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“I KNOW that one day I will die screaming in my bed:”

Corporeal Vulnerability as a Tactical and Symbolic Function within the Occupy Movement

This talk was given on September 30th, 2012 at Governor’s Island in New York City as part of the closing activities for the Occupy! exhibition, organized by the International Center of Photography and curated by Rachel Elizabeth Seed. The text below was adapted from a paper presentation given previously at the 2012 Rouge Forum in Oxford Ohio at Miami University.

In this article, I examine Occupy images and “image events” as a form of symbolic politics. As a gateway into the project, I examined content published on the Adbusters blog from the weeks leading up to the Occupation of Wall Street. Adbusters is credited as the key initiator of the Occupy movement. The political image content posted on their blog exists in a variety of forms, including video, graphic and textual images designed to mobilize massive direct action consistent with the tenants of the anti-globalization movement (Shantz, 2011). Second, I explore a large number of photographic images posted on the Tumblr site “wearethe99%”. The site was designed to encourage participatory action so “resisting others” could express their personal grievances in solidarity with the Occupy movement against social and economic inequality (Routledge, 2009). I also discuss a smaller range of images and symbols that were foregrounded as defining images of the Occupy movement, including the [99%|1%] symbolism and a small range of violent images.

Grounding the Work in Theory – Some Info on Image Events & Symbolic Politics

DeLuca & Recent Activist History

- An academic researcher in communication and culture

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- Conducts media research focused on activist groups.
- *Image Politics* (1999)
- Explains corporate controlled mainstream media (television and newspapers) as a structured and “controlled space” through which corporations and states conduct ideological warfare by staging image events to legitimate their status and power
- Studies show how activist organizations in the 70’s and 80’s, Greenpeace and Earth First! began to mastering the art of staging “image events” for mass media dissemination that also “operate in the territory of the system”
- The activists developed image-based strategies stemming from direct action and civil disobedience in order to gain media coverage and public attention within the closed media system that marginalizes and exclude alternative voices.
- He refers to image events as the “central mode of public discourse” for politics and activism (DeLuca, p. 17).
- “Image Events” work through the layering of explicit and implicit messages communicated to the viewing audience through combinations of images, spoken words, and symbolic associations that intermingle with popular narratives and mainstream discourses (DeLuca, pp. 102-127).
- He shows how much impact activists have made over-time as a result of staging these “image events”

Important point about DeLuca’s work and also how we can view Occupy.....,

- He provides multiple examples of protest actions that can be seen as failing (in terms of direct action) *i.e. accomplishing an immediate goal or change* – but, he argues - they

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succeed as image events by raising public consciousness about the issues over time - which also leads to the creation of public tension and incremental political change.

- How image events work - draw on the **power of symbolism** to reduce complex sets of issues to symbols that break people's comfortable equilibrium (i.e. tree sitting in the redwoods or challenging a whaling fleet) - compels audiences to ask critical and reflective questions taken for granted ways of thinking and acting.
- Image events are powerful because they convey complicated problems using simplified, **symbolic representations**
- Can think of the laying of "image events" and "symbolism" contained within as a sort of ideological warfare – or, "imagefare" where contests of narratives, norms, ideas, beliefs, values, and "truths" compete through mass media
- Images become the creators of reality in a society mediated by mass media
- **Think of Occupy as a series or collection of these "image events" – similar to the way this exhibition presents a series or collection of photographic images (which are visual artifacts that capture these moments of time in a single frozen-frame image – The Occupy image events contain very complex symbolic structures that do implicit ideological work in the public consciousness – NOW we have social media and citizens have the ability to create original news content that side-steps the control of corporate media – BIG shift in terms of how information is distributed in society - The constant layering of image events ----- We might conceptualize this as a form of "mind bombing" ---- a continuous symbolic assault that challenges and sometimes rewrites the meanings of power.**

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- Image events are also a device for holding everyone accountable – citizens, corporations and governments (Police Brutality – Marine at Oakland Occupy who was severely beaten by police; US Davis student protests and the Pepper Spray incident – or – in the course of a normalized public narrative, Bill Clinton and Monica Lewinsky – Kanye West’s comment “Bush doesn’t care about black people” after Katrina)
- Activists understand that they can use acts of civil disobedience as a symbolic device to escalate tension with police
 - Example OF Activists AND THEIR SOPHISTICATION in terms of their ability to use of symbolic warfare
 - – Narratives of “occupation” are sold to mass audiences by governments and corporate media as acceptable norms – Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan - so long as it’s those in power controlling the occupation – extend this notion to public space and day-to-day life.
 - We can all consider how mainstream narratives of power occupy our lives and the decisions we make on a daily basis – this is the status quo – what we perceive as order – it becomes ingrained in us as a form of “common sense” – we do not question it until a new set of ideas or events intervene and disrupt our sense of the natural order of things
 - OWS symbolism is a REVERSAL of the accepted and normalized concept of Occupation – Using tents and the mass presence of bodies as a symbolic image that challenges the symbolic norms of governmental power and control over people’s behavior
 - Creates questions about who controls public space

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- Acceptable versus unacceptable use of parks
- Rights to public assembly and free speech
- Notions of safety and protection, citizenship

Look at images of RIOT COPS

- Activists are very skilled at Symbolically framing riot cops as “the archetype of evil” – this is WHY riot cops and police HATE cameras
- Police understand that the cameras of activists are used to fabricate negative narratives and negative media images of power
- David Graeber – Anarchist, Anthropologist, and Scholar of the Anti-Globalization Movement – has written about the notorious history of police for their aggressive destruction of activists’ cameras – this is part of the continuous struggle because Protesters understand they can provoke police violence by challenging “their right to define the situation”

The Art of Staging Image Events and Engaging in Symbolic Politics

Consistent with the horizontal organization of anarchist models for direct action, an image event can happen anytime and anywhere. As activists engage the police through a myriad of endlessly changing forms of resistance, they constantly challenge the police’s ability to control and define the situation. The police respond with both violence and inaction, and either way the activist tactical strategy is to create a symbolic assault on the establishment and façade of power.

- Images of non-violent protest go viral, illustrating the brutality of the police.
- Using cameras and circulating the content on social media sites, there is also a “Virtual” bearing of witness to these images – an aesthetics of atrocity

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- Activists are using the camera as the weapon
- **Occupy----- Might be seen as failing in terms of direct actions - but it is succeeding as an image event which draws attention to economic inequality and the corruption on Wall Street**

The Activists' Body and the Idea of Corporal Vulnerability

Look at some images now

- Activists position themselves as taking moral stance - Against the immoral opponent (police, riot cops, Wall Street) – Police and activists collaborate in a way that turns power into a spectacle – Police use violence against the bodies of non-violent protestors (immoral) – The activists place their physical bodies at-risk, put their asses on the line (line of riot cops) - and the protestors point their cameras at these image events and then disseminate the evidence broadly (**SEE IMAGES – MORAL versus IMMORAL**)
- Symbolically, violence against morally positioned non-violent protestors resonates in the public consciousness
 - Photography and video as mediums are bound up with personal histories and narrative construction.
 - As a cultural norm, photo and video mediums are embedded in family rituals
 - Used as a form of custom to document both an individual's personal existence and their collective membership to groups in relation to others
 - They comfort us in the face of our own mortality
 - Images of violence challenge our common sense use of documentary images for the purposes of projecting our own immortal images into the future
- People are concerned with their bodily safety on a daily basis

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- Images of violence against protestors have broader associations that touch on both real threats and potential fears
- Symbolically draws attention to our personal bodies and our personal relationships to systemic power - The tumblr site “I am the 99%” illustrates this range of fears – a monumental collection of images articulating a range of grievances people have that are tied to these narratives of fear for our bodies and personal security.
- I’ve spent a substantial amount of time analyzing these images, my research has which the nature of how deeply internalized systemic violence has become in contemporary culture.
- The Tumbler site acts as a unique form of self-portraiture that combines photographic portraits with textual, self-narrative portraits.
- Participants express a broad range of narrative accounts concerning financial and health conditions amongst Americans
- Themes of sadness and despair pulse through these images, revealing broken spirits – broken bodies – broken families – broken homes, etc. Broken bodies are a metaphor that critiques a broken system
- *Yet, they are counterbalanced with a sense of hope as many participants share a language of empowerment, suggesting they believe change is eminent.*
- Participants used the website to conduct very matter-of-fact structural critique
 - Ex: SEE IMAGES!!!!
- Others giving individual case-based accounts to illustrate systemic failures in terms of their personal lives being impacted

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- Ex: SEE IMAGES!!!!
- The Tumbler site encourages participants to sit down, think critically about their own lives in relation to the political economy, and engages them in the physical and intellectual act of narrative writing. It's a form of socio-political discourse.
- The Tumbler site strategically functions as a tool to facilitate the construction of an individual's identity in critical resistance, inviting thousands of people to conjure their own sense of vulnerability and to conceptually link it to the Occupy movement – creating solidarity
- I came across some very haunting quotes on the site. In one narrative portrait, a woman details the struggles of her life – poverty, disabled husband, caring for her geriatric father because they cannot afford a nursing home, needing dental care for her broken teeth, how they heat their home with wood because they cannot afford the electric bills, and she states “I KNOW that one day I will die screaming in my bed.”
- Range of Fears ----
 - People fear they will never achieve a moderate amount of personal success in life.
 - They feel excluded and denied equal access to opportunities.
 - They feel entitled to basic rights, such as being treated with dignity, having access to healthcare, and the ability to feel secure from harm.
 - People feel their freedom is seriously restricted, expressing how they are trapped in situations or how they have been coerced into making choices favoring one highly undesirable option over another.

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- Feeling ignored and insignificant, individuals outline how they are constantly overworked for low wages, denied medical coverage and retirements, stressed out, and living paycheck to paycheck.
- People are living in a constant state of fear that they will personally experience an economic collapse, feeling as if they are teetering in a precarious state within which one small health crisis stands between them as homeowners and the homeless.
- Many narratives express
 - Sickness
 - Disabilities
 - Diseases
 - Suffering illnesses, both physical and mental, and have no promise of alleviation
- These Tumblr images function to HUMANIZE the violence that OUR neoliberal political economy perpetrates against citizens
- These images do not have the same impact as actual images of police violence. They are not as exciting, immediate or traumatizing. Rather, this is an invisible violence rendered visible by the tumblr site – it is a more pervasive and culturally normalized violence.

Broken Bodies, Broken Systems

- Broken bodies function as a form of critique by implicating the brokenness of the system
- The activist's body receives the administration of corporal punishment from the state as part of their strategic tactics, understanding its symbolic

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appeal to a general, publicly-shared sentiment of collective corporal vulnerability.

- These symbolic representations are a disruption that intervenes in our normalized daily experience – they trigger a range of ever-present personal fears connected to the failures of the system
 - Concerns for one’s physical and mental health
 - Matters of economic security
 - The safety of one’s family (access to housing, food, medical care, etc...) are constantly evoked and referenced within this process.

[99% | 1%] - Symbolic Carnalization of the Transcendent Other

Corporeal vulnerability plays a central role in the [99% | 1%] symbolism. The 99% has been defined in terms of broken bodies, and activists use their broken bodies to critique a broken systems. Symbolically, this underscores the contrast between the broken bodies of the 99% and the privilege of security enjoyed by members of the 1%. Activists are critiquing the 1% for their parasitic means of attaining health and safety while simultaneously depriving these same basic rights to others. As an embodied mass of people living in a constant state of physical insecurity, the activists are willing to put their “asses on the line” in order to gain the virtuous benefits of pain. A means to an end, the physical violence against protester’s bodies is a temporary gateway to an end goal. Yet, the greed and violence of the system against society as a whole is pervasive and continuous.

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In contrast, the 1% remains safe, anonymous, hidden, and secure from threats. They project a faceless and formless image, one of uninhibited immateriality enjoying the absence of a vulnerable body in physical space. The image of the 99% is a reminder of their own vulnerability, designed to terrify the rich living in fear of a popular uprising. Hiding behind the façade of disembodied corporate entities, they facilitate an elite version of dissociative disorder by obscuring their identities and attempting to achieve untouchable status. The [99% | 1%] symbolism functions as a form of carnalization that works against the transcendent image of the immaterial manifestation of power. The 1% symbol represents this power in material likeness, as humans in the flesh. This is a symbolic abasement of the anaesthetized self-image of power they project onto the public screen. The 1% image places them within the 100% of the “living”, and further implicates their existence in parasitic relationship to the majority.

Conclusion

Corporeal vulnerability is bound up with the relational as a central conceptual theme across the Occupy movement, both as a tactical strategy and a symbolic challenge. Activists are using corporeal vulnerability to exploit the biggest weakness of power. Symbolically, transnational corporations as entities have no body with which to represent their own corporeal vulnerability in a symbolic contest against ethical activists. Their only defenses are the deployment of the representations of their power (their mercenaries) and to criminalize dissent as a preemptive strategy. Yet, behind the façade of smoke and mirrors are *actual* humans deflecting and obscuring their identities. The 99% symbolic image and the activist’s continuous onslaught of image events is creating political tension within the actual physical bodies of the 1%, hopefully compelling them to action. Quoting the former director of Greenpeace, DeLuca (1999) notes that “all revolutions are attempts to change the consciousness of the ‘enemy’” (p.

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4). There is no doubt that a very long battle is ahead, but perhaps the 1% will slowly be forced to come into consciousness through the physical and embodied tactics of the 99%. The Adbusters blog, Tumbler images, and violent image events coalesce to offer a salient critique of the contemporary political economy using images and symbols. We might find some added inspiration and hope by fully investing in images and developing an acute understanding of how the rhetoric of corporeal vulnerability presents sustained potential for the creation of critical consciousness and social change.