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What if this happened in your city?
Collective decision-making and embodied witnessing in live participatory film events

Maple J. Razsa, Penelope Papailias and Lillian Dam Bracia

Keywords: activism, uprisings, sensory ethnography, interactive documentary, film, sound


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What if this happened in your city? Collective decision-making and embodied witnessing in live participatory film events

Maple J. Razsa in conversation with Penelope Papailias and Lillian Dam Bracia

Abstract:
This discussion with documentary filmmaker and visual anthropologist Maple J. Razsa about live participatory film, activist video, the ethical and political implications of sound design, affirmative ethnography and sensory ethnography in the context of the ongoing wave of global uprisings was conducted online on September 10, 2020. His interlocutors were anthropologist Penelope Papailias and artist, curator and visual anthropologist Lillian Dam Bracia. Filmmaker and visual anthropologist Constantinos Diamantis recorded the interview and joined the discussion toward the end. The dialogue has been edited for clarity. Links to images, video and supplemental material have been added.

I. The ethics of genre: Ethnographic documentary after the radical democratization of filmic production

PENELOPE: Good afternoon from Greece, Maple, and good morning in Maine! It’s really great to reconnect. It’s been over a year—a year and a summer—since you screened and facilitated The Maribor Uprisings at our Data-Stories Confestival in Volos. As we discussed, our idea for this special section of Entanglements is to showcase different genres of “data-stories.” So, our first questions have to do with the genre of live participatory film. This isn’t a term everyone might be familiar with. I don’t know if you actually coined the term. But, in any case, we would like you to define live participatory film for us and potentially connect it to other practices, such as live cinema¹, which are performative events involving cinematic screenings.

¹ The film theorist Hollis Willis describes live cinema as the “staging of a live event that includes the presentation of moving images and sounds for an audience with a performance component that calls attention to presence and liveness, as well as to the specificities of site, space and time” (2016, p. 78).
Or, perhaps, to Augusto Boal’s “Legislative Theatre,”2 if you are familiar with his work, which is a more political kind of intervention involving the participation of the audience. Along with a definition, maybe you could also refer us works on which you have drawn, or that might have been produced subsequently, inspired by The Maribor Uprisings?

MAPLE: Yes, of course. To get started I think it would be useful to give a sense of how this film works. People might be puzzled when they hear that it is a “live participatory film,” wondering what that might mean in concrete terms. So, just briefly, this is a film about a popular uprising in Slovenia and it begins in such a way that you first watch what seems to be a more or less conventional introduction to a documentary film. But about eight minutes in, the film begins to pose questions in direct address to the audience. Namely, in this first decision point: Do you stay on Freedom Square, or do you follow this unruly crowd headed towards City Hall and likely conflict? (Figure 1). At this point, and at numerous other points in the film, there is live facilitation of audience discussion and decision-making. The audience decides together, guided by a facilitator, which way they’ll go. Then there are branching narrative pathways that place audiences on quite different trajectories through the material.

Please see HTML version for accompanying video content

Figure 1. This video clip shows the first decision-point in The Maribor Uprisings. Courtesy of EnMasse Films.

My co-director Milton Guillen and I were inspired, technically speaking, by online interactive forms of documentary. Prison Valley (2010, David Dufresne & Philippe Brault) was a prominent early example that caught our eye (Figure 2). You visit a valley in Colorado that’s studded with prisons. You can tour those and make decisions based more on curiosity rather than narrative, making your way through questions about the prison industrial complex.

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2 The Brazilian theater artist, activist and theorist Augusto Boal (1979) coined the term “Spect-Actor” as part of his “Theatre of the Oppressed,” a radical form of theater practice that put the audience on stage to reflect on social relations, play out conflicts and rehearse alternative possibilities to social problems. Elected to city council in Rio de Janeiro in the 1990s, Boal took this form a step further in “Legislative Theatre” (1998) in which the audience was called on to play out issues of social conflict and then brainstorm possible solutions, some of which resulted in actual legislative change.
But we weren’t so interested—especially with the material we were dealing with about a popular uprising—in individual choice and solitary experience alone with the computer. What particular uprising we were documenting, but also the wider global series of popular uprisings over the past decade, which—to only name the US examples—runs from Occupy through Standing Rock, to the past year of Black Lives Matter. Technically the form was inspired by online interactive documentaries, but the live participatory form that we took up was really inspired by directly democratic practices. These have emerged from social movements more than from other artistic practitioners.

So it was important to us to create a documentary form that resonated with the content. We wanted a form that would provoke some of the same debates, some of the same tactical dilemmas, some of the same political differences, which have emerged around many popular uprisings, such as now in the U.S. around Black Lives Matter: namely between violent and nonviolent, “good” and “bad” protesters. It was our sense that official and media responses to uprisings have encouraged such a division to effectively divide and demobilize those gathered in the streets.

**PENELOPE:** That’s really fascinating, Maple, and actually merges two of my questions: how this live participatory film, on the one hand, relates to changes in the digital context and, on the other, its connection to performance and the arts. While we’re interested in the performative aspect of your work and how it might relate to theater and draw theoretically from the arts, the fact that, in your case, this form is emerging organically from the pressure of the streets is very important.
But to pick up on the digital thread first. One of your previous works, *The Bastards of Utopia*, was also interesting to us in that respect. There you similarly play with this idea of the interactive and remixable, “choose-your-own-documentary” form (Figure 3). I think that’s the phrase you use. In both cases, in *Bastards of Utopia* and in *The Maribor Uprisings*, you are challenging and problematizing 20th-century-film conventions from the perspective of digital network culture by moving away from a director-centered or linear work. There’s this modularity. You can pick a different direction or enter the story at a different point and extract a segment and connect it with others in the footage.

So, I was wondering if you could talk about if you see what you’re doing in these terms. Of how in the digital moment, 20th-century narrative forms—not only film, but obviously ethnography itself as a monograph—are being broken because of these new emergent digital literacies?

**Figure 3. A screen grab of Bastards of Utopia: A Remixable Documentary. Courtesy of EnMasse Films.**

**MAPLE:** There are different ways I would answer that question in relation to these two distinct projects, but I might even go back one step further for both of them. We are talking about how these projects are distinctive in terms of the ways they display or present the video material, but I also want to emphasize that they first emerge from the radical democratization of production. Even though *The Maribor Uprisings* is primarily about participation and very much about the bodily feelings and implications of participating in an uprising, I myself wasn’t actually present at the uprisings. Rather, we gathered this archive of people in the streets who had individually documented the uprising, both in collectives and individually. So I think first it’s worth acknowledging this radical democratization of production.
But to turn to your question about the less linear, more archival, more open-ended ways that we've organized this material, and the ways that the primary role of the editor and director have been decentered and destabilized in these works. *Bastards of Utopia* has three forms. There's a written ethnography, a feature documentary and then this online archival form: all three under the title *Bastards of Utopia*. The one that you are referring to is, what we call, a “remixable documentary.” It's pretty media-rich. We've put a lot of material online: all the scenes from the film and many scenes that were cut from the feature-length documentary. We had about 200 hours of footage in total. And then also media produced by activists, which then came to live on this common platform. The platform thus had this interesting democratizing effect of creating a common frame in which media produced both by filmmakers and amateurs lives together in that space. We had imagined that this material would be remixable: that people actually would be able to make narrative pathways through that.

That's, in part, what inspired doing that remixing in a much more fully-realized way with the *The Maribor Uprisings*. But the remixable documentary became much more of an archive, in the sense of a historic collection of materials, rather that something that you could effectively explore in a narrative way. You could explore it through curiosity. You could see one video and think of another question and follow those questions. But it was driven by curiosity rather than narrative as we had originally imagined. In both projects we were motivated by a kind of cracking open or loosening of the director’s dictatorial control over the media. And that again, in both of these projects, had to do with the fact that they were dealing either with directly democratic popular uprisings or, in the case of *Bastards of Utopia*, with anarchist collectives and organizing. Again, it was our effort to try to make the documentary form responsive to the political ethics of subjects and their forms of organizing. But it was definitely made possible by new technological possibilities in both cases. Does that answer your question?
II. The live screening as performative event and political encounter: Facilitation, audiences, contexts

PENELOPE: Actually I think you answered my question, as well as one I wanted to ask you a little further along in our interview. Namely, I wanted to ask whether these kinds of database projects, while they sound great in theory—breaking away from a linear film that’s totally authored by the filmmaker or the ethnographer—if in fact people actually would do that? I was wondering if with The Maribor Uprisings—creating an event, a performative screening, to make people do it together—if that followed from the experience of Bastards of Utopia? And a second question, whether the idea to have a triptych of works was something that was part of the project from the beginning, or if it emerged afterwards? Did you feel you needed to have a documentary somebody could just watch from beginning to end? In the final analysis, even though theoretically we want to move away from the linear work, it seems people don't really engage with database projects—or that they want to be led through them. Do they even need an event that draws them to engage with the material?

MAPLE: I can expand a little on what I said before to answer your questions. I did realize as we constructed the archival version—what we called the remixable version of Bastards of Utopia—that even though I had imagined each as a freestanding work, which you could engage in relation to the others, that the remixable documentary was the least inviting for people to engage with deeply. So it eventually became something that I was very careful to avoid in defining the relationship between the feature film and the book: a supplement rather than a work with its own equal standing. Because I was fighting within the discipline for the importance of filmic ethnography, I did not want the film to be seen as secondary to written scholarship. Nonetheless, the remixable version did become more of a supplement to the book in some ways, rather than a fully realized stand-alone work. There are, for example, references all through the book to clips that you can find in the archival documentary, and they then became something like video footnotes, rather than a freestanding work. And I think the reason for that is exactly what you're gesturing toward, Penelope. It’s the rare interactive online work that motivates people to fully engage. They don’t tend to find the interface, or the organization of that material, compelling enough that they throw themselves into the work in the ways they do with other forms. That’s something that I’ve consistently found in my own response to online interactive documentaries, even ones that are very finely crafted and aesthetically really beautiful and game-like. I’m more excited by the idea of them than the actual experience of them. Very quickly I’m like, “Well, I love the idea of this, but I’m not really excited about interacting alone with this material.”

The other thing from Bastards of Utopia was that when I had done screenings of the film or presentations on the book, I started to use the interactive documentary in ways that responded to questions or readers’ or viewers’ reactions. So people asked me something and I would say, well, there’s actually a video clip that I think is related to your question or concern. And I would show a clip from the archival documentary and people would then respond and talk and it would be more dynamic. And I realized that maybe there is a way to animate this form in a live and collective manner. And so I think that’s the other seed that was planted by this somewhat failed archival project. It’s interesting in relation to the book, but it isn’t a freestanding success, if I’m honest.

In The Maribor Uprisings, on the other hand, we created a live event, but also these narrative pathways, these different storylines that audiences could choose among at key points during
the screening. What's deceptive about *The Maribor Uprisings* is that it's very interactive. It creates an atmosphere in the theater that's very participatory. People have been more engaged with it than almost any other work I've done. The Q&A's can go on almost for days after, because people really are provoked by the work. But the pathways you're on, they're actually—I would say, pushing back against your question—very carefully crafted and edited. It took enormous work to make the pathways you're on such that they reach decision points that feel organic to the material, and in which the decision point had enough balance that the audience disagreed on which way to go and debated. So there actually was a lot of directorial finetuning to provoke the moments of discussion and interaction. Furthermore, the interaction that's important, for us as creators of this work, is not the interaction with the media, actually. More important than the interactivity with the media—the interactivity of choosing which media to watch, I'd argue, is the interaction that the media—through crafting of immersive experiences of protest, reflections on those experience, as well as the decision-points—provokes amongst the audience members gathered in the theater together. How do the people present, informed by the specificity of their local city's history of protest and political conflict, respond to the discussions that emerge? The interactivity of choosing which way to go at particular junctures is actually very constrained and highly-edited and carefully crafted. It took many test screenings to get those to a point where they work. So, while participants experience these choices as a giving up of some directorial control, that's not really the case with this particular work, if that makes sense.

**PENELOPE:** Yes, very much. This is really what we're interested in with the "data stories" concept. I guess not the end of authorship, but the classical model of authorship—the figure of the director creating original footage—is problematized. To accept that you're using the images of others, which even might be poor images. Especially for an anthropologist this is important: not being so focused on the quality of the image, as on the social meanings it might have. So, in short, giving over that control, to some extent, doesn't mean that you're just collecting random clips. Could we speak then of authorship as a kind of curation, along with that crafting of decision-points that you described?

We also address this issue in another essay in this volume on anthropological role-playing games. It seems that much of the work of "writing" lies in creating the questions or situations around which people are going to play the roles. It's not at all easy to come up with a dilemma with which people can truly engage and have the kind of debates that go on for that long. Something that was really helpful in what you were saying is this idea that it's not just that the role of the viewer is enhanced as a participant and maker in this, but the collective dimension: the aspect of collective viewership and the discourse around it. It's not just that it's more "fun" to be in Volos all together doing this together and being facilitated, but that you're interacting with other people. The point is to debate.

**LILLIAN:** What you both just said ties in very well with the question of the audiences and the viewing context of those screenings, especially in the case of *The Maribor Uprisings*. I saw that you also presented the film at the CPH:DOX (Copenhagen International Documentary Film Festival). I assume that you have also presented it at various academic conferences. I was wondering what the reception was like. How would you compare the reception within the context of a film festival where you have filmmakers and people maybe coming from more of an art background in comparison to an academic conference with anthropologists, for example! What have your experiences been like?
MAPLE: For me, that’s what’s been most rewarding about making this film. On the one hand, it’s been the most exhausting film to show repeatedly because it’s a live performance. Unlike other films, you know them so well, you’ve worked on them for years. You hit play. You leave. You have a beer and you come back later and answer questions. And there’s a certain set of questions that come up and a certain range of concerns. Occasionally you’re surprised, but you have that down after you’ve done a few festivals or conferences and presentations. But with this film, you have to facilitate it live every time. You have to watch that footage over and over again. And the screenings are much less predictable than other screenings. For instance, because the screening interacts with the local political history of the place where you’re screening in really remarkable ways, it expands the range of question you hear posed. At a place like CPH:DOX in Copenhagen, the audience there was diverse. You definitely had filmmakers, film festival and art folks. But Copenhagen is a large enough international city, that we found quite a diverse set of experiences to be present at that screening. For example, there were seven or eight Turkish activists in attendance who were in exile in Denmark, having left Turkey after the repression following the Gezi Park commune. At several key junctures in that screening, these activists made interventions about the politics of gender for women in a popular uprising. They discussed how some confrontational tactics valorize certain very masculine styles of protest. They were by no means condemning them, but they were acknowledging that these more masculine repertoires have consequences for the internal organization and dynamics of the movement, and can push women, in some cases, out of the center of organizing, which they have held in so many of these uprisings. So these women brought that into some of the key decision points to inform whether we should retreat and regroup or continue to fight the police at a particular moment, for example.

That sort of played out in different cities all around the world. The most recent screening I did that was interesting in this way was in Taiwan in the fall. There were quite a few organizers who had been going back and forth from Taiwan to support the protests in Hong Kong. So they were reflecting on movement responses to some of the tactical and ethical and political dilemmas brought up in the film that were quite different from some of the European or North American contexts in which the film had been discussed. It’s been really interesting to see the ways that gender, race, movement dynamics, and colonial histories have impacted how people respond to the material and what demands they make of their fellow audience members in relation to those histories and those differences.

LILLIAN: It seems like people are usually sharing their personal experiences, their experiences from back home and the political context from where they’re from. Has there ever been any major disagreement in the discussion when things got heated or very emotional? I can imagine definitely emotional. I was thinking of the Data-Stories Conference (Figure 5). We were all quite agreeable, I think. We were coming from an academic, anthropological background, a left-wing kind of background. In other screenings, were there ever any political clashes? Any drama?
Figure 5. Maple Razsa facilitating The Maribor Uprisings at the Data-Stories Confestival in Volos on Saturday June 1, 2019. Protesters set fire to signs featuring the Mayor Kangler and the slogan, “He’s Finished!”. Photo by Christina Mitsopoulou.

**MAPLE:** Yes, there have been moments. As we discussed earlier in response to Penelope's questions, these decisions, including for the audience, are clearly crafted decisions. People don’t forget that they’re in a theater. They don’t forget that this is an art form. They don’t really lose themselves so completely, of course, in this film. But, nonetheless, some of the stakes that are real—and this is part of doing this in-person and collectively—is that people do have to indicate publicly, both with their questions and comments and by the raising of their hands to vote, which direction they’re choosing, which side they are supporting. And I’ve even had moments where people disagreed with the people they came with and challenged one another: “After all we've been through, how can you do this and not that?”

So, there are interesting moments like that, or others such as in a screening we did in the Rooftop Films series in New York, which was organized outside in a public square in
downtown Brooklyn. There, a group of Black Lives Matter activists in attendance intervened at the same decision-point at which the Turkish women had intervened in Copenhagen. As an aside, it’s worth acknowledging that the protesters in Maribor appear to be completely white. To American eyes there appears to be no racial diversity in the film. There actually are racialized differences among the uprisings’ participants, differences that are only legible to people from the former Yugoslavia, but that’s another story. What’s interesting is that people from quite different backgrounds, and in quite different settings around the world, nonetheless find the questions raised by the film relevant, including questions around race. In any case, the BLM activists at the Brooklyn screening addressed those white audience members who had been pushing for a more confrontational path: “It's never safe for us to go to the most confrontational places in these protests. And we'd ask that people respect that and instead opt to regroup in safety and decide from there how to proceed.” This happened at a moment the audience had already done a quick straw poll to see in which direction they seemed to be headed before we discussed and then had a binding vote. And the BLM activists’ intervention shifted the direction in which the audience was initially headed.

Figure 6. An audience in downtown Brooklyn decides collectively how to proceed at a screening in the 2017 Rooftop Film summer series. Photo by Andrew Kirst.

I agree that the Volos screening was less confrontational, with less disagreement than in some places. What’s interesting is that often in Northern Europe or in predominantly white places in North America where I have shown the film, we more often take the less confrontational routes. People seem to have more faith in the authorities than they do in southern Europe or in more racially diverse audiences. I actually took the way that things went in Volos as having more to do with the fact that so many of the participants, given Greece’s recent political history, had their own experiences of protests, rather than that we had a shared academic background. I’ve found that academic audiences can be the most
resistant to this form, and anthropologists in particular. It seems to me they have an agenda to prove that they’re not taken in by this form, that they’re not getting emotional, that they’re keeping their distance, to show that they don’t buy this. So there’s often a kind of skeptical resistance to the interactive form amongst anthropologists, especially in more elite North American and Northern European settings than in other academic settings. I took the reception in Volos again to be more a matter, again, of Greece’s political history. Even though it was a pretty diverse group in Volos, there still was at least a half Greek audience, and people spoke in many cases about their experiences in the whole wave of protests within Greece over the past decade. Constantininos or Penelope, I don’t know if you have a different understanding of why things played out the way they did at that screening?

CONSTANTINOS: I think that people admired the project, so they might have been too positive. I promoted the work of Maple a lot, so people were positive and open to see it. In general, the people with whom I spoke really liked this approach of making collective decisions in a screening. For people who are working on this idea of making collective decisions in demonstrations, this film really touched them. So I guess that’s why they were super positive with the film and not that critical.

PENELOPE: One of the things that I was thinking about as you were speaking, Maple, is what makes a given screening successful for you. Because what you’re asking the audience to do is to enact the actual process of a being in an assembly. Many people in Greece have that experience. Whereas, for instance, I grew up in the U.S. and before I came to Greece, I wasn’t familiar with this type of political organizing. I just went to various marches, for women’s rights, for the environment, whatever. But we never engaged in these kinds of practices. Again, to bring in the theater here and Boal’s work that I mentioned earlier, you’re asking the audience almost to do theater in a way. But in Greece we know how this works. We’re able to do it. Not just speak about experiences, but to enact the process of listening to other people in the assembly. So, the question is: is it more successful if it goes against what people are used to doing, what they know, or is it successful because we can all appreciate this process, in the way Constantininos explained, in the Greek context? Of course, the screening can be successful on many levels at the same time.

What’s interesting, though, is how that success might be gauged less based on the film itself, than on how the screening goes, on the audience and the facilitation. Attending The Maribor Uprisings is not your conventional kind of film screening where the audience watches and then judges the film. In a sense, here, instead of making a complete film statement, you kind of “give up” your film to the audience, which is not easy to do. So, I’m wondering if you could speak about the role of the facilitator, which seems really crucial. As an anthropologist, it’s hard to step back and be a facilitator and let other people decide things. When you have studied something deeply, you certainly have your opinion. Could you speak a little about the role of the facilitator? It sounds like you might not even have fully realized how prominent that would be before you threw this work out into the world.

MAPLE: I don’t think we realized how prominent that would be when we were first conceptualizing the project, but as we did small test screenings, it became more and more clear how crucial that role would be. We found that the questions, as they were posed internal to the voiceover of the film, and then how these questions were amplified and facilitated by the facilitator, were crucial. We worked with two people to make that work. One was a theater director, Ian Carlsen, who also had worked as an editor and writer for role-playing games. And the other was a Black Lives Matter activist, Arlo Hennessey, in Portland, Maine.
where I live, who had experience using anti-racist and anti-authoritarian facilitation methods. We wove the insights from both of these collaborators into the script we created for facilitation.

This facilitation script allows anyone with an hour or two of preparation—reading through it carefully and watching the film once—to show the film without us. In some of the test screenings, we had Arlo run the film instead of me. I would say that in some ways that works better. Of course, often when people want to screen a film, they also want to bring the director too. But I think there's actually a problem in the commingling of the Q&A and the facilitation. I think there's a real tension between the much more open-ended questions that the film asks and that the facilitator asks, and the desire of the audience to have the director answer questions, to have the answers. I actually think that when someone else facilitates the film, and they are seen as a neutral medium for the discussion, then people in the audience actually turn to one another more, and less to the director for answers.

As far as my own criteria for when I feel like a screening is successful, it's when people don't ask only what happened in Maribor, which is more typically what happens with documentary films. Or, in festival settings, there are technical and artistic questions about the filmmaking. But with *Uprisings*, audiences often ask themselves and their fellow audience members, what would we do if this happened in our city? How would I respond to a popular uprising as a political subject, together with other people? And I think that my presence at screenings, as both the facilitator and director, muddles that a little, and actually takes a little bit of the responsibility away from the audience to grapple with those questions fully themselves. Except for those early test screenings, I haven't been able to observe a screening without being in the fray myself. I really should go to some screenings that someone else facilitates and just sit in the back and not be part of it at all. Festivals and activist gatherings have done their own facilitation occasionally, when I or my co-director haven’t been able to attend or there isn’t enough funding to bring one of us, but I haven’t actually ever just observed one of those.

**PENELOPE:** Fascinating, so letting going even more of that role of being the creator. But also recognizing that the facilitation script is also something that you've written, that takes a lot of thought to prepare. There's art in that.

**LILLIAN:** Going back to the question about the audiences. I was wondering, did you ever show this among your research participants or the subjects in the film? Have you ever done this kind of participatory screening with them? I'm curious.

**MAPLE:** I did. I went back and showed it several times in Maribor in different contexts, including at a local film festival there. I showed it in several squats and activist settings as well. We've talked already about festivals and academic settings, but I've shown it in a lot of movement settings as well.

This uprising happened in the winter of 2012-2013. The film was finished in 2016, but the film didn't really come out in festivals until 2017. I mention those dates because there were interesting political divisions that emerged out of the screening in Maribor that are related to recent political developments. As comes out in the reflections at the end of the film, the uprising achieved far more than people initially had demanded: the mayor was removed, the automated radar system that gave people speeding tickets, which was the spark that first started this uprising, those were disabled, and the national government even fell. Nonetheless, as this movement rose, people started to have much larger hopes for how things would
change, but they didn't change as much as they had hoped. So, one thing I would say that became clearer showing the film, three or four years after that uprising, was that actually it was quite painful for some participants to watch and to feel the hopes and the power that they had felt at that moment and that felt so far away to them now. That's something I've heard from movement participants in other settings as well. The collective power you feel in these moments and in these uprisings, on the one hand, sustains you for years, but, on the other, makes clear how little power you have most of the time and how little you're asked, or welcome to ask, the big important political questions that emerge from popular uprisings. So it was painful for people in Maribor to watch the film in some ways.

The other issue that came up was that there were small far-right fascist elements that tried to co-opt the protest, which we, of course, were aware of in making the film, but didn't take on as one of the central themes. It's something we often talk about in the discussions of the film afterwards, but we didn't put at the center of the film. We finished that film just a couple of months before Trump won the election, a couple of months before the far right really came out publicly as a part of American life in the way that it now has. I think if we had made the film a year later, as Americans, having a reckoning with that would have felt like a more urgent question. We kept the focus of the film around the ways that movements are divided and turned against themselves, as good and bad protesters, which remains an important dynamic. A film can't do everything of course. But with a little bit of distance, I think we would have also taken on "how do you deal with the presence of far-right fascist elements that are trying to co-opt a populist left uprising like this?" The questions of that not being engaged—I want to be honest and self-critical about this—those became questions for some anti-fascist and radical activists who were participants in the uprisings, and who expressed concern that that wasn't dealt with more directly in the film.

I am sympathetic with this, but I also would push back against this sentiment in some ways, which I'm happy to talk about. If I were to engage fascist presence, then, more fully, what I would have argued for and made clearer is that those elements need to be confronted. You need to struggle to keep a movement open for people who might be threatened by those fascist elements. But not that we should retreat from an uprising because of that presence. I think what some activists were saying in response to the film was that once there were any fascists present, we, as radical participants, should have removed ourselves and retreated. That was a point on which I and Andrej Kurnik, a radical Slovene activist and political theorist who wrote the film with me, were in disagreement with some activists in Slovenia, but I'm getting into the weeds of Slovenian activist politics! But that's a little bit of the local reception, Lillian, and the dynamics around it.

LILLIAN: I do think we should move towards talking about affirmative ethnography. But Constantinos had a question before.

CONSTANTINOS: In your new participatory approach, Maple, in addition to the cinematic subjects who take cameras into their hands to tell their own stories, as happens in participatory video practices, now the viewers themselves have a say in how and what they watch. Furthermore, in the process of participatory viewing, The Maribor Uprisings adds the idea of taking collective decisions. As we have discussed, multimedia projects up until then were limited to individual screenings of the viewer through personal computers. In a long-term view, we could say that your approach to live interactive video and the shift from the computer to the movie theater parallels that of the Lumière brothers’ intervention. Their cinematograph replaced the kinetoscope, Edison’s invention for personal film viewing, one
person at a time. So I was wondering if we can consider the live participatory documentary a new documentary genre? Has *The Maribor Uprisings* already inspired new filmmakers?

**MAPLE:** I have consulted with and advised a few people who are working on projects that felt inspired to take them in this direction, but none of those have come to fruition yet. We see the first commercial version of this interactive form in the *Black Mirror* episode “Bandersnatch.”

Unlike the Lumière brothers’ innovation, which multiplied cinema’s commercial opportunities, though, I would say that the interactive form *limits* rather than expands, commercial opportunities. I’m okay with that. We knew that when we made a film like this that it would mostly screen when we were present. We knew that rather than numerically larger virtual audiences, with weaker and individualizing online experiences, we would cultivate smaller live audience experiences that we hoped would be more intense.

We did work for a while with Slovenian television around the concept of doing a live interactive screening of this on TV. We proposed that people would vote with SMS voting like they do on national TV game shows. Our secret plan, which we didn’t tell them about, was that when they showed it on TV, we would do live screenings in the city squares where these uprisings happened around the country. So that people would actually be re-enacting the uprisings during the live screenings and voting collectively from city squares, rather than only individually from their living rooms.

There’s two limits on this live participatory form, which I must acknowledge, though I’m obviously really invested in it. It’s both more difficult to do wider screenings for people *and* it’s an enormous amount more work as well. You edit scenes that people don’t even ever see because they take different pathways. And there’s the extra work of creating this form. So, yes, I do hope that people will take it up since it has very potent effects for people’s subjective responses to film and the collective experiences they can have. But there are reasons that filmmakers might be hesitant to adopt it as well.

**PENELOPE:** For us at Data-Stories, it was a revelation to see how it’s these kinds of events, like Saturday night’s screening of *The Maribor Uprisings*, that anchor the idea of a conference that’s a *confestival*. All of the data-stories that we have in mind have this aspect of creating an encounter. This is essential to our idea of data-Stories as a potential model for a film festival for the digital era.

Also now, in the pandemic moment, it seems even more important to think about what it means to get together. Who is in the room? To whom is the invitation is made? That makes this form, I agree, *not* commercial, but definitely political and really something to cultivate. This coming together can also happen through other kinds of events and workshops that break out of the standard model of the conference. In the pandemic it has become increasingly clear that as much as we all like to get together, just to get together to hear someone read a paper might not be the best use of this precious occasion. In the same way that we’re rethinking the classroom, if we actually rethink it and don’t fetishize that we just need to get back there. I think we need to get together but to do *different* things together. So a form like the live participatory film is really inspiring in terms of what it can do for the events that are built around it.
**MAPLE:** What the confestival showed me was that bringing people together for these crucial and focused conversations, but also for these experiments in watching and interacting with media, can be so important. I think media are often thought about in terms of scale rather than intensity. And I think that the intensity of how we are affected or changed by encounters with new forms, with new people, with new ideas, shouldn’t be underestimated. We tend to think in terms of how many people saw a film, how many people read a book, etc. I think that sometimes, gatherings that explore new forms, that cross-fertilize people’s creativity, and where we encounter new approaches to data-stories, for example, can really have an outsized influence, one that’s much more important than scale. These gatherings can enable us to be aware of one another and they can give rise to a new community of collaboration and experimentation.

**III. Activist video and empowerment in the age of Black Lives Matter protests: Bodily presence, resistant audition and affirmative ethnography**

**PENELOPE:** For the last part of this interview, we would like to segue back to your discussion about activist video and connect it to this particular historical moment and the Black Lives Matter uprising in which we have seen this vast expansion of networked culture and witnessing texts. Video activism on social media networks has exploded as people are documenting what’s going on and witnessing extreme acts of violence. So, we were wondering if you could reflect on this moment in relation to *The Maribor Uprisings*, but also your own participation this summer in protests, as a citizen and as an ethnographer.

**LILLIAN:** I was very impressed, Maple, by the article you wrote, “Beyond ‘Riot Porn’: Protest Video and the Production of Unruly Subjects.” I like how you brought up the importance of the indexicality of the video and the photograph as a direct link “between the historical reality before the camera and the image recorded” (2014, p. 12). While reading this, I couldn’t help but think of what’s happening now: the Black Lives Matter moment/movement, the recent deaths that we’ve been seeing online. The horror. My first question would be about how, in your research, your subjects start creating new subjectivities and therefore new forms of power by understanding themselves as “unruly subjects.” I was also curious whether you feel that this also connects to the moment now, or if it’s something slightly different. I am wondering if we could draw any parallels.

**MAPLE:** Those are really important questions. I’m glad that you had a chance to read that article reflecting on “riot porn”—that is, amateur videos of protesters that are focused on physical clashes with the authorities—and its various uses in activist life. This article comes out of my earlier field work with anarchists and autonomists in the early 2000s when video technology, in general, and digital video, in particular, became broadly accessible. Movements widely gained the capacity to produce high-quality images during this period, whereas previously you’d really needed to have some specialized film or video training. I was interested in all the different ways that radical movements began to use the images they were producing, especially in contrast to the ways that they were used in human rights practice. While human rights videos tended to center on witnessing and on the documentation of victimization by the state, the radical activists with whom I was working were, as your question emphasizes, Lillian, stressed bodies in resistance, and even tried to cultivate themselves as unruly subjects. We see both of these things happening in the proliferation of videos produced around Black Lives Matter. We see people documenting police abuses. We see the brutal torture and killing of Black bodies in particular. Video is here, of course, very much functioning as a technology of witnessing. But activists are also using video to show the rich variety of forms of resistance
to state violence and to valorize the forms of physical resistance that have emerged to contest police violence.

So, rather than only showing victimhood, many of these videos capture a real sense of collective power and ways of resisting. I think we see both of those unfolding in the Movement for Black Lives. We can see in some of the criticism of Black activists and scholars to the circulation of these images of suffering and killing that, as powerful and important as these images are, people have reached a certain saturation point. Personally, I have never watched the murder of George Floyd, for example. I still haven’t watched that video. I’ve watched hundreds of videos of people in the street protesting, challenging the authorities around that murder, but I haven’t watched that video. I think in part that’s because people instead want to focus on forms of empowerment, rather than disempowerment and suffering. The other thing about the indexicality of video images is that part of the power of these images isn’t only that they are a first-hand witnessing of what movements are doing, a record of what has unfolded on the street. They also are always a record of the camera person’s bodily presence in the street too. I think this is part of the power of the images of uprisings that we’re seeing right now in the US, but that we’ve seen in a lot of other settings. These are aspects of the video images that we really tried to accentuate with The Maribor Uprisings.

Please see HTML version for accompanying video content

Figure 7. Video recorded from within social struggles bears the traces of the bodily positioning of the person who recorded those images, especially in popular uprisings. Video sample courtesy of EnMasse Films.

We did a lot of things in the editing room and in sound design, with advice from Ernst Karel from Harvard’s Sensory Ethnography Lab, to accentuate the viewer’s awareness of the bodily presence of the camera as a form of political participation. An important blurring of observation and participation, if you will. Every image is a record not only of what’s in front of the camera, but of where the person filming stood in relationship to that event. You feel with the cameras in the streets, in the Maribor uprisings and you feel with the Black Lives Matter protests today, that those cameras are positioned within the protest, amongst the protesters, in support of the protests, and also at bodily risk themselves. That’s so different from the images we usually have—to state the obvious—of cameras positioned behind the police lines, which position the audience to be protected by the police from those bad protesters. Instead you’re amongst the bodies of the protesters being threatened by the police. As a viewer you feel a bit of that bodily risk.

What we tried to do in the film and what I’ve tried to do in my ethnographic work is not only to criticize policing, not only to criticize the dominant economic ideas of the moment, say, neoliberalism. I think to do that only places the police, or places neoliberalism, at the center of our attention, as the central and inescapable focus of our lives. I think the real crisis we have today is one of not being able to imagine alternatives, even as the current order is exhausted, obviously exhausted and obviously creaking under the weight of its failures. The existing order is unable to solve the most basic problems we have in our lives. This has never been clearer to more people than it is at the moment. Yet, I don’t think we, as scholars, have done enough work to affirm what the alternatives might be, to actually see in the practices of the people we are working with, to recognize how these practices are already the seeds of an alternative order. If we can be part of the valorization, the amplification, the display of
those alternatives, I think that's where we can develop an affirmative, rather than just a critical, anthropology or filmmaking.

PENELlope: I'm very fascinated by this since I've written about witnessing myself and this “paradox of visibility.” You said you didn’t see the Floyd video, but just the other day the sheriff in Kenosha, Wisconsin, also said he hadn't seen the video of the shooting of Jacob Blake [the 29-year-old was shot and seriously injured by policemen on August 23, 2020, sparking widespread protests]. On the one hand, we need this visibility of violence because obviously without this documentation, it wouldn't be acknowledged, nobody would believe it, right? There wouldn't be this effective movement. Yet we also know that there's a limit. In the book of Bastards of Utopia, you also gesture to how activist video, in addition to being a masculinist genre, might be realist in a naive way. If we can get the document, it's settled. The “seeing is believing” of visual realism. But again and again we have seen that's not enough. Also, as you're suggesting, it can lead to the retraumatizing of the victim through its continual repetition. So it's important that you're showing that the camera is not a “transparent window” on reality, that you're asking us to think critically about mediation itself.

MAPLe: Maybe it's worth saying a bit more about how we tried to accentuate that in the film and why I think that matters. I think there were two main strategies. One was in the editing choices and the other in the sound design. The first involved simply including a number of key moments that were classically reflexive, where you become aware of the presence of the camera. So, a policeman with a plexiglass shield is seen (and heard) actually hitting the camera and pushing the cameraperson back, as he shouts, “Get out of here with your cameras.” Or a protestor, putting their hand right like this [M. puts his hand completely over his laptop’s camera] over the camera lens and grabbing it because they think the camera is a television crew. So the question of who's representing and how comes to the fore.

Please see HTML version for accompanying video content

Figure 8. The sound design for The Maribor Uprisings accentuated the link between the audio the audience was hearing and the specific position from which that audio was recorded by using hard audio cuts and eschewing cross-fades, which tend to soften the transitions between audio clips. Video clip courtesy of EnMasseFilms.

But the other was through sound design. Not just those moments where you hear the camera get struck and you're reminded of it, but by very deliberately not creating a privileged audio design, meaning that the sound editing room is not omnipotent and the microphones are not omnipresent. As a viewer—well as a listener really—you don't get to get the best sound from everywhere at every moment. It's not a smooth soundscape underneath the various activist video shots. Instead, you have hard audio cuts when you switch cameras. You go from one to the next one and you're reminded as a listener that you are in a new place, and you know you're in a new place because you're tied to the body of the person who was actually present there filming and recording audio. That's what enables you to be there. And you're now somewhere new. If you have a screening with a high-end sound system, it's very jarring and it actually is one of the things that gives people a sense of feeling physically vulnerable. It's a key part of what makes a viewer feel a little that “I'm there and I'm tied to this camera.” You hear the cameraperson coughing and things like that as well, but it's also that you're tied not only to the point of view of the camera, but also to the point of listening of that particular person as well. That gives you that sense of the auditory equivalent of perspective. It reminds
you that the condition of possibility for what you're watching, and listening to, is a particular person, standing in a particular place. This is not a film that has access to all sound, can be anywhere and is god-like. No, you're there because of a particular person. The reason I think that matters is that one also feels not just that to be there with a camera is a form of political participation, like I mentioned before, but that the body of the filmmaker is on the line and therefore the body of the audience becomes aware of the bodily stakes of being present there.

**PENELLOPE:** In this contemporary moment when there are just so many cameras out there, and based on what you said before about doing an affirmative ethnography—which doesn't just reinscribe scenes of violence, focusing always on the clash with the police—do you see work happening in that direction around the BLM protests? Are you yourself working on something?

**MAPLE:** I hope that someone is making something along those lines. This is happening at the same time as Covid-19 when travel is impossible, even within the US. I'm in a relatively small city in a rural part of the country where we've had just absolutely moving, remarkable protests, but I wouldn't describe it as an uprising. I've been doing this work mostly in the classroom. I'm teaching a course right now with students where we're documenting and archiving the Movement for Black Lives in Maine and gathering stories and material that participants shot, but then producing some of our own media as well. I do think that there would be possibilities to do something much more ambitious than *The Maribor Uprisings* in this direction, but I'm not sure if anyone is taking that on right now.

**PENELLOPE:** Visual literacy has become totally imperative at this moment in time, given the power of the image and the way it's being constantly manipulated. It's so critical to politics today.

**MAPLE:** Yes. Absolutely. And that's something we've tried to place at the center of audiences' experiences of *Uprisings*. The film has two faces. On the one hand, it attempts, in the ways I just described, to immerse the viewer, to grab the viewer by the sensory lapels and douse them in the auditory and the visual experience of being in a protest. On the other hand, in its interactive and essayistic modes, *Uprisings* tries to pull viewers out of that immersion through the collective decision-making, as well as through some of the essayistic reflections. In these latter modes we try to invite viewers to be aware of, and think about, how images are affecting them and how images come to have this power over us. So I would say that Milton and I have very much tried to give people some of the tools to reflect on how they are affected and how politically important such images are. I think that kind of work is very urgent at this moment. I'm continuing to do screenings with this film, which bring some of those questions to the fore, but it really needs to be done with this material too.

So I hope someone's doing it. I don't think I'm the right person to do it about this uprising either. I really think it should be done by filmmakers of color. Not least because the questions we're asking about are such embodied questions that, while I'm aware of and I raise these questions, I think in the U.S. this has to be done by Black filmmakers who can reflect on some of the specific embodied experiences of racialized bodies. The ideas that David MacDougall (2006) has developed around the "corporeal image" are very important to me, and influential to the work we've discussed here, but he doesn't turn much, if any, of his attention to the specific qualities of racialized bodies in front of the camera, or the racialized bodies of those holding the camera. But, around BLM, I think attention to the specificity of racialized
experiences of embodiment really matters. And so I think I'm not the right person for that project.

References

Film
*The Maribor Uprisings* (2017, directors Milton Guillén and Maple Razsa)

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