

The Aesthetic Dis- and Configuration of Democracy: On Nadia Urbinati's Conception of Democratic Opinion and the Aesthetic Function of Democratic Politics

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Abstract:

Nadia Urbinati, in her writings, has recurrently warned about the dangers of theorizing democracy in aesthetic terms. She sees most aesthetic elements of a mediaized politics as harmful for the very project of democracy itself. In *Democracy Disfigured* (2014) and other writings, she urges that in a democracy the people ought to be conceptualized as organized around the principles of voice and of written law and not as an audience enthralled by the aesthetic or visual and theatrical representation of the sovereign. She levels her critique of an aesthetic take on democracy primarily at Jeffrey Green's model of ocular democracy and its plebiscitarian undercurrent. While echoing Urbinati's concerns about Green's model of democracy, this article argues for an aesthetics of democracy that is detached from plebiscitary undercurrents and that points to the democratic value of aesthetic judgment and aesthetic experience in terms of citizens' freedom and participatory-critical engagement, by insisting on the fundamental political meaning of the sensual (pertaining to aesthetics writ large): that who, why, and how something can become publicly recognizable rests on aesthetic sensibilities that belong to a democratic conception of citizenship. The article suggests that these considerations could be compatible with Urbinati's conceptualization of political opinion, provided that this conception acknowledges that the aesthetic can take over some of the critical and participatory functions, which the epistemic and political functions of public opinion are supposed to fulfil.

Keywords: public opinion, aesthetics, democratic judgment, aesthetic judgment, political community, political participation

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.46854/fc.2024.1s64>

Nadia Urbinati, in her writings, has recurrently warned about the dangers of theorizing democracy in aesthetic terms. She sees most aesthetic elements of a mediatised politics as harmful for the very project of democracy itself. In *Democracy Disfigured* and other writings, she urges that in a democracy the people ought to be conceptualized as organized around the principles of voice and of written law and not as an audience enthralled by the aesthetic or visual and theatrical representation of the sovereign.¹ She levels her critique of an aesthetic take on democracy primarily at Jeffrey Green's model of ocular democracy and its plebiscitarian undercurrent. While I agree with her that Green's model is problematic for various reasons, I want to invite her to consider the aesthetic arguments about democratic politics that are detached from the plebiscitary model and that insist on the fundamental political meaning of the sensual (pertaining to aesthetics writ large): that who, why, and how something can become publicly recognizable ultimately rest on aesthetic sensibilities that belong to a democratic conception of citizenship.

I will argue for two main claims that will emerge from my discussion of the relationship of Urbinati's conception of democracy to aesthetics. The first claim is that Urbinati's rather negative view of "aestheticized" democratic politics originates from two different sources, one of which belongs to her conception of democracy rather accidentally, and the other of which is at its core. The former is her extended criticism of Jeffrey Green's plebiscitarian ocular model of democracy and the specific problematic aesthetics that derives from his model. I will suggest that her criticism of an aestheticized democracy primarily refers to the media aesthetics of this specific plebiscitarian model and does not per se preclude the possibility of a normative reflection of democratic ideals in aesthetic terms. Yet, the second source of her negative view is her conception of political opinion that does preclude this possibility. Urbinati believes that opinions can only fulfil their critical functions of safeguarding individual autonomy and providing necessary checks on institutions and majority-decisions if they are confined to reasoned public discourse that corresponds to the enlightening word and written law, despite their legitimate "cacophonous and imprecise character".² That is, it can fulfil these functions only if the aesthetic in democracy is limited to safeguarding the publicity, transparency, and accountability of political power.

1 Urbinati, N., *Democracy Disfigured: Opinion, Truth, and the People*. Cambridge, Harvard University Press 2014; and Urbinati, N., *Me the People: How Populism Transforms Democracy*. Cambridge, Harvard University Press 2019.

2 Urbinati, N., *Democracy Disfigured*, p. 6.

However, I will argue that this is a too narrow understanding of the normative significance of aesthetics to democracy. I will propose, as a second claim, that an aesthetic reflection on democratic politics shows that both aesthetic experience and aesthetic judgment are valuable for the *political* and *critical* functions of democratic opinion, at the level of individual democratic citizenship, but not in principle detached from political procedures and institutions.

The paper is organized in three sections. In the first section I discuss Urbinati's criticism of Green's aesthetic model of democracy against the background of her conception of democratic opinion that requires the simultaneous and equilibrate performance of its aesthetic, epistemic, and political functions. I largely agree with Urbinati's assessment that Green's plebiscitarianism – together with its reliance on the aesthetic configurations of and the interplay between mass media, political elites, and the democratic masses – renders this model highly problematic. In the second section, I suggest that if we disentangle aesthetics from a plebiscitarian model of democracy, it might be possible to lay bare the aesthetic underpinnings of democratic freedom and democratic citizenship. In particular, I show that the ideals of democratic citizenship and democratic freedom both have an aesthetic dimension that is dependent on aesthetic judgment and aesthetic experience. I further discuss these ideals in relation to viewership and images in the context of documentary photographic images. This account of aesthetics and democracy may inspire a revision of Urbinati's exclusively negative stance on viewership and images in connection with democratic politics. In the third and final section, I consider whether the arguments presented in section two speak in favour of Urbinati's conceptualization of political opinion or whether an extension of the aesthetic function of opinion would be required, and how such an extension would affect her conception of political opinion.

Urbinati's Warnings of the Aestheticization of Politics and the Resulting Disfiguration of Democracy

The suggestive title *Democracy Disfigured* implies that in order for democracy to become disfigured some sort of original figuration – a proper democratic form – has to be assumed that can become deformed. While the term “disfigure” in everyday usage means to deface, to make ugly, to make unattractive, to spoil the appearance of, etc. and refers to a face or surface that is impaired aesthetically, what is at stake here, rather, is the proper functioning and equilibrium of the complex relationship between contemporary democratic institutions and democratic citizenship.

Democracy's proper *form*, for Urbinati, resides with a conception of democratic proceduralism that accentuates the core features of the democratic ideal. Such proceduralism has two main legs. One leg refers to the dynamic and interacting *diarchic* structure of democratic sovereignty: the dual rule of will and opinion. The sovereign democratic people rule by way of expressing their wills in democratic elections on the one hand, and on the other hand by way of exercising their faculties of forming opinions on political matters outside of formal institutions. The other leg refers to a conception of representative democracy that corresponds to the diarchic structure of democratic sovereignty. Taken together, this results in a conception of representative democracy as a diarchic system in which will and opinion, the two powers of sovereign citizens, influence each other but never fully merge. The public forum links together opinion and will, and it has a central legitimating function for Urbinati: by enabling the interchange of ideas and perspectives between citizens, it produces a form of communicative power between the two legs of democracy's diarchy, so that opinion can influence political decisions and the will (decision) remains fallible and is checked.

In its proper form, the public forum has to reliably employ three functions that have to be kept in a state of equilibrium: an epistemic, a political, and an aesthetic function:³

“Representative democracy defends and benefits from the complexity of the public sphere of opinion: its critical and cognitive function, its political style and spirit, and its propensity to make power visible and also for this reason public. Yet none of these functions are sufficient alone; in fact, taken in isolation they may compromise the diarchic configuration of democracy.”⁴

The epistemic function refers to the capability of the public sphere of opinion to enable the rational exchange and deliberation of perspectives on political matters among citizens. The political function refers to the participatory and inclusionary effects of the public sphere of opinion, and the aesthetic function relates to the positive effects of the public forum in terms of publicity, transparency, and accountability of political power.

At the heart of this proceduralism looms the normative “idea of citizenship as an expression of political autonomy,” which pivots on the ideal of equal freedom for all citizens. In Urbinati's estimate, this is best realized through the diarchy of will and opinion, because this diarchy engenders ex-

3 Ibid., p. 173.

4 Ibid., p. 12.

actly the right form of active participation by citizens.⁵ But what constitutes the right form of active participation in democracy according to Urbinati? Although she seems to provide no direct answer to this question, what is clear is that, for her, actively participating citizens must rely on two specific human senses in order to actualize or realize the underlying normative value of individual autonomy: voice and hearing. She holds that:

“voice and hearing together, not one or the other, are the two complementary senses that ordinary citizens use when they form their views and listen to others’ and change and express their opinions and seek through them to acquire a political presence, to watch and judge their elected politicians.”⁶

Active participation in democracy, in other words, takes place by way of using one’s voice to form opinions and make one’s will heard and by way of using one’s capacity to listen. According to this determination, both these capacities are necessary preconditions of participatory forms of political action, whereas, for example, mere spectatorship is passive and therefore unsuitable for political participation. “Opinion is a form of action and a form of power that has voice at its heart,” Urbinati urges, “not sight.”⁷ Because “speech is the organ of political autonomy,” hence, a deliberative configuration of the democratic public forum is a necessary condition of political autonomy.⁸

Against the background of this understanding of democracy, Urbinati identifies three contemporary disfigurements of the democratic concept of diarchic sovereignty in representative democracy: epistemic, populist, and aesthetic-plebiscitarian conceptions of democracy. These disfigurements refer to the three functions of the public sphere of opinion. What makes them dangerous, in Urbinati’s view, is that they isolate one of the three functions at the expense of the other two, thus creating an imbalance between them. In other words, these disfigurements are all characterized by the conviction that there is one single function or value that trumps democracy’s diarchy and the equilibrium of the three functions that characterize the public sphere of opinion.

I am particularly interested here in Urbinati’s discussion and rejection of one of these disfigurements, namely the aesthetic-plebiscitarian conception

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid., p. 15.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid., p. 226.

of democracy that Jeffrey Green presents in his book *The Eyes of the People*.⁹ Green defends a plebiscitary theory of democracy which is intended to promote a paradigm shift in our reflections of the democratic ideal: from the predominance of the vocal form – active democratic participation based on communication – to the ocular model. In this model, the origin of democracy’s power is no longer sought in words and in the citizen as a deliberative participant, but in images and in the citizen as a spectator as part of a political audience. Beyond the mere affirmation of the political reality that citizens of contemporary mediatised democracies find themselves in, Green attempts to draw up a normative map of how to navigate such a shift from the vocal to the ocular in contemporary democracies.¹⁰ One of his key claims is that citizens’ ocular capacities constitute on an aggregative level a form of empowerment of the people by virtue of the disciplinary power of the gaze. He enlists Foucault and Bentham to elaborate his central proposition that the gazing plebiscite can exercise a genuinely empowered form of vision in contemporary mass society. The idea here is that the politician is forced to present herself before the eyes of the citizens in order to constantly solicit approval and favour. What is normatively decisive for Green is that the conditions under which the politician has to prove herself need to be beyond her sphere of influence. Such loss of control over the conditions of her public appearance, Green claims, give the citizens power over the politician because it compels her to “candour”, by which he means the idea of sincerity in appearance due to circumstances that are beyond the politician’s control.¹¹ Hence, within the ocular model of democracy, the gaze is the tool of democratic power, and candour is the normative standard, which takes some power out of the hands of political leaders and hands it over to the viewers. In short, the communicative public is being transformed into an aesthetic and theatrical one, a transformation that, according to Green, is desirable because it leads to the politicization of citizens and thus is able to realize the egalitarian and liberal ideals of democracy.

In chapter four of *Democracy Disfigured*, Urbinati critically discusses Green’s ocular model of democracy. Her main disagreement is with its underlying plebiscitarian premise, which Green unhappily fuses with the aesthetic elements of a mediatised public. The problem with plebiscitarianism

9 Green, J. E., *The Eyes of the People: Democracy in an Age of Spectatorship*. Oxford, Oxford University Press 2011.

10 “Most citizens most of the time are not decision-makers, relating to politics with their voices, but spectators who relate to politics with their eye”. *Ibid.*, p. 4.

11 *Ibid.*, p. 13.

is that it reinterprets citizens along the lines of “a mass spectator of political elites. Visual audience becomes the only collective capacity of the people”.¹² And thus, aesthetic values necessarily become key: politics turns into a theatrical stage where spectators watch actors play their parts. As a result, the discursive role of citizens participating in the public forum is replaced by the cheering and booing of political leaders in the visual media, reducing the active participation of citizens in voting and politics to a reality TV show. This is troubling for Urbinati because it deprives democracy of both its epistemic and political function and instead reduces it to the aesthetic function of publicly presenting power. Consequently, Green’s “videocracy” essentially buys into a conception of democracy that tends to be devoid of rational and critical engagement.¹³ This is the central problem of the aestheticization of democracy for Urbinati:

“In making vision, rather than hearing, central, television is said to have contributed in purging the opinion of the masses of all pretence or rationality upon which the power of persuasion of the orators relied. [...] Video democracy confirms the fact that the politics of the masses belongs in the domain of aesthetic and theatrical, not cognitive or deliberative; it actually has nothing to do with rationality.”¹⁴

The ocular public sphere of video democracy is populated by the *homo videns*, whose mind is no longer shaped by concepts but by images. The *homo videns* sees without understanding, makes political decisions on an affective rather than a rational basis, guided by the tastes of the masses and the fashions of the time, “within which the subjective point of view becomes an embarrassing sign of anachronism.”¹⁵ Opinion becomes “the name of crafted images unfurled by video technicians to which the people react.”¹⁶ Such an understanding of “opinion” leads to the normative valorisation of aesthetic pleasure and emotional capture at the expense of deliberative processes of opinion-formation in terms of rational justification and factual and moral reasoning. Without such processes, Urbinati fears, *doxa* cannot be the critical tool that provides the control of majority decisions and elected politicians that her diarchic model requires. Green’s democratic vision must accept what is given to our senses, and consequently, because it lacks the

12 Urbinati, N., *Democracy Disfigured*, p. 232.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 5.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 203.

15 *Ibid.*

16 *Ibid.*, p. 8.

epistemic and political functions, it defies the idea of active-critical citizenship as an expression of political autonomy.

By conveying all critical power to citizens as viewers, Green's aesthetic plebiscitarianism must rely on the critical function of mass media and online communication, but such reliance is problematic for democracy, because "the world created by the mass media is the world itself, a total and only reality"¹⁷ I am here reminded of Guy Debord's criticism of the spectacle in terms of its overwhelming power of making us inhabitants of industrialized modern mass-societies assume that there is nothing beyond the spectacle itself:

"The spectacle presents itself as something enormously positive, indisputable, and inaccessible. It says nothing more than "that which appears is good, that which is good appears." The attitude which it demands in principle is passive acceptance which in fact it already obtained by its manner of appearing without reply, by its monopoly of appearance."¹⁸

Urbinati's criticism of Green's audience plebiscitarianism relates to what concerned Debord, namely that the media-ruled political spectacle, no matter how well intentioned its organizers may be, carries totalitarian tendencies. Unlike Debord, however, Urbinati's critique of a mediated spectacle democracy is concerned with the irrational power of the human gaze and the impossibility of letting the rational power of the voice appear and take effect. The *homo videns* always makes *post hoc* decisions on conditions and matters that it did not choose or consent to, which as a result renders the "public a passive audience that watches leaders act with insatiable curiosity and no participatory aim."¹⁹ Furthermore, Urbinati argues, there exists a negative correlation between a decline of electoral and political participation and the "the aesthetic and theatrical function of the public, a voyeuristic machine that serves to gratify people's longing for political spectacle more than their liberty from arbitrary power."²⁰

Indeed, it remains unclear how politicians' submission to the disciplinary position of being seen by the people influences and transforms their actions in any significant way. The claim that the people's gaze contains a significant amount of popular power seems especially doubtful because of the economic and technological conditions that deeply shape the medially conveyed po-

17 Ibid., p. 215.

18 Debord, G., *Society of The Spectacle*. London, Bread and Circuses Publishing 2012, § 12.

19 Urbinati, N., *Democracy Disfigured*, p. 20.

20 Ibid., p. 226.

litical experiences of contemporary democratic citizens. A plebiscitary audience democracy might very well be dictated by the logic of commercial marketing and publicity that creates a form of political visibility and discourse where perceived attraction determines attention and visibility. And, what is even worse, it has the effect of veiling the true power of the leader by creating a pretence of publicity and transparency in making the life of the leader visible and an object of spectacle. Thus, merely seeing politicians, even under ideal circumstances of “candour”, has very limited critical and participatory potential.²¹

For these reasons, I broadly agree with Urbinati’s criticism of Green’s ocular model of democracy, and I also agree with her that the aestheticization of democracy in the form of Green’s plebiscitarianism in fact depoliticizes and normatively legitimizes the rule of the few over the broad mass of citizens, thus undermining the democratic ideal of equal freedom. At the same time, however, I argue that their warnings against an aestheticization of democracy should only apply to aesthetic plebiscitarianism and not, in principle, to any conceptualization of an aesthetic of democracy.

We can distinguish between three separate but intertwined concerns that motivate her criticism of Green’s model. The first concern relates to her negative view of images in politics and our corresponding specific sensory capacity pertaining to vision. As we have seen above, the problem with our ocular senses for Urbinati is that they can neither evoke critical engagement – because the viewing of images does not convey any argumentative substance that could be part of communicative efforts that make our political disagreements rational – nor do they represent an active form of participation in politics.

The second concern relates to the socio-psychological mechanisms of the mob that can reduce and even change the critical behaviour of individuals who are part of a mass audience.²² Individuals who are part of a crowd tend to become emotionally invested in how the crowd reacts to what it sees and

21 Another reason for this limitation is that Green’s account of the gaze is confined to the supposedly disciplining effect of being seen that reduces watching to a passive disciplinary tool of surveillance, hence not really accounting for the watching subjects, which require an exploration of the aesthetics and ethics of watching. This aspect of the limitations of Green’s conceptualization of the gaze is discussed well in Bíba, J., *Democratic Spectatorship beyond Plebiscitarianism: On Jeffrey Green’s Ocular Democracy*. *Filosofický časopis – Philosophical Journal*, 2017, No. 1, pp. 71–91, esp. pp. 84–88.

22 This concern particularly comes out in a section of *Democracy Disfigured* where Urbinati discusses the de-rationalizing and affect-intensifying effects of the crowd in the context of the Roman model of the forum and Le Bon’s analysis of the crowd in mass society. Urbinati, N., *Democracy Disfigured*, pp. 217–221.

hears and thereby lose their sense of critical reflection. While being part of a crowd enhances emotional participation, it tends to reduce critical-rational participation.

The third concern relates to Green's specific form of audience plebiscitarianism, which tends to reduce representative democracy and democratic citizenship to the direct support or rejection of a leader or a proposal; it leads to passivity and requires no form of political activity other than approval or rejection. Plebiscitarianism consolidates and justifies the unequal relationship between the powerful few and the passive majority.

Urbinati's first concern seems, to me, to be coloured by the second and third of her concerns, and her criticism seems targeted not at the aesthetic lens through which Green models democracy in plebiscitary terms, but rather at the specific aesthetic constellation that the plebiscitarian model of democracy asks for. Green's model of democracy is problematic in its dependence on aesthetics because it generates specific aesthetic effects that result from an interplay between contemporary mass media and the conditions of a plebiscitarian democracy. Indeed, Urbinati's unease with aesthetics should be not so much a worry about the aesthetic in connection with democratic politics as such (or the gaze or images as such), but rather a worry about the specific aesthetic forms that plebiscitarianism engenders.

But what happens if we uncouple an aesthetic reflection on democracy from plebiscitarianism? How can we think about democratic citizenship and democratic ideals in aesthetic terms beyond a plebiscitarian model? Urbinati in passing offers the view that a non-plebiscitarian interpretation of the idea of ocular democracy could, in fact, be "interpreted as a tool for more participation, or even the breaking of ordinary politics."²³ While she does not explore this possibility in her writings, in the next section I would like to outline how this could be done.

The Aesthetic Configuration of Democratic Citizenship

Urbinati enlists Kant's theory of aesthetic judgment and taste to illustrate the trade-off between the aesthetic function of democratic opinion on the one hand and the epistemic and political functions of democratic opinion on the other hand. She explains that for Kant, aesthetic judgments of taste, because they are not determining, "isolate but [do] not foster communication."²⁴ This is so, she holds, because taste only expresses subjective likings and as such

²³ Ibid., p. 212.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 209.

cannot be a means of mutual understanding or agreement. Indeed, Kant rejected the idea that aesthetic judgments could ever be determining in that they could be proved or disproved by evidence. At the same time, however, he insisted that aesthetic judgments are not entirely subjective, because judgments of beauty postulate the agreement of others and fall into the realm of quarrels and contention (Kant calls it *Streiten*): “For in a matter in which contention is to be allowed, there must be a hope of coming to terms”.²⁵ The judgment “this sculpture is beautiful” is not the same as the assertion “I like pizza”, and hence it would be odd to say that this sculpture “is beautiful *for me*”.²⁶ Consequently, for Kant, aesthetic judgments of taste do not only express idiosyncratic likings.

This has two important implications. The first implication relates to what Arendt (1992) held about Kant’s conception of aesthetic judgment, namely that it provides a template for theorizing political judgments: both political and aesthetic judgments pertain to appearances as appearances and refer to universality of a special kind.²⁷ Because political judgments resemble aesthetic judgments, we can quarrel about those judgments in inter-subjective communication, which could establish agreement as the upshot of persuasion rather than evidence or verification. A judgment of taste, Kant held, is based on a concept that “acquires at the same time validity for everyone [...] because its determining ground lies, perhaps, in the concept of what may be regarded as the supersensible substrate of humanity.”²⁸ For Arendt, this idea of a supersensible substratum of humanity underpins reflective aesthetic judgments: judgments that we arrive at by “think[ing] in the place of everybody else”, which calls for imagination and a sense of community, the latter of which Kant defines as an enlarged mentality and Arendt calls “representative thinking”.²⁹ For Kant, a state of enlarged mentality demands the bracketing of purely subjective and private grounds of judgment and the reflection of one’s “own judgment from a *universal standpoint* (which [one] can only determine by shifting his ground to the standpoint of others).”³⁰ From this, Arendt suggests that taking into account the standpoint of others in the absence of known rules and established concepts is the nature of both aes-

25 *Ibid.*, p. 166.

26 Kant, I., *Critique of Judgement*. Ed. N. Walker. Transl. J. C. Meredith. Oxford, Oxford University Press 2007, p. 44.

27 Arendt, H., *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*. Ed. R. Beiner. Chicago, University of Chicago Press 1992.

28 Kant, I., *Critique of Judgement*, p. 168.

29 Arendt, H., *Between Past and Future*. Ed. J. Kohn. New York, Penguin 2006, p. 217 and p. 237.

30 Kant, I., *Critique of Judgement*, p. 124f.

thetic (reflective) and political judgments. Consequently, Arendt's reading of Kant's conception of aesthetic judgments recognizes the inter-subjective room for quarrels that both aesthetic and political judgments provide for, which engenders a form of (political) objectivity that bears a strong resemblance to Urbinati's conception of *doxa*.³¹

While these reflections on Kant's theory of aesthetic judgment are intended to show that aesthetic judgments of taste, for Kant, not only express idiosyncratic likings, but, if we follow Arendt, exemplify the structure of political *doxa*, we can also interpret Kant in a way that implies that there are two separate moments in our encounter with an aesthetic object: the instant of aesthetic experience, and the instant of aesthetic judgment. The difference between these two instances can be mapped in terms of how Kant understands disinterestedness: Disinterestedness in judgment denotes the moral-political capacity of representative thinking, whereas disinterestedness in connection with aesthetic experience denotes the disintegration of representation and judgment. Kant affirms that the judge:

“can find as reason for his delight no personal conditions to which his own subjective self might alone be party. Hence he must regard it as resting on what he may also presuppose in every other person; and therefore he must believe that he has reason for expecting a similar delight from everyone.”³²

While this passage seems to reiterate the above point about the objective aspiration of judgments of taste, it also conveys something else, namely that the subject of aesthetic experience is disinterested because it is disconnected from entrenched interests that shape its manner of organizing meaning, values, and facts.³³ Disinterestedness in connection with aesthetic experience then means the entire suspension or temporary bracketing of refer-

31 Linda Zerilli recently has argued that Arendt's conception of *doxa* assumes some sort of political objectivity and assumes “a public notion of truth.” Zerilli, L., *A Democratic Theory of Judgment*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press 2016, p. 120. “Public truth” is not the Platonic absolute Truth (with a capital T) pitted against opinion, but the Socratic truth of opinion (with a lowercase t). This, it seems to me, determines *doxa* in a very similar way to how Urbinati does, namely with reference to how Aristotle used the term “verisimilitude” to conceptualize opinion. See Urbinati, N., *Democracy Disfigured*, pp. 31ff.

32 Kant, I., *Critique of Judgement*, p. 43.

33 On this interpretation of Kantian “disinterestedness” see chapter 2 of Guyer, P., *Kant and the Experience of Freedom: Essays on Aesthetics and Morality*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 1996. As well as chapter 1 of Panagia, D., *The Political Life of Sensation*. Durham, Duke University Press 2010.

ence and normativity – the disarticulation of any interest in the object we relate to in our experiences. In other words, the disinterestedness of aesthetic judgments is rooted in the feeling of freedom from practical or cognitive constraints that aesthetic experience engenders.³⁴

The disinterestedness that the aesthetic experience of freedom incites, I submit, has import for how we think about democratic freedom. The idea of freedom in democracy represents, partially, the freedom to begin anew and represents the most precious form of human freedom, namely the form of freedom through which human beings break free of alienating or oppressive relationships to other people, to institutions, or to the commonly shared human world.³⁵

The freedom to begin anew seems to require the extraordinary that breaks through the ordinary. However, it seems that shifting the attention away from the ordinary to the extraordinary is an implausible or even dangerous basis for reflecting on politics, and seems to confirm Urbinati's reservations about an aestheticized democracy, because the extraordinary seems to create the ecstatic moment of eruption that sparks interest, intensity, and emotional consummation, just as is the aim of a hyper-mediatized spectacle-democracy. But is this the right way to understand the extraordinary, as something that gives us aesthetic satisfaction in terms of making us "interested"? Kant's conception of aesthetic experience suggests that it is exactly a kind of *disinterested* interest that aesthetic experience commands and that we have to bring to bear on our sensual perceptions in order for the genuinely new and the extraordinary to emerge. A hard dichotomy between the new that gives us a thrill or horror and thus is laden with aesthetic quality and the boring "old" familiar or normal case of the political is normatively undesirable. If the extraordinary in politics is conceptualized in terms of such an understanding of the "aesthetic" (that which sparks interest and gives us immediate satisfaction), which only fits the nature of an undesirable spectacle-democracy, we get the following picture about democratic politics: We accept as given a world of common practice and understanding in which our interactions can make sense in comprehensible but largely unquestioned

34 Such a feeling of freedom is simultaneously independent from and indirectly tied to other values for Kant, as Guyer has shown: "[Kant recognized that] aesthetics could serve the interests of practical reason or morality in the long run... only if it were to remain free of any direct constraints of theoretical as well as practical reason in the short run." Guyer, P., *Kant and the Experience of Freedom*, p. 50.

35 On the argument that democratic freedom has to presuppose the idea of aesthetic freedom see e.g., Rebutisch, J., *The Art of Freedom: On the Dialectics of Democratic Existence*. Cambridge, Polity Press 2016. And Schaub, J., Aesthetic Freedom and Democratic Ethical Life: A Hegelian Account of the Relationship between Aesthetics and Democratic Politics. *European Journal of Philosophy*, 1, 2019, No. 27, pp. 75–97.

ways. Without the possibility for the new to become part of the political, we are left with an ossified and self-sealed political space.³⁶

What if the democratic function of encountering and creating the new and extraordinary lies not only in our rational-critical capacities of reasoning, argumentation, and judgment, but also in the disarticulation of judgment through aesthetic experiences? What if such disarticulation takes on a critical function for democracy that lies beyond deliberative conceptions of public reason and critical analyses of alienating social relationships? Because aesthetic experience interrupts our perceptual, conceptual, and rule-based givens, such experiences may create occasions to suspend authority and newly reconfigure the arrangement of any order. Whereas Green's ocular model of democracy values the surveilling gaze as a critical instrument of control, we could say that Kant's notion of aesthetic experience emphasizes the aspect of the *loss* of control: aesthetic experience is a critical instrument of freedom, whereby the critical aspect resides precisely with this loss of control.³⁷

For the liberating effect of aesthetic experiences to accrue, the experiencing subjects must have a disposition for a disinterested interest in the objects of their experiences, which means that they should have the willingness not to attribute preconceived judgments and meanings to the objects of their experiences. How should we imagine such a disposition for a disinterested interest to take effect in the context of democratic politics? With regard to citizens' ocular senses, it would require a form of viewing that is not a mere seeing. Contemporary visual media and visualized politics mostly want us to merely see (and hear) the uninterrupted flow of ensembles of images and narratives that guide citizens' political convictions and allegiances. To punctuate this uninterrupted flow, citizens must practice a form of viewing that cannot be reduced to mere seeing, but includes active participation in the act of viewing itself. The difference between seeing and viewing, we could say, points to an ethics and pedagogy of viewing (that I can only briefly address here), which are closely linked to the phenomenology of the aesthetic experience of viewing.

36 On the value of the extraordinary for democratic politics see Kalyvas, A., *Democracy and the Politics of the Extraordinary: Max Weber, Carl Schmitt, and Hannah Arendt*. Cambridge – New York, Cambridge University Press 2010.

37 To be clear, the controlling gaze of Green and the loss of control in Kantian aesthetic experience refer to different contexts: While the object of control in Green refers to the conditions of appearance of political actors, the loss of control in the Kantian notion of aesthetic experience refers to a subject's lack of possibility to make comparative judgments based on given and established standards, rules, or norms. I am only concerned here with pointing out that the functional connection between aesthetics and democratic freedom can be drawn up differently from Green and his concept of the controlling gaze.

To view an aesthetic object – let us say a photograph – requires two modes of being disinterested towards the image: the moral capacity of representative thinking in judgment, and the temporary suspension of representation, significance, and meaning. With Laura Marks, we can call the latter disinterested disposition “haptic visuality”, which she distinguishes from:

“optical visuality, which sees things from enough distance to perceive them as distinct forms in deep space: in other words, how we usually conceive of vision. Optical visuality depends on a separation between the viewing subject and the object. Haptic looking [...] is more inclined to move rather than focus, more inclined to graze than to gaze.”³⁸

Both forms of visuality are important for an ethics and pedagogy of viewing. They relate, I suggest, to the Kantian idea of disinterestedness – optical visuality to aesthetic judgment and haptic visuality to aesthetic experience that precedes the judgment. What is important is that both forms of visuality can be conceptualized as an active participatory event. Optical visuality is that which enables the necessary critical distance between the viewing subject and the object viewed. It is the form of viewing that makes the viewer an actor, insofar as “she observes, selects, compares, interprets. She links what she sees to a host of other things that she has seen,” as Rancière has put it.³⁹ In other words, optical viewing is an activity in which we observe and connect what we see with what we have already seen, said, thought, and imagined, and from it, we create something *new*. Optical viewing is a truly individual act of interpretation and imagination that is not guided by the dynamics of the masses and thus does not consist in exerting a collective disciplining force on the actors on the political stage.

Haptic visuality, on the other hand, is active in that it requires the viewing subject to set aside their narrative habits and interpretive patterns for the sake of engaging only the image itself. It, Marks explains, “forces the view-

38 Marks, L., *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses*. Durham, Duke University Press 2000, p. 162.

39 Rancière, J., *The Emancipated Spectator*. London, Verso 2011, p. 13. Rancière uses the notion of the “emancipated spectator”, which in essence denotes emancipation from inequalities with regard to conventional forms of viewing, or with regard to any hierarchical and asymmetrical forms of sensing and how these forms take effect in social and political interaction. Relating to Kant’s idea of disinterestedness, Rancière argues that visual aesthetic experience has an emancipatory and liberating potential by temporarily suspending the rules and norms of validation. My argument relies, thus, as much on Rancière as it does on Kant and Arendt. See, however, footnote 45 below, where I briefly outline a key difference between my concern in this essay and Rancière’s aesthetic account of politics.

er to contemplate the image itself instead of being pulled into narrative.⁷⁴⁰ Thus, haptic visuality marks an aspect of aesthetic experiences that is not sufficiently captured by narrative interpretation. In contrast, optical visuality relies on narrative interpretation, in which the viewing subject applies his or her interpretive habits to the image's parts and aspects and tries to understand what the image means in the context of a narrative structure and semantic representation. Whereas optic visuality relies on a separation between viewing subject and image whereby an all-perceiving subject organizes the aspects and parts of an image into a unifying whole that gives those parts and aspects sense and meaning, haptic visuality is directed exclusively at the parts and aspects of the picture itself. It occurs phenomenologically when the viewer becomes immersed in, or is pulled into, the images and the sensations they produce. It binds together parts and aspects in a contingent manner, which means that the viewing subject creates associations between them that are not determined by any necessity and thus are free of criteria of judgment that could be epistemically verified or that could be hermeneutically justified. In short, the process of relating aspects and parts of images to one another in haptic visuality does not follow any determining rules or a common measure but rather invites the creative association of parts and aspects beyond verification and interpretive judgment.

These two forms of viewing and their ethics and pedagogy have implications for how to think about equal citizen participation in democratic politics. That and how a person registers as an appearance with others depends in part on how they are viewed, and how a person is viewed depends on the viewing habits of the viewing subjects. The ethics and pedagogy of viewing outlined above therefore influence how viewed subjects can become perceivable as appearances and are registered as such by others: If viewing subjects relate to other subjects by bracketing judgment, narrative, and meaning, the former accept the latter *as appearances* without any need for determinate recognition in any representative context of reference.

In the democratic-political sphere, such a notion of viewing and of being viewed would allow that subjects do not need specific epistemic and cognitive abilities or qualifications that enable them to appear as political subjects, as it would suffice to appear and to be viewed as an appearance in order to “count” as a political subject. On the part of the other political subjects, this requires an act of admission that, as I have tried to show, is based on the

40 Marks, L., *The Skin of the Film*, p. 163. In order for this to happen, viewers need to exercise what Davide Panagia calls an “act of admission: an appearance advenes upon us, and we admit to it.” In: Panagia, D., *The Political Life of Sensation*, p. 151.

bracketing of judgment that aesthetic experience requires. The temporary loss of narrative structure and determinative control that goes with the disarticulation of judgment in aesthetic experience, then, might serve the democratic function of offering possibilities to political subjects of equal participation in a polity, independent of any provisos to participation. Provided that democratic citizens admit others by their way of viewing, principally anybody can appear as a political subject without having to make a cognitive claim, because the appearance is the “claim”. For this simple reason, vision and appearance are tools for egalitarian democratic participation different from narration, deliberation, and voting. Of course, these tools have their own technological, material, and – as I have tried to outline above – ethical and pedagogical prerequisites and requirements, which are implied in the notion of viewing,

Consider as an example the iconic photographic images of Aylan Kurdi, the Syrian child who washed up dead on the coast of Bodrum in autumn 2015. The photographs seemed emblematic of the catastrophe that was taking place every day on the fringes of Europe in the wake of the “refugee crisis”. In the days that followed, the images were distributed millions of times in print and television media and via digital networks, provoking considerable public and political reactions. The reactions provoked show that images and photographs are never merely aesthetic or documentary objects. Rather, they always prove to be interwoven with social and political relations. On the one hand, these particular images seem to illustrate the problem of photography, which, as Susan Sontag famously wrote:

“has so many narcissistic uses, [and] is also a powerful instrument for depersonalizing our relation to the world. [...] It offers, in one easy, habit-forming activity, both participation and alienation in our own lives and those of others – allowing us to participate, while confirming alienation.”⁴¹

As voyeuristic viewers, Sontag says, we might be touched affectively by the shock-effects that horrific photographic images such as these generate, but affective capture does neither give us a clear path for critical engagement, let alone genuine participation, but instead creates a false sense of participation.

On the other hand, however, as Ariella Azoulay has argued, anyone – even a stateless person – who addresses others through photographs, or is ad-

41 Sontag, S., *The Image-World*. In: *A Susan Sontag Reader*. New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux 1982, pp. 349–371, esp. p. 349.

dressed by photographs, can become a member of the citizenry of photography.⁴² Viewing photographs, Azoulay argues, is a civil act, and taking photographs, being photographed, and disseminating and looking at photographs has opened a space of political relations that operates beyond the ruling power of the state. Appearing in, making, and viewing photographic images enables the subjects of human suffering to appear and to present their suffering. She insists that the photograph of politically induced suffering constitutes a tool for “contesting injuries to citizenship. [...] When a photograph turns into a grievance, whoever articulates it becomes its civic subject.”⁴³

The subjects portrayed in a photographic image of human suffering, in other words, can be taken to be putting forward wordless claims to citizenship *qua* being an appearing subject in an image. Such a “claim” does work because of the force of the image, which at the same time requires an act of admission on the part of the viewing subject: The viewing subject is touched by the image and thereby brought into a position to contemplate the image, rather than being directly pulled into narrative or judgment – which cannot simply be dismissed as an opportunity for shallow voyeurism. The unspeakable presence of the dead child’s body has an appellative character that requires an act of admission, and both the presence and the admission of it are prerequisites for any forms of recognition – for example, recognizing the appeal as a claim to citizenship or democratic recognition that goes beyond the image and the portrayed subject itself. The aesthetic experience of viewing these photographic images precedes such forms of recognition. Clearly much more is needed in addition for the image to “work” as a political claim to citizenship, for example that the depicted event in the image is a testimony to an actual event (if it turned out that the image was fictitious or otherwise manipulated, it would lose its ethical-political force) and that the viewing subject can combine the horror of seeing the dead child with a socio-political reality and with a narrative context that ultimately structures their political judgment.⁴⁴ But it cannot work without the aesthetic experience of viewing. It is not only the documentary character (i.e., the possibility of being perceived as an authentic testimony of a story, which is decisive for the appellative power of the photographic documentary image), but also the as-

42 Azoulay, A., *The Civil Contract of Photography*. New York, Zone Books 2008.

43 *Ibid.*, 132.

44 The question of the authenticity or veracity of photographic images, in turn, refers to aesthetic norms and habits of viewing and presenting, which are closely linked to a complex mixture of ultimately fragile (and contingent) but powerful social and political norms. Butler, for example, calls these aesthetic norms and viewing habits “frames”, and Rancière calls them “forms of visibility”. See Butler, J., *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* London – New York, Verso 2010; Rancière, J., *The Politics of Aesthetics*. London, Bloomsbury 2013.

pect of the perception of a mere unspeakable presence is essential for this, which is coupled with it.

Consequently, the political function of making and viewing images and appearances is not only that they might enable political discussion and judgment and ultimately policy, but that they try to capture our attention and invite us to acknowledge and question the commonsensical ways of perceiving and sensing that guide our (political) life. Thus, the participatory and possibly inclusionary effects of viewing and being viewed do not simply include hitherto non-recognized subjects, groups, or claims into institutions or the way democratic politics is done, but more fundamentally, they also involve the challenging of the entire aesthetic *a priori* of what (and not only who) counts as sensible and what and who does not count as sensible in a polity.⁴⁵

Conclusion

By way of conclusion, I would like to offer some thoughts about how what I proposed in terms of the democratic value of aesthetics relates to Urbinati's diarchic conception of democracy.

45 My argument coincides with some aspects of Jacques Rancière's aesthetic account of democratic politics, especially with his conception of the "emancipated spectator" and with his idea that the "partition of the sensible" organizes our public lives not (only) according to moral, epistemic, or judicial rules and norms, but is (also) conditioned by aesthetic systems and modalities of sense that, in the way of historical-social, contingent *a priori*, distribute social positions in society, according to what things and people present themselves to sense experience and become recognizable as parts of a common world. See primarily Rancière, J., *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press 1999; Rancière, J., *The Politics of Aesthetics*. However, Rancière's account intentionally does not provide the basis for a normative theory of democracy, because it assumes an incommensurability between the partition of the sensible on the one hand and our moral, epistemic, and judicial rules and norms on the other hand, and because it associates genuine politics only with the partition of the sensible but not with any sort of judging, interpretation, and mutual understanding (on the implications of Rancière's deliberative lack of a theory of political judgment see Panagia, D., *Rancière's Sentiments*. Durham, Duke University Press 2018). Rancière is clearly animated by a deep commitment to radical equality, and it is this commitment that motivates change for Rancière in the way common sense-making and organizing the senses do not account for. Yet, he does not want to give us a sense of what normatively directs such change. As a result, Rancière's democratic account is incompatible with Urbinati's diarchic model of democracy. In order to be part of a conception of democratic opinion, an aesthetic of democracy would not only have to recommend the *disarticulation* of structures of concepts, norms, and rules through an aesthetic mode of world reference, as Rancière does, but would also have to additionally point to a normative horizon for the *transformation* of such structures of habit-forming and appropriation of power. An aesthetic of democracy that is compatible with Urbinati's account, in other words, would have to be premised on a political theory that understands the structures of *aisthesis* and its disruptions to be continuous with the formation of critical habits and rules, through judgment and will. I elaborate such a theory in Räber, M., *Knowing Democracy – A Pragmatist Account of the Epistemic Dimension in Democratic Politics*. Cham, Springer 2020.

I believe that everything I have said about aesthetic experience and aesthetic judgment could be compatible with Urbinati's conception of public opinion. In order for that to be the case, however, we would have to extend her conceptualization of the aesthetic function of public opinion beyond the narrow limits of enabling publicity and transparency. Public opinion, defined by Urbinati as "a plural space that is composed of several kinds of opinion", would have to be more than a discursive forum in which opinion plays "the role of a unifying and 'inclusive discourse'".⁴⁶ It would have to be conceived not only as a public space in which a multitude of different judgments and wills assemble, but also a space in and through which the forms of such assemblages and of the subjects constituting them can be experienced, acted on, and discussed.

While Urbinati insists that democracy needs to perform an aesthetic function by making power visible and public, she considers it necessary to keep this function in check through the political and epistemic functions of will and opinion, because only in this way can the balance between these functions be maintained: "The empire of the ocular or the inflation of images" and, more generally, the "aesthetic factor of public opinion" come at "the expense of understanding and participating."⁴⁷ I tried to show in the previous section why this is not necessarily the case (but is related to Green's plebiscitarianism) and that the aesthetic function of public opinion in democracy is by no means exhausted in the creation of transparency and publicity, but can take up a participatory and a critical function. The aesthetic function of public opinion can help to engender equality of participation, and it can help to engender the freedom necessary for countervailing and checking institutionalized democratic politics, which is the function of public opinion. The democratic value of this aesthetic function of public opinion is less its direct check on norms, rules, and laws that are produced on the institutionalized level of democracy, but rather consist in second-order effects on democratic freedom, democratic participation, and democratic citizenship.

Extending the aesthetic function of public opinion in democracy would break the symmetry Urbinati assumes between the aesthetic, the epistemic, and the political function of opinion for democracy, because the aesthetic would take up some of the critical and participatory functions that the epistemic and the political functions of her conception of opinion are supposed to perform. But this symmetry is perhaps also less desirable than Urbinati believes. It is based on two potentially contradictory premises. On the one hand, Urbinati argues against epistemic democrats, populists, and plebisci-

⁴⁶ Urbinati, N., *Democracy Disfigured*, p. 40.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 208.

tarian democrats that what is at stake in politics are neither (only) instrumental considerations about political ends, nor the supposed homogeneity of the people or the mere judgment of the citizen-audience of the political spectacle, but the very terms under which citizens' opinions and wills interact. On the other hand, her conception of democratic opinion implies that these terms never really and fully are at stake in democratic politics, but have always been normatively fixed on the rationalizing effect of the spoken and written word. A politics of opinion based on public reason and public justification alone, however, is not sufficiently attuned to the democratic processes of marginalization that go with these socio-political assignments of value and the kind of agency necessary to counteract them.

In other words, what is at stake for Urbinati in democratic politics is the *content* of politics – political claims and ideologies – but not its *form*, which configures how democratic ideals and citizenship are enacted and what and who can become the subject of politics. The political procedures we follow, the possibilities we have to participate politically by way of speaking and viewing, and the framing of political debates and images are decisive not only for the expected results, but also for the perspectives and interests we develop, the decisions we are willing to make politically, and the type of people we take ourselves to be. To put it another way, when we change the game, we change not only the outcomes, but also the character of the players and their relation to each other, as well as their relation to the game itself. By addressing the *form* of democratic citizenship and democratic politics, an aesthetics of democracy, as outlined in this article, suggests that the considerations of who is sensible, as well as the conditions of possibility that something or someone can become sensible, should be subject to political interaction and also to a normative philosophical reflection on democratic politics.