

Reviews

Protest Scenography

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'All protest is theatre.' So David Solnit, an influential activist in the 1999 anti-World Trade Organization protests in Seattle, once told me. He then added, 'It's just that some of it is really bad theatre.' With almost three decades of experience as an activist, and hundreds of protests under my belt, I can attest to the accuracy of Solnit's observation. I have been part of, indeed, helped organize, protests that were bad theatre: exercises in self-flagellation that served only to signify our powerlessness, with success measured by the brief mention of police arresting activists on the evening news. I have also participated in, and organized, protests that were profoundly empowering: performances that communicated a vision of political possibility and brought about demonstrable social change. Why some protests fail and others succeed is complicated, having to do with everything from the quality and creativity of the organizers to the historical moment in which the protest is staged. But a key determinant for success or failure is what Pamela Howard defines as 'the setting of a stage space', that is: protest scenography (Howard 2009: xxiv).

Effective activists have long understood the importance of setting the stage. Consider Jesus of Nazareth. Not the divine figure but the real-life radical Jewish peasant waging a protest against imperial authority and religious



■ Stephen Duncombe consults his colleague Ronald on strategies of scenography.
Photo Matt Mimiaga.

hierarchy in ancient Palestine two millennia ago. Jesus was, above all, an activist and an organizer, and judging by the 2,000-year duration and global spread of his message and movement, a pretty good one. He was successful, in part, because he understood the fundamentals of using story and spectacle, staging and scene craft. For example, when Jesus overturned the tables of the money-changers and sellers of ritual objects, he was staging a political performance. It was particularly effective performance because he used the main temple of Jerusalem – a setting loaded with political and religious import – as his stage. For props, he utilized the tables and

possessions of his adversaries, thereby bringing them into the act. He could have stood outside the temple and harangued the passersby with his opinions, the ancient equivalent of the activist on the soapbox, but instead he demonstrated his politics through a spectacular act of civil disobedience. Through such an action he not only demonstrated visually and bodily his political ideals, but did it in such a provocative way that news of his deed, and therefore his message, was sure to travel.

A more recent example: Reverend Martin Luther King Jr's campaign to desegregate Birmingham, Alabama, in 1963. The pictures captured of that

protest – school children being marched off to jail, police dogs let loose on black Birmingham residents, and high-pressure fire hoses turned on peaceful protesters exposed the brutality of racism in the American South to a global audience and helped lead to the passage of the Civil Rights Act the following year. What is less well known is that this campaign was *staged*; in fact, it was staged twice. A year earlier, a similar protest had been attempted in the city of Albany, Georgia – where it failed. It failed, in part, because the police simply, and politely, arrested everyone, effectively clearing the stage and denying the press a dramatic performance. King and his fellow organizers learned from this experience. They picked Birmingham as the scene for the protest the next year because it had a long and fractious history of race relations but also because of the city's Commissioner for Public Safety: Eugene 'Bull' Connor, a white man infamous for his racism. King cast Connor in the role of villain, and Connor played the part perfectly by ordering his police and firemen to attack the protestors in broad daylight. The result were those scenes with which we are all familiar: images of black decency and courage and white violence and racism. It was a brilliant – and creative – example of what the social movement historian Doug McAdam has called King's 'strategic dramaturgy' (McAdam 1996: 348).

The wave of protests that has swept the globe over the past two years, from Tahrir Square in Cairo to Puerta del Sol in Madrid to Zuccotti Park in New York City, also provides examples of effective protest scenography. Unlike more traditional marches and rallies,

which are both fluid and fleeting, the tactic of occupation used by these protesters provided a stable stage for a relatively long-running show. Activists, however, are rarely provided with a stage expressly created for them to set; instead they must transform the spaces they find. A number of the best known occupations occurred in the least likely of spaces: Tahrir Square was a busy traffic circle in Cairo, and Zuccotti Park was a not really a park at all. The latter was a 'privately owned public space', created and managed by real estate developers, surrounded by imposing financial buildings and partially sunken below street level. (Zuccotti's deficits as a stage for protest did not go unnoticed by the organizers of Occupy Wall Street: it was not their original choice but a fallback option when the police made the first site inaccessible). In terms of protest scenography, however, the least propitious site sometimes makes for the best stage because what carries political power is seizure of the space and its appropriation as a stage for protest. Places, once occupied, became *liberated* spaces. Under occupation, Tahrir Square was no longer a traffic-clogged thoroughfare, and Zuccotti Park no longer a lunch spot for financial workers. The takeover of these places, and their repurposing for functions other their 'official' intent, served as a vivid reminder of rebellion.

Once liberated, these spaces became stages, and the performances began. The occupied stage made it easy for the news media to communicate the protest performance to a mass audience. At any time an actor could be found to produce lines for a reporter, and a tableau created to be captured as an

image. Consequently, certain elements that translated well to sound bites and dramatic scenes became the performance that most people saw. In many cases this was the tired act of police versus protestors, but other scenes also made the cut. In the case of Occupy Wall Street, the myriad protest signs with their multitude of messages and the General Assembly meetings where protestors publically governed themselves, provided props and performances that, at their best, communicated the overall political message of the movement: 'This is What Democracy Looks Like'.

As important as an external audience is for a protest, it is a mistake to think that these are the only people for whom the performance is directed. Protestors also set the stage for themselves. In the United States the word 'demonstration' is often used interchangeably with the word 'protest' with no distinction made between the two terms. This slippage is revealing because what activists do through their protests, consciously or not, is 'demonstrate' a vision of the world, either dystopic (a situation to change) or utopic (a society to create). In the case of Occupy Wall Street, it was the latter. Zuccotti Park was used by protestors to demonstrate what an alternative to current political and economic systems might be. General Assemblies demonstrated non-hierarchical decision-making in the face of entrenched political power structures; free food demonstrated a distribution of resources in a time of covetous capitalism; libraries at occupations demonstrated the value of public institutions as opposed

¹ It is worth noting that the history of the Arab world is filled with instances of urban protest, dating as far back as the late nineteenth century. In fact, the colonial and early post-colonial histories of many Arab states were characterized by many instances of urban oppositional mobilizations. However, by the 1970s such protests were, for the most part, contained and marginalized even if opposition was never completely demobilized. Thus 2011 marked a return to mass protest movements as the dominant form of opposition politics in a manner not seen since the 1950s and 1960s (Beinin and Vairel 2011, Khalidi 2011).

² 'The woman in the blue bra' refers to a female protester who was beaten, dragged and effectively stripped by Egyptian riot police in Tahrir Square on 17 February 2011. During the assault, the protester's blue bra and torso were exposed to everyone in the vicinity, and to the rest of the world, as local, regional and international media captured images of the attack – one that was the subject of much debate.

³ Such speaking out has taken place through a variety of public forums, joint statements and street demonstrations. Most recently, activists launched 'Operation Anti-Sexual Harassment/Assault', which is one of many other recently organized sexual-assault prevention and response campaigns ('This is mass sexual assault' 2013).

⁴ By the 'regime as dramaturg' I mean the role of the regime in assembling the actors, providing a sense of coherence for a set of disparate performances,

to neo-liberal privatization; and the ubiquitous drum circles served as a sonic demonstration of Emma Goldman's apocryphal apothegm: 'If I can't dance, it's not my revolution!'

The function these acts served was more symbolic than real. General Assemblies were notoriously inefficient, food service drained the movement's resources, books taken from the libraries were never returned and drum circles were annoying to all those not drumming. But their material efficacy is largely besides the point. These props and performances, set within the occupation, dramatized the ideal of a counter-society: one based

on generosity, solidarity and joy rather than greed, individualism and sacrifice. And these scenes were performed – *demonstrated* – daily, not primarily for spectators but as practice for the actors themselves. Through the repeated acting out of the rituals of a new mode of political engagement, unfamiliar experiences like consensus decision-making, free expression and sharing resources became commonplace and a political form of what choreographers call 'muscle memory' was developed. Within a scene they set for themselves, protestors, for a little while at least, acted out their political ideals in the performance of

a world they longed to bring into being. Occupy Wall Street may not have worked as a 'real' alternative to the powers-that-be, but it was a very effective theatrical staging of what an alternative might look and feel like, a necessary dress rehearsal for the long run of social transformation and change. Some theatre is good protest.

REFERENCES

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The Contested Scenography of the Revolution

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In the last two years, people across the Arab world have repossessed public squares and affirmed territories by creating spaces for interaction, dialogue and intervention. These urban geographies have offered inhabitants of cities the scenography of the spectacle of revolution. As a result, citizens have turned from thinking resistance to performing resistance in their everyday lives. In order to stop protests from occurring, regimes and their loyalists have sought to redesign public squares by attempting to ban public protests and actions that transform those spaces into 'scenes' of transgressive politics. Despite these violent crackdowns, activists have practised alternative political expressions that affirm their right to perform in the public sphere.

The Arab uprisings began when a young Tunisian street vendor named Mohamed Bouazizi set himself alight as an act of protest against the confiscation of his cart by a notoriously repressive police force. His action was the catalyst for the Tunisian revolution (Bamyeh 2012), which then triggered a wider wave of revolts around the Arab world (Haddad et al. 2012). Bouazizi was not a live artist. However, he chose to create a public spectacle through his death. Since Bouazizi's self-immolation, spectacle has become a popular form of protest among other oppressed populations across the Arab world. For decades, authoritarian regimes cast the urban landscape of Arab capitals as the measure of national development. However, since December 2011, protests – performative interruptions to 'business as usual' – have politicized the urban landscape in a very different way.¹ In doing so, citizens have sought to reclaim public space as their own rather

than acquiescing to the regimes' claims on such spaces. The cases of protests and other forms of contentious political praxis in Egypt and Bahrain are illustrative of this dynamic.

Tahrir Square and Its Others

Tahrir Square and other urban public spaces throughout Egypt have been the scenographic setting of very different acts of spectacle by both the regime and the protestors. Images of collective dances, street theatre and mass slogans by anti-regime protestors have stunned the world. But so too has the spectacle of the regime's violent attacks on protestors. One such incident was when alleged loyalists stormed into Tahrir Square riding camels and whipping protestors (Fathi 2012). Other spectacles included running over protestors with armored vehicles (Shielke 2011) as well as stripping, dragging and kicking 'the woman in the