Democratic Spectatorship beyond Plebiscitarianism: On Jeffrey Green's Ocular Democracy

Jan Bíba —
Faculty of Arts, Charles University, Prague
jan.biba@ff.cuni.cz

Abstract: Contemporary democracies have been witnessing many profound changes, including an unprecedented rise of the power of mass media enhanced by new technologies, a crisis of traditional forms of representation and participation, leading towards a new emphasis on the role of political leadership in democracy. These changes have also raised many challenges to our traditional understanding of democracy, becoming a source for many innovations in democratic thought. One of these rehabilitated innovations is concerned with the role of citizens as spectators, one that has generally been overlooked or ignored by democratic theorists. The paper is concerned with Jeffrey Green's book, *The Eyes of the People*, that belongs to the most important exceptions to this trend. While I agree with the key role that Green attributes to spectatorship, the paper criticizes a strong relation between spectatorship and plebiscitarianism that Green establishes, and attempts instead to develop a theory of democratic spectatorship suitable for representative democracy.

Keywords: ocular democracy, plebiscitarianism, representation, spectatorship, synopticism

"We are all democrats now…", as Wendy Brown recently claimed,[1] but we are also puzzled democrats. The sources of our puzzlement are many, ranging from the fact that the name democracy is (mis)used by diverse authoritarian regimes to the fact that the so-called democracies employ the name to justify atrocities of war, nativism, exclusion or callousness towards humans in need. We are also puzzled because we do not know what democracy should mean

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1 Brown, W., We Are All Democrats Now… In: Agamben, G. et al., *Democracy in What State?* New York, Columbia University Press 2012, pp. 44–57.

today. Democracy as "government of the people, by the people and for the people", does anyone still believe? We are puzzled because our lofty democratic ideals contained in the numerous and multifarious literature on democratic theory are incommensurable with the workings of existing democracies and the gap seems to be widening. Norberto Bobbio was undoubtedly right when he claimed that the experienced democracy's discontent has its source in the fact that the democratic ideals we still cherish were designed for societies that were very different from ours.[2]

However, it seems that recent development has challenged even the modest remnants of democracy that democratic realists like Bobbio hoped for. Challenged has been the very idea of purposefulness of democratic elections and citizens' ability to influence policies by using their voices and ballots.[3] Many claim that thanks to a coalescence of complexity of our societies demanding technocratic rule and the iron cage of the global market economy, that both set insuperable limits on democratic decisionmaking, and new forms of political communication that concentrate rather on leaders' personal characteristics than on the political programs they represent, a completely new form of democracy was born, one whose main features are the separation of "politically active and politically passive elements",[4] charismatic leadership, passive citizenry and a concomitant decline of parliamentary politics coupled with a surge of the role of executive power and presidentialism. While some – as I believe mistakenly – designate this new democratic form as populism and others have coined new labels like "audience"[5] or "leader"[6] democracy to give this form a name, I believe that its proper name is plebiscitarianism.[7] This shift towards plebiscitarianism brings about a collapse

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2 Bobbio, N., *The future of democracy: a defence of the rules of the game*. Cambridge, Polity Press 1987, p. 37.

3 In Pierre Rosanvallon's words: "The function of elections has been whittled down: elections are simply the process by which we designate those who govern. They no longer provide a priori legitimation for policies to be enacted later." Rosanvallon, P., *Democratic Legitimacy: Impartiality, Reflexivity, Proximity*. Princeton, Princeton University Press 2011, p. 4.

4 Weber, M., The Profession and Vocation of Politics. *Weber: Political Writings*. Eds. P. Lassman – R. Speirs. New York, Cambridge University Press 1994, p. 385.

5 Manin, B., *The Principles of Representative Government*. New York, Cambridge University Press 1997.

6 Körösenyi, A., Political Representation in Leader Democracy. *Government and Opposition*, 40, 2005, No. 3, pp. 358–378.

7 The concept of plebiscitarianism has its origin in Roman *plebiscitum,* meaning yes/no decisions on proposals presented to Roman plebs to approval by tribunes of the plebs. Lately, plebiscitarianism became synonymous with formal popular approval of decisions that were already done by political elites or leaders. As Nadia Urbinati explains, "(t)he meaning of plebiscitary consensus is popular *pronunciation* more than popular *decision*." Urbinati, N., *Democracy Disfigured: Opinion, Truth, and the People*. Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press 2014, p. 176 (italics by Urbinati). Theory of plebiscitarian democracy was first formulated in works of Max

not only of our traditional understanding of democratic legitimacy, representation, responsiveness and accountability, but also of our understanding of democratic citizenship based on ideals of active participation and deliberation.

However, this situation of a collapse of our traditional democratic imaginary and of fecklessness of traditional forms of democratic participation[8] also opens a possibility of emergence of new forms of democratic involvement and participation that traditional democratic theory finds difficult to adopt.[9] In other words, our predicament demands that we reconsider the foundations of democratic theory and invent new forms of democratic practices beyond voting, participation and deliberation. This broadening of democratic theory's scope entails (among others) an inclusion of "democracy's ordinary", i.e. some of the everyday practices that democratic theorists tend to ignore because they do not consider them political practices at all.[10] One of these generally overlooked or ignored citizens' practices, spectatorship, has recently attracted attention of several democratic theorists.[11] In this paper, I will be concerned with Jeffrey Green's book, *The Eyes of the People: Democracy in an Age of Spectatorship*, that seems to be the most ambitious work in the field as it attempts to completely re-build democratic theory around a citizen-spectator.

Green's work is undoubtedly a very original and thoughtful piece of political theory that deserves the attention of political theorists (and theorists of democracy in particular) both for its criticism of unsubstantiated preference of speech over other democratic experiences (i.e. logocentrism in Derri-

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Weber and Carl Schmitt. For a recent revival of interest in plebiscitarianism see Green, J. E., *The Eyes of the People: Democracy in an Age of Spectatorship*. New York, Oxford University Press 2010; Posner, E. A. – Vermeule, A., *The Executive Unbound: After the Madisonian Republic*. New York, Oxford University Press 2010. It should be noted that plebiscitarian theory of democracy that has recently resurrected from oblivion is still rather a "nascent theory". See Green, J. E., *The Eyes of the People*, op. cit., p. 120.

8 Krastev, I., *Democracy Disrupted: The Politics of Global Protest*. New York, University of Pennsylvania Press 2014.

9 Warren, M. E. ‚What Can Democratic Participation Mean Today? *Political Theory*, 30, 2002, No. 5, pp. 677–701.

10 This approach would involve not only different sensory aspects of democratic experience but also phenomena such as apathy or extrapoliticism. For the concept of sensory democracy, see Dobson, A., *Listening for Democracy: Recognition, Representation, Reconciliation*. Oxford, Oxford University Press 2014; for apathy and extrapoliticism, see respectively Green, J. E., Apathy: the Democratic Disease. *Philosophy*, 30, 2004, No. 5–6, pp. 745–768; and Green, J. E., *The Shadow of Unfairness: a Plebeian Theory of Liberal Democracy*. New York, Oxford University Press 2016, pp. 130–164.

11 See e.g. Manin, B., *The Principles of Representative Government*, op. cit.; Rosanvallon, P., *Counter-Democracy: Politics in an Age of Distrust*. New York, Cambridge University Press 2008; Fitzgerald, S., *Spectators in the Field of Politics*. New York, NY, Palgrave Macmillan 2015.

da's parlance) that haunts most of democratic theory, and for the attention it pays to ordinary democratic life as experienced by most of the citizens in mass liberal democracies (that is to say rather to "citizens-being-ruled" than to "citizens-governors"). The logocentrism of democratic theory and its concomitant neglect of the ordinary is – as I believe – premised upon the problematic equation of democracy and participation (broadly conceived) and I also believe that this equation deplets our understanding of democracy and democratic practices. Therefore, I understand the widening of our view of ordinary democratic practises beyond voting, participation and deliberation as the main achievement of Green's work. However, Green's work also has several drawbacks and the main task of this paper is to shed light upon them. My main concerns relate to Green's refusal of representative democracy and the connection he established between spectatorship and plebiscitarianism. While Green believes that representative democracy is a pedigree of an outmoded and unrealistic vocal model of democracy that should be supplanted with ocular plebiscitarian democracy based on citizens-spectators, I claim – contra Green – that spectatorship is, together with speech, an indispensable feature of representative democracy and that proper attention to spectatorship is destined to strengthen rather than weaken representative democracy. In other words, while Green claims that recognizing spectatorship as a prominent democratic practice will lead us beyond representative democracy, I see a proper form of spectatorship as its necessary component.

To disentangle the connection between spectatorship and plebiscitarianism established by Green, I will pay attention to the key presuppositions of Green's argument: Firstly, I intend to criticize Green's assertion of a non-representative character of contemporary democracies and to claim that Green works with an impoverished notion of representation, and that had he taken into consideration some of the insights provided by theoreticians of the representative turn (mainly the role of judgment and the constructivist aspect of representation), he would have had to come to a different conclusion. And secondly, that Green works with a problematic notion of spectatorship that presupposes inherent passivity in the spectator. Building on a body of literature on spectatorship, I intend to show that spectatorship is far from passive. I believe that affirmation of this point enables us to assign a proper place to spectatorship in democratic theory and practice, one that sees sight and speech as two complementary powers of the democratic citizen.

The paper's structure and line of argumentation is, therefore, as follows. In the first part, I introduce the key aspects of Green's argument. In the second and third parts, I dispute Green's claim that contemporary democracies are essentially non-representative and his notion of spectatorship, and

in the last section, I refer to Wittgenstein's concepts of aspect perception and aspect change to suggest a different way of conceiving the relationship between vocal and ocular aspects of democracy.

Green's ocular democracy

Green's starting point is the belief that "democratic theorists … are not free to choose their protagonists, but must be guided in their selection by the nature of political experience available to everyday citizens".[12] And because the everyday experience in contemporary plebiscitarian democracies is rather one of citizen-spectator than citizen-governor, democratic theory should provide us with "non-ideal" theories, i.e. it should – instead of designing ideal democratic regimes – strive to deepen progressive elements in existing democracies. In other words, Green sets his task as democratization of plebiscitarianism. This allows him to come with the blasphemous statement that the main currents of democratic thought from ancient Athens to the present have provided us with an inadequate understanding of democracy. The nature of this failure, Green claims, can be found in the fact that democratic theorists have always preferred voice over sight, that we have understood the workings of democracy almost exclusively from the perspective of a talking subject. Green suggests that instead of insisting upon an inadequate traditional model of democracy based on speech and on the ideal of active participation, we should rather concentrate on the sensory aspects of democratic experience.[13]

Green's discussion of the role of sight and spectatorship in democracy is underpinned by his distinction between the vocal and the ocular models of democracy. Green claims that, should we change our perspective from understanding democracy based on the ideal of citizen-governor who actively participates in discussion, deliberation and decisionmaking, to the perspective of citizen-spectator who does not deliberate, does not decide and "only" watches politics, we would get two completely different models of democracy. While the first model (the vocal model) encapsulates a traditional understanding of democracy based on the idea of empowerment through citizens' voice and speech, the latter (the ocular model) connects empowerment with the power of gaze. These two models differ on three levels. The first level concerns the object of rule: while the vocal model sees as its main object laws "that are written, debated, and enacted",[14] the ocular

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12 Green, J. E., *The Eyes of the People*, op. cit., p. 48.
13 Green particularly accentuates sight but also mentions hearing. Ibid., p. 40.
14 Ibid., p. 8.

model concentrates on political leaders and their conduct. The second level refers to the organ of rule: the vocal model understands popular decision as an organ of rule, while the ocular model follows Foucault's analysis of panopticism[15] and emphasises the role of disciplinary gaze as a "hierarchical form of visualisation that inspects, observes, and achieves surveillance".[16] Third, the models differ in what they conceive as their critical ideal: while the vocal model is committed to the ideal of popular autonomy (that is to the people being in control of "the means of lawmaking"), the ocular model is premised on the ideal of candour that gives the people negative control of the decision-making made by political elites by bestowing upon the people "control of the means of publicity".[17]

Green claims that the shift of our perspective from talking to vision has several important advantages. Firstly, it provides us with a realistic and descriptively accurate understanding of modern democracy because in contemporary liberal-democratic societies, citizens are rather spectators of the actions of political leaders than autonomous decision makers. It also makes us see contemporary democracies as non-representative, and invites us to think "outside the normative rubric of representation" because the ocular model "does not depend on citizens having pre-existing preferences, interests, or opinions…, it does not depend on citizens deciding at all".[18]

In this respect, Green's theory of democracy resembles Schumpeter's "another theory of democracy" because of its elitism and a conviction that political will is not forged by ordinary citizens but by political leaders. However, Green believes that his ocular model, in comparison to Schumpeterianism, introduces several democratic (i.e. egalitarian) elements: Firstly, people's sight is a form of democratic empowerment that is more inclusive than speech as the capacity to watch is distributed more evenly than the capacity and ability to voice one's views and make oneself heard. Secondly, the ocular model – even though it presupposes that people do not contribute to lawmaking – can provide a certain progressive or egalitarian twist by placing the burden of "candour" on disproportionately powerful elites. By candour, Green means an "institutional requirement that leaders not be in control of the conditions of their publicity", and not a norm of personal sincerity.[19] In other words, citizens-spectators are endowed with a quasi-Foucauldian power of gaze that enables them to inspect and survey the actions of political leaders and this can take place particularly in situa-

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15 Foucault, M., *Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prison*. London, Penguin Books 1991.
16 Green, J. E., *The Eyes of the People*, op. cit., p. 9.
17 Ibid., p. 14.
18 Ibid., p. 17.
19 Ibid., p. 13.

tions when leaders' "public appearances are neither rehearsed, preplanned, nor managed from above, but rather contain all the risk and uncertainty of spontaneous public events".[20] Hence, in Green's ocular model, the main site of democracy has shifted from legislative and deliberative assemblies to situations where political leaders are subjected to momentary involuntary candid appearance that is observed, judged and evaluated by ordinary people. Among the possible sites of such candid appearances, Green lists a whole set of events ranging from cross-examination of political leaders during public debates, press conferences, public investigations and trials to heckling.[21]

The emphasis on the role of candour also highlights "eventfulness", i.e. an egalitarian aesthetic value of ocular democracy. Green claims that candour allows us to differentiate between pseudo-events and candid events. While pseudo-events are predictable, unspontaneous, acclamatory and aimed at manipulation of the observer, candid events are political happenings that are spontaneous, unpredictable, and potentially critical and therefore able to reveal to spectators something previously unknown – and this is what makes candid events "worthy of being watched".[22] However, eventfulness should not be understood only as something that allows us to differentiate between pseudo-events and genuine events, but also as an intrinsic political value that "links democracy to the cultivation and institutionalization of spontaneity".[23] Green refers to Hannah Arendt who – as he claims – not only defined political space as a space of appearance but also "celebrated political life for its capacity to break free from the automatic and repetitive processes of nature, to generate new and historical events". From this point of view, eventfulness becomes a crucial political value that should "be enjoyed, not simply by the political actors who perform the event, but even more by spectators who behold it". As Green insists, the demand for greater eventfulness in politics has *"democratic* aspiration precisely because it seeks a political life that will satisfy not only the few who enjoy the fame and responsibility of self-disclosure on the public stage but the many who routinely watch such figures as they appear".[24]

And finally, by focusing on the role of citizens-spectators of political events rather than citizens-governors, the ocular model allows us to restore the People (capitalized throughout the book) as a meaningful concept

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20 Ibid., p. 14.
21 Ibid., pp. 178–200; see also Green, J. E., Analysing Legislative Performance: A Plebeian Perspective. *Democratization*, 20, 2013, pp. 417–437.
22 Green, J. E., *The Eyes of the People*, op. cit., p. 20.
23 Ibid., 21.
24 Ibid. (italics by Green).

of democratic theory. Green is right when he claims that recent (and not-so-recent) democratic theory has dealt with the concept at least with suspicion, suggesting that it is an unrealistic and potentially dangerous philosophical abstraction that belongs either to the pre-modern notion of democracy or to the world of populism and totalitarianism. However, Green suggests that the ocular model enables us to see the People not as a homogeneous political actor with a single will but rather as a collective spectator. Green believes that defining "the People in its collective capacity as a mass spectator of political elites" avoids totalitarian danger for two reasons: firstly, the People as the mass spectator do not have to share the same identity or collective will but only a collective interest that consists merely in the fact that citizens-spectators want to watch a political spectacle that is worthy of being watched; and secondly, the People as a mass spectator is passive, it does not act, and therefore, it cannot be a source of gravitation towards totalitarianism.

The paradox of the spectator

Green's position has been met with many objections. Its critics suggested that Green had resigned *vis-à-vis* liberal-democratic malaises, and that the defensiveness of his position betrays some key democratic values like autonomy, celebrating passivity instead. Some objected Green's elitism, others focused on his allegedly naïve belief in the ability of mass media to provide moments of "candour" and, finally, some claimed that the state of permanent distrust towards politicians, which is the necessary corollary of permanent surveillance, would stall the process of decisionmaking.[25] I subscribe to most of this criticism. However, there is an element that seems to be shared by Green, some of his critics and democratic theory more generally. This element could be expressed in terms of Rancière's paradox of the spectator. What is the nature of the paradox?

"(T)here is no theatre without a spectator… But according to the accusers, being a spectator is a bad thing for two reasons. First, viewing is the opposite of knowing: the spectator is held before an appearance in a state of ignorance… Second, it is the opposite of acting: the spectator remains immo-

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25 See respectively Dobson, A., *Listening for Democracy*, op. cit., p. 18–35; Urbinati, N., *Democracy Disfigured*, op. cit. pp. 200–207; Fitzgerald, S., Is There a Role for Spectators in Democratic Politics? A Reflection on the Theater Metaphor in Green's "Ocular Democracy". *Constellations*, 22, 2015, No. 2, pp. 302–313; Avramenko, R. – Schwartzberg, M., Symposium. *Political Theory*, 42, 2014, No. 2, pp. 188–217.

bile in her seat, passive. To be a spectator is to be separated from both the capacity to know and the power to act."[26]

Hence, the paradox of the spectator is based on a presupposition of an insuperable inferiority of a spectator *vis-à-vis* an actor, of subordination of (political) auditorium to (political) stage. A spectator is always secondary, less powerful, and passive in comparison to a (political) drama that takes place on the stage. As I have already mentioned, I believe that this hierarchical topography and hierarchical network of presuppositions – or "distribution of the sensible" in Rancièrian terms – is shared by Green, some of his critics, and by democratic theorists in general. However, while for Green the spectator's passivity leads to a rather defensive posture and affirmation of plebiscitarianism, many democratic theorists attempt to overcome the paradox by turning the spectator into an actor, by tearing down the metaphorical "wall" separating auditorium and stage, or at least by showing that the wall is more permeable than we usually think.

Even though this latter approach is commendable, I believe that by acknowledging it we miss an important aspect of democratic experience that Green highlights, i.e. that of "citizens-being-ruled" that is connected to spectatorship in modern democracies. In other words, taking into consideration that even the most active citizens turn into spectators just after casting their ballot or coming home from a deliberative assembly, democratic theorists should take spectatorship seriously — not only as an aberration to be cured by turning spectators into actors (participatory and/or deliberative democracy) or as an impoverished last vestige of ocular plebiscitarian democracy whose main virtue is that it is still better than nothing (Green). Hence, we desperately need a more pronounced theory of spectatorship and a more pronounced understanding of the role of spectatorship in democracy. To tackle this task, I will re-read some key aspects of Green's argument, focusing mainly on his treatment of representation and spectatorship and on the connection between vocal and ocular models of democracy.

Is there a non-representative democracy?

Green's vindication of plebiscitarianism and his call for an ocular model of democracy are underpinned by his criticism of the vocal model that comprises both direct and representative democracy. It should therefore be emphasized that the aim of Green's discussion of representation and repre-

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26 Rancière, J., *The Emancipated Spectator*. London, Verso 2011, p. 2.

sentative democracy is not the "uneasy alliance"[27] between representation and democracy but a refusal of the ideal of self-legislation in democratic theory that can be pronounced both via direct and representative democracy.[28] In other words, an ocular model of democracy can do not only without citizens directly participating in the lawmaking, it can also do without citizens being represented, because the task of citizens-spectators consists merely in surveying the actions of political elites. Hence, a crucial part of Green's argument consists in his claim that contemporary mass democracies are by their nature non-representative and that this makes ocular democracy the only democratic model suitable for contemporary societies. In this section I argue – against Green – that his claim that contemporary democracies are non-representative is unsubstantiated and works with a rather impoverished notion of representation. I also believe that acknowledging the representative nature of our democracies invites us to rethink the place of spectatorship inside the normative rubric of representation.

Unfortunately, Green does not provide an unambiguous definition of representative democracy to support his thesis that representative democracy is not only contradictory per se but also hopelessly unrealistic. However, his understandings of these two concepts could be reconstructed from several instances where he talks about representation and representative democracy. Green, for example, claims that "representation transmits the preferences of the electorate" and that representative democracy should be seen "as a regime in which government … carries out the aims, policies, and interests of the electorate through the central vehicle of periodic elections for leadership".[29] This suggests that Green's view of representation is similar to the traditional model that Jane Mansbridge calls "promissory representation". The promissory representation model presupposes that citizens' interests provide the main input for the democratic process and that elections are the crucial instrument that makes representatives responsive and accountable to their constituency.[30] However, Green claims that this model is unrealistic for two reasons: firstly, because citizens do not possess any coherent or stable interest and, secondly, because electoral process is curbed and unable to provide responsive government. While Green's discussion of electoral

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27 Pitkin, H. F., Representation and Democracy: Uneasy Alliance. *Scandinavian Political Studies*, 27, 2004, No. 3, pp. 335–342.

28 Green, J. E., *The Eyes of the People*, op. cit., p. 19.

29 Ibid., p. 44 and 18.

30 "Promissory representation … comes closer than any other model to an ideal in which the simple imprint of the voter's will is transmitted through institutions to an equal exertion of power on the final policy." Mansbridge, J., Rethinking Representation. *American Political Science Review,* 97, 2003, No. 4, p. 516.

process builds especially on Bernard Manin's notion of electoral aristocracy, in discussing citizens' ability to possess and articulate coherent interests that could become a basis for governmental decisions, Green builds on a body of empirical literature that emphasises citizens' "nonattitudes" and "ambivalence" on many policy issues.[31]

It may seem that acknowledging the fact that citizens do not have "underlying preferences that are stable and thus capable of representation" together with recognizing the impossibility of transmission of these fluid preferences via electoral mechanism makes representation and representative democracy inconceivable. However, this inference seems less plausible if we leave the terrain of promissory representation. In other words, the recognition of the impossibility and non-factualness of promissory representation does not necessarily mean that we should renounce the very possibility of (democratic) representation. Firstly, it has been acknowledged many times that citizens' preferences are not as fluid and unstable or nonexistent as Green believes and that the relatively low level of responsiveness of democratic governments is not caused by citizens' "nonattitudes" on many policy issues but rather by the fact that governments tend to be more responsive towards the preferences of economic elites and business interest groups than toward those of the average citizen and mass interest groups.[32] Secondly, by persisting on the promissory notion of representation, Green disregards some of the most important stimuli that the representative turn brings to democratic theory, mainly its emphasis on the constructivist aspect of representation and the role of judgement and/or opinion. As different proponents of the constructivist approach have shown, democratic representation should not be considered simply as a transmission of voters' pre-existing interests and will but rather as a dynamic process that constitutes both the represented and the representative. As Monica Brito-Vieira and David Runciman eloquently claimed: "Interests do not need to constitute an objective category, established prior to representation. Indeed, they hardly ever do. They are rather established within the process of representation itself."[33] It also seems that Green's notion of representation emphasises elections as its main venue and undervalues citizens' ability to influence decisionmaking in between elections. In Nadia Urbinati's parlance, while Green recognizes the diarchic nature of modern representative democracy

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31 Green, J. E., *The Eyes of the People*, op. cit., pp. 45–47.
32 See e.g. Manza, J. – Cook, F. L., A Democratic Polity? Three Views of Policy Responsiveness to Public Opinion in the United States. *American Politics Research*, 30, 2002, No. 2, pp. 630–667; Gilens, M. – Page, B. I., Testing Theories of American Politics: Elites, Interest Groups, and Average Citizens. *Perspectives on Politics*, 12, 2014, No. 3, pp. 564–581.
33 Brito-Vieira, M. – Runciman, D., *Representation*. Cambridge, UK, Polity 2008, p. 101.

that consists in the fact that "will" (decisions taken in representative institutions of the modern state whose origin should be found in popular vote) and "opinion" (a citizen's exercise of judgement that influences decision-makers also in between elections) "are the two powers of the democratic sovereign, and that they are different and should remain distinct, although in need of constant communication",[34] he also reduces opinion only to its aesthetic function and therefore debilitates its potential to influence the decision-making process.[35] To sum up the previous argument, it seems to me that Green's claim that contemporary democracies are non-representative is unsubstantiated because it is based on a very problematic notion of representation and representative democracy. This way of rethinking the meaning and role of representation will allow us to place spectatorship inside the rubric of representative democracy, which will be the task of the next section.

Towards a Theory of Democratic Spectatorship

The refusal of Green's argument about the non-representative nature of contemporary democracies accentuates the need to understand the relation between democratic spectatorship and representative democracy, the need to include democratic spectatorship as a part and parcel of citizens' ordinary experience in representative democracy. However, as we have seen, democratic theorists are rather suspicious of spectatorship because of its alleged passivity, and Green's subordination of spectatorship under the rubric of plebiscitarianism is destined to strengthen their concerns. Therefore, in this section, I intend both to "deconstruct" the passive-spectator/active-actor dichotomy and to outline some of the components of democratic spectatorship. What I offer are preliminary notes on the subject matter of democratic spectatorship and not a full-fledged theory of democratic spectatorship, one that – as I believe – still awaits its formulation.

Let me start with the question of spectator's passivity. To tackle the task, I will begin with a short quotation from Hannah Arendt's *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*:

"We … are inclined to think that in order to judge a spectacle you must first have the spectacle – that the spectator is secondary to the actor; we

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34 Urbinati, N., *Democracy Disfigured*, op. cit., p. 22.
35 According to Urbinati, "opinion" has three different functions – cognitive, political and aesthetical. Plebiscitarianism reduces opinion to its aesthetic function, i.e. it transforms "the role of opinion in an aesthetic spectacle performed by leaders to which citizens passively attend". See ibid., p. 80.

tend to forget that no one in his right mind would ever put on a spectacle without being sure of having spectators to watch it."[36]

We usually think that the spectator is secondary to the drama or spectacle which takes place on the stage. In sum, we usually cling to the paradox of the spectator. However, Arendt invites us to reconsider this element, because no one "would ever put on a spectacle without being sure of having spectators." If so, is it still possible to consider spectators and spectatorship as subordinated or secondary to a (political) spectacle? Or, in other words, should we not think of a spectator, in some sense, prior to a spectacle? And if not its sole originator, then should we not think of her, at least, as the co-originator of the spectacle performed? Once we accept this position, it becomes clear that the meaning, course and fortune of that very performance depend – at least partially – on its spectators. This necessary "participation" of spectators on what is being seen has been emphasized by many different disciplines including art and theatre theory, visual culture studies and neuroscience, to name just a few.[37] For example, prominent art critic John Berger states in his probably most famous work, *Ways of Seeing*:

"(S)eeing … comes before words, and can never be quite covered by them… We only see what we look at. To look is an act of choice. As a result of this act, what we see is brought within our reach… We never look at just one thing; we are always looking at the relation between things and ourselves. Our vision is continually active, continually moving, continually holding things in a circle around itself, constituting what is present to us as we are."[38]

In other words, sight and thus also spectatorship are far from being passive. A spectator is always active: by using sight she forms the world around her and her place in it, she selects, interprets, and compares what she sees. She also links what she sees to what she has seen before etc. This form of spectatorship is different both from Green's passive spectators, waiting in the darkness of an auditorium for a politician's slip, and from attempts to transform spectators into actors. In other words, what we get is spectatorship as an activity of its own.

Taking this into consideration, we can overcome the passive-spectator/active-actor dichotomy that is underpinned by Green's understanding of sight and hearing as "the passive organs of sense".[39] To claim that seeing

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36 Arendt, H., *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press 1982, pp. 61–62.

37 Mirzoeff, N., *How to See the World*. London, Pelican 2014; Bishop, C., *Artificial Hells: Participatory art and the Politics of Spectatorship*. New York, Verso 2012; Berger, J., *Ways of Seeing*. London, Penguin 2008.

38 Berger, J., *Ways of Seeing*, op. cit., pp. 8–9.

39 Green, J. E., *The Eyes of the People*, op. cit., p. 40.

and spectating are activities of their own and that they are also a necessary component of the very spectacle performed allows us to "deconstruct" the passivity/activity dichotomy by showing that what Green sees as passive is – at least – contaminated with an activity. In other words, instead of thinking in terms of insuperable dichotomy, we shall see political spectatorship and participation as two different forms of political activity. It also seems to me that a confirmation of spectatorship as a form of activity can surprisingly (or paradoxically) be found in Green's own writings, where Green – while persistently declaring the passivity of the spectator – acknowledges the necessary activism of spectating because his ocular model – even though he never makes this distinction – presupposes two forms of spectators: *passive* spectators waiting in the darkness of an auditorium and *active* spectators[40] (journalists, hecklers, late night show hosts etc.) who by their conduct turn pseudo-events into candid ones and thus make these events worthy of being watched.

I believe that what prevents Green from seeing spectatorship as a specific form of activity and from developing a more pronounced theory of democratic spectatorship is the fact that his notion of synopticist spectatorship[41] is based on Foucault's and Bentham's account of panopticism.[42] I suggest that the limits of Foucault's and Bentham's approach for democratic theory consist mainly in the fact that they both pay attention to the workings of disciplinary gaze on those who are being watched and they pay almost no attention to those who are watching. This, I believe, makes Bentham's and Foucault's understanding of spectatorship inapt for democratic theory.[43]

Hence, I believe that proper attention to democratic spectatorship that would take us beyond the logic of panopticism is needed. Therefore, in

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40 In Green's parlance, these active spectators can only be spectators because they are not citizen-governors, because they do not make political decisions.

41 The main difference between synopticism and panopticism concerns the numbers of those who are watching and those who are being watched. While panopticism means that few watches many, the synopticism of modern media enables "*the many to see and contemplate the few*". This difference, however, is not supposed to change the nature of the gaze as a peculiar form of disciplinary power. Hence, synopticism and panopticism should not be seen as opposites but rather as two complementary forms of disciplinary mechanism. See Mathiesen, T., The Viewer Society: Michel Foucault's "Panopticon" Revisited. *Theoretical Criminology*, 1, 1997, No. 2, p. 219 (italics by Mathiesen).

42 See Bentham, J., *The Panopticon Writings*. London, Verso 2010; Foucault, M., *Discipline and Punish*, op. cit.

43 It seems that Bentham's panopticon would function better if there were no guards, no watchmen, because their presence always contains the risk of being acknowledged by inmates, and so, it would become possible for them to also recognize moments when guards are not present and inmates are not being watched.

the following, I will suggest what I believe should be some of the features of democratic spectatorship. I also believe that to overcome the paradigm of panopticism, we need to look more closely at the activity of spectating and the nature of political spectacle.[44] As should be clear by now, Green builds on a long tradition of political thought: that because politics is a public activity that takes place before someone's eyes defines political space as an optical one, as a space of visibility, appearance, spectacle, and therefore performance.[45] Hence, some form of theatricality is a necessary dimension of politics and political activity. However, what is the nature of theatricality? Mitsuya Mori suggests that the structure of any theatrical performance ("Actor plays character for Audience") comprises two levels: (a) the physical level and (b) the fictional level. While the physical level (a) entails that a concrete person plays a concrete role, which means she makes certain moves, gestures, utters certain words, and she does so in front of other people (spectators), the fictional level (b) entails an actor who represents a character and does so in front of an audience. This level is fictional because a character is constructed by the actor's acting but it exists only thanks to the audience's imagination. (An actor representing Hamlet is not the real Hamlet, he can be a Hamlet only thanks to the imagination of his spectators.) Hence, politicians should also be seen as playing their roles (they are concrete persons uttering speeches, doing certain moves), but they are also acting. It means they become characters politically acting in front of the many. (When politically acting, i.e. acting in front of the public, a politician does not stand merely for her own person, she always stands for something else, she is always a character; i.e. she is not speaking only as a particular person but she is speaking as a character: as a prime minister, leader of opposition, presidential candidate, protester etc.) According to Mori, then, "theatricality emerges when the (a) breaks into, and yet, does not destroy, the (b), that is, the (a) and the (b) are combined in the stylized performance, which actually stands on the edge of fictionality".[46] The existence of the fictional level of spectacle is possible only because it is represented by the physical level, but this representation is never perfect: the physical and the fictional never merge, the physical is never absorbed by the fictional and vice versa,

44 My task is not to criticise Foucault's rendering of the disciplinary power of gaze and panopticism. I am rather concerned with the limits of the panopticist paradigm for democratic theory.

45 Green's main reference here is the work of Hannah Arendt, but it should be emphasized that the notion of political space as an optical space dates at least to Machiavelli's teaching of "double perspective". Green acknowledges the influence of both of these thinkers on his work.

46 Mori, M., The Structure of Theater: A Japanese View of Theatricality. *SubStance*, 31, 2002, No. 2, p. 89. See also Fitzgerald, S., *Spectators in the Field of Politics*, op. cit., pp. 76–80.

the physical always announces itself in the fictional and dislocates it. In other words, the performance is always destined to fail.[47]

This impossibility of merging of the fictional and the physical part of spectacle allows us to specify both the nature of democratic spectatorship and its relation towards representative democracy. As far as democratic spectatorship is concerned, (citizens-) spectators are required to acknowledge both levels, including the impossibility of their merging, and to understand this failure of representation as a necessary precondition of the political spectacle. In other words, citizens-spectators should exhibit "willing suspension of disbelief",[48] citizens-spectators are required to approach a spectacle and actors with generosity that has its origin in citizens/spectators' confidence that the performance will succeed. However, Green's notion of political spectatorship seems to be the antithesis of this approach. Green believes that the purpose of political spectatorship is to make sure that an intrusion of the physical into the fictional destroys the fictional. Proper spectatorship, as Green believes, is meant to disclose the fictional as mere dissimulation and so turn a pseudo-event into a candid event. This disclosing power of spectatorship can be demonstrated on Green's favourite example of ocular democratic practise, Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*: Coriolanus wooing support to be elected as consul is literally baited by tribunes and plebeians to reveal his secret hatred towards the plebs. While democracy needs some form of "intelligent distrust"[49] and suspicion towards members of the political class, democracy reduced to quasi-nondemocratic practices of distrust is impossible. Sandey Fitzgerald is undoubtedly right when she points out that Green's approach towards the (political) actor is "sadistic" and can bring only embarrassment and humiliation.[50] In other words, instead of democratic spectatorship, Green offers a theory of popular sadistic voyeurism. This confusion of democratic spectatorship and voyeurism is – as I believe – premised upon Green's persuasion of a non-representative character of contemporary democracies. Since citizens, as Green claims, cannot – because of their "non-attitudes" and "ambivalence" on policy issues – have any stable interest that could be represented, the only reason for watching the political spectacle that remains

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47 This also means that we can refute Green's dichotomy of pseudo-/candid events, because every political event is simultaneously both candid and pseudo-event. From this point of view, it becomes more important to keep certain dialectics between these two sides of the political event than to disclose it as a pseudo-event.

48 Fitzgerald, S., Is There a Role for Spectators in Democratic Politics?, op. cit., p. 308.

49 Hook, S., Democracy as a Way of Life. *The Southern Review*, 1938, No. 4, p. 51.

50 Fitzgerald, S., Is There a Role for Spectators in Democratic Politics?, op. cit., p. 309; see also Dobson, A., *Listening for Democracy*, op. cit., p. 27.

is – as Greens makes clear– malignity, the malicious joy of someone else's failure.[51]

This brings us back to the question of the relation between spectatorship and representative democracy. Perhaps surprisingly, many important aspects of theatricality and democratic spectatorship conform to democratic representation. As I have already mentioned, democratic spectatorship presupposes a dialectic relationship between the physical and the fictional aspects of performance, i.e. that the physical always breaks into the fictional without destroying it, and it is this dialectic that allows us to realize that an actor "represents" her character without being consubstantial with it. In the case of democratic political spectacle, a political actor is always a political character, which means that she "represents" and holds power, however, this representation is always undermined; a political actor is never consubstantial with the political power she represents. In Claude Lefort's parlance: in democracy, political actors are "mere mortals, who hold political authority" only temporarily; they are always prevented from "incorporating [power] into themselves", so that "(t)he locus of power becomes *an empty place*".[52] This coincidence between spectatorship and representation is premised upon a distance between spectator and actor, one that is the ontological condition of both representation and spectatorship: seeing is, as Jean-Luc Nancy claims, a "deferred touch"[53] and identity of the representative with the represented makes representation unthinkable.[54] However, this distance, while insuperable, makes spectatorship and representation both possible and impossible. When the distance is too large, we can doubt both whether the representative can *sympathize* with her constituencies and therefore act "in the interest of the represented, in a manner responsive to them"[55] and whether the represented can exhibit "willing suspension of disbelief", i.e. whether spectators can *sympathize* with the representative as a necessary precondition of any performance. And, on the contrary, when the distance is too small, the spectator can only uncritically *empathize* with the character, the represented can only uncritically endorse the representative. I believe that while the malady of populism could be described as

51 In his later work, Green goes as far as to defend a kind of Machiavellianism for the people based on a "principled vulgarity" of the plebs. See Green, J., *The Shadow of Unfairness*, op. cit., pp. 101–129.

52 Lefort, C., *Democracy and Political Theory*. Cambridge, Polity Press 1988, p. 17 (italics by Lefort).

53 Nancy, J.-L., *Noli Me Tangere: On the Raising of the Body*. New York, Fordham University Press 2008, p. 49.

54 While direct democracy presupposes identity of governors and the governed, representative democracy is based on insuperability of the distance between them.

55 Pitkin, H., *The Concept of Representation*. Berkeley, University of California Press 1972, p. 209.

the latter disfiguration of distance, Green's ocular plebiscitarianism is an example of the former.

Finally, we can sum up some features of democratic spectatorship: firstly, democratic spectatorship is far from being passive, and acknowledging this fact invites us to think of spectatorship not in terms of the passive/active dichotomy but in terms of different forms of democratic activities and practices. Secondly, democratic spectatorship is different from quasi-Foucauldian panopticism, and therefore, it cannot be reduced to a disciplinary gaze that inspects, observes and achieves surveillance. Thirdly, on the contrary, democratic spectatorship demands that spectators and actors share common interest in the spectacle, which means that spectators must exhibit some confidence in the fictional aspect of the performance. And finally, spectatorship demands proper distance between spectators and actors that allows interplay between trust and distrust and therefore approximates democratic spectatorship and representation.

Spectatorship and aspect change

After this brief delimitation of democratic spectatorship, let me finally turn to the question of the place of spectatorship in democratic theory and mainly to the question of the incommensurability of ocular and vocal aspects of democratic experience that as I believe is shared by democratic theoreticians in general. I will again use Green's approach as a convenient starting point. As I have already mentioned, Green's discussion of spectatorship is underpinned by his distinction between the vocal and ocular models of democracy. However, the distinction between these two models in Green's thought also corresponds to the active/passive opposition that is contained in the paradox of the spectator. The vocal model sees citizens as active participants in political decisionmaking, while the ocular model attributes to citizens the passive role of spectators "gazing" at the drama performed by political elites. Hence, from this point of view, the "deconstructive" reading of the dichotomy of passive spectator/active actor suggested in the previous section must necessarily reformulate the relation between the vocal and the ocular models.

However, as I have already suggested, Green – as I believe - unintentionally acknowledges the activism of spectatorship when his model presupposes the existence of active spectators who turn pseudo-events into candid events. So, let me follow Green's argument more closely. On one hand, he suggests that the ocular and the vocal model are somewhat contradictory and that the ocular model should supplant, substitute or at least be privileged over the outdated and utopian vocal model. On the other hand, Green

emphasises on several occasions that these two models do not have to be always contradictory and that they may sometimes even overlap. So, it seems that the relation between them is far from clear. To confuse us even more, Green claims that both models have their origins in some *extravocal* and *extraocular* sources such as elections. Considering the ocular model, it is in fact the fear of losing an election, claims Green, what compels leaders to appear on the public stage and expose themselves to observation and surveillance. And as far as the vocal model is concerned, Green claims that it is not the intrinsic power of speaking but the *silent* electoral institutions and coercive force of the state that enforce popular will. So, Green claims that "(t)he choice between ocular and vocal methods of popular empowerment … is less a debate about the origins of popular power than a question about how the power should be applied".[56]

In his response to critics, who accused him of inconsistency on this point, Green explains that the difference between both models cannot be found at the level of the origin of popular power, but instead in the field of its manifestations. In fact, the distinction between the ocular and the vocal model seems to be rather a matter of two different perspectives on the same subject than one of existence of two different or separate entities. To support this interpretation, Green gives several examples of how democratic practices are read differently from an ocular and a vocal point of view:

"(A)n 'ocular democrat' … would support having leaders … compelled to provide public testimony about their conduct … – a practice which might seem unhelpful (because retrospective, non-legislative, and disruptive) from the perspective of the vocal model, but deeply satisfying (because providing an institutional source of candour) when considered in ocular terms."[57]

It should be clear by now that with Green's analysis we have moved onto a terrain that somehow resembles Wittgenstein's analysis of aspect perception and aspect change. As is well known, Wittgenstein's exposition of aspect perception in *Philosophical Investigations* refers to Jastrow's duck-rabbit optical illusion. The essence of this illusion consists in the fact that the picture has two different and incommensurable meanings or aspects. We can read the duck-rabbit either as a duck or as a rabbit. It is impossible to see both animals simultaneously.

An important feature of Wittgenstein's treatment of aspect perception is the element of "aspect dawning" when we realize that the picture we have seen so far under one aspect, say as a duck, has another aspect to it, a rabbit. There are two important elements of aspect dawning that must be empha-

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56 Green, J. E., *The Eyes of the People*, op. cit., p. 12.
57 Green in Avramenko, R. – Schwartzberg, M., Symposium, op. cit., p. 22–23.

sized. First, the dawning of a new aspect does not presuppose any change in the picture, with no new information or parts added to the drawing. Aspect change is based on "drawing new connections" between parts of the picture. "When the aspect changes parts of the picture go together which before did not."[58] Hence, aspect dawning entails that a concrete democratic practice, say public testimony of political leaders, remains the same, yet we can see it and understand it in a new way, in our case either from a vocal or an ocular perspective.

Second and most important, when a new aspect has been noticed, it becomes impossible to reduce the drawing to the former or the new aspect. It becomes impossible to see only a duck or a rabbit. Even though we can see only one aspect at a time, we know about the presence of the second aspect. Once we understand a concrete democratic practice from both the vocal and the ocular perspective, it becomes impossible to reduce only to one of those perspectives. According to Wittgenstein, in this paradoxical situation of being faced with incommensurable aspects that we must nevertheless hold all, "new types of language, new language games come to existence".[59] In other words, this situation calls for new democratic practices. As should be clear by now, these new democratic language games or political grammars[60] should allow us to offer "challenge to contemporary equation of participation and democracy",[61] yet without renouncing either the former or the latter.

In lieu of a conclusion

Let me now briefly summarize my argument. As has been emphasized many times, contemporary societies have been witnessing many new challenges to their democracies. Innovative mass media technologies, the crisis of traditional forms of representation, the steady decline in party membership and the advent of an "audience" or "leadership" democracy are just several examples of this profound change. There are also new challenges to our traditional understanding of democracy that have given rise to many innovations in democratic theory. One of these rehabilitated innovations is concerned with the role of citizens as spectators, one that has been usually overlooked.

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58 Wittgenstein, L. *Philosophical investigations.* 3rd ed. Transl. G. E. M. Anscombe. Oxford, Blackwell 1984, p. 208e.

59 Ibid., § 23.

60 I use the term political grammar in the sense used by Aletta J. Norval, as a kind of horizon that provides limits to what is "sayable" and "doable". See Norval, A. J., *Aversive Democracy: Inheritance and Originality in the Democratic Tradition.* New York, Cambridge University Press 2007.

61 Bishop, C., *Artificial Hells*, op. cit., p. 40.

Green's book, *The Eyes of the People,* is among the most important exceptions to this trend.

However, I have claimed that Green's attempt to build democratic theory and practice around spectatorship has several important setbacks that make his approach seem less attractive; that the reason of this unattractiveness can be found in Green's persistence on the paradox of the spectator that presupposes a hierarchical division between political actors and spectators based on the activity/passivity dichotomy; that persistence of this paradox in other areas of democratic theory has lead democratic theorists to conceive of spectatorship as something at least suspicious, something that we should overcome by turning citizen-spectators into political actors; and that this approach prevents us from understanding and appreciating spectatorship as a specific and important democratic experience.

I have suggested, instead, that a "deconstructive" reading of the dichotomy of passive spectator/active actor can distract democrats from fear of spectatorship and open new possibilities to enriching our understanding of democratic theory and practice. To fulfil this task, I reformulated Green's understanding of the relation between the vocal and the ocular model by using Wittgenstein's concepts of aspect change and aspect perception. I also believe that this Wittgensteinian turn has revealed a key danger of "aspect blindness" (i.e. inability or unwillingness to accept the ambiguity of democratic practices as a starting point of democratic thought) that has been haunting the attempts to enrich our democratic grammars.