

OCCUPY THIS: A DIALOGIC DÉRIVE

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Abstract

This dialogue is the text-based component of an evolving performative multi-media lecture. By re-reading Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle* [1], in relation to the global Occupy movement and the rise of social media, we ask: in what ways does the proliferation of digital imagery enable and limit this recent form of political activism? By subjectively responding to selective quotations from Debord's writing, we link the triumvirate of global capitalism, public space and digital technology, producing commentary on the displacement imposed by contemporary 'spectacular' technologies, the networked 'technical image' and the politics of public space.

Keywords: situationism, resistance, Occupy, Super 8, Žižek, digital media

This text takes up Vilém Flusser's call for a historically informed critical unpacking of what he calls the 'technical image' [2], and in doing so we accept Lev Manovich's insight that the 'avant-garde became materialized in a computer' [3]. We enlist avant-garde techniques of sampling, serial and repetitive strategies to execute a technological 'dérive' [4], a performed textual analysis, expressed through its gaps and silences, on the Occupy movement and its effects. We draw on the radical potential of Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle* to frame our journey through public, private, political, aesthetic and academic spaces, in order to make sense of the relationships between global capitalism, digital technologies and political resistance.

'6. In all its specific manifestations - news or propaganda, as advertising or the actual consumption of entertainment, the spectacle epitomizes the prevailing model of social life.' [5]

We've seen this piece of Occupy movement street theatre many times before; it has played worldwide with minor variations. The people occupy the streets, chanting slogans, singing songs, brandishing banners of protest: 'Stop the War', 'Ban the Bomb', 'Free Nelson Mandela', 'Give Peace A Chance', 'We are the 99 per cent!' The police, the na-

tional guard, or some other army of uniformed agents of a repressive state apparatus stand in opposition to the people — a grim, thin blue (or black, or brown) line of authority. Sometimes they wield truncheons, sometimes guns, sometimes they just stand stock still, fixing their adversaries with stern, cold stares.

The cameras are always on hand to record history, or make history. On the 17th of April 1965, crowds of young anti-war protesters march on Washington DC. A young white man with a shock of blonde hair places a flower into the barrel of a National Guardsmen's rifle; Click, Click, Click. A camera captures this symbolic moment for posterity. The guardsmen look like storm troopers with their shiny helmets, and they look every bit as young as the protesters. The image becomes iconic, and circulates throughout the world like a virulent virus. A few years later, the National Guard shoot Kent University Student, Alison Krause, dead; on the day before her death, Alison places a flower in the barrel of a gun.

1968 is a very good year for political street theatre. Paris in the month of May comes to a grinding halt; the wheels of capitalism stop turning. Students occupy university buildings, and around eleven million workers go on strike.

In August of the same year, Soviet tanks roll into the streets of Prague to ensure that summer doesn't follow spring. Once again the cameras click, and record the people of Prague bravely standing up to the evil empire. One image is especially arresting - a young man standing defiantly on top of a Soviet tank. A young Milan Kundera is part of the spectacle, and later reflects on Nietzsche's eternal return and something he calls the 'Grand March' in his best-selling novel, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. For Kundera "The Grand March is the splendid march on the road to brotherhood, equality, justice, happiness; it goes on and on, obstacles notwithstanding, for obstacles there must be if the march is to be the Grand March." [6] The Grand March is an image repertoire, a mise-en-scène, a vocabulary of protest that eternally recurs: Us against Them, Good against Evil, the People against the State.

1989, Tiananmen Square. Another click, another iconic image - a lone protester plays a dangerous game of chicken with a Red Army tank. He stands in front of the military machine, which is also a potent symbol of state power; the whole world is watching, again.

In 2003 millions of people in cities worldwide take to the streets, protesting against the imminent invasion of Iraq by George Bush's coalition of the willing. And so it goes, back and forth, appearing and disappearing from time to time and place to place: Petrograd, 1921; Soweto, 1976; Berlin, 1989; ... Sometimes regimes fall, and walls come tumbling down, but not today, not in Melbourne, Australia in the year 2011.

On this day, I'm part of the Grand March, along with a few thousand other members of the disenfranchised 99%. We gather around a man with a megaphone earnestly speaking to the crowd. He's old school — he exhorts the workers of the world unite. He recites a long list of battles between capital and labour currently being fought in different parts of the world, and concludes that the thin blue line encircling the crowd are part of the larger struggle against capitalism. They are workers, too, and they, he says, have more in common with the dispossessed than the crowd, who are mostly young, white, and apparently affluent. I notice a young girl with a bunch of single stem flowers, which she offers to the police in riot uniforms. Click. Click. Click.

'167. This society eliminates geographical distance only to reap distance internally in the form of spectacular separation.' [7]

I am in Belgrade for a conference. There is snow. I have just skyped my son who is back from Shanghai with his Chinese partner at my Melbourne home. The MYKI transport system has done them in. I have been pushing a bus out of the snow with my fellow passengers. They'll go to Sandringham beach, I to a dormitory. She is a doctor. He works for Disney, introducing children to an interactive form of pseudo English, an aspirational mix of the Mickey Mouse Club from my own youth and Sesame Street. He wears bright colours. He wants me to finish his Solitary Man video, so he can put it on Youtube. I do not have time anymore. I tell him to go and see his grandmother who has never been back to Europe, which is where I am now, since the '50s. But I could be anywhere, anytime. Click. Click. Click.

I saw Serbian filmmaker Ljubomir Šimunić's 8mm *Retrospective*. I write: "Šimunić tattoos Beograd's city life onto your eye with his mobile double 8mm camera, the soundtrack reminiscent of the transistor radio's newfound mobility,

driving '60s youth culture. These films' double- and triple-layered imagery of street lights, neon signs, B&W TV; the glimpsed everyday, write the kind of eye movement across the frame that the *dé-rive* elicited in chance walks and city taxi rides. These films document a new way of seeing borne from city life, in which reflections, the car's mobility and the double images offered by both the taxi and shop window are hard-wired into the senses. The layered speed of Šimunić's visual writing predicts the compacted grazing and sampling response to the tidal wave of imagery now colonising the everyday, both on the street and online".

I am presenting a paper on the Melbourne Super 8 film group: *Forgotten Oz Hysterics*. Its pages are like a chat room, a cacophony of contesting opinion. It was the group's strength, if you could call it a group. This is now History. By luck I have brought an old newsletter from May 1998 which has an old article of mine about Situationism, 'In Praise of the Everyday'. I re-read bits to myself; can I recycle any of it?

Maurice Blanchot noted: "Despite massive developments in the means of communication, the everyday escapes. That is its definition" [8]. I re-edit excerpts with a blue pen: "The everyday escapes from culture's Spectacularisation. It doesn't climb an electrified fence with sirens wailing on a rainy night. Though within the Spectacle itself it is where such a breakout is expressed. The spectacle eliminates the everyday every day but cannot exist without it, yet the everyday exists without the Spectacle everyday. The everyday is experienced as boredom and permeates itself with this shame. In this way the everyday takes form. Welcome it in. Welcome in the never-ending leak above our heads. Drip, drip, drip".

Of such conundrums Guy Debord voice-overs in one of his films "Of course we might make a film of it, but even if such a film succeeds in being as fundamentally incoherent and unsatisfying as the reality it deals with, it will never be more than a recreation — poor and false like this botched up travelling shot". [9]

Super 8 is ideally suited to recording the everyday; that is where it exists.

The harder it is to buy a Super 8 camera or stock or splices, the less interest the powers that *be* have in this medium. The more often you hear that Super 8 has been superseded, the more scratches appear on your original irreplaceable

film, the more broken sprockets rattle, rattle, rattle through the gate, then ... the more film becomes like the everyday itself: worn out, shunned, ignored, devalued and put in a dark corner somewhere, like a sick bird looking for a place to die, a complete waste of time. This is important at machine's end, at history's end. This is the time of the anti-manifesto. It is important beyond words, ideas, beyond life, beyond history: to waste time. Wasted time is becoming a scarcity. Wasted time functions to make you guilty every time you use it. It is a brave person indeed who is willing to admit to wasting time. I waste time every day, yet I am not very brave at all. Killing yourself is the greatest waste of time of all. That is what Debord did. How brave is that? Bang. (bang, bang)

'107. As a group the bureaucrats may be said to make all the decisions, but the cohesiveness of their class can only be ensured by the concentration of their terrorist power in one person. In this person reposes the only practical truth of the lie in power: the power to lay down an unchallengeable boundary that is ever subject to revision. Stalin thus had the power to decide without appeal exactly who was a bureaucrat, and hence an owner; his word alone distinguished "proletarians" in power from "traitors in the pay of the Mikado and Wall Street." [10]

The celebrated radical philosopher, Slavoj Žižek, addressed the Occupy Wall Street protesters in New York's Zuccotti Park in September 2011. He reprises one of his best-known anecdotes about living under the repressive yoke of dysfunctional communism: the regime sends a man to Siberia for some unspecified reason. He decides to communicate with a friend via mail, but knows the authorities will monitor his letters for traces of rebellion and dissent. He tells his friend that he will establish a code to circumvent this intrusive surveillance. If he writes in blue ink, it means the information contained in the letter is true. Red ink indicates that the letter contains falsities. The first letter arrives. It's written in blue ink. Everything is great in Siberia, it says. You can buy everything, the shops are full of food, but the only thing you can't get is red ink. Žižek explains that

the point of this story lies in the fact that today we lack a language to tell the truth about the world — we know there is something badly wrong, but we don't know how to express this truth. We don't have any red ink. So, where might we find language to express the current situation's truth?

The people in the New York crowd enthusiastically echo Žižek's story. The crowd play Echo to Žižek's Narcissus (or disciples to Žižek's Messiah). But who are these self-proclaimed members of the 99%? They look as though they're enjoying themselves in the midst of the carnival-like atmosphere that pervades the gathering. "Don't fall in love with yourselves" Žižek instructs the crowd, pointing out that the seductive qualities of the carnival can impede political action. What matters, he declares, is what happens after the protests, for revolt without revolution is pointless. Will the crowd find copious quantities of red ink, or will their anger dissipate when they get bored or tired?

In his recent book, *The Year of Dreaming Dangerously*, Žižek argues that the Occupy protests are not "proletarian protests, but protests against the threat of being reduced to a proletarian status". [11] Nevertheless, he reads the demonstrations as a significant political event, because unlike various strains of identity politics based on gender, race and sexual orientation, they unambiguously identify capitalism as the 'name of the beast' — the cause of poverty and injustice. Like Melbourne's megaphone man, Žižek sees transformational potential in resurrecting class struggle, which turns differences (between Wall Street and Main Street, as the Americans like to put it) into antagonisms. In other words, where identity politics seeks to turn antagonism into difference — the peaceful co-existence of identities — class struggle is militant, and revolutionary. It seeks to annihilate the capitalist beast. Moreover, this encounter with the Beast can only result in victory if we jettison the 'democratic illusion'; in other words, it is "the acceptance of democratic procedures as the sole framework for any possible change, that blocks any radical transformation of capitalist relations." [12] This is all well and good, but where do we find the red ink?

'177. Quite obviously, it is precisely because the liberation of history, which must take place in the cities, has not yet occurred,

that the forces of historical absence have set about designing their own exclusive landscape there.’ [13]

In the late ‘50s my welcoming aunt toured my nonplussed newly arrived parents and I proudly around the Olympic Games sites from a few years before, stating in front of the old Olympic Swimming pool (now Collingwood Football Club’s Training Centre) that now Melbourne had made it; Australia was now part of the world. Already, as a small boy, I could recognize the folly of her posing. This did not make sense. Clearly, the carnival had already left town.

By the ‘70s I felt what my aunt felt. I thought that the culture I had now grown up in could participate globally, and film was in the air. A colonial cast could be broken. I had seen packages of experimental works at the Melbourne Filmmaker’s Co-op, where I had been working on the front door. There were the meta-texts by Brakhage, Mekas and Thoms, and local work by Michael Lee, Lindsay Martin, Solrun Hoas and Cantrills Filmnotes.

How do you connect such an initialising time to the present? So much water has passed under the bridge. At the Australian Film Commission the main game constructed, understandably, a national film industry with flagship features, and funding morphed and split through various forms as the experimental was ushered into its own ever-diminishing funding back-water.

With such discounting one had to confront the reality that we were not participating in any official dream, but more of an outsider, self-sufficient, reflexive cottage shadow of the official story. This was no big deal at the time, as it seemed in keeping with my station as a ‘Wog’ in what was purported to be a classless society, and it promoted a kind of ‘Everyday versus Spectacle’ take on it all. The spectacle told me we were all one, while the Everyday’s small, subtle and repeating humiliations told me we were not. Everything was still possible, as long as you pulled it out of your own garage hat with a good old Oz DIY disposition of making do. I was not alone in this boat and, after all, there was a global scene for this film art stuff that you could identify with.

What also happened, unfortunately, via a changing of the guard at Experimenta in the ‘90s, was the erasure of any public profile for local experimental

film, through a commendable advocacy for New Media. This centrifugal pull from the central embrace of the new to reach the margins seems like a repeating account. It is a particularly Australian tradition, founded in that Terra Nullius moment when, on arriving, those members of the first fleet planted that British Flag on these shores and declared that there was nothing here. Is it our cultural tradition to ignore what is already here?

That is how this script has repeatedly unfolded in Oz, with setbacks and betrayals that have both crippled and strengthened my practice. In this I merely repeat my parents’ migrant resolve in passage from the old world to the new, to always run towards a receding horizon of belonging and safety. I seem to elicit a similar, wary response that marks difference as a liability. Like everyone else I have migrated to the new, but not as some erased identity that could be redressed at will. This graceless twisted persona has ‘form’, is tainted with an old technology’s past.

I remain marooned outside any promise that Whitlam’s now mythical ‘70s illuminated. I brace myself for another round of a futile struggle; not that earlier construction of a settler homestead, no dissenting Glenrowan residue, nor a heroic search for an inland sea or even marginal participation in a national film industry. Tricked by a quirk of history and place, I must continue minutely to search, eke out to Occupy a space for my own art to exist in my own country. It is rumoured to be found somewhere between the carnival and its hollow trace, it is pockmarked with denial’s ancient damage and it presses me to remember, through some fuzzy local Aussie logic, to Never say Never.

Conclusion

The spectacle asserts itself, not only in our search for a national identity, how we replay the past or where we sit inside Occupy’s carnivalesque but also in the ways we migrate in and out of academia.

Institutional protocols determine the tone, structure and style of academic writing. These procedures require scholars to scrupulously cite references, and, more often than not, adopt an ‘objective’ authoritative tone in their writing. This paper occupies academic space, and observes some of the genre conventions of academic discourse. However, it also enacts a Situationist *détournement* by deliberately employing an anecdotal register that unsettles assumptions about politics and technology.

Online, the old and the new repeat each other in no particular order. For the migrant, dislocation and occupation is not a fashion-click or a Facebook friend, but an act of survival that registers in analog technology as a trace-able trace. Such difference speaks of a disparity between Debord’s 1950s and an ephemeral mobile present, and it is Žižek who provides the double negative twist to bridge its gap. Yet Debord can still make visible the way in which spectacular technologies create an illusion of community that alienates people from each other. We post and graze with each accumulative click, to make friends and network in the service of our individually designed profiles. This need not be inherently traumatic, but what kind of community has been borne and what are its connections to the past?

References and Notes

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4. For a detailed account of the *dérive* — a spontaneous drift through space — and other oppositional political strategies used by the Situationist International see the following texts: Sadie Plant, *The Most Radical Gesture: The Situationist International in a Postmodern Age* (New York: Routledge, 1992); Greil Marcus, *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the Twentieth Century*, Twentieth anniversary edition (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2009); Mackenzie Wark, *The Beach Beneath the Street: The Everyday Life and Glorious Times of the Situationist International* (London: Verso, 2011).
5. Debord [1], p. 13.
6. Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (New York: Harper Collins, 1984), p. 257.
7. Debord [1], p. 120.
8. Maurice Blanchot, ‘Everyday Speech, 1962’, in Stephen Johnston ed., *The Everyday (Whitechapel Documents of Contemporary Art)*, (Cambridge Mass. London: MIT Press, 2008), p. 37.
9. Guy Debord, *On the Passage of a Few Persons Through a Rather Brief Period of Time* (1959), film.
10. Debord [1], p. 75.
11. Slavoj Žižek, *The Year of Dreaming Dangerously* (London: Verso, 2012), p. 12.
12. Žižek [11], p. 87.
13. Debord [1], p. 126.