

Irresistible Images

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Michael Shane Boyle in conversation with L.M. Bogad

A group of black activists sits down at a whites-only lunch counter in Nashville, Tennessee to push for desegregation. When refused service, they remain in their seats even as a racist mob insults and assaults them. In Ferguson, Missouri thousands of people take to the streets after police murder an unarmed black teenager. When attacked by riot cops, they raise their arms and shout 'Hands up, don't shoot!'

Moments like these define two generations of political disobedience in the United States thanks to their wide circulation as what performance theorist L.M. Bogad calls 'irresistible images'. The following conversation with Bogad tracks a genealogy of irresistible images from the 1960s Civil Rights Movement up to current struggles against global capital and anti-blackness. Bogad and I discuss several aesthetic precedents for understanding how irresistible images grab the political imagination of audiences far beyond their site of performance, most importantly Bertolt Brecht's theory of the 'gestus. As Bogad argues in his new book *Tactical Performance* (Routledge 2015), irresistible images have a long history in social movements, but how do gestures of defiance acquire unique eloquence in an age of online media? And what are the limits of symbolic political action today?

To question the limits of symbolic political action means asking about *both* the shortcomings of particular categories of action *as well as* the stakes in even categorizing an action 'symbolic'. This has special relevance for theatre scholarship, which tends to approach political demonstrations as performances loaded with meaning and engineered for the media.¹ Performance analysis of this stripe can illuminate much about how protests convey messages and political positions, but it also risks obscuring the non-communicative dynamics of some interventions whilst ignoring others that refuse legibility or prefer to operate under the cover of invisibility. Often the politics of such framing goes unacknowledged as scholars take it for granted that activists must articulate themselves to the media or communicate coherent messages to be effective. What parades as an analytical lens thus can slip from a clear methodological decision into a symptom of prevailing political culture.

Yet performance scholarship need not abandon focus on the symbolic effects of political action. Instead, we need to ensure our research also encompasses critical methods and political practices that do not privilege symbolic or communicative modes of intervention.

Both Bogad and I have studied and participated in activist practices that are unmistakably theatrical (Bogad, for example, has worked closely with satiric activist groups like [Billionaires for Bush](#) and [The Yes Men](#)). It is because of—rather than despite—this abiding interest in the symbolic potential of performance that we take seriously what else performance can do for contemporary struggles.

To offer just one recent movement as an example, the ongoing Black Lives Matter struggle in the United States does



Nashville lunch-counter sit in. Photo: James Garvin Ellis. Sourced under fair use from

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Rodney_Powell_Nashville_sit-ins_1960.jpg.

more than compel political attention to systemic anti-blackness. To risk stating the obvious, the blockades of highways, railroads, ports, and shopping centres that are crucial to many Black Lives Matter demonstrations also threaten the very economic infrastructure of a system founded on racist brutality and exclusion. Whilst expressing outrage, these protests shut down the circulation of goods and people in major metropolitan areas, in some cases for extended periods. And although blockaded roads and shops might reopen for business, that hardly makes blockades of them *only* symbolic. As a critical lens, performance can do more than help us study how demonstrations raise awareness; among other things, performance analysis has the potential to grasp how people moving through a city together can incapacitate an entire urban infrastructure. Moreover, a movement like Black Lives Matter should push us to consider the role performance itself can play in future political struggles, as not just a theatrical tactic for changing hearts and minds, but also a perspective to help plan interventions with profoundly material consequences like blockades.

By noting some of the ways a movement like Black Lives Matter operates in addition to communicating messages, I hope to have blurred rather than bolded the line between symbolic and material interventions. As Bogad and I note in this conversation, a political struggle certainly can capture public imagination through irresistible images, yet what it achieves resists being captured in only an image.



Time magazine use of 'hands up' pose to represent Ferguson protests. Original photograph by Scott Olson—Getty Images. Sourced under fair use from <http://time.com/3153427/in-the-latest-issue-3/>.

Shane Boyle: In your new book, Tactical Performance, you use the term the 'irresistible image' to describe a particular connection between performance and protest. What exactly is an irresistible image?

L.M. Bogad: An irresistible image is an image artists and activists can create in public confrontation. It's an image that is so compelling, so strange or surprising, or just so succinctly sharp in its analysis of a situation that even your ideological opponents will reproduce it. And, ideally, it's an image that tells your story while jamming the signal of what I call the hegemonologue—the hegemonic monologue of corporate or state media. There's a lot that goes into an irresistible image and for that reason, they don't appear often. They're hard to achieve since they require a high threshold for success.

SB: Can you give an example of an irresistible image?

LB: To my mind, a great example is the image I chose for the cover of my new book. It's the image of a member of our Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army kissing the riot shield of a police officer during a protest in Scotland in 2005. In it, the cop is just contemplating what's going on and not reacting aggressively. You can see both faces reflected in the see-through shield between them. I don't want to say such an image is a victory in and of itself, it's just one helpful element. And this image needs to be understood in the context of what was happening when it was created. At this point in the mid 2000s, the global justice movement was being criminalized and caricatured in the dominant media as full of nihilistic people hell bent on destruction. The image of disobedient clowning was an eloquent gesture that was both disarming but fearless. It is not just a peaceful gesture, but one that is resistant, transgressive, and prefigurative in a way that's charismatic.



Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army, Scotland 2005. Photo: Peter Morrison.

Sometimes luck is involved in the creation of an irresistible image. You have masses of people taking action and then, at the right place at the right time, an image like this is generated and this image in particular did go all over the place. Even rightwing tabloids in Europe who were demonizing the movement still reproduced the image. I don't want to overstate it, but this image jammed up, just a bit, the dominant message about the G-8 protests and the global justice movement. If you looked at the paper that day, that image did not go along with what the newspapers were writing and reporting.

SB: It seems an irresistible image, in some cases, can be like a reverse caption—a caption to reporting.

LB: Exactly.

SB: So is it that an irresistible image need not necessarily be planned ahead of time, but groups can set the conditions for these images to emerge?

LB: Sometimes, but going into an action with an intention, training, and a game plan really helps the chances of an irresistible image happening. The best irresistible images, and this is not a law or anything, anticipates your opponent's reaction, and incorporates your opponent into the image itself. And believe me, they don't want that, because you've set things up so they are at a disadvantage narratively, symbolically, and semiotically. In the case of this image, there were something like 150 or 200 rebel clowns all trained in our bizarre method and we were all scattered throughout Edinburgh and that moment happened in one confrontation on one street. Meanwhile on another street, the group I was with was baton charged by riot cops and we had to try to run away in our big shoes to get the hell out of there. So as you say we did set the conditions for something to happen, but that was a result of training and considerable thought about what we wanted to do.

SB: It was not random, but nor was it rehearsed.

LB: In the book I go into how some of the aesthetic techniques of theatre and performance art apply here. This image relied on the idea of 'yes, and...' a key rule of improv. So I wouldn't say an irresistible image is random. You can create favorable conditions for it.

SB: If they can never be guaranteed to happen, but depend on circumstances often beyond the control of activists, how useful are irresistible images actually?

LB: First of all, it depends how predictable your opponent is, that really improves your chances. A movement can think

in terms of irresistible images even if they don't quite nail them. A movement can also invert the idea of an irresistible image as a way to think about what types of images they might want to avoid. It is often a balance between discipline and affect. You want to have a certain amount of emotional impact on others through your actions, but that tends to involve quite a bit of discipline behind the scenes over your own emotions.

SB: The emotional work that goes into the production of an irresistible image seems to resonate with the labor of an actor in the theatre. But what you have been saying about the irresistible image also brings to mind Bertolt Brecht's theory of the 'gestus'. Can you talk about the relationship, if any, between the irresistible image and the gestus?

LB: For Brecht the gestus is a physical relationship on stage. The gestus is a way to create a *Verfremdungseffekt* in the very controlled environment of the stage. It's a way you can make an otherwise unremarkable socio-political relationship appear remarkable. And for there to be Brechtian "magnitude" there has to be a critique of that relationship within the gestus. The gestus puts some wonderment into what has been accepted, reified, naturalized in the world; it makes, of course, the familiar strange. And the gestus is just one of the tools for achieving *Verfremdung*. A classic example comes from Brecht's play *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*. There's a scene in which two people are having a meal and one teaches the other, who is rich but trying to pass as a poor person, how to eat like he's poor. He says that when you're poor you eat hunched over to protect your food. But when you're rich you can lean back and savor, and not worry about anyone grabbing the food. This is a great example of the gestus because we have the performance of something that might go unnoticed but says a lot about class, at least in that particular historical context.

SB: And how does an irresistible image, then, relate to the gestus?

LB: An irresistible image is harder to achieve. In a way, it's a contemporary analogue to the gestus but moved into the more public context of what I call '[tactical performance](#)'. An irresistible image creates a moment of surprise and should pierce corporate media, speak through it, and/or go viral on the web. But like gestus, an irresistible image has to have Brechtian magnitude. It has to expose an injustice or disrupt an oppressive narrative. Brecht differentiated his magnitude in this way from Aristotelian magnitude, which simply has to do with great conflicts featuring 'important' people. But unlike gestus, an irresistible image is so powerful that it gets reproduced by your opponents.

SB: In other words, an irresistible image departs from a gestus insofar as the Nazis would not have produced a play by Brecht.

LB: Exactly, and when you encounter a Brechtian gestus, you are already in a theatre situation.

SB: The audience is already primed for the gestus.

LB: And that's not a problem. I don't want to set the false binary between the converted and everyone else. But to receive a Brechtian gestus, you are already in that wonderfully controlled environment of the theatre, where everything has been deliberately worked out. You are not incorporating your actual opponents into the gestus. An irresistible image, by contrast, is in a less controlled environment. Ideally it incorporates your opponent into the image and makes them part of the narrative in a way that is advantageous to you.

*SB: In that way, an irresistible image seems to follow the logic of immanent critique you find in the Situationist *détournement*, but in a way that relies on the gestural quality that is so fundamental to the Brechtian gestus.*

LB: An irresistible image may involve *détournement* and might, but does not necessarily, repurpose what's given. You are creating something new from the given circumstances and that's how it makes the familiar strange. I would argue that the action 'One Thousand Coffins' actually did this. The Bush administration forbade the photographing of coffins returning from Iraq and Afghanistan, and in response a group of artists paired up with veterans organizations to build and parade a thousand coffins through the streets in New York [2004-5] and [DC](#). The organizers of this action did not incorporate their opponents like police into their image, but simply reproduced and performed a censored image. The image was reproduced all over the place. It was very eloquent—no one had to ask what it meant. It spoke not only for the costs and casualties of these wars; it also spoke to the ongoing issue of state censorship without speaking a word.

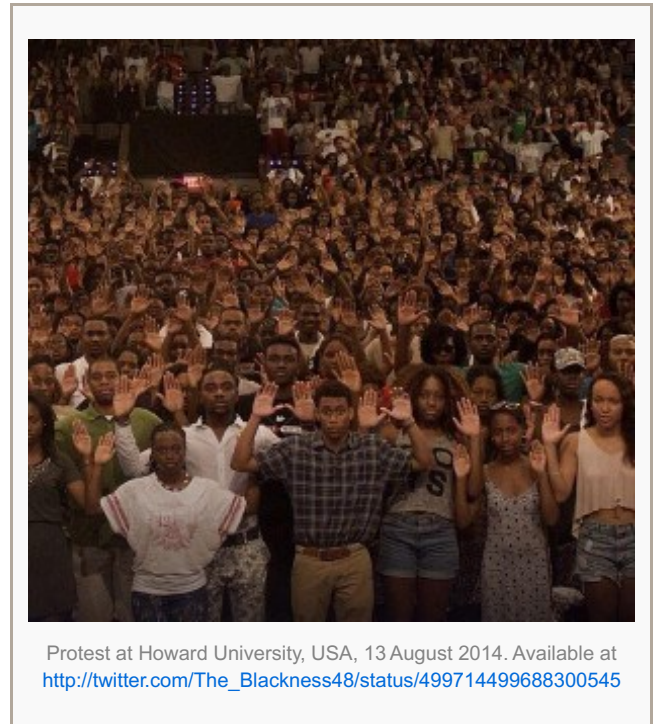
It was an irresistible image.

SB: How do you think the slogan and gesture of 'Hands Up, Don't Shoot' from the ongoing anti-police and [Black Lives Matter](#) protests in cities like Ferguson and Baltimore figures as an irresistible image?

LB: 'Hands up, Don't shoot' is such an eloquent and succinct summary of racist police violence in the US. When performed by many people simultaneously in the street in a mass action it is symbolically very powerful. Not only that, but, it raises the political cost of repression in that immediate moment. It speaks to a specific problem and issue, but is also empowering. It is not a gesture of surrender, but is quite defiant. The tensiveness of using what appears to be a gesture of surrender in a context in which it actually is one of defiance is what is so estranging about it.

SB: Your book deals quite extensively with the history and legacy of the Civil Rights movement in the United States. How do the irresistible images generated by the Civil Rights Movement compare to "Stand Up, Don't Shoot"?

LB: The Civil Rights Movement set a great precedent for [today's protests against racist police brutality](#), namely for fusing symbolic action with direct action. And we still can learn a lot from them even as we update their actions for a new media environment.



SB: And how does the changed media terrain explain some of the differences between the tactics of the Civil Rights Movement and Black Lives Matter?

LB: Obviously we are in a different media environment than in the late 1950s and 1960s. In addition to there being no web and 'going viral', as we know it, during the time of the Civil Rights Movement there wasn't quite the media monopoly as there is now. And I don't want to romanticize the media back then, but there was an investigative-journalistic ideal to live up to, just as Habermas' bourgeois public sphere is this ideal that has never been reached but which provides a basis for critique. The whole terrain of media was different and you could capture the imagination of a national audience—or at least pockets of a national audience—by staging spectacles of cruelty and creative suffering, as with the sociodramas of the lunch counter sit-ins. Today we not only have shorter attention spans, but a more fragmented public sphere. And in terms of corporate media, things are worse than ever. You can have a blockade of a major port [like those in Oakland, California during Occupy in 2011] and it may be acknowledged in the local media—simply because it has to be, since local residents couldn't help but know it happened—but then on the other side of the country, judging from media coverage, it is as if it didn't happen. Today, there's what I like to call the radical cat paradox, which the Civil Rights Movement did not have to deal with. If you put a cat playing with toys on YouTube, it gets millions of views. But if we post an amazing and creative action, it might get a few thousand. So how do you square the circle? An image as contagious and appealing as a cat playing with toys but with Brechtian magnitude! Maybe the cat is a radical? We joke about it but you see the dilemma and our attempts to overcome it.

SB: It's hard to dispute the potential of irresistible images. But there are also, I think, important limits to struggles that orient themselves strategically to working in and through the media, just as there is a profound limit to thinking strictly in terms of symbolic action.

LB: I think there has been a growing realization the past few years that it can't just be about getting on TV or even going viral. Here's the thing: in creative and artistic activism, what gets the most attention from theorists and scholars is what gets the most attention in the media.

SB: Do you mean groups like the Yes Men and Reverend Billy?

LB: Those are perfect examples. I've worked with the Yes Men on projects in the past and the sort of attention their actions get is very satisfying, not to mention impactful. But if that work is not connected to an actual campaign that is deliberately trying to generate specific pressure, it's ephemeral. It may have impact on consciousness in a way that's hard to measure, but how we can use these techniques to help an actual campaign? Culture and performance activism is really valuable when it's hooked to a specific social movement and in dialogue with it. And not just a decoration or window dressing. It's really important for an action to be infused with an awareness of the wider context of the campaign and movement. That's why I make this distinction between air war and ground war in the book. I'm concerned about the militarist parallel here but I think it's a helpful metaphor. You can have an air war without trying to gain ground and disseminate messages, and maybe it does something. But if you have a hybrid movement with a grassroots 'ground war' that is actually trying to take territory (systemic or policy changes), then the 'air war' aspect, the performances and art, are much more useful. Artistic activism, like an air war, can soften up the ground and make it easier for a movement to make advances. On it's own, it's hard to say exactly what artistic activism does without being linked into a specific movement. Sometimes coordinating with a movement is humbling for artists but it's important.



Billionaires for Bush. Photo by Fred Askew.

SB: That brings us to the usefulness of performance as a lens to study tactics that don't necessarily or only lend themselves to being read as symbolic political action. You and I have both written about and experimented with theatrical forms of protest that prioritized raising awareness through evocative and often-satiric performances. Performance, I agree, can be very useful for analyzing how actions like these allow people to communicate messages. But it strikes me that theatre and performance scholars tend to pay far less substantive attention to tactics that are difficult or even impossible to read symbolically—I am thinking specifically of increasingly familiar actions like the [blockades of freeways and ports](#) and even urban riots we have seen in movements associated with Occupy and Black Lives Matter.

LB: Even if they are not conceptualized as performances by those taking part in them, a blockade or uprising is still a performance. There might not be shtick but there's still performativity. And there's also room for shtick in actions like these. For example, I did my '[angry banker](#)' routine during a blockade of a bank headquarters in San Francisco. I had been asked to help tell the story behind the blockade so I brought this character. You can still have shtick with something like a blockade—they can work well together. With something like a port blockade, even if we aren't using shtick, we can still create a *Verfremdungseffekt* that makes remarkable and terrible the everyday processes of the port and its position in the global economy. And adding in that effect can allow a blockade to apply even more political pressure beyond any direct effects.

SB: I am mostly thinking about actions or ways of thinking about actions that don't have or need a narrative or shtick to have consequence, like the blockades of the Port of Oakland that took place in California around the repression of Occupy in late 2011. I think it's possible and also useful to think through how ideas or methods from performance can be applied to political interventions in ways that are not limited to symbolic action or working towards media. For instance, how can choreography be used to study a port blockade. Or even to plan how to evade police or block specific berths?

LB: Well, the principles of theatre or performance can be used tactically in something like a port blockade just to make it more impactful. We are obviously getting into stuff now that is not about creating irresistible images to convince people watching TV about something.

SB: *Exactly.*

LB: Principles of theatre can be really useful for planning an action. For example, as in theatre, you might use misdirection—focus the ‘light’ over here to get the attention of police, while something over there takes place. We do that all the time in theatre, and in our creative hybrid actions. Think about timing and blocking, illusion and tension, narrative and surprise.

SB: *Those principles which are often used to plan actions are theatrical even if they are not named as such.*

LB: Even in an action that does not have a narrative or a conventional storyline, you are still performing commitment. And you are also performing coalition. And that commitment, that coalition, is created, constituted and actualized in part through this collective performance, this praxis under pressure. How you perform coalition says a lot about your movement. To return to the port blockades in Oakland, they were performances of coalition and of solidarity amongst the diverse groups doing the actual blockading but also with the union workers in the port who are a radical union. This is important to note because, and I don’t mean this as a critique, but after the blockades were over, the port was open the next day. And that’s fine, but we want to do an action that has the kind of impact that can build and reach a level of *sustained* magnitude. By magnitude I am referring again to Brecht’s idea of magnitude. We need more people. And that requires charismatic action.

SB: *And what is charismatic action?*

LB: Charismatic action attracts people. Actions that show we are brave, we are committed, we are doing something together, and we acknowledge the differences among us. It also means building a subculture of defiance. And thinking theatrically. It means creating actions and images of action that others will want to be a part of.

[L.M. Bogad](#) is Associate Professor of Performance Studies at the University of California at Davis. Routledge will publish his new monograph, *Tactical Performance: Serious Play and Social Movements*, and an updated second edition of his first book, *Electoral Guerrilla Theatre: Radical Ridicule and Social Movements*, in September. He has worked internationally with social movements as an artist-activist and scholar for twenty years. He is a cofounder of the Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army and has worked with Billionaires for Bush, The Yes Men, Reverend Billy, La Pocha Nostra as well as labor, human rights, and ecological and economic justice organizations.

Michael Shane Boyle teaches at Queen Mary University of London as Lecturer in Drama, Theatre, and Performance. His book *The New Spirit of Performance: Antiauthoritarian Aesthetics and the Refusal of Work in Postwar West Germany* is forthcoming. Together with L.M. Bogad he participated in the activist performance group the [UC Movement for Efficient Privatization](#).

Notes:

1. Two important examples of this position are: Baz Kershaw, *The Radical in Performance: Between Brecht and Baudrillard* (London; New York: Routledge, 1999); Richard Schechner, “The Street is the Stage,” in *The Future of Ritual: Writings on Culture and Performance* (London; New York: Routledge, 1995), pp. 45-93. ↩