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Contagious bodies. An investigation of affective and discursive strategies in contemporary online activism

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ABSTRACT

The paper presents an analysis of Climate Justice Fast, a campaign consisting of an international hunger strike against political in action on climate change. Within the theoretical framework of political online activism and theories of affect, we investigate the encoding and decoding of the starving activist bodies in relation to CJF. Our material consists of texts from the CJF website, activist blogs, and two online debates on a large Danish media platform. The methodological approach is discourse analytical and esthetic-affective. In our analysis we outline the different semantic significations of the starving bodies as central signifiers and we investigate the different affective responses to the hunger strike. We furthermore argue that the starved body seems to be relationally powerful, because of both its contagious ability to attune other bodies and its semantic 'wildness'.

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1. Case presentation and motivation

Climate Justice Fast (CJF) was a campaign run by global activists ahead of and during the COP15 United Nations Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen 7–18 December 2009. The campaigners presented an international hunger strike against political in action on climate change. The Fast began on November 6 on the last day of the Barcelona climate negotiations and ended on December 18 the final day of COP15 after 44 days of fasting. The Climate Justice Fast-campaign had 9 long-term fasters located at different places: 5 in Copenhagen (Anna Keenan (AUS, 24), Diane Wilson (USA, 61), Sara Svensson (Sweden, 25), Daniel Lau (AUS, 22) and Matthieu Ball (France, 27)), 2 in Canberra Australia (Michael Morphet (61) and Paul Connor (29)) and 2 in the USA (Mikayla Irle (19) and Charles Cain (50)). They were joined by approximately 3000 solidarity fasters who completed shorter fasts ranging from one day to three weeks. CJF can thus be considered a global form of political activism since different localities and political players from all over the globe were connected across time zones in the creation of a common event.

The political focus of the campaign was climate changes and the goal was to avoid "a crime against humanity, and against all life on earth" and to install a just world "where people from all nations enjoy the same, fair, sustainable level of consumption". The CJF activists use the CJF website as a tool to mobilize external allies, to attract attention to the cause, and to enable effective internal communication and support. This is not something new. What is new and what motivated us to write about the CJF campaign is that it combines a traditional political protest form (the hunger strike) with an environmental agenda, and performs the hunger strike in a media environment making it possible for social actors all around the world to participate while staying (and starving) in their local environment. But most of all we have been interested in the way the starved body is integrated into CJF as a political project. The campaign and how it was received shows us how the sacrificing body can be an effective activist tool when it comes to motivating affective responses and creating relations to people outside the activist environment. In this affective perspective the starved body is simply highly contagious. The reception of CJF furthermore makes it clear that the affective power of the body can be very difficult to control because people interpret it in many different ways. The starved body thus seems to be both affectively powerful and semantically unruly. In that way the starving self-sacrificing body becomes an interesting convergence point of contesting affective and

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discursive processes because it forces people to relate without determining the type of relation created.

In that way CJF opposes one of the points made by Jenny Pickerill, Senior Lecturer in Human Geography, who after doing extensive research among environmental Internet activists in Britain concludes: “[O]verall, environmentalist use of the Internet as a tactic provides an additional appendage rather than a fundamental shift in their repertoire of actions. In general, interviewees have simply transferred their existing methods onto the Internet and not challenged their approaches to protest” (Pickerill, 2001: 368). When looking at CJF this is not totally true. Here we see a new type of *mediatized* and *affectively charged* environmental activism (Hjarvard, 2008), which uses the Internet to construct a new type of protest based on affective processes motivated by geographically dispersed hunger striking. Without the Internet this deterritorialized collective hunger strike would simply not be *possible* or in any way *effective* in terms of raising awareness and creating relations. CJF gives them an opportunity to create a new activist practice that transgresses the limitations of bodily coexistence in physical space, while maintaining and using the affective power of the starved body to communicate their message and create a global political event. In that way the online media is not only an instrument used in staging traditional activism, but also an environment changing the very character and possibilities of political activism (McLuhan, 1987; Meyrowitz, 1997).

2. Theoretical framework

Before beginning our analysis we will present the theoretical and methodological framework of our analysis focusing on 1) the potentials and problems of moving political activism into online environments. By focusing on this we want to enhance the understanding of CJF as a *particular mediated type of activism*. 2) The meaning of the concept ‘affect’ and the relation between affect and political mobilization, which plays a prominent part throughout the article. By focusing on this we want to prepare our analysis of CJF as a *particular affective type of activism*. 3) Last but not least we explain the analytical strategy of the article.

2.1. Online activism – potentials and problems

Since the 1990s when the Internet began to flourish outside the scientific and military communities it has been embraced by political activists as a tool used both to promote causes and to ensure internal communication and solidarity. Two events have been highlighted as pioneer examples of how political activism and online technologies can be intertwined in effective ways. Harry Cleaver points at the Zapatista movement, which in 1994 used the Internet to mobilize international support in its rebellion against the Mexican state (Cleaver, 1999). The reason for the uprising was the state’s implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which according to the Zapatistas had a range of problematic social consequences for the poor rural population. In 1999 anti-capitalistic protesters “began employing the Internet to foster affiliations and stage events” (Kahn and Kellner, 2004: 87) during the so called ‘Battle of Seattle’, where huge demonstrations against the World Trade Organizations Ministerial Conference took place. These early events underlined the potential of the Internet for political activists and NGOs: 1) The *production* and *dissemination* of media information to a wider audience becomes very cheap, fast and potentially global, 2) external supporters are easier to *reach/mobilize*, 3) *solidarity* amongst internal members of the activist community can be boosted more easily, 4) actual activities can be *coordinated* rather effortlessly, 5) direct individual *participation* and *interaction* among (geographically dispersed) activists is ensured (Fenton, 2008; Jenkins, 2006; Pickerill, 2001).

The concepts of ‘participatory culture’ and ‘media convergence’ are highly relevant in order to understand the broader media cultural context of contemporary online activism (Jenkins, 2006). According to Henry Jenkins we are witnessing a media cultural shift toward co-production and participation due to technological developments making it very easy for each individual to produce and disseminate media material to a wider audience. The technological precondition for this participation is what Jenkins calls ‘media convergence’, which refers to the intertwining of different media on (among others) a cultural level. *Cultural* media convergence refers to the fact that the ability to move material from different media platforms has created a new type of cultural situation, where more people participate in the production, evaluation and distribution of media material. CJF is exactly an example of non-professional media producer’s ability to create media material (e.g. written blogs, video blogs), to move it between different media types (e.g. a video recorder, a webpage, Facebook, Twitter) and to attract mainstream media attention as a result.

Jenkins is primarily positive when it comes to evaluating the democratic potential of convergence culture because it enables participation in political activities, mobilization of the youth and gives the economically less privileged a possibility for raising awareness of their cause. Natalie Fenton acknowledges the potential of online technologies, but nevertheless stresses three problems: 1) The possibility of creating an online environment for every type of activist project could end up tapping social movements for their collective power. 2) The energy of political activity is directed too much toward smaller interest groups and never toward the larger media platforms, where matters of common interest are being discussed. 3) The new political groups on the Internet may never have any effect outside the media environment and the followers using it. According to Fenton the pivotal question when evaluating the potential of online activism consequently is: Does the online activist group have the ability to create a solid movement and actually foster social change or does it function as a kind of ‘radical ghetto’? (Fenton, 2008: 238) Will the online environment only be used as a room for a quick uprising of energy and indignation that will not affect the broader social structures of society in any way? We address more directly this question in relation to CJF throughout the article.

2.2. Affect and affectedness: A definition

As we see it the Internet creates a range of milieus where the ability to affect and be affected is altered compared to face-to-face communication and non-digital media. The Internet’s deterritorialization of communication, the possibility of a high degree of immediacy and personal interactivity simply enable the making of new types of environments, where collective affective processes can be quite intense despite the lack of a common physical space (Tomlinson, 1999, 2007). When looking at the CJF website it can be seen as an opportunity to create an interactive, geographically dispersed, human community around a live event (cf. the hunger strike). The affective potential of the Internet in other words is its intertwining of *immediacy* (the users relate to events as they occur), its *loosening of spatial constraints* (the users can be situated all over the world) and its *interactivity* (the users can communicate with each other as individuals). With this in mind we claim that CJF facilitates an affective online environment in order to spread the message and mobilize audiences. Before demonstrating analytically how exactly this is done we refer briefly to recent discussions of affect that have taken place within what some call the affective turn in social sciences (Brennan, 2004; Clough, 2007; Gregg and Gregory, 2010; Massumi, 2002; Thrift, 2008).

Just like the cultural turn within economics and social sciences (Boswijk et al., 2007; Gay and Pryke, 2002; Pine and Gilmore, 1999; Ray and Sayer, 1999) and the spatial turn within arts and social sciences in general (Döring and Thielmann, 2008; Falkheimer and Jansson, 2006; Soya, 1989; Warf and Arias, 2008), the affective turn in social sciences seems to be a lasting shift in perspective on how to conceive the dynamics within society.

The theoretical inspirations of the affective turn come primarily from three sources: a poststructuralist relational perspective according to which, as expressed by Bruno Latour the social is defined “not as a special domain, a specific realm, or a particular sort of thing, but only as a very peculiar movement of re-association and reassembling” (Latour, 2005: 7). The social seems here to be characterized as momentary constellations of forces, drives and energies. Secondly the inspiration comes from new neuro-scientific ways of theorizing the relation between the biological and the social. Thirdly the affective turn has resulted in re-readings of sociologies and philosophies that consider affective and emotional relations as primary factors in social dynamics. Sociologists such as Gustave le Bon and Gabriel Tarde and philosopher Baruch de Spinoza have been relaunched because of their respective focus on imitation, social contagion and the idea of the public sphere as a psychic economy.

Spinoza proposes a model of society based on relations, encounters, passions and emotions. Desire is man's nature and essence while pleasure and pain are passive states or passions. Active states are formed by different emotions: “By ‘emotion’ I mean the modifications of the body, whereby the active power of the said body is increased or diminished, aided or constrained, and also the ideas of such modifications” (Spinoza 1997/1678, Definition III). The increasing and decreasing of active bodily power is according to Spinoza related to the possible changeability of these bodies. It is therefore obvious that Spinoza is one of the founding fathers of subsequent philosophical and social thinking focused on embodied differences as the dynamic motor of the social.

Early sociologist Tarde radically formulates the answer to the question of what a society is: “it is imitation” (Tarde, 2001/1890: 134) and thus offers a key concept that contemporary (e.g. Georg Simmel) and later sociologists (e.g. Jean Baudrillard and Gilles Lipovetsky) have used to describe the dynamics of modern societies. Tarde enumerates various reasons to imitate: imitation out of respect, out of admiration, out of fascination and he terms the act of instinctive imitation ‘sommambulist’ in order to qualify the activity as unconscious (Tarde, 2001/1890: 138). Those we imitate have *prestige* and exert an irresistible force of attraction. The way of wielding prestige in relation to another person happens “to the extent one answers to the needs of confirming or wanting something here and now” (Tarde, 2001/1890: 138).² Thus the prestigious offers the possibility of instant satisfaction of the receiver's desire to change. The transindividual and relational character of the social in the thinking of Spinoza and Tarde is a substantial inspiration for contemporary theorists preoccupation with affect as a social bond.

The key role of the body as transmitter and receiver of energies is crucial to Latour for whom ‘the body’ cannot be understood as a closed substance or entity. When describing the body one must always focus on what it is related to, what touches it, what it is aware of: “(...) to have a body is to learn to be affected, meaning ‘effectuated’, moved, put into motion by other entities, humans or non-humans” (Latour, 2004: 205). Latour therefore promotes a kind of ‘possession philosophy’ (Latour, 2002), which does not start with assumptions about identity or being, but rather with

investigating what kind of attachments, relations, transactions and connections characterize a certain composite of bodies and entities.

Latour stresses that the experience of being affected is to practice embodied knowledge and to become an articulate subject (Latour, 2004) able to feel or sense the differences of the surroundings. As an example a nose can become more and more able to sense and be affected if it is systematically introduced to evermore nuances of smells. In that way the introduction of stimulatory differences is a way of making the body aware of what it perceives or of its *attachments* to the surrounding world of other humans, objects and spaces (Latour, 1999). The sensation of differences is in other words experienced as affective shifts of intensity at the level of the receiving body. The CJF campaign shows bodies in a process of decaying and this investigation of differences in bodily states via starvation produces the receiving body as a touched, attached and ‘aware’ body. The activists’ prestige – and their ability to inspire admiration, respect and magnetic fascination – therefore derives from their bodies on display: they change visibly and as such metonymically embody the opportunity of creating (political) changes here and now.

If we turn to politics some see the focus on affect as a way of rearticulating a relation to political power in a less strategic and more energetic perspective (Gibson-Graham, 2006). Brian Massumi articulates the mobilizing potentials of affective politics or ‘micropolitics’ not as a way of managing the masses but as an *art of triggering the cues that attune bodies*. Using a slightly different vocabulary we can say that politics is about creating some level of sameness within populations consisting of differences. According to Massumi, however, politics is not to make actions in unison, because unity is never guaranteed or is maybe never the case. Even if a huge number of bodies are subjected to the same shock, a sameness of affect cannot be deduced from these situations. There are always different responses to the same affective environments. No situations can ever fully be predetermined by ideological structures and encodings. The levels of decodings and the levels of potentials and intensities felt are never predetermined, which we exemplify later when analyzing the external reactions to CJF. According to Massumi politics must create affective environments that citizens inhabit together and can respond to in different manners; environments of difference. An element of micropolitics is thus to work upon openness and potentials of any given situation.

In Spinoza's conceptualization of ethics as a way of increasing energy in the others' bodies (Spinoza, 1997/1678) is a line of thought, which we find very appealing when it comes to online political activity. Teresa Brennan likewise stresses the energetic dimension of affect in her neuro-scientific perspective. She defines affect and affectedness as the non-representational physiological shifts that are experienced encountering and evaluating an object. “This is why they can enhance or deplete” (Brennan, 2004: 6). To become filled with energy and to get depleted of energy are the two extreme conditions that affective encounters trigger. Three important features in this concept are present here: affects are the physiological *results* of encounters, to become affected means experiencing a *shift* or an *intensity* in orientation.

Non-representational theory as performed by human geographer Nigel Thrift seems to be in line with Massumi's micropolitics and idea of attunement of bodies and with Spinoza's/Brennan's focus on energizing relations and environments. Thrift formulates more concrete alternatives or challenges to what he calls our times of authoritarian capitalism, which rely on sentiment and media and where the main interest is to accelerate innovation (Thrift, 2008: 222). According to Thrift the left apparently does not know how to combat “this post-liberal form which privileges media (news) time and election time over historical time” other than by repeating the orthodox leftist politics of radicalism, morality and victimization

² Our translation of: “dans la mesure où l'on répond à son besoin d'affirmer ou de vouloir quelque chose d'actuel”.

(Thrift, 2008: 222). The alternative that Thrift proposes goes through a rematerializing of democracy, which focuses on concepts such as mental and imitative contagion, the creation of atmospheres, the snowballing of mimetic desire and reverberating circles of influence (Thrift, 2008: 231–232). The affective environments characterized as “a mix of hormonal flux, body language, shared rhythms, and other forms of entrainment” (Thrift, 2008: 236) are examples of a rematerialized democracy and a revitalized left that considers participants as transindividual resources and creates relations between participants marked by kinetic empathy and kinesthetic awareness/imitation (Thrift, 2008: 237). We consider online political activism as a possible rematerializing and energizing of democracy through the creation of intensive environments. Intensive environments as political scenes are not only ideologically pre-planned, but open to different kinds of reactions/participations.

2.3. Analytical strategy

In our article we will investigate both the encoding and decoding of the starving activist body in relation to CJF (Hall, 2006). Our encoding material will consist of texts from the CJF website (focusing on the texts introducing CJF, the blogs of the activists). To investigate the decodings of CJF we have selected to analyze responses on 1) the CJF website and 2) a large Danish media platform – the website of the national broadcast channel DR1 – where CJF was the object of two online debates. The CJF website is chosen in order to be able to analyze the users' immediate responses to the material of the website. The DR1 debates are considered because the broadcaster is important in the local context and the website is extensively used, but also because the CJF debates received a big response. We have not been able to find other online debates – especially not outside a left wing activist environment – with so many responses explicitly reacting to CJF (approximately 80 entries).

On the encoding level we use analytical concepts from the discourse theory of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, but we have chosen to introduce these concepts while using them in order to avoid too many repetitions (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001). The reason for using discourse theoretical tools is that they can help us describe the way CJF articulates its project and the way other actors rearticulate the meaning of the starved body thereby making it into what Laclau and Mouffe call ‘a floating signifier’. From the theory of affect we will focus on the affective encounters between the long-term fasters and the possible future activists. We look at the effect of the starved and starving bodies with respect to physiological-affective reactions: repulsion/attraction, bodily attunement/attachment, intensity shifts, empathetic imitation, relational energizing. Both the discursive and the affective level seem important in an analysis of CJF as political activism. They often intermingle, but it is possible to distinguish them when taking the body as the important signifier. In the discursive analytical perspective the body is starved as part of a *representational* articulation, while from an affective perspective starving is *presenting* relational possibilities. Following the encoding/decoding analysis we will discuss two topics raised during our analysis: the relation between affect and collective sameness and the media strategy of CJF.

3. Analysis

3.1. Encoding the starving body

The CJF homepage contains a range of introductory and explanatory texts concerning the concept of CJF and the medical and historical background underpinning the hunger strike. Historically hunger strikes have been used for different reasons and our first goal

is therefore to understand how the website encodes the CJF hunger strike. The text “Hunger Strikes – A Fast history” takes the reader through important uses of the hunger strike and describes this mode of protesting as a way to “capture attention”, “catalyze social movements”, and as “the most powerful statement against injustice that an individual can make”. In the historical account CJF focuses on the hunger strike as an effective tool for creating changes. The examples mentioned are mostly cases that are likely to motivate sympathy and support, for instance Mahatma Gandhi's fight for equality and peace during British colonialism in India, the British suffragettes' battle to ensure voting rights for women, a young general's protest against the suppression of Tamils in Sri Lanka, and young students' protests against the Chinese government at Tiananmen Square.

This historical narrative positions CJF as a group with an important goal, with justice on its side and a heroic willingness to sacrifice in the name of political change. Because of the urgency of the climate crisis CJF believes “that hunger striking could not be more appropriate for the issue of climate change” thereby articulating CJF as the weaker, but morally rightful, actor trying to go up against the agenda of larger, stronger and morally inferior agents (e.g. the established political system failing to react).

CJF also links its project to the iconic figures of Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King. The header of the webpage shows a range of quotes including several made by Gandhi, such as: “The golden rule is to act fearlessly upon what one believes to be right.” Another of the quotes comes from King: “A man who won't die for something is not fit to live.” By associating the environmental hunger strike to these persons CJF naturally encodes the fast with a certain righteous and emancipating glow. Hunger striking is simply articulated as a form of political protest, which is more quiet, pure and less violent, but nevertheless stronger because of the level of dedication shown through the act of self-starvation. The starved body incarnates a type of self-constraining discipline, which quite paradoxically can be mobilized politically as a powerful spiritual and moral force.

3.1.1. CJF as an affective activist strategy

The political activist has always put the body in peril in manifestations, fights with the police etc. As argued by Brian Doherty eco-activist protests have often focused on actively producing or manufacturing the activist body as vulnerable or in danger when trying to stop the destruction of green areas. This self-inflicted victimization according to Doherty serves a very pragmatic goal: to delay the criticized project by for instance locking on the body to roads in order to prevent big machines from reaching their destination. The manufacturing of vulnerability among activists is nevertheless also a question of carrying out “a sustained performance of their own moral commitment for a media and public captured by the epic quality of the confrontation” (Doherty, 2000: 70). This is also the case in relation to CJF, where the bodily processes become the strategy itself as the success of the campaign solely relies on the mobilizing potential of experiencing a vulnerable, weakening and heavily committed activist body. It is the decaying bodies of the long-term fasters that the viewers and potential future political activists relate to in the first place. They serve as strangely depleted but energizing engines that help to gather an attuned community around the fast.

Being an online form of political activism the fast represents a micro-political strategy based on a synchronized bodily investment performed by the fasters and documented as the fast proceeds and the bodies weaken. While the solidarity fasters fall in and out of the campaign as they wish, the campaign of the long-term fasters follows the time frame of the COP15. And quite interestingly the call for urgency of climate action happens through the fasting bodies of the political activists slowly becoming more and more depleted of

energy. The weak body becomes the strong body due to the amount of inner strength and moral dedication expressed through the deterioration of the body itself. Or with the words of one of the users responding on the CJF website: “HARD DOES NOT MEAN STRONG, SOFT DOES NOT MEAN WEAK...” We will come back to these important contrasts below.

According to the official CJF texts the point of the extreme bodily investment is that a radical shift in political willingness to address environmental problems must be motivated by a just and radical shift in the forms of civil protest. New approaches to political activism will only be provoked by new ways of political protest because the traditional forms “are all too easily ignored by the media and the public. We need something more”. The long-term faster Paul Connor elaborates why the hunger strike is necessary in one of his early posts called “Will extreme actions ‘alienate the mainstream?’”. Following our theoretical outline of affect, Connor very clearly uses affective arguments by underlining that people’s inclination to act when facing a danger is grounded in a logic of contagion or imitation. He uses a fire alarm in a shopping mall as an example, and explains that the individual will only act in a dramatic way – running or screaming – if other people are doing the same in response to the alarm. If the alarm does not affect the other people at the mall – if they keep on shopping in a quiet, normal way – the individual will probably also react rather non-dramatically. The role of imitation is therefore stressed: people do what other people do, and if CJF wants people to act in a drastically new way, CJF will have to do just the same themselves. Or quoting Connor: “To inspire a generation, we ourselves must be inspirational. We cannot afford to wait around for miracles. We must be the change we need to see” (Paul Connor, 20 December 2009). If activists want to make people act in a radical manner to prevent climate changes, they will have to provide them with visible cues (e.g. the starved body) that something is completely and urgently wrong. The weakening of the body simply provides a visible embodiment of the state of urgency that the climate is facing, and as such the contagious bodies can motivate an immediate, pre-reflexive and drastic response from people witnessing it.

The affective potential of the starving body becomes very obvious when looking at Paul Connor’s blog, which consists of written entries, followed by numerous comments, and still photos from Australian events including CJF appearances at COP15. The most interesting item on his blog is the video-diary that he keeps to describe the 44 day long fast. It includes 29 videos produced intensely at the beginning of the fast but becoming more and more sporadic from day 20 of the fast. The diary communicates hope for the future of activism in spite of the lack of results produced by political leaders and societies: “There is more to us than the physical”, “We are better than what we are doing at the moment” (Paul Connor, 19 December 2009). But the videos also have implicit affective and esthetic qualities stressing the effect of the videos on the audiences. As the fast progresses, the videos get rare, but more intense. The energizing of the viewer does no longer pass through the explicit and efficient rhetorical strategies of Paul speaking, but is transmitted through Paul’s fasting body directly. He giggles sometimes, he speaks in a lower slow voice with slouching movements, he stumbles over the words at the end, and the sight of his visible loss of weight, is an important visual marker for change. The energizing of the viewer thus oscillates between being a result of explicit inspirational rhetorical strategies to being an empathetic reaction to the long-term fasting body depleting of energy.

3.1.2. Fasting for solidarity

On Thursday 17 December, one day before the Heads of State arrive to finalize the deal in Copenhagen, Climate Justice Now invites the reader to join a single global day of fasting stressing the

fasting weapon as a way of showing empathy with the victims of hunger (past, present and future) from climate change. Or as a solidarity faster says “to understand what it feels like to go hungry for a week, two weeks, three weeks, four weeks?” (Deepa Gupta, Sunday 6 December 2009). In that way the activist body also imitates the physical state of the less privileged thereby making the activist body into a canvas embodying both a more abstract ‘state of urgency’ and the specific results of climate changes on a certain group of marginalized people. Internally this strategy was contagious to a certain extent, even if it was not intended to be viral and to spread: “It was not intended to be a petition – it just happened in solidarity” (Anna Keenan and Matthieu Ballé, 11 December 2009). Many followed some of the path in a double solidarity with the hungry and the long-term fasters (3000 on a global scale). The fast is described as a voluntary act stressing the fact that the choice of fasting is deliberate and not a consequence of constraints e.g. imprisonment or denial of access to other democratic ways of protesting. The similarity between the fasting bodies of the activists and hungry others is here paralleled by a difference in situation: deliberate choice versus constrained conditions of life. The fast then becomes a solidarity action, but also a chosen personal experience.

3.1.3. The chain of equivalence

Summing up CJF encodes the starving activist body with a range of semantic and affective potentials thereby underlining that self-starvation can be “approached as a symbolic language, a performative act” (Pashmore, 2009: 34). Using the analytical concepts of Laclau and Mouffe the central signifier (or what they call the ‘nodal point’) in the material analyzed above is the ‘hunger strike’. Around this nodal point other signifiers are related to each other thereby creating a ‘chain of equivalence’ that gives the nodal point a certain meaning, goal and ethos. The chain of equivalence established in relation to the nodal point ‘hunger strike’ is visualized in Fig. 1.

CJF simply articulates the nodal point ‘hunger strike’ by linking it to the signifiers of the outer chain. By articulating the hunger strike in this way CJF thereby constructs an activist subject position (Foucault, 2005; Hall, 2002), which is hunger striking as part of a moral, spiritually devoted, globally responsible, effective and appropriate form of protest, and not, as a critic might say, as an act of political extremism, or as a way of attracting attention to the activist as a person. The question raised by the abovementioned analysis is whether or not the users of the website and people debating the fast accept the activists’ encoding of the project?

3.2. Decoding the starving body

Looking at the CJF website the responses are most often supportive of the activists’ encoding and of the activists as individuals. The long-term fasters seem to gain a kind of celebrity-status of ‘achieved celebrity’ (Rojek, 2001: 18) through their accomplishment of the long-term fast. Some of the commentaries on the blogs also resemble random responses: “I cant’ feel more proud of you, you fasted for 43 days and still so optimistic and willing to keep going” (Augustina Galeano, 19 December 2009). “Call me a psycho fan” (Michelle, 30 November 2009). The political engagement of a large audience is dependent on these long-term fasters as endorsers and also on their ability to communicate as well as on their screen appearance (Fig. 1).

As celebrities the long-term fasters inspire others to do the same thing, but the predominant way of inspiring audiences happens through an affective attuning strategy. The argument for adhering and fighting for this cause is proportional with the passion the long-term fasters put into the matter. The photo of Michael Morphet (61) ending his fast shows a body weighing less than 45 kilos,

Fig. 1. Encoding the C/JF hunger strike.

representing a dangerous fall below 20% of normal bodyweight, is significant (cf. Fig. 2). The sight of the skinny body is linguistically expressed by formulations such as: “how much an effort”, “how much courage”, “in getting to this point Mike probably put more at risk for C/JF than any of the rest for us”. (Paul Connor, 9 December 2009). The metonymical bodily sacrifice of the long-term fasters is received as a symbolic exchange that puts us all in debt. A lot of the bloggers commenting on the news say thank you for the “commitment”, “passion”, “dedication” and conclude “You are an inspiration”. The amount of effort visualized by the skinny body (or in the narratives of the discomfort, pain and nuisances of the fast) indebts and inspires the viewer to action because the change is obvious and visible.

The people responding to Paul Connor’s blog also comment on his effort with admiration. The comments show that some imitate the long-term fasters, some admire the rhetorical power and activists’ will in the long-term fasters, some get moved by the diary and the hope it inspires: “Your blog entries have routinely brought me to tears. Not of sadness exactly, but just from a full feeling in my heart” (Emily, 26 December 2009), some are worried by the consequences for the concrete bodies in action (Michelle, 30 December 2009). The abovementioned responses clearly show that the affective strategy of C/JF is working, because the process of starvation creates immediate responses of admiration, sympathy and care. But while the responses to the fast on the website are often highly supportive the external reactions to the campaign were often of a more oppositional character.

3.2.1. Critical decodings

Taking the Danish media as an example C/JF received quite a lot of attention in the national newscasts (e.g. on TV2 and DR1) and created debate. After being presented with the story of Anna Keenan the users of DR1’s website were asked to debate the question: “Does the climate benefit from a hunger strike?”. Another thread

associated with a youth programme on DR1 raised a similar question. Sixty-five users answered the first question and 11 answered the latter. The vast majority of the reactions make an oppositional decoding of C/JF’s project, meaning that they do not accept the encoding of the fast presented by the activists. Approximately ten respondents are either mildly or strongly supportive of C/JF, but most responses are negative and broadly reproduce three overlapping points: 1) The C/JF activists are *childish* and *naïve* in the sense that they think that they can force politicians and companies to react by jeopardizing their own well-being, and that the campaign is most of all about activists craving (media) attention. One respondent writes: “I guess it is just another way of getting 15 min of fame after being refused by Robinson or Big Brother”. 2) That the C/JF project and the activists are *pathological*. This point is expressed in the widespread use of ‘madness’ and ‘lunatics’ in the responses, but also when one of the respondents suggests that Anna Keenan could very well be an anorexic in disguise. 3) That the campaign is *communicating the message in a bad way* because the attention created by the hunger strike cannot easily be translated into a claim about climate changes: “It will have no impact. What is their message? We only see and hear that they are hunger striking, but what is the message? [...]” as stated in one of the answers. On a personal blog discussing the C/JF claim that you should be prepared to die for the ideas you believe in a fourth type of more rare criticism is raised. Here the act of hunger striking is linked to political extremism by one of the respondents: “In the 1980s I lived in a place that experienced the use of the hunger strike weapon by a group of Irish nationalist fanatics. [...] Hunger strikes are blackmail and those who take part in them are extremists”. Looking at these different responses with the concepts of Laclau and Mouffe in mind the ‘hunger striking body’ functions as a floating signifier, which is being inserted into different chains of equivalence thereby giving the act of starving different meanings ranging from excessive self performance, sickness, bad communication or political extremism.

Although there is of course an element of regular online ‘flaming’ – a term designating the often very quick, aggressive and negative interaction flourishing among online audiences (Baym, 2006; Lister et al., 2003) – it shows that the starved body is a rather uncontrollable catalyst of different types of responses. Judith Butler’s work on performative identity stresses that bodies come into existence and participate in social life by reproducing and negotiating established discourses (Butler, 1993, 2006). But according to Butler bodies are not always controllable in the sense that the individual is in command of how it is being interpreted and what kind of meaning is attributed to it socially (Butler, 1997: 155). A person can articulate a certain statement in speech and the body another opposing statement simultaneously, because the intentionality of the speaker cannot control the interpretive or affective work of the receiver (Hall, 2006). The bodily action of starving is related to a certain discourse of dedicated activism by the C/JF activists, but this discourse is as shown not necessarily accepted by the receiver (Pashmore, 2009). The point in relation to Butler is that the C/JF campaign cannot control what type of association, affect or interpretation is established when the receiver sees the images of starved bodies. As an image the voluntarily starving body is simply semantically overdetermined and for that reason it can be quite difficult to control the affective responses that it motivates. The weakened body is therefore not only an instrument that embraces the spectator affectively, but also a ‘semiotically wild’ object.

4. Discussion: Affect and media strategy

In the final part of the article we want to address two topics, which have been raised, but not sufficiently clarified, during our

Fig. 2. Michael Morphet during the hunger strike.

analysis. The first is the role of affect in relation to the mobilization of other bodies, the second is the media strategy of the campaign.

4.1. The role of affect: Attunement, imitation or both?

As shown in our analysis the mobilization of outsiders is very much handled by using affective forms of appeal: by trying to *embody* and *move* energy, devotion and force from the activist to the spectator. Nigel Thrift points out that contemporary critiques of neoliberal tendencies, should not avoid being affective, but rather engrain affect in the project as is clearly exemplified by CJF. Here affect plays a prominent role as a way of creating inner relations among the activists and as a way of connecting to the outer world. But going back to the theoretical framework it is necessary to clarify how one should understand this affective relation created by CJF and people responding to the campaign. Is CJF creating a process of imitation (Thrift, 2008), where the involved persons become more identical/alike, or rather a process of attunement (Massumi, 2009), where a certain affective environment is established, but without creating 'sameness' among the people being affectively touched by CJF?

Our suggestion would be not to think of imitation and attunement as contradictory concepts, but instead conceptualize imitation as one way of responding to an attunement. Hereby we stress that affective environments are always highly complex situations, where a certain investment (e.g. self-starvation) can create pre-reflexive reactions in many different ways. Looking at the spontaneous critique of CJF, this could also be understood as an affective reaction to the shock created by seeing the weakened body, but not an affective reaction creating sameness between activist and spectator. The starved body certainly has a contagious effect, but the results of this contagion are manifold, meaning that they can both be oppositional, negotiating or imitating. Following Latour you could claim that CJF therefore creates an *attachment* between the activist and receiving bodies, because this concept exactly

designates an unpredictable relation between entities that neither control nor are controlled by each other (Latour, 1999).

The act of imitation is also highly differentiated looking at the more supportive responses to CJF. The dimension of imitation has to be distinguished into two: imitation as mobilization (I act on a cause, because I see you act on a cause) or as literate imitation meaning doing exactly like you (fasting). In that way the affective environment created by CJF attunes a range of bodies, and one way of reacting is by imitating the activist in various ways, another is to make an opposing, but nevertheless affective, response to the fast.

4.2. The CJF media strategy: Participation and body spectacles

The CJF campaign is an emblematic example of participatory culture. It simply relies on a number of people's willingness to create media material through recording, blogging, commenting and so on. Henry Jenkins stresses that the goal for many political movements relying on user participation is to attract the attention of broadcast media (Jenkins, 2006: 222). As shown some of the critics of the campaign point to the fact that the whole campaign is a media stunt meaning, that it is nothing but a media strategy with the goal of attracting attention. This critique often directed at both traditional politicians (for being in the pockets of their spin doctors) and at political activism (for not happening *on* the streets, but only *in* the media) misses the point in our opinion. All political activist movements have had media and communication strategies. The special feature of CJF is that it consists of testimonies in the form of diaries and videos displaying the process of hunger striking, which is obviously performed to create media awareness of the cause. Following this the media strategy of CJF could provocatively be termed *terrorist* in the sense that it points at the personal responsibility of everybody and displays the responsibility taken by some by creating a spectacle.

Taking his point of departure as the "mother event" of the terrorist attack on WTC 9/11 in New York Jean Baudrillard qualifies the spirit of terrorism as the playing out of the "more than real" death: the symbolic and sacrificial death" (Baudrillard, 2002: 408). In his famous article on 9/11 Baudrillard furthermore argues that the terrorists – regardless of the total immorality and cruel cynicism of the act – gains *symbolic power* in the exchange with the West by investing more in the battle (cf. their own lives) and by winning the battle on images. CJF in the same way tries to *force* people to relate, react and reflect on the urgency of climate changes by performing an act of extreme bodily sacrifice, which creates a spectacle that is difficult to overlook. Of course 9/11 is a much larger and more unavoidable event on a global scale than CJF, and – to avoid misunderstandings – we are not saying that CJF is a masked terrorist group or that their strategies by closer analysis show themselves to be terrorist. Nevertheless the link between CJF and acts of symbolic terrorism (Juergensmeyer, 2000) is the fact that the actions on display only *gain meaning and symbolic value through their ability to create media spectacles*, and that they try to create the spectacle by raising the stakes through an *ultimate corporeal investment*.

5. Conclusion

In our article we have analyzed the encoding and decoding of the CJF hunger strike, and discussed some of the perspectives concerning affect and media strategy that it raises. The hunger strike is *encoded* as an appropriate, spiritual, virtuous, globally responsible and contagious form of activism aimed at transmitting energy and devotion to the spectator through feelings of admiration and sympathy. Becoming weak and becoming strong is thus equaled in terms of the activist body, but with surplus value created

in the relation to the energized and motivated spectator. On the level of *decoding* one of our important findings is that the weakening body is a highly powerful energizing entity that spectators have difficulties *not* to respond to and care for.

The very different responses to CJF nevertheless indicate that the voluntarily starving body is a rather uncontrollable catalyst for affective responses due to the many different connotations available (e.g. sainthood, anorexia, political terrorism). Two kinds of *affective decodings* were detected in our material. One kind of affective response was to react by imitating either through *similar acts* (protesting, commenting) or *identical acts* (fasting). The second kind of affective responses was to be found in the more critical, oppositional decodings. Semantically these decodings considered CJF as childish, pathological, failed communication or even political extremism.

As a *media strategy* the campaign is *internally* all about supporting the participatory culture surrounding the CJF group in different ways (e.g. coordination of events, enabling global and deterritorialized communication). *Externally* the media communication expresses a 'terrorist' line of thinking by linking a political project to the creating of media spectacles directed at dissemination in broadcast media by using an extreme bodily investment to attract attention.

After finishing the fast, and in the wake of the political disappointment of the COP15's inability to create a binding environmental agreement, Anna Keenan writes:

Distress, confusion, hurt, anger? Hope, passion, energy? Emotion! Let it all out, people! [...] COP15 will not go down in history as the moment when the world, humanity, people of all nations and creeds, came together and united for the common good of all future generations. What a pity. It is actually pitiful. A complete shame. So what the hell happened, and what do we do now?

Whether or not CJF will have lasting social effects depends on a number of factors. Analyzing CJF it therefore both seems to oppose and confirm some of the pessimistic assumptions concerning online political activism presented by Natalie Fenton in our theoretical framework (e.g. the ephemeral character of online groups, the risk of fragmenting social movements, the abandonment of collective discussion in a common public sphere). CJF is actually faced with the interesting challenge of doing long-term political activism without losing the ability to energize, mobilize and attune. But despite the dangers of the ephemeral character of new media and of the starved body out of (political) control, we must conclude that the weakening body as displayed in the CJF campaign is a powerful body capable of proliferating on- and offline.

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