

Image Circulation Struggles: The George-Floyd Uprisings and the Intermedial Infrastructures of Contemporary Capital

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Abstract

The capitalist world-system is in a crisis of stagnation, of declining profitability and productivity, characterized by a shift from industrial production to logistical circulation as its engine. This has entailed the primary form of struggle swinging from the strike to the riot (Joshua Clover). Concomitantly, ubiquitous digitization and social media has enabled ever-greater means to participate in, document, and coordinate these networked protests through digital images. This paper takes the uprisings following the murder of George Floyd in 2020 as a paradigmatic case through which to analyze how the algorithmic circulation of images across platforms is imbricated with the circulation of capital. Floyd’s murder was caught on video and uploaded online, sparking outrage from screen to street and back, as social media became awash with images of masses marching, clashes with police, and property destruction. These images illustrate the intermediality of communications infrastructure, for the technical networks that allowed these images to appear as information threatened not only to turn them into “trends” for the attention economy’s churn of content, but also enabled the tracking of activists through surveillance images taken from drones and body cameras. These latter examples evince the genealogy of racial capitalism from which digitality emerges (Simone Browne, Seb Franklin) and which the uprisings were fundamentally protesting against. Moreover, the intermedial analysis of the George Floyd uprisings aims to historicize the digital present’s image surplus within dwindling surplus value whose effect is the growth of under- or unemployed, indebted, and historically racialized “surplus populations” (Marx).

Keywords

Operational images, circulation, riots

Bio

Leo Hansson Nilson is a PhD student at the section for Cinema Studies in the Department of Media Studies at Stockholm University. Currently, he is working on his thesis project tentatively titled, “Terminal Circulation: Algorimages and the Logistical Media of Capital,”

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which is a materialist theorization of the algorithmically processed, digital images which circulate on social media platforms as a historical form of appearance emergent within capital's turn to circulation and logistics amidst secular stagnation. His research interests include film and image theory, Marxism, media archaeology, and philosophy of technology. His work has appeared in *Necus: Journal of European Journal of Media Studies*, *Filosofisk supplement*, and presented at *Visible Evidence XXIX/Film Forum 2023*.