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Exploring Dynamics of Street Protests in Moscow using Video

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In spite of the administrative pressures and threats, people get involved in collective mobilizations in Russia. With the aid of a camera, I offer to conduct a located analysis of these practices of demonstrations. The use of a camera allows to reveal a big quantity of at first glance obvious and insignificant sensitive facts but that constitute the depth of any experience. It allows to settle the question of "how " of a demonstration, the distribution of time, of space and of activities among those who participate in it. The practice of the camera rests on the active physical commitment of the researcher in a situation, at the root of a true Techniques of the Body which makes it attentive to the sensitive contents of particular experiments, as demonstrations.

A Proposal for an Analysis of Russian Street Protests : Investigating Situations and Practices

In Russia as elsewhere, the proliferation of light and inexpensive video cameras has enabled many demonstrators to film their protests. This technical progress has also had an impact on the academic sphere : visual and audiovisual recording techniques are used in the analysis of situated action and anthropology. However, they do not exist in protest studies, at least in Europe. The video has been used in the United States in the 1970s, but then marginally.

When I arrived at the beginning of 2008 in Moscow, on my PhD field, I was struck by the quantity and diversity of street protests taking place in this city, even if the number of participants was small[1]. Then I had the desire to investigate these cases of collective action that are not subject to a specific interest in protest studies (Soutrenon, 1998 : 38)[2].

In most cases when videos and photos are used it is for illustrative purposes (Conord, 2002). I chose an exploratory approach[3]. From the beginning, I filmed the protesters trying to set aside the implicit assumptions derived from direct observation and explanations provided by the people, activists or not, about the weakness of social movements in Russia.

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1 According to a 2004 survey, 73% of polled, and 83% of those under age 35, have never participated in a rally in all their live. Only 4% of respondents participated in a rally after 1991 (http://bd.fom.ru/report/cat/pow_free/dd041530).

2 My PhD research concerns the dynamics of contemporary russian street actions. The protests of my study are conducted by political or social organizations, progressive or not. In Russia, the urban space is also actively invested by pro-government youth groups and the ruling party, United Russia. The latter organizes demonstrations in support of government, as in 31 January 2009, where thousands of people gathered in manage square, at walls of the Kremlin, to support anti-crisis measures implemented by it.

3 This approach has been defined by Claudine de France (1989 : 309).

By practice and repeated observations of his films, the filmmaker becomes sensitive to the movements of the persons and to the details of the action. So he is engaged in a process of learning components of the observed object (Relieu, 1999 : 81). These elements are usually regarded as sensitive insignificant evidence. These facts prove to be, in fact, real constraints on protest action. The practice of the video is even more : it requires scientific description to be more precise and more responsive to the sensory dimension of the action (Laplantine, 2007 : 49).

Among the situational aspects, videos provide information on behaviors and styles adopted by people in action, ie the ethos of the collective. They reflect the specific role of individuals, how they act together in a pluralistic way, facing an audience, in the drama and rhetorical art of protest. In a second step I will not elaborate here, the investigation by the video offers a dense material from which it is possible to analyze and understand the strategic choices of groups and to estimate their adaptability and invention compared to those of the repressive system4.

I will discuss here two video clips to reveal the different ways to demonstrate in Moscow, the experiences and some external and internal constraints related with them.

The Rally: a routine way of Protesting in Moscow

The rally presented in video clip 1 took place Sunday, April 12, 2009, at the entrance of the former Exhibition of Achievements of the National Economy (VDNKh). The form of action « rally » was chosen by default because the authorities have not accepted, unlike the previous year, the organization of a march. A group of nearly 150 people, mostly democratic and liberal activists, are calling for a reform which would abolish military conscription in favor of a professional army. The protest activity is absorbed in what is happening on the podium. The remaining demonstrators listen without any of their actions has any subversive power, except, perhaps, when the speeches at the podium are interspersed with slogans proclaimed by the podium and then repeated by all participants. Only these moments correspond to actions performed in common, by the verbalization.

Few passersby stop to watch what happens inside the enclosure, although the topic of military recruitment is a major concern in Russia. The park in this day of April, however, attracts many walkers. Passersby are physically separated from the demonstration by metal barriers. These barriers surround systematically all protest pickets and rallies since the early 2000s. The entrance is through a portal metal detector. I notice some journalists, but no television. Soldiers and police are scattered all along the barriers, within the enclosure. Most are very young. They turn their backs against the stage and take a distant attitude. They seem to be bored and not at all interested in the action that directly concerns them. The demonstrators and speakers at the podium have neither a glance nor a word for these soldiers, which makes the event rather strange and unreal.

The March : Reclaim the Streets

The forms of collective action that involves a movement in the city are rarely allowed in Moscow. Apart from the traditional May Day parade, holding such events are rare during the year. Some groups choose to organize marches so without seeking permission from the authorities. As thoses libertarians and antifascist activists who have organized since 2008

4 In the case of Belarus, Tatyana Shukan (2008) shows the inventive capacity of young protesters, who privileged the flash-mob to better escape the repression.

spontaneous processions through the city. The "antifa" movement was born in Russia in the early 2000s when the murders committed by the ultra-nationalist increased dramatically. This movement was inspired by english and german "antifa" and "reclaim the street" movements about the militant practices, modes of action and clothing fashion.

Thus, on April 21, 2009, a march of 150 young people held in the street near the subway station Mendeleevskaja after Olesinov Alexei, an anti-fascist activist, was arbitrary sentenced to one year in prison (Video Clip 2). The demonstrators marched quickly, sometimes run, most hidden to avoid being recognized. Most of the demonstrators form a block delimited on the front with a banner and two handwritten banners on the sides. Inside the group, the bodies are very close. Throughout the parade, people are without a break chanting, shouting, with slogans demanding the release of their comrade. These chants create a feeling of exaltation which is mixed woth a feeling of fear because everyone knows that the police will arrive one minute to another and that their reactions are totally unpredictable. The organization in small groups (« affinity groups »), in which members pay attention to each other, allow the demonstrators to be highly mobile and able to rebuild the column after the frame was broken a first time by the police.

In these extreme situations, behaviors of people, including the researcher, are instinctive. The selectivity of perception is emphasized. It is difficult then for the researcher to observe in detail, to think carefully about his research issues. He can not take a note. In those moments, I try to shoot as much detail of the action and try to capture the atmosphere of the event. A more detailed analysis will be done later, watching the images repeatedly.

In this action, the staging is a good choreography : slogans succeed, the people unit, join forces. The movements say the unity and the cohesion of the group. Here we observe the proper balance between outlet and control of representation mentioned by Emmanuel Soutenon (1998 : 53). Compared to the rally, the libertarian march is rather subversive : the street is occupied without authorization and the participants - in a Russia where young people do not protest and feminism is non-existent – are very young and the leaders are girls.

Protests, Constraints, Experiences and Organizational Culture

We can consider groups of protesters as « communities of practice » (Quéré, 1991 : 77). The very different, individual and inter-individual practices of protest are being built more or less consciously and are transmitted within these groups. They are part of the groups organizational culture.

The video of the rally shows that the action staged is unsophisticated, not expressive, routine minded, that is predictable by the police. The people are distant from each other. Their behaviors do not embody a cohesive group. The small number of participants marginalize their claims. One way to hide the weak mobilization capacity is to choose spectacular actions, of which success is less dependent on the number of participants, as in the case of libertarian march. Since the action is short and does not cause meaningful interactions between the demonstrators and bystanders, the success of this type of action depends on a large review in the media. This success is often limited[5].

In France, the demonstration, despite its changes, remains for those participants a strong collective experience and a place of sociability. It is also an "open space", never totally

5 The media coverage is generally limited to persons already sensitized by the protests.

controlled, where, unlike ordinary situations, people who do not know each other can begin a conversation without needing a reason, where they socialize, experience themselves verbally and physically[6]. This accessibility is mutual based on the fact that people recognize each other as belonging to one group of people showing solidarity. In Russia, during the actions, people are almost exclusively engaged in face to face relationships with people they know. The handing out of leaflets and approaching someone that you do not know are rare and considered rude. The protesters are not intended to an audience of strangers. The distribution is associated with the techniques used by commercial firms and by « political parties sold to the Kremlin ». We're then in a strange situation: the meaning of the event is for the majority to be identified by the media, while everyone knows the limits of the media in Russia.

The two videos show different sides of the police. The system responsible for maintaining public order during actions in Moscow is based on an oppressive administration regulation. The administration imposes, for example, the places of the actions, even though the law stipulates that the choice is left to activists. This provides many pretexts for arrests and administrative penalties, always unpredictable. The extreme bureaucratic procedures weighs heavily on the activists and further on the non-initiated who want to organize committees or actions. The latter, unlike the activists ,do not know how to deal with the administration and lack of interpersonal relationships with representatives of the administration[7]. These repressions, open or latent, create a feeling of great uncertainty and unpredictability8. This uncertainty about the response of law enforcement is a management principle that prevents the protest to develop. The protest can not be normalized : the protesters don't not know in what extent it is possible to act. The repression of activists have intensified in recent years, particularly since the adoption in 2004 of the Federal Law « Struggle against extremist activity ».

After filming the action, interviews with video images will permit to understand the choice of actions and behaviors of groups. For both the investigator and the person who committed politically, I hope to show here the necessity of a further thought reflexion on protest action, a movement that film projections stimulate. This situational approach foregrounds the space of action. It differs from an existing trend in protest studies and, as said Bernard Aspe (2006), in militant rhetoric, which deduce the political capacity of refusal from an objective analysis of what sets the enemy space, which is in the cases studied, the Russian state system.

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6 The definition of "open space" is in Erving Goffman (1963 : 131).

7 We must understand the knowledge of the law by the activists, particularly among libertarians, not as a sign of respect for the law or a desire to restore the state as legal guarantor, but as a attempt to escape by any means, even the law, the arbitrariness of the police.

8 The practice of video permits the researcher to raise awareness about the uncertainty regarding what is and what has value in situations. The concept of uncertainty is developed in (Boltanski, 2009).

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