

The New Political Subject: Affect and the Media of Self-Organizing Politics

ABSTRACT This paper looks at new articulations of the subject found in documentary films about the Indignado or 15-M (15 May) movement and the Occupy Wall Street movement in 2011. These movements rejected representation in favor of a call for direct democracy on a political level. The paper suggests that their rejection had significant implications for documentary film, forcing makers to embrace new routes to portraying thought and action in a collective context.

The paper uses the work of theorists of affect including Franco Berardi and Brian Massumi, as well as of political theorists and social scientists including Jodi Dean and Zeynep Tufekci to suggest that the groups that rose up in the aftermath of the Great Recession of 2008 were reacting specifically to a rise of an attention economy, an economic system that depends on the exploitation of the “immaterial labor” of human affect and attention to extract profit.

The paper shows how the film *Tres Instantes, Un Grito* (Three Moments, One Cry, 2013) by Chilean-Spanish filmmaker Cecilia Barriga uses various strategies to avoid typical narrative approaches to character identification and development, and focuses instead on the shared space of discussion where a collective understanding is produced, and demonstrates how this strategy is appropriate for the depiction of a self-organizing movement. Other films emerging from the Occupy Wall Street and 15-M movements are analyzed to show how approaches using filmic rhythm and bodily entrainment give a sense of how these movements create new affective protocols for shared political action.

I suggest finally that affective logics deployed in these films offer a way of understanding how films, specifically political documentaries, function beyond representation *per se* to help open a new kind of shared political space.

KEYWORDS Indignado movement, affect theory film, political documentary, Occupy Wall Street media

The Plaza del Sol in Madrid. May, 2011. The clock strikes midnight and we see thousands of wiggling hands, without voices. Then the crowd calls out, “Que no! Que no! Que no no representan!” (They don’t! They don’t! They don’t represent us!)¹ [Image 1].

This outburst held and holds revolutionary implications for political and economic systems based on representative democratic government. The cry poses a different problem for the documentarian. How to document a movement that rejects, even denies the validity of, representation *per se*? Even if the denial is in relation to a political system, and the representation is an audiovisual one, falling in the space of documentary? How do you interact with a movement like this, and what do you do with your camera? In this essay I

1. Opening sequence of *Tres Instantes, Un Grito* (Three Moments, One Cry, 2013), directed by Cecilia Barriga, as described by author.



IMAGE 1. Still from *Tres Instantes, Un Grito* (Three Moments, One Cry, 2013) by Cecilia Barriga.

will take a close look at two documentary attempts to depict the movements of 2011 as well as a few other videos produced to publicize and characterize the movements as they unfolded.

The new social movements of the early twenty-first century, from the Arab Spring to the *Indignados* in Spain and Occupy Wall Street (OWS) in the US, have risen and fallen away like a flood tide, leaving in some cases new political formations, in others new terms for the debates on economic and social inequality. It is hard to remember now, as the rise of authoritarian governments globally threaten the end of democracy as we know it, that these social movements embraced forms of self-organizing and politics that, while they retain aspects of older political movements, suggest new forms of subjectivity that still hold promise. Particularly, the rejection of representation on the level of the government and the mainstream media sets new terms for documentary film, leading to innovations on the level of both form and narrative approaches, and also on the level of function and context, in what political documentaries can do and how they do it. In particular, for the documentary film form, these movements interacted with other media in new ways—ways that not only open up possibilities for organizing a grassroots base, but potentially enable new forms of social relations. In an era where information is a commodity and the cultural activity of individuals becomes both an economic profit point as well as a potential point of resistance, documentarians need to engage the question of representation in a way that frames the process of development toward a collective subject.

Cecilia Barriga, a documentary filmmaker and a resident of Madrid who was laid off during the economic crisis, joined the *acampada* (encampment) in the Plaza de la Puerta del Sol at its inception. The scene from the Puerta del Sol that begins this essay is the opening one in her film *Tres Instantes, Un Grito* (Three Moments, One Cry, 2013). While the film seems to offer a classic chronological account of events starting on the first day of the occupation and continuing to its disbanding three weeks later, *Tres Instantes* takes an unusual approach to the narrative structure of documentary. Although I believe that the

occupations of 2011 are best understood as developing in the context of an affective politics, I was surprised to find that, for me, the most compelling strategy that Barriga uses is more on the level of the subject and the construction of a shared subjectivity in relation to the event or to history than on the level of extra-linguistic effects such as contagion and mimesis that are more commonly the subject of affect-related critical discussions. I believe that Barriga's approach can be usefully viewed in terms of an affective logic on the level of narrative and the construction of a shared subjectivity. Who are the "they" who don't represent us? And who are the "we" who go unrepresented?

If politics is, as Hannah Arendt notes, what happens *between* people,² Barriga goes a long way toward shifting the camera toward that space, the space of relations. The twenty-nine-minute sequence focused on the Puerta del Sol features dozens of speakers. None have names. Many are only heard, not seen, so they don't have faces either. What they do have is the desire to create a shared situation for politics, one that includes complex decisions concerning how to interact with powers that be, solve logistical issues, and move toward their desire to remake society, all in the space of the three weeks or so that the occupation lasts. The buildup is slow. There are no brilliant leaders, and the ideas emerge slowly. Dip into the film at any specific point and what people are discussing seems unremarkable.

Early on in the film there is a discussion about whether to set up tarps to protect the protesters from the hot sun. The discussion is carried out by speakers using a megaphone. The camera rarely stays on the speaker, spending most of its time with the slowly growing crowd of eager listeners. The result is that the speakers are doubly anonymous, heard but not seen, while the visuals tell a parallel story.

MAN 01 (OFF): The police have just been here, and they have asked us to take down the canopy. We don't have a permit. We can stay here, but we have to take down the canopy. (synch): I think it's an issue we have to discuss.

WOMAN 01 (ON): If we decide to maintain the canopy . . . how should we resist? Should we barricade? I mean, how can we keep the canopy up if they try to take it away?

MAN 02 (ON): No, it isn't a hundred percent essential and necessary. Yes, it's very warm, but . . . They have their sticks, but we have the citizenry here. At the Assembly at 4:00 pm it was just ten of us, and now look at how many we are.

Cut to sign "Derecho a Techo" (The Right to a Roof)

WOMAN 02 (OFF): We're here for something else. Think about what our message is. (synch): Forget the canopy. It's not the most important issue.

MAN 03 (OFF): But precisely, if the canopy is there, what happens? (synch): It encourages people to bring another one . . . And then another and another. Just because they see it there.

CUT TO: Slow high-angle pan of the square, now covered with canopies from end to end.³

As we follow the specific issue develop in the sequence above, we see people making signs, preparing food, but mainly listening intently. There is no character development; no

2. ". . . *man* is apolitical. Politics arises *between men*, and so quite outside of *men*." Hannah Arendt, *The Promise of Politics* (New York: Schocken, 2005), 95.

3. Dialogue from *Tres Instantes*, directed by Cecilia Barriga.

individuals are singled out for us to follow. The result is that, as viewers, we are somewhere between the voices we hear and the faces we see; we find our focus in the story that is built in the shared space of discussions. Rather than getting changing subjectivities or “character development,” we see group growth around a set of goals, but also the development of a set of shared norms for interaction, a system of logistics and a way of moving forward as a movement. *Tres Instantes* does not adopt the external stance of a historical documentary; chronological references are minimal. Nor does it ask us to follow the story of specific individuals as they experience events in the Plaza. In Barriga’s film, the arguments over strategy, tactics, and importantly, methodology (who speaks, when, and how) play out step by step, always anonymously, as the group develops a sense of self.

The camera cuts to a banner that reads “The Crisis IS Capitalism.” We hear a woman speaking to the crowd via megaphone as the camera travels across the plaza: “We want to send a hug to everyone that passes through here . . . and discovers us, that finds us . . . They are welcome, stay for a bit.”⁴ At another point a man explains to the crowd that he has to leave for Germany. “I love you all,” he says.⁵ How do we understand these expressions of feeling? Are they just a sort of post-millennial throwback to the Summer of Love? I would say no. Nor are they the kind of expressions that you’ll hear in the halls of Congress or at a central committee meeting. One key aspect of the affective logic that I am hoping to deploy in this essay is that feelings and thoughts do not emerge as separate. We may split them for analytical reasons, but they are complexly related. The other thing is that they are exactly relational. Affect implies an *affector* and an *affected*. Thought is imponderable until expressed to others. The focus on the space of relations, on relations external to subjectivities, is characteristic of the theoretical approach pioneered by Gilles Deleuze and now broadly subsumed as “the affective turn.”⁶ As philosopher and social theorist Brian Massumi notes, “It is clear that the affective thinking-feeling is not the thinking or feeling of a particular object—or a particular subject . . . affect is a *differential attunement* between two bodies in a joint activity of becoming.”⁷ This attunement doesn’t mean people agree on everything. What starts to emerge, I would argue, is a kind of shared space of trust. In a way, Barriga offers us this space as itself a political subject.

While a variety of groups across Spain put out calls during the spring of 2011 indicting the policies of austerity, the shutting down of public services from healthcare to education, and the general inability of the government to protect citizens from the consequences of the economic collapse, it was the arrest of demonstrators in Madrid that finally crystalized the group of citizens who occupied the Plaza de la Puerta del Sol in Madrid on May 15, 2011. The 15-M Movement, as it came to be known, grew quickly from a few hundred people in one square to tens of thousands in city after city across Spain. 15-M united a large section of Spanish society, from pensioners, students, and laid-off office workers to middle-class

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid.

6. For a representative example, see *The Affective Turn: Theorizing the Social*, ed. Patricia Ticineto Clough (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

7. Brian Massumi, *The Politics of Affect* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2015), 94.

homeowners (unprotected by bankruptcy laws) in their rejection of the political system and the economic forces it supports.

What form did the movement take? The hydraulic metaphors used to describe organizing in Spain are worth contemplating. One headline is typical: “El Movimiento 15-M inunda las calles de España” (The 15-M Movement Floods the Streets of Spain).⁸ This could be just another cliché, but this kind of language extends to ideas of flow (*flujo*), of (live)streaming, and even of the subgroups that organized around specific issues such as housing and education and are called *mareas* or “tides.” No longer are these revolutionary masses organized by parties, issue-oriented groups, or labor unions. If any organizing is to happen, it will start here and now. The evocation of fluidity suggests a shared agency that escapes the discrete separation of individual subjectivity.

As Amador Fernández-Savater noted in his essay “How do you organize a climate?,” “15-M is not just an organizational structure, but above all a new social climate.”⁹ It is this climate—volatile, capable of finding its way through cracks in the system, and thick with rage, hope, fear, and a kind of enormous patience—that Barriga’s work attempts to characterize.

At an early point in the film one speaker says, “Collective thought is absolutely contrary to the current system.”¹⁰ For me it is key to ask: What is this shared thinking? Does it happen in one brain at a time? Is it a product of a group mind, or a “smart” mob? Yes, the crowds that come together in Madrid are composed of individuals, and the shared understanding that arises does not do so automatically. Rather there is a process, one where discrete individuals join in a collective subjectivity. What filmmakers like Barriga suggest is that what the occupants of the Puerta del Sol are deciding to do is create a space. It is not a space that automatically holds new politics. What is important is that it opens a breach, a rupture in business as usual.

The question of representation, of what is actually happening as political process, not just the break—the moment when a group decides to resist the existing order (which is a kind of high)—has to be seen as an extended moment. The question then becomes whether this gap can be held open long enough to fill it with new political forms. Political scientist Jodi Dean says that “the energy of the crowd *opens* to political subjectivity, but it is not the same as political subjectivity.”¹¹ But it is not just an opening with nothing in it, waiting for a party or leader to fill it. It is a space rife with energies. The group dynamic raises some real questions. What is the value of consensus (which is followed and then modified during the course of the film)? What does it mean to have people put ideas in a box and then read them out over a megaphone hour after hour? It is exactly Barriga’s ability to stay patiently in the emergent space of creating these shared rules, norms, and procedures that are their own content that distinguishes her work.

8. “El Movimiento 15M inunda las calles de España,” Canal Historia (History Channel Spain online), May 17, 2011, <https://canalhistoria.es/hoy-en-la-historia/el-movimiento-15-m-inunda-las-calles-de-espana>.

9. Amador Fernández-Savater, “¿Cómo se organiza un clima?” *Fuera de Lugar*, January 9, 2012, <https://blogs.publico.es/fueradelugar/1438/2como-se-organiza-un-clima>.

10. *Tres Instantes*, directed by Cecilia Barriga.

11. Jodi Dean, *Crowds and Party* (London: Verso, 2016), 80.

VIRAL RECRUITING

One of the more popular organizing or recruiting videos made for the M-15 movement was *Despertarse* (Wake Up), produced in 2012.¹² This video's visuals tell a simple story, one that starts with a series of tight close-ups of individuals with their eyes closed; they then open their eyes as if having a lightbulb moment. It ends with those subjects all part of a crowd. The awakening of consciousness that is the content is a given, not a process: it just happens and it takes an instant. The viewer is given mandates at the end of the short film: "Difunde la causa (Spread the cause)" and "Involucra tu gente (Get your people involved)." These suggestions reveal both the strengths and weaknesses of this movement. For one, the transformation (the arrival of a political consciousness) is presented as a kind of miracle cure. In fact, one could say that the video owes as much to television advertising as it does to the history of political documentary. The idea of being one in a number (stand up and be counted, represent yourself, make your vote count) is shifted from a political act to a subjective experience, more akin to a religious awakening. For another, the key plea is to become a node in a network rather than an independent political actor. This may not sound promising as a beginning of a movement. But this idea of rescuing one's subjectivity as a political goal is very much of our time, a period defined by the exploitation of our creative selves, of our souls as Italian philosopher Franco "Bifo" Berardi would have it, as the primary mode of production.¹³ To think of this another way, *Despertarse* focuses on the viewer's ability to become what affect theorists such as Massumi might call a "transducer," a modulator of energies. That this appeal can be generic is indicative of our times. We live at a point where every advertiser asks us to "like" them on Facebook or send us a picture of their product embedded in our lives—where every cute picture is not to be enjoyed but to be shared, and the "Share" button offers us half a dozen channels. What is important is that all of this activity is now monetized. Our curiosity by Google, our taste in clothes or reading by Amazon—these are among the many sites where profit is extracted from our labor [Image 2].

IMMATERIAL LABOR

In his 2002 book on the new urban economy of the twenty-first century, *The Rise of the Creative Class: And How It's Transforming Work, Leisure, Community, and Everyday Life*, Richard Florida highlighted the fact that work was no longer encompassed by the industrial model and had moved to a mode defined by the growing role of immaterial production at the center of the global economy.¹⁴ While Florida celebrated the rise of a new class of creatives reenergizing urban life, the precarity of life in the freelance, part-time startup economy quickly became evident. The crash of 2008 made it a crisis. Here is Dean again:

The crowds and riots of the last decade—particularly those associated with the Occupy movement, Chilean student protests, Montreal debt protests, Brazilian transportation

12. *Despertarse* (Wake Up), director unknown, 2011, video posted by Agareso: Reporteros Solidarios on YouTube channel spanishrevolutionsol, www.youtube.com/watch?v=OjVoL2DfV6E.

13. Franco "Bifo" Berardi, *The Soul at Work: From Alienation to Autonomy* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2009).

14. Richard Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class: And How It's Transforming Work, Leisure, Community, and Everyday Life* (New York: Basic Books, 2002).

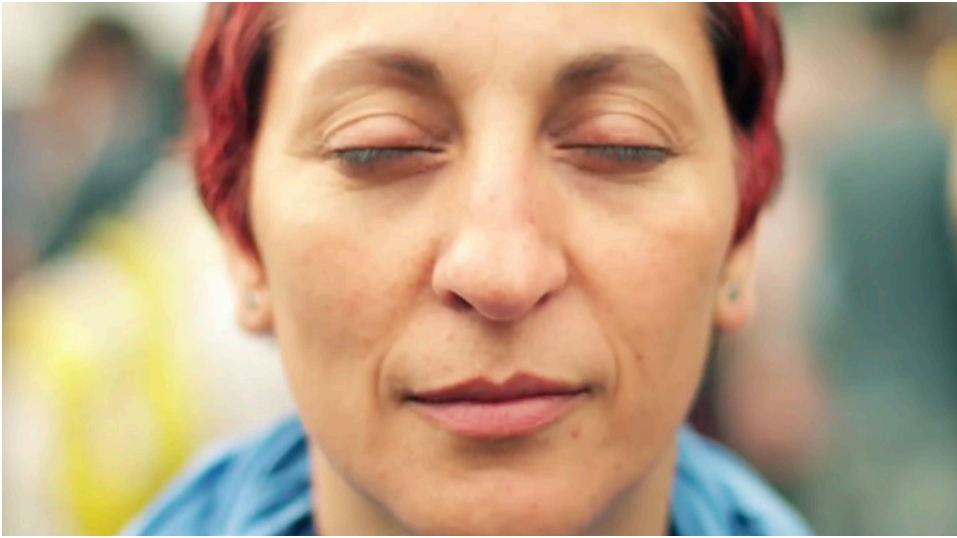


IMAGE 2. Still from *Despertarse* (Wake Up, 2011).

and FIFA protests, European anti-austerity protests, as well as the multiple ongoing and intermittent strikes of teachers, civil servants, and medical workers all over the world—are protests of the class of those proletarianized under communicative capitalism. These are not struggles of the multitude, struggles for democracy, or struggles specific to local contexts. Nor are they merely the defensive struggles of a middle class facing cuts to social services, wage stagnation, unemployment, foreclosure, and indebtedness. They are fronts in global communicative capitalism's class war, revolts of those whose communicative activities generate value that is expropriated from them.¹⁵

One important implication of this notion is that the media maker, the documentarian, cannot easily stand outside of the situation they are documenting. They too are part of the exploited class and cannot stand outside it and make a “problem film.” On a larger scale, this suggests that the terrain of struggle is the internal space of human creativity. This means that affect is at the center of the terrain of contention between workers and capital. Any resistance has to happen also in a space of the politics of affect. For purposes of this essay, it also means that the documentary film can no longer function socially in the way that it was supposed to have done for much of the second half of the twentieth century, based on a classic model built on an external observer who looked at a problem exposed, discussed the issue, and offered their support for one or another policy.

The Occupy Wall Street movement started a few months after the protests in Spain, in the Fall of 2011. Marisa Holmes, director of *All Day, All Week: An Occupy Wall Street Story* (2016), was a member of the OWS media working group.¹⁶ In the opening moments of her film, as we see her being arrested, she shouts her name and hands her camera to someone

15. Dean, 16.

16. *All Day, All Week: An Occupy Wall Street Story*, directed by Marisa Holmes, 2016, Vimeo video, <https://vimeo.com/172339354>.



IMAGE 3. Still from *Tres Instantes, Un Grito* (Three Moments, One Cry, 2013) by Cecilia Barriga.

else to keep shooting. This handing off of the point-of-view is not just to establish street cred. Holmes's film does try to take a historical view of the events of 2011, but the complex inside/outside position of the maker is a key factor that makes the film significant. As Holmes noted, "I tried to situate myself within a larger political subject, which was complicated because, of course, the 99 percent was not homogenous. There are different experiences within the 99 percent."¹⁷

All Day, All Week partakes in many ways of the apparatus of the classic historical social issue documentary with its clear chronology of "Day 1," "Day 2," segments from news broadcasts, and a story built around interviews with some half-dozen OWS participants looking back from a year or two later. But one thing that it shares with Barriga's *Tres Instantes* is a notable focus on process. A trope that appears in both films is of someone sweeping with a push broom, an image that contrasts strongly with typical revolutionary imagery. Both the Barriga and the Holmes films take a trip through the various working groups that form as the occupation continues: one for food, one for the media, one for medical services, one for planning ongoing actions, and even a mobile library group [Image 3].

While the film features plenty of the demo footage and battles with police that are typical of the political genre, this focus on logistics is new and worth thinking about. One way to understand it is in terms of an ethos of competence and ecological thinking. More broadly, though, I understand this focus as underlining that these movements offer an exercise in world-building that is ultimately pragmatic. But it is a curious pragmatism. This film, other than declaring its opposition to Wall Street and the one percent, offers next to nothing in the way of arguments for change, and even less in terms of program or policy. Nowhere

17. Marisa Holmes, in-person interview by author, New York City, July 4, 2018.



IMAGE 4. Still from *Nobody Can Predict the Moment of Revolution* (2011) by Martyna Starosta and Eva Radevojevic.

are there demands made, nor does the film even address the fact that the movement specifically had no demands, no platform other than “Occupy Everywhere!” [Image 4].

In *The Politics of Affect*, Massumi tries to build a case for a rethinking of subjective/objective and self/other binaries. He notes Baruch Spinoza’s definition of affect as the power to affect and be affected, writing, “The formula ‘to affect and be affected’ is also proto-political in the sense that it includes relation in the definition. To affect and to be affected is to be open to the world, to be active in it and to be patient for its return activity. This openness is also taken as primary. It is the cutting edge of change.”¹⁸

Berardi suggests why this might be so. For him, when our creativity is at the center of our labor, it gives a new valence to our exploitation. Berardi discusses the classic model for the intellectual that has bearing on the way that documentary filmmakers see their role:

The modern figure of the intellectual finds philosophical justification in Kant’s thought. Within that context, the intellectual emerges as a figure independent from social experience, or at least not socially influenced in the ethical and cognitive choices s/he makes The intellectual is the guarantor of a thought freed from any boundaries, the expression of a universally human rationality. In this sense s/he is the guarantor of democracy.¹⁹

He then goes on to distinguish this bourgeois intellectual from a Marxist vision committed not to interpreting the world but to changing it. He notes that “For Lenin, intellectuals are not a social class, they have no specific interest to support.”²⁰ This is a key point for me; the inference is that the documentary maker today is another exploited laborer in the media jungle,

18. Massumi, ix.

19. Berardi, 30.

20. Ibid., 31.

neither an objective outside observer, nor an intellectual supporter in “trustworthy solidarity with the proletariat” as Walter Benjamin suggested in his essay “The Author as Producer.”²¹

Much is made of how the struggles of 2011 emerged because of or through the internet, which allowed movements to spread with viral speed. This is so significant that for some scholars the older media such as video are more or less irrelevant, or at least secondary to the new social media tools of Facebook and Twitter. For social scientist Zeynep Tufekci, whose 2017 book *Twitter and Tear Gas: The Power and Fragility of Networked Protest* takes an exhaustive look at struggles from the Arab Spring to Taksim Square, video is so insignificant that it is almost not mentioned at all.²²

One aspect of that new reality is that documentary film is only one of a variety of options for conveying messages, a variety that includes Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and in the case of several movements, various autonomous live feeds. One might say that in the face of a variety of new net-based options, the role of political documentary, which has a history of some one hundred years, has now been displaced by social media in a way analogous to the fate of painting after the invention of photography. This raises a question of what a political documentary actually does or can do in a networked age.

CONTAGION & NET POLITICS

When the Occupy movements began, the social media use that characterized them was highlighted or even mythologized, starting with the Arab Spring, where Facebook and online video were considered causal in the overthrow of authoritarian governments in Egypt and Tunisia. While these new tools are very much part of all of these movements, many think that these are not two discrete or isolated realms. In their 2012 book *Sensible Politics: The Visual Culture of Nongovernmental Activism*, Meg McLagan and Yates McGee suggest that “media requires bodies on the street to have an event, even as those bodies on the street require media to exist in a global arena.”²³

If social media and online video platforms helped spread the message of the movement, what is the actual mechanism for that growth? Part of the equation is certainly access: once everyone has a cell phone, platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube become significant. But the other part of it, the actual virality of a viral video, for example, needs its own explanation. Here, I would like to redeploy the concept of mimesis. In her seminal 1996 essay “Political Mimesis,” Jane M. Gaines offered mimesis as a route to understanding the extralinguistic power of political documentary: “The whole rationale behind documenting political battles on film, as opposed to producing written records, is to make struggle visceral, to go beyond the abstractly intellectual to produce a bodily swelling.”²⁴ More recent writers such as Anna Gibbs postulate mimesis as contagion: “Contagion is everywhere in

21. Walter Benjamin, “The Author as Producer,” *New Left Review* 1/62 (July–August 1970): 83.

22. Zeynep Tufekci, *Twitter and Tear Gas: The Power and Fragility of Networked Protest* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017).

23. Meg McLagan and Yates McGee, *Sensible Politics: The Visual Culture of Nongovernmental Activism* (New York: Zone Books, 2012), 23.

24. Jane M. Gaines, “Political Mimesis,” in *Collecting Visible Evidence*, ed. Jane M. Gaines and Michael Renov (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 91.



IMAGE 5. Still from *All Day, All Week: An Occupy Wall Street Story* (2016) by Marisa Holmes.

the contemporary world. It leaps from body to body, sweeping through mediatised populations at the speed of a bushfire.” She goes on to note: “Consumer economies actually rely on contagion for everyday functioning, connecting people, money, goods, resources, ideas, and beliefs in global flows . . .”²⁵ This goes back to the notion of the in-between space as being the place to look.

At times the affective dimension of OWS is portrayed as almost comic. In a Brechtian scene in Holmes’s *All Day, All Week*, a General Assembly coordinator explains the characteristic hand signals developed to facilitate process during the Occupy movement. “Up for approval. Way up for ‘I really like this idea’ . . . Mezzo mezzo hands for ‘I feel neutral’ . . . And down hands for, ‘I feel uncomfortable with this.’”²⁶ [Image 5].

Compare these nuanced feelings with the classic binaries of *yea* or *nay*. What is key is not your political will but your feelings! Although it is easy to trivialize this aspect of the movement, I don’t mean to do so. Massumi suggests that the goal of affective politics is to modify potential in people’s lives, the space of hope and possible action. He suggests also that there is a kind of “affective contagion,” which goes some way to explain the rapid rise of the occupy movements.²⁷ As Holmes notes, at one point in October 2011 there were something on the order of a thousand Occupy groups around the globe.²⁸ In fact, for her now, the rapid scaling up is something to be aware of and to contemplate carefully.

It’s worth noting that OWS and its sister movements can be cast as failures, especially looking back now in a period of spreading counter-revolution and authoritarianism. In her 2016 book *Crowds and Party*, Dean criticizes the occupiers as individualistic romantics who

25. Anna Gibbs, “After Affect: Sympathy, Synchrony, and Mimetic Communication,” in *The Affect Theory Reader*, ed. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 186.

26. *All Day, All Week*, directed by Marisa Holmes.

27. Massumi, 112.

28. Holmes, interview by author.



IMAGE 6. Still from *Consensus* (2011) by Meerkat Media Collective.

wanted to stay forever in the honeymoon phase of revolution, never settling down to do the dirty work of organizing a base to struggle from for the long haul. “The politics of the beautiful moment,” she notes, “is no politics at all.”²⁹ For me, this lack of policy and platform may be a sign of failure, but not necessarily one that can be solved by focusing solely on electoral politics or on party building.

One short film seen by large numbers of viewers on YouTube was *Consensus* (2011), produced by the Meerkat Media Collective, who note tellingly that the consensus process that was a hallmark of the Occupy movement is an approach to filmmaking that is central to their own production process.³⁰ *Consensus* is consciously produced in a style that mimics the stylistics of mass media, using high-end DSLR cameras that isolate individuals from the crowd they are part of in a significant way. The images seem to offer fuel for Dean’s critique that the hyper-individualism of capitalism means that the Occupy participants were condemned to avoid real political change [Image 6].

For Tufekci, the almost total lack of interest in electoral politics and representative government meant that the OWS movement was intrinsically bound to fail, in contrast with groups like the Tea Party, which was able to become a real force politically.³¹ But the larger notion of political action outside of program or agenda is, for her, realistic, even essential.³² In one OWS video, *Nobody Can Predict the Moment of Revolution* (2011, directed by Martyna Starosta and Iva Radevojevic), seen by some 75,000 viewers on Vimeo.com, a

29. Dean, *Crowds and Party*, 80.

30. *Consensus*, directed by Meerkat Media Collective, 2011, video, www.meerkatmedia.org/portfolio/consensus. On Meerkat’s website, alongside the film itself, is the following from the collective: “We have been using consensus process in our filmmaking over the last six years and found ourselves in a unique position to be able to create this video.”

31. Tufekci, 276.

32. “It is important to learn from the past, no doubt. But maybe it is better to keep walking forward and keep asking questions.” *Ibid.*, 274.



IMAGE 7. Still from *All Day, All Week: An Occupy Wall Street Story* (2016) by Marisa Holmes.

young man says, “I don’t know how to achieve collective liberation . . . we’re here . . . we’re holding space.”³³ [Image 7].

It is exactly how that space is held that becomes the significance of these films. Take a key trope of Occupy Movements, the so-called “human microphone,” originally necessitated by the prohibition of electronic amplification. This “mic,” where every statement from the platform is repeated in a kind of synaptic series to the edge of the crowd, means that any statement made in discussion has a series of rolling echoes. In a film, these act like aria in an opera, stopping the action as they move from person to person. As Tufekci notes, “They had a cause, and a megaphone, themselves.”³⁴ However, as one of the subjects in Holmes’s film, Lisa Fithian, points out, the mic, on the surface highly inefficient, enforces active listening, and offers an ethos where every voice is equally important and equally empowered. The scenes where these human microphones carry waves of speech over crowds are many, and make the film notably distinct. They also make for a shared rhythm in the experience of occupation. In Holmes’s film this entrainment, this sense of sharing a moment, includes the rhythms of the human mic, the tempo of intimate discussions of the various committees, the swirl of the growing crowds, the handing out and receiving of food and of information (about everything from the weather to anticipated police actions) [Image 8].

It is worth comparing this movement of bodies with a description of a scene in Chantal Akerman’s 1995 film *From the East*, a documentary about a trip to Russia just after the fall of the Soviet Union. As media theorist Ilona Hongisto writes, “Moving frames turn into still frames with moving bodies, and still bodies in moving frames suddenly start moving in

33. *The Moment of Revolution Cannot be Predicted*, directed by Martyna Starosta and Eva Radevojevic, 2011, Vimeo video, <https://vimeo.com/29513113>.

34. Tufekci, 215.



IMAGE 8. Installation view of *Philadelphia Assembled* by Jeanne van Heeswijk at The Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2017.

relation to still frames. The variations of movement and stillness in the documentary give form to a sensation of dynamism, hypnotic agitation.”³⁵

As I looked for language to describe the central the idea of creating a shared space of questioning, and what its politics are, I spoke with the artist Jeanne van Heeswijk about her recent large-scale public art project *Philadelphia Assembled*.³⁶ Van Heeswijk is an artist working in the area of “relational aesthetics” where the art lies in the production of social interactions. Unlike political activists, as an artist Van Heeswijk was able to take real time to create the space for interaction. The result was a project that took some three years to unfold, from complex beginnings in working groups that had real difficulties coming together to a final exhibition at the Philadelphia Museum of Art in 2017 that featured the work of some two hundred collaborators representing marginalized communities throughout the city and their cultural efforts around issues from historical preservation and prison reform to housing and gentrification. For van Heeswijk, the question of our time is exactly about *collective caring*. “Care,” she says, “is a dangerous word. You think of the ‘care industry.’ But we need to use care to collectively imagine a way we want to be together.”³⁷ In order to do that, suggests van Heeswijk, we need to come together, each bringing what we care about. This, I believe is the process depicted in the two films discussed here.

Beyond the anarchist slogans and the calls for direct democracy is a real call for people to come together and take shared responsibility for the direction of society, something that both films show in a level of detail that, while it may not be stirring, should certainly be heartening at a time when authoritarian and populist governments offer simplistic answers

35. Ilona Hongisto, *The Soul of Documentary: Framing, Expression, Ethics* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2015), 121.

36. *Philadelphia Assembled*, Philadelphia Museum of Art, September 9–December 9, 2017, phlaassembled.net.

37. Jeanne van Heeswijk, telephone interview by author, Aug. 7, 2018.

in the downgrading of democratic institutions. As OWS participant Chris Gotono points out, in the movement people went from a sense of ineffectual powerlessness to one where their decisions matter: “It really does make a difference what it is you do and what it is you say—the ideas that you have.”³⁸ In a way this sense of personal empowerment, emerging as it does from a collectively defined context, seems contradictory. My sense is that because the power is not external, does not come from identifying with a powerful other, it really does hold the possibilities of a new politics.

A group of Spanish social scientists operating under the name “Tecnopolítica” produced a major study of 15-M, in which they state:

The fundamental thing about net political culture, characterized by the centrality of collective identities and the dynamics of anonymity is that it has a huge power in terms of expressing a new political space, one that feeds itself on a critical mass or collective intelligence on the net.³⁹

Tecnopolitica terms this a “new political space”; however, it might be better termed a space where a new politics can be created if somebody does it. As a filmmaker, Barriga succeeds by seeing what is there: a group of people who don’t know what they’re doing but who are doing it anyway, making up rules of interaction as they go along. The characters in her film are anonymous. There are no lower third titles giving names or occupations. But we do see and hear real people, real bodies in space, voices arguing, folks sitting, folks listening as they create a world.

For Barriga, the lack of preconceived goals creates an interesting dramatic tension. If the emphasis stays on process, what is that process? The *acampada* creates an opening; the film follows people trying to fill it, seemingly with few preconceptions. Ultimately, Barriga’s fluid and sensitive style seems evolved specifically to be able to occupy the space of rupture sympathetically, and follow shared moves forward, rather than either reveling in the intoxication of potential, or standing outside the space of change [Image 9].

In the dramatic last scenes of Barriga’s film, the group votes to end the occupation and go out “into the neighborhoods.” While the film ends there, the actual movement has continued to have a life. The *Marea Verde*, or “Green Tide,” has improved support for public education on several fronts. The *Marea Blanca*, or “White Tide,” has fought cuts in public health and sanitation. And significantly, *Podemos*, or the “We Can” party, has become the fourth largest political party in Spain, with positions on regional councils and mayorships in major cities such as Barcelona. The effort to create a shared space that Barriga carefully depicts could be said (especially in light of the move toward a right-wing populist politics in Italy and Germany) to be in some ways a successful opening to a new political imaginary.

38. *All Day All Week*, directed by Marisa Holmes.

39. From a research presentation in Powerpoint by sociopolitical research group Tecnopolítica, translation by author. “Tecnopolítica: La Potencia de las Multitudes Conectadas; Sistema Red 15M; Un Nuevo Paradigma de la Política Distribuida,” by Javier Toret, et al., June 20, 2013, <https://datanalisis15m.files.wordpress.com/2013/06/tecnopolitica-slides.pdf>.



IMAGE 9. Still from *Tres Instantes, Un Grito* (Three Moments, One Cry, 2013) by Cecilia Barriga.

In order to create that imaginary, regardless of where on the planet we are, we need to come together with our most urgent personal concerns, not from the confined space of the individual voicing needs or demands, but from the stance of an open subject. For van Heeswijk, building in a context of collective care means that the artist engages in creating a collectivity that has no predetermined goal outside of its own project of creation and definition. The result is not a measurable outcome, but a kind of continuous balancing act. To critique it from the point of its growing pains is a bit like suggesting that the Wright Brothers' first airplane would not have crashed if it had stayed on the ground. This, I believe, is the process depicted in Barriga's and Holmes's films—and depicted successfully. ■

MARTIN LUCAS is a documentary filmmaker and educator who teaches in the Integrated Media Art MFA Program at Hunter College, City University of New York.

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