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The Articulation of Protest

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Every articulation is a montage of various elements – voices, images, colors, passions or dogmas – within a certain period of time and with a certain expanse in space. The significance of the articulated moments depends on this. They only make sense within this articulation and depending on their position. So how is protest articulated? What does it articulate and what articulates it?

The articulation of protest has two levels: on the one hand, it indicates finding a language for protest, the vocalization, the verbalization or the visualization of political protest. On the other, however, this combination of concepts also designates the structure or internal organization of protest movements. In other words, there are two different kinds of concatenations of different elements: one is at the level of symbols, the other at the level of political forces. The dynamic of desiring and refusal, attraction and repulsion, the contradiction and the convergence of different elements unfolds at both levels. In relation to protest, the question of articulation applies to the organization of its expression – but also the expression of its organization.

Naturally, protest movements are articulated at many levels: at the level of their programs, demands, self-obligations, manifestos and actions. This also involves montage – in the form of inclusions and exclusions based on subject matter, priorities and blind spots. In addition, though, protest movements are also articulated as concatenations or conjunctions of different interest groups, NGOs, political parties, associations, individuals or groups. Alliances, coalitions, fractions, feuds or even indifference are articulated in this structure. At the political level as well, there is also a form of montage, combinations of interests, organized in a grammar of the political that reinvents itself again and again. At this level, articulation designates the form of the internal organization of protest movements. According to which rules, though, is this montage organized? Who does it organize with whom, through whom, and in which way?

And what does this mean for globalization-critical articulations – both at the level of the organization of its expression and at the level of the expression of its organization? How are global conjunctions represented? How are different protest movements mediated with one another? Are they placed next to one another, in other words simply added together, or related to one another in some other way? What is the image of a protest movement? Is it the sum of the heads of speakers from the individual groups added together? Is it pictures of confrontations and marches? Is it new forms of depiction? Is it the reflection of forms of a protest movement? Or the invention of new relations between individual elements of political linkages? With these thoughts about articulation, I refer to a very specific field of theory, namely the theory of montage or film cuts. This is also because the thinking about art and politics together is usually treated in the field of political theory, and art often appears as its ornament. What

happens, though, if we conversely relate a reflection about a form of artistic production, namely the theory of montage, to the field of politics? In other words, how is the political field edited, and which political significance could be derived from this form of articulation?

Chains of Production

I would like to discuss these issues on the basis of two film segments - and to address their implicit or explicit political thinking based on the form of their articulation. The films will be compared from a very specific perspective: both contain a sequence, in which the conditions of their own articulation are addressed. Both of these sequences present the chains of production and production procedures, through which these films were made. And on the basis of the self-reflexive discussion of their manner of producing political significance, the creation of chains and montages of aesthetic forms and political demands, I would like to explain the political implications of forms of montage.

The first segment is from the film *Showdown in Seattle*, produced in 1999 by the Independent Media Center Seattle, broadcast by Deep Dish Television. The second segment is from a film by Godard/Mieville from 1975 entitled *Ici et Ailleurs*. Both deal with transnational and international circumstances of political articulation: *Showdown in Seattle* documents the protests against the WTO negotiations in Seattle and the internal articulation of these protests as the heterogeneous combination of diverse interests. The theme of *Ici et Ailleurs*, on the other hand, are the meanderings of French solidarity with Palestine in the 70s in particular, and a radical critique of the poses, stagings and

counterproductive linkages of emancipation in general. The two films are not really comparable as such - the first is a quickly produced utility document that functions in the register of counter-information. *Ici et Ailleurs*, on the other hand, mirrors a long and even embarrassing process of reflection. Information is not in the foreground there, but rather the analysis of its organization and staging. The comparison of the two films is therefore not to be read as a statement on the films per se, but rather illuminates only one particular aspect, namely their self-reflection on their own specific forms of articulation.

Showdown in Seattle

The film *Showdown in Seattle* is an impassioned documentation of the protests revolving around the WTO meeting in Seattle in 1999. [1] The days of protest and their events are edited in chronological form. At the same time, the developments on the street are grounded with background information about the work of the WTO. Numerous short statements are given by a multitude of speakers from the most diverse political groups, especially unions, but also indigenous groups and farmers' organizations. The film (which consists of five half-hour single parts) is extraordinarily stirring and kept in the style of a conventional reportage. Along with this, there is a notion of filmic space-time, which could be described in Benjamin's terms as homogenous and empty, organized by chronological sequences and uniform spaces.

Toward the end of the two and a half-hour film series, there is a segment, in which the viewer is taken on a tour through the production site of the film, the studio set up in Seattle. What is seen there is impressive. The entire film was shot and edited

during the period of the protests. A half-hour program was broadcast every evening. This requires a considerable logistic effort, and the internal organization of the Indymedia office accordingly does not look principally different from a commercial TV broadcaster. We see how pictures from countless video cameras come into the studio, how they are viewed, how useable sections are excerpted, how they are edited into another shot, and so forth. Various media are listed, in which and through which publicizing is carried out, such as fax, telephone, WWW, satellite, etc. We see how the work of organizing information, in other words pictures and sound, is conducted: there is a video desk, production plans, etc. What is presented is the portrayal of a chain of production of information, or more precisely in the definition of the producers: counter-information, which is negatively defined by its distance to the information from the corporate media criticized for their one-sidedness. What this involves, then, is a mirror-image replica of the conventional production of information and representation with all its hierarchies, a faithful reproduction of the corporate media's manner of production - only apparently for a different purpose.

This different purpose is described with many metaphors: *get the word across, get the message across, getting the truth out, getting images out*. What is to be disseminated is counter-information that is described as truth. The ultimate instance that is invoked here is *the voice of the people*, and this voice is to be heard. It is conceived as the unity of differences, different political groups, and it sounds within the resonator of a filmic space-time, the homogeneity of which is never called into question.

Yet we must not only ask ourselves how this voice of the people is articulated and organized, but also what this voice of the people is supposed to be at all. In *Showdown in Seattle*, this expression is

used without any problematization: as the addition of voices of individual speakers from protest groups, NGOs, unions, etc. Their demands and positions are articulated across broad segments of the film - in the form of "talking heads". Because the form of the shots is the same, the positions are standardized and thus made comparable. At the level of the standardized conventional language of form, the different statements are thus transformed into a chain of formal equivalencies, which adds the political demands together in the same way that pictures and sounds are strung together in the conventional chain of montage in the media chain of production. In this way, the form is completely analogous to the language of form used by the criticized corporate media, only the content is different, namely an additive compilation of voices resulting in the *voice of the people* when taken together. When all of these articulations are added together, what comes out as the sum is the voice of the people - regardless of the fact that the different political demands sometimes radically contradict one another, such as those from environmentalists and unions, different minorities, feminist groups, etc., and it is not at all clear how these demands can be mediated. What takes the place of this missing mediation is only a filmic and political addition - of shots, statements and positions - and an aesthetic form of concatenation, which takes over the organizational principles of its adversary unquestioningly. [2]

In the second film, on the other hand, this method of the mere addition of demands resulting together in the "voice of the people" is severely criticized - along with the concept of the voice of the people itself.

Ici et Ailleurs

The directors, or rather the editors of the film *Ici et Ailleurs*[3], Godard and Mieville, take a radically critical position with respect to the terms of the popular. Their film consists of a self-critique of a self-produced film fragment. The collective Dziga Vertov (Godard/Morin) shot a commissioned film on the PLO in 1970. The heroizing propaganda film that blusters about the people's battle was called "Until Victory" and was never finished. It consisted of several parts with titles such as: the armed battle, political work, the will of the people, the extended war - until victory. It showed battle training, scenes of exercise and shooting, and scenes of PLO agitation, formally in an almost senseless chain of equivalencies, in which every image, as it later proved, is forced into the anti-imperialistic fantasy. Four years later, Godard and Mieville inspect the material more closely again. They note that parts of the statements of PLO adherents were never translated or were staged to begin with. They reflect on the stagings and the blatant lies of the material - but most of all on their own participation in this, in the way they organized the pictures and sound. They ask: How did the adjuring formula of the "voice of the people" function here as populist noise to eliminate contradictions? What does it mean to edit the Internationale into any and every picture, rather like the way butter is smeared on bread? Which political and aesthetic notions are added together under the pretext of the "voice of the people"? Why did this equation not work? In general, Godard/Mieville arrive at the conclusion: the additive "and" of the montage, with which they edit one picture onto another, is not an innocent one and certainly not unproblematic.

Today the film is shockingly up to date, but not in the sense of offering a position on the Middle East conflict. On the contrary, it is the problematizing of the concepts and patterns, in which

conflicts and solidarity are abridged to binary oppositions of betrayal or loyalty and reduced to unproblematic additions and pseudo-causalities, that makes it so topical. For what if the model of addition is wrong? Or if the additive "and" does not represent an addition, but rather grounds a subtraction, a division or no relation at all? Specifically, what if the "and" in this "here and elsewhere", in this France and Palestine does not represent an addition, but rather a subtraction?[4] What if two political movements not only do not join, but actually hinder, contradict, ignore or even mutually exclude one another? What if it should be "or" rather than "and", or "because" or "instead of"? And then what does an empty phrase like "the will of the people" mean?

Transposed to a political level, the questions are thus: On which basis can we even draw a political comparison between different positions or establish equivalencies or even alliances? What is even made comparable at all? What is added together, edited together, and which differences and opposites are leveled for the sake of establishing a chain of equivalencies? What if this "and" of political montage is functionalized, specifically for the sake of a populist mobilization? And what does this question mean for the articulation of protest today, if nationalists, protectionists, anti-Semites, conspiracy theorists, Nazis, religious groups and reactionaries all line up in the chain of equivalencies with no problem at anti-globalization demos? Is this a simple case of the principle of unproblematic addition, a blind "and", that presumes that if sufficient numbers of different interests are added up, at some point the sum will be the people?

Godard and Mieville do not relate their critique solely to the level of political articulation, in other words the expression of internal organization, but specifically also to the organization of its expression. Both are very closely connected. An essential

component of this problematic issue is found in *how* pictures and sounds are organized, edited and arranged. A Fordist articulation organized according to the principles of mass culture will blindly reproduce the templates of its masters, according to their thesis, so it has to be cut off and problematized. This is also the reason why Godard/Mieville are concerned with the chain of production of pictures and sound, but in comparison with Indymedia, they choose an entirely different scene - they show a crowd of people holding pictures, wandering past a camera as though on a conveyor belt and pushing each other aside at the same time. A row of people carrying pictures of the "battle" is linked together by machine following the logic of the assembly line and camera mechanics. Here Godard/Mieville translate the temporal arrangement of the film images into a spatial arrangement. What becomes evident here are chains of pictures that do not run one after the other, but rather are shown at the same time. They place the pictures next to one another and shift their framing into the focus of attention. What is revealed is the principle of their concatenation. What appears in the montage as an often invisible addition is problematized in this way and set in relation to the logic of machine production. This reflection on the chain of production of pictures and sounds in this sequence makes it possible to think about the conditions of representation on film altogether. The montage results within an industrial system of pictures and sounds, whose concatenation is organized from the start - just as the principle of the production sequence from *Showdown in Seattle* is marked by its assumption of conventional schemata of production.

In contrast, Godard/Mieville ask: how do the pictures hang on the chain, how are they chained together, what organizes their articulation, and which political significances are generated in this way? Here we see an experimental situation of concatenation, in

which pictures are relationally organized. Pictures and sounds from Nazi Germany, Palestine, Latin America, Viet Nam and other places are mixed wildly together - and added with a number of folk songs or songs that invoke the people from right-wing and left-wing contexts. First of all, this much is evident, this results in the impression that the pictures naturally attain their significance through their concatenation. But secondly, and this is much more important, we see that impossible concatenations occur: pictures from the concentration camp and Vnceremos songs, Hitler's voice and a picture of My Lai, Hitler's voice and a picture of Golda Meir, My Lai and Lenin. It becomes clear that the basis of this voice of the people, which we hear in its diverse articulations and at the level of which the experiment takes place, is in fact not a basis for creating equivalencies, but instead brings up the radical political contradictions that it is striving to cover up. It generates sharp discrepancies within the silent coercion - as Adorno would say - of the identity relationship. It effects contraries instead of equations, and beyond the contraries even sheer dread - everything except an unproblematic addition of political desire. For what this populist chain of equivalencies mainly displays at this point is the void that it is structured around, the empty inclusivist AND that just keeps blindly adding and adding outside the realm of all political criteria.

In summary we can say that the principle of the voice of the people assumes an entirely different role in the two films. Although it is the organizing principle in Seattle, the principle that constitutes the gaze, it is never problematized itself. The voice of the people functions here like a blind spot, a lacuna, which constitutes the entire field of the visible, according to Lacan, but only becomes visible itself as a kind of cover. It organizes the chain of equivalencies without allowing breaks and conceals that its political objective does not go beyond an unquestioned notion of inclusivity.

The voice of the people is thus simultaneously the organizing principle of both a concatenation and a suppression. Yet what does it suppress? In an extreme case we can say that the empty topos of the voice of the people only covers up a lacuna, specifically the lacuna of the question of the political measures and goals that are supposed to be legitimized by invoking the people.

So what are the prospects for the articulation of a protest movement based on the model of an "and" - as though inclusion at any cost were its primary goal? In relation to what is the political concatenation organized? Why actually? Which goals and criteria have to be formulated - even if they might not be so popular? And does there not have to be a much more radical critique of the articulation of ideology using pictures and sounds? Does not a conventional form mean a mimetic clinging to the conditions that are to be critiqued, a populist form of blind faith in the power of the addition of arbitrary desires? Is it not therefore sometimes better to break the chains, than to network everyone with everyone else at all costs?

Addition or Exponentiation

So what turns a movement into an oppositional one? For there are many movements that call themselves protest movements, which should be called reactionary, if not outright fascist, or which at least include such elements easily. The movements this involves are those in which existing conditions are radicalized in breathless transgression, scattering fragmented identities like bone splinters along the way. The energy of the movement glides seamlessly from one element to the next - traversing the homogeneous empty time like a wave moving through the crowd. Images, sounds and

positions are linked without reflection in the movement of blind inclusion. A tremendous dynamic unfolds in these figures - only to leave everything as it was.

Which movement of political montage then results in an oppositional articulation - instead of a mere addition of elements for the sake of reproducing the status quo? Or to phrase the question differently: Which montage between two images/elements could be imagined, that would result in something different between and outside these two, which would not represent a compromise, but would instead belong to a different order - roughly the way someone might tenaciously pound two dull stones together to create a spark in the darkness? Whether this spark, which one could also call the spark of the political, can be created at all is a question of this articulation.

Thanks to Peter Grabher / kinoki for calling attention to the films.

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[1] *Showdown in Seattle*, Deep Dish Television. USA 1999. 150 min.

[2] This is not intended to imply that there is any film that could take over this work of mediation. However, a film could insist that this cannot be replaced by simple adjurations.

[3] *Ici et Ailleurs*, Jean-Luc Godard, Anne-Marie Mieville, France 1975. 52 min.

[4] And what does "Here and Elsewhere" mean *now*, if synagogues are burning in France?