

Occupy the Media: The Role of Independent Media in the Occupy Wall Street Movement

A brief browsing of the internet offerings under the search terms “Occupy Wall Street video” suggests both the broad appeal and general return to basics offered by the OWS movement:

Original Full Version “One Marine versus 30 Cops” by BklynJHandy, 1,316,386 views.

Anonymous WARNING to NYPD on Behalf of Occupy Wall Street” by rengadegamin, 13,166 views.

“I am not Moving” by Bigsteelguy4, 630,437 views.

Occupy Wall Street Protest Now On Every Continent Except Antarctica!
MOXNews.com, 14,629 views

“NYPD Gone Wild - Attacking Protesters With Motor Bikes”
by TheBrutalityTube , 20,738 views

And the titles proliferate: “Occupy Wall Street Continues,” “Occupy Wall Street Grows,” “Occupy Wall Street Gets More Organized,” “Occupy Wall Street -- Is It The Revolution?,” “Occupy Wall Street - Funded by George Soros?” And of course, from a major news outlet: “Occupy Wall Street Meets Champagne Drinkers” courtesy of ABCnews.go.

Many of the videos (20,000 in October, up to 95,000 in December) on Youtube, Vimeo and other outlets recall the earliest days of cinema, a recapitulation of the anecdotal focus on the every day, the quotidian innocence of film before audiovisual storytelling fell under the ideological mandate of commercial narrative: “Man crosses street and is arrested.” “A Day in the Life of a Protester”, “ NYPD Arrest Child?” Much like the hundreds who gathered in parks, plazas, and lots around the country and around the world, these videos are the visible tip of a much larger iceberg of media now calving on the Internet.

More or less surprisingly, the stylistics of OWS media tends to the conservative. If you do a content analysis, these OWS film are a bland blend of faces and crowd shots - mixed with cops and sprinkled with a heavy dose of violence - the very stuff of political documentary. They are light on polemics. The bulk of OWS videos don't look particularly radical in terms of form or overt content. Basically there are two main types. Many are very short and raw, often a single shot, or a series of images from a single event, filmed with a iPhone, or a point-and-shoot. But another group of films are crafted works. Although made very quickly by documentary standards, they are beautifully shot for handheld street footage, and elegantly paced. Yet their aim is not to impress you with their competency. What these

videos offer is more like the ethos of competence and 'ecological' thinking that the OWS occupiers attempt to create in the framework of every 'occupation.' Like the demonstrators who have set up their own cleanup teams, cooks, librarians, and medical services, these media makers give a sense of competently serving the movement, with a fair amount of precision, fairness and timeliness.

One thing that seems important is to situate these works historically. These short films compare intriguingly with their most direct ancestors, the Film and Photo League films of the 1930's and the Newsreel films of the 60s. These are work made not by outside observers but makers who place themselves inside the struggle. Like those activist films from other eras these are as much as anything about the creation of a shared subject. The OWS media are works whose goal is less to convince you in a polemical way, and more to characterize a movement that you already part of. These are films that give you a sense of how long it's been, of just how vicious the restrictions, imprecations and dystopian strictures offered to us as 'bare life' for regular citizens over the last thirty years are. They remind us how just holding a space open seems like a breath of fresh air, and yet how radical it has become to do so.

But there is a key difference between OWS's 'message' and older radical media. In the 1930s the people at the point of political action, even of revolution, were 'the masses' and the masses as a notion speaks to the idea of leaders. This movement has point people around issues, (spokes but not spokesmen) yet struggles hard to remain leaderless. One clue is the way that the videos of the celebrities are a side-bar not a main entree. Have you been down there yet? If you are anyone from Slavoj Zizek to Naomi Klein to Michael Moore you were there and you were on video, but you weren't really the point.

Another thing you will find surprisingly little of is economic analysis. These are not "Inside Job" with it's poking at the specific ins and outs of Wall Street wheeler-dealers. Rather these films are about the construction of a new *polis*. They are more about method than content. They are the virtual reality of the real virtuality that makes this movement.

An ethos of inclusion. The Occupy Movement makes a strong effort to retain difference as it creates unity. This is one useful lens with which to view these videos. The French philosopher Alain Badiou talks about the multiplicity that comes into consciousness rather than the unity that notions of progressive politics often espouse.ⁱ Although big on representation in the cultural sense, this is a movement very unhappy with representative forms of democratic government.

One concept that may be helpful is the notion of the "Empty Signifier" as used by Ernesto Laclau in works such as *On Populist Reason*; this is the idea that in populist movements, terms (think 'justice' or 'liberty') appear, but any meaning they may have is up in the air. In the first couple of months there was quite a lot of discussion of lack of demands in the OWS movement.ⁱⁱ This bears thinking about as one looks at OWS media. My sense is that they suggest a new field of action, or that a new way of constructing meaning, as being more important right now, a strategic focus. Here are people the films suggest, literally 'making

sense' or manufacturing, not so much meaning, but the space for it to unfurl. As Noelle McAfee the philosopher and author of *Democracy and the Political Unconscious*ⁱⁱⁱ notes, the public sphere isn't a big crystal ball that is just sitting there waiting to see if a crowd shows up. It is more like an inflatable balloon, a space that only grows where there is discourse of democratic politics to fill it and withers without debate.

VIRTUAL SPACES IN REAL PLACES

The first parliament in 933 was the 'Althing' or General assembly. According to Wikipedia :

All free men could attend the assemblies, which were usually the main social event of the year and drew large crowds of farmers and their families, parties involved in legal disputes, traders, craftsmen, storytellers and travellers. Those attending the assembly dwelt in temporary camps (*búðir*) during the session.

In one video, *Nobody Can Predict the Moment of Revolution* by Martyna Starosta and Iva Radevojevic,^{iv} a young man speaks to the importance of what is going on: "I don't know how to achieve collective liberation... we're here... we're holding space." This was echoed in an intriguing way in the mainstream media by the New York Times architecture critic:

"The whole situation illustrates just how far we have allowed the ancient civic ideal of public space to drift from an arena of public expression and public assembly (Speakers' Corner in Hyde Park, say) to a commercial sop (the foyer of the Time Warner Center)."

Mark Kimmelman New York Times^v

And there are many plazas, squares, places, squares... Madrid, Athens, and especially Cairo, but also Schenectedy, London, Santiago de Chile, Rome, Sydney, Tokyo, San Diego, each in the heart of a city, relocalizing a space of political action hitherto blown into a generalized field of meaninglessness via globalization.

What does it mean to "occupy" in our globalized world? While there is a meaning inherent in taking over, of filling space in a world where so much of the territory lies in 'cyberspace', in these videos the local is actually kind of a meta-local, promising a kind of planetary solidarity that is a new kind of mix of physical and virtual. You can create a local occupy movement, that will follow a model, but will be full of its own particularity.^{vi} Note the difference with the Teaparty Movement, which even with inchoate demands, speaks back to an idea of a central authority (and representational / idealist politics.) With the Occupy movement it is not so much 'we the people' as 'we are people' a statement that avoids the creation of a unified subject. Utopian it may be but these are the terms laid out here.

It is worth noting that while there is an 'official' OWS media team, the videos are made independently, sometimes hosted on the OWS site and sometimes not. The main media

directly created by OWS is the livestream, a stream which, in informational terms, is sometimes a trickle, and sometimes a mighty wave. Here again, the significance is more the medium than the message, more its presence that counts, lighting a kind of small candle in the darkness of an illiberal moment, one that reminds us of our own possible freedom in a time where government seem capable of offering only police action and austerity for the victims of the global economic crisis, and where the forces of reaction are given all the encouragement.

The Occupied Space is a space filled with people literally talking each other's words as well as listening. It has its own magic as suggested in a key video, one titled "Consensus" and made by the Brooklyn-based Meerkat Collective, a film group which itself developed a consensus-based production method over the last several years.^{vii} What the focus on methodology means in political terms, and what kind of media might be in the future of this movement, is an ongoing discussion, a discussion not so much observing and deciding that the truth claims of these films is valid or not, but in participation creating the world they may or may not open a door to.

OWS is a movement that doesn't want sympathy so much as participation. It is a movement, that reflected in its own video coverage, is less about issues and content than it is about experience, process and method.

As one of the OWS Media Working Group says in the above mentioned video, "It's a model of a new society; it's not a protest in the sense of being against something."

How can we evaluate these claims? Let us watch and learn.

Martin Lucas
New York, January 2012

- i In his seminal work, *Being and Event* (1988), Badiou advances such a project, drawing on developments in mathematics and its axiomatic treatment of infinity to establish a way for philosophy to think pure multiplicity, avoiding Levinasian recourse to a mystical infinite (Other) as well as Deleuzian recourse to an empirical, pragmatic multiplicity. For Badiou, ontology is mathematics, and mathematics as “pure presentation” (or “the presentation of presentation,” and hence of nothing) allows us to think “inconsistent multiplicity,” a pure multiple without recourse to the One—“without-oneness.” With this establishment, Badiou sees a way to save the subject (and philosophy) from passivity toward and slavery to the Other on the one hand, and the violent totalizing imperialism of the cogito and Being on the other.
<http://students.washington.edu/schenold/badiou/>
- ii <http://www.possible-futures.org/2012/01/03/a-movement-without-demands/> by Marco Desiiris and Jodi Dean
- iii New York, Columbia University Press, 2008.
- iv <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6dtD8RnGaRQ>
- v <http://www.dailykos.com/story/2011/10/20/1028321/-An-Architecture-of-Consciousness:-An-Insightful-NYT-Article-on-OWS>
- vi Sites such as <http://occupydesign.org/> offer a kind of complete set-up kit for your local occupation, giving you the branding but leaving space for your own local issues.
- vii Consensus Meerkat Collective <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6dtD8RnGaRQ>