

The Terror of Visibility

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2023

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*Fuck it! You draw back and go underground again and come up somewhere else.
(Viv Libertine)*

1. Intro

What happened at the protest - or was it a street party, or a weird circus parade? - against the 633 bis in Palermo in December 2022 was, to my mind, a symptom of bourgeois society's deep frozen reality and at the same time of our difficult, liminal position in it. I felt, again, the aggressive deadness¹ of "normality"; I plunged for a fleeting moment into the breath-taking vortex of the bacchanalia right in the centre of the bourgeois citadel; and I witnessed the dilemmas of resistance facing us. This text is maybe more convoluted than the previous ones, maybe more polemical. In any case, it does not pretend to be the absolute truth, but one possible interpretation of events, a reflection of my current ethics and libidinal microcosm; as such, it will appeal more to some and less to others. This is precisely how it should be: texts should provoke new discussions, approaches, thoughts and experiments about what we are - or, rather, about what we are not? - and want to become.

2. The Spectacle

While the event was being planned, I was obsessively musing: "A protest is a step towards the domestication of the movement. Channelling our energies into organising it means being lured into a political game whose rules and outcomes are decided by the enemy and that, in the long run, we cannot but lose." This obsessive panic was an offshoot of my current political ethics: I came to feel that the usual forms of public political action - protests, marches, parades, public campaigns, performances and so on - are by now domesticated. They are so familiar that they do no surprise anyone. This means that they do not short-circuit, or even mildly disturb, the given order of things; on the contrary, they function as an occasion for its ritual reinstatement. And most times, without realising it, they follow the homeostatic logics, forms and methods of a vast dispositif of control that can be called the "Spectacle".

I find it difficult to concisely discuss the Spectacle, because of its complex and decentralised nature. I will try to explain a bit what I mean and why this is a relevant concept, with the caveat that I will be cutting some corners - but, hopefully, this discussion is just starting².

All control dispositifs aim to make sure that nothing happens that might disturb bourgeois homeostasis. Within the great modern deployment of dispositifs of control, the role of the Spectacle is to shape one's horizon of possibilities, what they want, imagine, dream of and enjoy; and to prevent certain such possibilities from existing. Or is it maybe more accurate to say that the great modern effort to police the forms of expression, imagination and pleasure that are possible,

¹ The mainstream and its inhabitants are "dead" like a metaphor is dead, an imagination is dead, a passion is dead, like lettuce leaves drowsed in carbon dioxide in a plastic bag under supermarket neon lights are dead. These are the times of living death.

² Since there is no space to discuss the Spectacle in detail, the argument will seem a bit elliptic. Also, I am myself discovering all the possible facets and uses of the concept. I have included this discussion here to, maybe, start a debate and, also maybe, to prepare the terrain for other interventions on this topic. Anyway, the concept of the "Spectacle" comes from Debord, of course, then Tiqqun, etc. I am working on my own take on it.

encouraging some and blocking other has, in the past 200 or so years, gradually assumed Spectacular form? Anyway, the aim of the Spectacle is to control “souls”; I could even hypothesise - partly as a heuristic device, partly as an intuition worth exploring - that the historical dispositive that the contemporary Spectacle usurps is the church. Like the church, the Spectacle shapes souls both through everyday, mundane practices (working, praying, watching TV) and through ritual grandiose festivities (Easter celebrations, political elections, the opening of the Olympic games). Spectacular productions, like religious productions, are not confined to the visual field but invade all symbolic fields that shape identification and fantasy. Like religion, the Spectacle is lived by the subject as common-sense perception and self-evident truth and as a freely chosen – natural, even - form of (self-)expression. And the result of the Spectacle’s shaping of souls, like that of religion, is a world of rigorously governed forms of life.

The Spectacle utilises a specific discourse: freedom, pleasure, fun, individuality, creativity, self-development, self-affirmation, self-expression and so on. And uses a certain method, obviously that of the public display of “socio-cultural³” productions and icons: the stage, the screen, the tribune, the culprit, the street, the plaza, the show, the performance, the fascinating event, the shocking news, the celebrity, the influencer, the expert, the politician, the preacher, the author are all part of its arsenal. Our world is saturated with spectacular productions: mass media, fashion, film, music, indeed, “art” in all its forms from museums and galleries to festivals, advertising, internet and so on.

By now, moulded by the Spectacle, most of us have the same types of craves, joys and dislikes and, when we are trying to be creative and inventive, come up with some reheated form of the same old tricks. Some of us are actively involved in the construction of the Spectacle - like a magician’s show, the events of the Spectacle require our participation. But we never seem able to produce the templates for the forms of life that populate its countless stages. As such, all these templates reiterate the world exactly as it is, even when they seem to critique it. It’s a form of eugenics of imagination and desire, of what and how we can do with ourselves.

We should experience the Spectacle as terminally boring; but by now we are so merged with it that we don’t even feel the bite of boredom.

This being said, there is nothing artificial or inauthentic about the Spectacle: the Spectacle creates forms of life, as authentic as they get. The Spectacle *is* life, all that is left of life in the bourgeois order, the only place in this order that produces desire and enjoyment. If we remove the Spectacle it is not the truth that will stare us into the eyes, but the void.

What does this – for some, I am sure, tedious - argument have to do with anything? A lot. As mentioned, to say that the “classical” forms of political manifestation in the Western world are by now part the Spectacle is to say that, rather than threatening the status quo, they replenish the mystique of bourgeois democracy. For the mainstream ideological machine, such political events are further proof of how free, “multicultural”, tolerating of free speech, diversity and even dissent “we“ are, as long as it is all properly performed. When dissent is not performed according to the official rules, such events are further proof of how violent, destructive and sectarian some groups are and of how the paternal State and its forces of order are the only entities able to defend freedom, peace, prosperity and “our normal way of life”. In all their instantiations, Spectacular political events are an opportunity for the ritual validation of the bourgeois order, a celebratory

³ The terms “culture” and “society” as defined by bourgeois social sciences – anthropology, sociology, cultural studies – are highly problematic constructs; I used them as a stepping tombstone to my discussion of the Spectacle.

ritual of re-birth if you want, regularly injecting this dead body with the frisson it needs to feel alive. They feed its insatiable hunger for “scandal”, “exciting news”, “controversy” and “public debates” for a few moments, until something more interesting is displayed on the screens of bourgeois life. More importantly, they are stuck in a reactionary position, reacting compulsively to the endless disasters of capitalism without ever having the energy to build their own worlds.

3. Visibility and recognition

Spectacular politics take place on a stage. They shout a message and choreograph a public display of bodies with the aim of attracting the attention and sympathy of those watching and/or raise their political consciousness. In such events, one performs for another: they expose themselves to the assessment of some onlooker, real or imagined, and demand their attention, recognition and support.

The free party is the opposite: it does not display itself to any authoritative gaze; it does not ask for anything from any institution; it makes no claims and no pleas, it does not try to convince anyone and aims for secrecy, not visibility. Its strength is precisely the ability to create an autonomous cosmos without asking for recognition. Its surge of intensity hides in the dark, a witches’ feast shrouded in mystery, evading the normative gaze of authorities, the cannibalistic curiosity of the media and the competition for new “edgy” thrills of the radical-chic.

This difference runs deep. Classical “radical” political movements aim to make their message loud and clear, to make their actions, ideology and motivations visible and intelligible to public and authorities. They share the classical goals of liberalism: to display, to demonstrate, to debate, to convince, to educate; to be obvious, noticeable, recognisable. They are forever locked in a macabre erotic embrace with the enemy. The free party movement, as I live and understand it at least, is radically anti-State, anti-capitalist and anti-bourgeois, while also being many other things; but it does not depend on the presence of the enemy to exist. It is not fuelled by rage or frustration, feelings which invoke the ghost of the enemy and carry it in procession inside the event, but by the excitement and curiosity of creating improbable worlds, even if for a moment. We dance among ourselves, not with or for the cops and bosses. For the outside world the party remains inscrutable, unpredictable like the desire of the Other⁴, like seeing from afar “the cave of an oracle: steam drifting, sybilline cries arriving out of the darkness...”⁵

The free party movement, the way I experience it, is not a proletarian or worker’s movement, is not a movement of the oppressed: it is a movement of people temporarily freed from the paralysing bind of such identities, who experiment with becoming otherwise. This is why, as I was writing in the first issue, I do not think much of the argument that the free party needs to align itself with the “causes”, demands and strategies of traditional Western political movements. If the incongruences between the free party and “normal society” are bent into some sort of fit then, for me, the movement has been domesticated and they have won, turning us into another side-show in the global composition of the Spectacle.

⁴ This is a reference to the psychoanalytical concepts of the gaze and desire of the Other, or rather to the eternally unanswerable questions we eternally ask ourselves: “How does the Other see me? Am I desirable to the Other? What can I do to become desirable to the Other?”

⁵ Thomas Pynchon.

4. Trapped by the gaze

Thus, when questions about what and how to organise as a reaction to the 633bis started circulating in our circles, my initial reaction was: “Surely not a march!” Why should we, I thought, come out of the underground and expose ourselves to the scalpel of the dominant gaze, let it cut us into thin strips of flesh to examine under microscope? With what purpose and effects? Do we hope to convince those watching us that we are good, harmless and constructive people, with families, jobs and “proper values” just like them? Ask for their sympathy and support? Well, as said before, any respectable citizen of the Empire can, at any point, reveal themselves to be a cop. They see in us everything that frightens and annoys them, the refusal to be docile and to enjoy the pleasures provided by the official industry of fun. Are we aiming to turn ourselves and the free party into something that they can relate to and consume, something tame, law-abiding, clean and cute? Not me.

I still have these thoughts. But of course, once it was decided to go that way, I have participated wholeheartedly and did not regret it. I shall describe below my experience of the event. Before that, however, let me say that the lack of know-how that we have witnessed at the beginning of the organising process was actually a good sign. Not knowing how to stage a Spectacular event is nothing to reproach ourselves for but, on the contrary, means that far we have been doing things as we should, avoiding as much as possible the lure of the Spectacle. I will be more worried when we shall become able to organise such events without sweating.

5. Cutting through the city’s hungry corpse

For most of the six hours of the itinerant party that traversed Palermo’s via Vittorio Emmanuelle, I felt quite excited. We have invaded - but not infested – the gentrified city centre, cutting a wound full of pullulating forms of life in this bloated living corpse, bringing our “dangerous” practices inside the metropolitan sanatorium of the movida, fracturing the consensus of the sad and disciplined x-mas happiness with our depraved bacchanalia, cracking the display window of the new, tourist-, bourgeois- and hipster-friendly Palermo. It was all done with the permission and under the strict surveillance of the forces of order, so indeed, it was a Spectacular event, an official holiday. But I didn’t care any more: being with my tribe, drinking, dancing and laughing in the aseptic urban core, blocking for a short while the habitual flows of consumers, cars, commodities and desire felt invigorating.

What I could see around me, outside our party, was hostility: zombie citizens stubbornly doing what they always do, spending their money and lives on trinkets, drinks and food in one of the many identical shops, bars and restaurants that line the streets like rows of sentinels. The slight annoyance of the shop-owners whose business we interrupted. Some curiosity from a few people in balconies and in the streets that somehow felt the parade was exciting but did not dare joining in (with very few exceptions). Most of the onlookers did not have a clue what this is about and couldn’t care less. I suspect many of them would actually agree with the new law: “Put away those barbarians, eliminate those foci of perversion and infection, we want a clean and orderly country!”

When I walked out of our group to find a place to piss – bloody hard work with cops all around us – I felt like K., Kafka’s character in the Trial, while being absorbed deeper and deeper into the

labyrinthine bowels of the bureaucratic machine: walking on the streets full of placid families and members of the “creative class” showing off their new boots in some “gastronomic” or “artsy” bar, drinking ridiculous cocktails and artisanal beers, I felt enfeebled, drained, suffocated and had to quicken my step to re-join the parade.

It is fairly obvious to me that the protest did not contaminate. Do we even want to? Are we taking upon ourselves this messianic work of “converting” and preaching? Not me. I don’t want a career as a missionary, priests, educator or politician. It was clear to me, as it was to the majority of the onlookers staring at us: there we were, two antagonistic worlds rubbing against each with all the discomfort born out of our mutual rejection. The protest had value exclusively for us, the ravers. Would I participate again? Maybe. Maybe not.

6. The birth of discipline

It has been said many times that the world of the free party is anarchic, and it is: there is no authority that can tell anyone what to do. This does not mean that anything goes, but that problems and conflicts are dealt with as they appear, in a spontaneous manner and that there is no one appointed to maintain order and to make sure that everyone respects some given set of rules. It is up to the ethic of each one of us. It is different in the case of a legal protest: anarchy is then replaced with the self-appointment of a group of people “in charge” that know what must and must not be done, what is the best practice, what is forbidden etc. and that try to imprint their view on the event. This is not - or not only - because there are authoritarian people among us that try to assume leadership; it is a structural issue, something that occurs each time things are done according to the requirements of the forces of order.

The authorisation given by officials is meant to destroy any potential for doing or being otherwise. In such circumstances, the cop in each one of us comes out and people that usually despise the police start policing each other into respecting the law. That is: once it asks for the authorities’ permission, even the most defiant group internalises the gaze of authority and starts to self-police according to what they imagine this authority sees when looking at them. It is a time-tested and well-honed technique for inscribing the law at the heart of excited and ecstatic, dangerous bodies and making them dance the waltz of power. This is one possible reading of the strange maxim that Foucault inserts in his description of the working mechanisms of panopticism and discipline: “the soul is the prison of the body”. Once the gaze of authority colonises their “souls”, bodies start marching to the rhythm of the law... And this is why the forces of order insist on every event asking for their permission and why they allow events to happen that would be immediately repressed if “unauthorised”, even if they would take exactly the same form in both situations.

7. Some conclusions: The party shall not be televised

Let me sum up the argument and add a few thoughts about legality. Irrespective of the merits of protests, parades and similar events, authorised or not, they have little in common with the spirit of the free party. The free party temporarily liberates a space – physical, symbolic, psychological, libidinal – from the compulsion to respond to the interpellations of the Spectacle and thus becomes a radical event that tears in the fabric of “normality” a gash towards something else, to-

wards the incredible and unthinkable. To retain its force as a movement, it has to remain anarchic, spontaneous and unruly, outside the parameters of “proper politics” and “proper living”.

Some of us feel that if the party is not illegal, it is not free. This is not an abstract moral or political principle; it is a concrete, tactical approach to building forms of life. When one needs to ask for permission to build a world, then their world is an annex of the world of those that give the permission.

I know we all know this, but it seems it is worth repeating it once in a while: is not because of a moral principle that anarchy does not obey the law; but because a reality ruled by the law slowly but certainly aligns all events with a codex of commandments that regulates every aspect of every life. Such a reality is hierarchical and centralised, since governed by lawmakers and law-enforcers. It is also a dead reality: in a territory ruled by the law, only the forms of life imagined and nurtured by the law are allowed to exist and this is the opposite of anarchy.

Think of this little scenario if this government proves inflexible to the pressures of our Spectacular events and official demands (which it almost certainly will because it is the only governing strength it has), are we going to start looking for other political parties that might be more receptive to our demands? Are some of us going to spur the others into voting for this or that opposition party in the name of the “cause”? Are we going to organise ourselves in the format of identity-politics, as a “minority” group that demands rights from the State? What do such actions have in common with anarchy or autonomy? To my mind, not much.

Central institutions that coordinate the free party movement, efforts to be recognised and accepted by the mainstream and authorities, hierarchical coordination and homogenising of the events, legalisation? Those are not forms of political organisation that I care about. As to the “authorised parties” that would come out of this line of action, they wouldn’t be free parties but something else: festivals, outdoor clubbing, techno fans’ conventions, musical congresses, artistic workshops, whatever. Nice, potentially. But there is a profusion of such events already, some ambitiously curated and excellently organised, so I personally do not need more of the same.

6. Codicil: The lair of the anomic pulsation

I will append some thoughts that might seem a bit weird but that could, also maybe, inspire other approaches to telling stories about the seduction of the free party. What if that which makes the free party unlike other form of politics is the fact that it encourages an anomic pulsation⁶? Anomie points towards worlds without *nomos*, like anarchy points towards worlds without *arkhos*. And to refuse the “nomos” is to refuse the pretences of naturalness of the dominant symbolic order. It means contesting that “modern” will-to-truth in the name of which the most aberrant forms of domination are enacted. It is the impulse to make space, to dissolve, the pulsation towards undoing the rigidly paranoid “I” invented by modernity, with its draining pretences of unity, coherence and self-transparency. Not so as to enthrone some other pre-packaged truths and certainties about the nature of the world; but to start composing our own imagination and affect from the dispersed and vandalised atoms of the old ones.

⁶ This term is inspired by the psychoanalytical concept of the “death drive”. However, I don’t want to get bogged down in discussion with authoritative bodies of knowledge. I will take what I need and also use as inspiration other discussions of the death drive outside the psychoanalytical field, esp. from what has been called the “queer antisocial turn” in the USA (Lee Edelman, Baedan, etc.) to think about it otherwise.

This “anomic pulsation” is a symbolic element, part of our social being rather than an instinctual blind force. It would be that thing within our disciplined subjectivity and bodies that relentlessly pushes towards rupture; that impulse, created residually by the very process of training we call “education”, to unravel the given, the habitual, common sense and comfort.

The free party, when everything goes well, becomes an ecosystem that pushes one towards the encounter with the anomic pulsation. It is a territory of pleasure and risk, of ecstatic terror at times, when you confront the lure of unravelling and the usual functioning of the world is short-circuited. Here, one might soften their edges and re-compose in absurd, unstable and grotesque combinations with fragments from other beings and things. This is, I think, something worth further investigation.

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Retrieved on 3/11/2023 from

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This text is the English version of zines in Italian that are distributed at free parties in Sicily. It is written in the context of the new 633bis law, pushed by the neo-fascist Italian government in 2023 and that makes possible sentences of up to 6 years in jail for organising illegal free parties, interception of phone calls, etc., all under the cover of "anti-terrorist" and "anti-mafia" measures.

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