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Aflame

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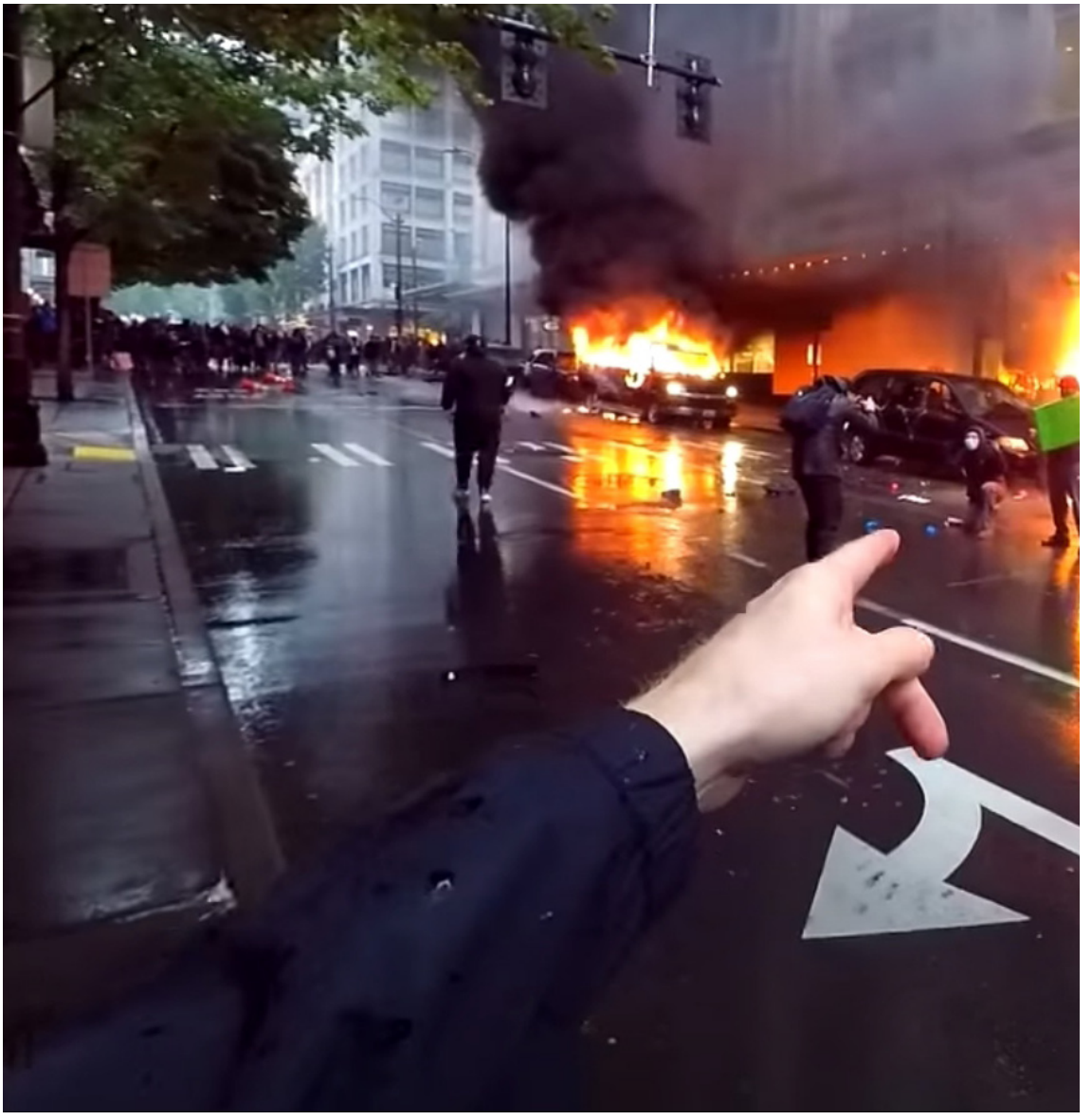

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a cura di / dossier coordonné par / edited by
Alberto Brodesco & Andrea Mubi Brighenti

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EDITORIAL

Fire means passion, but also destruction – and sometimes, even, passion for destruction. Canetti once suggested that fire is a powerful crowd symbol, whose attraction is overpowering: the crowd surrounds itself with fire, in the first place, not to destroy but to grow. However, as the history of urban unrest over the last century attests, cities are set on fire whenever social tensions explode. A little spark suffices, to begin with.

How to explain the paradox of rioters burning down their own neighbourhood? How to account for the dangerous attractiveness of fire? What is it precisely that is carried along by our immemorial fascination for fire? Can fire ever function as an unconscious *phármakon* for urban evils? Political protesters brandish fire to convey their own craving for justice: the fire element here becomes a more hopeful token of the possibility to reunite, warm up, and mobilise against the arrogance of power, which is everywhere the same. Fire can also function as a rally call.

Cities burn to the extent that they are built with suitable, versus unsuitable, materials – where suitable means *flammable*. The history of urban fires mirrors the history of the urban fabric itself. If fire management has represented a key modern development in urban governance, fire-fighter brigades today are called to face new sources of danger deriving from human-induced climate change. With cities becoming hotter and hotter, fires become likelier and likelier. Once we look into an 'elemental' history of cities, their fragility and resilience suddenly come to the foreground in a novel key: cities share the same fragility of the world's atmosphere.

In this issue, we host a number of contributions tacking the manifold, intertwined histories of cities and flames – stories of rage and desolation, of hope and ardour, atmospheric histories of our times. The issue opens from a historian's perspective: David Garrioch summarises the role and effects of fires in premodern European cities, highlighting the logic and the variability of fire prevention measures. If cities have co-evolved with fires, it is to the extent that they were able to regulate jointly building materials and social practices. But, while since the late 18th century modern architecture and the organisation of professional fire-fighting units has dramatically improved preparedness against blazes, Garrioch also notices that, to date, safety from fires remain highly diversified in terms of social class.

The two following contributions explore the political significance of fire. Cathy Lisa Schneider takes a comparative perspective on France and the U.S. as concerns the relations between ethnic minorities and the police, on the one hand, and urban unrest,on the other. In particular, Schneider reminds us, most urban riots start from nonviolent gatherings calling for justice, which are violently repressed. The ideological and operational posture of the police becomes pivotal, given that it is the violent response to emotionally charged popular gatherings that almost always determines the escalation towards full-blown urban rioting and looting.

The symbology of fire – in a very Canettian sense – is at the centre of the contribution by Lara Sartorio Gonçalves and Simone da Silva Ribeiro Gomes. Reporting on a recent wave of protests in a number of Latin-American countries, the authors remark that burning buildings and sculptures seem to almost ritually accompany such acts of protest, especially when strong feelings of injustice are attached to them. Not simply, but the aesthetic of fire also serve a precise strategy of visibility, enabling protesters to somehow break the silence the mainstream media usually reserve to political protests in illiberal and authoritarian contexts.

The historical perspective laid out at the outset of this issue is juxtaposed to the geo-biological perspective proposed by Oleg Koefoed in his

visionary article. Covering the Anthropocenic coexistence of humans, fire and fungi, Oleg synthesises a vision where, once the alliance between humans and fire turns into climate change nightmare, a new entanglement of human lives and fungal existence concurrently materialises – 'Who would have thought that the only thing the Anthropocene called for was a redirecting of that everlasting energy-hungry human urge?' The restless animal finally has a chance to encounter the most patient of creatures, namely fungi . . .

The next pieces depict two specifically dramatic cases of fires in recent urban history. Leonie Tuitjer and Elena Hubner document how the 2019 Australian bush fires have been interpreted by Instagram users trying to make sense of the relation between bushland destruction and the urban existence. Massive urban sprawl, in particular, has put urbanised landscapes in increasing proximity with the bushland, and even further, with the vast arid Outback regions. In such a context of extreme consequences, the authors are interested in capturing the aesthetic sensitivity that is developed in taking and sharing pictures of large fires, where the framing of natural and anthropic items becomes sensitive.

On his turn, Federico Camerin reconstructs the 2017 Grenfell Tower disaster in London (already evoked in Garrioch's piece), when a popular housing high-rise caught fire leaving more than seventy dead and dozens more homeless. Camerin draws attention to the context of real estate speculation in high capitalism, and especially the London market, as one key dynamic to understand the roots of the horrible blaze. He argues that the terrible visibility of the fire should not blind us from looking deeper into the economic and political causes that made it possible, in a mixture of neglect, resource disinvestment, and neoliberal policies targeting the lower classes.

The final piece is written by one of the two issue editors. Alberto Brodesco advances an interpretation of the Youtube video *Riot Holiday* by the anonymous videomaker Vagrant Holiday, whose still frames accompany this journal issue (and whom we wish to thank for the kind permission to reproduce). Deepening the paradox of the observer 'watching a riot,' Alberto raises the question concerning the unattainable neutral and non-participant gaze, that challenges us all as spectators of horrible fires and urban destruction. Taking vs non-taking part, and condemning vs condoning, converge in an uneasy zone of indistinction. Evoking the finale of Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* (1989), Alberto ponders the impossible equation of injustice and destruction. Although the latter can never redress the former, one is also reminded of the ominous quote from Ladj Ly's *Les Misérables* (2019): *Vous n'éviterez pas la colère et les cris* . . .

AB, AMB

Fire in premodern European cities

David Garrioch

Urban fire, like bushfire, has a complicated history. Contrary to a widespread perception, fire disasters were relatively rare in early modern European cities, although small fires were common. Premodern people used fire every day for cooking, lighting, and heating, and were perfectly capable of understanding its nature and how to prevent it spreading. Accidents did happen, but the real problem was that fire ecologies have changed over time. Urban growth, new forms of building, shifting climatic conditions, hazardous industries, and new ways of using fire were all key factors in changing the nature and risk of urban fire. Governments were often slow in responding to new risks, and taxpayers were reluctant to fund costly fire prevention.

David Garrioch is Emeritus Professor of History at Monash University (Australia). His research interests include urban social history, in particular the relationship between space and social relationships. This article draws on his current work on the fire history of European cities.

David.Garrioch@monash.edu

The nature of urban fire

Until relatively recent times, cities were built of the same materials that were found in the surrounding environment: mainly wood, but often also straw and turf for roofs. The houses therefore burned in the same way as woodland (Pyne 1997). Ancient Rome was largely built of wood and of wattle and daub, so when it burned, as much of it did in 64 AD, the flames, driven by strong winds, raced through its multi-storey tenements exactly like wildfire through a forest (Canter 1932). When much of the centre of London burned in 1666, the fire spread easily among densely-packed wooden-framed, shingle-roofed houses, embers flying into the overheated air and setting spot fires ahead of the fire front, precisely as happens in bushfires. In both cases, stores of oil, grain, wood, and other flammable goods provided further fuel (Garrioch 2016).

Urban fire obeyed the seasons, just as forest fire did. Summer was typically the most dangerous time, the combination of hot and dry conditions favouring combustion. In Stockholm, Moscow, or Vienna, most fires occurred in the warmer months of the year. By contrast, London or Paris, where rain fell across the entire year, fires occurred all year round. Nevertheless, climatic variation affected all cities, just as it influenced the incidence of woodland fire. Climate historians have shown that the Little Ice Age (which peaked in the seventeenth century) produced lower average temperatures overall, but was characterised by 'anomalies', extreme weather events that defied the general trend (Frenzel et al., 1994). This was precisely the period when European cities experienced the largest numbers of disastrous fires. The summer of 1666 was exceptionally dry and hot, and in London, six weeks without rain contributed significantly to the Great Fire (Zwierlein 2011). A similar pattern of anomalies has emerged in the context of recent global warning, which has produced not only unusually hot summers, but also powerful snowstorms and extreme cold spells.

It might seem, then, that fire was a natural phenomenon, that humans could do little to control. Yet the built environment was a human creation, and most fires in early modern towns – just like

those today – resulted from human misjudgments. The historical record is full of examples of candles knocked over or left too close to a straw mattress, of vats of oil allowed to boil over, of hearths left untended. A terrible fire in the English town of Warwick in 1694 began when someone coming home late at night allowed their flaming torch to set a thatched roof alight (Borsay 2002). Other fires were caused by poorly built chimneys and stoves. City people and governments were well aware of all these dangers. Yet once a fire took hold, early modern people had few options. As in today's huge bushfires, they could try to create firebreaks in the path of the flames, put out spotfires, and hose down buildings as yet untouched. Otherwise, all they could do was to evacuate people and moveable goods, and pray for rain or for the wind to drop. The crucial thing, then as now, was to stop the fire from starting in the first place, or from spreading if it did.

Prevention and firefighting were everyone's business, since even a small fire, if it spread, might burn the entire city

Fire prevention

Almost as far back as written records exist, cities took preventive measures against fire. In the late Middle Ages, blazes led urban authorities to mandate the use of fire-retardant materials. The 1212 regulations in London, for example, required houses to be fire-proofed by covering thatched roofs and internal wooden walls with plaster. Thatch was banned on new houses, and walls shared by adjoining buildings were to be constructed of stone. Bakers and brewers, who made extensive use of fire, were prohibited from working after sunset. A night watch was put in place, and all householders were ordered to keep a tub of water ready to hand (Keene 1999). These measures were apparently effective, since London experienced no large fires for over 400 years. Many towns banned dangerous activities like lime-burning and brewing from the city centre, and in seventeenth-century Vienna even bakers were progressively moved to the suburbs (Czeike 1962). People were also well aware that it was risky to store large quantities of flammable substances. The Paris police tried to restrict the availability of gunpowder, and even shops were banned from keeping more than a small quantity.

At the same time, city authorities attempted to regulate people's behaviour. In many places, someone who caused a fire was required to pay for property destroyed. As governments became more bureaucratic and populations more literate, fire regulations became more detailed. Across the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, city authorities engaged in veritable public awareness campaigns, attempting to alert people to the dangers of smoking in stables, of letting wood-shavings accumulate in workshops, or of strewing straw on the floor (Garrioch 2019). Many towns instituted a fire watch. This was often one of the duties of citizen militias, composed of householders and responsible for public order. Other places employed paid watchmen, especially for night patrols, and many towns placed observers in one or more of the church towers. When a fire was spotted, or when someone raised the alarm, the watchmen would ring the bells to warn the population. As soon as the alarm bell went, people came running. In most places, building workers were required to attend fires, because they were used to climbing on buildings and could demolish them if necessary. Trades that used waggons and barrels were often required to transport water.

In normal times, these measures were quite effective. The problem was that they were reactive, imposed after a big blaze, but then allowed to lapse. If no fire had taken place for a long time, municipalities and taxpayers were reluctant to spend money on equipment and precautions that no longer seemed necessary. This is still, of course, a major problem today: the best fire regulations are useless unless they are enforced, and they need to be forward-looking, anticipating new dangers.

Fighting fires

Urban fire, like epidemic disease, was a threat to the entire population. Prevention and firefighting

were everyone's business, since even a small fire, if it spread, might burn the entire city. As soon as the cry of "Fire!" went up, or the alarm bell rang, the neighbours would come running, and the vast majority of fires were doused before they took hold. Even in the nineteenth century, when many cities had professional fire brigades, neighbours and passers-by continued to do much of the work of fetching water and often battled the flames alongside the firemen.

One of the earliest places with specialised firefighters was Venice. Workers at the Arsenal, who made ships and produced guns, and therefore used fire in their everyday work, became experts in extinguishing fires. The first fire brigades, in most cities, were created to work the new fire pumps, invented in the sixteenth century, and that became increasingly complex to operate. Buildings in Europe's major cities became steadily taller, because of population pressures, and firemen became experts in evacuating people, assisted by the invention, in the 1700s, of extension ladders and protective clothing. With the industrial era came large factories and fires fuelled by chemical products, so specialized firefighters became essential (Garrioch 2019). In this sense, fire brigades were a response to a new set of problems, rather than to the eternal risk of urban fire.

Arson and scapegoats

The nature of the premodern urban environment also made arson an unusual crime. It was used mainly in the countryside, where burning a haystack or a farmhouse was an easy way of settling a grudge, but in the city, it risked spreading and destroying the whole neighbourhood. Fire was widely used as a form of urban protest, but in the open space of the streets, where angry crowds would burn an unpopular figure – a government minister, Guy Fawkes, or a foreign ruler – in effigy, imitating the ritual of criminal executions. They might also attack the house of a prominent citizen, throw the furniture out the window, and set it alight in the courtyard. Only very occasionally were houses fired, for example during the Gordon Riots in London in 1780. Paradoxically, the spread of fireproof building materials and the power of modern firefighting methods made setting buildings on fire a more common form of urban protest.

Despite its rarity, many fires were attributed to arson. A huge explosion and fire in Paris in 1563 was blamed on the English, while the Great Fire of London was rumoured, in its immediate aftermath, to have been lit by Catholics or Quakers. German-speakers were arrested after a bad fire in the French town of Troyes, in 1524. At other times, soldiers, vagrants, Jews, became scapegoats, and there is rarely any evidence to support such accusations. Like the perception that fires were a divine punishment for the sins of the city, they tell us more about people's beliefs, fears, and prejudices than they do about actual fires (Roberts 1997). An even more common form of scapegoating was blaming accidental fires on servants, apprentices, or on careless women.

Modern urban fires

Since the late eighteenth century, patterns of fire in modern European cities have changed dramatically. Increasing use of fireproof materials, first brick, then iron and glass, has combined with improved firefighting to limit the spread of flames. One of the last conflagrations to burn entire neighbourhoods, outside wartime, occurred in Hamburg in 1842, when fire destroyed some 1700 wooden houses and warehouses full of flammable goods. Since then, this type of fire has become rare in Europe, replaced by large blazes in single buildings, which have often been more deadly. In earlier centuries, the largest constructions were churches and palaces, but the nineteenth and twentieth centuries saw the proliferation of larger structures that met the demands of the industrial age. The cotton factories of Manchester burned repeatedly in the early nineteenth century (Ewen 2010), and mass entertainments produced new risks: Vienna's largest theatre burned in 1881, leaving over 600 dead, either trampled or burned. In 1897, a fire in a Paris department store, the Bazar de la Charité, killed over 100 people. Such buildings were larger than those of earlier periods, except for cathedrals,

and these fires behaved differently from the old, multi-house ones. Industrial warehouses, theatres, and department stores were full of highly flammable materials, and their open spaces and stair wells drew the flames rapidly upwards. These fires often had high death tolls because people were trapped inside (Garrioch 2019).

Industrial fires also created new dangers. Acids began to be widely used in manufacturing in the late eighteenth century, and by the middle decades of the nineteenth, many cities were lit by gas. The risk of explosion was high and the consequences devastating: when London's Nine Elms gasworks exploded in 1865, a huge area of the South bank was flattened. Noxious fumes could be released by fires in chemical plants, so breathing equipment was vital for firefighters.

Social differentiation

Fire has always affected the poor more than the rich, because cheap housing burned far more readily. Yet the development of industrial class societies, in the nineteenth century, brought an important change, since it was accompanied by growing separation of rich and poor within cities, partly because of industrial smells and risks. Whereas in early modern towns, rich and poor usually lived in such close proximity, residential segregation created distinct wealthy and poor areas. The former had high quality buildings, often with gardens that prevented fires from spreading, while poor areas were crowded, the buildings often sub-standard, and the fire risk much higher. This was already apparent in late eighteenth-century London, where fires repeatedly swept through the areas near the busy ports, where cheap housing adjoined warehouses and factories (Garrioch 2016). That fire ecology continues, mainly outside Europe, in shantytowns on the fringes of many of the world's mega-cities, such as the favelas of São Paolo.

Today's European cities no longer experience the same population pressures, and most are better regulated. Yet poor housing remains particularly vulnerable to fire and preventive measures are often neglected. This is clear from the Grenfell Tower disaster in London in 2017, where more than 70 people died after flammable cladding on the 24-storey apartment building spread the fire rapidly to the upper floors. In Paris in 2005, 49 people, mostly African immigrants, died in fires in below-standard housing (Barling 2019; Serafini 2011). Urban fire and its management continue to be socially differentiated.

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By nightfall, the city was in flames

Cathy Lisa Schneider

On May 26, 2020 Minneapolis police brutally murdered George Floyd, Officer Derek Chavin dug his knee into Floyd's throat as he struggled for air, and looked defiantly at the neighborhood residents begging him to stop. Nonviolent protestor ensued, but by nightfall, the city was in flames. Other cities followed. Within a week over 2,000 cities were scenes of mass protest, vandalism, arson or looting. Protestors in sixty countries marched in sympathy, some in protest against their own violent police force and the killing of their own racially stigmatized citizens.

In Kentucky, protestors mourned George Floyd but also Breonna Taylor, who had been shot in front of her home when police raided the wrong house the past March. In Georgia, residents mourned George Floyd, but also Ahmaud Marquez Arbery, murdered by off duty white nationalist police officers while jogging in February 2020. The next week, protestors were mourning the death of Rayshard Brooks, drunk and sleeping it off in his car in June. In Los Angeles, residents grieved the deaths of 29-year-old Dijon Kizzee, 38-year-old Jarrid Wayne Hurst, 39-year-old white man Robert Melton Colvin and Michael Thomas, a 61-year-old grandfather. In Dallas, Amber Guyger, residents were still aching for Botham Jean, fatally shot in his own home, when a drunk off duty policewoman entered the wrong home and thought he was an intruder, in September 2018, with the trial held October 2019. The accumulation of so many killings and police impunity added fuel to the fires. So did the tens of thousands of deaths in black, Latino and Native American communities, the collapse of 40 percent of Black, Asian and Latino small businesses, and the derogatory comments and deadly policies put in place by the white nationalist confederacy supporting President Donald Trump.

In much the way Nicolas Sarkozy once nationalized riots that erupted in the Parisian suburb of Clichy-sous-Bois, when he accused the dead boys of being criminals (they were loved in their community, one a straight A student, the other a local football champion) and defended the police, as having done nothing wrong. As a community organizer explained, the flames consumed 300 immigrant suburbs for three consecutive weeks in November 2005: "Some kids in pain cut themselves. These kids, instead of cutting themselves, set things on fire. It was like getting rid of all this pain inside and throwing it outside. It was like they were externalizing their internal explosions."

Unlike the French police, who pulled back to a less provocative distance, American police responded to the protests against police violence with more violence, encouraged by the President. In Buffalo, officers shoved a 75-year-old man to the ground, causing him to hit his head on the sidewalk. He was taken to a hospital with a serious head injury. In Huntsville, Ala., police fired so many rounds of rubber bullets and tear gas at chanting protesters that one reporter called it a war zone. In Louisville, police shot pepper balls at a journalist on live TV; in Washington, D.C., U.S. Park Police used their shields to beat journalists as officials cleared Lafayette Square before President Trump's photo op there

Cathy Lisa Schneider is Professor in the School of International Service, at American University. She is the author of *Police Power and Race Riots: Urban Unrest in Paris and New York* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014); *Shantytown Protest in Pinochet's Chile* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995); and *Collective Violence, Contentious Politics and Social Change: A Charles Tilly Reader*, co-edited with Ernesto Castaneda (Routledge, 2017) and assorted articles on repression, resistance and urban social movements. She holds a PhD from Cornell University.

schneider.cathy@american.edu

Monday.

Trump's rhetoric even managed to provoke uprisings in New York, a city that had not seen city-wide riots since the 1977 blackouts, and which had only seen one police killing of an unarmed person since 2016, the result of a successful action by the Justice Committee and a group of mothers of young people killed by police (including Gwen Carr, the mother of Eric Garner, choked to death in July 2014) who put cardboard coffins in front of the governor's office and convinced him to appoint a state-wide special prosecutor for every case in New York state where police killed someone unarmed.

But in 2020, feeling both goaded and protected by the Trump administration, white nationalist police aggressively attacked both protestors and ordinary citizens. Rayne Valentine, for instance, was jumped by a group of police officers, as he left work at the hospital. They pounded him with their batons, leaving him, bleeding and bruised with a cracked skull. Emergency room doctors at his hospital put seven staples in his head. The city became a free-for-all, Gina Arias, of the Justice Committee in New York, told me.

While police brutalized protesters and journalists, however, they failed to protect other parts of New York from arson, looting and vandalism. High-end shopping districts in Manhattan suffered widespread damage and theft, as young people walked down the streets with luxury merchandise in their arms. The scene was similar in Chicago, where marauding gangs terrorized neighborhoods at night, while police pepper-sprayed peaceful protesters in the face, including one of my undergraduate students. In Minneapolis, families peaceably assembled on a closed highway were forced to flee a truck that drove into the area. As police headed to the scene, they pepper-sprayed protestors they passed.

No feature of a racially divided society installs the message of subjugation more forcefully than police. Allene Person told me she became so depressed that her legs wouldn't function after police killed her son in January 2007 in the Bronx. Nicholas Heyward was kept awake by guilt: If only he had taken his son with him, the police officer would not have shot the 13-year-old, Nicholas Heyward Jr., while he was playing with his friends on the stairs of their apartment building in Brooklyn. Both parents died prematurely. A Boston University School of Health/University of Pennsylvania study found that in neighborhoods where there were higher rates of unarmed African Americans killed, residents had higher rates of depression and premature deaths.[1]

Cori Bush, elected to congress in 2020, told me that after Michael Brown was killed in Ferguson, Mo, in 2014, that she was astonished to see tanks in the street. "My god, I thought, a regular army. It was unbelievable to me that this was not only happening in America to American citizens, but that it was happening to supposedly save other American citizens, in light of a tragedy that should never have happened. The rights that are supposed to protect us were working against us. We said to the police 'Who do you protect, who do you serve?'"

In *Police Power and Race Riots*,[2] I argued that most uprisings start as nonviolent gatherings and pleas for justice by families, friends, and neighbors of the victims. Nonviolent calls for justice are more likely to turn to riots when they are met by brutal police. I traced the process from political campaigns that play to racial fears, through to racial profiling and police killings, to explosions of residents in poor and disadvantaged communities:

1. Politicians in tight races attempt to appeal to a detachable section of the electorate by playing to racial fears.

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1 Jacob Bor, Atheendar S Venkataramani, David R Williams, Alexander C Tsai, "Police killings and their spillover effects on the mental health of black Americans: a population-based, quasi-experimental study," *The Lancet* 392, July 28, 2018.
2 Cathy Lisa Schneider. 2014. *Police Power and Race Riots: Urban Unrest in Paris and New York*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

2. The political scramble to avoid being out-segued on the crime issue leads major political actors to engage in increasingly harsh law-and-order public discourse.
3. Increased political attention to crime leads to spikes in sensationalist and racially distorted media coverage.
4. Politicians favoring harsh policing measures are elected and pass harsh punitive crime and/or anti-immigrant laws.
5. Police interpret such signals to mean they are immune from prosecution when interacting with members of subjugated groups.
6. There is a dramatic increase in levels of police brutality in stigmatized minority neighborhoods, leading inexorably to a particularly egregious act of violence—usually the killing of an unarmed resident.

The accumulation of so many killings and police impunity added fuel to the fire

7. The state is unwilling to hold the police officers accountable or, worse, takes the side of the police officers against the victim.
8. Lacking other options (such as established institutions to address police violence, strong social movement or community-based organizations, with a repertoire of successful nonviolent protest), communities are consumed by fire.
9. As knowledge of or rumors about events spread, riots diffuse to surrounding neighborhoods, then to cities and towns with similar conditions, particularly those where affected minorities constitute the majority of residents. National-level incidents (such as the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr.) and officeholders provoke more rapid riot diffusion than neighborhood-level events or officeholders.

My book focused on Rudolph Giuliani in New York and Nicolas Sarkozy in France, both of whom constantly played to racial fears and used the police to promote themselves as protectors of white citizens. Sarkozy nationalized the 2005 uprisings in France, as he was head of the national police. Giuliani was only in charge of the New York police, and since policing in the United States is local, uprisings were local, and when they crisscrossed the country in the 1960s, they did so in a staggered pattern, spreading locally first and then jumping to other cities where a similar process had occurred. In contrast, in France the flames spread quickly throughout the country.

Donald Trump in 2020 made the United States resemble France, in the rapid spread of protests and of violence assaults on property. He did this by both encouraging white nationalist and sadistic police and in increasing the suffering and violence experienced in poor black, Latino and Native American areas. But the events of January 6, 2021 in the US Capitol Building, while congress was certifying Joseph Biden's election, revealed the acute schisms within the nation's police forces. Black and other police officers defending democracy and the elected government were assaulted and some killed by other police officers, some local and some off-duty arriving from other cities. Black officers in DC pointed out that they had warned for years of the growth of white nationalism and racism within the police force.[3]

We now stand at the precipice in the United States. We either seriously reform the police and purge it of bigots and sadists, protecting those officers who come from and want to protect and serve more

3 Joshua Kaplan and Joaquin Sapien, "No One Took Us Seriously": Black Cops Warned About Racist Capitol Police Officers for Years," *Pro Publica*. January 14, 2020. https://www.propublica.org/article/no-one-took-us-seriously-black-cops-warned-about-racist-capitol-police-officers-for-years

disadvantaged communities, or we risk losing our democracy. Racially targeted police violence inflicts an ugly wound: it undermines the legitimacy of the state and sends the message that the lives of some of its citizens are not valued. As the Federal Communications Commissioner Nicholas Johnson noted of the 1968 riots in Washington, DC, "A riot is somebody talking. A riot is a man crying out, 'Listen to me mister. There's something I've been trying to tell you and you are not listening.'" In the 1968 National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, more commonly known as the Kerner Commission Report, investigators found that those who had participated in the riots listed police violence as their number one complaint. Now, more than 45 years later, too little has changed.

From sparks to fire

The permanent aesthetics in Latin-American protests

Lara Sartorio Gonçalves & Simone da Silva Ribeiro Gomes

It is December 2020 and, after months of lockdown and restrictions, the Covid-19 pandemics has slowed down, but not stopped, the global protests.[1] In recent months, Guatemala, Chile, Colombia and other Latin-American countries have taken part in a growing wave of protests met with harsh governmental repression and the criminalisation of activists. According to a regular script, protests are depicted as starting 'largely peaceful, before taking a violent turn.' Here, we discuss what happens when flaming objects are taken as symbols of such a 'violent turn.'

We focus on our magnetic draw to fire in protests. Humans have been using fire for over 400,000 years, and our ability to control it is linked to our ability to evolve as a species, using it to cook, forge tools, and keep warm (Wrangham, 2009). Among many things, fire includes passion, desire, rebirth, resurrection, eternity, destruction, hope and purification. The fire's ability to nourish, protect, as well as cause harm and kill has been extensively researched. It is not unusual that fire is associated with riots, in witness statements, pictures and videos. Historically, social movements have experimented with violence, as illustrated by the suffragettes in 1918. Whilst their traditional image depicts empowered young women, holding placards, determined to win the right to vote, they have also taken part in numerous acts of violence, such as explosions and bombs prior to winning voting rights[2].

The images of burning buildings, stores and public sculptures seem to fascinate humans. Burning objects immediately shape the perception of protests in mass and social media. There is also a dissociation of the crowd. Fear, panic, despair, fascination and desire are some of the emotions aroused. Looking for safety and physical integrity, individuality comes first and, as a result, others become immediate strangers. Alterity is rejected. In that sense, the aesthetics of fire itself emotionally mobilizes people.

The recent mobilizations in Chile on 18 October 2020, that culminated in the burning of two churches, are an example. The date marked the first anniversary of the inflamed protests in Santiago that led to the recent referendum for a new Constitution. In reaction to the over 30 deaths and 600 injured people previously caused by the police, a massive protest was called to demand radical police reform and justice for the victims. The protest ended up with two churches, which were seen as connected to the *carabineros* (police agents), being burnt down. Hundreds of protesters have been arrested. For at least two months, in Chile almost daily protests against neoliberal policies had been carried out. Similarly, in late November 2020 protests in the capital city of Guatemala to demonstrate against the government Covid-19 relief budget ended with activists setting fire to the Congress build-

Lara is Phd Candidate in Sociology by Social and Political Studies Institute (IESP), of State University of Rio de Janeiro (UERJ), and Researcher at Nucleus of Studies in Social Theory and Latin America (NETSAL-IESP). Her research interests include Social Theory, Violence, Policy of Fear, Social Movements, Urban Studies.

larasartorio@hotmail.com

Simone is an assistant professor of Social Sciences at Universidade Federal de Pelotas (UFPel) and at the Pos Graduate Programme of Sociology at UFPel in Pelotas, Rio Grande do Sul. Her research interests include social movements, riots and narcotrafficking.

1 *Acknowledgement*. The author's names are in alphabetical order. The text was equally written by both authors.
2 https://www.bl.uk/votes-for-women/articles/suffragettes-violence-and-militancy

ing. In 2017, riots against a possible re-election of the president – framed as a *coup* - also occurred in Asunción, Paraguay, ending up with protesters setting fire to the Congress building.

One wonders what these fire represented: a revenge against government policies? An effective way to bring down symbols of oppression and privilege? A vivid portrait of the victory of protesters' claims? Fire makes the demands made to the State more cogent. Pyromania is not an end in itself, but a ritual with communicative and mobilizing potential. Direct action has been recurrent in riots throughout the XX and XXI centuries as a tactic enacted by those who have been brutalised by the State in the first place, and who resort to a reaction outside of bureaucracy and welfare institutions. Fire, as a symbol of a decaying world, is also performative politics.

The idea that everything must be burnt down in order to start a new world is not new, but the act of burning is emblematic of contemporary struggles

In line with other thoughtful analysis that takes into account the ongoing protests in Latin America (Okuneva, 2020), one thing is sure: protests have their consistent trans-historical aesthetics. The media silence about the riots currently going on in Chile and Guatemala, for example, could only be broken by the images of burning churches and the Congress set on fire. Those images are very powerful and effective in themselves. If buildings are burning, then people are fed up, the government should cooperate, and demands from the minorities will be finally heard – so the activists think.

But this is not always how protests seem to operate. Literature on protests consider them as key functions of democracy, an expression of ideals and principles that necessarily challenges dominant orthodoxies. In the past, the civil rights movement went through multiple major tactical innovations, from bus boycotts to sit-ins to freedom-rides to community-wide protest campaigns (Tufecki, 2017). In the last decade, they have appealed more to performative actions (Butler, 2015). This form of struggle is broadly related to political protests that emerged following the economic and financial crisis of 2008. Those reactions occur when people assemble to react against inequality, injustice, exclusion and other precarities. The aesthetics of protests include humour, graffiti, slogan, art, symbols, gestures, colours and other elements apt to be digitally shared across social culture, both performative and communicative (McGarry, Erhart, Eslen-Ziya, 2019).

What follows protests also matters. It is not unusual that lootings take place, sometimes considered repertoires of contention, mainly because of their relation to other movements of a specific struggle. Rudé (1959) and Thompson (2016) documented riots in Europe from the XVIII to XX century, confirming that lootings, depredations and incendiary practices were common. In Brazil, although historically disputed among members of the left (Gorender, 1987), since the 1930s direct action appeared spontaneously as a form of struggle with intense repercussion. Looting can reveal the reality of a specific historical moment, bringing to light the contradictions, conflicts and tensions in the political, economic and social spheres.

Accordingly, the literature on riots (Briggs, 2012, Ferreira, 2009, Bowden, 2014, Abt, 2019, Abu-Lughod, 2006) points out that the burning objects and buildings have invariably provoked curfews, police backlash and (un)justified repression. The idea that everything must be burnt down in order to start a new world is not new, but the act of burning is emblematic of contemporary struggles. We highlight a certain pyromania that is an important part of contemporary riots – also on account of their imageal potential. Fire then exerts a fascination over a wide political *continuum*: right-wing groups search for incrimination as soon as they see the flames, left-wing activists celebrate what they consider to be a victory. One hypothesis is that fire is a stable condition amongst the changing patterns of protest. As if the Revolution was coming, the interpretation of social movements after things

are set on fire is that the present repeats the past: people have had enough.

Both revenge and fatigue are some of the social fuels of the past century in Latin America; but the success, and very likely the repression, of riots comes after the burning of objects. What the handy resource of fire in protests does not allow to pass unscathed are the insistent actions and voices of rioters, which Thompson (2016) once called 'hunger rioters.' It also finds its way into the mass media, since it becomes impossible for state agents not to take a stand, hand in hand with the increase in repression. The only variation at that point concerns the degree of repression to be employed.

Latin America is – permanently – on fire

The pandemic scenario has propelled us into the radicality of the moment we are living: the apocalypse seems nothing else than our everyday life. The survival regime to which the vast majority of the world population is condemned implies experiencing life in its suspension, waiting for death. It is no coincidence then that images associated with insurrections affect us in red and heat. Fire. The moment when the burning present makes us face fear, the panic of losing what we have that is so little, is also seductive. Just as heat is agitation, so fire can function as an extension of creative acts: as transformation.

Hellfire plays a role in constituted memory. When calling on divine notions, we find ourselves in a world divided between good and evil – a Manichaeism appropriate to (permanent) war contexts. In an unreasonable way, activists have been increasingly identified with terrorists. Following the example of the United States, most countries have approved anti-terrorism laws in the last few years that frames political collectives, organizations, movements and protesters as near-terrorists. The aesthetics of fire plays a seductive role for this discourse in the face of a political imagery repeatedly accustomed to the association between fire and terror. Representing the political violence from the oppressed through a *policy of fear* (Sartorio, 2018) has created fertile ground for authoritarianism, social control and increasing population surveillance.

Fire and fear are intimately linked also when it comes to producing perceptions of the other: the fire image, with its extraordinary communicative power, casts phenomena as the expression of their truth. When we have the images of fire during protests, for example, there is a radicalism immediately expressed by it: protesters are not only a threat, but truly dangerous. The spectacle of fire thus seems to add a dimension to the power of protest, although this is frequently a deception capable of justifying disproportionate State repression.

Performative actions in protests can be seen as a simulation of radicalism. Gurgel (2015) defined similar actions as 'ephemeral political actions, concentrated in the present time, with extraordinary use of space and simulating radicality'. A continuity in Latin-American protests can also be found in not knowing what to do after the ephemeral fire scene: the challenge remains to find out how to step off the simulation, and make the sparks become a large-scale blaze.

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Fungal Fire

A brief account of certain mycohumanoid events

Oleg Koefoed

The urban areas seem to be the best testing ground in studying fungal expansion because the most documented cases of a rapid transmission of phytopathogenic fungi takes place when a fungus or its host is an exotic species, and they have not coevolved. Because of an insufficient number of findings from certain types of habitats, e.g. areas subjected to increased human impact, the discussion on the expansion, invasion and hemerophoby of many taxa of parasitic fungi is still frequently omitted in relevant literature.
(Ruszkiewicz-Michalska, 2008)

If the greenhouse technology grows to become the physical and metaphorical enframing to the past and future of natural history and of natural science, then its deposition may display alternative procedures for remembering-to-forget … for remediating – as healings and transitions – away from the messianic destiny of Global Warming.
(Barrios-Negrón, 2020)

Oleg Koefoed is an Action-Philosopher, PhD, co-founder of Growing Pathways, based in Copenhagen, author of numerous articles and upcoming book: *ALL OVER - a daily practice base for Re-membering Life in an entangled Anthropocene future* (2021). He articulates these ideas through projects, partnerships, and learning programmes in Copenhagen, Denmark, and beyond.

oleg@growing-pathways.com

On the surface, humans were lighting a fire. They burned out of fear, out of rage, some even started to burn out of impatience: let the fire begin, let's burn it all down since we are going that way anyway, they murmur as they gather around buildings about to be finished, letting the flames do the work that a thousand hands would need months to handle. It is so much faster to burn than to dismantle. The purification of fire, the glow and attraction. The feeling of being together, around the fire.

Then something happened.

Kindling the fire

> Global fires were estimated to have released 8.1 Peta grams of CO2-equivalents per year between 1997-2016 or about 23% of global fossil fuel CO2 emissions in 2014. As we move beyond the natural fire regime of many ecosystems, we do not yet fully understand how these systems will evolve and thus how best to manage them. (Future Earth, 2020)

For millions of years, the fire had been a place to gather. Then the gathering happened around fires that no longer functioned to keep the humans warm, but to warm their hearts in times where hearts grew timid and anxious, and minds wandered and got lost in time. The fires attracted the humans once again, igniting their attention. They felt the heat and they knew, time had come, it would be time soon to choose between throwing yourself in the flames or just watching, longing for reconstruction at a different pace, a different *taste*.

The flames live their own lives. They do not read the NO TRESPASS signs. The flames are going for the material. Wood is good, wood burns so crisply. Plastic is less attractive, but it burns with an inertia that has its own buzz. The pyro-polystyrene colours are so vivid, and the smoke brings its own announcement of times going down, of a civilisation that brought itself to its highest peak without noticing how the same materials that were so moldable in building, were the very same that, when they burn, fill the air with the toxicity of a smoke that kills.

So they built the domes.

When disease struck in the area, citizens could scuffle into the safe zone of the city walls, and fire could be lit to protect the ones inside from the dangers outside

Long before, the cities had been built with walls. Walls marking the border between the zones that could be protected by the local sovereign or guild. When disease struck in the area, citizens could scuffle into the safe zone of the city walls, and fire could be lit to protect the ones inside from the dangers outside. They *burned* the carriers of disease if they could. If the efforts failed, the dead were there to be burnt, offering a cleansing, sacrificial act of letting go of the dark, deep threat from the outside.

What was left to hope for, let them light their own fires, why would the sovereign protect them if they came for themselves, they could die for themselves, they could feel the last whoosh.

Then came the era of the grey, networked, splintered city. The *urbs* whose interest lays in growing, in attracting anyone willing to be sucked into the machinery of the city. The fire was no longer needed to keep the intruders outside – instead, the sprawl of *favelas* and *banlieues* was erected to offer a burning zone. The worst disease for this city of industry was an aesthetic disease: the tragedy of being ugly, cold, and insulated. This city stifled all life, including the human communities.

Humans had lost the edge, they said. Their spark had died, and all they could come up with was a dream of going to Mars or even further, a future in pleasure domes, where the no longer working humans could linger, serviced by robotic creatures intuiting every wildest dream the human might have. Except, of course, for the fire dream.

Who wanted the fire those days? With the growth of the water element, fire became *the* enemy. Pictures of fires as the worst threat on the planet, next to the rising sea levels. Water, fire, the dangerous ones. Mud all over and burning soils, the worst nightmares they could dream of.

But the humans had succeeded, finally, in taming the fire, getting it under control, like the water. They learned to be kinder, to care for the elements, to follow the flow of the water, and to catch the fire when it lit and drew out its energy. Paradoxically, the energy from fires igniting across the planet due to global temperatures rising became one of the most important sources of alternative energy. Or rather, really classic, old-school energy. And no one needed to kindle that fire, except for just going on, doing things like they had for centuries. Human life cultivating fire, praying for the benediction of the ember.

Same story for the rising water levels: with higher tides and wilder floods, so much energy was being produced. So much power. All they had to do was go out there and catch it, love it, no need to urge it, just set up the new wave-power-generators, and cities were lit, robots were fueled, self-driving cars and drones were all worked up. Who would have thought that the only thing the Anthropocene called for was a redirecting of that everlasting energy-hungry human *urge*?

But under the perfectly sealed domes, something was simmering. Something lost down the line. The

more humans stopped needing to use their bodies to work, the more they learned to find comfort in pleasure. 'Work' changed its meaning altogether and became, once again, a term for the movement of robotniks. In the meantime, human minds couldn't stop churning for new ways, new directions. Now what? Where was the goal in the future that they could pursue?

They couldn't let go of the longing, like it was growing from within.

How could pleasure be more pleasurable? How could perfect bodies be more beautiful, more perfect, more adapted to a life in the perfect dome?

From somewhere in this dream state, the cracks started to appear. Not in the walls. They were made of proof-tested titanium-glass amalgamate, impenetrable and invulnerable. The cracks came from the inside. From border zones inside the bodies. As some of the humans started to go a little bit further into experimenting with the mindblowing capacity of fungi, a whole new web of mycology grew.

The dream of the mycorg emerged like it came out of nowhere.

Every day, it became a little clearer, and at the same time, a little more foggy, entangled, blurry. The path was so obvious, but it was the way that the path seemed to think itself that was behaving strangely. Like ideas were going their own ways, and the humans couldn't find ways to catch them, hold on to them, identify them and purify them out of their webs of life.

Below the fire, the fungi

> There's a study that came out quite recently which analysed the tooth plaque enamel of some Neanderthal skeletons . . . So fungi use in medicine stretches along way back. As a fire starter, as a way to hold fire, a kind of tinder and a coal holding material, a way to transport fire, played a very important part as well. And as psychedelics in some cultures in middle America, the use of psilocybin containing mushrooms as a sacrament, as a cultural tool of experiencing . . . there's a long entanglement of human lives and fungal lives. It's not going to stop either. (Sheldrake in Barrett 2020)

From below, from the sides, from the edges, the fungi move. Slowly, if compared to so many other creatures. Take ants, or leopards, so renowned for their moving skills. When it comes to fungi moves, it's all much more about meticulous, meandering, *mycolicious*. The moves of fungi serve. Every movement weaves the patterns that fulfill the destiny of the other beings. Flies. Algae. Becoming lichen. Becoming winged. Fulfilling, filling out, taking over, taking in.

Fungi come in wherever there is a need to decompose. Gently, but steadily do they creep. For the blunt eye, the movement of fungi could seem like an invasion, like a disease. I once knew a man who rebuilt his entire house after finding fungi in the walls. What a power to make movement. And what a *fear*. The fearing gaze misses out on the beauty of the moves. The depth of the patterns that weave. Why would there be no affect for fungi? Of what do fungi dream at night? Of new patterns, of slippery surfaces and drier ones.

Of heat. 72 degrees is a great composting temperature. And warmer than that? Don't go there.

Every time there has been an extinction, it has been happy days for the fungi. Would this make them ferocius, greedy? Would they grow a *hunger* for extinction, wanting more, creeping in to do their thing?

That is not the temper of fungi. In spite of the millions of species, they have one thing in common: patience. This is the skill of the fungi. When you are omnivorous, there is no need to hurry. There will always be another feeding chance. In patience, beauty grows. From the mycelium to the mushroom head, patterns form in a practicing dance that mirrors every single move they will make when time comes. This internal fungambulation grows like a wave, like a tide. It holds its inhalations, stillnesses, exhalations.

It had been time for exhaling for long. For expiration. The fungi were there, in so many colours, outside the walls, seemingly waiting outside the impenetrable membrane the humans had set up to hold on to their last hope, and then held on to after they had secured their survival. The humans had feared the presence of the fungi for so long, until they began to understand the nature of their fungal co-evolvers. There is no pain, there is no evil, in the dance of the pattern. So the fungi on the outside waited, without impatience. They were preparing for the cleaning and the metamorphic bliss of other patterns. They knew they were just as many on the inside anyway.

And little by little, the morphic spark was lit, the connection was made, to the fungi inside. It became clear from slow, patient nocturnal sharings, that the ones on the inside had something in common: their *comestibility*. The humans had a liking for fungal energy, but were not too pleased with the decomposing part. They had a feeling that something was happening. Something definitely not part of the scheme and the symbiont agreement between human and fungal species.

The humans knew that there were fungal species on the outside that had evolved to a point where they had entered into a closer relation with fire. The fungi most responsive to fire were always the *Pyronoma* and the *Morchella*. Humans knew them as morels and had cherished their exquisite umami qualities for millennia. Long time in a human perspective. The morels on the inside behaved normally, growing in the cultivated woods inside the domes, offering their fruits to hungry human lips. But on the outside, a certain adaptation had happened over the last centuries. It had intensified after a series of particularly strong fires in the woods toward Compostela, Northwest of the Central Iberian Desert, killing all the Basidiomycetes fungi in a large area, and severely damaging the conditions even of the Ascomycetes.

But this very incident allowed for the new adapted mutations of morels to proliferate. To begin with, they foraged on the dead wood and all the other post-incendial materials in the burnt-off woods. Then, as they moved toward the Northwest, toward the megadome of Compostela, a new pattern emerged. Was it a co-evolution of an element and a group of species? Was it the fungi taming the fire and using it to provide them with nutrition? Was it the fire using the morels to give it better conditions in the future, as the decomposition provided by the fungi made the Ponderosa pines grow faster? Which would, in turn, allow for more wood to burn.

Whatever it was, it spread.

And as it spread, the fungi and the fire seemed to form an alliance combusting the forests faster than ever before. By the time they had reached the outskirts of Compostela, with its fifty-thousand inhabitants human megadome at the heart, the mycopyrrhal allies had become a combustion and decomposition capacity at a speed unseen previously.

That's when the inexplicable happened.

The Morphing Morels of Compostela

> When you have seen one wall, you have seen them all. (Hayes, 2020)

Compostela was not the last place that the new phenomenon happened. Those who were around report that there was a change in the light for several months, something that would normally be ascribed to seasonal changes. But this was different. It looked more like an intensifying of light patterns moving between the burning woods and the dome. Like Aurora, but yellowish.

Of all the advanced theories of entanglement that the humans had been forced to accept as the Anthropocene era came, morphic resonance was one that had never really caught hold. The scientific communities resisted, they exiled the few members who followed in Rupert Sheldrake's footsteps, or even following the work on domes and fires and resonance by Luis Berríos-Negrón; those idea

withered away and remained hidden in archived hard-drives in Boulder, Colorado. Yet, this would probably have been the only explanation for the incidents that followed. Had it made a difference what the story would be? Would the acceptance of the theory have been able to save the remains of the human-human species? Or would it have only slowed down the inevitable sympoïetic evolution based on mutual mutative events between the *Pyronoma*, *Morchella*, and *Homo Sapiens* species?

Today, we know that this particular entanglement probably saved the human species, through the rapid metamorphosis of a group of *Sapiens* in Compostela. The first step was probably the morphic reception of change of coded behaviour among the morels on the inside. Once they had received the ability to light fires, they created some degree of confusion on the inside of the dome turning away attention from the other part of the infusion. The second step was raising the temperature so intensely in a small section of the dome, that the earth far beneath started to burn and melt. In this chaotic environment, the first *Ophiocordyceps* slipped in. The third step was infecting humans with the new guest. The integration, entanglement, took place through the new fungi. Instead of eating, the fungi were eaten as their main way in. Humans became carrier bags for their own mutation. As the humans became more and more addicted to eating, the fungi mutated. They eventually found ways to decompose the dome walls. They were already kin to water, they became kin to fire – and to humans, the hardest species of them all to tame.

And a new future emerged: just as we thought they were doing away with humans, we realized that they were actually putting humans back together again, as containers and as chums who also love mycelia and connectedness, and they are in there like buddies, like ants and waves and trees and grasses.

Our new species has so many qualities that we were never able to understand before. Some humorously call it *Homo Spainiens*. The proper scientific name is still being discussed, but less vehemently than in the pre-homofungal age. Now that we have properly merged, it seems that our obsession with separation and classification is less important to us. In a distant past, the taste of the world has changed. After millennia of grabbing, we learned to lick, to taste, to feel the earth. Let fire ingest our oh so much more sensitive organisms. Celebrate water from the myriads of mycelic buds within our so much wider beings.

At last, we came home. Became us.

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MEDICAL DENT
BUILDING
MDB
Coca-Cola

The images included in this issue are still frames from the video Riot Holiday *(2020) by Vagrant Holiday. Vagrant Holiday (www.youtube.com/c/VagrantHoliday) is an anonymous videomaker known for his punk videos. The other videos on the channel show his no-budget explorations around the world (Europe, Japan, US trains), sleeping rough, engaging in illegal activities, mainly trespassing. With a different, always anonymous nickname, he is also the author of another Internet video project that was discussed in the Cahiers du Cinéma. His boldness, instinctiveness, his distinctive use of the Point-of-view shot make him one of the most interesting gatherers of images in the contemporary media-sphere.* Riot Holiday *is discussed in Alberto's contribution below.*

#Bushfiresaustralia
Instagramming climate futures

Leonie Tuitjer & Elena Hubner

Introduction

Australia is no stranger to bushfires. The bushfire season 2019/20 was one of the most catastrophic fire crisis in Australia, burning the largest area of bushland and cultivated land recorded during the last 100 years (Deb et al., 2020). Wildlife, infrastructure and 5,900 homes were destroyed; 34 deaths were mourned (Richards, 2020, p. 1). Despite improvements in fire risk management and enhanced public awareness, the severity of this fire season was unpredictable. Climate change is one reason for this, as it interacts with many complex factors. While climate change does not directly "cause" the fires, it has the potential to increase their frequencies, magnitudes, intensities and extend the fire-prone season, hence complicating their predictability (Richards, 2020).

While seasonal bushfires and controlled burnings were the norm in many parts of Australia (also as part of aboriginal land use), human settlements are now increasingly in the way of bushfires as a result of urban sprawl and growing rural communities within commuting distance of larger cities. While bushfires were thus once a phenomenon of the outback, they are now a phenomena of the city as well, as they are increasingly experienced at urban fringes and suburban sites (Reid & Beilin, 2015).

In this essay, we explore how the recent series of bushfires in December 2019 and January 2020 were documented, portrayed and discussed on the social media platform Instagram. While Instagram data and other GeoTagged social media data have been used to analyse fire risk (Yue et al., 2019) and the image of cities (Zasina, 2018), we focus on how the image sharing platform is used as a way to document and comment on human-nature interactions in contexts of urban fire events. As part of a larger project on how people use social media to document, discuss and remember environmental change online, we start here to explore three distinct aspects of the images circulated on Instagram. First, we note that an astheticisation of fires, smoke and ash clouds happened. Second, Instagram immediately turned the fires into a translocal event. Third, the platform was also used as a vehicle for sharing advice for the prevention of fires. Crucially, what we foreground here is that Instagram is a media that allows people not only to document images of wildfires, but also to anticipate a climate-change affected future.

A brief note on methodology

For the purpose of this short paper, we manually scrawled through the images associated with the hashtags "#australianbushfires" and "#sydneyfires". We quickly noticed that a few images were recurrent: images of fire fighters, injured wild animals (especially koala), and large fires within the outback. We equally found a large volume of images that portrayed particular urban sights, e.g. iconic

Dr. Leonie Tuitjer is postdoc at the Institute of Economic and Cultural Geography at the Leibniz University, Hanover (Germany). She has obtained her PhD in Human Geography from Durham University (UK). Her work in urban geography has coalesced around issues of asylum and migration, global environmental change and the politics of affect.

Elena Hubner, M.A. is PhD student at the Institute of Economic and Cultural Geography at the Leibniz University, Hanover (Germany). Her work in social and cultural geography focuses on spatial memories in urban contexts and the production of place through social media.

tuitjer@kusogeo.uni-hannover.de

hubner@kusogeo-uni-hannover.de

landmarks in front of a red-tinted dusty sky, or suburbs engulfed in smoke and ashes or with active fires. For the purpose of this paper, where we are thinking about the connection between fires and cities, we manually selected four images that best represent the latter type of pictures shared online. We use these images as a basis for our reflections.

#Nofilter: aestheticisation of bushfires

Although Sydney was not directly affected by the flames, the bushfires had a strong impact on the city and its inhabitants. For the most part, the images shared on Instagram show everyday scenes of ordinary life, but the immediate experience of a threat from the fire led to a series of spectacular – one might even say beautiful – images that set Sydney in a fiery scenery. The city was so heavily surrounded by smoke and dust that the cityscape was plunged in an orange-red light (images A and D). The dust particles in the air transformed the quality of vision and dipped Sydney into a science fiction look: foreshadowing apocalyptic times of drought, heat and infernal fires that might become a reality sooner or later.

Human settlements are now increasingly in the way of bushfires as a result of urban sprawl and growing rural communities within commuting distance of larger cities

To stress that these pictures are not reworked with any filters that are typically used on Instagram, users attached the hashtag "nofilter" to their images. Nevertheless, Instagram shows a curated (Zasina, 2018, p. 219; Boy & Uitermark, 2016, p. 2) or augmented (Graham & Zook, 2013) reality. In presenting impressive shots on the fire that are designed to evoke admiration and praise, all users participate in the construction of spatial representations of the fire. In doing so, the illustrated reality in Instagram might evoke fascination, horror or bewilderment. For example, image B looks like taken from a war scenario or disaster movie, with fire rising high into the sky in the background of the illuminated city. Suddenly, it seems the bush and its fires are intruding into the urban, already licking at its fringes. The outback comes close and brings its dangers to the global city. The images show how directly engaged were urbanites with the disaster happening in the outback and the suburbia. Furthermore, they can serve as a warning of future fires. This increases the symbolic range of fire and turns it into a disaster with an extended emotional and cognitive reach, which was enhanced through a particular aesthetics.

From the dusty-red backgrounds (image D) to the fire pillars engulfing the suburbs (image B), Instagram pictures thus contribute to a particular aesthetic rendering of the fires. These depictions can have various effects. Some might understand them as warnings of a dangerous future yet to come, others might simply respond to them in an intuitive, affective way and feel estranged from their transformed surroundings. Instagram hence plays an important role in the immediate documentation and contextualization of the bushfires. Contrary to traditional mass media, social media platform can be used to instantly share images without an editorial eye to shape or bend the images in any particular way (Boy & Uitermark, 2017, p. 613). Instagram thrives on quick action and commentary and the images provoke equally immediate affects and emotions. They pull you in, because they work without the cognitive effort of reading, translating, and describing emotional and affective intuitions. The online documentation of the fire thus spread wide and far online – like the bushfire itself spread wide and far throughout Australia.

#bushfiresaustralia: translocal fires and the global city

Local disasters are often translocal in reach, as their effects are often felt (both physically as well as emotionally) in faraway places as well (Wisner et al., 2004). Here, we explore how Instagram contributed to the translocality of the bushfires and how the city of Sydney was interwoven in this process.

Aspects of translocality can be found in the images of the Sydney Opera House shared on Instagram that year (image A). Much like the Eiffel Tower symbolises Paris and France like no other architectural structure does, the Sydney Opera House is a global icon. Instagram has preserved these images as part of an everyday archive of human-fire interactions and, as such, can contribute to building a "'vernacular' or first-hand and locally specific memory" (Reid *et al*., 2020, p. 36) of what happened during the bushfire season in 2019/20. At the same time, however, Instagram transcends such local geographies of memory by spreading these images through its virtual social networks across the globe. Thus, the distinction between local fires and global (emotional, affective, aesthetic) effects is transcended again. The images allowed people from far away to tap into the "event" of the bushfires. The Sydney Opera House engulfed in smoke becomes a symbol of a fire that can both foster world-wide attention and serve as a warning to other cities.

#bushfiresaftey: Instructions for handling with the fire

In addition, Instagram posts are a helpful tool to explain the handling of fires, or even to support the prevention of fires. Image D shows a car park engulfed in the smoke. Our first interpretation was to think of the image as simultaneously showing us (one of) the cause(s) (private transport) and consequences (enhanced bushfire risk) of climate change. Yet, the immediate text below the picture explains that the car is in fact an electric car that saved the family from the bushfire's aftermath (the hazardous smoke). The comment thus offers advice to re-think the value of an electric car as petrol is often hard to come by after the bushfires. Usually, the comment explains fire related power shortages are fixed more quickly than the refuelling of gas stations happens in Australia. Whether such advice is useful, or simply an advertisement for electric cars in disguise, remains debateable. However, within the text it becomes obvious that future bushfires are anticipated and accepted as a part of Australia's future by the user.

Image C generates special attention on Instagram because it stands out as a cartoon among the many photographs on the platform. In fact, the post is part of the broader institutional communication on fire risks. This shows another example of how Instagram is used as a site to share advice and communicate with the public on how to adapt to the increasing bushfire risk. Here, it is recommended to beware of ember attacks that can happen when the wind blows ember from the main fire into small cracks and openings of roofs and wooden porches. Within the pictogram that shows a house sitting in a scenery of bushland, it seems to be recommended to think more broadly about one's home as embedded within a fire-prone landscape. Sharing such visuals on Instagram thus can also promote environmental awareness and careful attention to the surrounding nature. Thus, they contribute to a sense of digitally mediated place-making or home-making in Australia's increasingly risky suburban landscape. As such, digital practices of image sharing can potentially support the promotion of fire-risk awareness, self-help and adaptive behaviour.

Conclusion

The Instagram images discussed here show how users tried to make sense of the bushfires by documenting, sharing, commenting on the fiery world around them. The site hence functions as an everyday archive of personal experiences and memories and allows us to capture, share and store emotional scenes. Specifically, we have shown that the images fall into three categories of "aestheticisation" of the fires, a trans-localisation of the event and sharing advice. Through digital practices of image sharing, moreover, fiery city futures are anticipated. Within these images the urban and the suburban play an important role. For example, the Sydney Opera House enhances the trans-local and affective reach of the fires; the suburban homes shown in the official cartoon exemplify the dangers of such settlement types and fire pillars closing in on the metropolis demonstrate that fire risk is no longer confined to remote outback territories: rather, it is an increasingly urban issue to deal with.

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The 2017 Grenfell Tower fire as a mirror of London's search for profit

Federico Camerin

Marco and Gloria together forever
https://www.grenfellove.org/en/

The 2017 Greenfell Tower fire as a public failure

'I am about to go to heaven, I will help you from there' and 'I cannot understand why the line is constantly failing. I love you, both you and my mother' (Martin, 2018) were the last words pronounced by respectively Gloria Trevisan and Marco Gottardi to their parents. The Italian pair were among the 72 residents who perished from the fire that destroyed the 24-storey residential Grenfell Tower during in the early hours of Wednesday 14th June 2017, being one of the UK's worst modern disasters.

Ignited at 1am at the fourth floor, the fire swept across the building. The inquiry conducted after the tremendous blaze found that the £8.6m renovation completed in May 2016 had worsen the poor safety features of the building. Among the crucial factors enabling the spread of the fire were: the refurbishment provided the windows with exposed gas pipes and combustible materials; none of the flat doors met current fire resistance standards; the building's smoke extraction system was not working; highly flammable cladding had been added to the building's exterior in order to make it more aesthetically pleasurable to see; the lifts renovation had left them unfit for evacuating vulnerable residents; and, the firefighters experienced problems with the water supply as no 'wet riser' was present. By 4.30am, the entire Grenfell Tower was engulfed, despite the 'stay put' fire policy, according to which fire could be contained in a single flat for the time necessary to bring in the fire brigades.

This is why many residents were told to remain in their flats by the emergency services, only to become trapped as the fire grew out of control, and a thick poisonous smoke spread along the single staircase. Luckily, some people ignored the stay put advice and made their way out to safety. As documented by MacLeod (2018), firefighters and emergency services arrived massively and tirelessly worked to extinguish the fire and save lives. Eventually, the blaze was extinguished by 01:14am on Thursday the 15th, 24 hours later. Volunteers entered immediately into action with donations, but such a grassroots support contrasted with the tangible absence of official municipal presence. The cuts to council budgets made the surviving Grenfell Tower residents impossible to relocate: they found themselves homeless overnight. The public that who are supposed defend the 'right to the city' for everybody, failed to provide care and support, just as they had failed in the previous renovation management before the tragic fire.

Federico Camerin (1989) is an Urban Planner (2014) and postdoctoral fellow in urbanism at Dipartimento di Culture del Progetto, Università IUAV di Venezia. Federico holds a double Ph.D. degree (2020) in the framework of the European Joint Programme "urbanhist", title awarded jointly by Universidad UVA de Valladolid (Spain) and BUW Bauhaus-Universität Weimar (Germany). His research topics deal with the European city-making from the 19th century onwards based on the perspective of the construction, emptying/dismantling, and regeneration of industrial, military and railway settlements intended as "capital in land" linked to real estate development.

fcamerin@iuav.it

Urban fires as the Angel of Death?

As claimed by Bankoff, Lübken and Sand (2012), urban fires have shaped cities across the world for centuries. To analyse the case of the Grenfell Tower fire, I follow the interpretation provided by Samuel Stein (2019: 1) regarding capitalist-led city making. According to Stein, the fire is not just a phenomenon, but can be also seen as a symptom of the logic of capital. As put by the Jewish socialist newspaper Forward after the New York's Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire on 25th March 1911, which resulted in 146 victims, fire can be seen as Azrael, the biblical Angel of Death (Cahan, cited by Stein 2019: 1). In Jewish mysticism, Azrael is the embodiment of evil (Davidson, 1971: 26; 64-65) and, according to Forward, his behaviour could resemble fire for two reasons. First, where the Angel of Death appears there is no remedy and, second, as soon as he has received permission to destroy, Azrael makes no distinction between good and bad, and provokes death. The inquiry into the accident also found that most damages could have been prevented if the company had taken the necessary precautions. In that period, New York was going through a huge industrial boom. That caused increasing competition, which in turn led companies to violate building security regulations (New York Factory Investigating Commission, 1912).

The factory owners were brought to court on charges of manslaughter, but were eventually acquitted. They were fined $75 for each life lost, for a total of $10,950. Nevertheless, their insurance policy paid them the rate of $400 per life lost ($60,000) – so that they basically profited from the tragedy. At the same time, the 1911 event strongly stimulated the Labor Movement to reclaim more safety laws, and wages in line with risk levels (Lewin, 1986). The 1911 New York fire is more than anecdotal: indeed, Stein (2019: 2) stresses that the Grenfell Tower blaze has the same cause: the continuous search for profit and capital growth. But if in 1911 the 'arsonist' was industrial capital, today the driving force has become the real estate capital. New York and London, two of the most emblematic global cities, seem to have found their *raison d'être* in real estate investments and the rush to keep making profit (Atkinson, 2020). In this sense, the 2017 Grenfell Tower fire can be intended as a symptom of the contemporary urban condition, marked by poverty and social deprivation in a city at the centre of global economic flows of wealth.

The fire as a result of long-lasting policies against the working class

The Grenfell Tower had been built in 1974 as a part of the redevelopment project Lancaster West Estate in the Notting Dale Ward of North Kensington. During the 1970s and 1980s, the zone has experienced economic decay, but since the 1990s, due to the exponential real estate speculation, it also started to host new buildings for wealthier populations (Barr, 2017). Atkinson (2020: 26) notes that while the Grenfell Tower's area is home for lower income working class, 'it feels more like a device to enable wealthy bodies and their cash to rest, rather than a living, breathing social space.' In the context of a city dramatically shaped by the global market economy, the London's power bloc – a complex amalgam of networks, institutions and elites whose perspectives are shaped by a common interest towards profit – acts towards the creation of new profit spaces in the logic of capital.

In 1996, the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea Council (RBKC) introduced the Kensington and Chelsea Tenant Management Organisation (KCTMO) for the maintenance of the Lancaster West Estate, while ownership remained with the RBKC. Despite occasional works to improve the quality of Grenfell Tower and its surroundings, some residents established the Grenfell Action Group in 2010 against the increasingly fear for safety and the privatisation of public and community assets as a result of the austerity-induced cuts to council budgets. Among the concerns, fire safety stood out, since it became clear that the Tower did not meet the safety standards and feasible solutions for potential fires, with many reports submitted from residents to complain about the fire risk. As Hills reports (2017), the

initial evaluation for works expenditure in 2012 was £11.3 million, although KCTMO-RBKC proposed a £10 million budget as a maximum expenditure.

The competitive tender for the renovation works was eventually awarded for £8.7 million in 2014. Had this cut anything to do with the drop in renovation works quality? Within the overall costs, the external façade works (i.e., aluminium cladding, windows, and curtain wall) totalled £3,476,855. It is remarkable that, in 2016, the RBKC gained £4.5 million from the sale of two three-bedroomed council houses in Chelsea: «£1 million more than it was prepared to spend on protecting 120 council homes [those of Grenfell Tower] – one of which incidentally was bought by a multimillionaire property investor» (MacLeod, 2019: 469). The real estate capital market proved stronger than the residents' concerns. MacLeod (2019: 469-470) argues that the Grenfell Tower renovation was carried out mainly to the benefit of the super-rich: 'The planning approval document signals that the reason for the 'materials to be used on the external faces of the building(s) . . . [are about] . . . ensuring that the character and appearance of the area are preserved and living conditions of those living near the development suitably protected.'

In the aftermath of the disaster, both local and central Government committed themselves to conduct an open and participatory official inquiry

In the aftermath of the disaster, both local and central Government committed themselves to conduct an open and participatory official inquiry. The aims were to improve the quality of the Estate, letting the residents lead the process. In 2018, this process brought in a number of architectural practices for the 'Ideas Day' workshop with residents which resulted in 2020 in a £57.9m-competition to upgrade the 700-home estate surrounding the Grenfell Tower. Meanwhile, the inflation of London's housing costs is making survivors' life difficult: some of them have been placed in expensive housing, which they ordinarily could not afford at market price. This has led to discrimination: for instance, social housing tenants relocated to the Kensington Row luxury development, where apartments cost between £1.3m and £7.2m, have been directed to use an access door next to the bin storage (Atkinson, 2020: 140).

In conclusion, cities burn to the extent that they are built with flammable materials as a result of capitalist-led urban governance. This is what happened in the case of London's Grenfell Tower, in which fire can be intended as an unconscious phármakon for urban evils, as it happened 100 years before in New York's Triangle Shirtwaist Factory.[1]

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How to Watch a Riot

Alberto Brodesco

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).

alberto.brodesco@unitn.it

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 though 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 builds 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 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.

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

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 snickers? 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 "oppositive 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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MEDICAL DENTAL

lo Squaderno 58
Aflame

edited by // Alberto Brodesco and Andrea Mubi Brighenti

Guest Artist // Vagrant Holiday

Io Squaderno is a project by Andrea Mubi Brighenti and Cristina Mattiucci, coedited with Andrea Pavoni.
More Info | http://www.losquaderno.net/?page_id=2
Contact | losquaderno@gmail.com

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Beyond Urban Violence

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