

An Imagined Dialogue with a Defender of Taking Photos of People

Counter-arguments for those who don't want to contribute to the spectacle of
the end of the world, but to end the world of the spectacle

Anonymous

28 June 2022

Me: Stop filming or I smash your camera.

“But pictures are just raw information. They only show facts.”

The photographic re-transmission of facts depends on the point of view in which the person taking the picture situates themselves, which makes it subjective although it claims objectivity. This claim to objectivity is a lie, not so much because a photograph lies but because it claims to be true. Being a spectator, neutral and exempt from the power relations at play, can only be an illusion, because it is in itself a way of taking sides, although indirectly. In this way, no one taking pictures can be considered outside of the action. They are in it, but on the wrong side: the one that fixes what's in motion, virtualizes what's living, spectacularizes rage and passion, and generally participates in neutralizing the subversive potential of revolt. Among those taking pictures, some are clearly our enemies, because they declare themselves as such (cops, official journalists, video surveillance cameras...). Others claim neutrality and participate in propaganda (in our favor or not), like the more or less independent news agencies. And finally, there are others claiming to be friends or activists involved in documenting struggle, and even some people doing illegal stuff themselves and filming it for a few minutes of virtual glory followed by many hours of very real hardship.

“But pictures are history, they serve the struggle.”

Images of struggles have mostly served to wield authority over people's imagination. From the dawn of photography and before, they have created idols, artificial scenes that resemble what's real. They elicit emotion, empathy or pity for certain subjects, fear or envy for others. In and of themselves, they don't lead to revolt, but at best to indignation. Anti-authoritarian ideas and struggles have often done without images, because they hardly existed or because the means of producing them didn't fit with what the moment required. Today, in a society where control and surveillance is one of the cornerstones of power, we can all recall images of demonstrations. Especially those that directly lead to people spending time behind bars, whether they be comrades or strangers.

“But pictures protect us from police violence. They discourage repression.”

Wasn't George Floyd's murder filmed? Sure, these stories spread in part because of the images, but who's to say they wouldn't have without them? The “buzz” is clearly not in our control. Is that rage and anger due to our experience of oppression and seeing ourselves in the person experiencing it because we've been through the same, or is it because we watched it from behind a screen? And what's the use of these images when the harm is already done, unless you believe in the healing offered by a hypothetical conviction thanks to the use of images, though this involves wasting your money and energy and putting yourself in the hands of one of the quintessential tools of the powerful, the justice system. By filming rather than trying to prevent police violence from happening through action, we're not just letting it happen in the name of some hypothetical future trial: we're repressing all those who might want to act directly against the police to give them a taste of their own medicine. Who would want to resist by hitting back during their arrest if photographers or videographers were filming? Who would try to rescue a friend from the hands of the pigs while being photographed from all angles?

While a few people might be able to use the courts against the police to get off their charges, we all know that most of them will be found guilty. It's an illusion to think that a mere video can change the balance of power in the justice system, which, being an instrument of the powerful, is structurally not in our favor. And those few, couldn't they have defended themselves without the video? What role should we give to images, even in the justice system, and at what cost for all the others who, without wanting to, find themselves in those same images? Is the math less prison time for one, more for another?

“But the picture is beautiful. People are reasonable, they know the risks and mask up. And I've got a technique to avoid causing them trouble.”

And that's exactly the problem. It's nothing more than liberalism to satisfy your need for pleasure and/or propaganda while accepting, or worse still, defending and promoting the presence of cameras, a presence that can only harm those who seek to act differently. Those who didn't think it through before the intensity of a moment of revolt, or even those who are masked, but likely haven't been able to remove all features that are potentially identifying when under the scrutiny of the police. It's freedom without practical consequences or ethical responsibility for your choices. Except in extremely specific cases where a group, for tactical and political reasons, decides to film themselves, taking photos affects everyone involved in actions larger than your own group. There is no correct framing, proper editing or blurring technique, no good moments to film or right way of publishing. There are a thousand and one good reasons, even after having taken all necessary precautions, for someone to not want it known they were there at a certain place and time. These days, where so many people have conditions forbidding participation in demonstrations, where some would like to be more discrete in the eyes of power, where images, along with DNA, are the greatest proofs for determining THE truth, every piece of information counts, in society and in the courtroom alike. That the state will continue through its own means the filthy business of tracking revolt is one thing, it's quite another to create more images of illegal acts yourself. To think you'll be able to outwit the police's techniques for finding third-party images—imagining quickly swallowing your SD card before being arrested, or dreaming of securely erasing all your videos, or playing at being a super-cropper and blurrer of the right moments—is nothing but a dangerous illusion, and one the pigs are counting on.

“But images are everywhere. Our enemies use them, so why pick on us?”

Like every fight we engage in, it might seem doomed from the start. The goal is certainly not to convince a public opinion that doesn't exist, or even just to fix any individual problem. Through their integration into techno-capitalist society, the use and spreading of images has become one of the pillars of domination. That said, even if people don't agree, on this subject and others, we still have the ability to act. We can smash cameras, those of the city-prisons as well as those of journalists or any other intrusive smartphone. We can confront the harm done by those who, rather than contributing to the mayhem, are engaged in its narcissistic or authoritarian presentation (filming others without their consent to make propaganda), even with the best of intentions. These actions could be taken by anyone, as one contribution among others to widening the space for revolt rather than restricting and repressing it.

Me: so then, are you going to put the camera away or am I going to smash it?

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Intended for distribution in demonstrations ;)

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