

Lights, Camera, Police Action!

John L. Jackson Jr.

“The revolution will not be televised.” Poet Gil Scott-Heron put that 1960s Black Power slogan to music (flute, bass, and drums) in 1970, turning it into one of the most iconic spoken-word recordings of its time (Carmichael and Hamilton 1967; Vincent 2014; Wald 2015). A frenetic critique of corporatization, political opportunism, and the anesthetizing distractions of popular culture, the tune traffics in a discussion of what some academics took to calling “the hegemony of vision” not too long ago (Levin 1993). In the Scott-Heron anthem, a fusion of jazz, blues, and funk, *televised* stands in for a neo-liberal logic that would seek to domesticate revolutionary possibility, relegating it to what fit inside network TV’s standardized commercial breaks or to what could only be beamed into living rooms commercial-free if a large enough conglomerate was willing to underwrite such televisual anomalies (in that bygone era before broadcast TV became the successful pay-TV model of HBO).

Proffering an overly romantic notion of “revolution,” one perched categorically outside of all mass-mediated co-optations, the song includes dismissive references to television coverage of looters stealing TV sets and nightly news recaps of urban unrest. There is even a specific allusion to recurring media imagery of police officers killing young black men. “There will be no pictures,” Scott-Heron raps, “of pigs shooting down brothers on the instant replay. There will be no pictures of pigs shooting down brothers on the instant replay.” The line is repeated for emphasis. Particularly striking in this provocative formulation are the unapologetically derogatory term used for law enforcement agents and the suggestion that killing “brothers” can be likened to sporting events (recreational hunts?), complete with instant replays for bloodthirsty fans.

Ever since August 2014, when police officer Darren Wilson shot and killed eighteen-year-old Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, city streets across the nation have been aflame with public demonstrations over the continuing racial

disproportionalities of America's criminal justice system. "Hands up, don't shoot" became the rallying cry for those who protested Brown's murder. He was in the process of surrendering, they argued, and that still didn't save his life. He was shot down in cold blood anyway, "execution style."

When the St. Louis grand jury decided, three months later, that there wasn't enough evidence to justify Wilson's indictment for Brown's murder, the decision seemed to pivot quite explicitly on refutations of that popular "Hands up" rendition of things. As opposed to being extended above his head in a posture of peaceful surrender, Brown's hands, according to credible eyewitnesses, the prosecuting attorney maintained, were viciously assaulting Wilson while simultaneously struggling to commandeer the officer's gun.

For many skeptical protesters, it didn't matter what the grand jury alleged. They could hardly just accept its proclamation, instead disputing some of the forensic evidence and eyewitness accounts. One of the legacies of our nation's founding commitments to state-sponsored racial discrimination is black America's enduring distrust of the criminal justice system and of police officers as that system's primary street-level enforcers. For a Brooklyn teenager like myself who grew up on hip-hop music in the 1980s, such distrust epitomized one of the most fundamental political philosophies of that urban vernacular form. Soon after the grand jury announced its decision not to indict Wilson, hip-hop artist Nas took to Twitter to cite rapper KRS-One's canonical 1989 formulation of this deep-seated cynicism: "'You were put here to protect us, but who protects us from you.'—KRS One."¹ It was retweeted over ten thousand times.

If only there were footage of the altercation, some protesters lamented. At least then we would have definitive proof of what happened, of guilt or innocence. And as if some patron saint of snuff films were there to answer those collective prayers, we suddenly had that footage. Not of Brown's death in Ferguson. True. But even as folks were still in the streets protesting that shooting, a Staten Islander's camera-phone video of Eric Garner being choked to death by one of the New York Police Department officers arresting him for illegally selling "loosies," or single cigarettes, on the street went viral.

Although Garner's death predated Brown's by a couple of weeks, the video of Garner's death seemed to get real traction in the digital public sphere only after

1. It wasn't lost on hip-hop fans that Nas (from Queens) and KRS-One (from the Boogie Down Bronx) represented historically rival factions within hip-hop's New York landscape. But even given those long-standing geographic tensions, the two could agree over a cynical take on law enforcement agents.

Brown's case had become a national news story, maybe a consequence of unsatisfiable desires for footage of Brown's death. In this case, there was footage, and it showed Garner begging the officer, Daniel Pantaleo, to stop choking him, to ease up. "I can't breathe," Garner says several times. "I can't breathe." That would become the second ubiquitous slogan of a protest-packed 2014 ("Black lives matter" being the third), and the Garner footage taken by bystander Ramsey Orta was all the more riveting for the synchronous sound it captured along with the low-resolution camera-phone images uploaded to YouTube.

When the grand jury in New York chose not to indict Pantaleo for his application of the chokehold, a physical maneuver that some argued fit the description of a tactic that had already been explicitly banned by the city, it was clear that the value of video footage as some kind of self-evidential smoking gun in disputes about how to read such tragic incidents was overstated. But that fact didn't stop the Internet from curating an avalanche of video footage depicting more and more police shootings of unarmed black men.

In April 2015, cell-phone video surfaced of Walter Scott being shot to death in Charleston, South Carolina, as he ran away from Officer Michael Slager after a routine traffic stop for a broken taillight. That very same month, in Tulsa, Oklahoma, video of a reserve deputy shooting and killing a suspect who had already been subdued by fellow officers made the nightly news, mostly because the deputy admitted that he had meant to use his Taser and accidentally pulled his gun instead.

Again in April, a dashboard camera's video depicted an Arizona police officer purposefully running over Mario Valencia at high speed as his chosen method for apprehending the walking suspect. Although Valencia didn't die and was holding a shotgun at the time (and so was not "unarmed"), the brutality of the collision is breathtaking to watch. It also struck some viewers as quintessentially lazy policing. Similarly, much of the discourse about the footage of Scott's South Carolina killing emphasized the fact that his attempted getaway looked to many a lot more like a pained and pathetic jog than a bona fide sprint. It shouldn't have been all that difficult, some argued, for a police officer to chase down the out-of-shape man and cuff him.

Fatal or not, these images of police violence reinforce the aforementioned sense of presumptive police brutality. The notorious Rampart scandal in Los Angeles in the late 1990s seemed scripted for Hollywood, with its cases of police-orchestrated bank robberies, drug dealing, unjustified shootings, and framings of local drug dealers. All told, about seventy officers of the antigang program Community

Resources Against Street Hoodlums (CRASH) in Los Angeles were implicated—and without much publicly circulating video documentation to speak of.²

There are fascinating moments when videos of these kinds of killings are emphatically not made public, such as when Chicago authorities declared that they would not release footage of teenager Laquan McDonald being shot sixteen times by a single police officer in October 2014. There is something about how we fetishize these kinds of videos—in their ubiquitous circulation or their purposeful suppression, in their incessant rebroadcasting or their wished-for existence when absent—that speaks to how naive we all continue to be about the empirical self-evidentiality of visual “proof.”

There is an inherent ambiguity to visuality. That is, of course, part of what we mean by the aphorism “A picture is worth a thousand words.” And those are often disparate and not easily reconcilable words. But the visual image isn’t just rife with layers of nuanced and conflicting meanings; it also gets read as paltry and impoverished in terms of its ability to render the fullness of social life at all. Philosopher Gilbert Ryle and anthropologist Clifford Geertz agreed that the film camera’s renditions of the world are “thin” and inadequate (Jackson 2013). There is far too much that the camera (like “the naked eye”) doesn’t or can’t capture—that lies just beyond its rectangular frame or that transpired before the camera was turned on (in ways that inform what the camera does portray, but mostly in unrecoverable ways, if reliant only on the camera’s indexical image making).

One doesn’t have to be a disciple of Michel Foucault to imagine that visibility can be a trap, and that isn’t just because of the inadequacies or ambiguities of photochemically, electronically, or digitally captured visuals. For Foucault (1977), it was as much about the dangers of institutionalized investments in the linkages between surveillance and criminal justice, imagination and imprisonment. Jeremy Bentham’s seventeenth-century renderings of the Panopticon and its value to the scrutiny of the carceral subject depict prisoners who internalize their own surveillance in ways that help to bend them more readily into compliance with the mandates of penal authority. There is an assumption of being seen, the argument goes, being surveilled, that organizes their everyday movements. This assumption can be interpreted as either (1) surveillance extending well beyond the prison grounds and made into a more general organizing principle for political control in a modern “disciplinary” society or (2) a volatile and all-encompassing logic that can potentially be turned on its head and used against the surveilling state itself.

2. In 2011 Woody Harrelson and Sigourney Weaver starred in a feature-length film version of the events.

There are compelling arguments for both readings. In a post-9/11 world, video cameras seem to cover just about every inch of our collective public sidewalk space, providing surreal after-the-fact depictions of, say, sibling suspects' movements during the lead-up to the Boston Marathon bombing of April 2013.

"If you see something, say something," is the mantra. And someone almost always sees something, which is why the "no snitching" ethos that defines certain contemporary quadrants of urban black America (steeped in that aforementioned skepticism about police) appears especially discordant these days. Un-American. Even if you aren't being seen (in real time or after the fact via surveillance cameras), there are concerns fueled by Edward Snowden about the National Security Agency accessing phone records that provide an equally powerful mapping of our most private lives. Social media apps we use on our PDAs even flag our whereabouts for "friends," "followers," and strangers, often without us realizing it.

At the same time, police officers feel pressure from those pedestrians equipped with cameras and inclined to monitor police exploits. The current dispensation of public protests over inequities in our criminal justice system (and the sometimes videotaped afterimages of police shootings) began just as I became dean of the University of Pennsylvania's School of Social Policy and Practice (SP2) in July 2014. SP2 boasts an explicit mission of training students to seek "social justice" and helping them to mobilize their education quite specifically in service to the public good. Many of those students are especially interested in understanding and challenging racial disparities in the meting out of state protections. Listening to SP2 students this academic year as they negotiated the current political moment was actually encouraging. They didn't all agree with one another about how to diagnose or fix things, but they pushed each other, their faculty, and me to think about how best to seize the moment by doing something that reflects their rigorous training.

My reading of things was further shaped by the fact that I had been an active member of the University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg School for Communication before taking up my new post. I was also interested in media representations of the protests, of the trials, and of the killings themselves, interested in what happens at the nexus where social justice meets social media. Hashtags about black lives mattering circulated alongside "die-ins" staged for web-based circulation, and all of this had an impact on the political landscape itself in ways that merited discussion and theorization.

Freddie Gray died in April 2015 after sustaining a spinal cord injury while in police custody. There was no footage of Gray's actual death, but the media dutifully looped the same few seconds of cell-phone video showing the young man getting placed into the back of a Baltimore police vehicle. Since many of

the city's leaders and officials are black, including Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake and three of the six police officers implicated in Gray's death, some pundits maintained that racism should be dismissed out of hand as a relevant variable in this incident. The following month, State's Attorney Marilyn Mosby filed charges against those six Baltimore police officers, and the grand jury brought back formal indictments soon thereafter.

Even before the indictments came down, arrest rates started declining in Baltimore—and rather precipitously. Police advocates insist that it is difficult for officers to do their jobs effectively in the current climate. Even routine stops find them swarmed by throngs with cell phones thumbed to video mode.

The revolution may not be televised, but the state's maneuvers are subject to more and more freeze-framed examination. That hundreds of millions of dollars have been committed to purchasing police body cameras means that more officers will be the filmmakers and not just the filmed subjects, but it doesn't negate the fact that a state's supposed monopoly on violence doesn't easily extend to exclusive control over that violence's digital recording.

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