OF SPECTACLE AND COLLECTIVE RESISTANCE: RETHINKING THE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN “SYMBOLIC” AND “DIRECT” ACTION

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Abstract: In the late 1960s, Guy Debord famously critiqued the “society of the spectacle”. Debord sought instead to overturn what he framed as the capitalist reign of images, through which he argued, “all that once was directly lived has become representation”. In the decades since, however, radical theorists have called into question the extent to which an authentic “reality” actually exists behind the images that circulate and inspire. This paper examines how this debate between the desire to promote, occasionally divisive, “directly lived” engagements, and the impulse to draw on the powers of representation to unify and build movements, both pervaded and was transformed during the 2012 Quebec student strike. Drawing on analysis of both written and performed interventions, I argue that this debate threatens to mask a more pervasive tension between individualized and collectivist discourses and modes of organizing. The surfacing of this latter tension as primary has nevertheless been a defining characteristic of the 2012 student movement, and one that must now be discursively disentangled from the former dichotomy between the “direct” and “symbolic”.

Keywords: student strike, activist art, protest tactics, politics of representation, direct action

Résumé: À la fin des années 1960, Guy Debord a critiqué la « société du spectacle ». Il cherchait à renverser ce qu’il envisageait comme le règne capitaliste des images, règne à travers lequel, croyait-il, « toute réalité est devenue représentation ». Dans les décennies qui ont suivi, cependant, des théoriciens radicaux ont remis en question l’ampleur et l’existence même de cette réalité, désormais dissimulée derrière les images et les représentations qui la font circuler et qui l’inspirent. Cet article montre comment ce débat entre le désir de promouvoir des actions « directement vécues » (qui sèment parfois la discorde) et la volonté de se baser sur les pouvoirs de la représentation afin d’unifier et d’élaborer des mouvements a été non seulement omniprésent durant la grève étudiante de 2012 au Québec : il a aussi été transformé par cet événement. En me basant sur l’analyse d’articles écrits et de performances, je montre que ce débat menace de dissimuler une tension qui se fait davantage sentir entre les discours ainsi que les modes d’organisation individuels et collectifs. L’apparition de cette dernière forme de tension a néanmoins été une caractéristique définitoire essentielle de la grève étudiante de 2012. Cette forme de tension doit maintenant être démêlée, d’un point de vue discursif, de l’ancienne dichotomie entre le « direct » et le « symbolique ».

Mots-clés: Grève étudiante, art engagé, tactiques militantes, politiques de la représentations, action directe

In the late 1960s, during the build-up to the famous 1968 general strike in France, situationist Guy Debord famously critiqued the “society of the spectacle” with the argument that “all that once was directly lived has become representation” (Debord, 1994: 12). Debord’s critique focused on the manner in which images in the late twentieth century – whether circulated by the entertainment industry or the mass media – had become objects of contemplation. He argued that such images were drawn upon to unify an alienated populace, who nevertheless remained passive consumers of the images fed to them. Debord and the Situationists thus search for authenticity in struggles to *overturn* the capitalist logic of the reign of images through a range of tactics, including “détournements” that consisted of creative acts of subverting corporate images, and various techniques for encouraging active participation of those affected living in capitalist society. However, as Sadie Plant convincingly argued in *The Most Radical Gesture*, the rise of post-structural understandings of society that gained steam in the wake of the May 68, such as those of Lyotard, Baudrillard, and Deleuze and Guattari, have called into question the extent to which an authentic “reality” actually exists behind the commodified images that circulate and inspire. Indeed, over the course of the past four decades, the revolutionary “détournements” and the attempts to call people into being creative agents in their everyday lives have since been commodified, sold and turned into sources of revenue and free labour for social media companies and service providers selling the possibility of promoting “self-expression” through the possibility of manipulating one’s image.

This paper examines how the tensions between the desire to promote “directly lived” engagement, rather than look to the powers of representation to unify and build, have pervaded activist discourses, practices and debates on the ground. In the pages that follow, I will show how these tensions played out in the discursive and strategic conflicts between activists and supporters during the 2012 Quebec student strike and corresponding popular movement. I will then show how the apparent tension, as explained by Graeber, between “symbolic” (as the harbinger of “representational logic”) and “direct” action (as the indicator of authentic engagement in democratic processes) masks a more pervasive tension between a logic of individualism and that of collective decision-making. Integrating aspects of Debord’s analysis of the importance of understanding social relations as mediated by images under capitalism, and drawing on Jacques Rancière’s analysis of the two kinds of pedagogy at work in critical art, “representational mediation” and “ethical immediacy” (Rancière, 2012: 137), I argue that both the individualized as well as the collectivist position draw equally on “symbolic” and “direct” action, though in very different ways, thereby encouraging different kinds of social subjectivity.

In the spring, summer and early autumn of 2012 in Quebec, “symbolic action” and “direct action” were routinely pitted against each other in the rhetoric that circulated. In an April edition of *Ultimatum: Newspaper of the Association for Solidarity amongst Student Unions (ASSÉ)*, an anonymously authored piece entitled “No Victories with Parades” concludes: “[T]hose who reap the benefits of austerity will not be defeated by spectacle” (*Ultimatum*, 2012: 1). Seemingly coming from the other end of the tactical spectrum the following month, Catherine Lalonde, editorialist for *Le Devoir*, wrote an article on the extension of the struggle through artistic means as a way of engaging broader support and participation in the movement, “Extension du domaine de la lutte: le panda, la batucada, la plume et l’imagination comme outils de contestation” (Lalonde, 2012). Lalonde points to the many creative faces of the movement, from mascots like AnarchoPanda to the many poetic arti-

culations and actions that various student groups and artists in solidarity launched. It is tempting to discount the differences in argumentation as tactical: *Ultimatum* addressed a primarily student readership of those actively shaping and participating in events and as such may be inciting those already engaged in the strike to escalate tactics. While no doubt also read by many of the students on strike, *Le Devoir* addressed a broader readership of Quebec residents, many of whom may have limited direct exposure to the concerns of striking students as well as their tactics.

The argument that there can be “no victory with parades” suggests that in order to force actual change, one needs “direct action”. The argument for creative engagement is that it increases avenues for participation, such that a movement is able to integrate more voices. It is worth mentioning that at no point did either article criticize the tactics of others ; both indeed leave room for the principle of diversity of tactics, although Lalonde does make the point that if one does not take creative non-violent protest seriously, one potentially invites more aggressive forms, presumably because activists will have no choice but to turn to more militant tactics. Nevertheless, the choice of tactics that are valorized by the two authors does appear to point to broader differences in political strategy. As explained by David Graeber in *Direct Action: an Ethnography*, those who support “symbolic action” argue that one must be mindful of not offering an easily rejected image of the movement in the media that would turn off would-be supporters (Graeber, 2009). Rather than blocking bridges and breaking bank windows, according to the logic of symbolic action, activists ought to present a creative and welcoming face to draw support, that they may be able to create positive images of the movement to those who may otherwise be hostile. Lalonde’s valorization of “artistic means” rehearses this position. By contrast, as David Graeber amply documents, many direct action advocates reject the argument as the project of “imagists” pandering to a non-existent “public opinion” in ways that will never be able to actually challenge the status quo, arguing that only by interrupting the flow of capital exchange will activists be able to exert pressure on the present system (Graeber, 2009: 203-11). This latter position is suggested by the very title of the *Ultimatum* piece: “No Victory with Parades” (*Ultimatum*, 2012).

The question is, *why* won’t “those who reap the benefits of austerity” be “defeated by spectacle”? More to the point, why are protest “parades” reduced by the writers to “spectacle”? According to Debord, where images mediate direct experience, alienation reins: images produced take precedence over the lived relations that produce them. Debord writes: “[T]he spectacle is not a collection of images: rather it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images” (Debord, 1994: 12). According to this theory, image production, symbolic production, and other forms of creative production are produced by, and participate in, the creation of actual social and material processes.

One critique against symbolic action’s creation of mediating images is that, rather than engaging directly with others to alter the conditions one wishes to change, one is effectively merely “buying into” an image. In wearing red, one revels in the image of being a revolutionary without in fact needing to affect a transformation in the actual world. This critique reduces all symbolic action to spectacle. The trouble with this position is that while some actions may self-consciously present or manipulate images, all tactics are vulnerable to being flattened as representations. The images of blockades, of clashes on the picket lines amongst students and between students and police

flooded the media rather more insistently than the images of creative student collectives making puppets, hanging squares on trees or creating giant red square cube installation performances in the metro. In the society of the spectacle, violence makes for the greatest spectacle – and will be re-edited and reconstructed depending on the desired effect to be produced in the reader or viewer – typically by maximizing or de-contextualizing the appearance of protestor violence and minimizing the appearance of police brutality. I argue that violence may even be “artfully” deployed with the aim of making a political point. Spectacle has less to do with action itself and more with the social relations that shape the ways in which images of the action are produced and disseminated.

In David Graeber’s definition of direct action, what direct actions tend to share are the embodied efforts by those engaged to directly take matters into their own hands, rather than symbolically pressuring elected representatives and authority figures to serve as intermediaries to advocate for the change desired (Graeber, 2009: 201-211). One very clear example of the difference between symbolic and direct action in the context of the student strike would seem to be the case of hard versus soft pickets. Hard picket lines meaning that people would be physically unable to enter the classroom or teach a viable class, whereas soft pickets, or informational pickets, act as a kind of demonstration in front of a classroom wherein the picketers appeal to the conscience of individuals not to cross the line. Tactically, soft picket lines were selected because students were threatened with disciplinary measures or legal sanctions if hard picketing was selected – that is if they forcibly prevented others from entering the space by interrupting passage with their bodies. However, while soft picket lines succeeded in communicating the discontent of many students, they required their targets to respect the line (even if begrudgingly), and thus in cases where targets refused to respect or recognize the line, they frequently did not work to stop classes from continuing. While the example of the two sorts of pickets would seem to present a very clear illustration of the distinction between symbolic and direct action, the force of picket lines are better understood when they are considered in terms of the logics of individualized versus collectivized choice; that is to say as tactics for encouraging particular, divergent social subjectivities.

The negotiation of soft versus hard pickets became a bodily negotiation with existing codes of conduct in both their formal and informal senses. The picket line could be seen as the first and clearest performative rejection of the dominant neoliberal culture. The picket line stages an encounter with another possible logic – a logic of collective action that plays out very differently depending on how soft or hard a line is created. In the case of soft picketing, it becomes the soft encounter of a moral appeal, and as a result, the choice to cross or not to cross becomes individualized; whereas to the extent that a hardline is defended, even those who make the decision to cross will find themselves blocked, or their courses otherwise interrupted and unable to proceed as usual. Whereas soft pickets leave decisions to individuals, seeking to win over one person at a time, hard pickets actualize the vote of a collective decision-making body. In both cases, there is an actual attempt to interrupt business as usual. And in both cases, the cultural memory of what it means to go on strike, as well as the historical importance of the right to collective action, are implicitly invoked by the theatre of operations that played out through the various ways classes were stopped.

Drawing on and reinforcing the symbolism of a strike, picket lines function in part by building cultural memories concerning promises of accessible education, such as those made during Quebec's Quiet Revolution and defended during the eight student strikes that preceded the 2012 student strike. With the spring of 2012 in our recent memory, the possibility of future successful mass mobilization became more of a reality, thereby fostering the development of active social networks. The main difference between soft and hard pickets was ultimately, I would like to suggest, how agency was distributed: who gets to make choices about how education will continue, and will these choices be made by individuals deciding individually to attend at a particular cost set, or by collectives pooling their collective decision-making power and acting in solidarity?

We can now begin to see how many of the interventions deploying cultural and political symbols palpably conflated the two modes of pedagogy that Rancière has pointed out as typical of "critical art." Both hard and soft picket lines contain an element of representational mediation as well as ethical immediacy, but how the representation mediated action in the case of the Québec student strikes and what ethics were instantiated varied, thereby encouraging different ways of enacting individual and collective choices. Many of the actions that took over the streets extended variations on the logic of individual versus collective decision-making. There are, of course, countless examples of students putting their educational pursuits to work beyond the classroom for the collective future access to education; acts which in themselves carry a direct logic of collective production while carrying a symbolic weight.

An example is the action known as the "ligne rouge" or the "red line." Started by theatre students at UQAM, with other students rapidly joining in, every morning at 8:30, students dressed in red would spread out along the southbound subway station platform in Montreal's Jean-Talon Metro Station, boarding and disembarking at every station until they got to school. The symbolic and visible journey showed not only commitment, but actually provided a visibility and discussion point with those also making the trek to work at that time. Dance and theatre students from Concordia formed the "red line dancers" and "theatre struck groups" and performed such symbolic actions as slow motion Butoh walks down busy St. Catherine street, illustrating the catch phrase "don't slow down our education" (with a tuition hike). They also constructed giant puppets to animate and enchant protest marches and facilitated group imaging actions, wherein participants would meet in public squares and were each invited to come up with a gesture in the service of creating a vision of the world they would like to be actualizing through their resistance to austerity. Also, l'École de la Montagne Rouge developed posters, slogans and images for the movement amongst other initiatives. Archicontre, a group from the Université de Montréal, constructed giant red cubes and posed in public spaces, lying down, crushed beneath the weight of the red cube; crushed, that is, beneath the symbolic weight of debt. The main force of such creative symbolic acts lies in how they situate the issues in what is typically a space of transit between the private sphere of individual homes, and the places of work and of commerce. This space of transit between institutions is turned into a collective space for rethinking the relationships between those who live in the province, as mediated by the choices made about collective resources. On the one hand, artistic interventions find creative ways to symbolically represent the concerns: giant book worms protest, students are crushed under giant red square installations in a public space, students visibly take their trip to school

all “in the red”, etc. On the other hand, the very ways the creative act changes the manner in which people participate in public life becomes an end in itself.

In making the distinction between individualized political expression and collective acts, it is important not to erase the power of singular actors. The logic is not only a game of numbers, but rather has to do with how individual and collective relations are both represented and ethically instantiated. As Thain has convincingly argued, creative interventions like that of the mascot Anarchopanda illustrate the power of singular actors to evoke the collective (Thain, 2012: 2). As a symbol, Anarchopanda would seem to invoke a soft, loving, non-violent image of militant resistance to authority and commitment to collective self-organizing. Once the identity of the Panda was revealed as that of a Cegep philosophy professor, the symbolic change morphed to one of a professor fighting alongside students. However, the biographical details of the human Panda have been consistently downplayed, with the Panda referring to himself in the third person and repeatedly making a distinction between his personal life and symbolic power. The panda suit, however, had a very real effect of raising morale and softening police violence both literally (it hurts less if one is cushioned) as well as affectively by offering hugs within a militant setting.

Black Bloc tactics are frequently taken as militant and direct as opposed to festive and symbolic. However, it was precisely through the symbolic nature of their actions that the Black Square manifesto served as a defense to the accusations of violence that were levied against them: “We attack objects. This is a political, symbolic action”. The objects become symbols, and attacking them becomes a symbolic gesture, intended not to do violence to people, but to challenge the symbols of capital that mediate social relations. In keeping with the logic of Debord and according to the terms of the manifesto, the act becomes, in other words, an attack on the society of the spectacle; a society in which the symbols of wealth become ways of mediating and directing the lived experience of people. However, as suggested by the manifesto produced, it is an attack that functions primarily on a symbolic level to challenge the ethic of policing to protect capital accumulation and corporatized interests, with respect to financial or educational institutions.

Despite suspicion that the mass dissemination of images via mainstream media runs serious risk of distortion, most activists do not tend to eschew the use of either symbols or the power of merely symbolic acts, even when arguing that such symbolic acts alone are insufficient. As the group “No One Is Illegal” wrote in a statement of solidarity with student activists:

We agree that it’s not just through symbolic protests and actions – which are important to build solidarity and support – that the Charest government will capitulate. Rather, they will respond to the sustained and tangible disruption of the Quebec economy (“No One is Illegal,” 2012).

Here, symbolic action is not reduced to a spectacle, alienating would-be participants from the “real” experience of solidarity and direct democracy, but is rather in itself a part of actual solidarity building. The shortcomings of the theory of the spectacle as an alienating force do not, however, detract from the importance of Debord’s insistence on analyzing the social relations created by the image under capitalism. To analyze the actual dynamics at work in the production of an event, including its dissemination via various media and its analysis of how the event functions to create

a particular symbolic resonance, matters. For instance, the symbolic resonance of these monthly marches was in stark contrast to more seemingly chaotic, though ultimately more routine nightly marches that took place every evening for over a hundred consecutive nights. The resilience and ritualistic regularity of these marches itself became a symbol of determination. Whereas those participating in actions such as the “red line” found their power in predictability and regularity, the nightly protests, which began the following month, had, by contrast, a much broader base of participation. They followed a more chaotic, indeterminate trajectory, and were stopped by the police almost every night. In each case, the manner in which the events were designed and approached altered not only the symbolic resonance of the event, but also who could participate, how, and with what degree of creative agency. Those with small children, for instance, were unlikely to be able to march late at night. In a large march, individuals or a collective may be able to add their own flare, but would be unable to steer the direction or form of the overall event, particularly if organized in advance.

It is also worth noting here the distinct role of the media in the nightly marches. Unlike many of the other actions, the image stream generated from the nightly protests, notably by CUTV, a student television station, was not packaged. When things got tense, the camera crew and reporters were frequently the first to bear the brunt of police brutality. Here, those disseminating images were not positioned as outside observers representing the situation; the live streaming created an ethical immediacy whereby the spectator could, in theory and at any point, join the action, whether by heading out into the streets or by picking up the phone to attempt to intervene. This changes the nature of the public stage created and the manner in which theatrical and performative interventions were leveraged as ways of changing the affective tone of streets as a public space of civic engagement.

The divergent manners of involvement in producing political images, discourses and events have led theorists from Plato to Rancière to articulate the changing relevance of particular aesthetic forms to politics. The semi-scripted institution of the theatre, in which form and manner of live engagement cast certain people as spectators and others as actors; the choreographic mode, in which the entire community stages its unity, and the regime of text and image dissemination that began to reign in the 19th and 20th centuries are, in an era of social media, citizen journalism and live streaming, now intermingled in very particular ways, transforming again the social relationships created by “spectacular” production (Rancière, 2004: 13-15).

When, in May, in response to the Special Law, “the casseroles” began, the affect of the nightly marches was transformed. Every night at 8 o’clock, people would bang on pots and pans on their balconies and in the streets, bleeding into, and multiplying the nightly marches. The casseroles became a symbol of non-violent civil disobedience; one that had a carnivalesque quality in the Bakhtinean sense of reversing power relations and prioritizing the bodily interaction of those who celebrate, encouraging inclusivity, with children and adults and even the elderly often taking active roles. The image of the casseroles was that of poetic participatory solidarity. As the casserole protests spread, the image of the movement was softened to one of a community orchestra. Videos of the casseroles flooded social media. While these marches appeared largely symbolic, strictly speaking when they manifested in marches of over fifty people, they were direct actions in the sense of a direct take-over of public space over and against the rule of law.

Moreover, while the banging of pots and pans did sometimes quite literally draw out some of the more militant chants, masking them with a harmonious and rhythmic family activity, to the extent that the casseroles were in fact responding to state repression, what made such actions both possible and necessary were precisely the more militant actions that inspired the repression. Interruptions in dominant practices of value production (i.e. the continuation of particular forms of economic and service activity potentially to the detriment of popular collective decision making) found support here in the collective acts of symbolic production in which the community “sings and dances its own proper unity,” to borrow a phrase from Rancière (*pace Plato*) (Rancière, 2004: 14).

I am not arguing that there is no difference between what people call symbolic action and direct action, or that these terms are not useful shorthand. Clearly they are, to the extent that organizers understand them to be indicative of particular ways of re-distributing agency in situations. However, if we revisit the concerns that, in the society of the spectacle, all that was directly lived becomes representation, we are not led to a dichotomy between symbolic and direct in terms of general tactics. Nor are we led to clashes between ideologies (that of “capitalism” versus “collectivism”, for instance) that are then expressed, as Debord suggested, by actions. We know that many people who engaged in, for instance, the hard picketing of classes, also participated in mask making, public art interventions and casserole demonstrations. My proposition here is that in assessing the politics of tactics, it may be less a question of distinguishing between the symbolic and the direct, than distinguishing between the types of social subjectivity embodied and actualized through various forms of political actions and interventions. This means assessing how social relations, social codes, as well as divisions of space and time affecting the nature of participation and the distribution of collective and individual agency are made manifest. When we do this (and most organizers already are, in a very practical sense, doing this), we will be better able to assess how the ecology of tactics is functioning and how radical thought is actively being transformed through the embodied actions in which we participate.

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