

Embodying Alternatives in Global Justice Social Movements: Radical Clowning, Giant Puppets, and Tactical Carnivals

Julien Cossette
York University

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Abstract

Artistic elements have transpired Western social movements throughout the last few decades. Consequently, the efficacy of these cultural acts of resistance has been widely debated. In this paper, I refrain from reifying this sterile discussion by suggesting that its epistemological basis misreads activism through a rigid instrumentalist lens. Reflecting on radical clowning, giant puppetry, and tactical carnivals, I argue that such expressive and creative actions are not merely spontaneous materializations out of thin air, but rather well-thought modes of resistance. I seek to highlight the generative possibilities of these forms of direct action to argue that cultural activism and resistance should not be taken lightly. I submit that play is a meaningful political mode whose effects can extend beyond the performance. It is a way of exposing, but also an alternative way of learning, knowing, and being in the world. Play, however, can lose its edge. It must be understood as only one tactic in a rhizomatic assemblage with “multiple lines of flight” (Scholl 2010:160) that thrive on diversity. To this end, I conclude with a note on demographics and accessibility, emphasizing that cultural activism may not be considered as a tenable strategy by everyone.

Summit of the Americas

Quebec City, April 2001

A large catapult operated by the “Medieval Bloc” tosses stuffed animals over the fence erected by the police (Graeber 2009:147–157; Shepard 2011:206). It is the first time in the modern history of “anti-globalization” protests that such a large fence circumscribing the perimeters of a summit is built, a symbol that represents for many activists “the contradictions of neoliberalism” (Graeber 2009:xv).¹

First “Bike Lane Liberation Day”

New York City, August 2005

Clowns ride their bikes in the streets of New York City when they stumble upon a parked UPS delivery truck obstructing the lane reserved for bicyclists (Shepard and Smithsimon 2011:184–195; Shepard et al. 2008:17–25). A fake ticket emulating NYC parking infractions is issued to the driver, warning him by quoting the city by-laws that the punitive consequences could have

been real, raising awareness, and encouraging discussions about the issue.

More Than Just Play

Such “purely expressive” (Graeber 2009:157) actions did not materialize out of thin air. They were not empty signifiers, but rather well-thought “ironic gesture[s] of ludic opposition” (Shepard 2011:206).² In Quebec City, as the standing protesters enacted with their catapult an absurd state of siege and played on the “aesthetics of the flying teddy bears” (2011:242), the “security” wall (and the negative representations of activists as violent) that stood in the way of their vision(s) of democracy and justice was exposed and parodied.³ In New York City, the trickster clowns, adopting a playful and humoristic approach to activism, bemused drivers at fault and unsettled the most recalcitrant of them to foster new ways of thinking (Shepard and Smithsimon 2011:195) or simply subject them to ridicule. After all, an infuriated driver insulting clowns risk himself or herself to become the buffoon. As one participant noted, “nothing can shame a driver into moving out of the bike lane more than a pack of cheerful clowns” (Shepard et al. 2008:20). In both situations, the activists relied on the politics of play to redefine community spaces and acts of resistance (Shepard and Smithsimon 2011:184), re-establishing a “spirit of fun to... activism” (Shepard et al. 2008:21). These actions were generative, in the sense that they “embodie[d] an alternative way of being in the world” (Shepard and Smithsimon 2011:194).

Against Instrumental Views

Much ink has been spilled debating about the efficacy of such actions (Ehrenreich 2006:259; Kanngieser 2010:115; Shepard 2011:3,16; Shepard et al. 2008:1–5).⁴ My goal here will not be to reify the sterile argument, for I would suggest that the epistemological basis of that debate misreads activism through a rigid instrumentalist lens of immediacy. In this essay, I want to engage instead with the generative possibilities of some forms of direct action — namely “radical clowning” (Bogad 2010)⁵, giant puppets, and “tactical carnivals” (Bogad 2010) — to argue that cultural activism and resistance should not be taken lightly. In the spirit of Johan Huizinga, who inspired many social movement activists (Shepard et al. 2008:2), play will be thought of as inherently meaningful, for there is always “something ‘at play’” (Huizinga 1960:1). Play, I thus submit, is political. It is a mode of learning and knowing, as well as a way of being in the world. It provides opportunities to challenge the current state of affairs, and it can even embody alternatives.⁶ This essay will focus on the spaces (physical or otherwise) that are attempted, created, or imagined through playful cultural activism and resistance. As a bundle of strategies or tactics, those actions not only expose some of the ills struggled against, but also perform the world activists envision.

On Cultural Activism

“Art is not a mirror held up to reality, but a hammer with which to shape it.” – Bertolt Brecht (Bloch 2012:233).

Radical clowning, giant puppets, and tactical carnivals are forms of “cultural activism” (Grindon 2010:21) or “creative cultural resistance” (Bloch 2012:338), two neologisms among the many that have been used over the years as art, play, and performance, and the need to understand their political use, became popular activist tactics (Firat and Kuryel 2010:10). Surely, this concept is elusive and vague (Grindon 2010:21): it can encompass a large variety of cultural practices which, like the examples I focus on in this essay, are not entirely identical in their approaches, goals, and actions. My use of the term, then, reflects this situation. By cultural activism, I will refer generally to the history and tendency for elements of art, play, and performance to transpire Western social movements throughout the last decades, if not century (Orenstein 2001:140). The Seattle 1999 protests, in the wake of the World Trade Organization meeting, were particularly striking in that regard (2001:139). While it was not a pioneer moment in cultural activism — it has shown “adaptations of earlier repertoires” (Smith 2001:14; see also Wood 2012:6) — the punch and effectiveness of the protests led an overwhelming number of activists to consider that moment as the “dawn of a new era of political activism in America” (Orenstein 2001:139) and a “laboratory of innovation and exchange” (Wood 2012:5).⁷ Since then, social movements have seen an explosion in (the use of) cultural activism strategies, such as radical clowning, giant puppets, and tactical carnivals (see Firat and Kuryel 2010:13), demonstrating effectively that they can affect politics in a considerable, and importantly non-authoritarian, way (Boyle 2010:209).

(Radical) Clowning

It was a “paradigm-shifting kiss,” Bogad (2010:539) writes. In a gendered gesture, a (radical) clown named Trixie stamps pink lipstick kisses on the shields of riot cops. The next morning, pictures immortalizing that shocking contrast between a gesture of love and an (read: violent) instrument of order, are disseminated all over the world (2010:538–539). For Bogad, the “clown-logic” (2010:552) of improvisation and absurdity “made such a poetic moment, where it appeared that clowns could dispel the intimidating power of the state through fearless silliness and serious play, possible” (2010:539).

Clowns, shamans, and other similar figures, as Van Blerkom (1995:468) notes, transcend cultures, to a point of quasi-universality (see also Hereniko 1994:2). “They mediate,” she adds, “between order and chaos, sacred and profane” (Van Blerkom 1995:463), which inspires both fear and respect. They are tricksters, in that they transgress, invert, disrupt, and manipulate cultural conventions, and symbols, exposing, destabilizing, critiquing, and/or even disrupting them in the process (Bogad 2010:542; Brightman 1999:272; Butler 2012; Hereniko 1994:1; Little 1993:118; Van Blerkhom 1995:468–469). Clowning, in this sense, is a “political commentary” embodied in the form of play (Hereniko 1994:1–2). While it formulates “a kind of comic catharsis” (Little 1993:118) that may powerfully distract (Van Blerkhom 1995:471), I would argue that its effects can extend beyond the performance. As Hereniko writes, “the message ‘this is play’ mask[s] the serious of important messages that [are] disguised in

laughter but nonetheless experienced and felt” (1994:1).

Play removes the performers from the “criticism and make their biting satire palatable. Criticism is therefore usually accepted in good humor,” (Hereniko 1994:5), which is especially important knowing that power usually demonstrates little patience and opening toward fearless commentators and free thinkers (1994:2). To clown is to possess, always to an extent, a license to mock, challenge, and expose (1994:10), which implies a strong “state of critical awareness” (Butler 2012:71) about one’s world. Butler writes that Augusto Boal “points to the red nose as the actual signifier of critical consciousness: the device that exposes the ‘ridiculousness’ of social conditioning” (2012:66–67). The red nose does not only transform the clown, but also its audience. It has, Butler argues, “a ‘reflective’ or empathetic function for those who encounter it face to face” (2012:67–68); it encourages and/or gives “a sort of permission to behave in a way that conventional social and cultural codes might not normally sanction” (2012:68).

But, further, clowning is also “a process of unlearning” (Butler 2012:64) what Freire has termed a “mechanistic view of reality” (1970:124). Butler (2012:64) argues that to clown is to see the world with new eyes, to embrace a certain naivety, thus to remove the cultural filter, gradually inculcated from childhood, that direct movements and behaviours, and alienates everyone from individual expression, imagination, and creativity (see also Hereniko 1994:1).⁸ She points out that Giovanni Fusetti, an Italian clown pedagogue, suggests to consider clowning not as performance, but as a state of being with a logic of its own, a “way of existing in the world” (2012:64; see

also Hereniko 1994:20). As such, to “clown functions as a verb” (Butler 2012:64): clowning may expose, but it also embodies what are, sometimes, so-called radical possibilities.

Giant Puppets

Giant puppets (and other props) have been a prominent feature of early anti-globalization protests in the first years of the 2000s (Wood 2012:36).⁹ In Seattle, condoms thrown by a Greenpeace activist are raining over the government delegates at the World Trade Organization meeting, summoning them to “practice safe trade” (Smith 2001:12). In Tehran, demonstrators react to George W. Bush’s assertion, in 2002, that Iran was “part of an ‘axis of evil’” (Blumenthal 2005:165) by destroying a giant puppet approximately representing Uncle Sam.

Quite similar to clowns and shamans, puppets are found in many cultures in different forms (Blumenthal 2005). They can also be tricksters by transgressing the cultural order and engaging in behaviours that would not be normally acceptable from anyone else. In this sense, both clowns and puppets, pretending to be neophytes to cultural norms, occupy a liminal space, what anthropologists Victor Turner has described as “betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention and ceremonial” (1969:95), in which they can embody, if only for a moment, an alternative mode of being. Throughout history, the perspicuous spurious quality of puppets has granted them (and especially their puppeteers) a certain license to mock, challenge, disrupt, expose, and create (Blumenthal 2005:129–130).¹⁰ This has not

always been true, however, for in many cases puppeteers have been arrested and dissenting puppets destroyed by those in power,¹¹ or even used for state propagandist purposes (2005:163–185), which may speak to their political salience.¹² As Orenstein (2001:139) argues, authorities are not oblivious to the influential power of performance. Not only does such “puppet-ganda” help conveying a festive atmosphere to protests, but it also “provid[es] opportunities for activists... to convey political messages in creative, irreverent, and often humorous ways” (Smith 2001:12–13).

A Note on Media Representation and the “Hegemonologue”

“Our art suffers without political and social relevance in the same way that our politics suffer without the creative and visionary thinking of artists” – Alli Starr (Orenstein 2001:150).

The playfulness of radical clowning and giant puppets can partially expose and disrupt, according to Bogad, the “hegemonologue” (2010:542) and sensationalism of mainstream media and politics which consistently depict and demonizes protesters as violent anarchists (see also Chesters and Welsh 2006:74, and Graeber 2009:438–446 on media demonization). Such mode of representation is also typical, as Graeber (2009:499) argues, of an “American journalism ethos”: provocative and sensationalist news stories whose content rarely deserve the same attention when it is rebuffed or proved wrong. Boyle (2010), in turn, denotes some ambivalence in terms of traditional media representation of protests by the corporate media. On the

one hand, the broadcasting of images of property destruction serves the ideological stance of the state and legitimates, according to him, its increased securitization and militarization (Boyle 2010:210). On the other hand, he writes that to respond with “the display of dissent through traditional non-violent avenues such as rallies, marches, the courts, and even old-fashioned reasoned argument has also lost effectiveness ... in the age of ever-expanding media spectacle” (Boyle 2010:210; Graeber 2009:489; Orenstein 2001:146).¹³

In this light, Boyle points out that over the past decade, globalization activists have increasingly geared their efforts towards “injecting mass demonstrations with more color and creativity in order to... win over public support” (2010:210) and expose issues. Playful tactics and actions such as radical clowning and giant puppets have the ability to draw the attention of media and the general population, and to speak louder than words and didactic arguments (Gold 2011; Orenstein 2001:150; Smith 2001:13; Treibitz 2012:325; Wood 2007:378). For Orenstein, “puppets serve as the visual equivalent of sound bites, containing strong messages in succinct, larger-than-life visual images” (2001:150). In terms of live performances, activists-actors such as the Billionaires for Bush, for example, “recommend[ed] staying in character for media interviews and pretending that this is real organization for the rich in order to catch people unaware” (2001:149; see also Bogad 2010:550 for the similar approach of “staying ‘in clown’”). Such tactics and actions can generate disarming, absurd photographs that expose as much as they challenge dominant ideologies, ridicule unbalanced power

dynamics between activists and the state, and articulate radical critiques through striking contrasts and dissonance (see Boyle 2010:209; Chesters and Welsh 2006:74; Scholl 2010:168). Unlike the “pious humorlessness” of some contemporary social movements, Critchley (Shepard et al. 2009:7) argues that the powerlessness of activists engaging in radical clowning, manipulating giant puppets, or just dancing in tactical carnivals is actually powerful and profound. He specifies indeed that “politically, humor is a powerless power that uses its position of weakness to expose those in power through forms of self-aware ridicule” (2009:7).

Whether the media is willing to broadcast those pacifist images seems uncertain (see Orenstein 2001), but in any cases, they present the potential to “[disrupt] the constant barrage of dehumanizing rhetoric about the protestors, if only from the jarring juxtaposition of the visuals above the denunciatory text” (Bogad 2010:554), thus perturbing dominant rhetoric and anticipation (see Chesters and Welsh 2006:56).

Thinking about Radical Clowns and Giant Puppets through the Tactical Lens of Carnivals

“If We Can’t Dance, It’s Not a Revolution” – Emma Goldman

Clowns, giant puppets, and other artistic props are forms of “radical performance” (Boyle 2010:201) that evoke a carnivalesque atmosphere. The street is, after all, and according to Conrad (2010), a unique site, relatively outside of the grips of artistic institutionalization, for the

radicalization of performance. In the context of social movements, Sheppard writes that carnivals, which radical clowning and giant puppetry can be a part of, “had become the primary metaphor for a new model of protest” (2011:167) internationally at the turn of the millennium.¹⁴ Although not a recent phenomenon, their prominence in the eyes of activists had changed (see Bogad 2010:542; Ehrenreich 2006:259).

Many have argued that carnivals (in Venice or Brazil, for example) have historically always been more than simple performances (Riggio 1998:7; Rubenstein 1990:53; Williamson 2012:261–262). Their subversive nature indeed rendered them political, and potentially dangerous for the ruling class. Over time, however, carnivals have been institutionalized, controlled, and commodified, which consequently sanitized them through public order and restrained movements and behaviours (Bogad 2010:546; Chester and Welsh 2006:34; Williamson 2012:261–262). For example, Williamson writes that the carnivalesque political mobilization of black Brazilians in Bahia has been co-opted and “weakened by a focus on culture rather than politics” (2012:262).

The radical performance strategy of “tactical carnival,” as Bogad (2010:542–547) terms it, stands in contrast, and in some ways responds with an alternative to both institutionalized carnivals and standard models and tactics of social movement protest, which can be referred to as indirect action. They can “celebrate... earthiness and silliness over commercial standards of beauty and respectability” (2010:550) through participation in forms of resistance that blends actors with spectators (Scholl 2010:162). In this sense,

they are also liminal and transformative (Shepard and Smithsimon 2011:166). Unlike institutionalized carnivals, they are “neither calendrically nor spatially circumscribed” (Bogad 2010:542). In fact, it is significant that, according to Bogad (2010), such carnivalesque gatherings were, and still are, generally illegal and unsanctioned. Permits are rarely requested and/or granted, and reasons for an embracement of illegality are multiple (2010:540). Shepard (2011:134–138) states, for example, the element of surprise (in relation to the police) and political repression as possible context-specific motives.¹⁵ He also adds that, for the activist group *Reclaim the Streets* (RTS), requesting permits for events through the police went against their values and mission of reappropriating public space for the public and by the public (2011:138). It also constituted a direct response to what his informant Alia framed as the problematic control of protests by the authorities that are actually targeted. “Declared and embodied by a movement” (Bogad 2010:542), carnivals usually reject the authority of the state to some extent; they are “an affirmation of the joy of solidarity and resistance (particularly resistance to the regulation of everyday behavior in increasingly privatized and controlled public space)” (2010:540–541).

At this point, the term “carnavalesque” necessitates perhaps some further theoretical discussion. It is clear that tactical carnivals draw inspiration, at least to some degree, from the work of Mikhail Bakhtin and Rabelais, in particular the former who “celebrated the carnivalesque, mass-participatory freedom and anti-authoritarian laughter” described by the latter (Bogad 2010:541). Bakhtin writes that

carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people. While carnival lasts, there is no life outside it. During carnival time life is subject only to its laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom. [1968:7]

For him, carnival “is a frenetic, celebratory and ideologically ambivalent performance mode” that disrupts boundaries “in a joyous, outrageously humorous demonstration that has some potential for rebellion” (Bogad 2010:541). Bogad notes, however, that tactical carnivals are slightly different, since Bakhtinian carnivals embody a context “where the laughter is ideologically ambivalent, where all participate, and where the event is demarcated and approved of by the authorities even though there is always the risk that the licensed fools may go too far” (2010:541). Tactical carnivals are also more radical, in that they hint more clearly at a revolution through the embodiment of alternatives, rather than a simple and temporary inversion of norms (2010:546–547). They indeed do not limit themselves to the concept of “World-Turned-Upside Down” embraced by the medieval European carnivals described by Bakhtin; instead, they embody the slogan that “Another World Is Possible” (2010:547).

On Embodying Change: Direct Action

In contrast to the indirect actions of petitioning and marching, these carnivals reflect a tactical approach to activism known as “direct action,” which is

increasingly recognized by activists as a form of performance (Shepard 2011:190). While direct action has been understood in various ways, Bogad highlights the aim of “open[ing] up public space, with do-it-yourself group and individual creativity” (2010:547; see also Boyle 2010:203–205; Orenstein 2001:149; Shepard and Smithsimon 2011:183–184). Instead of relying on elected and government bodies to make decisions and bring change, activists apply directly those changes, producing the world in which they want to live, in the immediacy of the moment (Bloch 2012:339; Bogad 2010:546; Scholl 2010:159–162). In its creativity, improvisation, and spontaneity, direct actions embody ruptures and changes in the normal flow of life, and possibilities in the immediate present moment, highlighting the temporal orientation and “daring imaginations” that activists embrace in their attempt to create “a temporary crack through a joyful intervention” (Scholl 2010:159; see also Bogad 2010:539). In other words, direct actions can take the form of a “living alternative” (Shepard and Smithsimon 2011:144), if only for a moment. They can give “a living, dancing example of what public space could be” (Orenstein 2001:146), thus moving beyond theory to embodied practice.

Tactical carnivals, as acts of “prefigurative politics” reflecting a “Do-it-Yourself” (DIY) ethos, engage in such practices that hint at a “better world” (Scholl 2010:165).¹⁶ In carnivals, “the roots of a new embodied democratic experience take shape through shared play, autonomy, conversation, and performance” (Shepard and Smithsimon 2011:149). They echo Guy Debord’s critique by “creating a situation

that denies the logic of spectacle consumerism by turning everyone into a participant, an active agent of social change, at least for a moment” (Scholl 2011:162). Writing about Reclaim the Street, Shepard and Smithsimon note that the organization’s actions set a “space for these actors to connect, check in with their bodies, and demonstrate what a democratic image of public space could really look like” (2011:129,165). While they might not be ends in themselves, argue Shepard and Smithsimon, “such gestures inject ludic unpredictability” (2011:149) and possibilities into the day-to-day business status quo.

Tactical carnivals are also reminiscent of temporary autonomous zones (TAZ) which, in a nutshell, are “uprising[s] which [do] not engage directly with the State, a guerrilla operation which liberates an area (a land, of time, of imagination) and then dissolves itself to reform elsewhere/else when, before the State can crush it” (Bey 2002:117). TAZ, however, are not free from critiques. While they manifestly “[disrupt] the normalized flow of public spaces,” their effects are, in appearance, temporary, and raise doubts about their long-term sustainability (Scholl 2010:161; see also Bey 2002; Bogad 2010:555; Shepard 2011:173–174).¹⁷ It is not long before “the liberatory spaces it creates are quickly dispersed,” Bogad writes, by state authorities or the “inevitable need” to return to daily activities (2010:555). Unpacking McKay’s virulent critique of such DIY activist tactics, Scholl notes that the author “touch[es] upon a sensitive point...: instead of admitting the failure in totally breaking with capitalist reality, activists champion the temporary capacity of disruptive moments” (2010:161). It consequently

means “that the epistemology of disruption is defeatist, because it seems to suggest that the world cannot be changed, but merely disrupted momentarily” (2010:161). I would argue, however, against this understanding. Tactical carnivals are far from being senseless, trivial, or even temporary in their effects. As Bogad eloquently argues, their embodied assertion and demonstration that another world is possible marks a “difference between a temporary inversion of power relations and an assertion of the possibility of, and advocacy for the struggle towards, lasting and substantial progressive social change” (2010:547). Other tactics should also be questioned, but it should be kept in mind that the global justice movement struggles against an “almost unbeatable target” (Shepard et al. 2008:10). To this end, tactical carnivals, while they are perhaps, in the words of an activist quoted by Shepard et al., “not the most efficient thing to do,” are one of “the only thing we can do” (2008:10) by “giving as good as we’ve got” (Graeber 2009:19) to challenge a faceless rhizomatic giant.¹⁸

There are, nonetheless, some dangers. Play, for example, can “sometimes... merely [release] a pressure valve, creating a space for leisure, which allows the system to continue unchecked” (Shepard et al. 2008:11). Wood (2012:36) notes, for example, the decline of giant puppets in some movements. The Ontario Coalition against Poverty (OCAP), she writes, reacted strongly against such tactics and their users, on the grounds that they “trivialized the serious issue of homelessness” by emphasizing aesthetic over politics (2012:121–122). According to an OCAP activist, the playful approach of puppets clashed with the serious approach of the

organization struggling for change (Wood 2012:122). For Churchill and Ryan, who wrote the provocative *Pacifism as Pathology* (1998), “prefiguration can end in a pathological proclamation of pacifism by ‘white progressives’ that tend to perform a ‘loyal opposition’ which means ultimately contributing to the corroboration of the status quo” (Scholl 2010:166).

Playful actions lose their political impact when they act primarily as stress reducers (though this effect should not be discarded),¹⁹ thus “becom[ing] forms of repressive desublimation” (Shepard 2011:174). There is also a danger of the reification and ritualization of play through uncritical, predictable repetition which would wreck the learning potential of such direct actions (Scholl 2010:174). A certain risk definitively exists that the compulsive excitement resulting from the use of those tactics “culminates into a sort of ‘creativity for the sake of creativity’ stance and tend to drift away from tactical thinking” (Firat and Kuryel 2010:13), thus losing political efficacy. But again, such activist grammar of artistic expressiveness should not be readily discarded as trivial and unproductive, for that would be missing the point of the powerful impact arts and culture may have in our everyday lives (see Bloch 2012:337; Premo 2012:322–323; Treibitz 2012:327). Tactical carnivals do not simply speak in theory, but rather have the potential to experiment and deploy new possibilities, ideas, and forms of change in practical and improvisatory ways on the streets (Bogad 2010:542). As Scholl writes beautifully, we should see “art not as an object but as a social relation that potentially transforms the way we know and act in the world” (2010:158).

Some Concluding Remarks on Demographics and Accessibility

Tactical carnivals “are not equally open to all,” as Bogad (2010:555) notes. The cost of participation in such protests is indeed lower for those holding the time and financial resources to face the threat of arrest and jail. It is quite different for racial, economic, gender, and sexual minorities, for whom confronting authorities still often comes with higher risks and harsher penalties (Bogad 2010:555; see also Wood 2007:377–383). At the time of their research, Shepard and Smithsimon (2011:139) noted that Reclaim the Street activists were overwhelmingly privileged: white, young, experienced, college educated adults with time on hands.²⁰ Scholl crucially links what he refers as “a self-indulgent way of practicing alternatives” to neo-liberalism and its perpetuation, as “responsibilities for socially organized inequalities are downscaled to local communities and social life as a whole becomes deregulated” (2010:166). The cost of alternative, he argues, simply cannot be afforded by the disenfranchised, which might partially explain the dominance of privileged groups in some activist realms (2010:166).

Yet, Shepard et al. argue elsewhere that “play is anything but a class-bound activity” (2008:5), rebutting a consistent criticism of play by drawing on historical examples from social movements since the 1960s, and asserting that “the struggle to break down racial, social, cultural, and sexual barriers included a great deal of play and sexual experimentation” (2008:6). But again, the demographics of those movements should be contrasted with

their claims, especially in a North American context. The authors’ argument that “joyful engagement,” as a sustainable practice that cheers people up and allow them to momentarily forget dramatic issues, “takes place in the unlikeliest places” (2008:6) would nonetheless deserve more attention. They cite, for example, the deadly civil war in El Salvador, where a *comité de alegría* (committee of joy) was set up by refugees in each camp (Shepard et al. 2008:6).

Geopolitical location also impacts accessibility, the choice of tactics, and the “range of motion of creative protesters,” for Bogad (2010:555) argues, as an example, that the United States’ approach to demonstrations is much more conservative than Great Britain. As such, “police repression affects the activities of protesters,” which are also targeted differently because of race, gender, class, and sexuality (Wood 2007:377–383).

Social movements are, according to Bloch (2012:339), similar to ecological systems: they thrive on diversity. We must thus realize there are as many possible actions and tactics as actors involved (2012:339), and that may work best in rhizomatic assemblages with “multiple lines of flight” (Scholl 2010:160) instead of one clear linear direction. To this end, radical clowning, giant puppets, and tactical carnivals are just three tactics among many others, perhaps not even the best (Bogad 2010:555). If anything, they are not guaranteed an eternal life in the activist toolbox (see Shepard 2011:234 on the possible decline of carnivals). Since no single tactic presents the solution to the global justice problems confronted, however, adaptation to local contexts and demographics as well as experimentation

with embodied alternatives, is key (Bogad 2010:555; see also Wood 2012). What is interesting about the cultural activism tactics discussed in this essay, however, is the juxtaposition of theory and practice, critique and embodiment of alternatives, “the expressive collapsed with the instrumental” (Scholl 2010:159).

Notes

¹ Graber later refers again to the fence-wall, which he reasserts as “the obvious symbol of the hypocrisy of neoliberalism” (2009:37). This understanding, shared by his fellow participants and activists and himself, could be taken to emerge from the drastic contrast between the mobility restriction imposed by the fence and neoliberal policies which support, among things, free trade and free markets — that is, free movement of capital. In this sense, it does indeed seem contradictory that free trade policies were, and are discussed in meetings within self-enclosed perimeter.

² Such actions can indeed involve months of discussions, collaboration, preparation, and training.

³ Jaggi Singh, back then the spokesperson of the Convergence des Luttes Anti-Capitalistes (Anti-Capitalist Convergence), was arrested on weapon charges in relation to this action, for possession of a catapult (Graeber 2009:471–472; Shepard 2011:206). If the charges were later dropped, they nonetheless appear absolutely ridicule and almost humoristic, and thus contribute to the dialectical exposition of the absurdity of political and police repression. As Graeber writes, “no one could possibly hear a story about anarchists whose most elaborate weapon was a teddy bear and come to the conclusion that they posed a genuine threat to public safety” (2009:472).

⁴ While I would not want to readily imply that some of these opinions represent state discourses, it is worthy to note that the argument that such protests are temporary and inefficient supports their oppression and delegitimization by authorities.

⁵ While I will stick to the term “radical clowning” throughout this essay, other terms have been used which I consider to be referring to the same thing, e.g.: “rebel clowning” (Bogad 2010:555), “military

clowning” (Boyle 2010:202), and “activist clowning” (Boyle 2010:202).

⁶ The theoretical concept of play (serious play) would deserve a longer discussion, some of which has been attempted by Shepard et al. (2008:1–4), who also write that “some issues are far too important to be dealt with a straight face” (2008:10). See also Shepard (2011) for a book long discussion of the concept.

⁷ The meanings and value of the ensuing “Seattle tactics” were widely discussed in several countries; the resistance strategies, thanks to their relative success in Seattle, had suddenly been revitalized (see Wood 2007, 2012).

⁸ Butler quotes Wright, which is worth repeating here: “We’re all clowns really, but we’ve spent most of our lives trying to hide this embarrassing reality under layers of intelligence, sensibility and social nicety” (2012:95).

⁹ Generally built from papier-mâché and other second-hand material, large puppets utilize, according to one activist quoted by Orenstein, “trash that is left behind by others... to create art, to create vision, to create message, to communicate to the community” (2001:139; see also 2011:Gold) in imaginative, and sometimes consciously-distorted ways.

¹⁰ Interestingly, Blumenthal notes that, following a court judgement, puppets are protected by the United States constitutional first amendment rights to free speech (2005:165).

¹¹ In August, 2000, for example, police searched a Philadelphia warehouse where activists had been crafting giant puppets, pre-emptively arresting all of them and destroying the material (Graeber 2009:495; Orenstein 2001:139).

¹² Snodgrass writes an account of Bhat (low-status performers from the region of Marwar) puppet theater in India that complicates an easy propaganda/resistance dichotomy. While they were hired to perform in shows promoting modernization projects, Snodgrass asserts that Bhat puppeteers resisted, subverted, and sabotaged, to an extent, their sponsors’ agenda by parodying both traditions and so-called modern understandings (2004:65–67).

¹³ In the age of spectacle, Duncombe notes that we must “think intelligently about politics” (cited in Orenstein 2001:146), which I take, among other

things, as a call to be creative: creative thinking, creative actions, and more.

¹⁴ To be sure, radical clowning and giant puppetry are tactics in their own rights, and in and of themselves. Such actions have often been described as “carnavalesque,” however, hence my hint at the idea that they can be thought through the same tactical lens of carnivals.

¹⁵ Shepard explains that, in New York City towards the end of the 1990s, repression from the city “became so intimidating that some stopped trying to obtain permits” (2011:134).

¹⁶ Anarchitecture, for example, is an example of the deployment of an action framed from a DIY ethos. For *The Space Hijackers*, “anarchitecture is the re-labeling of space, and re-distribution of power within space, by means of creating events, or placing objects within an area in order to redefine its collective history” (2010:243).

¹⁷ Butler makes a similar point in regards to the act of clowning, as she questions “the transferability of this liminal experience to other spheres of social

life” (2012:70) as performers re-immense themselves in mainstream society. What she argues, however, is that her students “have not left their noses in the classroom,” that, “rather, the clown state is now within them, ready to be called forth in moments that require heightened awareness and a critically thoughtful position” (2012:70).

¹⁸ Graeber writes similarly about the idea of a donut gun: “something ridiculous, absurd, but which nonetheless implied that, if this were a battle, we’d be giving as good as we got” (2009:19).

¹⁹ There are been reports of giant puppets and radical clowns diffusing heated clashes with police forces (see Graeber 2009).

²⁰ Another example is *The Space Hijackers*, who celebrate their projects as similar to “all those drunk ideas for saving the world that you have in the pub, except this lot [*The Space Hijackers*] wake up in the morning and actually do them” (2010:244). This is enough to raise more than an eyebrow, wondering who holds the privilege to enjoy several alcoholic beverages, to the point of intoxication, at a pub and dream about being a world saviour.

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