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Theatricalising protest: the chorus of the commons

This essay looks at five instances of costumed political protest over the last decade, in order to ask some questions of collective dissensus, viral motifs of opposition, and the manifestation of resistance in the public sphere. It examines how <u>performance</u> helps shape the appearances, experiences and narratives that obtain here. It also considers how these are both focused and diffuse, and how thereby they express, in exemplary ways, wider processes in contemporary culture and politics. The instances are provided by the Red Rebel Brigade, the Guy Fawkes mask, the <u>Handmaid's Tale</u> costume, the pussyhat and the yellow jacket (<u>gilet jaune</u>). Without further ado, let's look briefly at each in turn, before drawing some threads together.

The Red Rebel Brigade

In the week beginning Monday 7 October 2019, the Extinction Rebellion (XR) movement held five days of civil disobedience protesting against climate change in cities including (to indicate geographical spread) Amsterdam, Athens, Banjul, Berlin, Buenos Aires, Cape Town, Islamabad, Istanbul, London, Melbourne, New Delhi, New York, Paris, Prague, Quebec, Rio de Janeiro, Rome, Tokyo, Vienna and Wellington; among others. Actions were announced in advance on the XR website, including 'Occupation of prominent public space in inner city Vienna', 'nonviolent direct actions blocking the headquarters of Bayer/Monsanto and Pan American

Energy' (Buenos Aires) and 'everything from family-friendly picnics to full scale rebellion in the streets, culminating in a human XR logo on iconic Bondi Beach' (Sydney) (Extinction Rebellion 2019). XR manifestations in various places featured the appearance of groups of protestors wearing red cloaks and mask-like faces (made up with white face-paint, like mime artists, along with red lipstick), in eye-catching displays of troupe presence.

These particular costumes are those of the Red Rebel Brigade, conceived as such by Doug Francis, Creative Director of Invisible Circus (Heardman 2019). Based in Bristol, UK, the company organises circus-style shows and presentations in buildings of various sorts and sizes, and at festivals, carnivals and other events. The costumes were first used in an XR context at Extinction Rebellion's ten-day protest from 16--25 April 2019 in London. Francis explains:

> We used to do a lot of these statue slow motion things around Europe … and they were our signature characters. But for this, I thought I'd bring it out in a different colour to represent the blood of the species. (Heardman 2019)

For their XR appearances, Invisible Theatre's performers worked with a deliberately minimalist palette of movement and gesture, without speech or song, in a choreography that Francis describes as

> very slow moving, focussed [and] meditative. … We just want it to be emotive and to have a message without having to explain it; the idea was that you would almost empathically feel and understand the situation, which is the power of art. We wanted to embody that ethos and convey our non-violence emotively. (Heardman 2019)

By the time of the October 2019 actions, the costume also appeared in protests in (for example) Berlin, Canberra, New York and Tel Aviv. This wasn't the only instance of costumed demonstration within the XR movement. Some protestors wore green or black cloaks. Some sprayed themselves with fake blood, lying as if dead next to the Wall Street bull; in Athens some poured black paint over themselves to symbolise oil. Spain also saw blue and beige brigades. Protestors in Sydney dressed as bees to

stage a die-in (illustrating the rapid diminution of the bee population, associated with climate change).[{note}]1

Viral in its spread and reach, theatrical in its orientation, symbolic in its import, and both playful and angry, the Red Rebel Brigade's instance of political costuming is now one among many over the past decade or so.

The Guy Fawkes mask

Debonair, sardonic and peculiarly chill, the Guy Fawkes mask -- as worn in protests around the world -- entered popular culture in the comic book series V for Vendetta by Alan Moore and David Lloyd. The series ran from 1982 to 1985 in partial form in a comic entitled Warrior, before being serialized in full form in ten parts by DC Comics. Its imagery -- indeed now, iconography -- leapt into the public imagination through the film version in 2005, written by the Wachowski Brothers and directed by James McTeigue (Warner Bros.). Set in 2032, the film stars Hugo Weaving as V, a stylish vigilante embarked on a dissident action against a corrupt fascistic British state. V wears a mask at all times, on account of his disfigurement as the victim of a coercive bio-experiment conducted by the state. This particular mask, with its trimmed and upturned moustache, thin line of beard below the middle of the lips, arched eyebrows, rouged cheeks and smiling demeanour, suggests a casual roué. It deliberately evokes that earlier anti-establishmentarian terrorist, Guido Fawkes, one of a number of dissenters behind the failed Gunpowder Plot -- a scheme to blow up the Houses of Parliament in London in 1605 with a view to restoring a Catholic monarchy.

The mask has a kind of viral presence. It is a superior version of the mask worn by the countless Guy Fawkes dummies burned in the UK's annual bonfire night on 5 November, thereby emerging from a long tradition of casual commemoration. In V for Vendetta, it becomes diegetically viral. V arranges for its multiple distribution for use by citizens, and in the story's denouement it is worn by a phalanx of protestors (including, in a narrative turn of mystic revolutionary optimism, characters presumed dead) who march on parliament both to enact and witness a destruction that could only ever be dreamt of by the seventeenth-century plotters. In a chain of intertextual

borrowing and international uptake, the mask has moved from the ritual of Bonfire Nights into the comic book, onwards into the film, and then beyond into public protests initially through its adoption by the activist group Anonymous in 2008 and the Occupy movement particularly in 2011 and 2012, and by way of its appearance in many demonstrations since then.

In wearing the mask, the Occupy protesters and others are reaching back to some fundamental elements of mask performance. The mask provides anonymity. It presents a persona (here, the dashing radical). The mask is serial: it is reiterated and hence stands for both one and many. And the use of a mask ensures that protest is seen as performance -- is therefore charged with symbolic value, in this case as an emblem of radical subversion. The symbol is also double-weighted, conveying not only a referent (Guy Fawkes and the Gunpowder Plot) but also an attitude -- literally, in its jaunty demeanour, and figuratively, in its ironising presence. As Riisgaard and Thomassen suggest:

> The spread of masks indicates a mimetic process, and the mechanical reproduction of sameness, mockingly so. … Instead of the modern autonomous individual -- that problematic pillar of social and political thought -- we have a decentred and slippery person, jokingly multiplying into the many. (2016: 86)

In a related turn of popular culture, it is perhaps not by accident that the Joker, as played by Heath Ledger and Joaquin Phoenix, has emerged as a figure de nos jours. [{note}]2 Indeed, Joker concludes with a form of civil disturbance that has similarities with the denouement of V for Vendetta. Inspired by the violent interventions of Arthur Fleck (who by the end of the film assumes his identity as the eponymous Joker), which are promulgated through careless and casually populist media outlets, a riot ensues. Its participants, we understand, demonstrate in the only way available to them against the civic arrangements of a city that doesn't look after its infrastructures nor properly care for its people. They perform their togetherness, their anonymity and dissension from authority by adopting clown masks and make-up. Gotham City, in this origin story, understands costume before Batman and Robin will wear theirs several years later. This broader trope -- the individual concealed in full public view

as one of many -- describes other kinds of recent performance in our actual cities through the adoption of particular outfits.

The Handmaid's Tale costume

On 20 March 2017, a group of women sat in silent protest in the Senate meeting at the Texas State Capitol. They wore outfits matching those designed by Ane Crabtree for the TV adaptation of The Handmaid's Tale, the novel by Margaret Atwood that dramatizes the oppression of women in the imaginary state of Gilead.[{note}]3 The women were protesting against a bill that would restrict their right to have an abortion and would empower doctors to conceal conditions that might prompt such a decision. As Andrew Liptak reported, they were 'turning cosplay into a political act, and inspiring a national anti-abortion protest movement that has adopted the costume as a de facto uniform' (Liptak 2017).

The protest in Texas was preceded by a Facebook discussion that mooted the demonstration and its distinctive mode, based on a previous anti-abortion demo in 2015 in which protesters wore hospital gowns. The sense of viral development is twofold -- firstly in shifting from the outfit associated with one ostensibly oppressed group (the medicalised patient) to another (the Atwoodian handmaid); and secondly in proliferating the red and white costume across diverse protests geared around women's rights and a disavowal of male power. Handmaid's Tale outfits were worn by women protesting the visit of US Vice President Mike Pence to Philadelphia in July 2018; pro-choice protestors during Ireland's referendum on the rights of women to have an abortion; women campaigning in Buenos Aires for abortion rights; and protestors on the occasion of the visit of Donald Trump to London. The Handmaid's Tale outfit enters public space, not unlike the Guy Fawkes mask, as an ironic commentary at the same time as it performs presence and protest. In Atwood's novel and the TV adaptation the handmaids are captive servants, for whom public transgression is prohibited. The adoption of the costume in actual protests, then, performs an intertextual form of liberation, 'springing' the protagonist Offred and her peers in the fictional Gilead by embracing and reproducing them in public space, whilst inhabiting the subjected-subject position of the women in order to give voice and make a stand. It is a good example of how protest intersects with principles of

performance in a mediatised and social-media-saturated culture: intertextual, cross-medial, strikingly presentational, and laden with symbolic value.

The pussyhat

Another instance demonstrates how symbols sometimes slip their moorings. The pussyhat was conceived by Krista Suh and Jayna Zweiman in advance of the Women's March on Washington in the wake of the Presidential election in November 2016 (see Pussyhat Project). Knitted in pink and usually featuring two points that look not unlike cats' ears, the pussy hat rapidly became an emblem for women's rights. The hat appropriates a word propelled into public discourse by Donald Trump when his 2005 'Access Hollywood' tape was released during the Presidential election campaign. On 7 October 2016 The Washington Post published an article and video detailing a conversation between Trump and TV host Billy Bush, in which Trump boasts of being able, as a celebrity, to make advances to women. As the Post reported, '"Grab them by the p---y," Trump says. "You can do anything."' (Farenthold 2016). As indicated on Pussyhat Project's website, 'The name Pussyhat™ was chosen in part as a protest against vulgar comments Donald Trump made about the freedom he felt to grab women's genitals, to de-stigmatize the word "pussy" and transform it into one of empowerment' (Pussyhat Project). The pussyhat performs both a renunciation and reclamation. Accessible and deliberately home-made, it foregrounds knitting as a decidedly non-corporate artisanal activity. Suh said that she was inspired by the Phrygian hat, worn by American and French revolutionaries -- an echo here of the tricoteuse knitting Phrygian caps during the French Revolution (Qureshi 2017). It also performs its wearers as an avowedly female presence.

After an initially rapid take-up, there have been concerns that the hat is not sufficiently inclusive in relation to ethnicity and gender orientation, and anxieties about misrepresentation or insufficiency in symbolic charge have led to a diminution in its use. Phoebe Hopps, president of Women's March Michigan, explains that a number of organisations have moved

away from the pussyhats for several months now, and are not making it the cornerstone of our messaging because ... there's a few things wrong with the message.

It doesn't sit well with a group of people that feel that the pink pussyhats are either vulgar or they are upset that they might not include trans women or nonbinary women or maybe women whose (genitals) are not pink. (Shamus 2018; see also Shenton 2019)

The very things that make the hat theatrically effective for protest -- its striking colour and its relation to male derogation -- also complicate its referentiality and uptake. Costumed protest is more fully effectual when its wearers produce themselves as a chorus of citizens (more of which later). There is another feature of the pussyhat worth commenting on here, that aligns it with the other costumed interventions under discussion. Whether or not you agree with its adoption, its use marked both a critical engagement with political discourse (here, seeking to interrupt male phallocentrism with female presence) and a witting ironising of the tools of its own mobilization. A woolly hat was the weapon of choice. The colour pink was reclaimed rather than renounced. In a customary feature of costumed protest, the ironic fun of dressing up is part of the point (wit and pleasure are a riposte to the arrogance and banalities of power); but so too is the mission to theatricalize the seriousness of what is at stake.

Le gilet jaune

A final instance, here, is the yellow high-visibility jacket (or rather, waistcoat), required by law as a possession of all motorists in France, and adopted first in France and subsequently more widely as a costume for political demonstration. Saturday 17 November 2018 saw the first gathered protest of the gilets jaunes. An estimated 280,000 people took part -- typically impeding traffic at roundabouts and toll booths across France. In Facebook posts the gilets jaunes called this Act I, the first in a series of Saturday demonstrations. As Jeremy Harding observed:

They position themselves theatrically: giving every Saturday 'act' a number commits them -- and everyone watching -- to a weekly cliffhanger, in the style

of a serial podcast or reality TV show. … Demonstrations are produced and curated as they unfold … with hundreds of director/participants live-streaming or waiting to upload content from their phones at the end of the day. (2019)

Act II involved more violent actions, with barricades erected and set on fire and shop windows smashed. Act III saw the Arc de Triomphe vandalised. The initial protest was a response to a proposed reduction to the speed limit from 90kph to 80kph on single carriageway roads and was quickly widened to include a demand for a reduction in petrol prices and then more besides.

Harding marvels at 'the pace at which a provincial revolt about fuel prices and speed limits broadened into a radical rejection of Macron … the National Assembly and the political parties, including Marine Le Pen's Rassemblement National' (2019). Just as the costume takes hold and spreads, there is something viral, too, to the extension of mandate and representation claimed by this particular protest. 'Peoples' Directives' circulated online, with forty-two demands including a cap on salaries, care for the elderly, a tax on aviation fuel and enhanced rent controls. France's President Macron responded with a 'great national debate', involving written testimonies submitted following discussions in over 5,000 town halls, and a second phase of meetings by way of an online process of proposal that allowed anyone to set out the themes, time and venue for any such meeting. The process concluded on 15 March 2019. Macron made a position statement, and announced various measures on 25 April 2019, including cuts to income tax, the creation of a citizen's convention and changes to legislative and representative processes (see, for instance, France 24 2019 and Nossiter 2019).

The gilets jaunes in France have inhabited a position largely associated with a leftist programme, even if it is not asking for this programme to be represented by a particular party -- but it is difficult to map any closer affiliation with political parties, and indeed there are contradictions here. Jacques Rancière observed that 'the gilets jaunes movement is the act of people who normally do not move' (2019). Meanwhile, Ben Quinn and Jon Henley describe the more anarchist-oriented actions of 'violent "casseurs": extreme rightwing sympathisers, anarchists, vandals and rioters interested mainly in fighting running battles with the police and looting shops'

(2019). Whilst the latter is a familiar feature of anti-establishment protest, it perhaps has the upper hand in yellow-jacket manifestations in the UK, although again the picture is mixed. On 12 January 2019, for example, a leftist anti-austerity march organised by The People's Assembly and addressed by the Labour Party's shadow chancellor John McDonnell, saw thousands of people wearing yellow jackets. The garment has been appropriated even more eye-catchingly by the far right, as exemplified by James Goddard, a prominent Brexit Leave campaigner, when he was arrested on 12 January 2019 for public order offences connected with the harassment of Remain-supporting MP Anna Soubry, and again on 2 September 2019 for blocking a car that he understood was carrying Jeremy Corbyn (Greenfield and Townsend 2019; and Deardon and Giordano 2019).

Choruses in common

What do these instances have in common? Firstly, they allow us to ask questions of the very idea of 'the common', which we can approach in the spirit of Jacques Rancière as an expression of common interest that is in some way of 'the people'. Gabriel Rockhill observes (in a note to his translation of writings by Rancière) that 'Le commun [is] alternately translated as 'something in common', 'something common', 'what is common', or 'what is common to the community'.' (Rockhill in Rancière 2004: 102--3). We should immediately note that the demonstrations addressed above take place in divided societies, where the 'will of the people' is not straightforward to determine, however much it is claimed by way of mandate of some leaders (for example Trump in the US and Boris Johnson in the UK).

Ranciére's celebrated formulation of the distribution of the sensible is helpful here. To remind ourselves:

> Politics occurs when those who 'have no' time take the time necessary to front up as inhabitants of a common space and demonstrate that their mouths really do emit speech capable of making pronouncements on the common which cannot be reduced to voices signalling pain. This distribution and redistribution of places and identities, this apportioning and reapportioning of spaces and times, of the visible and the invisible, and of noise and speech constitutes what

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I call the distribution of the sensible. Politics consists in reconfiguring the distribution of the sensible which defines the common of a community … to render visible what had not been, and to make heard as speakers those who had been perceived as mere noisy animals. (Rancière 2009: 24--5)[{note}]4

In an added twist, the community refigures itself not only by adopting a voice and taking up position, but by dressing up to boot. Who are these people? It is often not straightforward to label groups of demonstrators in recent times as being politically of the left or the right, representing the poor, for example, or the working class. These older political divisions and groupings have been eroded whilst demonstration has been claimed by groups who may not previously have taken to the streets. They are part of a wider shift in political transaction. In his book The Mask and the Flag, Paolo Gerbaudo describes an 'emergent political horizon' that includes Trump and Sanders in the US, Podemos and Ciudadanos in Spain, the Five Star Movement in Italy, Farage in the UK, Ada Colau in Barcelona – 'in the wake of 2008 financial crisis', and after the 'dominant order' of neoliberalism since 1980s (2017: 1) -- a contemporary cocktail in which a base of neoliberal economics is mixed with new forms of neopopulist expression, whether of the right or left. Gerbaudo's book is about the movement of the squares, amid what he sees as a disavowal of traditional political positions, a turn to amateur modes of protest, and the galvanising of action through the use of social media both to organise and disseminate protest. There are several discontinuities, particularly in terms of social and cultural habitus, between some parts of the movement of the squares and the instances that I have addressed above, not least since the latter largely take place in Western settings where representative political systems have a particular reach and history. Nonetheless, in each case the protests arise from a sense of disprivilege, de-democratization and disenfranchisement (from processes, power, political sway). Costumed protest, masked appearance, the symbolic presence of groups of people who express through political dressing, are part of a wider performance of the desire to have a stake in civic process and decisions that affect communities.

What else are we to make of this new plethora of costumes? Let's immediately observe that these are indeed costumes, not uniforms -- a small but important distinction. This is popular demonstration not in the manner of the Suffragettes

during the first two decades of the twentieth century, with their upscale Edwardian attire, accessorised in purple, white and green; certainly not that of the Blackshirts of the 1930s; nor of the Black Panther movement in the 1960s, with its blue shirts, black leather jackets and black berets (sunglasses optional). In these more historic instances, supporters donned a particular attire not to dress <u>as something else</u> while making a stand, but to inhabit an outfit that presented an individual indivisibly associated with the cause that they espoused. The uniform -- with its connotations of military belonging -- precisely produces its wearers as part of an army (even if that army is a 'monstrous regiment' of women attired precisely as women); not a group of lookalikes, but a quasi-regulated body that observes codes of dress and behaviour.

With the uniform there is no separation of person and pose. With the costume, however, the wearer always appears <u>in addition to</u> the persona that they present. In the case of the five instances discussed above, the dress or mask is donned to present <u>the appearance of another reference</u> at the moment that the individual body inhabits public space to take a stand. Presentation is thereby both doubled and multiplied. Doubled, because we see individuals appearing as themselves in person, and as intertext, evoking the panoply of referentiality that accompanies (for example) the Guy Fawkes mask or the Handmaid's costume. Multiplied, because the intertext appears in series, not exactly as an 'army' in the manner of the uniformed protests further back in time, but as a looser and more fluid presence. The protestors are <u>other</u> while also being present, counted, immersed. They act as an iteration, an actualization, of the ideas evoked by the costume, whilst also embodying an idea delineated by opposition to that which is protested against. The protest not only states its requirements or disagreements; it also performs its resonant mythology, its symbolic back-story.

Margus Vihalem relates this appeal to the people to a wider affective scene:

> Politics is not conceptualised; it is visualized. From street banners to television advertisements, it must be showed-off and staged, it must be realized in the sensible. Politics is not so much a matter of discussing and doing, as it is a matter of fantasizing, promising, representing and reproducing -- on a deeper level it is sensed rather than thought. Far from being kept apart from

politics, <u>aisthesis</u> seems to be the very medium of politics: politics is what is sensed and what is felt. (2018: 2)

The mythic appearance, the suffusion of other narratives (the Gilead story, for instance) and functions (the fluorescent jacket that makes workers safer, for example), perform the mobilization of those who represent themselves to be disprivileged and disenfranchised. This is a Chorus of the Commons, deliberately presented as a group rather than a set of individuals. In classical Greek tragedy the chorus inhabited a dramatic ecosystem that included a protagonist along with other main characters (these included the deuteragonist and tritagonist, second and third in importance), in a system that pitted individuals against each other or in counterpoint, with the chorus operating as witness, collective and non-individualised (group) consciousness. In contemporary theatrical expressions of protest, the costumed chorus has a similar function, appearing as witness, and collective conscience -- except that it performs its own agency <u>in reaction</u>, in a way that was typically denied to the ancient tragic chorus. The contemporary chorus speaks (or, in XR mode, moves) in favour of an idea or a cause -- anti-corporatism, the reversal of climate change, reproductive rights for women -- rather than merely reflecting on what it hears in the manner of the ancient chorus. The new chorus claims a voice, and it does so by performing its presence as a theatre of the street, a theatre of the real.

For all that it takes place in actual time and space, the demonstration also operates in a domain of fiction, symbolism and representation in order to counter precisely these features (abuse of fact, harnessing of mythologies, organisation of mediation) in the processes of contemporary hegemony. Ideology is no longer invisible in the Althusserian sense but inhabited and performed -- both by those who wield power, and those who object to the effects of power. Performance here denotes the continuous <u>interrelation</u> of medium and message in public discourse; and the staged conjunction of local protest and international movements that allows individual protestors to join as part of wider expressions of dissent.

This returns us to the viral. Vihalem suggests:

> Social media can be considered a sign of a new era in which almost
> everybody (under the condition of having access to appropriate technical
> devices) has a specific functional access to the public space and can to some
> extent participate in reshaping this space. (2018: 6)

If social media reshape what we understand of public space and our engagement
with it, they also facilitate actual embodied inhabitation. The chorus of the commons,
then, is enabled digitally, consumed virtually, and expressed in actuality as
embodied performance. What's performed is a contestation of meaning in the public
sphere, which is also a demonstration of the contingency of things -- by which I
mean the meeting of dramatic narratives, cultural tropes, and affective social and
political memes. We see here the ingraining of performance not just as a major
structure of contemporary cultural production, but as a central mode of conveying
meaning. Associated with this, an extension of the operations of mediation, as the
instrument through which performance achieves its effects.

Rancière argues that 'Politics revolves around what is seen and what can be said
about it' (2004: 13) -- but what can be said about it is also engaged by what can be
shown about it. What can be shown draws upon a repertoire of symbolic materials
(masks, gilets, bonnets) that theatricalizes this refiguring of political transaction.
Hidden political processes are contested in the 'specific sensorium' (Rancière 2009:
29) of the public sphere -- now a sensorium that includes the omni-present digi-
sphere. This happens by making visible a resistance that is not only a demonstration
in and of itself, but that demonstrates through performance a symbolic repertoire that
counters hegemonic discourse. The costumed chorus stages its opposition precisely
by appearing representationally.

This is, then, an aesthetic mode of political intervention -- the appearance of a self
that is also an 'other', one among a chorus, dressed up in order to be a vehicle for
myth and symbol. This is not quite a version of the adage that the pen is mightier
than the sword, since demonstrations may or may not change things, and may or
may not be solely aesthetic. (We should acknowledge that some demonstrators --
wearing yellow jackets or Guy Fawkes masks, for instance -- adopt the methods of
the sword rather than the pen.) Nonetheless there is something similar in opposing

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state power and corporate hegemony with theatre and performance, and with cloaks, masks and bonnets.

Notes

1 See, for instance, https://spainsnews.com/the-colors-of-the-climate-rebellion-red-blue-and-brown-society/; https://www.news.com.au/technology/environment/climate-change/shambolic-bizarre-and-upsetting-moment-climate-protesters-lost-us-for-good/news-story/a8e9c8b0e5784f865f418a68d108bfc8 (accessed 13 October 2019).

2. The Dark Knight was directed by Christopher Nolan and released on 14 July 2008; Joker was directed by Todd Phillips and released on 31 August 2019.

3 Atwood's novel was published by McClelland & Stewart in 1985. A film, The Handmaid's Tale, directed by Volker Schlöndorff, was released in 1990. The TV adaptation, The Handmaid's Tale, was produced by Daniel Wilson Productions, Inc., The Littlefield Company, White Oak Pictures and MGM Television, and broadcast by the streaming service Hulu, with the first three episodes premiering on 26 April 2017.

4 See Vihalem 2018 for a discussion of the common in relation to aesthetics and politics.

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