

Making the News

Stephanie Schwartz

Several slogans repeat throughout the twenty-five minutes of Ronnie Close's film *More Out of Curiosity* (2014). We see and read — again and again — 'HOOLIGAN' and 'MARTYR'. Spelled out, not spoken, these words flash across the screen in bold white letters. They offer opposing descriptions of the film's protagonists: young Egyptian men, fanatical football supporters who took to the streets of Cairo in 2012 following the massacre of seventy-four Al Ahly fans at Port Said. These young men, viewers learn as they watch and listen to footage of protests and rallies, are also known and identified as the Ultras (Ultras Ahlawy). They are a group, a club and a fan base — not a singular type. 'HOOLIGAN' and 'MARTYR', those opposing positions on the social spectrum of political activism, are simply how these men are referred to in the media — which is the real subject or protagonist of Close's film. See, read, and repeat is the organising structure of Close's canny inquiry into fanaticism and our mediated public sphere. We record. We stream. We watch. We repeat. We produce the news. In the news, after all, every hooligan is also or already, for someone or to something, a martyr.

Close's interrogation of the media is made even more evident when we read another slogan or 'headline', appearing twice throughout the film: 'LIVE / ON / TV'. The phrase reminds the viewer of the immediacy of contemporary new coverage as well as the fact that the massacre at Port Said was broadcast live on television. The cameras were rolling, broadcasting the match, when the fans of the El Masry club, the victors, took the field wielding knives, stones and fireworks. They continued to role when the police decided not to intervene, left the stadium, locked the doors and turned out the lights. Twenty minutes of frenzy ensued.¹ Bodies moved through the darkened pitch, crawling and climbing up walls, as the cameras rolled on, blurring an already blurry line between entertainment and the news. In today's mediascape, it is almost impossible to see or even hear the difference. This is not simply because the news is — has always been — produced in accordance with a corporate profit structure designed to sell us 'the goods'.² It is also because enticing people to watch — to consume — necessitates that the news is as spectacular, if not more spectacular, than entertainment. The latter occurrence has the same cause as the former: the drive of accumulation. Sell more; sell faster. The result, as one media theorist has concluded, is that we have a sense that 'there isn't time for thinking, that there are only emergencies to which one must react, that one can't keep up and might as well not try'.³ We watch. We react. We move on.

Close's editing neatly marks the slippage between entertainment and news as well as the event and its record. This viewing of the riots live on TV is cut with clips of a local news broadcast of the mayhem as it unfolded on the football field. Moving between the necessarily anodyne faces of a rank of TV newscasters and the darkened TV screen, Close fixes his camera on one face, one gesture: a newscaster bowing his head and covering his eyes. He can't bear to look as he listens to what is

happening 'Live on TV'. It is almost as if he is enacting that memorable line the late Harun Farocki read while playing the role of a TV announcer in the opening scene of his 1969 film *Inextinguishable Fire*: 'If we show you pictures of Napalm damage, you'll close your eyes'. Farocki's line opened his extended investigation of how the Western public was being trained to ignore the war in Vietnam. Tracking the production of Napalm in the Dow Chemical labs, the film also demonstrates the ways in which the division of labour in the factory ensures that the workers never know exactly what they produce. Ignorance is not bliss; it is programmed. Likewise, empathy is bliss; it is encouraged. Focusing on newscaster's inability to look, *Close* offers viewers the perfect counterpoint to their fascination with looking for and at the news.

How we as viewers — as a public — look or learn to look neatly comes into focus. In *More Out of Curiosity*, the newscaster can't look, but rather averts his eyes, instead of burning his arm as Farocki did at the close of his scene. The camera zooms in as Farocki presses a lit cigarette into the back of his left arm. 'A cigarette burns at 400 degrees. Napalm burns at 3,000 degrees', the voiceover explains. This gesture, and the disparity, is the only way, Farocki insisted, to represent violence to a domestic, TV public. As he explained in a series of statements unfolding, step-by-step, that publics' avoidance of and aversion to horror: 'First you'll close your eyes to the pictures; then you'll close your eyes to the memory; then you'll close your eyes to the facts; then you'll close your eyes to the connections between them. If we show you a person with Napalm burns, we'll hurt your feelings. If we hurt your feelings, you'll feel we tried Napalm out on you, at your expense. We can only give you a weak demonstration of how Napalm works'. Avert your eyes, skim the news or try to make the unimaginable visible, even or especially if the image and the action of the cigarette burn as a demonstration of how Napalm 'works' is wholly inadequate.⁴ *Close*'s reverses the shot. Instead of an image of action, *More Out of Curiosity* offers its viewers an image of affect. In the movement between live footage of football fans acting in the street and the announcer's withdrawal from action, we instantly recognise our continued obsession with the now iconic gestures of pathos that come to stand in as news.

As we see it, the Egyptian newscaster's aversion to the news also takes place live on TV. The viewer watches him watch (and avert) the news. News is registered by affect, not information. We watch the newscaster turn away from the news; we register his shame, his horror. The news, *Close*'s editing makes plain, is far from immediate. Like the slogans 'HOOLIGAN' and 'MARTYR', 'LIVE / ON / TV' opens up its own binary or false opposition. In the news, any hooligan can be made into a martyr. In the news, any live event is also processed and recorded. As we watch the news this newscaster broadcasts without watching, we recognise that nothing can be 'live on TV'. Everything live is always already mediated. After all, even the massacre was most likely engineered. As many in the news — from print journalists to bloggers — speculated, what unfolded live on TV at Port Said could have been a planned retaliation for the Ultras' role in the 25 January 2011 standoff with the police in Cairo's Tahrir Square.⁵ Media is entertainment and entertainment is the news. The events at Port Said did not simply happen on TV, they happened *for* TV.⁶ Just as we simultaneously watch and avert the news, react and move on, we watch because we produce it — for the media. To entertain is not simply to 'hold engaged'. It is to keep someone captive, 'to keep, to retain (a person) in one's service'.⁷ We

record. We stream. We produce the news for and on the screen. In our new mediascape of cell phones and live streams, old forms of control may become the new means of collaboration and collective action, but the media today, *More Out of Curiosity* reminds us, is still a means of keeping the public busy making the news.

More Out of Curiosity is not a documentary about the events at Port Said, nor is it a documentary about young men keen to act politically as football fans. There is no moralising. There is no attempt at objectivity. There is no celebration of self-representation. Yet, moving between the live and the mediated, between the men and the media, *More Out of Curiosity* reminds us, like the best documentary work, that we can't get beyond mediation. This message builds slowly, through repetitions as well as Close's 'live' recordings of the frenzy of the street demonstrations leading up to and following the trial and eventual conviction of fifty football officials at the closing of the film. If Close's editing as well as the literal layering of numerous cameras in and on the scene, makes mediation transparent, that transparency is cunningly expressed as a cacophony of signs and sound. We read English and we hear Arabic. Close does not translate all the chants, the broadcasts or the posters. News, opinion, street cries, banners, slogans merge, producing noise as well as necessary questioning and confusion. Nothing is really uncovered or explained, just as nothing is really 'live' on TV. In this slippage between live and mediated, between sight and sound, in the mix of the very problem of translation (from one language to another, from one cultural context to another, etc.), Close also makes us — the viewer — his protagonist. Do we continue to look? Do we continue to watch, read and repeat? Do we gather opinions in lieu of the facts?

Importantly, *More Out of Curiosity* is as much about our mediated present as our mediated past. The repetitions remind viewers that mediating transparency is nothing new. Any quick tour through media's history makes evident that this has been the condition of news and media since the explosion of photojournalism, radio and film newsreels in the 1920s. In film and photography, on the radio, then too, there was little call for objectivity. There was the motivated organisation of a collection of facts. Everything had a point of view — was mediated. In turn, mediating transparency drives against our still lingering postmodern conviction that doubt is the best mode of being in the world. You can't doubt the media while also believing that it might be true or could be more transparent. Should we continue to critique the media, point out its lies and its fetishization of uncertainty as a springboard of fear? Or do we slow down and wade in the noise?⁸ Don't avert your eyes. Don't expose the lies. Don't build political conviction on the back of the latest emergency. Stay in front of the screen for a moment longer. Be confused. Stay motivated to watch — even, or especially, 'out of curiosity'.

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Notes

¹ My account of the event is based on conversations with Ronnie Close as well as information found in various media outlets online. See, for example, 'Egypt football violence leaves many dead in Port Said', *BBC News* (Published 2/2/12, Accessed 8/1/15: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-16845841>). For a less conventional account of the massacre and its aftermath, see Jonathan Rashad, 'The Port Said Massacre', *World Press Photo* (Published n.d., Accessed 8/1/15, <http://storiesofchange.worldpressphoto.org/stories/the-port-said-massacre>). Of course, these are simply two of the sources privileged by my Google search.

² As Raymond Williams argued already in the 1970s, television is a mass media distributed into our homes for private consumption. Raymond Williams, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* (London: Routledge, 2003). Williams's book was first published in 1974. See also Jane Feuer, 'The Concept of Live Television: Ontology as Ideology', in E. Ann Kaplan ed., *Regarding Television: Critical Approaches — An Anthology* (Los Angeles: The American Film Institute, 1983), pp.12-22.

³ Jodi Dean, *Blog Theory: Feedback and Capture in the Circuits of Drive* (Maden: Polity, 2010), p.2.

⁴ For a compelling discussion of this opening scene and the need to look, see Georges Didi-Huberman, 'How to Open Your Eyes', in Antje Ehmann and Kodwo Eshun eds., *Harun Farocki: Against What? Against Whom?* (London: Koenig Books Ltd, 2009), pp.38-50. See as well Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All: Four Photographs from Auschwitz* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008). Didi-Huberman is tapping into the still pressing debates about looking and looking away presented by Susan Sontag in her *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003).

⁵ See news sources above. According to most accounts, the police failed to complete the security checks and thus allowed the weapons into the stadium. They did nothing to prevent or manage the mayhem.

⁶ On this aspect of the news, see Thomas Keenan, 'Mobilizing Shame', *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, Volume 103, Number 2/3 (Spring/Summer 2004), pp.435-449.

⁷ See 'Entertain', *Oxford English Dictionary* (Published n.d., Accessed 8/1/15, <http://www.oed.com.libproxy.ucl.ac.uk/view/Entry/62849#eid5488465>).

⁸ On this directive, see Dean, *Blog Theory*.



Ronnie Close, still from *More Out of Curiosity*, HD digital film, 2014.



Ronnie Close, still from *More Out of Curiosity*, HD digital film, 2014.



Ronnie Close, still from *Serious Games*, HD digital film, 2014.



Ronnie Close, still from *Serious Games*, HD digital film, 2014.

INTERNATIONAL NEW MEDIA GALLERY

