The Emergence of a Lumpen-consumerate: The Aesthetics of Consumption and Violence in the English Riots of 2011

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Suggested Running Title: The Emergence of a Lumpen-consumerate:

Abstract:

Within hours of the outset of unrest in the August 2011 English Riots, the government asserted that they were the doings of “criminal gangs.” In doing so government officials and journalistic commentators cited television images of rioting and plundering youths. Although this assertion was subsequently abandoned, it reflected an on-going process: the criminalization of youth in Britain. The recycled images of flames and hooded teenagers came to serve as the proof of youth “gone bad.” This paper explores both the actions supposedly captured in the images depicting the riots, and the discourses surrounding the reproduction of those images. It seeks to connect the youth politics of the everyday – especially the problems of being ignored as political subjects – to the formal political structures that rely on youth to be socially unruly on one hand, and disciplined consumers on the other. Segments of British youth are cast out, seen as unneeded or unwanted in this disciplinary project, and constitute what I call here a “lumpen-consumerate.” The paper concludes with a comparative analysis of the consumer images that both discipline young people and serve as a model for framing the unrest. The paper builds upon Deleuze, Bourdieu, Bauman and others in order to examine how spontaneous, uncoordinated action came to be read through mass media spectacle as dismissible and intolerable images of “criminal gangs” to be policed.

Key Words: Collective Violence, Riots, Consumer Culture, Neo-Liberal Capitalism, Aesthetics, Identity, Belonging

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“No one at the top of society, in government or in City Hall cares about or speaks for them [these young people]: they have no prospects for jobs... This is anger and disaffection.”

-- Ken Livingston, former Mayor of London¹

“Come on let’s commit some crimes! Yeah, let’s get sushi and not pay.” – *Repo Man*

INTRODUCTION

Its midnight, and the crowd outside of the hip, new clothing store is growing, clamouring for the gates to be opened, pressing against one another. A triumphant cheer goes up, as the barrier to their entry into the store gives way, and the steel gate rises; young people squeeze under the barrier, rush inside the store before others can get there, and grab all they can. Throughout the store people run for what they want, stacking their loot in their arms.

Elsewhere, in another store, one news outlet called the chaos of young people rushing in to rip dresses from displays and gather all they could carry as “nothing short of a stampede”. “Posses were on a mission; running, pushing and grabbing.” It took only two minutes and twenty-nine seconds for all of the store’s racks to be emptied, and the merchandise to be whisked away in bundles and piles. Not knowing what they grabbed in the commotion, many would begin a complex series of trading with others to get what they wanted. But the initial strategy was clear: rush in and grab all one could.

In both stores, camera crews and photojournalists and reporters documented the events, tried to stay out of the way, and were both jostled and ignored, as otherwise modest women stripped off their clothes to try others ones on, and in other places, otherwise unnoticed men fought over televisions and threw merchandise at one another. The doors of a store were ripped off their hinges, thrown out of the way, while hundreds of young people, dressed in their hoodies, rushed the store to snatch up Nike Air Jordans, tripped and fell over one another; many panicked that

they might be crushed in a pile. In yet a different store, two men actually shot one another over the toys each was trying to grab.²

Chaos, greed, pandemonium, and violence, surely these must have been the scenes from Tottenham to Croydon in London from 2011. Yet these events did not occur in the UK, but rather in the US; and they are not meant to be condemned but celebrated. Well, not the shooting part, or the damage to the doors. The rest of the images are presented in a spirit of wonder and frivolity. The professional news reporters earnestly described the discounts to be found, while the amateur narrators capturing the images on their phone-cams laughed in amazement at the size and intensity of the crowds, posting all they see on YouTube and other social media. These are scenes from a California mall on Black Friday – the shopping day after the U.S. Thanksgiving holiday – 2011; from the bi-annual “running of the brides” wedding-gown super sale at U.S. retailer Filene’s Basement in 2008; and from a shopping mall in Indianapolis on the launch of the latest Nike Air Jordan XI in December 2011. These are events of capitalist triumphalism: they depict the extremes to which we have been taught to go to battle for the best deal, to be competitive shoppers, to go home with the most toys, gadgets, and fashion items.

In an undated and unattributed photo ostensibly documenting the London Riots from a website named -- creatively enough -- Londonriots.org.uk, the image is reminiscent of one of the Black Friday scenes: man slips under the steel gate of a store with a television set in his hands. Only this time rather than a smile, it is a kerchief he has across his face.³ There are shards of broken glass suggesting that the group of men surrounding the man with the television have helped him to break into this shop and take electronics. Other men stand ready to either go in themselves or receive further bounty from inside the shop. Yet in this surreal moment of consumerism, on the web page an advertisement has been linked to the photo. The text reads: “You have the TV, you have the movies... give your family the surround sound they deserve.” At the bottom of the ad is a hotlink to an on-line electronic superstore selling home theatre equipment and sound systems.⁴ The ad suggests that it does not matter *how* you came by the TV, what matters now is that you “give your family the surround sound they *deserve*” by purchasing it bizrate.com.

Illustration 1 & 2

Keeping in mind the difficulty of distinguishing between celebrated shopping and condemned rioting, this paper will explore the processes involved in creating what Jacques Rancière calls “intolerable images.” Through these images, a narrative of the event in its entirety is woven. This narrative is then used to structure the public’s understanding of the causes, to delimit the boundaries of the events, to encourage particular emotional responses, and to specify and justify state actions, both in the immediate aftermath and in relation to future happenings and applications of state power. The paper will examine the concept of spectacle in this moment of high consumerism and increasing state austerity, a moment marked by the spread of affective capitalism, characterised by the widespread acceptance of welfare state contraction and shrinking state responsibility. I argue that the chaotic days and nights in London in the summer of 2011 were political events, but not in a traditional sense.

These were not the student protests of 1968, or even of 2009, when British students in London engaged in direct action to protest the raising of university tuition and fees to £9000 per annum. Nor were they the riots of Oldham and Bradford in 2001, the Dudley and Leeds riots of 1991, or the Brixton riots of 1981. They were not about student or worker empowerment; nor protests against specific government policy; nor expressions of inter-ethnic strife, tensions with the police; and they were not a fight against racism. The 2011 events were about many young people asserting their equality to consume in a market environment in which they have been excluded. They were – in the words of Zygmunt Bauman -- “a mutiny of defective and disqualified consumers” (2012:11). These three nights of stores being emptied, of cars being burned, and public defiance of the police and other authorities witnessed the emergence of what I call a “Lumpen-Consumerate” demanding to be included in the contemporary affective mode of consumption: to possess the consumer items necessary to be someone.

CONTROL AND THE RISE OF A LUMPEN-CONSUMERATE

In 1990 Gilles Deleuze wrote of the coming shift away from the disciplinary societies that Foucault had so eloquently described as emerging in the eighteenth century and reaching their zenith in the beginning of the twentieth (1990:3). Whereas disciplinary societies are characterised by enclosures, differentiating one conceptual space from another and establishing a rigid boundary between them, control societies give the impression of permeability and free movement, but subtly regulate passage. Deleuze writes “enclosures are *molds*, distinct castings, but controls are a *modulation*, like a self-deforming cast that will continuously change from one moment to the other, or like a sieve whose mesh will transmutate from point to point” (1992:4). Exclusion is not fixed in a territorial or physical fashion, but is experienced rather as incapacity or deficiency. In a society of control what is important, Deleuze writes, is a code; it is a password (1990:3), which indicates whether someone is to be accepted, provided access, or afforded trust. In this way, I suggest those who do not possess the code are either unaware of their deficiency or else experience this lack as a personal incapacity. They internalize the judgment that something is wrong with them that can be rectified with the correct purchase, the correct performance, or the correct mode of consumption.

In contemporary consumer society it is marketing that sets these codes. We can imagine this as a further elaboration on the work of Pierre Bourdieu. Bourdieu described the central feature of the practice of distinction as an exclusion based on not knowing. “Social order is progressively inscribed in people’s minds” through “cultural products” including systems of education, language, judgements, values, methods of classification and activities of everyday life (1984:471). These all lead to an unconscious acceptance of social differences and hierarchies, to ‘a sense of one’s place’ and to behaviours of self-exclusion. Being “last year”, “out of style” or a “wanna be”, “being behind”, means not “being in.” The more removed from the means of producing control, the more redundant one becomes, and at present much of the means of producing that control is through particular forms and modes of consuming.

In affective capitalism surplus value is created not through labour extraction, but via emotional extraction. Consumers co-create value by believing they are more emotionally fulfilled through the consumption of specific objects, and are thus willing to pay more for the experience of possessing, wearing, or ingesting the object or “the commodity” consumed. More importantly they are happiest and express their love and humanity the most when they are actively consuming. Colin Campbell writes: “Since ... more and more areas of contemporary society have become assimilated to a ‘consumer model’ it is hardly surprising that the underlying metaphysics of consumerism has in the process become a kind of default philosophy for all modern life” (Campbell in Bauman 2007:28).

Slavoj Žižek writes that we no longer buy commodities “on account of their utility,” rather we buy them “to get the experience provided by them.” “We consumer them in order to render our lives meaningful” (2009:52). New objects, new styles, new sounds must all be consumed to demonstrate that one has status and social capital in the new consumerist society. This creates an endless sense of change. The experience of consumption provides meaning in a world in which consumption *is* the meaning. No longer is the possession of an object important; rather it is the experience of the object, and perhaps more importantly the experience of the moment of consuming that object. It is an inexhaustible process in which there is no “enough.” For it is not the accumulation of objects that conveys social meaning, but the endless participation in consumer culture. One may have “enough” items collected and accumulated, stored and stockpiled; but if the focus shifts to consuming, then there is never an “enough” for one can only attempt to be constantly consuming. Just as Deleuze points out that “control is short-term and of a rapid rate of turn-over, it is also continuous and without limit” (1992:6), the practice of consumerism creates permanent change, or what Bauman calls an “unnerving sense of insecurity” (2007). Not only is there the threat of exclusion based on improper modes of conduct/modes of consumption, demonstrating that one does not “know” the codewords, but this threat of exclusion is also never ending. At each moment, in a multiplicity of circumstances, one must demonstrate the knowledge of belonging. Yet there are few clues as to how to ascertain such knowledge.

The great difficulty of discerning these codes is that they are conjoined with the articulation of the virtues of liberal individualism. Each of us must learn these codes through marketing and advertising, not necessarily through social interaction. This is in part because the valorised individual operates alone; consumption may be an act of social performance done to demonstrate one's position and status to others, but it is an individual act. It is not a collective act. Moreover to express this individuality, the knowing consumer is entreated to break social conventions. One can imagine innumerable television advertisements that admonish viewers to never be less than their fullest potential, to never accept the rules, to take "no" for answer, or to expect less. For example, in a 2011 Levi Legacy Jeans advertisement, which was banned in the UK because it depicted scenes reminiscent of the London riots, the voice over declares "your life is your life!" Part of the text reads:

Beyond the watch the gods will give you chances:
Know Them.
Take Them.
You can't beat death/ but you can beat death in life.
Your life is your life.
Know it while you have it.
You are marvellous!
The gods want to delight in you/ go forth!⁵

As images of guitar wielding young men and slam dancing women give way to scenes of tear gas canisters exploding in the street, a solitary figure in jeans and a leather jacket walks up to a line of police in riot gear. He defiantly raises his arms in to the air, beckoning them to approach.⁶ Is it a dare? Is it an act of madness? Is this what the gods want to delight in? Is this when we are most marvellous? Do we live our lives as our lives when we defy the police? The message appears as a reversal of Kant's "*Du kannst, denn du sollst!*" "You can, because you must" becomes "You must, because you can" (Kant quoted in Žižek 2009:58).

What does all of this actually mean? How is one to know which conventions are to be broken as an expression of being a knowing, belonging consumer, and which conventions must be maintained to exclude the unknowing defective non-consumer? The Polish absurdist playwright and satirist Sławomir Mrożek writes of these consumer messages while he was living in France:

I was told “to refuse to accept any limits”...I was told: “invent yourself, invent your own life, and manage it as you wish, in every single moment from beginning to end.” But am I able to rise to such a task? With no help?⁷

Further, the stakes of exclusion can be incredibly high. Bauman has suggested that exclusion may even be irreversible. It is the “irrevocability of their eviction and the dimness of the chances of appeal against the verdict that makes the contemporary excluded into dangerous classes” (Bauman 2007:69). In earlier moments of capitalism, unemployment represented a temporary condition of exclusion –or outsider status – from the norm of being within the power relationship between proletariat and bourgeoisie.

For Marx those permanently outside these arrangements of socially useful production constituted a lumpen-proletariat, a rogue proletariat, or literally a proletariat in rags. In an age of production they are the “refuse of all classes” and the “flotsam of society.”⁸ In the age of consumerism the excluded are a redundant, disposable group incapable of performing the required codes of conduct: consuming. Beyond their inability to act as consuming selves, the excluded are further irrelevant as a collective, for they provide no useful data on spending habits or consumer preferences. Deleuze suggested that the shift to a society of control was marked by the passage of the individual/mass pairing of productionist-disciplinary societies. That is, in control society this duality evaporates because individuals have been rendered as “dividuals”, reducible component attributes to be catered to or sought after, while the masses have become survey samples, composite data, market shares, or time banks.⁹ No longer the solitary body contrasted with masses of bodies, the individual/mass dyad gives way to the data-point/algorithm capable generating infinite sequences on new information. Just as the lumpen-proletariat was comprised of the excluded who did not or could not contribute to mass production, the presently excluded constitute a lumpen-consumerate of defective and redundant non-consumers, who add nothing to the knowledge of consumer habits, who cannot contribute to political and social life as governed by a politics and ethics – and aesthetics – of continuous consumption.

THE AESTHETICS OF EXCLUSION

In this shift consumers supplant humans, as consumer culture makes humans, *qua* their uniqueness as individuals, superfluous. Few images represent this more than those of the fashion photographer Jean François Campos, who juxtaposes runway models dressed in *haute couture* with people living in slums around the world.¹⁰ He takes great pride that these images are not photo-shopped; he travels to *favelas* and other similar areas of deprivation for his location shoots. In one photo a tall, very white model with shockingly blonde hair and dressed in very high heels, leather leggings, and fur shrug, sits slouched in a chair above two peasant women sitting on rocks and dressed in rags cast off by the first world. All three directly face the camera; no one looks away. Yet while the model wears the stunned, expressionless face of the catwalk zombie, suggesting a slight annoyance with being in the world, or being bothered to stop her busy day of living high fashion, the two women sitting with her have pained expressions on their weathered and worn, distinctively brown faces. In terms of the social life of consuming, when one sees the photo one instantly knows to which side of the photo one belongs. Does one notice the shoes, the hair, the cut of the dress, the quality of fabric, and experience a desire to purchase this “look” at what will assuredly be at a of very high price? Or does one see the painful contrast between one who represents power and of two who will never belong?

In a similarly disturbing image, Campos poses the same “size-one” model with two young teenaged boys. Again the contrast between her porcelain white skin and their dark brown complexion is quite striking. But in this photo it is similarity that actually marks the boundary between included objects of consumer desire and the excluded objects of contempt: the boys appear to be rather emaciated. Their rib cages clearly visible, it is the image of their paper-thin skin pulled tightly over their breastplates, that makes one think of the images from the concentration camps of the Bosnia War, and earlier horrors of the twentieth century. The model is likewise very thin, but we know her protruding clavicles reflect her embodiment of an aesthetic norm and not inadequate nutrition or exposure to waterborne parasites.

Illustration 3

Illustration 4

The artist, photographer, and social critic Martha Rosler's work stands in stark contrast to that of Campos. Rosler rose to prominence in the late 1960s and early 1970s with her photomontages *Body Beautiful or Beauty Knows No Pain* (1966-1972), which critiqued consumerism and domestic life, and *Bringing the War Home: House Beautiful* (1967-1972), which contrasted middle class American complacency and consumerism with the trials and costs of the Vietnam War. She revived the *Bringing the War Home* series as a critique of the Iraq War in 2006-2008. Rosler's work is intended to induce the discomfort that attends seeing matter out of place. We are meant to see the war in our living room, but not through the confined and distanced space of the television set. She places the war outside of our windows, climbing our stairs, and adorning our walls as "art", making the war inescapable, as it should be, and as it is for those who live it.

In her piece “Photo Op” we see a similar “glamorous” blonde fashion model contrasted by two framing bodies.

Illustration 5

In this case, rather than looking into the camera, Rosler’s model is “posing” for a self-shot on her camera phone, and the framing bodies are two dead Iraqi girls lounging in Danish design chairs. Behind them, through the picture window, we see an explosion or fire silhouetting a tank. The model gazing into her phone like Narcissus on the riverbank, is oblivious to the chaos outside of her window, and to the proximity of death in the chairs of sleek Scandinavian designed sitting room. The model in Rosler’s piece looks at herself while ignoring the persons around her, the model in Campos’s photos looks at you. Rosler works to shock us by placing the familiar and the desirable side by side with the violent and the painful. In Campos’s work we are invited to see ourselves in the glamour of the fashion model, and in that act of longing to consume and be her we must exclude the others in the photographs as merely part of the background, the scenery. Those who are excluded are superfluous. The fashion model and the photo crew will pack up after the day’s shoot, and leave the women and the boys in the photos behind to live their lives in poverty without so much as a thought. At best the excluded form the backdrop against which the included can admire their own beauty. This is a challenge for the social critique at the heart of Rosler’s work. She writes with frustration: “It has become difficult to arouse any kind of protest when people’s main concerns centre around appearances and the consumption of brands.”¹¹

In a control society the narration of the image shapes our emotional response. The narration of the fashion photographs draws our attention away from the human qualities of those who stand near, but are merely the backdrop framing the models. The others – the excluded – are like the landscape, to which we may have an emotional response, but to which we have no social obligations or responsibilities. We are told we need not look away, because Campos's photos are not social critique; his photos are the social codes of fashion. Rather than look away we are invited to identify, and yet if we do not identify with the model, with the fashion, then the image was not for us. We don't get it. Thus control society creates expectations of emotional as well as physical codes of conduct. In the case of the fashion images, the emotion valorized is desire and not the feeling of pity or guilt. Similarly the emotional conduct in response to the images of the riots is fear. Those who are not fearful, who display inappropriate emotions, are to be regarded as suspicious or potentially defective, unworthy of empathetic identification, and perhaps unworthy of trust or inclusion.

THE MAN IN THE WHITE RUNNING SUIT

The face of the events of August 2011 was a man in a white running suit who, ironically, was covering his face. On BBC footage we can see the man in the space of a very short period of time (only a few minutes), aggressively throw coffee at police officers; take a wooden beam from a truck; use the beam to break windows on a bus; unsuccessfully try to break the front window of a Ladbrokes betting parlour; throw the beam at a different police officer; and then run out of the view of the camera. But it was Kerim Okten's photo of the man covering his face, which went out on the National News/ZUMA wire, that was reproduced again and again, selected by editors from *Mother Jones* to *The Conversation* to adorn their coverage.¹²

The man in Hackney is caught by Okten striding past a burning car in a posture of defiance. His face is invisible -- a black void surrounded by his white hoodie. Any face, any persona could be projected onto his body. The image conveys that this is what "the rioters" look like; he *is* the riots. But what is going on here? In the BBC footage we see that he is far from being just an example among many; rather he and a partner appear to be the most active in the immediate

environment. There are many, many on-lookers with their camera-phones and cam-corders out. A man rides up on a bicycle to watch the White Running Suit man try his hand at the Ladbrokes window. There are many people doing many different things, not merely “rioters” versus the police. This is consistent with social psychologist Clark McPhail’s work on crowds and collective gatherings. Far from the “uniform” crowd, united in purpose and action, McPhail finds that gatherings bring people out for many different reasons, with different motivations and intentions (2008). Seeing all who were out on the streets in London, Birmingham, Manchester, and Salford from Saturday, August 6 until the early hours of Wednesday, August 10, as “rioters” flattens the complexity of who was involved and why. Further, to suggest that it was “simple rioting” or “out and out criminality” as suggested by the BBC presenter interviewing Ken Livingston on August 8 is to ignore the heterogeneity of the crowds and the multiplicity of purpose. Just as there were many different people involved in these events, one could also say that there were actually a number of different events over that long weekend in August.

Illustration 6

The chain of events began on August 4, when the police shot and killed an alleged drug dealer and gang member, Mark Duggan, after stopping the minicab in which he was a passenger.¹³ Even more than a year later, what exactly happened on that Thursday afternoon remains unclear. There were claims that Duggan was executed¹⁴, that he shot a police officer, that he was armed, that this was a planned operation.¹⁵ Even with such a passage of time, the family of the slain father of four still has many unanswered questions about what occurred in Tottenham.¹⁶ Yet while the violence that occurred on Thursday August 4 is linked to the violence that followed on Saturday the 6 through to the police actions on Wednesday, August 10, it is worth pointing out

there were no street actions, no demonstration, no violence related to the Duggan shooting on Friday, August 5, 2011.

On Saturday afternoon, a small group of protestors organised by family and friends of Duggan and his father, Bruno Hall, approached the police station in Tottenham to demand more information about Thursday's shooting. By most accounts the 150 or so demonstrators were peaceful and patient but were ignored by police.¹⁷ Events came to a head when a group of women approached the police and the police line responded by surging ahead and drawing their batons.¹⁸ Apparently the crowd, sensing that the police were attacking a 16 year-old girl, pushed back against the police line and began hurling bottles, rocks and other items. On one camera-phone video posted on YouTube, it is possible to hear people jeering at the police to stop, and a woman's cries that "She is only a girl! It's a girl! Look how he's dealing with her! She's a fucking girl!"¹⁹ An eyewitness stated that the people were completely ignored: "The police treated those asking for answers with contempt, and even at that point they [the demonstrators] did not retaliate. And then, when the police were pushing on her [the young teenage girl], and drawing their batons, that's when the people started to retaliate. I think in all circumstances, having seen that, most people retaliate".²⁰ The Independent reported that Mark Duggan's girlfriend, Semone Wilson, who is also the mother of three of his four children, saying something very similar: "When we were outside the police station last night we wanted someone to come out. We wanted some answers. I have not even told my children that he is dead because we cannot give them any answers" she said. "I am not happy about what has happened. What we wanted was answers. We didn't want this trouble."²¹

The protestors set fire to police cars, stopped and set a bus alight in the Tottenham High Street, and most importantly began to text, send sms messages, photos, and tweet about what was happening in Tottenham. Soon these tweets would repeat and be re-sent. Many were from protestors to their friends to come out and to support them; some simply stated that people should come out to do battle with the police. For example, The Independent reported that a Twitter user with the screen name "English Frank" tweeted: "Everyone up and roll to Tottenham to fuck the 5-O! [the police]".²² But this was also an important turning point: other tweets and texts pointed out that the police were no longer in control of the High Street and people could do

as they wished. “Sonny Twag” tweeted: “Want to roll Tottenham to loot. I do want a free TV. Who wudn't [sic].”²³ Kevin McDonald reports that a recurrent theme among Blackberry messages was a general cry to all of London to join in these actions. There were appeals to people to “start leaving ur [sic] yards [neighborhoods]” from “everywhere” or “everyone from all sides of London” (McDonald 2012:21). Over the next three days stores would be attacked and the merchandise taken in neighborhoods across London, in the center of Birmingham, and in neighborhoods in Manchester and Salford. Throughout the long weekend social media encouraged young people to take to the streets. The forces that normally block the way of these young people were absent. It was time to be free.

These appeals suggest that there was a sense of solidarity among the participants. McDonald also reported a sense of solidarity among people on the street who were not directly participating in looting or stealing or combating the police. “At times journalists found themselves unable to film events due to the actions of other observers, who, while not looting themselves, would express their solidarity by blocking journalists’ attempts to report events by standing in the way of cameras” McDonald 2012:20).

For the next three days, until the government deployed the extraordinary number of 16,000 police in London alone with the cancelation of all English police leave, the clash over the control of images became key. On that first night in Tottenham, a BBC television crew reported that their truck was attacked, and that they were being bombarded by projectiles from the crowds.²⁴ But while the network televisions cameras were stuck inside their trucks, on YouTube, Flickr, Twitter and other social media, people in the street were posting video, photographs and descriptions of what they were seeing, as well as plotting the location of fires and documenting events they witnessed Google maps and other interactive geography software. Sources such as the West Londoner blog site began to compile tweets in real-time to provide assessments from the street as to what was happening.²⁵ Far from the Hobbesian world of anarchic chaos reported by the mainstream television networks, many tweeters reported cooperation and a sense of mutual recognition by the people on the street. In one case on Monday night, a tweeter reported that large men approached him on his bicycle, pushed him off of it, and one jumped on to ride away as the other one ran alongside. They had not gotten more than a few yards when a passing

car stopped, two men got out and admonished them, saying they could take from the shops but not from each other. The man then was given back his bicycle, and he rode away to tweet from home.²⁶

Images of fires dominated the mainstream news media, especially television. On the first evening a carpet shop and the block of flats above it on Tottenham's high street were set ablaze. On Monday night a furniture store in Croydon became an inferno. In writing about riots Randall Collins argues that fires play a key role: "there is nothing that demands attention more urgently than a fire." (Collins 2008:247 in McDonald 2012:21). It demands the attention of the authorities, of outsiders, and those in the neighborhood. In the case of the Croydon fire, which the BBC featured in much of its coverage that Monday night, the accompanying description from an eyewitness said that the neighborhood looked like a "war zone" yet he was reporting from a number of blocks away.²⁷ If one looks closely at the television images, one sees not only the incredible inferno of what was once a family owned furniture store, but also that there is no one on the surrounding streets. There was no "war" in proximity to the fire.

The image can be seen in a number of ways: that the "rioters" are engaged in wanton destruction and lack the common decency that would dissuade them against attacking a local family business; that the larger situation on the ground in London -- like the fire -- is out of control; and that the emergency services cannot get to the fire. If the police, the fire and the ambulance services could not control the fire, perhaps they cannot control anything or anyone. For many young people, this was a clear sign that they, and not the police, were in charge of the streets. Kevin McDonald reports that one Blackberry message makes this very clear: "bring your ballys [face covering/balaclava] and your bags, trollys [sic], car vans, hammers, the lot! Whatever ends your [sic] from put your ballys on, link up and cause havoc, just rob everything. Police can't stop it" (McDonald 2012:21). Interestingly, the message ends with a call to not light any more fires: "dead the fires!" urges the sender. Again, the call to resist control is accompanied by a call for cooperation.

In this moment of liberation from the forces of control – from the police, from CCTV, from store detectives – these young people could realize their desires, and "live their lives as their lives"

just as the Levi Legacy ad encouraged them to. However in realising their own dreams, they became the stuff of nightmares for others. The crowds, the masses of the unruly, the clichéd phantasies of “feral youth packs” and “wilders” became a reality through these televised images, and in this actualization, this realization, became the justification for control in the first place.

THE STRUCTURAL VIOLENCE OF SOCIAL ORDER

The excluded themselves engender further fear. In Bauman’s words, they are the “walking symbols of the disaster that awaits fallen consumer” there to “frighten *bona fide* consumers” (2007a:32). But these failed consumers who are excluded are very much like those elements described as “criminal” for they are equally “unfit.” Those that interfere with the normative conduct of society – consuming – must be restrained. Since the end of the last century in Britain such restraint has taken on the power of juridical authority through the Anti-Social Behaviour Order (ASBO), which allows the police to issue tickets, impose fines, and eventually criminalize those that defy the normative order. The irregular becomes the criminal. Like the scenario Karl Schmitt describes wherein non-conformists who act as they see fit are to be called partisans and thus be made legitimate targets of state violence, those who act as they see fit can be transformed into the criminal (Schmitt 1963:22). Illegality is substituted for irregularity, and those who do not abide by the codes of normative conduct are criminalised. The events of August 2011 are themselves an inversion of this prohibition. Like Bakhtin’s notion of the *carnivalesque*,²⁸ when servants and underlings parody *and* emulate their overlords and masters, those that took to “looting” in 2011, were trying to emulate the consumers they see entering the shops and stores to which they are otherwise denied access. At last they could encounter the meaningful experience that as the lumpen-consumerate they are otherwise deprived.

In the everyday, those who even appear to be defective consumers must be treated as potential criminals and viewed with suspicion. Many of the young people who find themselves in these ranks of the lumpen-consumerate are the objects of police stops and searches, and are the targets of CCTV surveillance. They are required to queue and only come into shops one by one, often followed by in-store detectives, or they are banned from entering certain shops altogether. If the boundary between “us” and “them” is marked by the affordance of trust,²⁹ the excluded – the

suspect – understand that they are treated as “other.” This has important consequences, for once the “other” is criminalized, his or her behaviours -- and even dress, appearance, hairstyle, musical choices, or other accoutrements – are subject to regulation by the police who deploy the tools of state violence, including incarceration and brute force. This is not merely a theoretical assertion. The 2009 UK Policing and Crime Bill contains specific provisions to prohibit “individuals deemed to be in a gang from: being in a particular place; being with particular persons in a particular place; *wearing specific types of clothing* in a particular place; or *being in charge of a specified species of animal* in a particular place.”³⁰ This regulation of space transforms vulnerable areas into dangerous ones: ones that require heavy policing. The result is the transformation of areas into “gang neighbourhoods” where all residents are viewed with suspicion and subject to police interventions.

The government’s concern that the “rioters” were elements from or related to “criminal gangs” is largely a product of the policing techniques employed in London and in England more widely. In 2008 the UK government identified the “gang” as a primary target of its “action plan” to tackle violence, and created new governmental agencies and task forces with specific “anti-gang” remits.³¹ This gives rise to the idea that “gangs” are the problem on the street, and transforms tensions and non-normative behaviour into “gang” behaviours. Of course once these institutions are charged to “find” gangs, they often see “gangs” everywhere. This is most visible in the transformation of violence.

There are many ritual practices that revolve around violence in Britain, especially those defining masculinity. These ritualized encounters, structured by normative codes of street conduct, such as knife carrying, become redefined as “gang-related.” Those who press others to participate in these rituals, especially social peers, are seen as gang affiliates, rather than as those transmitting or reproducing a social norm. Just as the police have begun to see “gangs” everywhere, Simon Hallsworth writes that the British news media has likewise “discovered gangs”, and “has since applied the term [gang] permissively to include seemingly all and every group of (working class) young people with any street presence” (2011:191). A reinforcing cycle ensues: the lumpen-consumerate are seen as defectively other, and are policed because they are not afforded trust; the police justify tough measures claiming the objects of those measures are gang members; and

the media reports increasing “gang” presence within British cities, requiring more policing. The policing techniques are employed *as if* all these young people are members of “criminal gangs.” As these young people are the objects of “anti-gang” police operations they become “gang members.”

Following the events of August 2011 Prime Minister David Cameron said that there was to be no talk of a “culture of fear,” that the riots were “criminality pure and simple,” and that the rioters “will feel the full force of the law.”³² Yet it is clear that many young people feel that full force of the law every day. Cameron’s comments made clear the establishment’s desire to remove from social life the redundant, the unemployed, the defective, who have been rendered criminal. It is this last step that makes even the proposition of such an eviction plausible. Félix Guattari envisioned a society of control in which inhabitants wear an electronic collar that regulates the opening and closing of barriers and gates, as they pass through a city (Deleuze 1990:5). For the wearer, gates would open or close depending on one’s status in the society. The society would have the appearance of being an open environment, but which barriers open when could be controlled. Deleuze describes his collaborator’s city as an example of control society: “What counts is not the barrier but the computer that tracks each person’s position – licit or illicit – and effects universal modulations” (1992:7). The systems may be a bit cruder, but the layering of CCTV with ASBOs and other police powers to stop and search and detain, effectively open and close barriers much like Guattari’s electronic collar. Cameron stated that he would remove “riot” participants from public housing as a punishment for their “criminal” behaviour. The threat of such a removal, a threat of homelessness, is evocative of Giorgio Agamben’s notion of *Homo Sacer*, where the redundant, defective young person would be cast out of consumer-social culture, beyond civil society, and forced into bare life. The transformation of the defective into the criminal, like the transformation of the political opponent into a terrorist, justifies state violence and the employment of any means necessary to maintain the hegemonic order, including the expulsion from society.

AN HOMAGE TO SHOPPING: A CONCLUSION

One of the difficulties in analyzing the events of August 2011 is that they do not resemble previous mass encounters characterised by property crime and violent clashes between young people and the police. The 2011 events began with anger directed at the police, an unfortunately familiar source of tension and violence in the UK for the past forty years, with explicitly anti-police unrest or reactions to police behaviours occurring in 1981, 1991, and 2001. The frustration expressed in 2011 by the small crowd in front of the Tottenham station at the sight of police officers advancing on a young girl grew into mass violence against the police, and then became a revolt against their control. But this was no ordinary revolt. There were no political demands *per se*, but it was about the politics of inclusion. It was not a demand for equality but a demand for equal access, and not for access to the state or education, to institutions, or even the juridical order, but for access to currently valorized forms of self-realization and self-actualization: consumer culture. The French social critic Alain Finkielkraut saw something similar in the 2005 unrest in the French suburbs, writing of the “terrorism” of unimpeded consumption: “what they [the young people on the streets] want is the ideal of consumer society. That’s what they see on television” (Finkielkraut 2005 in Rancière 2009a:39). Or as Douglas Kellner wrote, the events of August 2011 seemed far less musically inspired by Public Enemy’s “Fight the Power” than perhaps by 50 Cent’s “Get Rich or Die Tryin’” (2012:18). This appeared to be a consumer rampage.

The Situationist Guy Debord wrote in 1967 that the spectacle is the inversion of life. This inversion occurs when the real and the apparent split, where reality and image change places. The spectacle is presented as a mean unification, of connecting reality and image, yet under this condition the broad diversity of experience is reified into appearance. He writes that the spectacle is the “visible negation of life – a negation that has taken on visible form” (Debord 2009 [1967], Thesis 10:26). Appearance stands triumphant over the real, and the image becomes the totality of the real, rather than offering a mere glimpse of an aspect of life. The spectacle is not a collection of images, but the social relations between people mediated by those images; it is the view of the world that has become the world. Or as Jacques Rancière put it, reflecting on Debord: “the spectacle is not the display of images *concealing* reality. It is the existence of social activity and social wealth as a *separate* reality” (2009a:44). Douglas Kellner has written extensively on the means by which the contemporary news media creates spectacles, and in

doing so creates new realities.³³ It is the reality on the screen, transmitted via the web, appearing on the front page of the newspaper. Regardless of the experiences of the young people in London and Manchester and elsewhere in 2011, the reality of the “riots” resides in the hegemonic images that have come to stand for it. Individual images that do not comport with the hegemonic narrative are outside of the spectacle, and are themselves superfluous. The images that conflict or counter the new images of the spectacle become in themselves suspect. Rather, the events of August 2011 become the fires of Croydon and the theft of blue jeans. In this way, the simplified and compressed images become reality.

Debord writes that the spectacle is the “ruling order’s non-stop discourse about itself ... its own self-praise” and the presentation of its concerns (2009 [1967], Thesis 24:30). It will be presented with “the fetishistic appearance of pure objectivity” but it “conceals the true character of relations between people and between classes” (2009 [1967], Thesis 24:30). It obfuscates the power relations and technologies of power that make the creation of the spectacle possible in the first place. To rephrase Finkelkraut’s observation, what is presented on television becomes the reality of the whole, regardless of lived experience. To argue about the meaning of the spectacle presented on the televisions is to contest reality, whether that is to question the interpretation of the motivations of young people in London in 2011 or to question the meaning of “riots” or “violence.” Moreover, if there is no spectacle of “riots” then they do not exist, even as demonstrators experience confrontations with police in Athens, Lisbon and Madrid in the context of the Eurozone crisis. In this way, as Debord argued, life previously lived directly has become mere representation (2009 [1967]; Thesis 17: 27). It is no longer a question of a “false” or “true” representation of reality, for the imagery is no longer “true” or “false”. Rather all of this is simultaneous true, representing simultaneously and multiple truths, while at the same time creating new realities by joining these truths together in a single image, not intended to render an accurate likeness, but rather to evoke an emotional, sensual, or visceral response. Rancière describes such a fusion as “hyper-resemblance,” whereby the “resemblance does not provide a replica of reality, but attests directly to the elsewhere from whence it derives” (2009b:8). In this way the hyper-resemblance is not a mirror but is the statement of a direct vision. It does not reflect a reality, but rather is its own reality.

Images circulate around the globe at a blinding speed, one that distorts the context or the accompanying background material that may alter the interpretation of an image. De-coupled from the multiple realities that may inform it, the image can become an icon for other concepts. These pictures constitute a set of replicators, by which images reproduce, seemingly automatically and independently, trans-mutating into representations of something different from the original images of the referent. In this way, circulation is like a contagion, growing more pervasive, and destroying rival or competing images to convey a competing or rival truth.

For Rancière, the intolerable image is that which is deemed to be too real, too intolerably real to be offered in the form of a mere picture. The spectacle that occurred in August 2011 was not only the collection of images of young people taking merchandise from shops; it was also the narratives describing the reality depicted in those images. It was the news commentators, the politicians, the police declaring that the images were the reality of “out and out criminality” and the prevalence of “youth crime and criminal gangs.” The narratives and images of this spectacle conceal the power relations of a consumer culture that has replaced meaningful social interactions with shopping transactions. The images of young people taking jeans, smart phones, and flat screen televisions were too real in implicating everyone in reproducing the ills of consumer culture. They became intolerable images, documenting a new reality: not “broken Britain”, “gang-culture”, “youth crime,” but the terrorism of unimpeded consumerism. These events were not just theft in the sense of taking without paying; rather they also bespoke a denial of access to fulfilment – a broken promise of an ever better life – a kind of intergenerational theft in its own right. These events were an indictment of consumer culture precisely because they effectively paid such homage to consumer culture.

In 1920 György Lukács asked why the proletariat was not particularly revolutionary. He concluded that even in what he called the death throes of capitalism, most of the proletariat “still feel the state, the laws of the economy, of the bourgeoisie are the only possible environment for them to exist in” (Lukács 1971:262). This new lumpen-consumerate is much the same. The events of August 2011 were a protest of the denial of entry to the consumerist world, not an action of exit. Watching the television and seeing all of the products of the world, which convey the meaning and definition of an inaccessible but valorized life and creates a desire among the

lumpen-consumerate to be connected to this world of consumption. In this strange inversion, rather than feeling the full power of the law, of control society, of the politics and the instruments of the state which deny them entry, in the moment that the “they cannot touch us,” the lumpen-consumerate entered the ranks of those depicted in the advertisements and lived their lives. The lumpen-consumerate was suddenly free to act like so many other bodies on the television, acquiring the means to become someone, to live their life, to be fulfilled. Rancière writes that we do not see many bodies suffering on television (2009a:96). In fact they tend to be absent. We do not see images of the poor denied resources, food, housing, clean water. Rather we are offered the fantasy of a world where everyone desires and can obtain Manolo Blahnik shoes. We are made equal in the objects that we desire. But in the photos of Jean François Campos we see the poor as objects, as the set dressing that frames the objects of desire. The poor and the disenfranchised -- the lumpen-consumerate -- become superfluous; they become the jetsam of hyperconsumerism. Rancière writes that “there are too many nameless bodies, too many bodies incapable of returning the gaze that we direct at them, too many bodies that are an object of speech without themselves having the chance to speak” (2009a:96). In August 2011, freed from the elements of control society, the lumpen-consumerate spoke for itself. It said: “we’ll take that.”

Endnotes:

¹ BBC, August 8, 2011, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-14454246>, accessed August 13, 2012.

² “Triumphant cheers goes up” <http://youtu.be/DigiWS1YhxI>, accessed August 17, 2012; “loot in their arms” <http://youtu.be/scR8E-m6j-E>, accessed August 17, 2012; “nothing short of a stampede” WBZ/CBS, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hfVWz6IzoXw>, accessed August 17, 2012; “stripped off their clothes” WBZ/CBS, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hfVWz6IzoXw>, accessed August 17, 2012; “threw merchandise at one another” <http://youtu.be/33w22XyDkSs>, accessed August 17, 2012; “crushed in a pile” ABCnews.com, <http://youtu.be/Uqwg1KE2-xQ>, accessed August 17, 2012; “toys each was trying to grab” KABC/ABC, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hwC7_WZDPIE&feature=related, accessed August 17, 2012.

³ <http://londonriots.org.uk/2011/london-riots-2011/london-riots-2011-war-zone/>, accessed November 1, 2012.

⁴ <http://www.bizrate-partner.com/home-theater-systems/>, accessed November 1, 2012.

⁵ http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z_16b_tnSoo, accessed November 1, 2012.

⁶ http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z_16b_tnSoo, accessed November 1, 2012.

⁷ Quoted in Bauman, Zygmunt *Liquid Times: Living in an Age of Uncertainty* (London: Polity Press, 2007), p. 106.

⁸ Marx, Karl 1852, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1852/18th-brumaire/ch07.htm>, accessed 20 August 2012.

⁹ See Deleuze, Gilles, “Society of Control” *L'autre journal* No. 1, May 1990, p. 3.

¹⁰ <http://tmagazine.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/09/05/the-post-materialist-fashion-and-poverty/>; See also <http://www.jeanfrancoiscampos.com/>.

¹¹ <http://home.earthlink.net/~navva/photo/war2/war1.html>

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- ¹² <http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2011/08/whats-happening-london-riots>, accessed August 14, 2012; <http://theconversation.edu.au/english-riots-were-neither-mindless-nor-purely-criminal-2806>, accessed August 1, 2012.
- ¹³ Whitehead, Tom, August 8, 2011, "Dead man Mark Duggan was a known gangster who lived by the gun". *The Telegraph*. Retrieved August 13, 2012.
- ¹⁴ Peck, Tom August 8, 2011 "A death at the hands of police – and a vigil that turned to violence", *The Independent*. <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/crime/a-death-at-the-hands-of-police-ndash-and-a-vigil-that-turned-to-violence-2333590.html>
- ¹⁵ Laville, Sandra, Paul Lewis, & Vikram Dodd, August 7, 2011. "Doubts emerge over Duggan shooting as London burns". *The Guardian*. Retrieved August 17, 2012.
- ¹⁶ Stafford Scott, August 3, 2012, "Mark Duggan: The Lessons that Police Haven't Learned". *The Guardian*. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2012/aug/03/mark-duggan-lessons-police-learned>.
- ¹⁷ Eyewitness account, August 8, London, <http://youtu.be/CJQHWwEpwAY>, accessed August 17, 2012. See Also McDonald, Kevin 2012 "The can't do nothin' to us today" *Thesis Eleven* Vol. 109(1), pp. 18-19.
- ¹⁸ Beckford, Martin and Duncan Gardham, August 8, 2011, "'Attack' on teenage girl blamed for start of Tottenham riot" *The Telegraph*. Retrieved August 13, 2012. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/crime/8687547/Attack-on-teenage-girl-blamed-for-start-of-Tottenham-riot.html>
- ¹⁹ <http://youtu.be/v8nTHkpWxNY>, accessed on August 17, 2012.
- ²⁰ <http://youtu.be/CJQHWwEpwAY> at 0:46, accessed on August 17, 2012.
- ²¹ Peck, Tom August 8, 2011 "A death at the hands of police – and a vigil that turned to violence", *The Independent*. <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/crime/a-death-at-the-hands-of-police-ndash-and-a-vigil-that-turned-to-violence-2333590.html>
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- ²³ Peck, Tom August 8, 2011 "A death at the hands of police – and a vigil that turned to violence", *The Independent*. <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/crime/a-death-at-the-hands-of-police-ndash-and-a-vigil-that-turned-to-violence-2333590.html>
- ²⁴ "BBC satellite truck damaged in riots". *BBC News*. August 7, 2011. Accessed 13 August 2011.
- ²⁵ Author interaction, August 7-10, 2011.
- ²⁶ The West Londoner, August 8, 2011, and Author interaction August 8, 2011.
- ²⁷ BBC News August 8, 2011 http://youtu.be/rbsrR_u0Yq4, accessed August 13, 2012.
- ²⁸ See Bakhtin, Mikhail 1981 *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Michael Holquist, ed., Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, trans. Austin and London: University of Texas Press.
- ²⁹ See Murer, Jeffrey Stevenson "Constructing the Enemy-Other: Anxiety, Trauma and Mourning in the Narratives of Political Conflict" in *Psychoanalysis of Culture and Society*, Vol. 14(2) Spring 2009, pp.109-130.
- ³⁰ Aldridge, Judith, Robert Ralphs and Juanjo Medina, "Collateral Damage: Territory and Policing in an English Gang City" in *Youth in Crisis?: Gangs, Territoriality and Violence* Goldson, Bary, ed., (London: Routledge, 2011), p. 85.
- ³¹ Hallsworth, Simon, "Gangland Britain? Relaties, Fantasies and Industry' in *Youth in Crisis?: Gangs, Territoriality and Violence* Goldson, Bary, ed., (London: Routledge, 2011), p. 187.
- ³² *Euronews* August 9, 2011, <http://www.euronews.com/2011/08/09/cameron-rioters-will-feel-full-force-of-the-law/>, accessed 22 August.
- ³³ See Kellner, Doug, *Media Spectacle* (London: Routledge, 2002), *Media Spectacle and the Crisis of Democracy: Terrorism, War and Election Battles* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Press, 2005), and *Media Spectacle and Insurrection: From Arab Spring to Occupy Everywhere* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2011).

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