

Anyone's Voice

The Arab Spring, 15M, Occupy Wall Street, Iceland, the student revolution in Chile, demonstrations in Brazil, Pussy Riot, Stuttgart 21, Greece, Portugal, protests on Taksim Square, demonstrations in Guangdong, the Ukraine ... in my opinion, all these and other movements are signs of the growing unrest caused by the lack of democratic systems and the huge limitations of existing political institutions. The politics of anyone, the indignant citizens, the 99%, are all trying to create a physical and conceptual space in which people can meet and chat, listen and formulate alternative solutions to the economic crisis and to global politics. People are inventing a new way of doing politics and discovering a new rhetoric of protest, 'Let's Democratised Democracy', in order to create a space in which to build an alternative society where cooperation and mutual assistance will replace economic competition. These movements require the development of truly democratic institutions, a demand that comes into conflict with political organisations that are clearly manipulated by financial groups and political oligarchies. Conflicts and difficulties are inherent to democracy: to their fragility, their requirements and our expectations. The building where this democracy resides is perhaps full of tunnels and dark corridors that enable those who constructed them to disrupt the life of their dwellers.

It is interesting to explore the evolution of these protests and examine the ways in which the voices of resistance are articulated in public space, how they are controlled and exploited by governmental authorities. In order to do so we must challenge the hierarchies of power and their control mechanisms exerted by the sphere of politics, civilian and state security forces, and other agents operating in public space. We must dispute the structures of democracy, participation and the processes of social

transformation. The successive financial crises have clearly revealed the manipulation of political institutions by economic powers. Today democracy has dwindled drastically, and we stand and witness how governments are making highly unpopular decisions presented as the only possible way to satisfy the financial markets or the political interests of a few. The control of economic thought attributes political events to the markets, and this poisons the idea of democracy, almost as if the political doctrine favourable to the people's intervention in the government had become a bad libretto—a libretto we perform but do not direct.

A Space for Political Ventriloquism

Democracy has become an aesthetic matter. The stage of the public has become a sort of orchestrated video game or operetta with a few recited parts; an operetta performed daily before a people overwhelmed by the consequences of the crisis, that acritically acclaims a fake pre-established script, frivolous, affected and ridiculous; where the audience is immediately proscribed by the mass media and therefore defused before its fellow citizens should it dare boo from the stands. This is the criminalisation of protest, which we believe leads to the brutalisation of audiences implemented by refined political techniques—in short, to audiences that dare practice disobedience to the rules imposed by the theatrical institution, such as transgression, insubordination, the creation of new political experiences or the rehearsal of new voices.

I should now like to examine the creation of a theatre, the Palais Garnier opera, as an anomic space with the force of law without law. An opera house is a building designed for the performance of dramatic works with predetermined texts and musical accompaniment (vocal and orchestral). Some systems, however, resist being constituted as such, and this was the case of the Palais Garnier that, from the very beginning, suffered several setbacks. The construction had to be stopped when caves

with subterranean water were discovered during excavation of the foundations. It was interrupted again following the disaster of the Franco-Prussian War, the fall of the Second Empire and the Commune of Paris in 1870. During those years the building work continued but sporadically, and rumour had it that the construction would eventually be abandoned. On 29 October 1873 a fire that burnt for twenty-seven hours destroyed the theatre housed in the Parisian Royal Academy of Music, and this could have been the catalyst for its completion as Paris seemed to be devastated without such an infrastructure. The Garnier Opera House, also known as the Palais Garnier or the Parisian Opera, is one of the most characteristic buildings of the 9th arrondissement and of the urban landscape of the French capital, a true masterpiece of nineteenth-century theatrical architecture. Built by Charles Garnier and inaugurated in 1875, the building was the thirteenth opera house to open in Paris after the foundation of the institution in 1669 by Louis XIV. Napoleon III commissioned its construction at the time of the renovation of Paris carried out by Haussmann under his orders. The palace and the subterranean caves were the scenarios of the events described by Gaston Leroux in his novel *The Phantom of the Opera*, a fascinating story about a mysterious and terrifying man, romantic and tragic. The story begins when a young chorus girl called Christine Daaé joined the chorus at the Opéra where Erik, the phantom, falls in love with her. However, the idea that truly interests me is that of a subject who constructed a perverse system perfectly adapted to his talents, a microcosm manipulated at his whim. This is a metaphor of dominion and its hierarchies, a stage designed perfectly, down to the last detail, where all the pathologies of power, the most sophisticated conspiratorial conceptions and the control of indications to manipulate reality converge in a deleterious invention.

Erik, Leroux's character, has a distorted face and is a fine example of social scum.

The world turned its back on him at birth because of his deformity and he had to learn to live with that. For some time he frequented fairs in the company of gypsies; known as *the human corpse*, he travelled throughout Europe and Asia, acquiring acrobatic and musical skills and becoming an expert ventriloquist, polyglot, engineer and exclusive architect and assassin at the court of the Shah of Persia, where he built sophisticated traps, torture devices and an elegant intricate palace. No technical prowess was beyond the character. It would be interesting to examine the active role played by technology in political processes, starting from the organisational policy and sociology of technology and its multiple functions in the development of a coalition promoted by a given political programme. Political actors control technology just as the master ventriloquist controls his doll. Technology forms a part of the structural context of the process. Taking advantage of his architectural skills, Erik obtained a job as one of the architects of the Garnier Opera House. During the construction, given that the level of subterranean water was rising continually, eight hydraulic pumps were used to build an artificial lake under the building. Erik conceived a labyrinth of tunnels and corridors at the lowest levels without arousing any suspicion. Beyond the subterranean lake, in the underground shadows, he built a home for himself, a dwelling where he could be sheltered from other people while remaining at the very heart of the wealthiest European society.

This brilliant engineer and inventor was also a musical genius, and he began to visit the theatre to listen to operas and constrain the presumed bad taste of the manager.

Being unable to show his face in public, he dressed up as a phantom and used violence to blackmail the opera house's managers and subject them to his will. He took advantage of the superstitions of the members of staff and their knowledge of the

building's secrets to reach any part of the theatre without attracting attention. He terrorised those who refused to attend to his petitions and even killed people as a warning. Be that as it may, those who were loyal and obeyed his orders (such as Madame Giry) were treated well. Erik hated the world and life, and all he desired was to meet someone who would surrender to him completely and with no excuses, someone who would stretch out a hand to him. As Erik is a character marked by man's repulsion towards anything other than the most absolute perfection, to my way of thinking all his crimes are justified. All his murders are committed by the phantom inside him, a phantom that hates those who are not moved by the most sublime things in life such as inner love, music or genuine art not inspired by economic interests, which is why he destroys all those who stand in the way of what he believes to be the most beautiful voice in the world. The fact is that what he does with Christine he does not only for her but for himself.

Public politics seem to be sinking into a simulation video game that reproduces sensations that do not actually exist. What interests us here is essentially all that which refers to the controls of discourse as a way of perpetuating hegemony. Political technique is immersed in a sort of video game of construction and management in which players build, expand or administer fictitious communities or projects with limited resources, where the rules of the game are predetermined and opportunely interrupted. A perfectly defined, mathematically established computer game in which each movement, each strategy, the rules, the architecture, the characters and their movements or temperaments, even the space itself, are reduced to a mere code—a set of ones and zeros known only to its creators, who manipulate each of the players' motions at will. However, before this revolution of information and communication technologies, Foucault had warned that discourse is controlled, selected and

distributed by a certain number of procedures that are designed to invoke powers and dangers, to dominate random events and avoid their frightening materiality.¹ It's almost as if these video games recreated environments and situations of social conflict in which citizens think they control one or several characters (or any other element in this environment) to fulfil one or several objectives with concrete rules that they cannot actually modify. This is like *The Matrix*—the sort of references that evoke the cave in Plato's *The Republic*—where inner life is colonised, the body is exploited and experience is captured.

I could of course mention countless examples to illustrate this idea of simulated experience of reality, as Slavoj Žižek did in his study of the aforementioned *The Matrix*, but I prefer to allude to much plainer and probably naïve metaphor that I believe provides sufficient elements for analysis. The basis of representative systems is the interval they establish between the political agent (the voter) and his sovereignty, that is referred to a third agent (the elect representative). Politics is ventriloquism: hands that move dolls, mouths that are synchronised with speeches delivered by foreign voices, a collective fiction. The audience demands a change in the work designed to be performed, the music (orchestra, soloists, chorus and director, the libretto, the performance, the décor, lighting and other stage effects, make-up and costumes, and probably the building itself, as the audience is no longer resigned to being a mere passive observer but wants to take part in the performance.

¹ Michel Foucault, Lecture on *The Order of Discourse*.