

# Visual Activism(s): Tactics, Technologies and Styles

## Panel session co-organized by Katy Parry and Giorgia Aiello (ICA 2014)

This panel session aims to foreground the significance of the visual in key contemporary mediatized arenas of activist practice, performance and politics.

The entrenchment of activism, practices of mediation and key logics of mediatization have been highlighted and examined in recent major publications on political protest in the networked contexts of digital culture. Through a recognition of the crucial role that both media and publicity play in furthering contemporary causes, scholars have interrogated the performative and 'sensorial' nature of activist practices, with a particular focus on visual media and aesthetics (Feigenbaum et al. 2013; Khatib 2013; McLagan and McKee 2012).

The papers included in this panel extend key debates emerging from this burgeoning area of inquiry by addressing some of the major 'communicative' dimensions of visual activism across technological and aesthetic realms such as film, video, and performance. In doing so, participants will offer insights reflecting historical, sociological and semiotic approaches applied to a range of topics, including radical filmmaking, online political mash-up videos, and feminist protest performance.

In particular, each paper addresses one or more of these questions:

- 1) What are some of the key visual tactics or techniques employed and deployed by activists, protest groups and/or social movements in contemporary national, international or global mediatized arenas? Why and how are such tactical approaches chosen or selected among others? How do given visual techniques 'work' on target audiences, such as political institutions and the broader public?
- 2) What are some of the major technological means and media outlets that are used in visual activism? How does the specificity of such technologies and media institutions shape and affect the 'substance' of activist practices and politics?
- 3) What are some of the more properly aesthetic and stylistic features found in visual activism? What are the histories of such aesthetics, and how are they adapted and transformed in situated practices of visual activism? How and why are specific styles adopted and recontextualized in contemporary visual arenas of activism?

Taken together, papers in this panel engage not only with the communicative potential and concrete opportunities offered by the visual in globalizing and networked contexts of political protest and struggle, but also with some of the contradictions around the 'progressive' nature of activism and the various spectacles associated with it.

## References

Feigenbaum, Anna, Fabian Frenzel and Patrick McCurdy (2013) *Protest Camps*. London. Zed Books.

Khatib, Lina (2013) *Image Politics in the Middle East: The role of the visual in political struggle*, London. I.B.Tauris.

McLagan, Meg and Yates McKee (eds) (2012) *Sensible Politics: The visual culture of nongovernmental activism*. London. Zone.

## 1) Steve Presence

### A tale of two avant-gardes: Politics, aesthetics and political film networks in the UK

This paper explores the history of left-wing political film networks in the UK. At various points since the 1920s politically radical filmmakers in Britain have sought to develop networks of support for their work: establishing distribution and exhibition circuits; pooling footage and equipment; and lobbying industry and other sources for funding. The first decade of this century has seen a groundswell in the production of political film culture in Britain (and elsewhere), and in September 2013 individuals from across that culture founded the UK Radical Film Network (RFN), the latest in this long history of attempts to build sustainable infrastructures for overtly political filmmaking.

The nearest historical reference point for the RFN in Britain is the Independent Filmmakers Association (IFA, 1974-1990). The IFA achieved much both as a forum for practical and theoretical debate and as a pressure group. It was the IFA, for example, that was largely responsible for the Independent Film and Video Department (1982-93) at Channel 4, which broadcast some of the most politically and aesthetically radical work ever shown on television anywhere in the world. Indeed, this ability to represent both more conventional filmmakers interested in political communication as well as those whose work focused on developing radical aesthetics was one of the IFA's greatest achievements. In Britain today this historic, complex and contradictory distinction between the political and the aesthetic avant-gardes is more pronounced than ever, with their respective distribution circuits, exhibition sites, audiences and so on almost completely separate.

Re-establishing a relationship between the two avant-gardes is just one of the many other practical, political and philosophical challenges facing the RFN. Focusing principally on the IFA but with reference to contemporary organisations beyond the UK (such as Cinema Politica in Canada and the International Network of Women's Film Festivals in the US), the paper will outline the RFN's initial responses to questions such as: How should a radical film network be structured in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? How should it be funded? What do we mean by 'radicalism'? What constitutes political aesthetics in contemporary film culture? The answers to these questions are crucial if the left is to once more preserve and sustain its film culture.

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- Stoneman, R. (1996) Incursions and Excursions: The Avant-garde on C4 1983-93. In: O'Pray, M., ed., (1996) *British Avant-garde Film 1926 to 1996*. Luton: University of Luton Press, pp. 285-96.

## 2) Tina Askanius

### Online video activism and political mash-up genres

This paper situates contemporary forms of video activism in online environments within a historical trajectory of radical film recruited for Left thinking and action. Focusing on the remix ethos and aesthetics of *political mash-up videos* (Chanan 2011; Edwards and Tryon 2009; Horwatt 2009; Russo and Coppa 2012), the paper suggests how revisiting the analogue precursors of digital video may help contextualise and understand new forms of video activism, and politically committed media practices more generally (see e.g. McIntosh 2012). In the first part of the analysis, I engage with some of the principal conceptual themes and aesthetics that shape the various hybrid genres we see emerging in a 'post-broadcast media ecology' (Merrin 2008) on YouTube and similar video platforms.

For these purposes, I propose a typology for understanding the motley array of video documentary and documentation available online as a hybrid and diverse range of media forms for political investigation and portrayal. The second part of the analysis demonstrates how such mash-up practices play out on three distinct levels when digital videos are put in circulation online. First, political mash-up is understood as a set of material practices in which online content is mixed and repurposed, second, in terms of a convergence between different styles, genres and modes of address and finally the concept opens up for an understanding of the blurring of boundaries between different political actors and motives in online media environments.

#### References

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### 3) Katy Parry and Giorgia Aiello

#### The Moscow Masque: Embodying dissent in sacred spaces

Formed in 2011 – the ‘year of the protester’ (Time magazine) – Pussy Riot came to international attention with the recording of their performance in Moscow's Cathedral of Christ the Saviour in February 2012, and with their subsequent arrest and trial for hooliganism. The feminist punk protest group choose to hide their faces with brightly covered balaclavas, accompanied with clashing clothes and guitars. The contrasting colours of their masks, with ‘tea-cosy’ bobbles, are in stark contrast to the black balaclavas of other anarchist, neo-Nazi or terrorist groups, and offer only a crude level of anonymity. Significantly, these symbols of solidarity provide a striking visual metonym ripe for copying, adapting and parodying across diverse cultural forms.

In this paper, we argue that the antics of Pussy Riot can be analysed from the perspective of visual protest – it is not the musical aesthetics that stick in the mind, but the nature of the protest as an unruly and disruptive performance, reclaiming public space where the exclusion of women is a defining aspect of its sacrosanct nature. The eccentric and slightly shambolic performance in the altar of the cathedral harnesses the carnivalesque in its humorous and chaotic nature, yet retains its critical and political value.

Our discussion is situated in the recent work on the significance of the physical settings of protest, (especially protest camps) in concert with digital networks (Feigenbaum et al. 2013; Gerbaudo 2012; Khatib 2013), and the history of protest in which dissent is centred on female body and its states of nakedness and clothing (Tyler 2013); with the Femen movement providing a specific contrast.

From Chilean women dancing alone to symbolise their ‘disappeared’ husbands, to Saudi women posting YouTube videos of themselves driving in defiance of the law, the bodily reclamation of public and private spaces, and the circulation of subsequent representations across diverse media platforms, provide opportunities for women to ‘speak back’ to forces of patriarchy, political violence and religious offence in multifarious forms which are not always directly about ‘voice’. Our final contextual concern, then, is the broader relation between aesthetics and politics, influenced by recent developments in visual culture and activism that are starting to bring together analysis of the aesthetic and political realms with a productive emphasis on the practices of mediation, participation and spectatorship (Bishop 2012; McLagan and McKee 2012).

#### References

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Tyler, Imogen (2013) *Revolt Subjects*. London. Zone.

## Participants

Giorgia Aiello is a Lecturer in the Institute of Communications Studies at the University of Leeds and Vice-Chair of the ICA Visual Communication Studies Division. She is a recent recipient of the NCA Visual Communication Division's Outstanding Essay Award. Her publications focus on the nexus of visual communication and globalization in relation to branding, photography, and the urban built environment. She is currently researching the stock photography and branding industries for her EU-funded project "Globalization, Visual Communication, Difference", and is a guest editor of a special issue on "Difference and Globalization" for *Visual Communication* (with Luc Pauwels).

Tina Askanius is a post-doctoral researcher in the Department of Communication and Media at Lund University, Sweden. Her research concerns social movement media practices with a particular focus on contemporary forms of video activism in online environments. She has published several international journal articles and book chapters on the tactics and aesthetic features of visual activism in the context of both radical left and far-right politics today.

Katy Parry is a Lecturer in the Institute of Communications Studies at the University of Leeds. Her research on visual framing during wartime has been published in peer reviewed journals and edited books, and new projects aim to explore how 'frames of war' circulate in public culture, across genres and in both digital and material forms. Other current research interests include the relationship between visibility and political communications, including the powerfully visual forms of rhetoric adopted by protest groups, in addition to the symbolic politics of more traditional political actors.

Steve Presence is a Research Associate and Lecturer in Film at the University of the West of England (UWE), Bristol. His research interests include all aspects of political filmmaking, with a particular focus on oppositional documentary in Britain. He is Digital Editor of the *Journal of Media Practice* and Associate Editor of its practice-as-research periodical, *Screenworks*, and is the Fringe Programme Manager for *Encounters Short Film and Animation Festival*. He co-founded the *Bristol Radical Film Festival* in 2011 the Radical Film Network in 2013.