

“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.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup>

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,<sup>3</sup> who attended the three-to-four-hour general assemblies every week, who spoke out and confronted university officials, who walked the nightly demonstrations,<sup>4</sup> who spent time making red felt squares.<sup>5</sup> The film is especially for those who spent a night in jail, and consistently faced police violence.<sup>6</sup> 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. Its power is in how it moves. For those of us who were there, the camera's movement—its specific rhythm, speed, and force—is a translation of what inspired us to be involved in the strike. For others, its movement is slow; this might just mean giving it time, sitting with discomfort, letting it push against questions. The film requires patience and openness to receive what is not immediately understood.

*Insurgence* 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.<sup>7</sup> The film relays the present to those who felt it; it is a gift to us who endured.<sup>8</sup>

## 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 *insurgere*, “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 phenomenality 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-

zation process that withdraws from the temptation of retrospective interpretation and any form of elucidation from a privileged standpoint. As for the film, the manifesto celebrates the immediate bodily presence, our capacity to collectively tune into the frequency of the negative, to produce zones of offensive opacity, and uncover the political frontline of our times all the way down to the most intimate dimensions of our existence. 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.”<sup>9</sup>

**SS** 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 filming? 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 we find evocative for various reasons. First, it suggests for us an open-ended and non-voluntaristic proximity with the political potentialities of the strike, a way of staying close to its undetermined aesthetic dimension. It also connects with our intention to make a film that bears witness to and cares for the fragile ambivalence vibrating at the heart of every nascent, anonymous gathering.

One of our main concerns has been to produce a film that would insert itself as seamlessly as possible in the process of affective propulsion and resonance that moved Montréal in such unexpected ways during all these months. How could *Insurgence* increase the political power and impetus of the viewers, be they involved or not in the actual student movement that transfigured Québec society?

We didn’t want to make a movie that would try to represent the event, or speak in its name; and we also wanted to avoid the kind of climax-oriented epic narratives that are so common when dealing

with mass mobilizations. We wanted the film to stay as close as possible to the subtle process of creative involution triggered by the spontaneous coming-together of people on the streets for months and months. This film works by way of a subtraction that articulates, in a sober way (i.e. avoiding riot porn), the bodies and gestures in time, producing some sort of filmic trance that keeps clear from any form of climax. The film thus can be envisaged as a plateau, following Gregory Bateson and Deleuze and Guattari’s use of the term: a continuous region of intensity that resists external interruption, just like the student movement did.

*Insurgence* works as a claustrophobic assault on the senses. It’s a forced immersion into the inorganic body of the walking crowd shouting, chanting, fighting. It’s a harsh and long movie, too long according to many viewers. It is repetitive and doesn’t necessarily bring new information at every shot. It abrades the spectator on the thread of chronological time, making them go through a process of temporal exfoliation. It’s thus a film that must be endured, just like the endless night protests that were carried on every night for over three months (the strike itself lasted about eight months). In the film, time is the activator of *le politique*.

Ultimately, we hope that, as Brian Masumi suggests—commenting on the mode of existence of plateaus—that the heightening of energies produced by the film “is sustained long enough to leave a kind of afterimage of its dynamism that can be reactivated or injected into other activities.”<sup>10</sup>

**SS** As you mention, *Insurgence* challenges modes of representation. It refuses to adhere to a moralist position, in the sense that the film does not narrate a story. And you deliberately chose not to explain, describe, or through commentary position the image within a representational framework. Why did you decide to do this?

**É** *Insurgence* is an offensive film, although it is quite abstract. It operates at the immediate level of duration and sen-

sation, as we said earlier. It also seeks to connect with and perpetuate, by means of the moving image, the zones of offensive opacity produced by the student strike. In other words, the deliberate suspension of (linguistic) signification is aimed at fostering an *art of immanent attention*. We did try at certain points to introduce more information about what is on the screen: the location of the protests, the time and date, etc. But it didn’t work. We felt like something was lost in the process. The fact that we are often slightly confused and lost about what is happening on the screen allows for a different way of experiencing the events. One starts to pay more attention to the textures, the light, the movements, the gestures; one might even start thinking about what is not shown, what is missing from the screen. In this sense, the film really works by means of subtraction. Slowly, it empties out the clichés and preconceptions about what is “true” political combat. The relative suspension of signification allows the viewer to break free from a linear understanding of the event and allow more space for perceptual ambiguities. And then, perhaps, from this concerted attempt at producing a favourable context for filmic desubjectivation, there might emerge a meaning so unexpected, so thoroughly personal that it becomes anonymous. The anonymity of the void is to be conquered through the first person singular, not to be confounded with the plain, anaesthetized anonymity of the “full,” which coincides with the impersonality of the “they.”

This might seem nihilistic (in the literal sense of emptying out), and this deceptive gesture could come across as an aestheticization of the movement. It is not. It echoes deeply with one essential feature of the student strike: its capacity to create a temporality of its own, irreducible to the manipulative modes of storytelling as concocted by the state through the mass media. The marching, the-people-in-the-making, progressively moved away from any belief in or desire for media representation, assuming their relative opacity or closeness as a necessary condition to sustain and nurture collective action. As more and more people resisted the imagist temptation, the autonomous plane of consistency of

the strikers became ever stronger. This process of political conversion by means of lived proximity and joyful refusal is deeply moving. It informs *Insurgence*’s filmic gesture, which modestly tries to bear witness to this heterogenetic process that escapes all possibilities of representation.

**SS** The film was specific in its initial portrayal of a certain time, where you were present, where one’s presence, or *present-ness*, was felt by the severity of police aggression. It’s obviously not trying to encapsulate the strike as a whole event, and it was obvious to me that it wasn’t going to be about the peaceful protests or the family-friendly demos. There was another aspect of the strike that had to do with police violence that many protestors witnessed or experienced.

In a previous conversation you said: “We have to reintegrate this notion of violence—the violence of transnational capitalism—into the equation instead of remaining in a mode of perpetual political correctness. We could discuss the strike in these terms—*strike as lived abstraction*, by giving it a dark, speculative dimension.” How do we then begin to talk about violence in the sense of (re)integration? How does the film inspire a dark speculative dimension?

**É** There is something profoundly unsettling, and utterly fascinating about the *unlimited* general strike. On the one hand, it opens up a cyclonic vortex that devours all economic rationality and produces a sort of animated suspension, a temporality of its own. And on the other, it appears as the culminating point of life, its pure and glorious expenditure. Some friends in Montréal like to talk about a “human strike.” They want to emphasize the transformative power of the strike’s unboundedness. During the strike, they opened up a space called “La maison de la grève” to intensify it, and they are also working on a book about it.<sup>11</sup> In a way, they are trying to live up to Bataille’s political and mystical understanding of intimacy: “Everything shows through, everything is open and infinite between



those who *consume intensely*,” as he puts it in *The Accursed Share*.<sup>12</sup>

The vertiginous irreversibility and exuberance that characterized the strike as a radical political act needs to be accounted for at a cosmological level, so to speak, or else its constitutive relation to a living infinity is lost. During the making of the film and up to now, we have been caught up in a discussion about the question of active nihilism, and more precisely about what Nick Land, Reza Negarestani, Mark Fischer, and others think of as the question of *accelerationism*. Basically, against what they identify as the left’s defeatist and moralistic stance (what Land calls its “transcendental miserabilism”), they affirm that the anti-capitalist forces must reconnect with the resources of negativity: the “No” of hatred, anger, and frustration.

We wanted *Insurgence* to channel, or at least not preclude, this kind of energy, to open up the question of violence on a fully vitalist and cosmic scale that breaks with pacifying and moralist accounts of the strike. It’s a problem of scale, I guess. Violence is the horizon of degradation of politics into police. Some people are just unable to acknowledge the magnitude of this reduction. They are anaesthetized by the domestic or economic regime of governance and its fetishization of consensus. We wanted *Insurgence* to stay faithful to all the people who have experienced the possibility of a greater life through the strike. In a way, we could say that we wanted to stand up to Edmund Burke’s sad political advice: “Unless you can produce an appearance of infinity by your disorder, you will have disorder only without magnificence.”

Accelerationism as a speculative political horizon is concerned with the problem of communicating this kind of burning grandeur and intensity. Its orgasmic understanding of the body without organs and incendiary effect is an important ingredient in the actual composition of forces that might oppose transnational capital. But dark speculation, with its grandiose ideas about “non-trivial universalism” and post-capital hegemony, tends to dismiss the heterogeneous composition and irreducible located-ness of the forces involved in actual uprisings. As filmmakers, we

were bound to pay close attention to the affective ecology of practices and their living interstices composing the movement. We call this “care”—for the actual process of communization of experience, a *cosmopolitical* 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 cosmopolitical 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?

**É** 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 redact 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 (ASSÉ)—a grassroots student organization—this historic, seven-week strike managed to halt Charest’s decision to cut \$103 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, *carrément 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 2011): 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.
- 9 Jean Genet, “Violence and Brutality”, in *The Declared Enemy: Texts and Interviews*, ed. Albert Dichy, trans. Jeff Fort (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004): 172.
- 10 Brian Massumi, “Translator’s Foreword”, in *A Thousand Plateaus*, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1987): iv.
- 11 Le collectif de débrayage, *On s’en cédisse: Une histoire profane de la grève* (Montréal: Sabotart, Genève: Entremonde, 2013).
- 12 Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy, Vol. 1: Consumption*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 1991), 58.