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Aflame

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How to Watch a Riot

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*But when you talk about destruction
Don't you know that you can count me out / in
The Beatles, Revolution 1*

After the destruction, crowd and fire die away.
Elias Canetti

*There is only one thing a writer can write about:
what is in front of his senses at the moment of writing..
I am a recording instrument.*
William S. Burroughs

Alberto has published extensively about the limits of representation (violence, death, pornography, freaks) and the technoscientific imagery on audiovisual media (cinema, television, YouTube). He has contributed to journals such as *Cinergie*, *Nuncius*, *Public Understanding of Science*, *Schermi* and *Porn Studies*. His latest publication is *Sade et le cinéma. Regard, corps, violence* (Rouge Profond, 2020).

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Do the Right Thing

In the final scene of *Do the Right Thing* (Spike Lee, 1989), a mob sets on fire the pizzeria that was the central location of the film. Rioters burn it down in anger after the police has killed an African-American. It all started from a symbolic absence: a brawl in the pizzeria between Sal, the Italian-American owner, and its regular African-American customers. The latter wanted to add a black celebrity to the restaurant's "wall of fame", clearly dominated by Italian-American heroes such as Dean Martin, Frank Sinatra and Al Pacino.

The missing photograph, the fight, the arrival of the police, the killing. Then the fire. The first act of the riot is made by Mookie, Sal's employee, played by Spike Lee himself: he grabs a trash can and throws it through the window of the pizzeria, transforming a still rage into active destruction. Was it the right thing to do? Of course there is no comparison between the death of a young man and the smashing of a shop-window. But how does this gesture relate to Radio Raheem, choked to death by the police? Rioting and looting cannot undo that loss, but still, fire seems necessary. It is a way of mourning, a controversial rite, a funeral pyre. Fire gives to the Brooklyn community the chance to start anew.

Another film, *Joker* (Todd Phillips, 2019), similarly ends in riots and fire: Joker, who has been arrested, passes through New York in a police car. In the streets, people are burning and destroying stuff. Joker puts on a mad smile. Then he laughs. The scene provides to the viewer a strange, intense amount of excitement. Borrowing a concept from Linda Williams (1989), we could call it a kind of pornographic frenzy of visible destruction. The viewer cannot help but develop a kind of empathy, of psychological understanding, of personal forgiveness towards Joker, the villain. But then, watching the riot, where do we stand? In front of fire and destruction, do we smile with Joker? Is this, again, the right thing to

do? In the police car, the policeman tells Joker — and the film viewers with him: “Stop laughing, freak, this isn’t funny”.

Identification

Identification is a classic topic in Film Studies. What is the viewer’s standpoint in relation to the character? Do we identify with his/her position, adventures and struggles? How does the film build this identification (or projection)? Our participation, implication, empathy with images of destruction is shaped by the ways the director, videomaker or media company decide to show us the events. Participatory cultures (and the spreading of videorecording devices) have multiplied the points of view on riots. It is not just the outlook of media company cameramen who usually stand behind the police line, nor just the journalists’ voice-overs explaining

Rioting and looting cannot undo that loss, but still, fire seems necessary

the facts to us listeners. In the contemporary mediasphere footage appears instantly on YouTube. It is not easy to discover a path to move through all these representations. The topic of “identification” can help us find a way. If the images are “orphans”, produced by an anonymous crowd, we do not need anonymous images, but a situated gaze, a point of view we can discuss, even as controversial as the look of (a) Joker.

Riot Holiday

Riot Holiday is a YouTube video by Vagrant Holiday, an anonymous videomaker known for his punk videos.¹ The other videos on the channel show his no-budget exploration of the world (Europe, Japan, US trains), sleeping rough, engaging in illegal activities, mainly trespassing. With a different, also anonymous nickname, he is the author of another Internet video project that was discussed in *Cahiers du Cinéma*. Although the identity of the two anonymous videomakers is widely debated on the web, we prefer not to name the other account, since Vagrant Holiday never speculated on the success of his previous project and never connected the two. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Vagrant Holiday has to give up a planned travel abroad to shoot a video; yet he successfully manages to turn the missed chance into a visit to Seattle, where protests in response to the killing of George Floyd had escalated into riots, to film the events. The resulting video, *Riot Holiday* (20’59”), was published on YouTube on June 16, 2020.

The video opens with the following claim: “The creator of this video does not condone most of the shit you are about to see”. Vagrant Holiday is a mere witness of “the shit” happening — vandalism, destruction, burned cars, crowd violence. When asked “Are you in favor of the looting?”, Vagrant Holiday’s answer is: “Just observing”. There are things called *participatory culture* and *citizen journalism*, but Vagrant Holiday is neither a participant nor a citizen. In a mix of ideological neutrality and bodily participation, Vagrant Holiday is, as he puts it, “just making a video”, entering into the burning shops to record images and sounds of destruction (windows crashing, objects being smashed, sirens, shouts). He takes note of the discrepancies, of the different views among protesters — some pro-looting, some anti-looting. A protester screams to the people coming out from the shops with their hands full of stolen goods: “You are not different from the people we are fighting”; another one: “What are you guys doing there? You make everything look bad”. Others reply: “Fuck Starbucks! Fuck you, white boy”; or: “You have a problem with a motherfucker window... and you don’t have a problem with a black man losing his job... Break that shit”. A particular kind of disturbing authenticity is displayed. We do not simply see the riot, we become part of it. In a sort of First-Person-Shooter

¹ www.youtube.com/c/VagrantHoliday

videogame aesthetics, there is no external point of view.

With his voice-over, Vagrant Holiday is there to state the obvious, adding small cynical but realistic notes. While filming a protester smashing the taillight of burnt car, he remarks: "I think it's already destroyed, man". He stares at the attempt to knock down the door of a venue, commenting: "I don't know why he's trying to break the door if the window's wide open". When the police arrive, not all the protesters manage to run out of the shops. "I'm really glad I'm not in there still", comments Vagrant Holiday. A protester jokes about another one, trapped inside the shop: "He's stuck. He's still in. He's stuck. He's fucked". There is no sense of unity to be perceived between the rioters.

What are the motivations of the looters? Do they want to smash capitalism, or are just trying to get a new pair of sneakers? At Starbucks, is it anger or hunger? Which level of institutional violence legitimates a violent response from the citizens? In George A. Romero's film *Dawn of the Dead* (1978) the walking dead, remembering the place that they used to love the most, return to the shopping mall: zombies are consumers, and consumers are zombies — dangerous, slow, eternally condemned to buy, *i.e.*, to loot. Looting looks uncannily similar to consumerism. A comment on YouTube under the *Riot Holiday* video, signed by the user "ST", says "Not sure if this is a black lives matter protest or early black friday sales".

Comments

The best mirror of the reception of a YouTube video, is its comment section. *Riot Holiday* generated 2,171 comments (as of January 7, 2021), for a total count of about 30,000 words (a figure comparable to Roald Dahl's *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*). Unusually, there are many intriguing interpretative theses and references to cultures and sub-cultures. YouTube user InitialVox interestingly describes Vagrant Holiday "Straight ghosting through the crowds". Many others define the video as "the best tape of a riot ever recorded" (canarc1), "the best coverage of a riot I've seen" (Stephen Sottard), "by far the best footage from all the riots" (Arian K), "the purest form of journalism, I've come across in the past few months" (YoungerOstrich9). "This is what journalism should look like, just observing" (Anders Genaamd).

Some underline a kind of "cyberpunk" style in the work of Vagrant Holiday: "Holy shit this is some cyberpunk type shit" (KommunistGoddezz). There are many references to the role-playing game *Dungeons&Dragons*, and especially to the concept of "alignment", meaning the categorization of the character's ethical and moral perspective. Vagrant Holiday is labeled as a "chaotic neutral", that is — according to Wikipedia and the Wiki Fandom *Avanthea* — an individualist who follows his/her whims, and shirks rules and traditions. Others refer to the video-game *Minecraft*, stating it looks like an "anarchy server in real life" (Ralph the Kommandant) (in *Minecraft*, an "anarchy server" is a multiplayer server with scarce or no rules, where people can not be banned).

While appreciating the videomaker ability, the YouTube community in its large majority condemns the looting, and often also the riots. A comment by Jacob Keleman reads: "The stealing from a dry cleaners did kinda piss me off though, like that's other people's clothing and shit, what if that's important to them? It's not like you're taking from a business, at that point you're just taking it from other people". It is not just the commentators: Seattle rioters themselves are very divided on the subject of looting. Even in the middle of it, you cannot know for sure whether it is good or not. Dissent is an essential part of the idea of protest itself.

Shipwreck with Spectator

Apocalyptic images have a double implication: the first feeling is fear — fear of a possible future, of end times, fear of fire. The second is pleasure, a pleasure that goes beyond pleasure, or beyond the pleasure principle. Hans Blumenberg's *Shipwreck with Spectator* is a long ponder on a quote by

Lucretius (*De Rerum Natura*, Book 2, verses 1-61), where the Latin poet wonders why we like to stare at spectacles of destruction. In the introduction to the Italian translation of the book, the philosopher Remo Bodei, writing about the attractiveness of ruins and catastrophes, describes a series of “oppositional structures”: spectator vs. actor; theory vs. praxis; security vs. risk; extraneity vs. involvement; immobility vs. movement. Our feeling of personal security would press us to stand on the first column of options, but “modernity”, as Bodei calls it, pushes us into the second. What can be observed with a strange but evident sense of clearness in *Riot Holiday*, is the avoidance of all choices. *Riot Holiday* erases these dichotomies. Neither a spectator nor an actor, Vagrant Holiday is not in a secure place, but runs from risks; he is not a stranger in the scene, but does not get involved; he stands as a recording statue, as a détourned surveillance camera within movement and chaos. He walks around, doing no theory and yet theory is what we get from his videos.

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