DIY Dying: Video Activism as Archive, Commemoration and Evidence

Tina Askanius, Lund University, Sweden

ABSTRACT

This article examines video activism in a context where ubiquitous camera technologies and online video sharing platforms are radically changing the media landscape in which demonstrations and political activism operates. The author discusses a number of YouTube videos documenting and narrating the recurring, anti-capitalist demonstrations in Europe in the past decade. With the death of Ian Tomlinson in London during the 2009 G20 protests as an empirical starting point, the author raises questions of how video documentation of this event links up with previous protest events by juxtaposing representations of ‘the moment of death’ (Zelizer, 2004, 2010) of protesters in the past. This article suggests that these videos work as (1) an archive of action and activist memory, (2) a site of commemoration in an online shrine for grieving, and (3) a space to provide and negotiate visual evidence of police violence and state repression. The author offers a re-articulation of the longstanding debate on visual evidence, action, and testimony in video activism. The results are suggestive of how vernacular commemorative genres of mourning and paying tribute to victims of police violence are fused with the online practices of bearing witness and producing visual evidence in new creative modes of using video for change.

Keywords: Mediation of Protest, Online Commemoration, Ubiquitous Camera Technology, Video Activism, YouTube

INTRODUCTION

(…) For all the martyrs who live for Justice Peace and for an end to capitalist wars, cops and prisons. ‘Our First Martyr (Long Live Carlo G, Long Live Brad Will)’ (see Appendix, video 18)

When the newspaper vendor Ian Tomlinson fell dead on the streets of London on his way home from work during the 2009 G20 protests after a fatal encounter with the Metropolitan Police he was inscribed into the list of martyrs who have died fighting a common enemy – an enemy with many names that take on multiple forms in various contexts; the new world order, neoliberalism, predatory capitalism, unregulated financial globalization to name but a few of the terms used to designate the hegemonic doctrine of contemporary global politics by activists on the radical Left in Europe. Ian was no activist, let alone an anarchist willing to die fighting the system. On YouTube however, videos documenting his final moments are weaved into a coherent narrative of martyrdom and political resistance against global capitalism and state repression.
In the present discussion, the notions of video activism and visual evidence are taken up for reconsideration. In an era where digital camera technologies are ubiquitous and embedded into everyday media practices, an emerging and steadily growing ‘genre’ of videos is being uploaded onto YouTube and similar audio-visual repositories; namely the video documenting and framing demonstrations and acts of public disobedience. Videos falling into this category range from more or less random cell phone shots over the semi-professionally edited pro-productions by media activist to well-established video collectives who systematically document political violence and police brutality in order to feed the news flow with stories told from a street perspective of the people protesting in the streets.

This article will address, exemplify and contextualize the particular genre of the protest video as a contemporary phenomenon of collective ‘vernacular’ memory (Haskins, 2007; Hess, 2007; Zelizer, 2004). It concerns memories stored and archived online but at the same time, shared memories of past protest that project aesthetics of dissent and violence, which seek to mobilize activists for future direct actions. Guided by the notions of collective memory and commemorate genres (Wagner-Pacifici, 1996; Wahlberg, 2009) I pay specific attention to one small thread of videos within this genre: the commemorations of political martyrs. Further, I raise questions of the ways in which issues of visual evidence and truth claims are negotiated within the distinctive online context of YouTube.

EMPIRICAL ELEMENTS AND METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

Addressing the role of YouTube in the co-creation of activist memory and visual evidence, this article asks how the body of user-generated videos on the death of Ian Tomlinson in the G20 protest in London links up with videos of previous protest events by narrating ‘the moment of death’ of Carlos Giuliani, killed during the G8 demonstrations in Genoa in 2001 and Alexandros Grigoropolous shot dead by police in Athens, 2008. In a semiotic vein of inquiry, the multi modal texts are analysed in thematic clusters that reflect the typology proposed for understanding the various modes of appropriation connected to their production and consumption. In doing so, I pay specific attention to what Barthes (1981) has coined as an image’s third meaning or what I, in an explicit echo of Zelizer (2004, 2010), conceptualize as the voice of the visual in the about-to die aesthetic.

Vast amounts of videos documenting street violence and narrating political resistance from a citizen gaze are uploaded onto YouTube every day. The proposed study is no exhaustive examination of the range of protest videos circulating on the platform. The problem of sourcing videos in conjunction with the search algorithm bias on YouTube alone would make such an undertaking relatively useless. Rather, what is looked at here is a limited number of videos strategically selected by virtue of their relevance for the specific focus of this article. For these reasons, only protest videos specifically evolving around the death of the three men and only the ones explicitly named or tagged with words and phrases such as ‘R.I.P’; ‘a tribute to (…)’; ‘In memory of (…)’; ‘Mourning the death of (…)’ etc. have subsequently been selected for examination. Furthermore, only user-generated productions are included leaving out the sheer replications of broadcast media. Seeing how these videos are better typified as “user-uploaded-content rather than user-generated-content” (original emphasis), (van Zoonen, Hirzalla, & Müller, 2010, p. 9) as the actual input of the person uploading them is relatively small, these are not included into the body of texts under study. Subsequently, a total of 26 videos have been scrutinized. When studying YouTube videos, a strict empirical focus is not easily bounded. With the video itself comes the appurtenant user/channel presentation, channel comments, video comments, video responses etc. all forming part of the semiotic environment into which the video is embedded. These texts form
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