representations ac-
ccording to familiar and known standards to demonstrate that they are not only learning, but also writing in good faith? To use Habermas' language, is the point of our work to teach students to write in ways that provoke a mutual recognition of their ideas?

Considering the significance of how an object of representation looks marks the space in which rhetoric meets aesthetics, where strategizing also bespeaks a philosophical orientation about whether interlocutors should consciously attempt to craft representations that will be recognizable, comprehensible, as well as pleasing in appearance to others. It would have been nice if Panagia had explored the relationship between aesthetic and rhetorical traditions, since each is pertinent to any examination of the poetics of political thinking. Thinking through this relationship is not an issue Panagia addresses at length because, unfortunately, he writes from the perspective of the literary critic who associates rhetoric with the study of proper arrangement and delivery. Further conversations, however, might draw upon both aesthetic and rhetorical traditions when examining the ways in which embodied reactions to images encounter commonplace conceptions of the work of representation.


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At La Marcha, the April 2006 march on Washington in support of immigrant rights, men, women, and children waved a sea of U.S. flags; others draped themselves in the colors of El Salvador,