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Electoral Guerrilla Theatre: Radical Ridicule and Social Movements.

By L.M. Bogad

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Bombarded by the ever-increasing possibilities of personal communication and information media, today's activists continually search for new and effective methods of communication. *Electoral Guerrilla Theatre: Radical Ridicule and Social Movements* offers a thorough description of one recent activist technique and arrives as a timely intervention in our current media-saturated political culture. L. M. Bogad asks how social movements combine live performance with guerrilla tactics in an effort to find agency in the electoral system. How can parody and irony invigorate marginalized counterpublics and make voting more meaningful? He argues that the use of comedic performance forms to disrupt and critique the electoral system of modern democracies is an understudied topic and so sets out to define this activist performance tactic. *Electoral Guerrilla Theatre* contributes to the wider conversation about performance and politics by opening up a space for discussion of the problems and pleasures of this emerging performance form.

Bogad defines "electoral guerrilla theatre" as "an ambivalent, hybrid measure that merges the traditions and techniques of 'third-party' electoral intervention with grassroots direct action and performative disruption" (3). Participants hail from the political margins: they are leftists, anarchists, environmentalists, and LGBT activists who lack the power and resources to participate in the electoral system as legitimate candidates. Instead, they use "the aesthetics of camp, agit-prop theatre, and the stand-up routine to undermine the legitimacy of their opponents and sometimes the [End Page 153] very electoral system in which they are operating" (2). Although the concept of the electoral guerrilla seems oxymoronic, Bogad carefully explains that this contradiction is representative of dual goals: electoral guerrilla theatre works within the system to democratize electoral politics and also reaches beyond established structures to call marginalized groups to action.

Faced with a wide range of literature on activism, street demonstration, and political performance, Bogad wisely concentrates on activist performance as electoral campaign. The book is structured around three case studies, one each from the Netherlands, the United States, and Australia. Each chapter addresses one example and follows the same basic organization: Bogad establishes the context of the local electoral system and the history of the performer(s) before describing several performance events and investigating their efficacy. Throughout the book, he draws on Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalesque to position elections as ritual sites ripe for disruption by resistant voices. Because the ritual nature of elections can hide unmarked assumptions about race, gender, sexuality, and class, Bogad also relies on Bertolt Brecht's concept

of *Verfremdungseffekt*, or alienation, to demonstrate how electoral guerrillas, by means of irony and parody, point out these unspoken assumptions.

Chapter 1 follows the guerrilla street actions of the *Kabouters* (or *Gnomes*) in municipal elections in Amsterdam in the early 1970s. This eco-anarchist counterculture group engaged in public pranks like planting trees on sidewalks, occupying buildings, and setting fire to a municipal statue. The second chapter investigates the 1992 presidential campaign of drag queen Miss Joan JettBlakk. Backed by the Queen Nation / Chicago organization, JettBlakk used camp aesthetics in speeches, interviews, song, and parades to promote her working-class, queer-friendly politics.

Chapter 3 explores the 1998 campaign of Australian drag character Pauline Pantsdown against right-wing parliamentary candidate Pauline Hanson. Using digital sound sampling, lip-synching, and live performance, Pantsdown parodied Hanson at the parliamentarian's campaign events. Like JettBlakk and the *Kabouters*, Pantsdown disrupted legitimate political events with comedic live performance and relied on media coverage to inspire action at the polls.

Together, these three examples successfully make the case for electoral guerrilla theatre as an efficacious activist technique. Some *Kabouters* were elected to the Amsterdam city council, and Pantsdown's unrelenting parody of Hanson distracted the politician from her campaign. But these examples also reveal a key problem with electoral guerrilla theatre: the difficulty of remaining disruptive and retaining a guerrilla sensibility in the face of the pervasive power of the electoral system. *Kabouters* who won city council seats were unable to sustain their ludic energies once in power; JettBlakk's playful performances sometimes undermined the emerging political party behind her campaign.

Bogad demonstrates that electoral guerrilla theatre is a complex phenomenon, but nevertheless he leaves some problems unresolved. Electoral guerrilla theatre seems to have two obvious limitations: sustainability in the face of success and the form's vexed relationship to a social movement or counter public community. How does a movement both allow for and control disruptive forces? Although Bogad clearly defines electoral guerrilla theatre as a strategic activist tactic, its exact role in a larger movement is not apparent. The book describes electoral guerrilla theatre as an adaptive technique for social movements, an innovation of strategy by marginal groups. But how adaptable is this strategy to success? The author raises this question, but does not address the long-term sustainability of electoral guerrilla theatre. This is frustrating, for he notes that activist tactics are often integrated by the dominating system. If this is true, then the question of sustainability is necessary and urgent.

The union of politics and performance has never been as popular. The creation of twenty-four-hour news channels and the rise of blog culture mean that there is always someone with an opinion to share, and many more ready to respond with parody. Politics and pointed humor go hand-in-hand these days, from the Billionaires for Bush to Comedy

Central's The Daily Show. In this context, Bogad's exploration of electoral guerrilla theatre is a compelling and urgent read. His passion for the topic reminds the reader of the exhilaration of live performance and the importance of engagement in democratic life. Electoral Guerrilla Theatre's narrow focus requires Bogad to limit his definition of electoral guerrilla theatre to universal-suffrage democracies whose highly ritualized electoral systems resist participation by marginal communities. This definition helps him concentrate on the three main examples in rich and satisfying detail. Yet it leaves much room for further investigation of guerrilla performance tactics, efficacy, and sustainability in other electoral systems, and promises a lively discussion to come.