

# THEORY

## ETHICAL SPECTACLE

Since politics is not just about facts and reason, but also desire and fantasy, activists need to engage in spectacle. By honouring our principles, our spectacles can be ethical, liberating, and reality-based.

### CONTRIBUTED BY

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**“THE ARGUMENT HERE IS NOT FOR A PROGRESSIVE MOVEMENT THAT DECEIVES OR CHEAPENS ITS MESSAGE BUT RATHER FOR A PROPAGANDA OF THE TRUTH.”**

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“Boredom is always counter-revolutionary. Always.”  
—Guy Debord

The concept of ethical spectacle offers a way of thinking about the tactical and strategic use of signs, symbols, myths, and fantasies to advance progressive, democratic goals. First introduced in a 2004 article by Andrew Boyd and Stephen Duncombe and later expanded in Duncombe’s 2007 book *Dream: Re-imagining Progressive Politics in an Age of Fantasy*, the theory’s premises are: (1) that politics is as much an affair of desire and fantasy as it is reason and rationality, (2) that we live in an intensely mediated age (what Situationist Guy Debord called the Society of the Spectacle), (3) that in order to be politically effective, activists need to enter the realm of spectacle, and (4) that spectacular interventions have the potential to be both ethical and emancipatory.

An ethical spectacle is a symbolic action that seeks to shift the political culture toward more progressive values. An ethical spectacle should strive to be:

*Participatory*: seeking to empower participants and spectators alike, with organizers acting as facilitators.

*Open*: responsive and adaptive to shifting contexts and the ideas of participants.

### RELATED TOOLS

#### Stories

- 99% Bat Signal
- Battle in Seattle
- Battle of the Camel
- Billionaires for Bush
- Citizens’ Posse
- Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army
- Dow Chemical Apologizes for Bhopal
- Honk at Parliament
- Orange Alternative
- Public Option Annie
- Pyramid of Shoes
- Santa Claus Army
- Streets Into Gardens
- The Salt March
- The Teddy Bear Catapult
- #ThisFlag
- Welcome to Palestine
- Whose Tea Party?

*Transparent*: engaging the imagination of spectators without seeking to trick or deceive.

*Realistic*: using fantasy to illuminate and dramatize real-world power dynamics and social relations that otherwise tend to remain hidden in plain sight.

*Utopian*: celebrating the impossible — and therefore helping to make the impossible possible.

Progressives tend to distrust anything that smacks of propaganda or marketing — that's what the other side does. We tend to believe that proclaiming the naked truth is enough: "Ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free." But waiting for the truth to set us free is lazy politics. The truth does not reveal itself by virtue of being the truth: It must be told, and told well. It must have stories woven around it, and works of art made about it; it must be communicated in new and compelling ways that can be passed from person to person, even if this requires flights of fancy and new mythologies. The argument here is not for a progressive movement that deceives or cheapens its message but rather for a propaganda of the truth. This is the work of ethical spectacle.

*Originally published in Beautiful Trouble.*

## LEARN MORE

Dream: Re-Imagining Progressive Politics in an Age of Fantasy  
Stephen Duncombe, 2007

[http://www.stephenduncombe.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/12/Dream\\_final.pdf](http://www.stephenduncombe.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/12/Dream_final.pdf)

The Manufacture of Dissent: What the Left Can Learn from Las Vegas

Andrew Boyd and Stephen Duncombe, *Journal of Aesthetics and Protest*, 2004

<http://www.joaap.org/new3/duncombeboyd.html>

- Yomango
- "You'll never have a home in your f\*\*\*ing life!"

## Tactics

- Artistic vigil
- Banner hang
- Creative disruption
- Creative petition delivery
- Cultural disobedience
- Culture jamming
- Electoral guerrilla theatre
- Flash mob
- Guerrilla projection
- Hoax
- Human banner
- Identity correction
- Lamentation
- Media-jacking
- Spoof website
- Trek

## Principles

- Balance art and message
- Brand or be branded
- Make the invisible visible
- Punch up, not down
- Show, don't tell
- The real action is your target's reaction
- Use the law, don't be afraid of it
- Use the power of ritual

## Theories

- Action logic
- Alienation effect
- Anti-oppression
- Artivism
- Baltajiah (thugs)
- Expressive and instrumental actions
- Floating signifier
- Framing
- Society of the spectacle
- Theatre of the Oppressed

## Methodologies

- Battle of the story
- Perception box

- Points of intervention

**TAGS**

Action design, Campaign strategy