Play, Politics, & the Practice of Resistance

Daniel Møller Ølgaard

> Do not think that one has to be sad in order to be militant, even though the thing one is fighting is abominable. It is the connection of desire to reality (and not its retreat into the forms of representation) that possesses revolutionary force
>
> (Foucault 1977: XII)

Prologue

Politics are Fun Again

It is a seductive and influential image of our contemporary world that Jean Baudrillard presents. In the transition from the modern era of manual production to the postmodern age of global information technologies, our world 'has been launched into hyperspace in a kind of postmodern apocalypse … leaving us satellites in aimless orbit around an empty center' (Massumi 1987: 90). The substitution of reality with the signs and symbols that simulates reality means that everything is essentially empty, passive and without meaning. Art has become the art of pure reproduction of signs that may tease but never disturb order (Kellner 1989: 109-111). And politics has lost its antagonistic dimension as critique of those-in-power merely 'dignifies power's claim on reality' rendering the practice of resistance 'an unending, self-regenerating, tautological spiral' (Fardy 2012: 185). But there is also another image of our world floating around today. During the last decade or so, rather than a state of apathy,

> we have witnessed the creation of a worldwide movement against neoliberalism [and] a continuous wave of riots, strikes, and occupations across the world, emerging with a frequency and intensity historically

unmatched since the last great social movements of the 1960s and 70s (Nail 2013).

Alongside this eruption, attention has returned to the role of aesthetics in the study of international politics (Bleiker 2001) and specifically how art 'comes to situate itself' in framing the debate on the interplay between 'art, politics, and resistance' (Jabri 2006: 819). We might still formulate powerful forms of critique today through aesthetical experience and creative forms of expression (Harrebye 2013). As Zizek (2005) asks: 'Is not precisely the 'postmodern' politics of resistance permeated with aesthetic phenomena' showing to us 'the aesthetico-political … at its purest?' (79).

It certainly seems so as movements such as the Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army, Occupy Wall Street and Reclaim the Streets are reconfiguring the face of radical politics in the recent decade, preferring 'mocking satire and feather dusters' to 'guns and sticks' (Sharpe 2009: 181). They ask how 'social movements combine live performance with guerrilla tactics in an effort to find agency' (Shawyer 2007: 153), promoting a form of resistance that utilizes the signs and symbols of art for the very practice of critique Baudrillard claims they pacify. In a sense, it is a revival of Situationism, a political movement founded on Guy Debord's critique of late capitalist society, one of whose defining members held that to 'work on the side of delight and authentic festivity can hardly be distinguished from preparing for a general insurrection' (Vaneigem 1965: 25). More importantly though, this aesthetic move marks an epistemological turn for political resistance by recognizing Rancière's observation that politics 'revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak' (Ranciere 2004: 13). Thus, to 'enter into political exchange, it becomes necessary to *invent the scene* upon which words may be audible, in which objects may be visible, and individuals themselves may be recognized' (Rancière & Panagia 2000: 115). The political promise of the aesthetic move of resistance is thus to enable the ability of art and creative expression to *invent* and *embody* a space where critique can be spoken, enacted, heard, and seen (Harrebye 2013: 4), allowing politics to become fun again.

Based on this simple but central observation, I introduce the concept of *play* to describe the political potential of aesthetic forms of

protest today. I shall illustrate this choice with a brief excerpt from Greenwald's (2014) first encounter with Edward Snowden: Based on Greenwald's many years of journalistic experience working with whistle-blowers, Greenwald had expected a seasoned government employee in the autumn of his professional career and thus less afraid to risk it. The man he met did not look a day past 30. To address Greenwald's embezzlement, Snowden explained that he had mustered the courage to expose the National Security Agency by *playing* computer games. While often regarded as a meaningless activity, computer games had reminded Snowden that even the most powerless individual can fight injustice. It was in this sense an *act of play* that would bring Snowden to publish his material and, eventually, force the US administration to address their secret surveillance practices in public. With this story, I seek to highlight the relevance of examining the emancipative, and transformative, potential of playful activities; to make clear the need for an extensive analysis of playful action that moves beyond the traditional accounts of the activity as an act of pure simulation and fantasy. As the story and the earlier mentioned examples show quite clearly, playfulness, like critique, is also a way to intervene in a given reality through the invention of a new scene, and new possibilities for subjects to speak, show, see, and hear. Play is thus an aesthetic practice, and should perhaps therefore also be seen as a central element in politics. Rather than being merely a symptom of the victory of the simulacrum, this article puts forward the idea that *play* may serve as a template for investigating the political potential of creative protest action specifically and the interplay between aesthetics, politics, and resistance more widely.

In seeking the answer to this question, this also constitutes an attempt to engage with some of the wider issues in the study of the self, politics and resistance. Michel Foucault's work is central to this inquiry as it builds on a careful examination of historic practices and discourses that renders the modern self a docile body, subjected to the control of social institutions under the guise of increased measures of individual freedom and humanism (Foucault 1988; 1991). Yet, while much of Foucault's work shares Baudrillard's pessimism, one identifies in Foucault also a highly optimistic account of the possibility of autonomous action and self-determination (Foucault 1982, Rabinow 1997: 281-302). There must always be sites of resistance to dominant

schemes of power, he argued, and the task at hand was to locate these and to determine the most effective strategies and tactics for their practice. Ultimately, my argument seeks to challenge Baudrillard's dystopia and replace it with the possibility of a subversive ethics of political play.

I.

The Ethics of Resistance

The Depoliticization of Politics

I start out this inquiry by asking: How do we return politics to the subject, and what is the role of subjectivity, aesthetics and creativity in this process? To investigate these questions we must first come to understand the relationship between self and society, the subject and the political. How do human subjects come to be governed by politics, and more importantly, how do we take back agency and autonomy? In Foucault's analysis of modern society, the human subject moves, seemingly voluntarily, between institutions characterized as "enclosed, segmented space" in which "each individual figure is constantly located, examined and distributed" (Foucault 1991: 197). This *governmentality* constitutes subjects characterized by imposed as well as self-imposed control; a strategy that renders the subject a *docile* body in the face of its rulers. In addition to this disciplinary strategy of power aimed at the individual, biopower takes as its object of politics populations as such. In combining these forms of governance, modern liberal democracies are not only defined by disciplinary, punitive practices, but is just as much comprised of techniques aimed at monitoring the needs and increasing the life chances of its populations (Reid & Dillon 2009).

This increasingly global mode of governmentality renders the individual an object of various forms of control, and it disguises these globalized practices (such as war, imprisonment and torture) as paradoxically productive of life, with major consequences for how we are able to think ethically about the conduct of politics, war and society today (see e.g. Jabri 2010, Dillon & Reid 2009, Hardt & Negri 2004, Agamben 2005, Butler 2010). Instead of looking at systems of enclosure, Deleuze (1992) thus encourages us to investigate the 'the ultra-rapid forms of free-flowing control that replaced the old

disciplines' and how, within this crisis of the institutions of the modern era, we are constantly faced with emerging practices and discourses fluctuating between emancipation and control (Ibid: 4). Graeber (2009) e.g. shows how globalization of capitalism, rather than an emancipatory process that removes physical borders and battles inequality is 'the creation of the first genuinely planetary bureaucratic system in human history' (ibid: XI). The result is a democratic deficit that lies at the heart of the modern, liberal state, where politics is removed from the subject. By transforming the subject into an object of governance, representational politics becomes depoliticized in a sense. This is a global process where 'ideological visions … who compete for power is replaced by a collaboration of enlightened technocrats' (Zizek 2005: 72). The emergence of this global mode of governmentality is 'the attempt [to] de-antagonize politics by way of formulating the clear rules to be obeyed' and thus prevent deliberative democracy to 'explode into politics proper' (Ibid:71).

Unveiling the present condition of politics shows to us the 'frontier possibility of self-determination' (Foucault 1989: 66). To Foucault, this frontier possibility is closely related to notions of *knowledge* and *truth* which 'defines the conditions of possibility … whether expressed in a theory or silently invested in a practice' (Foucault 1970: 168). Foucault himself often described this play of forces as so-called 'games of truth,' and it is the exact way in which games of truth establishes objective knowledge about subjects and society that allows for self-determination to be decreased and for politics to become, in turn, depoliticized. On the other hand, the way in which the self *plays* these games of truth can have a transformative effect on the configuration of society. How might we then more specifically understand the role the subject *plays* in them?

The Playful Subject

'Games of Truth' is Foucault's concept for describing the ways in which the self is at once a subject and an object of discourses of knowledge and practices of power. The self is not only subjected *to* power as an object of knowledge or practices of control, it is also always the subject *of* power/knowledge. There 'is no subject that is already formed,' and in this sense 'the self is not only a constant *beginning* but also a constant *end*' (Ball & Olmedo 2013: 87). In fact, the

real basis of the self is its role as both agent and object (ibid). It is this constant divide of the self as at once governed by others and governing itself that leads Foucault to the idea of 'truth games' where the position of the self in relation to others and itself is constantly renegotiated. The possibility of self-constitution and -transformation arises from the subject in the form of a constant *becoming-subject;* the subject being capable of having multiple subjectivities. As Foucault explicitly states in explaining his concept of truth games:

> You do not have the same type of relationship to yourself when you constitute yourself as a political subject who goes to vote or speaks at a meeting and when you are seeking to fulfil your desires in a sexual relationship ... In each case, *one plays*, one establishes a different type of relationship to oneself (Foucault 1997a: 290–291, emphasis added).

In the third and last volume of Foucault's *History of Sexuality* the concept 'care for the self' emerged. Foucault traces its origins all the way to the philosophy of the Ancient Greeks, who were among the first to express the fundamental principle in the governing of self and others in this way. To a human individual, whose dominant relation to society is that of subjectivity, the main problem is for the subject to 'turn its gaze upon itself' (Rabinow 1997: 29). One might thus characterize the care for the self as a way to redeem politics to the site of the individual though a constant process of self-reflection and critique rather than the search for an object of divinity. To truly understand this *art of life* as a practice of resistance we must depart from the traditional notion of self-formation, *sophrosyne*, that is grounded in an hierachical, artistocratic understanding of society (Bogue 1994: 7). While this form of self-regulation as envisioned in Ancient Greece was mainly aimed at people in power to become masters of themselves as to be able to become a pure ruler of others, in Deleuze's account of Foucault, the *telos* of the constitution and formation of self is that very intimate internalization of power, whereby the inside and outside of the subject is united. This ultimately allows this playful self to utilize those power-relations one might see as exterior, dominant forces of control on to itself. In this way 'the telos

[of self-constitution] which Foucault discusses in terms of self-mastery, virility, truth and aesthetics, becomes in Deleuze's reformulation a fold of freedom and aesthetic self-creation' (Ibid: 13).

What Deleuze here identifies in Foucault's ethical writings is the possibility of the self as the creative centre of an aesthetical practice of resistance. By considering the relation between the subject and the objects of "truth" through reflection and critique, the self utilizes experience and problematizes the very process of consensus: Objectification. This makes the role of the outside forces of rule and domination an internalization of force. Here, the self becomes the 'locus of resistance' (ibid: 14) whose thoughts 'thinks its own history' of experience in order to 'liberate itself from that which it thinks' and to be able to finally 'think otherwise' about its own possibilities and limits (Foucault 1984: 127). To Deleuze, this desiring, creative self is essentially 'one that is anarchic, rather than aristocratic, conceived of as a mode of resistance to asymmetrical power relations rather than an integral part of such' (Bogue 1994: 20-21).

Ethics, Desire, & Creativity

As *control,* to Foucault, is nothing more than a strategy, a set of techniques, practices and discourses, so resistance, rather than a moment or an event, is a continuous practice that depends partly 'on the way of life (ethos) we somehow choose for ourselves' (Chokr 2006: 13). Thus, Foucault 'privileges localized struggle … and ongoing resistance to the minutiae of domination over grand emancipatory projects that endorse totalizing visions of social transformation' (Tobias 2005: 68). Because the self is at once the subject and object of power relations, it follows that it is the self that is also the site of resistant practice. This relocates the politics of resistance away from the organizing principle of representational politics and towards the individual. Cook (2013: 976), based on a Foucault reading, thus claims that since modern governmentality makes us 'prisoners of certain conceptions of ourselves and of our conduct', the aim of any strategy of resistance is to 'liberate our subjectivity, our relation to ourselves', which requires attacking the roots of the political rationalities that define power relations and which result in modes of individualization, totalizing visions and practices of control. This 'epistemological' understanding of resistance fosters a strategy of constant transgression

of established 'truths'; interventions that forces reflections on who and what are excluded from this 'truth' (Pickett 1996: 448). Resistance is, as such, the constant refusal of consensus.

Foucault linked this understanding of resistance to the Deleuzian concept of 'desire' in his preface to Deleuze & Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus* (Foucault 1977). Here, 'desire' means to 'embody the power of differential reproduction or becoming-other which is the condition of creativity' (Patton 2000: 69-70). As such, change is brought out by shifts in the configurations of desire in a given society and as such, *desiring-production* emerges as a central feature of political resistance. Three things are central in understanding desiring-production:

> (1) There is no subject that lies behind the production ... (2) the "desire" in desiring-production is not oriented to making up a lack, but is purely *positive*. Desiring-production is autonomous, self-constituting, and creative ... [and (3) desiring-production] does not connect "with" reality, as in escaping a subjective prison to touch the objective, but it *makes reality* (Stanford Encyclopaedia 2012)

The main point in combining Deleuze and Foucault is to understand how the concepts of desire and creativity are both relevant to understanding how the subject can actualize its political agency through an ethics of resistance. What Deleuze explicitly states is that this creative principle of desiring-production is fundamental to the human subject, and thus conditions the role of the self as the central site of resistance. Instead of merely constituting new forms of political representation, what is central to this notion of resistance is to focus instead on how the subject continuously seeks to actualize its desires through creative, aesthetic experience and production. Here we approach the final point I wish to make; in the current assemblage of modern, liberal societies, acts of resistance must be regarded as a way of life, an ethos, or continuous practice. Opposed to the view of neoliberal governmentality, or post-politics, as an all-pervasive, inescapable condition of politics today, resistance understood as ethics highlight a subject that *acts* in spite of its claimed docility. Since the human subject is already and always part of certain games of truth, it is

the way in which it participates in them that determines their outcome. It must act not to understand and define its role in the world *as is* and achieve freedom as a condition, but must seek constantly to imagine and create alternative realities, the very act of which enables the subject to continuously connect its desire to these and actualize it as a practice of resistance. Central to this ethos is continuous critique, self-reflexivity and creativity.

This, we might certainly characterize as an ethics of resistance. For as the self-constituting, desiring subject *plays* games of truth through critique, reflection, and creative desiring-production it might also come to play them in an emancipatory way. These include the direct refusal of domination and control; critical, reflexive thought where the self comes to realise its own role in these very practices; and lastly, the concrete search for an alternative reality, which Deleuze calls *desiring-production* understood here as the creative, aesthetic constitution of a different 'reality'. While few have dwelled much on the notion of this playful self, I shall now explore the perpetual interplay between play and politics and contextualize them along the categories of subjective resistance identified on the preceding pages. The following chapter is divided in two parts: The first part paints a thematic, historical and theoretical overview, and the second zooms in on contemporary political protest movements.

II.

Play & Politics

Play, Culture and the Disruption of Order

In the late 1930's, Johan Huizinga described the human species as *Homo Ludens*, or *Man, the player*. Where traditional theories of play 'start from the assumption that play must serve something which is *not* play, that it must have some kind of biological purpose' such as 'training of the young creature for the serious work that life will demand later on … an exercise in restraint [or] the necessary restorer of energy wasted by one-sided activity,' Huzinga defined play in- and by itself as the formative element of human culture; 'a special form of activity [with] a social function' (Huizinga 1949: 97-98). Play 'only becomes thinkable and understandable when an influx of *mind* breaks

down the absolute determinism of the cosmos' and bursts 'the bounds of the physically existent' (ibid: 99).

As humans 'recognize that the other individual's and its own signals are only signals' play also functions as a form of non-verbal communication (Bateson 2006: 315). As opposed to automatic behavioural response, this realization allows for signals of communication to be 'trusted, distrusted, falsified, denied, amplified, corrected, and so forth' by its participants (ibid). When engaging in play, humans (and animals) have the ability to separate real fighting from playful fighting, and play as a form of meta-communication thus happens beyond the spoken word and thus reveals itself as a context that allows for new cultural possibilities to continuously be explored by facilitating an 'open' setting that is not determined by the structure of language (Henricks 2011: 162).

The Fictional Capacity of Play

Caillois (2006) derived claim is that play as an ideal type must be defined as a *free* practice; the role of play is to remove the masks we wear, and to put the secret out in the open for everybody to see. Play, as opposed to games and ritual, is free in the sense that it has no defined outcome or sacramental function, no set rules of conduct and no pre-existing dogma that conditions its manifestation:

> A game which one would be forced to play would at once cease being play … As an obligation or simply an order, it would lose one of its basic characteristics [namely that the] player devotes himself … of his free will … each time completely free to choose retreat, silence, mediation, idle solitude or creative activity' (ibid: 125)

As such, playfulness is as an example of the open, 'order-breaking eruptions of collective imagination' (Henricks 2011: 159). In play 'people themselves control the course of events; in ritual, they subordinate themselves to otherness' (ibid: 163-164). It is this playful, creative impulse which 'has been critical to processes of societal self-consciousness and renewal throughout history' and which defines subjects 'as active explorers and negotiator of societal possibility' (ibid: 162) rather than docile bodies. Play allows for open-ended explorations

of new social and political possibilities; a social process of 'critical inquiry' focused on creativity and dialogue rather than mastery (Morris, Rorabaugh, & Stommel 2013).

Fiction is not only a valuable source for investigating the playful elements of human culture and society, it also illustrates how 'imagining utopia' is an intensely political act that allows for one to imagine alternative realities (Koh 2014). Edward Said emphasized the importance of the banned comics of his childhood in 'its untidy, sprawling format, the colourful, riotous extravagance of its pictures ... exotic creatures and adventures' (Said 2001: Preface). The strength of the genre lies in its playful approach to challenging cosmic order and breaking the rules of a perceived reality, they ' say what couldn't otherwise be said … defying the ordinary processes of thought, which are policed, shaped and re-shaped by all sorts of pedagogical as well as ideological pressures' (ibid). The absurdity of specific works of visual art such as comics are thus excellent examples of the playful element of creative forms of expression in which 'techniques of comedy, metaphor, heightened imagery, fantasy and so on are used to break down our conventional, habit-dulled certainties about what the world is and has to be' (Koh 2014) . It is this playful element of culture which 'create[s] a space for a world to be imagined differently ... which can be one day translated into reality' (ibid). This form of playful production 'move[s] from the sheer criticism of the existing state of things [to the] projection of how dominant social structures could be changed' (Desczc 2004: 32). In this way, play becomes a prefigurative intervention where imagination and fantasy is connected to a form of creative production.

A different take on the potentiality of playful activity emerges from playing computer games. Historically, the human species have been fascinated with trickery and the magic of personal transformation; we 'wish to attach ourselves to images or resemblances of idealized personages and to draw from them their powers' (Henricks 2011: 162). Thus, the political relevance of *mimicry* as a playful activity 'refers to the obsessive desire of humans to escape the boundaries and limitations of their own selfhood'(ibid) and to turn around or play with notions of what the self can and must do in a given society. Today, computer games such as the widely popular Grand Theft Auto (GTA) allow a high degree of self-determination and the ability to act out for the

player – often in an extremely violent and norm-defying fashion. This *ludic* logic of play removes the need for predefined structures, and allows personal experience to influence the course of action. Yet, in addition the game also allows for the player to act out a *memetic* desire for 'otherness'. In Grand Theft Auto, in most cases, one plays a character that is wildly different from oneself and thus allows for the exploration of new (political) possibilities – to act out *difference* (Duncombe 2007: 56-59). Playing games in this way can have a transformative political effect when, as Harper puts it, 'the right games are played in the wrong way' (Harper 2009).

An example of playing a game 'the wrong way' emerged during the 2009 riots in London where the police utilized a method for exhausting protesters known as the 'kettling' method whose tactic is to encircle peaceful protesters and refuse to let them go. *Metakettle* quickly emerged as a form of counter-action aimed at continuously changing the movement of protesters to prevent any surrounding by the police. In practice, one shouts 'Metakettle' to start the game, participants then start shouting animal names to form a team. Protesters gain members to their respective groups by entirely encircling them, creating an indeterminate pattern of movement inside the surrounded group of protesters, which makes it difficult for police to enforce the kettle and distracts protesters from feeling detained. Metakettle can be understood as a form of action

> designed to appropriate a particular situation and playfully turn it around. It is carnivalesque play at its best —an appropriation of a situation turned into the absurd through play that shows a political interpretation of the situation in which it is played (Sicart 2014: 74-75).

These cheats, toys and tricks can all be utilized by the playing subject to 'facilitate an epistemic moment beyond the seduction of playing tricks and gaming' (Charmante 2007). The use of absurdity and comic appropriation is political when the subject playfully subverts its present condition, reformulates the possibilities of action and oneself itself differently. The fictional capacity of play adds an extra element to this, as it allows oneself to move from criticism to the projection or imagination of concrete alternatives. But it is the performative capacity

of play, to which we shall now turn, that realizes this political potential to the fullest.

The Theatre of the Everyday

For centuries, theatre has been a cultural activity aimed at entertaining the public. One thing that is especially noteworthy - Shakespeare is one of the earliest and most well-known examples of this - is the role of the clown fool in dramatic performance. In most traditional accounts the fool is seen as a mechanism of social control – a laughing stock meant to exemplify the unwanted consequences of undisciplined, untrustworthy behaviour (as in Bergson 1914). Yet, in Shakespearean plays, the importance of the fool is its wisdom-in-folly (Asimov 1970). Exactly because the fool stands simultaneously on the inside and the outside of power, both alien and recognizable to society and their sovereign ruler, the clown-fool 'operates as antirulers' (Amoore & Hall 2013). They offer to their spectators 'sceptical, unencumbered viewpoints that scorn pride and challenge such concepts as logic … and solution' (Janik 1998: XIV). Just like *metakettle*, the clown-fool playfully appropriates situations and facilitates a new political interpretation.

It should be no surprise then that throughout history the clown-fool has served as a medium for subaltern, dominated social groups to foster and inspire resistance. In pre-civil-war North American slave communities, the Brier Rabbit tales tells of how the 'clown-trickster', in this case a seemingly inferior rabbit, uses cleverness and trickery to outsmart and defeat its apparently superior enemy, the wolf (Scott 1990: 163). It is hardly surprising that since these tales were fables elaborated by slaves and others under domination, the 'position of the trickster hero and the stratagems he deploys bear a marked resemblance to the existential dilemma of subordinate groups' (Ibid: 162-163). But these tales were not fables meant to conceal dissent. Most importantly, the seemingly innocent stories of the clown, trickster and the fool offered the subordinated groups a space where they could openly declare and idolize dissent. As Scott (ibid: 166) puts it

> the heavy disguise [these tales wear] must all but eliminate the pleasure it gives. While it is surely less satisfying than an open declaration ... [it] carves out a public, if provisional, space for the autonomous cultural expression of dissent

As such, the clown, the trickster and the fool embodies a unique social and historical persona that has been allowed to speak truth to power - even under domination (Amoore & Hall 2013). Through techniques of mockery, laughter and trickery, those in power can be questioned and ridiculed *in public*. True to Caillois ideal of play, these stories can serve to demystify objects of truth and divinity and enable the spectators to engage in a reflexive process which exposes absurd, dominant power structures and persistent social order.

This cultural dynamic is perhaps most clearly embodied by the ancient traditional of the Carnival. Through its dense, chaotic web of intersubjective dialogue, the Saturnalia, commonly referred to as the carnival feast, emerges as a playful element of premodern human society that allowed for cultural expression and dialogue to grow, and to transform in non-predictive and non-manageable ways (Bakhtin 1981: 422). As Agamben reminds us, in every carnival feast

> existing social relations are suspended or inverted: not only do slaves command their masters, but sovereignty is placed in the hands of a mock king … who takes the place of the legitimate king. In this way the feast reveals itself to be above all a deactivation of existing values and powers (Agamben 2014: 70)

To play and take part in such public performances is to break the established rules, and continually explore the limit-possibilities of existence. To Augosto Boal, any form of cultural production is relevant only when it transgresses the division between the real and imagination (Boal 1992: 246-247). His 'Theatre of the Oppressed' was defined as a method for breaking down the barrier between the active actor and the passive spectator:

> [Its] objective is to encourage autonomous activity, to set a process in motion, to stimulate transformative creativity, to change spectators into protagonists. [Thus, theatre] should be the initiator of changes the culmination of which is not the aesthetic phenomenon but real life (ibid: 245).

Theatre has nothing to do with its buildings or stages. Rather, it 'is the capacity, this human property which allows man to observe himself in action, in activity … It allows him to imagine variations of his action, to study alternatives' (Boal 1995: 13). Through the playful engagement of its spectators the 'Theatre of the Oppressed is theatre in this most archaic application of the word [where] all human beings are Actors (they act!) and Spectators (they observe!),' and cultural production and performance can thus 'help us build our future, rather than just waiting for it' (Boal 1992: XXX).

Where ritual has a defined outcome, playful activity, such as Boal's theatre, seeks to constantly redefine and renegotiate this very outcome. It is thus intensely political. By using humour, irony or comic appropriation, one mocks and subverts practices of domination or questions figures of authority. In addition, one observes and acts simultaneously and thus reflects on one's relation to the surroundings. And by using fantasy and imagination, one prefiguratively forms alternative realities.

Memes, Masks, & the Politics of Imagination

To develop these points further, I analyse four specific cases of contemporary protest movements. These are: *Reclaim the Streets* (RTS); *The Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army* (CIRCA); *Occupy Wall Street* (OWS); and finally *Adbusters*. While they all demonstrate playfulness through techniques of performing, clowning, mimicking, and mocking they are also clearly politically antagonistic as their actions are carried out with reference to conditions deemed abominable. While critical voices commenting on these movements have characterized them as, essentially, senseless (New York Times 2011a) I argue, in pointing to the playful elements of their political action, that they should be valued based on their ability to display an *excess* of senses and desires, the

potentiality of which is realized through their public manifestation in the gaze of a global audience.

On the preceding pages we identified three categories of playful action, which correspond to the three levels of resistance established in chapter I. These are *comic appropriation*; *performativity and the mimic and play of self*; and *prefiguration*. To elaborate these categories further I ask: Where and with what (political) effects do we identify these playful elements of political action in the protest sensibility of contemporary resistance movements? While certainly much is still to be said about the political objectives of these movements, keeping the aim of the article in mind, I shall focus here exclusively on the political effects of resistance understood specifically as a practice; focusing primarily on methods, tactics and strategies rather than ideological content.

Comic Appropriation

On July 4th, 2005 at the G8 summit in Edinburgh it was a surprising sight that met the massive formations of riot police who had hours earlier removed large groups of rioting protesters by the use of force: They were facing a group of protesters dressed as clowns, known as the Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army (CIRCA). The atmosphere was tense. In a surprising turn of events, one clown-trickster suddenly started kissing riot shields vigorously, repeating the act on the entire front line of disciplined and uniformed police men. The act changed the atmosphere and created obvious confusion with a number of shared nervous smiles and a sense of disbelief – with clowns and police both (Bogad 2010: 182). At the same G8 summit, clowns and policemen were again caught in a stare off when suddenly

> [a] pair of clowns dressed as cops … start to count down – 'Five, four, three, two, one – go!' The (real) police and clowns rush towards each other …There is a floating moment of confusion and then they run into each other's open arms – clowns hug cops, cops hug clowns (Cultural Hijack 2013).

The symbolic effect is obvious – and so is the political. Through childish, naive behaviour that questions social roles and political structures which are usually predetermined and unquestioned, CIRCA's

illogical playfulness becomes a critical artifice of subversion (Amoore & Hall 2013: 100). By kissing and hugging symbols of force, CIRCA clearly demonstrates the power of playful appropriation, showing that affection in the face of violence not only distorts and redefines hierarchies of domination and subjectification; it increases the space for protest (New York Times 2011b).

This playful logic is visible also in the global visual phenomenon of *memes*. The meme is a cultural object with obvious elements of humor and ironic appropriation. Characterized as "difference and repetition" it combines singular pieces of text and image in new ways and makes them visible through its online transmission, spread and continuous repetition (Bratich 2014: 65). One is the iconic meme "Casually Pepper Spray Everything Cop". It combines the image of a police officer using pepper spray against protesters and playfully appropriates it by adding the image of the officer to classical, iconic paintings or simply adding sarcastic, mocking text bits such as "don't mind me - just watering my hippies". In this way, memes transforms the context of the original image in order to emphasize the act it depicts. And it does so through humour, which demonstrates to us how comic appropriation promises to criticize indirectly by drawing readers' attention to the absurdity of the act. In many ways, my understanding of the political effect of comic appropriation thus relates closely to Slavoj Zizek's analysis of subversion through Sloterdijk. The meme is thus

> the popular, plebeian rejection of the official culture by means of irony and sarcasm [used] to confront the pathetic phrases of the ruling official ideology [and] to hold them up to ridicule, thus exposing … egotistical interests, the violence, the brutal claims to power. [This] subverts the official proposition by confronting it with the situation of its enunciation (Zizek 1989: 29-30).

The playful, engaging and confronting nature of humour and comic appropriation creates a creative 'culture of active defiance as an alternative to the everyday life experience of many people' (Bogad 2010: 180). Through techniques of humour and comic appropriation, these forms of playful political action thus questions, resists and in turn

redefines practices of detainment that are *directly* aimed at them and thus turns any attempt to render protesting subjects as objects of control on its head.

Guerrilla Theatre & the Mimic Play of Self

But these playful acts might also foster subjective reflexivity. After a road accident on Camden High Street, two men got out of their car and started fighting. But it was not real – it was all an elaborate part of a public performance which marked the first protest action by Reclaim the Streets (RTS). Following the accident and the staged fight, which took place on May 14, 1995, the debris of the collision had blocked the road, leaving it empty, while the fight had summoned a large crowd which started throwing themselves into dance as sound systems started playing the repetitive rhythms of rave (Blanco 2013). The protest action carried out here by RTS was the first in a long line of street party protests and a prime example of the political effects of public performance. What is important to note is that this was not a performance confined to its original stage, and to the members of the RTS. Its success rested on the way in which it engaged people who were passing by in a spontaneous fashion (ibid). Similar to Boal's ideal of theater, this public display of frivolous activity melted together spectators (who observe) and actors (who act). It allowed for people, not only to observe the performance but also themselves. This process transforms the audience from passive on-lookers into active, self-conscious spectators; what Walter Benjamin described as the modern *flaneûr* who shifts his focus from the scene to his own *relation* to the scene *(*Glenn 1998: 60). A clear example of this is seen in protests where participants dress up with masks or costumes; Occupy Wall Street (OWS) being the obvious case. These public performances not only engage spectators in a direct way but force them to reflect on themselves; they foster reflexivity, a *mimic* play of self, beyond the mere public display of bodies.

Sigmund Freud and Henri Bergson were pioneers in determining the performative potential of mimicry. To them mimicry is tantalizing to its audience exactly because it displayed and ridiculed the mechanic, deterministic aspects of human nature (Freud 1938: 776, 782-783.). By pointing out these characteristics, one effectively unmasks and questions the very notion of a human "nature". These public

performances are fostering creativity and self-reflection, creating new spaces for dissent. Dressing up or masking has an effect beyond merely ridiculing and laughing at that which one is protesting against. By e.g. mimicking billionaires, as in the Billionaires for Bush marches, you not only mock their role in society; you engage the spectator by provoking self-reflexivity, questioning his or her relation to that which is displayed. An important point to add is that these performances are not only aimed at their direct spectators. Their indirect audience, reached through the gaze of media technologies, is crucial to the potentiality of these creative tactics (Jabri 2006: 176). Just like Boal's 'Theatre of the Opressed' these public performances can be said to engage its audiences and force them to reflect on their own relation to the scene they establish. This adds a self-reflective, self-transformative element to the appropriative effects of e.g. *memes.*

This partly explains how an online meme posted by Adbusters could lead to the occupation of Zucotti Park in New York and beyond**.** OWS'

> memetic character can be seen in its repetition as sign (fidelity via the term Occupy) and its variation (adaptation to local contexts, especially related to types of people, space, state alignments). Occupy could be used by anyone (Bratich 2014: 65).

This point was evidenced by the global spread of action under the OWS banner – in fact, the OWS itself sought partially to mimic the protests on Tahrir Square in Egypt. To restate an important point: In addition to my earlier points, it is the way in which it captures the global media gaze and effectively engages its subjects that the political potential of public performance and the mimic play of self lies. The space carved out for critique and self-reflection by the "guerrilla theatre" is not confined to its buildings and stages; as evidenced by the international spread of mimetic, performative protest behaviour; it is the global cry to engage in a reflexive self-consideration. The political promise of this proliferating play is that it forces the subject to confront the political enunciations on the stage, and thus in turn by its very doing so becoming a political subject itself.

Prefigurative Action

In addition to appropriation of hierarchical structures as well as self-critique and –reflection, playful action offers a third political procedure - prefiguration. This perhaps most intensely political aspect of playful action works by "showing" rather than "telling". The question is: How do you realize this so-called power of playful imagination? For imagination to become political it must also be public; it must manifest itself in the gaze of society. In meeting this ambition, I hold that the carnivalesque protest sensibility employed by OWS and RTS contains elements which bridge the gap between imagination and its actual realization by not only pointing to injustice, but *prefiguratively* intervening in the everyday logics of politics and society; understood as the attempt to embody those forms of social relations, decision-making, culture, and human experience that one wishes to see in a political practice (Boggs 1977). The political effects of this have already been identified through the actions of the AGM in Seattle in 1999, where protesters not only pointed out injustices but confronted them 'in a way which demonstrated why the kind of social relations on which it is based were unnecessary' (Graeber 2004: 84).

Reclaim the Streets (RTS) has a rich history of conducting what one might call *public interventions;* from street parties organized simultaneously with G8 summits as well as other political/economical fora meetings, to the impromptu creation of urban fountains and bricking up entrances to banks (Blanco 2013). By transforming an urban space from its conventional, productive configuration that allows for circulation without major disruption into a chaotic, unpredictable and altogether different assemblage of fountains, masquerades and frivolous play, they not only describe political and social alternatives to the status quo; they actualize them. RTS' strategy of *prefigurative* intervention at major financial facilities, public streets or private companies not only subverts 'the normative function of space through a kind of carnivalesque hacking' but effectively 'potentiates the re-programming of reality' (St. John 2008: 172). This is a powerful political technique: RTS not only explains what kind of change they want to see, they *show* it for better or for worse.

The form of political activism pursued by OWS shares some of these features, albeit with a slightly different manifestation. In addition to the mimetic, carnivalesque characters of the marches performed under the "Occupy!" banner, in Zuccotti Park and many other places,

the protest movement also aims to create new types of societies. From setting up community kitchens to inventing 'the human microphone', the occupied 'spaces of dissent' were activated and became a political laboratory, where alternative forms of sociability were presented and played with. As one observer puts it, OWS effectively circumvented the traditional rules of representational politics and

> seized public space … to create its own form of direct democracy based on consensus decision-making, equality, and mutual aid. In societies that have failed [OWS has] decided to provide … kitchens, libraries, clinics, and media centres open to everyone who needs them (Nail 2013)

Several observers have described the days where the occupation took place. While the accounts differ – with some criticizing and others celebrating it - what is central was that they fostered 'experience'. Playful prefiguration as exemplified by RTS and OWS enables the subject to actualize its desire, and to pursue a practice that demonstrates in very concrete ways the possibilities for the creation of an alternative practice of politics beyond the current 'reality'. No matter if you were a direct participant in the events or not, the space the events created was still there and offered an experience of political and social change which words simply does not. By prefiguratively intervening in our everyday lives, they embody a scene where they are allowed to show, and where a public audience can see, the basic political objective at the centre of their struggle: the material and symbolic making and remaking of human society.

III.

Ethics, Aesthetics, Action

We have thus far identified and elaborated three dimensions of playful action that carries with them a political potential. In the face of practices of violence or control, we saw how comic appropriation emerges as a valuable tactic for resistance, subverting hierarchies and creating space for dissent action. Through performance and mimicry, the self is allowed to observe itself in action, so to speak, and to

critique and reflect on the relation between self and society. Lastly, fantasy and imagination proved a valuable platform for a prefigurative politics where one interrupts the status quo by showing rather than telling the change you want to see. The question we must return to is whether or not what I have argued thus far actually provides us with novel, new possibilities for formulating a politics of resistance. More specifically, does playful action, as envisioned here, finally break down the barrier between art and protest, and deliver on its promise of releasing the creative potential of the desiring subject into the arena of politics? To investigate these claims we start out by returning to the underlying premise of subjectivity and self-determination and ask the question: In this carnival, can the subject be claimed to *act* or even exist in any autonomous sense?

Totalitarianism, Liminality, and the Disappearance of Art

As we have seen, playful forms of protest are characterized by the public explosion of signs and symbols which we are forced to confront. What quickly comes to mind when discussing the use of signs and symbols in a political context is propaganda – particularly that pursued by the Nazi regime in 1940's Germany. Lene Riefenstahl's cinematic depictions of these public spectacles demonstrate with utmost clarity the ways in which performative, aesthetic forms of action can become the basis for ritualistic and repressive politics (Zizek 2005: 77). The use of signs and symbols, and the aesthetico-politics demonstrated by the Nazi regime are excellent examples of the way in which a subjective politico-aesthetic experience becomes instead the mobilisation of a political movement towards totalitarianism; where the playful aesthetico-politics meant to re-politicize human society through the continuous practice of critique, self-reflection and prefigurative interventions, becomes instead a totalitarian, particular experience of the divine object of truth. One might certainly claim that in these public displays of totalitarianism, it is evident that the creative desire believed to make possible the liberation of self is recaptured by the use of the very signs and symbols through which playful forms of protest seek to actualize radical, political change. To Guy Debord, this logic rearticulates itself even in liberal societies today. The late-capitalist *Society of the Spectacle* is characterized by *commodity fetishism* where, relations are not social, but economic; and where the capitalist mode of spectacle uses the image to direct people's desires (Debord 1977). As

such, capitalism becomes a system not of freedom, but of spectacles aimed at the control of people's desires through the aesthetic experience of its very spectacularity. The question is if this element of totalitarianism is inherent to any aesthetic mode of politics and thus also to the practice of playful protest.

While media have been quick to pick up on the carnivalesque tension visible in many modern forms of protest, it is unclear to which extent it bears an actual political effect. To many, the subversive nature of the carnival reveals itself as a paradox where the 'purifying power of mutual honesty' does not in fact foster actual change, but ends up 'regenerating the principles of classification and ordering on which social structure rests' (Turner 1969: 180). In fact, Turner argues, 'nothing underlines regularity so well as absurdity or paradox [and] nothing satisfies as much as extravagant or temporarily permitted elicit behaviour' which means that the carnivalesque rituals of reversal merely 'reaffirm the hierarchical principle [by] making the low mimic (often to the point of caricature) the behaviour of the high' (Ibid: 176). As Zizek explains, while one might certainly envision that radical, emancipatory politics is practiced through the transgression or subversion of certain rules, paradoxically, these transgressions are possible only if we remain within the given reality, seeking merely to bend or change its objects of truth and 'endlessly "subverting" or "displacing" the power system' instead of replacing it (Zizek 2003). The desires and creative forces released during a carnival might in fact not create a process of political change in itself. In fact, it might rather become a singular outburst, an isolated space allowed to exist within the current condition of politics, where desires are allowed to manifest themselves momentarily as to prevent them from entering politics proper. The Russian thinker Anatoly Lunacharsky reminds us that maybe, the carnival is simply 'a safety valve for passions that otherwise might erupt in revolution' which allows dissent voices to 'let off steam in a harmless, temporary event' (Docker 1994: 171). In sum, the liminality, or temporality, of the carnival as a method of political action is definitely an issue of contingency here.

In *L'échange symbolique et la mort* Baudrillard approaches this problematique from the notion of the symbolic. Recalling an earlier point, to Baudrillard, while the modern era was defined as the era of production, the current postmodern mode of society is defined as the

era of simulation. This is the basis of his critique of the *postmodern* carnival of society which, while it has its joys, all too quickly becomes boring and repetitive. Rather than an autonomous, real entity, the body in the simulacrum is defined solely by the signs and symbols of society (e.g. beauty), and the Carnival, rather than bodies-in-play displaying their pure desire, is the subjugation to normalization. In this aestheticized, postmodern form of action, one does not act in any autonomous sense according to ones desires, one fashions oneself in accordance with the dominant values of society (Kellner 1989: 99-102). This is particularly visible when putting the role of art in politics under critical scrutiny. Where, previously, art was characterized by its embedded moral values which endowed 'its artefacts with a spiritualistic-anthropomorphic aura', arguably, the role of art in the era of simulation is that of mere representation and reproduction (ibid: 108).

Furthermore, as Steyerl (2011) explains, what used to materialize itself as an object or a product of art has now becomes a process in the form of a performance or an activity. This is a strong critique of forms of political action defined as an ethics of creativity. If creative forms of resistance are the norm, art becomes an enforcement of a certain aesthetic logic rather than a creative intervention (ibid). This identified ethos of creative political action might thus simply be a symptom of 'an overall aestheticization of politics' as ethical activity which challenges human autonomy in the way it makes impossible the claim to a moral object (ibid). One might thus argue that the aestheticization of political action turns it into a repetitive, endless self-performance, a constant sense of auto-display without any political goals or objects of change. This questions the emancipative potential of playfulness and emphasizes the temporal nature of playful activity by pointing to the liminality of the carnival, showing how the carnival maintains rather than challenges political and social hierarchies, all of which questions on a broader level the very notion of the possibility of a playful ethics as a catalyst for protest politics.

Simulation, Sublimation, & Playful Subversion

We have thus far accumulated a series of critical inquiries: One questions the political, emancipative potential of playfulness understood as the realization creative desire through aesthetics, and asks

if not totalitarianism is inherent to aesthetico-politics; one emphasizes the temporal nature of playful activity by pointing to the liminality of the carnival, showing how the carnival maintains rather than challenges political and social hierarchies; and one questions on a broader level the very notion of the possibility of aesthetics, creativity and art as a catalyst for emancipative politics today. Might one even imagine a creative, aesthetic politics of desire or that tends to these notions of totalitarianism, liminality, and normalization? As Jacques Rancière argues, aesthetics is not inherently totalitarian, but it is inherently political (Rancière 2004). My starting point will be the issue of *sublimation;* we must seek to understand how one might prevent the collective aesthetic realizations of desire from becoming a repression of the playful ethics of resistance.

The ethical process of psychoanalysis, knowledge of self-relations, requires the acknowledgement of finitude. This, to Lacan is the tragic problem of *sublimation*; that the subject's desire can never be realized because that which desire tends to is death (Lacan 1997). Yet, perhaps, the 'picture of human finitude [is] better approached as comic acknowledgement … than tragic affirmation' (Critchley 2008: 78). In its use of mocking and comic ridicule, humour is a less heroic form of sublimation than Lacan's ideal of aesthetic beauty. This allows the subject to realize its finitude and laugh at it in the moments of its enunciation. Through a humorous sublimation of desire, the subject is allowed a space from which to observe and critically reflect on its actions. The sublimation of desire moves away from the manic, cruel suppression of the self towards a confident, critical, and reflexive ethics of self-knowledge. This allows for an aesthetico-politics separated from the capture of subjective desire by any object of truth. By approaching the sublimation of desire from a playful, appropriative sense of the comic, one might thus discover how desire can be realized without becoming repressive. The critical, reflexive work on the self is demanding, but playfulness and humour allow us to pursue it in a non-repressive way. This certainly supports the very possibility of playful political action which realizes subjective desire through an aesthetical experience or a process of creativity. This also reverses the issue of liminality. We cannot simply view these spontaneous, creative outbursts of desire in their singular manifestations; rather, we must view them as part of an ethical experience of subjectivity and creative desire which

allows the subject to continuously reclaim its autonomy through a politics of playful subversion.

But is the very problem not this transition from work (or object) to occupation (or process)? Does the endless pursuit of a political ethics of feather dusters and self-performance not mean that the practice of politics has become meaningless, repetitive and banal rather than thrilling displays of an alternative reality? The loss of the referent object in postmodernity has left us speechless, stuttering in the face of endless opportunities and the constant need for transformation and self-fashioning (Salecl 2011: 117-119). If art and thus also the aesthetics of politics today is empty and meaningless, as Baudrillard and Steyerl argue, does that mean we have to dismiss its political, transformative potential all together? Luckily, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari open a third way of aesthetic action in their philosophical approach to the simulacrum. There is more to simulation than copy or representation. To them, pop art, as a playful appropriation of signs and symbols, is the clear example of a form of

> simulacra that have successfully broken out of the copy mold [in which] the multiplied, stylized images take on a life of their own. The thrust of the process is not to become an equivalent of the "model" but to turn against it and … open a new space for the simulacrum's own mad proliferation (Massumi 1987: 91).

Baudrillard's concept of simulation does not replace the real; 'rather it appropriates reality in the operation of despotic overcoding' (Deleuze & Guattari 1977: 91). The simulacrum is not simply the loss of all meaning leading to a societal condition of emptiness in the lack of a referent object. Even in the postmodern simulacrum, autonomy has not disappeared. As pop art shows, through continuous appropriation, a 'point is reached where a now all-invasive positive simulation can turn back against the grid of resemblance and replication and overturn it' (Massumi 1987: 95). In the realization that simulations are more than copies or representations,

> the simulacrum envelops a proliferating play of differences … a logic capable of grasping Baudrillard's

> failing world of representation as an effective illusion the demise of which opens a glimmer of possibility (ibid: 97)

Simulations are not the disappearance of the real; rather acknowledging the simulacrum is also acknowledging that one can, in fact, become realer than real. We are not simply doomed to total indetermination in the face of the totalitarian political symbols; a subjective, playful appropriation of "reality" provides the opportunity to turn the conditioning ability of the simulacrum back on itself. The aestheticization of political resistance, then, does not mark the total surrender to the totality of the political spectacle's seduction, but interrogates it by adding friction to its seemingly slippery surface. This prevents the unproblematic global circulation of signs and symbols through a subversive ethics that playfully appropriates them and utilizes them in public, subjective imaginations of what politics might be.

Clearly, there are valuable and viable criticisms of the playful, aesthetic form of political action this article investigates. Certainly, there are ways in which it become meaningless, and where its political effect can be drowned in banality, repetitiveness and self-fashioning. Yet one should also not dismiss playful action entirely as an ineffective form of political resistance. While we 'cannot know, we cannot control, we cannot govern the entire force of the global mind' we must maintain, 'we can master the singular process of producing a singular world of sociality' (Bifo 2003). From the examination of playful forms of political resistance provided here, I argue that playfulness understood here as a subjective experience and subsequent aesthetic reformulation of politics provides a valuable platform for this. The continuous, subjective process in which one approaches the political through playful forms of action offers the subject the possibility to turn politics onto itself. In line with the ambitions of Spinoza and Nietzsche, playful politics thus represents a pluralistic method of action; an immanent mode of existence that replace the recourse to transcendent values; and where the search for a referent object of truth is replaced by an immanent ethics of playful difference.

Conclusion

The present condition of politics presents us with major challenges. To reverse processes of depolitization, to prevent the

subject from becoming an object of control and to relocate politics at the site of the subject, resistance must be formulated as ethics. This ethical definition of resistance must focus on forms of action that make visible and actualize the creative desires of the subject in the gaze of the public. Exploring the concept of play offers valuable additions to a formulation of how this might in fact be done. As I have shown, throughout history, through playful forms of action the subject may appropriate practices of domination and control, critically reflect on its own relation to society, and constitute new realities through the prefigurative acting out of its fantasies and desires. All three are intensely political engagements that demonstrate the emancipative potential of a playful understanding of politics. And to illustrate this, I have identified this potential in acts of resistance today. When CIRCAs dress up as clowns, they highlight the absurdity of police violence; RTS public performances encourages mimicry and self-reflection on a global scale; and OWS prefigurative interventions effectively connects the desires of a public 'acting out' to the possibility of an alternative future. Playful forms of political action are constantly challenging the established order of things, engaging people in large numbers and facilitating new political opportunities for change. We must disavow the wish for a politics of truth, and foster forms of action that celebrates its disappearance and the possibilities that ensue in relation to how we conduct ourselves as political subjects. A playful ethics of resistance offers the possibility of politics today. Continuously identifying and determining how the subject might continue to play is paramount for this possibility to flourish.

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