

Performance and Politics Fifty Years After 'Society of the Spectacle'

Written by Cami Rowe

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CAMI ROWE, FEB 27 2017

2017 marks fifty years since the publication of Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle*, in which the Situationist International founder critiqued society's reliance on imagery over experience. In Debord's words, 'everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation' (1967, p. 1). In a moment of historical resonance with this anniversary, the concept of 'post-truth' has reached a point of saturation in present-day popular discourse and media punditry, driven by digitally mediated representations of reality and social interaction. In the late 1960's, Debord sought to counter the way that social and political relations had become inherently image-mediated processes by devising alternative creative practices; but what becomes of such approaches in a post-truth, populist political context? This article offers some brief thoughts on the confluence of 'post-truth' with Debord's historical warnings, and the resulting implications for art and performance as practices of international relations.

Post-truth and the Possibilities of Resistance

The term 'post-truth' was deemed the Oxford English Dictionary's 2016 Word of the Year, in recognition of its centrality in political discourse. Whilst the neologism might feel somewhat clumsy to scholars, it nevertheless raises important issues regarding the present evolution of popular democratic processes. According to OED, it is an adjective meaning 'relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief' (Oxford Dictionaries, 2017). Contemporary uses of 'post-truth' arise from an awareness of the falsity of information presented to the public by politicians in recent years. For example, we might consider the fallout from the Bush Administration's false claims regarding Weapons of Mass Destruction as a nadir in public trust in politician's utterances. The recent malleability of facts declaimed in the American presidential campaign and the British EU referendum could be construed as a natural trajectory of this. One significant issue is the emerging environment in which politically-engaged members of the populace similarly reject the obligation to empirically substantiate their political claims or foreground them in testable sources of knowledge, in a practice that reflects and internalises modes of politics at elite levels.

Whether we conceive of the 'post-truth' Zeitgeist foremost as a wilful indulgence in falsity and prevarication, or simply as a zealous embrace of the affective power of political storytelling and spin, it must be recognised that the political processes of neoliberal democracies are increasingly marked by this attitudinal shift. Taken alongside the rise of right-wing populism in Europe and the United States, it seems crucial to investigate the ways that the political acts of individuals might offer resistance in the post-truth context. Furthermore, given that the discipline of IR increasingly concerns itself with artistic practices, it is important to consider such frames of perception when exploring the role that art and performance might play in such endeavours.

Getting to the Root of 'Post-truth'

Despite our sense that post-truth has been politically relevant in recent years more than ever before, it is important to note that the term originated in a 1992 essay published in *The Nation* by American playwright Steve Tesich (Oxford Dictionaries, 2017). In Tesich's words,

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We, by our actions, are saying that this is no longer necessary, that we have acquired a spiritual mechanism that can denude truth of any significance. In a very fundamental way we, as a free people, have freely decided that we want to live in some post-truth world" (1992, 13).

Tesich's final play, *Art and Leisure*, provides further insight into the roots of the term. In this play, written just a few years after the *Nation* article, American cultural and political dilemmas are presented through the parable of a theatre critic, named 'Alex Chaney'. Chaney is unable to engage meaningfully with the world at any level – whether in personal relationships or in perceptions of global suffering – because of his overdeveloped ability to view the world for its ability to *affect* him dramatically (Tesich, 1997). As the character relates in an opening monologue,

Somewhere right now a man, woman or child is dying a violent death. Is that drama? Is death by itself *a priori* dramatic or do those who're dying have the responsibility, if you will, to die in an engaging way if they expect us to be moved by them. [...] The dramatic events we follow from around our country or from around the world, produced by earthquakes or wars or personal misfortune, have now become theater. Good theater. Bad theater. But theater. Our response to those events is shaped by the same principles of dramatic criticism I use when reviewing a play (Tesich, 1997, pp. 7-8).

Here we can see the connections to our contemporary social-media-driven post-truth society, as well as to Debord's prescient warnings: bombarded by a constant flow of mediated representations of political experience, we are no longer able to experience the political world ourselves as reality, but only in the same way that a theatre critic detachedly observes the power of a performance to move him or her. If sufficiently moved, we might click on a sharing icon and perpetuate the flow of representations for others, and perhaps deceive ourselves that this action constitutes a genuine interaction with the world around us. Not only does society find itself experientially removed from political interactions; this removal is both facilitated by, and feeds into the capacity to consciously fabricate partial or false representations of political events in response. Thus results a cyclical phenomenon of detached reception-and-critique, prompting re-mediated representations circulated back to others.

Whither, then, resistance? For Debord, the challenges of the Spectaclised Society could be confronted through various tactics that might wake people from their mediatized slumber. This endeavour is of course not unique to the Situationists, being taken up variously by artists, politicians, philosophers and scholars across the course of human history. Indeed, it should be acknowledged that *Society of the Spectacle* has been inspirational to a number of theorists who have expanded upon or confronted Debord's ideas. Yet the era in which he wrote *Society of the Spectacle* was marked by rapid advances in technology that gave rise to a profound increase in circulated imagery and video, and this bore a direct impact on political interaction. Advances in colour television and the rise of corporate news media in the mid-20th century can be viewed as a parallel to the innovations of social media news sites in the present day. Influential thinkers have grappled with the resulting political dilemmas from varying perspectives. To mention just a few, Debord and followers believed *détournement* offered a potential solution to spectaclisation; Judith Butler writes of the powers of performativity and the potential for performative ruptures; Jacques Ranciere of moments of Dissensus to disrupt the fabric of the sensible (Butler, 1993; Debord and Wolman, 2006; Ranciere, 2010). What many of these perspectives have in common is an interest in jarring the individual out of their socially constrained ways of perceiving and interacting with the world, in the pursuit of a more emancipated and edifying political and social engagement. I would argue that this is a project shared by a large majority of socially and politically engaged theatre-makers of the mid-20th century and beyond – indeed, if the past half-century has been marked by the rapid rise in technologically mediated political interaction, it has also been marked by an unprecedented intensity of creative applications of art and performance to social and political problems (Prendergast and Saxton, 2009; Shaugnessy, 2012).

A crucial point of contention for political theorists has been the question of who or what possesses the power to create truly resistant acts. This debate has also been taken up by performance scholars and artists in the last decades of the 20th century, as the burgeoning field of Performance Studies (often defined in distinction to staged theatre or dramatic literature, and marked by a concern with the performances of everyday life, politics, and society) provided fecund ground for theorisations of performance's capacity to create social change – through ritual and everyday social performance, but also through entertainment. Many performance theorists celebrated the potential

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for theatrical 'restored behaviour' to enact the moments of rupture that Debord, Butler, Ranciere and others seemed to speak of. Yet they were occasionally guilty of insufficient interrogation of theatre and performance's capacity to change society, without fully considering the extent to which they serve centripetal conservative forces – operating as safety-valve outlets for counter-normal tendencies, or in some cases as fully commodified and co-opted semblances of nonconformity. By downplaying performance's tendencies to negotiate social and political liminalities for conservative ends, they were occasionally guilty of overly emphasising optimistic but largely unsubstantiated views of theatre's power to transform. This is an important point to stress, given the way that 'post-truth' politics are predicated on an environment in which emotional affect is granted more credence in political decision-making than evidence-based information. Can performance, with its emphasis on emotional impact through artifice, really intervene in this context?

The problematic nature of utilising theatrical affect for political resistance in the present day can be illustrated with a momentary focus on demonstrations of precarity. Precarity has gained purchase as a theoretical and political concept in the wake of austerity politics practiced in recent years, and some argue that the conditions it describes also underpin the rise of right-wing populism (Kriesi and Pappas, 2015). Perhaps most notably, Judith Butler has written of the potential for the visible vulnerability and precarity of others to create a sense of shared humanity on the part of viewers (Butler, 2006; 2015). However, the social-media-driven, populist post-truth context calls into question the extent to which the public display of precarious circumstances can even inspire solidarity, much less motivate others to action. This is because the environment of theatricalised image-circulation results in cynical spectatorship – first, the public consciously receives the performance of precarity as performance, that is, as if it is the result of deliberate theatrical crafting. This potentially engenders a mode of spectatorship that builds on the attitude of the theatre critic characterised by Tesich: given their suspicion of being deliberately emotionally manipulated, audiences react with even greater detachment, perhaps awaiting sufficiently 'convincing' actors before crediting a display of precarity with any degree of political authenticity. We can find examples of this in the reaction of some members of the public who accused Black Live Matter demonstrators of being 'paid protesters'; or those who demanded that child migrants invited to the UK from Calais should undergo dental examinations to verify their ages (Klein 2016; Riddell, 2015; Dominiczak and Swinford, 2016).

Furthermore, a convincing performance of authentic precarity is not in itself sufficient to create a sense of shared humanity, and might be more likely to result in a counter-performance that involves a display of the spectator's own precarity firmly couched within a politics of exclusion. As we have seen in recent political movements in the UK and US, performances that do succeed in conveying a sense of others' authentic precarity are often met with an increased perception of a receiving group's own precarity, yet starkly differentiated from that of the performers. For example, #BlackLivesMatter has been challenged by #AllLivesMatter, in an assertion of the perceived precarity of non-minority groups (Ross, 2015; Twohey, 2016). In Britain, recent global anti-poverty campaigns have been met with heightened rhetoric maligning foreign aid as a misuse of funds needed at home (The Guardian, 2013). Similarly, many Trump supporters seem to stress their own family's susceptibility to poverty and violence when asked to consider the welfare of those fleeing war (Root, 2015; Engel Bromwich, 2017). In these cases, the awareness of shared precarity has been rooted in a resistance to sustained dialogue or philosophical exchange, a rejection of empathy for the unfamiliar, and a perpetuated differentiation between 'us' and 'them'. I contend that this is facilitated in part by a social environment that is navigated through the hyper-circulation of memes and counter-memes that can justify a rejection of compassion for reasons of security. Furthermore, the spectacles of social media give rise to a heightened emphasis on individuals' own identity crafting processes. In addition to being political theatre critics, we have all become theatre makers who direct our biographies as we live them; after critically evaluating the theatrical success of displays of precarity, our next reaction is to consider how we can tell our own story in response.

In sum, displays of precarity can have varying results, traceable to the position of theatrical affect in a post-truth environment, where we are all both theatre-critics and theatre-makers. Butler is correct to highlight the extent to which displays of others' precarity can create an awareness of one's own vulnerability in the world; however, mindful of Debord's writings, I suggest that digitised social media spectacles of precarity are far less likely to result in empathetic solidarity, and much more prone to highlight differentiated precarity. To my mind this is just one example of the centrality of theatrical framing that must be recognised to fully account for the impacts and affects of political performance in a post-truth context.

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Next Stages

This brief reflection points up the way that effectively resistant political performance must be reconsidered in light of populist post-truth politics. It is not sufficient to laud a given intervention's resistant potential, when the very relevance of shared truths and the authenticity of others is increasingly, pervasively questioned. Given the historical desire of performance makers to hail the value of emotion and creativity in political processes, where does this leave practitioners who wish to put forward interventions to this seemingly wonton celebration of emotion at the expense of reality?

In answer, I return to comments I made at the 2016 International Studies Association Annual Convention. As a co-discussant on the panel, 'Visual and Performance Arts as Methods for IR', I suggested that the arts are frequently concerned not with generating new knowledge about the world, but with moving people from one way of knowing or sensing the world to another (Rowe, 2016). I maintain that this is indeed where our focus should lie, especially in the present-day political context. I want to suggest that as IR scholars interested in performance, we would do well to search for modes of performance that move individuals from a politics of appearance and spectatorship, to a politics of embodied being, engagement and exchange. This is not a unique proposition, given the vast array of theatre practices and political scholarship of the 20th and 21st centuries that focus on just that; however, I suggest that more IR scholars turn their attention to 'socially-engaged' and 'applied theatre' practices, from which we might glean important insights about the interlinkage of performance, theatricality, and the making and unmaking of international relations.

Despite the challenges I've noted, there can be little doubt that theatre-makers and theatre scholars have made active and positive contributions that have increased the potential for performance to offer meaningful political challenges. From performance protest that has succeeded in altering the political landscape (for example, see Liberate Tate's successful campaign against BP funding of the London Art museums); to applied theatre practices like Augusto Boal's legislative theatre that resulted in the de facto election of a theatre company to parliamentary office in 1993; to the global anti-war performances of *Lysistrata* in 2003, practitioners from diverse backgrounds and contexts have demonstrated the potential for performance to make a real impact on global politics and international relations (Boal, 1997; Heart, 2003; Clark, 2016). In the case of resistance to post-truth politics, I suggest that as scholars and artists we must reflect upon the broad repertoire of politically and socially engaged performance to seek out those instances from which some momentarily new kinds of political relation erupted. For performance makers, artists, activists, and political scholars alike, the question that must be lingered upon is, in what ways can people perform meaningful and lasting political challenge, rooted in the promotion of embodied interactive politics, in a post-truth age?

Whilst I am gratified by the growing number of IR scholars engaging with arts and performance, I want to challenge us to do more: to use the arts not only as a reflection of international relations, but as interventions; to search for the ways that the arts can be used to re-embodify, and re-authenticate, political experience. One year after the publication of *Society of the Spectacle*, the streets of Paris erupted with the Situationist slogan, 'All power to the imagination'. Half a century later, I suggest that we rework this demand for our present age, to insist that we grant more power to the kinds of imagining that result from a shared perception of lived human experience – imaginings that originate from an embodied, physical realm where we become aware of our shared susceptibility to cold, hunger, gunfire, nourishment, warmth and love.

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