

**Please cite the Published Version**

Ryan, HE and Flinders, M (2018) From Senseless to Sensory Democracy: Lessons from Applied and Participatory Theatre. *Politics*, 38 (2). pp. 133-147. ISSN 0263-3957

**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263395717700155>

**Publisher:** SAGE Publications

**Version:** Accepted Version

**Downloaded from:** <https://e-space.mmu.ac.uk/617969/>

**Usage rights:** © In Copyright

**Additional Information:** This is an Author Accepted Manuscript of a paper accepted for publication in *Politics*, published by SAGE and copyright The Authors.

**Enquiries:**

If you have questions about this document, contact [openresearch@mmu.ac.uk](mailto:openresearch@mmu.ac.uk). Please include the URL of the record in e-space. If you believe that your, or a third party's rights have been compromised through this document please see our Take Down policy (available from <https://www.mmu.ac.uk/library/using-the-library/policies-and-guidelines>)

# From Senseless to Sensory Democracy: Insights from Applied and Participatory Theatre

Dr Holly Eva Ryan & Professor Matthew Flinders

**Abstract:** This article seeks to stimulate a fresh and inter-disciplinary debate which revolves around the need to move from a ‘senseless democracy’ that is insufficiently attuned to the dilemmas and challenges of fostering meaningful political engagement to a more ‘sensory democracy’. It achieves this by first exploring and dissecting recent works within democratic theory that emphasize the role of ‘watching’ and ‘listening’ within socio-political relationships. It then goes on to develop a set of constructive criticisms by applying insights drawn from the fields of practical aesthetics and applied theatre. Not only does this exercise allow us to take the analytical lens far beyond the focus on voice-based forms of expression that have hitherto dominated political analysis, it demonstrates the value of inter-disciplinary scholarship in exposing sensory-subtleties that raise distinctive questions for both politics ‘as theory’ and politics ‘as practice’.

**Keywords:** democracy, theatre, applied theatre, aesthetics, engagement

*Dr Holly Eva Ryan, Department of History, Politics and Philosophy, Manchester Metropolitan University, Manchester, M15 6BH. Twitter: @HollyERyan*

*Professor Matthew Flinders, The Sir Bernard Crick Centre for the Public Understanding of Politics, University of Sheffield, Elmfield, Northumberland Avenue, Sheffield, S10 2TU. Twitter: @PoliticalSpike*

## PART I. INTRODUCTION

The existing research base on democratic politics is distinctive not just for its size in terms of data sets, surveys, and analyses, or even for its impressively global horizons but also for the existence of a major and fairly fundamental interpretive disagreement over what is actually going on. A broadly pessimistic body of scholarship (for the sake of simplicity let us refer to this as the ‘declinism’ literature) is arguably the most dominant and dates back to interventions made in 1960s and 1970s that highlighted the emergence of falling levels of public participation in traditional political activities. Standing very much against this ‘declinist’ interpretation, however, is a seam of less pessimistic scholarship that emphasizes democratic evolution rather than democratic malaise. Such ‘evolutionary accounts’ suggest that political participation is not necessarily eroding or stagnating but it is - more accurately – mutating and taking new forms. Certainly, in recent decades many of the more traditional forms of political expression like voting, party-politics, general strikes and worker-stoppages have been overlaid with an increasingly dynamic and fluid repertoire of civic expression (from occupations and silent flash mobs to ad-jamming, e-petitioning, and ‘slutwalks’). For some scholars, this journey from a sedimentation to an accretion of forms for political claim-making is normatively interpreted as a ‘good thing’ (See Keane 2009). For others however, it suggests that perhaps something has gone awry. Hugh Hecló’s work, for example, highlights the need for some *proportionality* in the relationship and expectations between the governors and the governed (Hecló 1999). The implication stemming from Hecló’s work is that greater ‘voice’ demands heightened receptivity. But does the widening of claim-making strategies, access points and modes of engagement by civil society actors *also* suggest that representatives of government should endeavour to become more – and differently - politically attuned?

In recent years a small body of scholarship has emerged within political theory, dubbed ‘sensory democracy’. Scholars within this tradition have attempted to address the question above by angling in on the particular roles played by the processes of watching, listening, and feeling in fostering, shaping and improving traditions of democratic practice. Whilst inquiries into the political effects of sensory engagement have antecedents going all the way back to Plato’s aesthetics, democratic theorists have been especially slow to connect the dots between these two spheres of theorising. Against this backdrop, our core argument is that the fields of practical aesthetics in general, and applied theatre in particular, offer significant insights that can be used to critique, refine and build upon the current state-of-the-art within democratic theory. Applied theatre for the purposes of this article is an umbrella term that embraces participatory performance and collaborative drama practice taking place in educational, community or political contexts. Projects within this genre are often undertaken in non-theatrical spaces and thus the boundary between actors, writers, directors, producers and the audience is sometimes intentionally blurred. Our attempt to trespass (*qua*. Hirschman, 1981) across disciplinary boundaries in this article aims to reveal some of the potential benefits of juxtaposing and integrating concepts, tools and practices that are developed from within separate fields such as politics and the arts.

In particular, we argue that the key sensory approaches that have been developed within political studies could benefit from a closer engagement with understandings that have been advanced in the theory and practice of applied theatre. This includes a more nuanced articulation of the so-called ‘theatre metaphor’ which is often deployed in politics, a keener appreciation for the ways and means by which ‘embodied knowledge’ can be communicated on and off stage, as well as an emphasis on the role of ‘liminality’ in fostering more effective learning about ‘self’ and ‘other’ and in creating spaces or moments in which new political ideas can germinate. In order to make this argument we have divided the rest of this article into three inter-related parts. Part II below explores and interrogates the work of

Jeffrey Green and Andrew Dobson on the ‘ocular model of popular empowerment’ and ‘the spectacle of listening’ (respectively) as some of the most sophisticated endeavours to signpost a more ‘sensory democracy’. Part III then demonstrates the insights – both theoretical and empirical – of practical aesthetics and applied theatre to illuminate how they can challenge, develop and deepen the work of both Green and Dobson in ways that add significant value to their analyses and prescriptions for reform. The final section (Part III) summarises and then reflects upon the broader implications of this article, especially its emphasis on the virtues of inter-disciplinarity.

## PART II. SEEING & LISTENING

The changing sensory position of politics (and therefore politicians) is laid bare by even the simplest analysis of technological development throughout the twentieth-century. In the 1920s the mass production of radio sets (wirelesses) allowed the public to actually hear politicians for the first time and from the 1950s politicians began to be seen with the advent of mass-produced televisions (Sanders 2008). During the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s a number of parliaments and legislatures around the world approved the televised broadcasting of proceedings (e.g. the American Congress from 1977, the British House of Commons from 1989). Put simply, the communication of politics changed dramatically during the twentieth century with the public’s field of political *vision* and *hearing* constantly expanding. Since the millennium this process has accelerated to the extent that the communication process is increasingly immediate and interactive. Real-time reaction ‘worms’, ‘live blogs’ and ‘Twitter trackers’ all facilitate immediate public feedback. The outcome of all of this, as Tambini (1999) suggests, is a qualitative shift in the way that politics is done. Not only are politicians and the mainstream media broadcasters forced to engage in new ways as new mechanisms and channels for scrutinising their activities become available, but also “as new media are interactive they institutionalise citizens’ right to reply, to select information, and to communicate directly with one another or their representatives without the gatekeeping influence of editors” (Ibid., 311). As a result of these developments, some have come to characterise the internet in terms of a new, virtual and ostensibly public sphere.

Indeed, information about politics and public affairs now flows continuously into the public forum with the effect that politicians are constantly held under surveillance and ‘called out’ publicly for their failings. These developments have been assessed positively by many. John Keane’s magisterial analysis of ‘The Life and Death of Democracy’, for instance, concludes with a focus on the emergence of a ‘monitory democracy’ that celebrates the expanding range of on-line and off-line mechanisms for exercising voice and indeed, power. On the other hand, scholars such as Hugh Hecló have questioned the benefits and implications of this explosion of political expression (Hecló 1999). Hecló’s argument is not intended as an anti-democratic one but rather aims to highlight an emerging chasm between politicians and the vast assemblage of views, interests and demands they are expected to represent. Put simply, ‘too much voice’ can become unmanageable within the bounds of the existing system. Helco’s argument here resonates with the work of Romand Coles, who suggests that better ‘receptivity’ is also vital to contemporary struggles for democratic empowerment. Yet, Coles (2004) also challenges the growing ‘accent on voice’ and asks whether this ‘current emphasis also conceals key elements of democratic vision, vitality and practice?’ But what does this notion of ‘democratic vision’ actually imply? And, what would it mean to take the idea of ‘democratic vision’ seriously?

Jeffrey Green’s *The Eyes of the People* (2010) offers possibly the most advanced and interesting set of answers to these questions through an argument focused upon a ‘plebiscitary’ model of democracy that is founded on the visual. Green laments a general failure to acknowledge that most people experience politics as relatively passive spectators rather than as *actors* with ‘voices’ that are listened to. From this perspective, for most citizens, most of the time, political engagement is based on observing rather than demanding; seeing rather than talking. As such, politicians, policy-makers and academics who seek to review, reform, restructure or revitalise democratic politics should accept the dominant

idiom of *citizens qua spectators* and develop theories or proposals that empower them *as* spectators rather than affording them a power and status to which they cannot practically aspire:

The ocular model of popular empowerment is justified because its mechanics do not assume that everyday citizens are what they clearly are not (choice-making, speech-making, legislating, active deciders of public affairs)... [but] on the contrary, acknowledge the passive, non-participatory, spectatorial nature of everyday political life (Green 2010, 16-17).

Green's argument is somewhat at odds with the position of those scholars including Keane and Heclo, (discussed above) whose work rotates around the concept of 'hyper-democracy' and the belief that a significant portion of the populous have, due to a range of factors, adopted exactly that role of 'choice-makers, speech-makers, legislators and active deciders' that Green rejects as idealistic. Yet, Green's work is illuminating in the sense that it weaves together a variety of scholarly traditions - from Foucault's discussion of the 'panopticon' to Mulvey's concept of the 'male gaze' - in order to draw attention to the possibilities for disciplining, legitimising or objectifying subjects simply by watching them. He shows how *spectating can in fact be an exercise of power* and he rightly notes that this possibility - that the spectator could potentially occupy a position of power *vis-à-vis* officials - has not been acknowledged in democratic theory. Indeed, the novelty and value of Green's argument lies in the manner in which it contrasts the conventional vocal or voice-based model of democracy with an ocular or spectator-based model that:

- (i) locates the object of popular power in the leader;
- (ii) focuses on 'the gaze' as the organ of popular power; and
- (iii) makes *candour* the critical ideal of democracy.

For Green, 'candour' refers not to sincerity or frankness as is conventionally understood but rather identifies the institutional requirement that leaders not be in control of the conditions of their publicity. In the ocular model, democracy is improved when the people at large control of the means of publicity by exercising an empowered gaze. The spectatorial power exercised by the public exerts a disciplinary force over politicians who must both show themselves worthy of being watched and put themselves at the risk of public ridicule, critique, disdain or dismissal. That they expose themselves to these particular risks, pressures and the scrutiny associated with being in the public eye, helps to restore some degree of political equality between leaders and 'the people'. In this limited way, Green suggests that 'the people', as spectators, can establish for themselves a more efficacious role in politics. For Green, 'candour' underpins a much-maligned model of *plebiscitary democracy* by acknowledging conditions under which 'the people' might exercise their collective will in relation to the political leadership. As such there is an implicit link between Green's work and Keane's focus on the explosion of sleaze-busting, account forcing and information-providing actors and processes that collectively form what Keane labels contemporary 'monitory democracy'. The crucial element of Green's position for the core argument of this article is simply the manner in which it seeks to move the debate away from a focus on voice mechanisms in favor of an awareness of the importance and potential of seeing, viewing and potentially to the democratic potential of 'the empowered gaze' for closing the gap that appears to have emerged between the governors and the governed.

And yet as the schoolteacher's favorite phrase to potentially unruly pupils reminds us - 'Watch, listen but do not talk!' - it may be that the development of auditory capacities, in addition to those of watching, also form an important element of a broader understanding of democratic engagement. It is at exactly this point that Andrew Dobson's *Listening for Democracy* (2014) provides a valuable reference point. Dobson's basic thesis is that democratic politics has, in terms of both theory and practice, tended to focus on voice to the detriment of an awareness of the cultivation and role of other senses: '[S]peaking has garnered the lion's share of attention, both in terms of the skills to be developed and

the ways in which we should understand what improving it might entail' (Ibid., 2). The result of this over-emphasis on 'voice' and under-emphasis on 'listening' is a consequentialist system that focuses on the outcomes of listening instead of the process of listening itself. Dobson finds much left wanting in the way political institutions 'listen' and he argues that a process-led approach may help us to reveal and enhance the possibilities for a different, more *apophatic* listening, which he describes as a form of receptivity that breaks with or suspends existing categories, thereby making space for new or marginalized viewpoints to find their way into the political arena.

The value of this emphasis on *democratic listening* lies not simply in its focus on cultivating the sensory skills of politicians, possibly through the introduction of new democratic innovations, but also in the manner in which it highlights *the spectacle of listening* as a highly political act. Just as the art of rhetoric involves purposefully deployed speech, the act of listening can also involve sophisticated strategies that attempt to resolve a perceived breakdown in socio-political relationships. In the context of post-millennium evidence on political disengagement the concept 'citizen dialogue' has underpinned a range of initiatives from the local to the national level including the 'Big Conversation' in the UK (2003), the Canadian Citizens' Assemblies in British Columbia and Ontario (2004 and 2006), the Irish Constitutional Convention (2013), the Australian 'Better Together' project (2013), the 'Citizens' Cabinet' (*Cultuur Burgerkabinet*) in Belgium (2015), the G1000 Citizen Summits (*Burgertops*) in the Netherlands (2014) and the 2015 Citizens' Assemblies on English Decentralisation in the UK. Yet, as Sherry Arnstein's (1969) classic conceptual work on 'a ladder of citizen participation' – and its numerous empirical applications – have revealed, there is a politics to top-down listening with the enormous power differentials between the governors and the governed often paving the way for manipulation, tokenism and 'empty listening'. In this way, 'being seen to be listening' as a form of statecraft strategy in fact combines Green's focus on spectatorship with Dobson's emphasis on listening.

While the contributions of Jeffrey Green and Andrew Dobson offer important cues for rethinking democratic practice and modes of political engagement in ways that highlight forms of both (democratic) sensory overload and sensory deprivation, the work of both scholars also possess significant limitations which we will to unpack and explore in the section to follow.

### III. ENRICHING THE DEBATE

The word 'aesthetics' comes from the Greek word "*aesthesis*" which refers to sense perception. Traditionally, the field of aesthetics has been concerned with questions of beauty and taste in art, with aesthetic judgement treated as an autonomous activity that can be objective and separated from everyday life. However, the field of aesthetic enquiry has expanded in recent years with the publication of significant new works about the senses and the re-examination of numerous issues, including the mechanisms and processes that underlie sensation in the brain and body, as well as the links between perception, cognition, and sensory encounter (Freeland 2012). Where some scholars still use the term aesthetics to denote the perceived formal qualities of 'a thing' or place, others refer to the aesthetic as a field of knowledge through which power and resistance can operate (Ranci re 2004, Panagia 2009, Bennett 2012). As Gareth White (2015) argues, these 'heteronomous' or 'practical' understandings and applications of aesthetics tend to underline the interconnection between art and the socio-political sphere. They also encapsulate the relational quality of applied artistic forms, such as participatory and applied theatre, which can be used to disrupt and re-define dominant conceptualisations of the political arena. More specifically, in applied theatre the locus of creativity is placed not solely on the actors upon a stage but upon the role and capacity of those conventionally defined as the audience or spectators. Moreover, it directs critical appraisal and awareness of one's environment and the ways that the cultures and physical settings people work within can give rise to particular opportunities for/limitations to expression. Put very simply, the existing literatures on aesthetics and theatre studies offer insights and

lessons through which to critique and take forward Green and Dobson’s initial analyses in the sphere of sensory democracy.

The question this section focuses on is therefore how the fields of aesthetics and theatre studies offer depth and challenge to Green’s work on political spectatorship and Dobson’s argument concerning listening for democracy. In order to answer this question, we put forward five inter-related critiques (see Table 1, below) that push us in the direction of applied theatre and away from a number of relatively stable, fixed or simplistic assumptions within Green and Dobson’s work.

**Table 1. Developmental Critiques of Green and Dobson’s focus on *Seeing* and *Hearing* Democracy**

CRITIQUE	FOCUS	ESSENCE
C1.	Political candour	Political hypocrisy is a complex and systemic - though not inherent - feature of democratic politics that is unlikely to be eradicated by simply intensifying ‘the spectatorial gaze’.
C2.	Spectatorial equality	The notion of ‘the eyes of the public’ assumes a harmony of interests, opinions and sentiments and pays insufficient attention to diversity, situatedness and individualism.
C3.	Theatre as metaphor	Sustained engagement with the history and theory of theatre studies raises questions about the reductive use of the theatre metaphor within the social and political sciences.
C4.	Non-verbal signaling	The emotive signaling that takes place when acting out a part exposes complexities and subtleties that are also inherent to political communication.
C5.	Liminal experience	Applied theatre forms allow individuals to adopt liminal positions that can position them both ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ of a given <i>socio-political role</i> at the same time.

### *C1. Political Candour*

The first critique takes issue with Green’s focus on considering ‘the people’ as an ocular entity rather than a vocal one and, more specifically, his argument that it is both possible and desirable to understand democracy in terms of what citizens get *to see*. It is Green’s focus on candour in particular that appears potentially naïve. The novel democratic paradigm that Green offers centres on empowering the public’s gaze through forcing politicians to appear in public under conditions they do not fully control. The assumption here is that this will force politicians to act with greater candour and frankness. In this regard there is (once again) a clear link with John Keane’s work on ‘monitory democracy’ and the manner in which increasing modes of off-line and on-line public scrutiny are said to empower the public while at the same time ‘putting politicians, parties and governments permanently on their toes...and sometimes smothering them in disgrace’ (Keane 2009:689). Increasing the power of ‘the popular gaze’ is therefore seen as synonymous with somehow forcing politicians to behave in a more honest manner. But would increasing ‘the popular gaze’ through new modes of spectatorship actually deliver increased candour? Might the emergence of new and ever-increasing modes of spectatorship have pathological implications? Is the normative ideal of candour itself problematic?

Taking each of these three questions in turn helps us tease-apart C1 into a number of component elements that each in their own way underline contemporary democratic complexities. The normative ideal of candour, for example, is an issue that Alex Sager (2012) has challenged on the basis that far from creating conditions for more political ‘gaffes’ the ocular model may lead to a situation in which

the most sly, slick and media-savvy politicians stand to gain at the expense of those that are less socialised into media management/manipulation. There is also a basic assumption that ‘the public’ want honest politicians when, in fact, it might be closer to the truth to suggest that the public frequently hold rather contradictory positions on what they most want from politicians (see Birch and Allen, 2010). Green’s candour assumption is also clouded to some extent by the nature of liberal democratic politics with its emphasis on compromise, deal-making and conciliation that makes candour actually very difficult in some situations. Responses to this element of politics tend to vacillate between moral outrage and amoral realism but is it arguably even more cynical to pretend that politics can ever be more sincere? To make this argument is not to deny the possibility or need for reform but it is to acknowledge the extent to which politics is inevitably a messy and worldly art in which mendacity is sometimes applauded. Bernard Crick’s seminal *In Defence of Politics* (2005) made exactly this argument and since then a distinguished community of scholars have written from this position. And yet it is from the political memoirs of politicians themselves – those who have experienced the ‘popular gaze’ in all its forms – that the candour assumption receives most challenge. Michael Ignatieff’s *Fire and Ashes* (2013), for example, reveals the phenomenology of the experience of being a politician ‘What drew me most was the chance *to stop being a spectator* [emphasis added]’ Ignatieff writes. ‘I’d been in the stands all my life, watching the game. Now, I thought, it was time to step into the arena’ (Ibid., 8).

But what Ignatieff encountered once he had stepped into the arena was that the demands of political office appeared to almost oblige individuals to adopt a certain way of being that grate against the ideals and principles that led them to enter politics in the first place. Put slightly differently, the political hypocrisy that is so often detected by the public, ridiculed by the media, written about by academics and even attacked by opposition politicians who are spared the dilemmas of power are arguably *systemic* in nature rather than representing the failings of specific individuals. More particularly, the intensity of the public gaze – either directly through ‘new’ social media or indirectly through the ‘old’ media – may be so intense that a politician’s freedom to actually speak openly and honestly is suffocated. The good intentions, energy and life – possibly even the hubris – that propels an individual to enter politics can be very rapidly destroyed by a systemic negativity and cynicism that means that spontaneity must be surrendered to a world of soundbites and media management. Ignatieff’s core insight is that, to a certain extent, the hypocrisy, half-truths and fake smiles become essential due to the simple fact that no politician can please everybody all of the time.

Within a year of entering politics, I had the disorientated feeling of having been taken over by a doppelganger, a strange new persona I could hardly recognize when I looked at myself in the mirror...I had never been so well dressed in my life and had never felt so hollow (Ibid., 80).

Despite stemming from reading of power and participation that endeavours to ‘start from where are’, Green’s ‘candour assumption’ arguably sits uncomfortably with the procrustean reality of everyday politics.

## *C2. Spectatorial Equality*

There is also a second (C2, Table 1, above) issue in the form of Green’s ‘equality assumption’. This is simply a view that the disciplining ‘eyes of the people’ can somehow create a shared or homogenous vision of acceptable political behaviour in increasingly diverse societies. How does ‘the spectatorial gaze’ account for well-known social and democratic inequalities? William Gairdner’s *The Trouble with Democracy* (2007) argues that those scholars, such as Green, who assess notions of democratic renewal and reform with reference to ‘The People’ fail to acknowledge the widespread impact of neoliberalism and market-logic in recent decades which has fomented a more atomized and individualistic set of social norms and values.



For Gairdner, the ‘public gaze’ can no longer be interpreted as a homogenous or shared social construction in the manner Green suggests but might more profitably be viewed as a myriad of individualised interests and viewpoints that may well interpret events very differently and place dissimilar demands on the political system. Gairdner’s position chimes with that of many media theorists who have problematized the idea that any community, group or citizenry can have a single, unified ocular experience. And it is these sorts of observations that prompt Richard Avramenko to ask just how the collective ocular power of ‘the people’ in Green’s model might be enkindled.

Let me put this in analogous terms...The choir is not just 40 voices simultaneously singing. They come together to form something more than 40 soloists. At mass, the choir fills the cathedral with more-than-ness. A good choir does more than merely send vibrations through the air. Thus, in asking whether we can speak meaningfully of the power of the collective gaze, I am asking if there might be such a thing as a "gaze-choir"? ... Even if there is such a thing as a gaze-choir, what might happen to the ocular power of the people should one or two voices sing out of tune? (Avramenko, 2016)

Under what circumstances and through what mechanisms can people be drawn together to form a “gaze choir” and how does such a model account for diversity? Arguably artist Lola Frost’s notion of the ‘dilating gaze’ offers a more representative model for what occurs for most people, most of the time (Frost 2015). Drawing on the work of Gilles Deleuze, Frost has described ‘the dilating gaze’ as one in which the spectatorial encounter engenders multiple ‘lines of flight’. Applied to political audiences, the dilating gaze reserves the possibility for ‘the people’ to experience different and multiple feelings, cognitions and all that is in between. Indeed, taking the ‘senses’ seriously in politics means moving away from the overriding dominance of a rational actor model that privileges cost-benefit calculations at the expense of the various emotional or affective cues and attachments that also drive political will, expression and action (See Bleiker 2009; Gould 2010, 2011; Ryan 2017). The challenges associated with formation of the “gaze choir” are therefore not just related to mediating distinct and bounded political interests or demands. They are further complicated by the challenges of synthesising divergent levels and directions of energy, commitment, passion, tolerance and trust.

### *C3. Theatre as Metaphor*

A third and broader issue that flows out of the points above is Green’s sustained use of ‘the theatre metaphor’: the long-practiced but under-studied convention of likening the political field to the theatre space. Jill Dolan (1993) points out that since the 1980’s there has been a surge in interdisciplinary and critical scholarship borrowing from the theatre, and using it as a metaphor. Yet, what has often taken place is a form of ‘conceptual stretching’ *qua*. Sartori (1970) – or more precisely, *metaphorical stretching* – involving a significant disconnect between the uses of theatrical metaphors in the political and social sciences, on the one hand, and understandings built on sustained engagement with the history and theory of theatre, on the other. Fitzgerald (2015) rightly suggests that Green’s application of the metaphor is problematic from the point of view of theatre studies. She highlights that his model of the passive spectator, as an individual boxed-off from the performance, is excessively pessimistic and in fact *ahistoricises* a model of theatre that only became the norm from the nineteenth-century and remains heavily contested. Indeed, an excavation of the history of theatre reveals the variety and fluidity of spectatorial possibilities and positionalities. In earliest Greek drama for example, there was no ‘fourth wall’ separating actors and audience. A chorus would often act as a bridge and interlocutor between the performers and spectators. Chorus members could talk to the actors on one side and the audience on the other. They were generally drawn from the Athenian citizenry and participated unpaid, as a part of their duty to the *demos*. More recent examples of applied or participatory theatre also reveal the possibilities for shifting the locus of creativity from the stage and towards the audience, allowing spectators to speak back to the actors and even drive the course of action:

Participatory theatre builds on conventional theatre. It gives the same benefits of escapism, a forum to put across a message, and a way to address issues, but it also provides an active way for the audience and community to become involved in the issues explored and form a sense of ownership. Participatory theatre is made for and by the community. It engages people to identify issues of concern, analyse and then together think about how change can happen, and particularly how relationships of power and oppression can be transformed (Sloman 2012).

Annie Sloman (2012), Tim Prentki (1998) and Mrinalini Thyagarajan (2002) amongst others, have shown how participatory theatre has been used to successfully reduce the distance between policy-makers and the public in developing states, whereas the National Theatre of Wales' (NTW) recent 'Big Democracy Project' (2014-17) has demonstrated the democratic potential of using participatory theatre as a tool of social cohesion and problem-solving in the UK. Indeed, many of these experiences resonate with Thompson and Schechner's (1988) arguments regarding the political potential of applied theatre to give birth to (1) healing, (2) action, (3) community building and (4) transformation of experience into art which, taken together, take us far *beyond* Green's narrow metaphor usage.

The four aforementioned goals or are not mutually exclusive and Augusto Boal's 'Theatre of the Oppressed' provides a celebrated example of applied or participatory theatre that attempts at all of them. Inspired by the work of the Brazilian educator and philosopher Paulo Freire (1970), Boal began experimenting with popular, integrative theatre in Rio de Janeiro's public spaces during the 1950's. His aim was to open up channels of two-way conversation among the populace, believing that dialogue was 'the most common and healthy dynamic between humans' (Paterson 1995). In a very early example of what might today be termed 'DIY democracy', Boal and his troupe of performers initiated applied dramatic interventions in the streets, factories, unions and churches. Plays dealt with pressing social and political issues and audience members could halt a performance at any point to suggest different actions for the actor, who would then carry out the audience's suggestions. Through 'acting out' an array of possible actions and results, participants became involved in processes of rehearsing political change that fostered critical engagement with alternative political models. Blurring the lines between actors and spectators, Boal's theatre encouraged citizens to 'give their opinions, discuss the issues, offer counter-arguments and share in the responsibility' for developing new local and national policy (Boal 1998, 20). The Brecht Forum Archive highlights that, 'in a now legendary development, a woman in the audience was so frustrated by an actor who could not understand her suggestions that she came on stage and began to play the role herself. For Boal, this was the birth of the 'spect-actor' and his theater was transformed' (Brecht Forum Archive 2015).

The core point being made here however, is that Green's adoption of the theatre metaphor, with its rigid 'them' and 'us', 'on-stage' and 'off-stage' distinctions, completely fails to acknowledge the history and theory of theatre and how such relationships are 'fluid, shifting, reciprocal and almost infinitely variable' (Fitzgerald 2015, 310). This is not to suggest that the theatre metaphor has no relevance for the political context, quite the contrary: it suggests a need to embrace a more dynamic account of theatre history and theory which makes space for individuals to move back and forth between different political categories - as Ignatieff does - rather than assigning them fixed or predetermined roles.

Taking the last point as a kind of springboard, we can think about different ways that the applied theatre paradigm might both extend and elucidate Dobson's concept of *apophatic listening*. In his book, Dobson makes a strong case for the turn to *apophatic listening*, defined as a form of listening that hinges on the suspension of pre-existing categories so as to 'open up and open out alternative ways of looking at and acting in the world' (Dobson 2014, 196). He cites examples where he believes this has taken place, namely through the activities of *GMNation*. However, Dobson is rather weaker on method: are there useful steps or techniques that we can follow to facilitate more inclusive, open and indeed 'transformational' listening practice?

#### *C4. Non-Verbal Signalling*

Diane Conrad (2004) argues that one of the barriers to effective listening is that ‘some types of cultural knowledge cannot simply be called up and expressed in discursive statements’. For this reason, Augusto Boal (2006) and Lola Frost (2015) have both argued forcefully against turning all political and cultural expression into supplement and document. Frost points out that linguistic categories do not map our feelings exactly, whilst Boal has claimed: ‘words are so powerful that, when we hear or speak them, we sometimes override our own senses – through which, without the intervention of words, we would perceive the signals of the world more clearly’ (Boal 2006,15). The underlying observation for politics and democratic practice is that when we reduce political expression to a voicing of demands by actors imbued with the power of speech, we in fact miss out entire territories of knowledge, sentiment, desire and need (i.e. C4, Table 1, above).

Among critical aestheticians and cultural theorists it is widely agreed that some forms of cultural and political knowledge are embodied. Following Pierre Bourdieu (1977), ‘embodied knowledge’ refers to a body’s propensity to act without any form of conscious deliberation: the corporeal manifestation of a set of socialised dispositions, or *habitus*. Conrad (2004) contends that since individuals are not generally aware of the myriad ways that their bodies are marked by culture, politics and power, embodied forms of knowledge are likely to be represented, conveyed and understood most effectively through performance, interruption and reflection. In other words, our bodies say things about our vocations, aspirations, confidence and opinions which can be drawn into much sharper focus through the process of ‘acting out’ a part.

Participatory theatre practitioners and arts-based researchers have developed and advanced processes and tools for listening to verbal *and* non-verbal signals put out by the body. One interesting example of this is Erene Kaptani and Nira Yuval-Davis’ (2008) participatory theatre project with four East London-based community organisations for refugees. The project featured a number of ‘image-work exercises’ in which participants from Kosovo, Somalia, and Kurdistan ‘sculpted’ images using their bodies and/or objects. Although the researchers did not include this exercise in their final discourse analysis, they found that these silent vignettes, depicting concepts such as ‘community’, ‘London’ or ‘solicitor’ provided a graphic illustration of the myriad issues faced by refugees and showed how social differences including gender, ethnicity, stage in the lifecycle, class etc. had profoundly affected their interactions with state officials, legal representatives and civil society organisations. Vignettes based on ‘power’ also helped to reveal weaknesses in the state architecture for dealing with asylum applications:

When the images of the 'solicitor', 'interpreter' and 'refugee client' were rearranged and interrelated by the participants, new relationships and social practices emerged. These practices came forth from what the participants projected at the time onto the images. For example, they put the interpreter next to the solicitor, touching her hand and people said 'bribery'. Another configuration was when they moved the solicitor to look at the refugee client so he could check if what the interpreter was translating was reflected in the facial expressions and mood of the refugee client (ibid.).

At the same time and very much in line with Diane Conrad’s argument, Kaptani and Yuval-Davis’ observe how the image work allowed the refugee groups to communicate with each other and with the researchers in ways that went beyond words, allowing the participants to call forth the ‘condensed memory of the experiences that the body carries through its affective and emotional encounters’ (ibid.) and use this as a foundation for reflection and learning.

#### *C5. Liminal Experience*

Methods drawn from participatory theatre have also been described as a way of opening up spaces on

the margins of 'what is' and 'what is not'. This idea flows into a critique (C5, Table 1 above) concerning liminality and an assumption that appears uncontested in the work of both Green and Dobson regarding individual identity and interpretation. Simply put, both Green and Dobson assume that those who 'see' or 'hear' democratic politics will adopt a foundational position in which their understanding and elucidation will be relatively fixed and clear. This contrasts with the insights of scholars such as Richard Courtney (1988) who have highlighted the manner in which 'the play frame [within participatory theatre] opens a liminal space where the "not me" encounters the 'not not me"'.

This is the dramatic paradox that lies in the possibility of being both 'inside' and 'outside' of a role at the same time; occupying a space that is temporarily 'betwixt and between'. This could be a refugee in the moment of reimagining him/herself as a border officer or solicitor; or, as a member of the public who momentarily sees issues or hears events through the eyes and ears of a politician. During the course of play and improvisation, existing categories, identities and options for political action can all be suspended or called into question, and new options/actions can be rehearsed. As such, participatory theatre offers up an alternative and more performative way of listening that includes 'drawing out responses that are a spontaneous, intuitive, tacit, experiential, embodied or affective, rather than simply cognitive' (Conrad 2004). Herein, there is a possibility of using the play frame to rethink and ultimately rebuild social and political relations from the bottom up. Shirin Rai (2015, 8) locates these sorts of arguments squarely within the contours of an improved democratic politics and defines such moments of liminality in terms of a 'threshold when political actors are in a space/place/time when disruption of the stable is possible'. Described in this way, the notion of liminality resonates strongly with Dobson's concept of *apophatic listening* and it reveals potentially productive options for extending and refining the concept to draw a productive bridge between the political and the aesthetic.

#### IV. FROM SENSELESS TO SENSORY DEMOCRACY

The central argument in this article is that the fields of practical aesthetics and applied theatre have much to offer political scientists with an interest in political engagement in general, and those democratic theorists who have sought to comprehend the role of the senses, in particular. The point of departure for this article was the well-documented explosion of new modes and mechanisms for political expression and claim-making. Building on the insights of Hecló, Coles and others we suggested that perhaps the 'problem of political science' was that it had predominantly focused on both the study and promotion of 'voice-based' mechanisms; and in so doing it has helped constitute a political environment that is found lacking in proportionality and receptivity.

It was here that we turned to the work of Jeffrey Green and Andrew Dobson as entry points to the analysis of a so-called 'sensory democracy'. Whilst finding much of utility within the works of these prominent theorists, we also found some room for improvement. Drawing upon insights from aesthetics and applied theatre, we identified five specific foci (Table 1, above) that, taken together, demonstrate the value of listening, speaking and learning across disciplinary divides. Among other things, our analysis revealed an implicit conservatism within Green's work due to the existence of: a) a set of assumptions that possibly over-estimated the existence of social homogeneity; while, b) significantly under-estimating the fluidity and role-reversal that may be facilitated by a more nuanced deployment of the theatre metaphor. The article similarly argued that Dobson's concept of 'apophatic listening' opened fresh intellectual terrain that could be extended, refined and exemplified by paying greater attention to the embodied and performative practices of listening that take place during improvisation, image-making and other applied dramatic forms.

In more practical terms, 'learning through drama' as Greenwood (2012,6) argues 'is a process that utilises the energy of the group and that develops meaning not only verbally but also viscerally, emotionally and socially'. It therefore offers up opportunities for cultivating the skills, confidence and

understanding of participants. Since it promotes a model of 'deep listening' that '... is not merely the instrumental extraction of information or a matter of 'ticking the box' of consultation' (Back 2010) applied theatre already provides a useful model of communicative practice through which to counter some of the political exclusions that result from 'democratic excess' or 'too much voice'. Moreover, as 'both a laboratory and battlefield for emerging and evolving ideas of a growing society' (Sloman 2012), one of the virtues of this dramatic form is that it quite literally turns spectators into decision-makers and provides an opportunity for them to rehearse the options for change (or stasis) within the political sphere. As such, applied theatre directs us to spaces in which the workings of 'apophatic listening' may be observed, experienced and explored. Here, we find a novel opportunity for transforming the concept from a rather abstract category into an achievable practice, process or goal.

In many ways however, all this focus on the practice of politics is secondary to this article's underlying focus on the value of inter-disciplinarity. 'During the nineteenth century, the ideal of the unity of knowledge - that a genuine scholar ought to be familiar with the sum total of humanity's intellectual and artistic output - gave way to specialization' (Nissani 1997). Most scholars and artists have since been stranded in 'ever-shrinking islands of competence' (ibid.), with little scope for cross-fertilisation. Although increasing specialisation has undoubtedly delivered some benefits, much has also been lost. Ernest Boyer's *Scholarship Reconsidered* and the debate around Michael Burawoy's 'public sociology wars' have focused attention on the impact of 'hyper-specialisation' within academe and it is neither necessary nor possible to reiterate their arguments here. However, even this short inter-disciplinary excursion has revealed that democratic theorists could gain much from closer engagement with heteronomous aesthetics and the work of applied theatre.

### **Acknowledgements**

The authors would like to thank the editorial team as well as the three anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments on this article.

### **About the Authors**

Holly Eva Ryan is a Senior Lecturer in Politics at Manchester Metropolitan University. Her research revolves around the role of art and cultural production in social movements and civil society.

Matthew Flinders is a Professor of Politics and the Director of the Sir Bernard Crick Centre for the Public Understanding of Politics at the University of Sheffield.

### **References**

Arnstein, Sherry R. 1969. "A ladder of citizen participation." *Journal of the American Institute of planners* 35(4): 216-224.

Back, Les. 2010. "The listeners." *New Humanist*. Available from: <https://newhumanist.org.uk/articles/2346/the-listeners>

Bennett, Jill. 2012. *Practical aesthetics*. London: IB Tauris.

Birch, Sarah and Nicholas Allen. 2010. 'How honest do politicians need to be?', *Political Quarterly*, 81(1), 49-56.

Bleiker, Roland. (2009) *Aesthetics and World Politics*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

- Boal, Augusto. 1998. "Legislative Theatre: Using performance to make politics, trans." *A. Jackson. London and New York: Routledge.*
- Boal, Augusto. 2006. *The Aesthetics of the Oppressed*, trans. A. Jackson. London and New York: Routledge.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1977. *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Boyer, Ernest L., Drew Moser, Todd C. Ream, and John M. Braxton. 2015. *Scholarship reconsidered: Priorities of the professoriate*. London: John Wiley & Sons.
- Brecht Forum Archive. 2015. *Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed*. Available from: <https://brechtforum.org/abouttop>
- Burawoy, Michael. 2005. "For public sociology." *American Sociological Review* 70(1): 4-28.
- Coles, Romand. 2004. "Moving Democracy Industrial Areas Foundation Social Movements and the Political Arts of Listening, Traveling, and Tabling." *Political Theory* 32(5): 678-705.
- Conrad, Diane. 2004. "Exploring risky youth experiences: Popular theatre as a participatory, performative research method." *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*. 3(1). Available from: <http://intl-ijq.sagepub.com/content/3/1/12.full>
- Courtney, Richard. 1988. Columbus here and now. In D. Booth & A. Martin-Smith (Eds.), *Recognizing Richard Courtney: Selected writings on drama and education* (pp. 55-61). Markham, ON: Pembroke Publishers Ltd.
- Crick, Bernard. 2005. *In defence of politics*. London: A&C Black.
- Dobson, Andrew. 2014. *Listening for democracy: Recognition, representation, reconciliation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Dolan, Jill. 1993. "Geographies of Learning: Theatre Studies, Performance, and the " Performative"." *Theatre Journal* 45(4): 417-441.
- Fitzgerald, Sandey. 2015. "Is There a Role for Spectators in Democratic Politics? A Reflection on the Theater Metaphor in Green's "Ocular Democracy"." *Constellations* 22(2): 302-313.
- Flinders, Matthew and Wood, Matthew. 2015. When Politics Fails: Hyper-Democracy and Hyper-Depoliticization. *New Political Science*, 37(3), pp.363-381.
- Freeland, Cynthia. 2012. "Aesthetics and the Senses: Introduction". *Essays in Philosophy*, 13(2): 399-403
- Friere, Paulo. 1970. "Pedagogy of the oppressed." *New York: Herder and Herder.*
- Frost, Lola. 2015. 'Aesthetic Risk: An artist's perspective'. Talk at University of Sheffield 'Values of Art'. Conference 20-21 June.
- Gairdner, William D. 2007. *The trouble with democracy: A citizen speaks out*. London: BPS Blackwell.
- Gould, Deborah B. (2009) *Moving Politics: Emotion and ACT UP's fight against AIDS*. Chicago:

University of Chicago Press.

Gould, Deborah B. (2010) On Affect and Protest, in Cvetkovich, A., Reynolds, A. and Staiger, J. (eds) *Political Emotions*. London: Routledge, pp.18–44.

Green, Jeffrey Edward. 2010. *The eyes of the people: democracy in an age of spectatorship*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Greenwood, Janinka. 2012. "Arts-based research: Weaving magic and meaning." *International journal of education & the arts* 13 (1): 1- 20.

Hecl, Hugh. 1999. "Hyperdemocracy." *The Wilson Quarterly* (1976-) 23 (1): 62-71.

Hirschman, A. 1981. *Essays in Trespassing*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Ignatieff, Michael. 2013. *Fire and ashes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Kaptani, Erene, and Nira Yuval-Davis. 2008. "Participatory theatre as a research methodology: Identity, performance and social action among refugees." *Sociological Research Online* 13(5). Available from: <http://www.socresonline.org.uk/13/5/2.html>

Keane, John. 2009. *The life and death of democracy*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

Nissani, Moti. 1997. "Ten cheers for interdisciplinarity: The case for interdisciplinary knowledge and research." *The social science journal* 34(2): 201-216.

Paterson, Douglas L. 1995. "Theatre of the oppressed workshops." *Seattle, WA: The Institute for Cultural Democracy*. Available from: <http://www.wgcd.org/action/Boal.html>

Panagia, Davide. 2009. *The Political Life of Sensation*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Prentki, Tim. 1998. "Must the show go on? The case for Theatre for Development." *Development in Practice* 8(4): 419-429.

Rai, Shirin M. 2015. "Political Performance: A Framework for Analysing Democratic Politics." *Political Studies* 63(5): 1179-1197.

Rancière, Jacques. 2004. *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*. Trans. Gabriel Rockhill. London: Continuum.

Ryan, Holly E., 2016. *Political Street Art: Communication, culture and resistance in Latin America*. London: Routledge.

Sanders, Karen. 2008. *Communicating politics in the twenty-first century*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Sartori, Giovanni. 1970. "Concept misformation in comparative politics." *American political science review* 64(4): 1033-1053.

Sloman, Annie. 2012. "Using participatory theatre in international community development." *Community Development Journal*. 47: 42-57

Tambini, Damian. "New Media and Democracy The Civic Networking Movement." *New media & society*. 1(3): 305-329.

Thompson, James. and Schechner, Robert. 1988. Why "Social Theatre"? *TDR*. 48: 3.

Thyagarajan, Mrinalini. 2002. *Popular Theater, Development and Communication*. University of North Carolina. University center for international studies.

White, Gareth. 2015. *Applied Theatre: Aesthetics*. London: Bloomsbury Methuen.