

How To Succeed In Revolution Without Really Trying

In the wake of all the setbacks to the Occupy Movement, culminating in the eviction of protestors from Lower Manhattan, it would appear that we have truly arrived, both literally and metaphorically, at "the winter of our discontent." With this in mind, it might prove a useful thought experiment to re-examine our notions of what success and failure might mean for revolution: namely, to conceive of failure as success. As usual, cinema and psychoanalysis can help us visualize this concept. The most obvious place to begin is *The Matrix*.

The similarities of *The Matrix* films to the Occupy movement barely require comment: it is in many ways a typical film about an underdog revolt against an oppressive system. However, what I want to emphasize here is how the revolution in *The Matrix* is part of the system itself. Revolution has been accounted for from the very beginning. As the Architect of the Matrix tells Neo, only 99% of people will accept the Matrix. The other 1% must eventually rebel so they can be used to re-start the Matrix when it inevitably crashes, so the system can continue as usual. (Aren't the 99% and 1% of significance here?). Thus, if Neo's revolution succeeds, i.e. overthrows the machines, it will inadvertently fail: it will destroy the Matrix and wipe out the human race.

Of course, Neo isn't going to let that happen. In the final film of the trilogy, the rogue agent Smith is infinitely copying himself and the system, as predicted, is spinning out of control (like Capitalism). Neo confronts Smith in a final showdown, but is unable to defeat him. In the climactic scene, Neo allows Smith to turn him into another duplicate, and then destroys himself, which in turn destroys Smith. Here, Neo has failed, i.e. failed to beat Smith in a fight, but in failing, he drew out the

inherent flaw in the system. Smith's greed to copy himself leads him to overextend himself, and the system collapses around him. Additionally, the machines, grateful for Neo's help, reach a treaty with the humans, a solution only attainable through failure.

To understand this scene, we can refer to Freud's primal scene as a sort of "original revolution," where the sons rebel against, murder, and eat their father. However, this revolution fails when it succeeds: the dead and absent father figure turns out to be more powerful than the living one. For Jacques Lacan, this dead, absent father figure, the Name-of-the-Father, is the foundation of not only the superego but also of the social realm: the world of Law, government, Capitalism, religion, etc. The revolution that fails reverses this logic. It draws the absent Father out of his hiding place and makes him present again when he confronts the revolution. In *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, McMurphy's "failed" revolution against the Asylum forces the system to reveal itself for what it really is, and in doing so, demonstrates this presence. McMurphy's lobotomized, blank expression at the end of the film reflects the father figure made present, a father figure who is castrated, pathetic, and powerless.

Capitalism today is just such an absent father figure: it hides behind a world of obscure financial laws, anonymous banking systems, and numbers and profits that have replaced people. A revolution, even one that "fails", forces absent Capitalism to become present: to defend itself like Nurse Ratched or Agent Smith. In doing so, the system is revealed for what it really is, and either destroys itself or becomes subject to change.

Let us take one final example: Hannibal's conflict with Fabius. But

to keep with our cinematic motif, let's look at this example as seen through the 30 Rock episode "The Fabian Strategy." In the episode, Jack Donaghy/Fabius has an argument with his live-in girlfriend Avery/Hannibal about redecorating the upstairs. Avery wants new wallpaper; Jack doesn't. Realizing that he can't win the argument outright, Jack employs the Fabian Strategy: refusing to engage Avery/Hannibal in battle, an effort to win through attrition. That is, he absents himself, a capitalist par excellence: through absence, things continue as usual. Jack eventually decides to knock down an upstairs wall, "to make things more symmetrical" (In destroying the source of the issue, we might make the analogy to Bloomberg's shutting down of Occupy Wall Street). Only then does he realize that this is what Avery wanted all along. Avery/Hannibal's revolution failed in that it did not achieve its purported objective, but in failing, it made the upstairs, i.e. the economic system, more symmetrical and equal.

Successful revolution is often just a blip in the timeline of the status quo, but "failure" can achieve unforeseen and truly revolutionary results. To put it simply, the revolution that succeeds might change the color of the upstairs wallpaper, but the revolution that fails might renovate the entire social space.

- William Welty