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studi di cinema e media

Media|Processes.
Moving Images Across Interface
Aesthetics and Gestural Policies

a cura di
Miriam De Rosa e Elio Ugenti

Bulzoni editore

Media|Processes: Moving Images Across Interface Aesthetics and Gestural Policies

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In copertina:
teamLab, *Drawing on the Water Surface Created by the Dance of Koi and People - Infinity*,
2016-2018, Interactive Digital Installation, Endless, Sound: Hideaki Takahashi
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Media|Processes: Moving Images Across Interface Aesthetics and Gestural Policies

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The Act of Filming.
Yellow Vests, Smartphones and the Gestuality of Struggle

Jeremy Hamers[*]

Abstract: Since the rise of several political protests at the end of the Nineties, social sciences and humanities have repeatedly focused on the militant use of video. Most of these studies consider activist media uses from the point of view of the product created, the video, and focus their analysis of media activism on assessing the conditions for the possibility of building an alternative space for expression. This article proposes to go beyond this reduction of the act of filming to the act of showing by proposing a political reading of the act of filming law enforcement by holding a smartphone at arm's length as it is one of the recurrent motives of the visual repertoire of contemporary protests in the urban space. My body of research is comprised of videos shot in the context of the yellow vests protests in France in 2018 and 2019. My approach is above all materialistic because it focuses less on the intentions or purposes behind the acts envisaged than on the pragmatic situation produced by using technical interfaces.

Keywords: Yellow Vests; Smartphone; Political Struggle; Gestuality; Copwatching.

Introduction

In October 2020, Alice Thourot and Jean-Michel Fauvergue, members of the presidential party LREM, introduced a draft law known as «Global Security» which appeared in a context characterised in France by an increase in the number of acts of police violence[1]. Of the twenty-nine articles making up this text, the twenty-

[1] I reproduce here the phrasing of «police violence» on purpose, which Emmanuel Macron challenged at a meeting in Grenoble in March 2019: <https://www.francetvinfo.fr/economie/transports/gilets-jaunes/video-gilets-jaunes-macron-juge-inacceptable-dans-un-etat-de-droit-de-parler-de-violences-policieres_3222835.html> (accessed April 2, 2021; my translation).

fourth particularly caused sharp recriminations from the outset among the ranks of the parliamentary opposition and the associations of journalists and civil society stakeholders. At the heart of the controversy was the proposal of

> punishment of one year's imprisonment and a fine of 45.000 euros for broadcasting [...], aiming to damage his or her physical or psychological integrity, the image of the face or any other element of identification of an official of the national police or a member of the national gendarmerie when he or she is acting in the context of a police operation[2].

The article in question explicitly condemns the broadcasting of a video of a law enforcement representative with the proven intention of exposing them maliciously. However, very quickly, the media debates sparked by the draft law have shifted from the ban on broadcasting images to the «risk of banning the filming of law enforcement officers in action», as stated in the editorial of «Le Monde» of 7 November, which further argued that the freedom to film in such circumstances «plays a decisive role in exposing police violence and thus in defending civil rights»[3].

Two observations, which I would like to question in this text, can be drawn from the outset of this brief reminder. Firstly, the shift from the act of broadcasting to the act of filming is not surprising in a contemporary context driven by the daily use of interconnected interfaces and widespread access to live broadcast applications such as Facebook Live or Instagram. The technical reality of our video practices no longer distinguishes, in many cases, between filming and broadcasting or, to put it in semiotic terms, between the perception, the enunciation, the communication and

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[2] Full text available at: <https://www.assemblee-nationale.fr/dyn/15/textes/l15b3452_proposition-loi#D_Article_24> (accessed April 15, 2021; my translation).

[3] *Filmer des policiers, un droit démocratique*, 7 November 2020, <https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2020/11/07/filmer-des-policiers-un-droit-democratique_6058896_3232.html> (accessed April 2, 2021). Three weeks later, in the same newspaper, Cécile Bouanchaud goes on to suggest that the bill is only a formalisation of practices already well anchored in the field: «Since the widespread use of smartphones and social networks, filming and broadcasting incidents with the police has become a common journalistic practice that the police are constantly trying to hinder.» Cécile Bouanchaud, *Filmer les policiers, un droit bafoué avant même la loi sur la «sécurité globale»*, «Le Monde», 28 November 2020, <https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2020/11/28/filmer-les-policiers-un-droit-bafoue-avant-meme-la-loi-sur-la-securite-globale_6061455_3232.html> (accessed April 10, 2021; my translations)

the transmission[4]. Secondly, these reactions build on the documentary paradigm of the trace and the corollary belief in the effectiveness of «video witnessing»[5] and «copwatching» as a tool for physical self-protection and for the preservation of civil rights[6].

A few recent cases in France, all driven by violent exchanges between the police and citizens, demonstrate the critical effectiveness of evidential images made possible by the proliferation of filming and broadcasting devices in the public space. Consider, among other things, the Michel Zecler case or the reconstitution by «Mediapart» of the police abuses that punctuated the protest against the global security law on 12 December in Paris[7]. However, these few examples also remind us that the visibility of these videos depend directly on the construction of a new enunciation (editing, infographic inserts, 3D reconstructions etc.). As such, they draw our attention to a blind spot in the debates sparked by the multiple revisions of Article 24 between the fall of 2020 and the spring of 2021: the vast majority of images shot at recent protest events in France are shot by amateurs who do not broadcast their videos or at most affect a relatively small community of Internet users. Drow-

[4] I freely borrow the four sense management operations identified by Pierluigi Basso Fossali in his semiotics of communication, and which the author reports on in his lecture *Le poids éthéré de la médiatisation. De la matérialité diaphane du média à son investissement comme environnement*, Congress of the French Association of Semiotics 2016, <http://afsemio.fr/wp-content/uploads/Sens-et-mediation.-P.-Basso-Fossali.pdf> (accessed April 10, 2021); cfr. Pierluigi Basso Fossali, *La promozione dei valori. Semiotica della comunicazione e dei consumi*, Franco Angeli, Milano 2008.

[5] In November 2020, Gérald Darmanin, Minister of the Interior, reaffirmed his belief in video witnessing on the set of France Info TV: «If you see a problem which falls under the Penal Code, you will have the right to film it and pass it on to the Prosecutor of the Republic, but if you want to broadcast it wildly on the internet, you will have to blur the faces of the police officers and gendarmes». Video available at: <https://www.francetvinfo.fr/faits-divers/police/violences-policieres/video-loi-de-securite-globale-gerald-darmanin-affirme-qu-on-aura-toujours-le-droit-de-filmer-les-forces-de-l-ordre_4179813.html> (accessed April 10, 2021; my translation).

[6] For example, cfr. AA.VV., *Filmer nous protège de la police*, «L'Humanité», 16 November 2020, <https://www.humanite.fr/filmer-nous-protege-de-la-police-696250> (accessed March 15, 2021).

[7] Cfr. Sébastien Bourdon, Camille Polloni, Antton Rouget, Antoine Schirer, *Comment les forces de l'ordre ont saboté la manifestation du 12 décembre 2020*, «Mediapart», 3 January 2021, <https://www.mediapart.fr/journal/france/030121/comment-les-forces-de-l-ordre-ont-sabote-la-manifestation-du-12-decembre-2020?onglet=full> (accessed February 5, 2021). For an example of a 3D modeling of CCTV footage, cfr. also: André Gunthert, *Violences policières: 'On peut plus jouer'*, «L'image sociale», 6 May 2021, <http://imagesociale.fr/9765?fbclid=IwAR2blvwqEaLdhxgKQ5mzaTIKJ12v9IBt-lW4pzlPdU-sdCYZRd_G56THh6bs> (accessed May 7, 2021).

ned in a massive amount of online videos that no longer catalyses any revolt, these videos pose no danger to the safety of the police, nor do they really change their use of force[8]. The thousands of videos, filmed but not broadcast, are thus breaking not only the theoretical equation between filming and broadcasting but also the belief in the critical effectiveness of the act of filming.

If we follow the hypothesis that the draft law seeks to prohibit the act of making and the act of broadcasting images, the videos shot by protesters but sparsely or never aired put forward this question: could it be that in the early drafts of the law, the legislator believed that filming a police officer might already constitute an act of aggression against a State official[9]? This is a legal question about the spirit of the text of a law, which goes far beyond my field of research. That is why I would like to take up this question by reversing the perspective; that is to say, by addressing it from the point of view of the protester filming and not from the State official being filmed. This shift in perspective allows me to transpose the question of the legislator's intention: can the act of filming a police officer in the performance of his duties be understood as a gesture of struggle, regardless of its apparent primary purpose, namely the making of a video? This question dissociates the act of filming from the product and thus opens up thinking about the act as a gesture. To identify some of the answers to this question, I will focus on representations generated by the "yellow vests" events in France in 2018 and 2019[10]. These videos show that the image of the protester filming police forces by holding a smartphone at

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[8] André Gunthert shows that most of the amateur yellow vests videos are not effective by default, as they rarely influence police behaviour after being put online, that they are usually the subject of a selection process that for the most part makes them invisible in favour of one or two videos becoming emblematic, and that they are subject to conflicting interpretations. Cfr. André Gunthert, *L'image virale comme preuve. Les vidéos des violences policières dans la crise des gilets jaunes*, «Communications», n. 106, 2020.

[9] Michaël Meyer and Samuel Tanner give empirical support to this hypothesis. Their interview and fieldwork based study on copwatching shows that the "new visibility", that is to say the permanent menace of being showed online, is a serious source of stress which impacts the behaviour of a part of the police forces. Cfr. Michaël Meyer, Samuel Tanner, *Filmer et être filmé. La nouvelle visibilité policière à l'ère de la sousveillance*, «Réseaux», n. 201, 2017.

[10] For a detailed presentation of the phenomenon of yellow vests and the various political and sociological realities it covers, cfr. Frédéric Royall, *The* Gilets Jaunes *protests: mobilisation without third-party support*, «Modern & Contemporary France», n. 28, 2019. In this text, Royall elaborates on the hypothesis that in the case of the yellow vests movement, which is characterised by the heterogeneity of its claims, «the police use of excessive force to contain the *yellow vests*» had as a consequence «to prolong the protests by reinforcing the protesters' cause», p. 112.

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arm's length is one of the recurrent subjects of the «visual repertoire»[11] of clashes between protesters and law enforcement authorities[12].

Firstly, I will quickly point out that recent research in the domains of media studies and social sciences has largely contributed to the confusion between the act of filming and the act of broadcasting images. In the second section of this article, I will attempt to free myself from this confusion by proposing a political reading of the physical occupation of urban space by the yellow vests. This opening up to the corporality of the protesters will allow me to offer some elements of analysis of the act of filming as a gesture of struggle, in order to identify the potentially political, subversive, or militant scope of an act that is no longer aimed so much at showing a police officer as showing oneself to him or her. From an epistemological point of view, my approach will be above all materialistic because I will focus less on the intentions behind the acts envisaged here or on their concrete effects than on the pragmatic situations and spatial repositionings produced by using technical means.

Methodological obstacle

Before continuing, it is necessary to stop at a methodological difficulty to which my project is exposed from the outset. As I have already said, I would like to focus on the countless acts of filming that have not necessarily led to a (long-term) broadcasting. But, without systematic fieldwork, the representations that allow me to analyse these acts are first of all the videos that have been particularly visible, for instance because they have been collected and taken over by formalized broadcasters on press sites, Facebook pages, etc. The vast majority of yellow vests videos however have never exceeded the level of individual pages, sometimes private or indivi-

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[11] I use this phrasing here in the sense given to it by Alain Bertho, who has also clearly identified the contagion and multiplication effect of the act of filming. Cfr. Alain Bertho, *Émeutes sur internet: montrer l'indicible?*, «Journal des anthropologues», nn.126-127, 2011.

[12] For example, cfr. this video shot during Act 59 in Paris in December 2019: arsenic.k, *laisse pas trainer ton téléphone devant un crs acte 59 paris 28 décembre 2019*, 29 December 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x5o7iIMlSwc> (accessed February 4, 2021). Several videos also show that the act of filming itself is one of the main issues of the confrontation between the protesters and the police forces. Cfr. Media Investigation, *[Gilets jaunes ACTE 12] Des policiers furieux d'être filmés*, 3 February 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NSKFRop-FRIc> (accessed February 4, 2021).

dually-run YouTube accounts that reap at best only a few hundred views before being closed or emptied[13]. Therefore, these videos are only identifiable at the cost of a partly random search, made even more difficult by algorithms that accentuate making the less popular videos invisible[14].

To help partially counter this methodological obstacle, I have combined three parallel working methods. Firstly, through a keyword search using popular tags associated with the movement, I have collected hundreds of amateur videos between January 2019 and November 2020. Secondly, I have subscribed to several Facebook and Youtube accounts active in the framework of the protests. Thirdly, I have consulted once a week several Youtube pages of alternative news broadcasters that have emerged or become particularly active in the context of the protest (CLPress, Taranis News a.o.). All these videos have been recorded and categorized in a spreadsheet following the identification of their alledged place of production, their content, some elementary formal settings and metatextual information. This three-fold method similar to what Ulrike Lune Riboni called «reasoned wandering»[15] has enabled me to collect about 780 different videos, of which approximately 550 could not be assigned to professional sources. More or less 60% of these videos have been removed from the internet by their alledged authors since the start of my research. Far from constituting a statistically significant sample, these collections of videos have enabled me to gain an initial overview of the recurrence of the act of filming as a visual issue or motive[16]. As such, according to the purpose of my research, the images that will be mentioned in my text should be regarded as secondary documentary sources that give us a partial but enlightening representation of the ge-

[13] This specific obstacle meets also a basic problem already extensively treated by scientific literature which concerns the constitution of a (non-)body of volatile amateur videos (online). Cfr. Hélène Bourdeloie, Christine Chevret-Castellani, *L'impossible patrimoine numérique? Mémoire et traces*, Le Bord de l'eau, Paris 2019; Aurore François, Anne Roekens, Véronique Fillieux, Caroline Derauw, *Pérenniser l'éphémère. Archivage et médias sociaux*, Academia, Louvain-la-Neuve 2018.

[14] On the technological determination and shaping by social networks of activist media productions, cfr. Thomas Poell and José van Dijck, *Social Media and Activist Communication*, in Chris Atton (ed.), *The Routledge Companion to Alternative and Community Media*, Routledge, London-New York 2015.

[15] Ulrike Lune Riboni. *«Juste un peu de vidéo.» La vidéo partagée comme langage vernaculaire de la contestation : Tunisie 2008-2014,* Ph.D. thesis, Sciences de l'information et de la communication, Université Paris 8 - Saint-Denis, 2016, p. 95. HAL. archives-ouverts.fr.
< https://hal.archives-ouvertes.fr/tel-02392337/document> (accessed July 28, 2021).

[16] On the distinction between statistically pertinent data and recurrent motives, cfr. Ulrike Lune Riboni. *Juste un peu de vidéo,* cit., pp. 86-90, pp. 95-96.

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stures and acts of filming. They should thus not be considered as objects of a formal analysis, but as traces involved in a continuous process of dissemination which engage the gestures they are witnessing in an open-ended process of perpetual reappearances. All these videos are indeed characterized by an intense circulation which does not allow us to identify with certainty who (or which organization) was actually the first author and/or broadcaster of a video. In other words, these videos are fundamentally moving or "transferring" objects. But, it is precisely this mobility that has enabled me to access videos that have been withdrawn from Youtube or Facebook since the start of this research.

An oppositional media sphere[17]

Since the rise of the anti-globalisation movement in Seattle in 1999, research in the social sciences and humanities has repeatedly focused on the militant use of online video. Most of the studies devoted to this recent history analyse the methods and contexts of capturing and broadcasting these productions, and articulate them with a media criticism that leads to experimentation with a new (participatory) media culture[18]. Indymedia's first slogan, «Don't hate the media, be the media», itself heir

[17] In this article, the term "oppositional" refers to a syntagm that has first been fostered by Alexander Kluge and Oskar Negt, «oppositional public sphere», in their critical answer to Habermas' conception of a common space of (democratic and bourgeois) deliberation. Cfr. Oskar Negt, Alexander Kluge, *Public Sphere and Experience: Toward an Analysis of the Bourgeois and Proletarian Public Sphere* [1972], University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1993. As reminded by Mike Mowbray quoting Nancy Fraser's famous essay on the topic (see also footnote 23), «rather than a space of consensus-oriented deliberation», the concept of oppositional public sphere refers to multiple «discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests and needs». Nancy Fraser, *Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy*, «Social Text», nn. 25-26, 1990, pp. 56-80; quoted in Mike Mowbray, *Alternative Logics? Parsing the Literature on Alternative Media*, in Chris Atton (ed.), *The Routledge Companion to Alternative and Community Media*, cit., p. 26. My use of the term «oppositional» reminds us here of the fact that the yellow vests movement has aggregate multiple opinions, modes of struggle and claims.
[18] As an example, Bart Cammaerts' study of protest logics is based on the premise that recording devices have enabled protesters «to photograph and film what they are seeing and experiencing, subsequently posting everything on social networks platforms». Bart Cammaerts, *Protest Logics and the Mediation Opportunity Ttructure*, «European Journal of Communication», n. 2, 2012, pp. 117-134.

to a set of practices and texts that appeared in the early Seventies[19], thus appears to be one of the watchwords still shaping research. Hence, replacing – or renegotiating the activists' position in – the professional or dominant media would be the main purpose of engaging recording devices in protests[20]. All these works consider these media uses from the point of view of the product created, the video, or its position in a given media field. Thus, they focus their analysis on assessing the conditions for the possibility of building an alternative (digital) space for expression[21]. In short, all of this work still considers the uses of the filming and broadcasting in-

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[19] One of the fundamental differences between the early committed video movements and contemporary video activism lies in the use of the latter by a set of commercial platforms that also host mainstream productions. Nevertheless, one of the watchwords in Hans Magnus Enzensberger's seminal text *Constituents of a Theory of the Media*, which served as a theoretical basis for early European video activists, still resonates directly with some contemporary video counter-information practices: «A revolutionary plan should not require the manipulators to disappear; on the contrary, it must make everyone a manipulator». Hans Magnus Enzenbserger, *Constituents of a Theory of the Media* [1970], in Reinhold Grimm, Bruce Armstrong (eds.), *Hans Magnus Enzensberger. Critical Essays*, Bloomsbury, New York 1982, p. 54. For a critique of the paradox or tension inherent in the use of commercial platforms, cfr. Christian Fuchs, Marisol Sandoval, *The Political Economy of Capitalist and Alternative Social Media*, in Chris Atton (ed.), *The Routledge Companion to Alternative and Community Media*, cit.; Christian Fuchs, *OccupyMedia! The Occupy Movement and Social Media in Crisis Capitalism*, Zero Books, Winchester 2014.

[20] Cfr., for example Angela J. Aguayo, *Activist Street Tapes and Protest Pornography: Participatory Media Culture in the Age of Digital Reproduction*, «Jump Cut», n. 56, Winter 2014-2015, <https://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc56.2014-2015/AguayoProtestVideo/text.html> (accessed March 15, 2021). Here again, André Gunthert's quoted article constitutes a partial exception to this approach. Gunthert shows that the tensions between mainstream and alternative media actually overlap with a more complex game of transfers between citizen media and established media outlets. Cfr. André Gunthert, *L'image virale comme preuve. Les vidéos des violences policières dans la crise des gilets jaunes*, cit.

[21] For a critique of the presupposed virtue of horizontal media participation, cfr. in particular Todd Wolfson's in-depth study: *Digital Rebellion. The Birth of the Cyber left*, University of Illinois Press, Champaign 2014.

terfaces under the prism of a process of building a(n) (oppositional) public sphere[22]. However, almost no account of the materiality is taken from the interfaces and technical tools such as smartphones, nor their relationship to the filmmaker's body. At most, one can find an approach to the materiality of the interfaces themselves on collaborative sites supported by activists who train the protesters to protect their smartphones. But most of the advice to protesters only concerns the content of the phones and the digital privacy of their owners to be protected[23]. Finally, some studies of the physical implications of recording confrontations with the police focus on the reception of the videos[24]. In these studies, the issue of bodily contagion through gestures and acts is central this time. But it mainly covers a link built between the activist, and the spectator.

[22] The title of DeLuca and Peeples' study on the media resonance of the Seattle events sums up this pattern: cfr. Kevin DeLuca, Jennifer Peeples, *From Public Sphere to Public Screen: Democracy, Activism, and the «Violence» of Seattle*, «Critical Studies in Media Communication», n. 19, 2002. The same can be said of a Habermasian reading of the relationship between the Internet and political engagement by Peter Dahlgren in *The Internet, Public Spheres, and Political Communication: Dispersion and Deliberation*, «Political Communication», n. 22, 2005. In his case study about the video activism of French environmental activists, Vincent Carlino broadens the very Habermasian question of a struggle for access to a sphere of deliberation, to the coexistence of a plurality of «subaltern counterpublics» identified by Nancy Fraser, and to the establishment of an «oppositional public sphere» as conceptualized by Alexander Kluge and Oskar Negt. Cfr. Vincent Carlino, *Vidéo en ligne et contestation politique radicale*, «Terminal», n. 127, 2020, <https://journals.openedition.org/terminal/5806> (accessed April 14, 2021). For a theoretical reminder of the importance of these concepts even before the generalisation of web 2.0, cfr. also Jeffrey Wimmer, *Counter-Public Spheres and the Revival of the European Public Sphere*, «Javnost – The Public», n. 2, 2005.

[23] Cfr. Alexandre Schmid, *Comment sécuriser son smartphone avant d'aller en manifestation?*, «Clubic.com», 12 June 2020, <https://www.clubic.com/pro/it-business/securite-et-donnees/actualite-3100-comment-securiser-son-smartphone-avant-d-aller-en-manifestation.html>; Joseph Cox, Lorenzo Franceschi-Bicchierai, *How to Protest Without Sacrificing Your Digital Privacy*, «Vice.com», 1 June 2020, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/gv59jb/guide-protect-digital-privacy-during-protest> (accessed April 4, 2021).

[24] Cfr., in particular, Maple John Razsa's enlightening article on the uses of riot porn. In his text, Razsa goes beyond the paradigm of «seeing is believing» to question the «specific sensory, affective and bodily qualities» of the video medium. Maple John Razsa, *Beyond «Riot Porn»: Protest Video and Production of Unruly Subjects*, «Ethnos», n. 4, 2013, pp. 496-524. On the impact of media images of protest, cfr. Stephanie Geise, Diana Panke, Axel Heck, *Still Images-Moving People? How Media Images of Protest Issues and Movements Influence Participatory Intentions*, «The International Journal of Press/Politics», vol. 1 n. 26, 2021.

In this quickly drawn-up panorama, research on the yellow vests is no exception to the rule. Here again, the use of video during a protest and confrontation with the police is essentially examined from the perspective of the creation or reappropriation of a media space[25]. To put it briefly, the work envisions the media activity of the yellow vests through the prism of «self-media»[26] and «direct, immediate policy»[27], considering the camera as a weapon of counter-information in a very clear evidencial perspective. This focus of research on productions broadcast on social media is probably first explained by the origins of the yellow vests movement: the creation of Facebook pages entitled "Colère" (Anger) and the launch of an online petition to lower fuel prices. Consequently, the yellow vests' use of public space was first considered as the corollary of the occupation of the digital space[28]. The few studies that look into the use of public space by the yellow vests focus on the occupation of roundabouts or urban centres as a struggle for digital and, more broadly, media visibility[29]. Therefore, they cannot question the act of filming as an issue in the occupation of real space. In order to consider it as such, I will devote the second

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[25] The study by Jonathan Clifton and Patrice de la Broise is certainly a partial exception to this focus. They open the prospect of research to the objects mobilised by the protesters, here a toll booth, the movement being, according to them, «communicatively constructed as a protest movement by both human and non-human actors.» In this way, they broaden the research perspective that has «traditionally viewed social media as a way of transmitting messages about protest movements rather than as a way of constituting them». However, their approach does not integrate the objects mobilised in communicative acts, for example, the smartphone. Jonathan Clifton, Patrice de la Broise, *The Yellow Vests and the Communicative Constitution of a Protest Movement*, «Discourse & Communication», n. 4, 2020, pp. 362-382.

[26] Cfr. AA.VV., *Les Gilets jaunes, étude d'un mouvement social au prisme de ses arènes médiatiques*, «Terminal», n. 127, 2020, <https://journals.openedition.org/terminal/5671> (accessed April 2, 2021); Héloïse Nez, *Des «informateurs citoyens». Usages des images par les Indignés espagnols*, «Sciences de la société», n. 94, 2015.

[27] Jean-Marc Vernier assumes that a «mediation of elected officials or experts» is necessary to any political form, and then criticises what he calls «the myth of a 2.0 democracy». Jean-Marc Vernier, *Gilets jaunes: la carte (les réseaux sociaux) précède le territoire (les ronds-points)*, «Quaderni», nn. 99-100, 2020, pp. 151-158 (my translation).

[28] For a numerical summary of the online birth of the movement, cfr. Igor Chernov, Igor Ivannikov, Radomir Bolgov, Igor Barygin, *Political Dimension of Modern eSociety: The Case of «Gilets Jaunes» in France*, in AA.VV. (eds.), *Digital Transformation and Global Society*, Springer, Cham 2019. The distinction between "digital" presence and physical commitment has been put at stake by Dork Zabunian: cfr. Dork Zabunian, *L'insistance des luttes. Images soulèvement contre-révolutions*, De l'incidence éditeur, s.l. 2016, pp. 51-52.

[29] Cfr. Jean-Marc Vernier, *Gilets jaunes: la carte (les réseaux sociaux) précède le territoire (les ronds-points)*, cit.

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part of my text to a return on the political investment of urban space.

Aside from the analysis of the occupation of media space, the occupation of real space by the yellow vests has been analysed in some works through the prism of the symbolic venues: the roundabout, the esplanade of the Arc de Triomphe, etc.[30] In contrast, to my knowledge, no research has yet looked at the practices of occupying less determinate spaces such as the large boulevards of French cities. I am not claiming to be clearing the way for this terrain. However, starting from the observation of several videos by protesters and journalists, I will point out that one of the issues of the actions of the yellow vests is the struggle for the very real visibility of the protesters. Next, I will show how this struggle is part of a conflicting relationship between two modes of movement into and the occupation of space between the yellow vests and law enforcement. Finally, I will question the act of filming itself as a manifestation of a subversive occupation of this space.

An Eye for an Eye: Filming as a Gesture in the Urban Space

The hallmark of the yellow vests is an object used to make the driver visible when he or she is forced to leave their vehicle. Of course, the centrality of this fluorescent garment first refers to the movement's origins: the protest against rising fuel taxes. The semantic reinvestment of the fluorescent vest as an emblem also gives the object another symbolic function: literally, it is a matter of making oneself "visible" to a political class that immobilised those who can no longer pay for fuel. However, this visibility is, first and foremost, a concrete issue for the protests. As many videos by the yellow vests demonstrate, the law enforcement's response to unauthorised or violent gatherings is to cover the protesters in a thick cloud of tear-gas smoke. Like other non-lethal weapons, the smoke becomes a sensory weapon that deprives protesters of all visual and spatial references. Locked in a cloud of irritating smoke, the protesters cannot see and are no longer visible[31]. As a corollary, the preservation of vision/visibility of a "pre-media" body in a public space is becoming one of the issues at stake in protests repressed by the police.

Many videos show protesters trying to thwart the strategies of law enforcement who are attempting to channel the flows. These videos show that two pat-

[30] Cfr. Tudi Kernalegenn, *Les territoires des gilets jaunes*, «Acteurs Publics», n. 138, 2019.
[31] For an example of a visual field covered by tear gas, cfr. this video produced in Montpellier during Act 25: Jonathan Dubosquet, *Montpellier acte XXV le moment où on a tous manquer de souffle*, 1 May 2019, <https://www.facebook.com/jonathan.dubosquet/posts/10218541511031868> (accessed June 7, 2019).

terns of moving in urban space are in conflict. When the confrontation between police forces and protesters seems inevitable, and riot squads start to move in a structured but handicapped way with a set of prostheses that limit the fluidity of their movements (helmets, shields, leg protection, etc.), it is in a scattered and seemingly random manner that the yellow vests are distributed in space, to make them retreat or lend themselves to a vaguely choreographed performance[32]. «Look, look! You don't even know where you're going!» shouts a protester at the CRS, smartphone in hand, in an amateur video recorded in Paris during Act 12[33], before going on to say: «You're lost in a forest, guys!». This mocking address punctuates a tactic that is based on the reversal of a flow regulation strategy: as the police attempt to make the protesters invisible to themselves in order to restore the normal order of traffic, the yellow vests take the initiative themselves to do so in order to resist a regulation imposed by the CRS. Funnily, this exclamation alone sums up the failure of vision management and an authoritarian structuring of urban space, which is met by free, unstructured, and continuously reconfigured occupation of public spaces[34].

This link between occupancy of real space, visibility and vision is also expressed in several videos through the superimposition of the camera lense and the protester's eye. Several «damaging views»[35] emphasise the exposure of the protester's eye to LBD launchers by inducing a superimposition between the mechanical eye and the

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[32] We could therefore say using Maxime Boidy's words that, like some *black blocks*, this is a «tactic [that] visualises an alternative corporality». Maxime Boidy, *Luttes de représentation, luttes de visibilité. Notes sur l'iconographie et l'iconologie politiques des dominé(e)s*, «Hybrid», n. 4, 21 December 2017, <https://hybrid.univ-paris8.fr/lodel/index.php?id=842&file=1> (accessed March 15, 2021). For an example of the dispersion of the yellow vests, cfr. this video shot in Paris during Act 12: InfoCritiqueWeb, *Acte 12 Gilets Jaunes - Affrontements entre CRS et "casseurs" - Paris 02.02.2019*, 2 February 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U-dWyYf-H11w> (accessed June 7, 2019).

[33] This amateur video recorded in Paris on February the 2nd and removed from Youtube in November 2020 has been archived by the author for scientific purposes: <https://dox.ulige.be/index.php/s/MdDeBOKCSJdISQG>.

[34] A video, which went viral in January 2019, showing the former boxing champion Christophe Dettinger, making several CRS back up, is symptomatic of a confrontation between two occupations of a space. The first, heavy and equipped, is defeated by the dance-like movements of a boxer: Le Parisien, *Un homme boxe un gendarme, l'incroyable séquence de l'acte 8 à Paris*, 5 January 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=649toUuqz7Y> (accessed June 7, 2019).

[35] I'm borrowing this expression (in French: "vue attentatoire", which can also been imperfectly translated as "detrimental", "confrontational" or "intrusive view") from Livio Belloï who refers to a set of early films that expose the viewer to an attack (a shot, a punch etc.). Livio Belloï, *Le regard retourné. Aspect du cinéma des premiers temps*, Méridiens Klincksieck, Nota Bene, Paris, Québec 2001.

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physical eye. Superimposing view and visibility, these videos document the threat to vision and visibility as they simultaneously preserve them[36]. In other words, these images document that the «[police] vision is a *sighting*»[37] while countering it with the affirmation of its counter-perspective. To be sure, at this point in the analysis, a smartphone that is stretched out towards the law enforcement can still be seen as a technical extension of the human body involved in a «machinating gesture»[38]. But the link I have just established between the occupation of space and the act of filming is crucial to our thinking as the occupation of urban space cannot be equated to the occupation of media space alone anymore. It appears to be an issue in and of itself.

The protests of the yellow vests are clearly part of an already long history of occupying public spaces. As the Occupy and Nuit Debout movements have illustrated, occupation is not only an expression but also an issue in the struggle. Like these movements, most mass struggles have resulted in developing a repertoire of gestures, that is, uses of the body that are expressions of the struggles[39]. However, in the case of the yellow vests, these gestures have not yet been rigorously analysed. In order to go beyond this blind spot, I would like to end by considering the gesture

[36] This superimposition of two threatened eyes, one real, the other mechanical, is materialised for example in a video shot during Act 23 in Paris. Caught in an assault by the CRS, the filmmaker releases his smartphone before the blood dripping from his face gradually covers the lens of his camera, which has the effect of the image turning into a red monochrome surface: Cerveaux Non Disponibles, *Chants des Gilets Jaunes vs charge de police (Acte 23 Paris)*, 22 April 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_fLG95aqsAg> (accessed June 7, 2019).

[37] I am making free use of Grégoire Chamayou's phrase in his essay on operative images filmed with a military drone: Grégoire Chamayou, *Drone Theory* [2013], Penguin, London 2015, p. 122.

[38] Yves Citton distinguishes between «machinating gestures» and «machinic gestures». The former «mobilise programmes to communicate movements to external agents, human and non-humans», while the latter are directly induced by machinic devices. Yves Citton, *Gestes d'humanités. Anthropologie sauvage de nos expériences esthétiques*, Armand Colin, Paris 2012, p. 65. (my translation).

[39] One thinks of the "three fingers" inspired by the dystopian *Hunger Games* film series and taken up by pro-democracy demonstrators in Burma, the kneeling that appeared in the wake of Black Lives Matter, or the silent applause of the "Indignados" in Spain. These gestures are assimilated to non-verbal means of expression, signs of rallying, or performative expressions of belonging to a group. Most studies consider these gestures to be signs, but only too rarely analyse the pre- or sub-semantics scope; that is, their function or effect as methods of physical activity in the context of struggle. Cfr. in particular: Denis Barbet (ed.), *Le geste, emblème politique*, «Mots. Les langages du politique», n. 110, 2016; Chuck Kleinhans, *Subversive Media: When, Why, and Where*, «Jump Cut», n. 56, Winter 2014-2015. <https://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc56.2014-2015/KleinhansSubversiveMedia/index.html> (accessed March 15, 2021).

of holding a smartphone as an act belonging to the bodily repertoire of the occupation of urban space. More specifically, I would like to formulate two proposals for a pragmatic interpretation of this gesture based on the observations made above.

First, as a gesture by mobile protesters toward rigid law enforcement, holding a smartphone is part of the gestural repertoire of the struggle. If this repertoire is mobilised in a set of situations where the issue is the free occupation of urban space, the smartphone brandished at arm's length can be understood as a tool of this free occupation. Further, the very mobility of the object is in all respects opposed to the rigidity of other filming devices used by law enforcement. Without extending my reflection to the filming devices used by the police officers themselves, it is worth remembering that law enforcement, often from a second line protected by a squadron's vanguard, film the protesters extensively with go-pros, generally attached to poles[40]. However, in the case of the yellow vests, there is no actual "front line", which gives them greater mobility than the police who film. If one only considers the physical and spatial dimension of the gesture of smartphone filming, that gesture and its proliferation can be understood as a reaffirmation of the mobility and freedom of use of the urban space.

Secondly, if the challenge of this occupation of space is the protester's visibility and vision, the gesture of shooting without framing can be understood as a way of asserting oneself in that space as a subject looking, with a view. Indeed, this gesture is carried out even when vision is blocked and the eyes themselves have to close because of smoke or under the threat of projectiles. To put it in a nutshell: by continuing to film, the yellow vests show their visibility and vision when they can no longer lead to the production of a visible image[41]. Therefore, my final proposal definitively frees the act of filming from its primary purpose (the making and broadcasting of a video) to make it a performative bodily gesture. This gesture has originally been shaped by the intention to film/broadcast the experience of the struggle. But, in the physical context of a free occupation of the urban space and

[40] This remark opens up a research perspective which places the act of filming with a smartphone in a face-to-face encounter with objects as Michaël Meyer and Samuel Tanner have showed. This face-to-face encounter should, in further research, be elucidated by the Latourian sociology of objects, aiming to identify the conditions of possibility of an agency of the recording and broadcasting devices themselves. Cfr. Michaël Meyer, Samuel Tanner, *Filmer et être filmé. La nouvelle visibilité policière à l'ère de la sousveillance*, cit.

[41] Here, my final proposal is indirectly reminiscent of Bart Cammaerts' Foucaldian approach of «self-mediation technologies» in community media, however transposed to the physical and gestual presence of the protestors. Cfr. Bart Cammaerts, *Movement Media as Technologies of Self-mediation*, in Chris Atton (ed.), *The Routledge Companion to Alternative and Community Media*, cit.

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of a confrontation with the police, it has become a performative affirmation of the protestor's visibility and vision. In this sense, it is still a gesture of struggle where the struggle seemed to have become impossible.

Conclusion

Starting from the observation that most of the acts of filming yellow vests did not lead to an effective distribution of videos, I freed what may at first still be considered as a enunciative gesture (choice of a point of view, attempt to embody the experience of the protester, etc.), the fact of directing his or her smartphone towards the police officers, from the enunciation itself. I have thus envisaged the act of filming as a pure enunciation with no statement produced, except that which is produced by the gesture itself. The benefit of this approach is twofold for further research. First, it removes the gesture of filming from the traditional epistemic criticism of smartphones as mediating communication tools: a device that encourages a growing confusion between sign, simulacrum, and reality[42]. My reading, on the contrary, makes it possible to view the act of smartphone filming itself as a manifestation of a subversive reinvestment of a supposedly mind-numbing technical tool. So, free of its primary purpose, the act of filming seems like a political "tactic". Secondly, my materialistic approach to this act potentially places it in a lineage or visual repertoire of struggle where it may not have been expected, as this act has been reduced to its apparent purpose until now. From a historiographical point of view, hindsight will probably allow us to confirm this final proposal. But, speculatively, it allows us to suggest that the gesture I examined resonates with other performative gestures that preceded it and that return by contagion. As a corollary, one of the premises of this essay, the invisibility and thus political ineffectiveness of numerous amateur videos made by yellow vests, should now be put into new perspective. Because the videos that have been shot although little or never watched, are also a non-iconic depositary of a memory of gestures that could or will one day be reactivated in other contexts of political struggle.

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[42] As an example of this critique of the impoverishment of reality through interface-induced gestures, see: Pauline Escande-Gauquié, *Smartphone, réseaux sociaux et gestes performatifs*, in Pierluigi Basso Fossali, Mario Colas-Blaise, Maria Giuilia Dondero (eds.), *La communication à l'épreuve du geste numérique*, «Médiation et information», n. 47, 2019, pp. 207-218.

Coda

On 15 April 2021, the French National Assembly finally adopted an ultimate version of the «Global Security» law and its controversial Article 24 (Article 52 in the final version). In its latest version, the text brings some guarantees as to the free exercise of journalists' profession by avoiding the question of recording and broadcasting images. In the end, the text favours an imprecise term that focuses on the identification of members of law enforcement:

> The provocation, with the obvious aim of causing physical or psychological harm, to identify a national police officer, a customs officer when he or she is on duty, a member of the national gendarmerie or a municipal police officer, when these persons are acting in the course of a police operation, is punishable by five years' imprisonment and a fine of 75,000 euros[43].

The phrase «provocation to identify» is vague. As a first intention, it is undoubtedly aimed at online lynching campaigns that targeted police officers. But, on closer inspection, it potentially condemns the act of filming for its own sake insofar as it would be considered a provocation to identify an officer. The question then arises: isn't any act of filming a member of the law enforcement potentially a «provocation to identify»? I will not venture to answer this question. But if my reading of the act of filming as a collective and contagious gesture of struggle has some consistency, it can be inferred that Article 24 inevitably aims at one of the only gestures of struggle that remains with the yellow vests when they are deprived of vision and visibility.

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[43] Full text available at : <https://www.assemblee-nationale.fr/dyn/15/textes/l15t0599_texte-adopte-provisoire.pdf> (accessed May 2, 2021; my translation).

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