Davide Panagia, *Ten Theses for an Aesthetics of Politics*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2016. ISBN 9781517901820.

Reviewed by Zachary Kendal

A short volume, Davide Panagia's *Ten Theses for an Aesthetics of Politics* (2016) sketches a thought-provoking framework for the reconceptualisation of the aesthetic experience. Panagia's sense of frustration with contemporary approaches to aesthetics is evident from the outset, as he indicates his wariness of the assumption that "appearances are deceitful" and that the aesthetic demands "epistemic critique" (xii). In a particularly poignant moment in the preface, Panagia describes his project as being spurred by dominant responses to images of people seeking asylum. He observes that we have become so accustomed to distrusting appearances that when faced with images of desolate refugees and asylum seekers, we respond first with suspicion: "How do I know that she really is the way she appears to be?" (xiii). This acute observation, which would no doubt resonate throughout much of the world today, recalls popular discourses around asylum seekers in Australia. As we are confronted by images of people in off-shore detention, subject to imprisonment at the behest of the Australian government after having fled war and persecution, we question the images' validity and rationalise them to minimise their impact. With this context in mind, one can recognise the urgency of Panagia's attempts to explore "the possibility of a pre-judgemental moment of experience where our most heartfelt critical intuitions about how the world ought to be ordered become undone" (xiv). To examine how Panagia attempts to achieve this, I will briefly move through his ten theses, one by one, to see how they articulate his vision of a new aesthetics of politics.

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1. ON ADVENIENCE

Panagia begins by deploying the term *advenience*, borrowed from Roland Barthes's *Camera Lucida* (1980), to refer to the "ingression" (or the "bodying forth") of an appearance in an event that is *prior to* such intellectual exercises as classification, categorisation, or political judgement (1). According to Panagia, treating advenience as merely the appearance of epistemic or representational objects denies the aesthetic experience its "singularity and friction," instead prioritising a totalising exercise of cognitive domination (2). Rather, advenience, for Panagia, indicates a resistance to these "cognitive, political, economic" interests, having originated in a pre-judgemental space (5).

2. ON BE/HOLDING

Panagia uses the slightly awkward construction *be/holding* to indicate an attention to appearance that is not a passive viewing, but an active taking hold of the resistance, or singularity, of an advenience. Rather than calling upon our critical and judgemental faculties, be/holding embraces the "dislocation of subjectivity" entailed in advenience, leading the be/holder to be "not human, but a human *something*" (10-11). It seems curious, here, that allowing oneself to properly face the advenience of an appearance, and thereby suspend cognition and intentionality, is cast as a kind of dehumanisation.

3. ON IMMEDIACY

Advenience occurs in an instant—an unanticipated moment, in which "our senses of constancy, continuity, and commonality" are undone (12). This, for Panagia, is the immediacy of his aesthetics of politics: an immediacy of sensation, of impression, prior to rationalisation and explanation.

4. ON ASPECTUALITY

It would be a mistake to assume that, as a short volume, Panagia's *Ten Theses* is perhaps an accessible introduction to the relationship between aesthetics and philosophy. Take, for example, his definition of an *aspect*: "it is a durational intensity that bodies forth contours of proximity that potentiate processes of intonation between advening appearances" (17). An aspect, for Panagia, is a "no-part"—it interrupts totality and, in its discontinuity, "resists the expectation of signification or meaning" (17, 19). Yet in a tension that contributes to this being one of the more unstable theses, Panagia emphasises the "partiality of things" while nonetheless insisting on the impartiality of advenience (18).

5. ON HANDLING

This resistance to totality continues as Panagia develops his notion of *handling*, our mode of actively be/holding the advenience. Here, Panagia emphasises the disinterestedness of handling, which is a be/holding not oriented "toward interest or use" (26). It is how we respond to the advenience of an appearance prior to the intentionality of putting it to some practical (or political) use. In a helpful example, Panagia reflects on the highlighting of a passage in a text that has, in its advenience, challenged the reader in some way.

6. ON THE *NOLI ME TANGERE*

Drawing on John 20:17 and Jesus's words to Mary Magdalene following his resurrection—"do not touch me"—Panagia uses the Latin of this phrase, "*noli me tangere*," to indicate the "mood" of his aesthetics of politics (28). Such a mood resists our dominating tendencies, which would see us penetrate the appearance to "know the image" or "possess the source of its sensation" (30). In his development of the *noli me tangere*, Panagia reflects on two paintings: Caravaggio's *Doubting Thomas* (1601-1602) and Pontormo's *Noli me tangere* (ca. 1532). This diversion into art criticism, like the example of the act of highlighting in the previous chapter, provides a welcome break from dense philosophical exposition and a necessary illustration of Panagia's meaning.

7. ON INTERFACE

This is where Panagia arrives at the political core of his argument: that the "economy of and interface with appearances is the principal feature of contemporary political life" (35). For contemporary politics, as Panagia rightly observes, is not about meaningful communication or the "exchange of ideas," but about appearances (35). And it is only here that Panagia begins connecting his theses back to contemporary political and socio-economic realities, with brief reflections on burst housing bubbles and the global financial crisis. There is also a particularly poignant reference to "Twitter-inspired political movements," which leads into a critique of screen-oriented modes of spectatorship and the screen's "screening" of the self from the political world (37). Yet some of the assertions in this chapter seem questionable, such as Panagia's claim that possession and ownership today are largely illusory and that resisting capitalism therefore does not mean resisting "property and structures of ownership," but engaging with a new mode of holding (be/holding) (35). Nonetheless,

the focus of this thesis—the taking seriously of technological modes of interface—does indicate the relevance of Panagia's project.

8. ON LUMINOSITY

Here, Panagia emphasises that objects are not political or aesthetic in themselves, but are instead "luminous entities without cause or purpose" (40). This chapter seems largely repetitive of previous theses, as the disinterestedness of Panagia's aesthetics of politics has already been established, and the necessity of the term *luminosity* is never fully apparent. The chapter's strength is a brief discussion of two orders of political realism: one in which objects are seen to illuminate something else (by reference), and another, corresponding to Panagia's aesthetics, whereby objects' luminosity makes possible the advenience of their appearance.

9. ON IMPROPRIETY

"Politics," writes Panagia, "is improper" (44). Improper, due to the resistance that results from advenience, which affronts our orientation toward intentionality and political judgement. The clearest description of impropriety comes in thesis ten: "The impropriety of an aesthetics of politics is its resistance to the epistemic demands of a politics of meaning" (48). As with the previous thesis, this one is largely a rearticulation of concepts developed earlier, although engagement with the political implications of the "impropriety" of Jackson Pollock's *Number 1A, 1948* does prove insightful (47).

10. ON THE UNUSABLE

Panagia's final thesis returns to the pre-judgemental and pre-intentional nature of aesthetic experience to conclude that the aesthetic object is "unusable" to politics (48). Unusable, because it refuses to be reduced to a system of interest or purposiveness that would put it to use (or declare it to be useless). In these closing pages, Panagia develops his critique of the "instrumentalization of aesthetics … for the purpose of a redemptive (and putatively progressive) politics" (48). Yet while he would seem to rail against the coupling of "emancipatory politics" with a "hermeneutics of suspicion" that seeks only to reveal aesthetic objects' referential meanings, he nonetheless concedes that "none of this implies that we do not, or ought not, make critical judgements and assert the meaning of things: that's precisely the task of critical thinking, and the task of judgement" (48, 52). As meanings are created by our individual and singular encounters with aesthetic objects, how are we to make critical

judgements about these meanings without reference to aesthetic experience? Here, the waters get a little murky, and more time spent developing this thesis would not have gone astray.

As it stands, it remains unclear how Panagia's theses could inform contemporary understandings of politics or the relationship between politics and the aesthetic. This could be why references to crises of contemporary politics are so scarce in *Ten Theses*. Although it was identified as one of the motivators behind the book, the refugee crisis falls, quite unfortunately, by the wayside as Panagia re-defines and catalogues his various aesthetic terms. In the end, there is little that can be said about how we experience media representations of refugees and asylum seekers, as Panagia's aesthetics of politics remains distant from the critique and reflection that would carry this conversation further. It may be that Panagia's *Ten Theses*, like the aesthetic experience itself, is ultimately unusable for politics, but it is nonetheless a deeply interesting contribution to aesthetic theory that can provide new ways to understand the pre-judgemental aspect of the aesthetic experience.

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