“Nous la forêt”
—A Conversation with Épopée on the Québec Student Uprising
Insurgence is a film by the Montréal-based collective Épopée, made during the Québec student uprising that began in February 2012. By March, most student unions across the province of Québec, both undergraduate and graduate, had voted to go on unlimited general strike. This initiated an unprecedented student uprising—the longest one in the history of student movements in Québec.

It is an impossible task to summarize the Québec student strike in a few words. Indeed, the strike should not be remembered this way, as an all-encompassing event representative of everyone who experienced it. It is impossible to sum up something that feels endless. General descriptions reduce the impact of its moment to something ordinary. It is in this way that Insurgence succeeds where other depictions have failed. The film induces—once again—the sensation of another world coming to existence.

Insurgence feels like a film that was made specifically for those of us who participated—who blocked classroom doors, who attended the three-to-four-hour general assemblies every week, who spoke out and confronted university officials, who walked the nightly demonstrations, who spent time making red felt squares. The film is especially for those who spent a night in jail, and consistently faced police violence. For those who weren't there, who don't know, the film might read as confusing, or simply boring.

Insurgence is not positioned to tell the story of what happened and how, but to accelerate the impulse that conditions such a collective gathering. The camera was consistently at the frontlines. The camera was the precise date or event? The film does not try to document the development of the uprising in a linear fashion, from its source through to an end. Rather, it makes us feel, again, what we had felt before—the acute urgency of what is at stake, folded into what must go on. Insurgence is of a pragmatist affiliation. The film relays the present to those who felt it; it is a gift to us who endured.

Scapegoat Says

What is Épopée?

Épopée The word means “epic.” It’s a long poem where reality and fiction are intertwined, meant to celebrate a person or an event. Épopée is an open collective. Our first film project was with sex workers and drug users living in Montréal’s Centre-Sud neighbourhood, east of downtown, an area we refer to as the “exclusionary zone.” Because the lives of the people living on the streets are heroic, Épopée seemed like a fitting name.

The collective was formed during the making of the documentary Hommes à louer (Men for Sale) directed by Rodrigue Jean, which was made between 2005 and 2007. At the time, some of the film’s participants, male sex workers, said they’d had enough with being documented. They wanted to move on to fiction and create films themselves. We then set up the Épopée projet, which took two years to put together. The project’s first initiative was to organize writing workshops which involved 30 participants who were made up of sex workers and drug users, and took place at a sex workers’ drop-in centre set up by RÉZO, a Montréal-based men’s sexual health non-profit organization. Épopée then developed a website (epopee.me), where three hours of short films, written and interpreted by sex workers and drug users, can be seen. Two feature films—L’État du moment and L’État du monde—were also created at that time.

SS How did you decide to start filming the Québec student strike? What was the precise date or event?

É Every year in Montréal, on 15 March, there is a demonstration against police violence, which we’d been going to for a few years. Usually a few hundred people gather, and the event is heavily repressed by the police. The 2012 demo was particularly hyped-up because the police had, a few months prior, murdered Mario Hamel, a homeless man. He was shot in the back. Another victim, Patrick Limoges, got hit by one of the stray bullets and died. He was a nurse who had just finished his shift at the nearby hospital. We also knew that the demo would be bigger than usual this year because the police had wounded a student protestor the week before, and the largest student union coalition, La Coalition large de l’association pour une solidarité syndicale étudiante (CLASSE), had issued a call to attend the demo. Five thousand people showed up. From then on, it made sense to be in the streets.

SS How did you decide on the title of the film? Why Insurgence?

É The term came up to us intuitively, although in French, the word “insurgence” is not in common use. Etymologically, it comes from the Latin surgere, “to stand up, or to attack,” deriving from surgere, to arise, to emerge. This definition suited our purpose quite well. The film aims to stay as close as possible to the collective and bodily process of political verticalization, as experienced by protesters swarming the streets. We describe the discrete phenominality of this political passage to the outside, or coming-out, in our manifesto, “Nous la forêt.” Also, we didn’t want to preclude or domesticate in any way the incipient violence animating the movement, as so many moralist approaches do. In this regard, the word “insurgence” highlights the intermediate or metastable state between the potentialities of collective emergence and the full-fledged explosiveness of insurrection.

SS What does “Nous la forêt” mean? Why a manifesto? How is this manifesto complimentary to the film?

É “Nous la forêt” means “We the forest.” It evokes the power of anonymity we found at the heart of the Québec student strike. At first, we had the idea of writing a text that would have been read in a voice-over. But after we did the first montage, we all felt that there was no place for commentary in the film. The images could and should speak for themselves. Thus emerged the idea that the film could work as some sort of installation, in conjunction with an independent text (the manifesto), as well as a website compiling a series of texts, films, and images that accompanied us through the film’s conception.

The manifesto envisages the protests in the political present tense, so to speak; it is an infinitive account of the politici-
You mentioned in an earlier conversation we had that the principle of filming Insurgence was based on abstraction or immanence—can you elaborate on what that means? How did abstraction/immanence, in technical terms, become the principle of filmmaking? Why was this important to you as an aesthetic position, and how did that encapsulate the politicization of the film?

É We like to think of Épopée as some sort of “dark precursor,” an expression that we used evocatively for various reasons. First, it suggests for us an open-ended outline of revolutionaries will be just enough. It also features an important sentence from Jean Genet, which we chose to put at the end of the film: “All the spontaneous violence of life that is carried further by the violence of revolutionaries will be just enough to thwart organized brutality.”

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Nous la forêt... Nous la forêt...
were bound to pay close attention to the affective ecology of their living interstices composing the movement. We call this “care”—for the actual process of communication of experience, a cosmopolitan concern. It slows down for a moment and considers the complex assemblage of forces in all its ambiguities—which is a turn away from the usual “call for mobilization.”

There has been a productive tension between an accelerationist inflexion and a more cosmopolitan one among the collective. This tension informs the realization process. We could say that Insurgence is both about the “acceleration” or intensification of political anger, and a radical slowing down in relation to the perception of duration and the modes of involvement in the student strike movement.

SS You’ve screened Insurgence a few times now. Does any particular event stand out, or were you inspired by a particular discussion that you’ve had with the audience?

E In Montréal, our position was very simple. We wanted to give something to a movement that inspired us, and in no way did we want to speak in its place, in its name. Outside of Québec, it’s been very different. We are not only bringing a film, but a vision of the movement to people who, for a large part, are very well informed about what has been going on in Québec, but want to know “what it’s been like from the inside.” And we have been lucky enough to have Québécois in the audience, often coming from very different positions, who include their voices in the conversation, making the film a vector rather than a representation of the movement.

Endnotes

1 Jean Charest, the head of the Liberal Party and the premier of Québec at the time of the 2012 strike, had proposed an 82 per cent tuition increase per student over seven years. Student unions across the province opposed the decision calling for an unlimited general strike. The students demanded that Charest retract his decision and called on the government to freeze tuition hikes. A previous general strike had taken place in 2005. Led by L’Association pour une solidarité syndicale étudiante (ASSE)—a grassroots student organization—this historic, seven-week strike managed to halt Charest’s decision to cut $130 million in student bursary funding in Québec.

2 Student unions in Québec have often gone on strike since 1968, continually demanding a freeze on tuition fees and improvements to the loans and bursaries program. Because of the consistent student uprisings—that are more militant than moderate—Québec students have been able to secure the lowest post-secondary tuition in Canada.

3 This was a tactic used by many students at Concordia University in Montréal. Students used their own bodies to block classroom doors in order to prevent students and professors from entering. Many professors and students refused to forcefully enter the classroom. But many others tried, and in some instances private security guards (hired by the university administration during the strike) were called to intervene.

4 Once classes were cancelled and the winter term ended, striking students organized nightly marches in order to keep the momentum going. The first one took place on 24 April 2012. They were organized for 8pm every evening at Place Émilie-Gamelin, a public square located outside a major subway stop in downtown Montréal. 1 August 2012 marked the hundredth consecutive nightly protest, and they lasted throughout the rest of the summer and well into early fall.

5 Le carré rouge, or red square, symbolizing the student uprising was adorned by many across Québec, pinned to jackets and backpacks. It is inspired by the French phrase, carré dans le rouge, meaning “squarely in the red,” in reference to growing student debt. See Stefan Christoff, Le fond de l’air est rouge (Montréal: Howl Arts Collective, 2013).

6 Over 2,500 people were arrested and ticketed during the eight-month strike. Francis Grenier, a striking student, suffered a serious eye injury after police fired a stun grenade into a crowd of protestors. The municipal police force, riot police, and the Sûreté du Québec (provincial police) were employed during the strike. There was excessive use of flashbang grenades and CS gas. Riot police beat up students on a consistent basis, and protestors were often kettled.

7 The use of the concept of pragmatism here is borrowed from Isabelle Stengers. “We don’t know how these things can matter. But we can learn to examine situations from the point of view of their possibilities, from that which they communicate with and that which they poison. Pragmatism is the care of the possible.” See “The Care of the Possible,” Isabelle Stengers interviewed by Erik Bordeleau, in Scapegoat: Architecture | Landscape | Political Economy 01-Service (Summer 2012): 12.

8 Interview and introduction by Nasrin Himada for Scapegoat. She participated in the eight-month-long student strike, as both a part-time professor and as a member of the graduate student union.


