

MODERN DRAMA, Winter 2006:
Electoral Guerilla Theatre: Radical Ridicule and Social Movements.
By L.M. Bogad
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If the last few presidential elections in America have dented your faith in democracy, you are not alone. Does anyone other than an obscenely rich, straight, white man have a realistic shot at becoming the president of the United States of America? How can we take American elections seriously when the votes of dead people can determine their outcome or when morally corrupt legal shenanigans prevent significant numbers of people from exercising their right to vote? To contradict one of my favourite American songwriters, Bob Dylan, money doesn't swear; it elects presidents. The situation is not appreciably different in other western democracies, like the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, or Australia.

You may not have to be super rich to become the prime minister of Australia, but it does help to be male, straight, and white. In short, not everyone can participate in democracy equally. Indeed, many people do not participate at all.

If we accept, as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri argue in their book *Empire*, that the nation state is in decline and that a new logic of power, enabled by global flows of capital administered by supranational institutions, increasingly governs our lives, then today participatory democracy is a sham, and elections a meaningless farce - nothing more than an elaborate performance designed to reassure us that we control the political process. However, if cynicism and political quietism have quelled your impulse to rage against this sorry state of affairs, L.M. Bogad's book *Electoral Guerrilla Theatre* demonstrates, with a high degree of wit and verve, that it is possible to expose the sham and, through a variety of performative tactics, make a meaningful contribution to democracy.

Bogad presents three key examples of how performance techniques can hijack and subvert the electoral spectacle by documenting the mock electoral campaigns of the Kabouteurs, Joan JettBlakk, and Pauline Pantsdown. These activists share a desire to expose the undemocratic nature of the electoral process in their respective countries by running as candidates and using satire and mimicry to draw attention to the enabling conventions of the electoral process. The term "electoral guerrilla theatre," then, designates a sub-genre of political performance that has affinities with the forms of counterculture performance of the 1960s practised by groups like the San Francisco

Mime Troupe, who performed in public spaces to highlight topical political events, often using commedia techniques to ridicule politicians and public figures.

While not entirely eschewing commedia, Bogad's electoral guerrillas draw more heavily on the three Bs of political theatre (Brecht, Bakhtin, and Boal) for their major aesthetic forms and performance techniques. While operating in different geographical and political contexts, the electoral guerrillas share a sense of play and irreverence. They mock the serious rituals of the electoral process by ramping up Brecht's oft-cited imperative to make the familiar strange and enthusiastically embracing the ethos of the carnivalesque. Indeed, in the hands of these activists, the familiar becomes very strange.

Bogad devotes most space to the Kabouters, a group of Dutch activists with roots in an earlier counterculture anarchist group, the Provos. The Provos, short for provocateurs, contested and won an Amsterdam council election in 1966 largely on the strength of a campaign that made ludicrous promises about improving the climate, among other things. Once elected, the Provos subverted the council by reading out fairy tales in lieu of contributing to council discussions and making political speeches. The Kabouters, whose membership included many Provos, successfully contested the Dutch parliamentary elections of 1970. Bogad notes that their campaign proved to be a largely non-verbal series of incursions into the capitalist public sphere, e.g. decorating illegally occupied unused housing with campaign cartoons and posters. The explosion of practical and direct actions, and the lack of traditional grandstanding and policy promises, drew grassroots energy and media attention to the campaign. (75)

Once elected, the group disagreed about whether to disrupt the parliamentary process totally or try to use their presence to push for progressive legislative reform. Ultimately, ludic joy gave way to bitter internal dissent, and the group disbanded. Bogad provides a compelling analysis of the rise and fall of the Kabouters by recounting some of their more outlandish escapades (like smoking joints during parliamentary sessions) and making a case for their enduring impact on the political culture of the Netherlands.

Bogad's other exemplary electoral guerrillas are drag performers. Joan JettBlakk, the nom de plume of black drag performer Terence Smith, contested the 1992 presidential election, using the slogan "Lick Bush." JettBlakk is a fascinating performer, who rejects many drag clichés. Foreexample, instead of lip-synching to the music of divas and performing variations on the "I will survive" theme, JettBlakk embraced a glam rock aesthetic and made no attempt to hide his gender. JettBlakk's campaign hijacked electoral media events and took every opportunity to "link the fight against the sexual regimes

of the normal to the struggle against capitalism and oppression of all kinds (126)."

In Australia, Pauline Pantsdown's target was more specific. Pantsdown, the alter ego of drag performer, sound designer, and academic, Simon Hunt, campaigned for a seat in the Australian Federal Senate in 1998. Hunt's adversary was not the electoral system as such but the racist policies of Pauline Hanson, the leader of Australia's right-wing One Nation Party. One Nation attracted significant voter support on an anti-immigration, anti-aboriginal, and anti-globalization platform in the late 1990s. Pantsdown used a number of sophisticated performance techniques, which included digitally rearranging Hanson's public speeches on two successful CD singles, to mock Hanson's contradictory policies. Hanson failed to win a seat in the senate, and Bogad credits Hunt's merciless parody as a not insignificant factor in the politician's downfall.

While Bogad's book is a highly entertaining read, it is not without its faults. A lot of the book is too descriptive, and I would have liked a more analytical and comparative approach to the three main case studies.

Bogad promises to conclude the book with an account of how variables, such as the differing electoral systems in the Netherlands, the United States, and Australia, influence the goals and strategies of his electoral guerrillas. The rather short concluding chapter goes some way towards realizing this aim but fails to provide a detailed analysis of local variables.

I was also surprised to find no mention of situationism in the book. After all, the situationist concept of *détournement* resonates strongly with electoral guerrilla theatre. *Détournement* is usually translated as "diversion" and refers to the process whereby an activist hijacks an already existing event, like a political election, and "diverts" it towards some radical political goal.

These criticisms are minor. The book provides an accessible introduction to forms of interventionist politics that are playful and inspiring, and I commend Bogad on making a major contribution to performance studies.