Journal of Visual Culture

Book Review: Jeffrey Edward Green, *The Eyes of the People: Democracy in an Age of Spectatorship*

journal of visual culture

Books

Jeffrey Edward Green, *The Eyes of the People: Democracy in an Age of Spectatorship*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010. 284 pp. ISBN 10: 019983847X

With *The Eyes of the People: Democracy in an Age of Spectatorship*, Jeffrey Green aims at contributing to the development of a democratic theory that is based on the figure of the spectator. His main argument is that a vocal understanding of citizenship – as illustrated by the figure of the 'citizen-governor', that is, the 'participating citizen, who discusses, acts, joins, protests, takes a stand, legislates' (p. 32) – is rather limiting. Instead, he proposes to view citizens as 'citizen-spectators', a figure 'that, as a matter of law and abstract principle, has full political rights but, as a matter of practice, experiences politics primarily as a spectator' (p. 32), and argues that to do so amounts to a form of popular empowerment. Despite its intentionally restricted disciplinary scope, the book provides an important contribution to the much needed mitigation of the hiatus between orthodox political theory and current discussions of political spectatorship that traverse visual culture studies, film studies, art theory and curatorial studies.

It's evident from its explicit goals and vocabulary that Green's work is mainly situated within the field of political theory. However, its central topic puts it in direct dialogue with ongoing debates throughout several disciplines. The author begins by arguing that the traditional conflation of citizenship with the People's voice does not account for the way in which democracy is experienced today. This statement directs the readers to the tension between, on the one hand, the arguably constitutive gap between the democratic ideals and their practical realisation and, on the other, the unremitting position of democracy as the least bad regime, as once declared by Winston Churchill. Furthermore, Green argues that the existing theoretical frameworks in the political terrain are unable to grasp the changing character of citizenship. Instead, he suggests that the transposition into political theory of discussions that have originated with the Freudian and Lacanian distinction between the 'ideal ego' and the 'ego ideal', Foucault's analysis of the 'disciplinary

gaze' and Laura Mulvey's work on the 'male gaze', among others, may provide an important framework to reflect upon the political potential of everyday spectatorship. As a result, Green proposes to interpret the gaze as an organ of sovereignty. This move can only be understood in relation to the author's criticism of the theories of participatory citizenship and direct democracy for their universalisation of the category of the 'citizen-governor' and, consequently, their inability to take into account the daily experience of politics. As the author demonstrates, the centrality of the vocal model of popular power in traditional democratic theory follows up from the association of the former with the legitimate voice, as present in the work of Rousseau, Bentham, Mill, Tocqueville and others. As an alternative, Green proposes a return to the Aristotelian notions of the 'citizen-spectator' and the 'citizen-being-ruled', both located between the extremes of the 'citizen-governor' and the apolitical citizen, making it possible to imagine forms of citizenship characterised by 'involvement without participation' (p. 62). This goal also positions Green among ongoing discussions of the problematic relation between interactivity, spectatorship and citizenship, such as those developed by Andrew Barry (2001) and Jodi Dean (2009).

However, while the political pertinence of the gaze as a central analytical category is widely accepted in the domain of visual culture studies, the need for an alternative model of democracy, which is to follow from such a novel conception of political spectatorship, is yet to be addressed. Green's proposal of the revival of the plebiscitarian model of democracy (originated from the work of Max Weber and characterised by the personalisation of politics, its conduct through the mass media and the presidentialisation of leadership, for instance) offers an interesting solution. This model evaluates the functionality of the democratic system, not according to the legal enactment of the People's voice but, instead, according to the 'disciplinary power of the public gaze' (p. 153). Through their sustained attention as spectators, the People are given the role of generating and reinforcing what Green refers to as 'candour' – 'the institutional norm that a leader not be in control of the conditions of his or her publicity' (p. 130) – in the modes of presentation of charismatic political leaders. Although Green acknowledges that the figure of the Weberian plebiscitarian leader has been criticised as insufficiently democratic in the literature, he argues that the 'ethical promise [that is] concealed within the Weberian corpus' (p. 153) may nonetheless provide an alternative to small-scale and mass democracy. And, indeed, the suggested return to Weber establishes Green's work as an important voice among ongoing debates on what concerns the ethics and politics of looking – a discussion that has recently reemerged in the work of Ariella Azoulay (2008), Judith Butler (2009) and Nicholas Mirzoeff (2011), to name a few. Furthermore, Green's aim to develop a gaze-centred democratic theory leads him to define the consequences that 'candour' (originally viewed as a practice that regulates the behaviour of political leaders) may also have vis-à-vis political citizenship itself (a position that he divides into a three-fold typology of citizen-spectators, partisans and democrats). Visual studies

scholars will discover that this analysis provides an interesting framework to examine and evaluate the ethical implications of spectatorship.

However, readers may find that the interesting notion of 'candour' is insufficiently discussed. Particularly, the differentiation between the right of the People to 'candour' and to authentic information (connected to the Weberian distinction between the rights to spectate and to legislate) would have gained from a more detailed analysis. It suffices to mention Colin Powell's 2003 public presentation to the United Nations Security Council (aimed at proving the necessity to wage war on Iraq), and the subsequent discovery by journalists that Powell's speech was based on deeply misinterpreted data, to understand that the intricate relation between both dimensions seems to be precisely one of the central characteristics of contemporary political culture. Although Green provides some examples of 'candour' at work, visual culture scholars will agree that his least convincing conclusions probably arise as a consequence of the author's fully textual analysis.

The ambition of *The Eyes of the People: Democracy in an Age of Spectatorship* is matched by the depth of its detailed argument, in which the author engages with an array of political theorists. Even if the fully textual character of his analysis reinforces the exact epistemological principles that Jeffrey Green discusses as in need of reevaluation, this is to be understood as following from the book's explicit aim to contribute to the field of political theory. The result is a pertinent reference for researchers in visual culture studies and related fields. Their subsequent work may provide the empirical evidence that is lacking in Green's book in order to corroborate the wide-scope applicability of his argument to contemporary political analysis.

References

Azoulay A (2008) *The Civil Contract of Photography*. Cambridge, MA: Zone Books.
Barry A (2001) *Political Machines: Governing a Technological Society*. London: Continuum.
Butler J (2009) *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* London: Verso.
Dean J (2009) *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies: Communicative Capitalism and Left Politics*. Durham, NC: Durham University Press.
Mirzoeff N (2011) *The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Mafalda Dâmaso
Goldsmiths, University of London
Email: m.damaso@gold.ac.uk