

THEORY: Ethical Spectacle

IN SUM

To be politically effective, activists need to engage in spectacle. By keeping to certain principles, our spectacles can be ethical, emancipatory, and faithful to reality.

ORIGINS

Andrew Boyd (p.433)

Stephen Duncombe (p.428)

PRACTITIONERS

The Situationists (p.433)

Abbie Hoffman/Yippies (p.428)

The Zapatistas (p.428)

Insurgent Rebel Clown Army (p.428)

Yes Men (p.428)

Greenpeace (p.428)

Billionaires for Bush (p.428)

FURTHER INSIGHT

Dream: Re-Imagining Progressive Politics in an Age of Fantasy, 2007, New Press
<http://trb.la/5aTr23>

Andrew Boyd and Stephen Duncombe, "The Manufacture of Dissent: What the Left Can Learn from Las Vegas," *Journal of Aesthetics and Protest* 1, no. 3 (2004).
<http://trb.la/5aTr23>

CONTRIBUTED BY

Stephen Duncombe

The concept of *ethical spectacle* offers a way of thinking about the tactical and strategic use of signs, symbols, myths, and fantasies to advance progressive, democratic goals. First introduced in a 2004 article by Andrew Boyd and Stephen Duncombe and later expanded in Duncombe's 2007 book *Dream*, [[Provide these two sources in a footnote? Or not, since they're given in "Related readings"?]] the theory's premises are: (1) that politics is as much an affair of desire and fantasy as it is reason and rationality, (2) that we live in an intensely mediated age (what Situationist Guy Debord called the "Society of the Spectacle"), (3) that in order to be politically effective, activists need to enter the realm of spectacle, and (4) that spectacular interventions have the potential to be both ethical and emancipatory.



This adaptation of the iconic image of Che Guevara into MiChe Mouse captures the tensions and contradictions of the ethical spectacle.

An ethical spectacle is a symbolic action that seeks to shift the political culture toward more progressive values. An ethical spectacle should strive to be:

Participatory: Seeking to empower participants and spectators alike, with organizers acting as facilitators.

Open: Responsive and adaptive to shifting contexts and the ideas of participants.

Transparent: Engaging the imagination of spectators without seeking to trick or deceive.

Realistic: Using fantasy to illuminate and dramatize real-world power dynamics and social relations that otherwise tend to remain hidden in plain sight.

Utopian: Celebrating the impossible – and therefore helping to make the impossible possible.



The Yippies used the symbolic power of flowers in this emancipatory spectacle. Flower Power, 1967, The Washington Evening Star photo by Bernie Boston.

Progressives tend to distrust anything that smacks of propaganda or marketing – that's what the other side does. We tend to believe that proclaiming the naked Truth is enough: "Ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free." But waiting for the truth to set us free is lazy politics. The truth does not reveal itself by virtue of being the truth: it must be told, and told well. It must have stories woven around it, works of art made about it; it must be communicated in new and compelling ways that can be passed from person to person, even if this requires flights of fancy and new mythologies. The argument here is not for a progressive movement that deceives or cheapens its message but rather for a propaganda of the truth. This is the work of ethical spectacle.

Related:

TACTICS

Détournement/Culture Jamming (p.341)

Carnival-Protest (p.344)

Flash Mob (p.336)

THEORIES

Society of the Spectacle (p.341)

PRINCIPLES

Be the Ethical Prankster (p.134)

Make the Invisible Visible (p.139)

Be Expressive & Instrumental, But

Don't Confuse the Two (p.145)

CASE STUDIES

Solvogren (p.134)

The Big Donor Show (p.139)

The Dow Chemical Apology (p.145)

TACTIC: Flash Mob

COMMON USES

To organize a show of dissent on short notice; to quickly replicate a successful tactic in a dispersed yet coordinated way; to create a shared moment of random kindness and senseless beauty.

PRACTITIONERS

Improv Everywhere (p.433)
Critical Mass (p.428)
April 6th Movement (p.428)
Newmindspace (p.428)
Adbusters (p.428)
Revolution through the Social Network (p.428)

FURTHER INSIGHT

Flash Mob -- The Meme
<http://trb.la/A36NBs>

Flash Mob -- Step-by-Step How-To Kit
<http://trb.la/b55NCs>

"The year of the flashmob: Mondo Award winner, first runner up"
<http://trb.la/hC34bM>

CONTRIBUTED BY

Dave Mitchell (p.433)
Andrew Boyd (p.428)

At a prearranged hour in 2009, in response to a widely circulated Twitter message, hundreds of grinning strangers show up on Wall Street, armed with pillows, to demand *their* bailout. Feathered chaos ensues.



Pillow fight on Wall Street, 2009. Organized by Newmindspace. Message for event read: 'Bring a pillow to Wall St & Broad St at 3:00pm. Dress in business suits, demand your bailout.'

Flash mobs first emerged in 2003 as a form of participatory performance art, with groups of people using email, blogs, text messages, and Twitter to arrange to meet and perform some kind of playful activity in a public location.¹ More recently, activists have begun to harness the political potential of flash mobs for organizing spontaneous mass actions on short notice.

Flash mobs have recently become a powerful tactic for political protest, particularly under repressive conditions. In the midst of a harsh crackdown on protests in Belarus in 2011, for instance, dissidents calling themselves "Revolution through the Social Network" began organizing impromptu demonstrations where protesters would simply gather in public spaces and clap their hands in unison.² The result was the bewildering sight of secret police brutally arresting people³ for the simple act of clapping their hands — a pow-



From the "How to Protest Intelligently" pamphlet circulated in Egypt in January 2011.

erful challenge to the legitimacy of an increasingly irrational regime.

The overthrow of President Hosni Mubarak in Egypt also involved flash-mob-like tactics, with organizers calling for protesters to gather initially in alleys and other protected spaces for safety before moving into the streets in larger and larger numbers. Blogger Patrick Meier explains the innovative thinking behind this approach:

Starting small and away from the main protests is a safe way to pool protesters together. It's also about creating an iterative approach to a "strength in numbers" dynamic. As more people crowd the smaller streets, this gives a sense of momentum and confidence. Starting in alleyways localizes the initiative. People are likely neighbors and join because they see their friend or sister out in the street.⁴

Another example of effective use of the flash mob tactic is UK Uncut. In October 2010, one week after the British government announced massive cuts to public services, seventy people occupied a Vodaphone store in London to draw attention to the company's record of unpaid taxes. The idea quickly went viral: within three days, over thirty Vodaphone stores had been shut down around the country by flash mobs organizing over Twitter using the hashtag #ukuncut.

The revolutionary potential for dispersed, coordinated action using flash mob tactics has only begun to be realized. As Micah White wrote in *Adbusters*:

Fun, easy to organize, and resistant to both infiltration and preemption because of their friend-to-friend network topology, flash mobs are positioned to be the next popular tactic with revolutionary potential. . . . With flash mobs, activists have the potential to swarm capitalism globally.⁵

Related:

TACTICS

Creative Disruption (p.341)
Guerrilla Musical (p.344)
Invisible Theater (p.341)
Carnival-Protest (p.344)
Mass Street Action (p.336)
Distributed Action (p.336)

THEORIES

The Social Cure (p.341)
Movement as Network (p.344)

CASE STUDIES

Orange Alternative (p.341)
UK/US Uncut (p.341)

PRINCIPLES

at work

Simple Rules Can Have Grand Results (p.134)

OTHER PRINCIPLES AT WORK:

No one wants to watch a drum circle (p.134)

Enable, Don't Command (p.139)

If Protest is Illegal, Make Daily

Life a Protest (p.139)

Be Expressive and Instrumental, But

Don't Confuse the Two (p.139)

SIMPLE RULES CAN HAVE GRAND RESULTS: Whether it's a mass pillow fight (bring a pillow, hit anyone else carrying a pillow), or a bank shut-down (get in line, ask the teller you'd like to withdraw your entire account balance in pennies, and be disarmingly polite), the invitation to participate in a flash mob is easy to share, but when multiplied by tens or hundreds of people, can lead to complex, dispersed and powerfully effective actions.

¹ The understanding of "flash mobs" that has filtered into popular culture is generally limited to *surprise choreographed dance routines performed in public*. But for organizing purposes, those carefully choreographed stunts are better described as "guerrilla" than "flash." (See TACTIC: [Guerrilla Musicals](#).) The distinct characteristics of a flash mob – an *unrehearsed, spontaneous, contagious, and dispersed mass action* – has its own unique advantages, and requires a different set of organizing principles than a surprise choreographed dance routine requires.

² "Dozens Arrested in Belarus 'Clapping' Protest," *Al Jazeera English*, July 3, 2011.

³ http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dj_ZGJynm_w

⁴ "Civil Resistance Tactics Used in Egypt's Revolution," <http://irevolution.net/2011/02/27/tactics-egypt-revolution-jan25>.

⁵ Micah White, "To the Barricades," *Adbusters* 94 (March/April 2011).

CASE STUDY: Florida Modern Slavery Museum

WHEN

2010 – present

WHERE

Exhibit has toured from Florida
Florida to Massachusetts

PRACTITIONERS

Coalition of Immokalee Workers (p.433)
Student/Farmworker Alliance (p.428)
*Interfaith Action of Southwest
Florida (p.432)*
Just Harvest USA (p.428)

FURTHER INSIGHT

*Florida Modern-Day Slavery
Museum website*
<http://trb.la/n19aSF>

CONTRIBUTED BY

Coalition of Immokalee Workers

In December 2008, farm labor contractors Cesar and Giovanni Navarrete were each sentenced to 12 years in prison for their part in what U.S. Attorney Doug Molloy called “slavery, plain and simple.” According to the Justice Department, the employers “pleaded guilty to beating, threatening, restraining, and locking workers in trucks to force them to work as agricultural laborers... [They] were accused of paying the workers minimal wages and driving the workers into debt, while simultaneously threatening physical harm if the workers left their employment before their debts had been repaid to the Navarrete family.”



A man tours the inside of the box truck that houses the Florida Modern Slavery Museum. Photo courtesy of Fritz Myer.

Although shocking in its details, the Navarrete case was simply the latest link in a long, unbroken chain of exploitation – including forced labor – in Florida’s fields. It was the seventh farm labor operation to be prosecuted for servitude in the state in the past decade, cases involving well over 1,000 workers and more than a dozen employers in total. The federal government has since initiated two additional prosecutions, bringing the total to nine as of 2011.

Even setting aside forced labor, farm work in the U.S. still offers the worst combination of sub-poverty wages, dangerous, back-breaking working conditions, and lack of fundamental labor protections. In this context of structural poverty and powerless-



The Florida Modern Slavery Museum is exhibited on the National Mall, Washington, D.C., June 2010. Photo courtesy of Fritz Myer.

ness, extreme forms of abuse such as forced labor are able to take root and flourish. However these cases are reflective of the impunity and exploitation that is rampant throughout the agricultural sector. In other words, modern-day slavery does not take place in a vacuum, nor is it an inevitable feature of our food system.

To highlight these abuses and to identify their causes and solution, the Coalition of Immokalee Workers — a community-based farmworker organization — decided in 2010 to create the Florida Modern-Day Slavery Museum. The mobile museum consists of a cargo truck carefully outfitted as a replica of the trucks involved in the Navarrete case and a collection of displays on the history and evolution of slavery in Florida over the past four hundred years. The multimedia exhibits were developed in consultation with workers who have escaped from forced labor operations, as well as leading academic authorities on slavery and labor history in Florida.

With a team of farmworker and ally docents, the museum toured Florida intensively, visiting churches, schools, universities and community centers for six weeks in the lead-up to the Coalition of Immokalee Workers’ three-day Farmworker Freedom March in 2010.

People’s reactions to the museum were so overwhelmingly positive and such a buzz was generated that the CIW later decided to tour outside of Florida to cities throughout the Southeast and Northeast, including a stop on the National Mall in Washington, DC. In March 2011, former President Jimmy Carter visited the museum in Atlanta, Georgia. Approximately 10,000 people have toured the museum since its creation.

Related:

CASE STUDIES

Taco Bell Boycott (p.341)

WHY IT WORKED

The Coalition of Immokalee Workers closely links education and action in its work. The last panel of the museum highlighted the ongoing Campaign for Fair Food as a systemic solution to the problem of farmworker exploitation. And since the Florida tour occurred during the lead-up to a major mobilization, docents were able to extend countless personal invitations for museum-goers (i.e., grocery shoppers) to join the three-day march to the corporate headquarters of Publix Super Markets, one of the CIW's main campaign targets. The museum was not only an educational tool but an organizing tool, reminding attendees of their own capacity for social change and the indispensable role they could play alongside farmworkers in transforming the food system.

right in the center of town. There's nothing like a museum on wheels to draw people's attention, not to mention a museum on wheels that addresses such a pressing and controversial topic as modern-day slavery. It was an effective conversation starter.

TEAM UP WITH EXPERT ADVISERS: A key factor that lent the museum credibility was the support garnered for the project from leading academic authorities on modern-day slavery and Florida's labor history. Several academics had the opportunity to offer crucial feedback on organizers' draft research brief. Others contributed "blurbs" similar to the advance praise you might read on the back of a book jacket, which were included in the museum booklet (which was itself a polished version of the research brief) so that attendees would know that the museum's content had been independently vetted.

KEY TACTIC

used

Public Art (p.341)

PUBLIC ART: The museum was not a "work of art" in the conventional sense of the term, but it did transform both the public spaces it inhabited and the people who viewed it. Through a host of different media and creative displays — the highlight of which was the careful re-creation of the Naverrete operation inside the truck itself — the museum was able to reach viewers at a visceral level.

KEY PRINCIPLES

at work

Show Don't Tell (p.134)

Take the Show on the Road (p.139)

Team Up With Expert Advisers (p.145)

OTHER PRINCIPLES AT WORK:

Take Leadership from the

Most Impacted (p.134)

Make the Invisible Visible (p.139)

Deploy Sympathetic Characters (p.139)

Reframe (p.139)

SHOW DON'T TELL: It is often very difficult for people to accept that modern-day slavery is a systemic problem facing U.S. agriculture. The thought that the tomato topping your hamburger or tossed in your salad may have been picked by a slave -- and was certainly picked by someone receiving very low wages for very difficult work -- can trigger a denial impulse that is difficult to break through. But the museum, by using actual historical artifacts, presented a tight and irrefutable indictment of the status quo that was able to pierce this veil and open peoples' minds to dialogue and possibly collective action.

TAKE THE SHOW ON THE ROAD: Instead of waiting for people to come to Immokalee to visit the museum, the CIW brought the museum to the people. With the museum as Exhibit A of an old-fashioned speaking tour, the museum crew toured across Florida and the Eastern US, often parking the exhibit



PRINCIPLE:

Use the Jedi mind trick (a.k.a. Confidence is contagious)

IN SUM

The Jedi mind trick worked for Luke Skywalker, and it can work for you, too. You just have to believe in yourself, and others will, too.

PRACTITIONERS

SimpleList (p.400)

FURTHER INSIGHT

How to be an expert persuader in 20 days or less
<http://trb.la/45cD1a>

Wookieepedia entry on the mind trick
<http://trb.la/r65N4d>

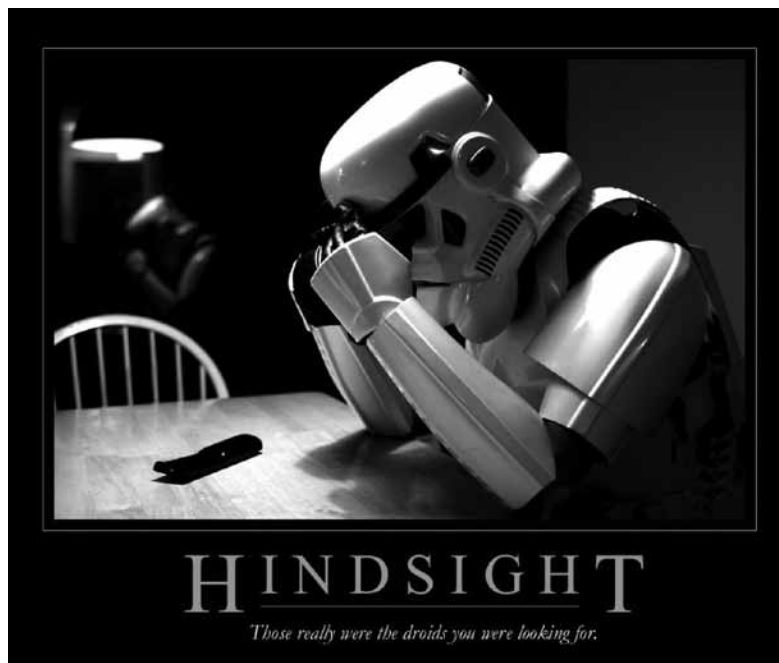
Kid gives inspiring speech on the power of believing in yourself
<http://trb.la/hC34bM>

CONTRIBUTED BY

Samantha Corbin (p.433)

“Whether you think you can, or you think you can’t — you’re right.”
- Henry Ford

Aside from being able to move objects with your mind and having a retractable sword made out of freaking light (how cool is that??), the best thing about being a Jedi has got to be the mind trick. The ability to persuade with a calm voice and a finger wave, “These aren’t the droids you’re looking for,” could prove indispensable in any number of beautiful trouble-making situations.



Use the Jedi mind trick on people you aren't likely to see again.

Good news: this hypnotic power of persuasion is actually within your reach. It springs from an innate authority, an irrational confidence that mystically bends the world to your will. Though this may not work on your bill collector (“I’m not the deadbeat you’re looking for”), it may work in convincing the mainstream media to cover your event or

the police to leave you alone. You might even pass unchallenged through the front gate of a nuclear power plant, or take charge of a closed-door meeting to which you weren’t invited. With the right attitude, much more becomes possible than you might have thought.

With nothing more than a confidence, an activist adept at the Jedi mind trick can make a security guard look the other way, or convince thousands of people, including a BBC news anchor, that he is a DOW chemical spokesperson, or that it’s perfectly normal to wear a climbing helmet in the middle of a convention center and start climbing the scaffolding.

Here are a couple of things to keep in mind as you prepare to break out the Jedi mind trick on an unsuspecting low-level functionary:

Know the rules, suspend the rules: The ability to transgress, trespass, or otherwise do what you shouldn’t with complete self-assurance, especially if challenged, carries its own power.

Act like you belong (a.k.a. fake it ‘till you get kicked out): Authority is more performed than innate. We constantly interact with and respond to coded indicators of status and authority, making assumptions based on attitude, manner, dress, accent, friendliness, sexiness, and other cues. By understanding and playing on these indicators we can also co-opt the authority attached to them.

POTENTIAL PITFALLS: *Beware the backlash.* The Jedi mind trick wears off quickly, and tends to leave the unsuspecting dupe it was used on angry and embarrassed. No one likes to feel like they got tricked. Use this tactic only with people you’re unlikely to see again. To avoid unnecessary backlash, tell the truth as much as possible and let other people fill in their own assumptions.

Related:

TACTICS

Infiltration (p.341)

Creative Disruption (p.344)

PRINCIPLES

Use People’s Pjudices

Against them (p.134)

CASE STUDIES

Bidder 70 (p.341)