

A photograph of a sunset or sunrise with silhouettes of people in the foreground. The sky is a vibrant orange and yellow, with some clouds. The silhouettes of people are visible in the lower portion of the frame, looking towards the horizon. The overall mood is warm and contemplative.

Ronnie Close

WE ARE HERE

Published online, 4th February 2015, by
the International New Media Gallery on
the occasion of the exhibition:

Ronnie Close

WE ARE HERE

4th February – 5th June 2015
www.inmg.org

Exhibition curated by Edwin Coomasaru
and Tom Snow, with support from Isabella
Smith and Adrianna Bielkova.

Edited by Tom Snow.

All rights reserved.

© International New Media Gallery, 2015.

Texts © the authors, 2015.

Images © Ronnie Close, 2015.

The catalogue front and back cover are
stills from Ronnie Close's *More Out of
Curiosity*, 2014. All images are courtesy of
the artist.

Ronnie Close

WE ARE HERE

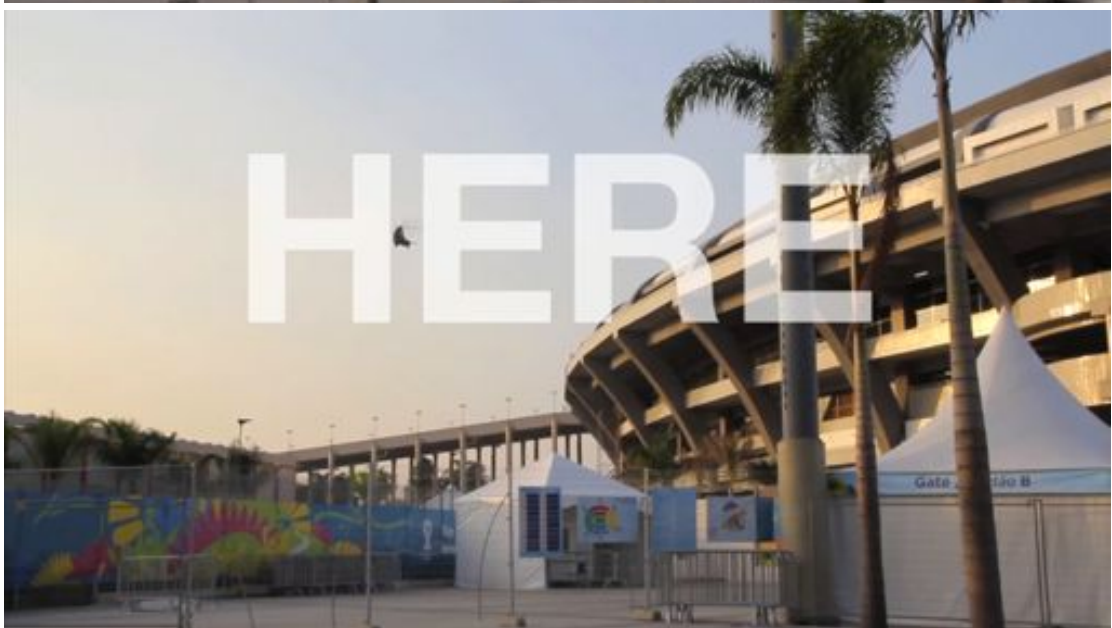
Edited by Tom Snow

Contents

p.4 Foreword
Tom Snow

p.9 Two Political Football Films by Ronnie Close
Graham Harman

p.18 Making the News
Stephanie Schwartz



Foreword

In the twenty-first century, citizens continue to gather in urban centres around the world to campaign for civil rights. Whilst collective bodies are evocative of mass exhaustion, protesters' tenacity simultaneously represents creative re-mobilisations of constituent power in the face of a postmodern atrophy. If anti-World Trade Organisation demonstrations in Seattle 1999 mobilised social movements in mass opposition to the privileging of privatisation and the gross inequalities of neoliberal globalisation, by 2010 citizens subjugated to corrupt and abusive regimes in the Middle East realised the power of occupying highly-visible public spaces. Since 2011, the term Occupy has been used to symbolise and form global alliances between diverse and growing protest cultures. Cross-continental solidarity between activists is achieved via the dissemination of images and information across the Internet. Often countering mainstream discourse, participants represent individual experiences digitally, producing multiple and contrasting narratives. In New York's Zuccotti Park, for example, occupiers uploaded footage of plain clothed police officers deployed to cause unrest in the encampment, and thus provide reason for the NYPD to enter with force. On the first evening of violence during the summer 2013 Gezi Park occupation in Istanbul CNN Türk ran a penguin documentary whilst international news agencies and social media networks — also available in Turkey — broadcast the action live. Today, many news networks have conceded to amateur documentary possibilities of mobile cellular devices, regularly featuring distorted footage from a first-person civilian perspective that frequently beat professional cameras to the scene. Whilst the image of activism has evolved, mediation of activism's new visual culture remains complex. The volume and velocity of digital data has significantly impacted collective memory. The distribution of alarming information also disappears at alarming speeds. Mainstay media outlets in many cases remain the go-to site for recollections of the 24/7 news cycles, with a few select fragments of footage used to represent yesterday's news.

The two works by filmmaker Ronnie Close featured in the International New Media Gallery exhibition (4th February – 5th June 2015) negotiate the relationship of recent protest cultures to contemporary mediatisations. Since 2012 Close has gained the trust of the Ultras Ahlawy football fans in Cairo, taking his camera into protest rallies during and after the anti-government protests linked with the Tahrir Square, which eventually ousted former Egyptian president Honsi Mubarak. *More Out of Curiosity* (2014) combines the filmmaker's own footage with television broadcasts in a way that contrasts panoptic views favoured by news media with a ground-level perspective located at the centre of Ultras' collected bodies and choral chanting. Close follows the Ultras' campaign for justice in regard to the 2012 massacre of seventy-four Al Ahly SC supporters in El Masry's stadium in Port Said. Capitalised white letters spell out various words across moving image, both parodying and interrogating conventional representation and typecasting of 'HOOLIGAN' protesters despite the legitimacy of the group's plight. As art historian

Stephanie Schwartz suggests in her essay contribution to this exhibition catalogue, distanciations necessitated by broadcast footage of any sort are already mediated. Schwartz reminds us that our viewing the news is also our *production* of the news. What is watched is what sells, politics and entertainment mix for our viewing pleasure. The production of meaning is dependent on viewers' engagement and (non)reaction, and in that pleasure and passivity are also sites of the political.

Although far from identical to events now commonly referred to under the umbrella term Arab Spring, Close's second film relates to *More Out of Curiosity* via engagement with the protest activities of marginalised groups. *Serious Games* (2014) focuses on protests during the 2014 FIFA World Cup in Brazil. Football is once again a central concern for the filmmaker, however rather than a common fan-base acting as grounds for political mobilisation, the event's neoliberal character is the object of contestation. In a country famed for passionate football support, the publically-subsidised global sporting event's apparent disregard for the disadvantaged and impoverished led to mass disillusionment and public expressions of anger beginning two years before 2014. A tremendous sense of alienation runs throughout *Serious Games* (2014), giving voice to the loss felt by many in Rio de Janeiro and throughout the country as the nation's investment in the game was systematically reframed, repackaged, and distributed across the world to the financial benefit of patrons, corporate sponsors, and television networks. As philosopher and former sports writer Graham Harman notes in his essay contribution to this exhibition, Close creates tension between the image of relatively serene yet impoverished everyday life in Rio's favelas, the high-gloss globally-oriented branding of the World Cup, and the violent confrontation of police to otherwise peaceful protest. Harman's perspective is to approach both films as an opportunity to reflect. In a certain sense, this is what Close's films both do. Each work stages an inquiry into a global image economy. Few forms or visual tropes are unique to Close's works, however their relationship to the mediated image of everyday life renegotiates both the tendency to spectacle and the politics of contemporary mediatisation. Though relatively short, both films feature moments of sustained inquiry into nominal conditions of human community. In foregoing the quick-pace segmentations of news media and sensationalised Hollywood-style visual gratuities, Close rethinks the experience of spectatorship in the contemporary moment. No doubt each viewer is affected in some capacity by the growing flow of activist imagery. Yet Close's work draws parallels between the politics of doing and of seeing, entertainment and spectator; and in that respect affirms the political positions of those who act, those who film, and simultaneously those who watch.

The title of the exhibition, *We Are Here*, is borrowed from Close's film, *Serious Games*. The words are those of a civilian in Brazil experiencing violent municipal intolerance to free speech on the occasion of the World Cup final. Whether in account of this specific protest pocket, or in mind of demonstrations drowned out by the global media spectacle during the competition, the words remind us that *we* is a plurality rather than an apolitical or all-encompassing reference to congregated or passive masses; that despite aesthetic homogenising regimes of corporate media, inequality and social injustices hardly remain uncontested.

I would like to thank Graham Harman and Stephanie Schwartz for their contributions to the catalogue. Their approaches to Close's work are varied and unique, each containing rich observations that demonstrate the complexity of the

material featured. I would also like to thank the director of the INMG Edwin Coomasaru for his tireless commitment to each and every project. Finally, I would like to thank the filmmaker Ronnie Close, who has been especially generous with his time and enthusiasm towards realising this exhibition.

Tom Snow, Curator
International New Media Gallery



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



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



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



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

Two Political Football Films by Ronnie Close

Graham Harman

As a former sportswriter and current philosopher, I am delighted by any attempt to explore issues of sport in an intellectual manner. Yet I am just as sceptical towards political approaches to sports as I am towards political approaches to philosophy, given the risk of moral posturing that hangs like a storm cloud over the opening minutes of a 'political' discussion about any topic at all. Nonetheless, there have been at least two genuine encounters in recent years between soccer and politics, and Ronnie Close found himself perfectly positioned to capture both of these events on film. The more violent and explosive of the two events is the topic of Close's *More Out of Curiosity* (2014), a withering record of the aftermath of a rare sports-related massacre. On 1 February, 2012, the Ultras group of supporters of the popular Ahly football club travelled from Cairo to Port Said to watch the match between their beloved team and home side Masry. Following the match, seventy-four Ahly fans were massacred on the pitch or suffocated in a closed exit tunnel, some of them taking their final breaths in the Ahly dressing room as weeping star players looked on. Even in an Egypt that had grown accustomed to incidents of mass violence during the previous year's Revolution, the Port Said Massacre was a uniquely horrific incident. As I write these words on New Year's Day 2015, almost three years later, Egypt's football matches continue to be played in empty stadiums by government order. The Port Said Massacre not only ranks as the worst violent incident in modern sporting history, but even deserves mention in the same breath as a still more violent and politically portentous sports massacre in the ancient world. I speak of the Nika riots in Constantinople in the year 532, in which a conflict over chariot racing led to tens of thousands dead and nearly ended the reign and the life of the Emperor Justinian. Close's other film, *Serious Games* (2014), deals with a less blatantly shocking event, though one that may prove to be of greater global importance in the decades to come: the widespread protests in Brazil over the 2014 FIFA World Cup against the shocking costs of the event. These protests led to a growing sense that international sporting events are more a drain than a boon to the countries that host them.

Though chronology would suggest that we discuss the film about Egypt before the one about Brazil, artistic and personal reasons have led me to reverse the order. Artistically speaking, the police violence evoked at the end of *Serious Games* cannot compete in emotional resonance with the stadium bloodshed and death penalty verdicts that begin and end *More Out of Curiosity*. There is the further consideration that long-time residence in Egypt makes it difficult for me to watch scenes of Egyptian political violence dispassionately. Roughly ten weeks before Port Said, I witnessed in person some of the post-Revolutionary fighting in which the Ultras Alhawya were most prominently involved: the waves of violence at the police barricades on Mohammed Mahmoud Street, just one block from Tahrir Square. Like Close himself, I am employed at the American University in Cairo, whose well-liked

student leader Omar Aly Mohsen was among the dead in Port Said. I was present for Mohsen's memorial on campus a few days after the massacre, heard the voice of his father and the cries of his sister from a few rows away, was present for the dedication of the Omar Aly Mohsen memorial gate on campus (which I often use to go to my office), and have given what I could to the Mohsen memorial scholarship fund. For all of these reasons, it is difficult for me to think of the Ultras Alhaway dispassionately.

Serious Games

During the preparations for the 2014 FIFA World Cup in Brazil, there was an unexpected degree of protest activity connected with the event. Is Brazil not a legendary football-loving nation, proud of heroes like Pele and Ronaldo, and glorying in more World Cup championships than any other nation on the planet? Brazil's armada of soccer trophies was apparently not enough to prevent grave concerns in some quarters about the cost and corruption linked with the event — especially given the abject poverty that endures in Brazil's slum areas, with many of these *favelas* living under the *de facto* government of drug dealers rather than the Brazilian state. *Serious Games* makes no literal statement about politics in Close's own voice. Instead, the film works by creating tension between mostly innocuous scenes of sporting-related pleasure and occasionally overlaid text alluding to police violence. For the most part, the sole visual support for these words early in the film are the relatively infrequent shots of actual protestors, usually appearing one at a time and silently carrying signs in English. But for me at least, the weight of the film's *imagery* falls heavily on the side of a nation greatly enjoying soccer and preparing to host the quadrennial international championship of the sport. Any 'critique' the viewer might wish to make will have to anchor itself to something other than immediate imagery.

The film begins with a young girl, perhaps even younger than ten, applying white markings to her stomach in the family kitchen, in what seems to be preparation for a sporting event. Meanwhile, a friend or relative attempts a lame falsetto rendition of Queen's *We Are the Champions* from off screen, seemingly unaware of the girl's own efforts. A guitar has been lazily placed on the kitchen table, reminding us that we are in the land of sass and samba. Though a trained eye could probably find traces of colonialism or premature sexualisation in this household scene, it is a fairly harmless opening for a film entitled *Serious Games*. The scene then shifts to what is probably a *favela* street, where boys who may be even younger than the girl of the opening perform remarkable tricks in a makeshift game with a round white object that passes well enough for a football. We then witness a helicopter hovering outside what is clearly one of the World Cup venues, looking every bit like a pre-game news helicopter and nothing at all like an instrument of riot control. So far there is no overt politics whatsoever, and the scenes might well have been chosen at random by a vacationer. But then the words come slowly one by one onto the screen, always white and in capital letters as in all the films of Close I have seen: 'WE / ARE / HERE' The interest of the viewer is piqued, but the film takes its time before this minimalist sentence expands into anything notably political. Indeed, it takes more than three minutes before we learn (though

we probably knew it already from the news) that the protests were about the 'WEIRD / COSTS' of the World Cup. FIFA is the first villain to appear by name, and though anyone following events of recent years will not doubt that FIFA deserves the accusation, the video once again seems to tell an unrelated story. The first shot of police, nearly four minutes into the film, shows a half-dozen isolated officers seemingly in harmless conversation over how to do their jobs, not looking especially violent or capable of inducing much fear. They are even viewed from overhead, as if the genuine source of power and authority were placed above them and might arbitrarily choose to crack down on them rather than on the protestors.

At last comes the sex, with female dancers gyrating on stage to music that sounds rather like a karaoke version of Carnival season. But now another disconnect between images and words: whatever the vague erotic reveries in which a male viewer may already have become entangled, the words 'WAKE / UP / BRAZIL / THE / WORLD / CUP / KILLS / THE / POOR' appear in sequence on screen. They do not wake us up from much, since the on-screen dancing seems to be merely going through the motions (no crowd is visible to show us how much fun we should be having) and any sense we have that the poor are being killed is an unrelated reminiscence from outside the film. With the music still playing, the film jumps from the dancers to a group of protestors who are lying in the street, except for one stock villain apparently meant to represent a Nazi, though with a dollar-sign armband replacing the infamous swastika. Apparently these protestors are the ones who know that the poor are being killed by the World Cup. Yet they look decidedly un-poor themselves, and the festive music reminds us that we are still waiting for visual evidence. The dancers return, along with the usual sequential words, this time reporting that the police have fired teargas. But still it is hearsay, and we find ourselves inclined to give the dancers another chance.

Six minutes in, someone who looks vaguely like a security officer shakes his head and waves his hands at the camera, as if telling the filmmaker to stop whatever it is he is doing. Yet there is no real violence to the gesture, and the security officer passes by before enforcing whatever his directive might have been. The police still seem fairly hapless whenever they appear on camera, despite the negative words we have read about them. Next come lazy balloons tied to a fence, ineffectually reading: 'FIFA GO HOME'. A lazy middle-aged woman appears next, with possible signs of worry on her face, followed by a distant shot of a smoothly running funicular as we learn more from the white words on screen: 'I / CAN'T / GO / HOME'. A family of Brazilians in an outdoor crowd seems mildly distressed by something seemingly viewed on screen: a match of the Brazilian national team? There is no way to be sure. The same holds for the next scene, perhaps the funniest in the entire film: a young, shirtless Brazilian wildly waving a German flag as Nirvana's *Smells Like Teen Spirit* blares over a speaker. The young man's action is illegible in purely visual terms, for it is deprived of any context that might explain it. Was the German flag simply the closest random object at hand, and Nirvana played simply by chance? Alternatively, was the young man sarcastically waving the flag of the team that was shaping up early as Brazil's biggest rival in the 2014 World Cup? Or was this embittered mock celebration of Germany's startling 7-1 evisceration of the home team Brazilians in the semi-final?

At approximately the 8:30 mark of the film, there is finally the report of a concrete police action that causes genuine concern: they 'BEAT / THE / SHIT / OUT /

OF / US'. But once again, any visual evidence is deferred: the words are accompanied by a slow-moving aerial shot of a *favela*, so once more we are left only with the possibly omniscient white letters as a source of evidence. At the nine-minute mark we see the first of what will turn out to be several protestors' signs trying to bolster the ambient case that the World Cup kills the poor. A self-gagged woman holds a sign written in code difficult to decipher, though its resulting message is clear enough: 'Douglas Dg -1 Murdered By The State'. Batman himself appears on a low rooftop, arms outstretched like Rio de Janeiro's landmark *Cristo Redentor* statue. The white words return and mention taserings by the police, along with a report that someone has been violently thrown. With the next protestor's sign, someone named Luis Felipe joins Douglas Dg in the ranks of those murdered by the state. An additional sign muses that the Olympics (which Rio will host in 2016) will be even worse in its impact. Nearly eleven minutes into the film, another sign warns that we must stop the genocide of the black people. Though not impossible to believe, we have still seen no sign of this genocide, deepening the film's tension between word and image.

Following more footage of celebrations interspersed with a few vague protests, we catch a first glimpse of the police in anything close to a sinister appearance, riding somewhere quickly on horseback as a young voice shouts in warning. Protestors (some of them waving red flags) begin to flee as we hear what sounds like the firing of tear gas shells, alternating with clips from an actual World Cup match. This seems to be the first time in the film that anything like guilt is imputed to those who are paying more attention to the World Cup matches than to the protests, or at least the first time the film can easily be read in this way. The protests now intensify, ultimately becoming the central event of the film for several minutes. There are occasional brief returns to the World Cup match, during which it seems to be Germans who are winning and rejoicing, in the Final against Argentina (a downcast Lionel Messi is sometimes visible on the field). Is Brazil now being called rudely back to reality, now that its anticipated World Cup trophy is almost in European hands?

In the last two minutes of the film we finally meet the man who was the source of the various white-word layovers throughout the film. It is he who was trapped in the Metro and beaten by police. The title *Serious Games* may or may not refer to the political protests as a more serious game than the World Cup itself. But in many ways, whether or not Close intended it this way, the topic of the film almost seems to be the *frailty* of the protests. In this particular film, at least, the protests have a rather thin existence. Either they are not effective enough, or they are a merely formulaic set of actions overwhelmed by football, dancing, a funicular, the shadow of the funicular on rooftops, and even a dog who appears for one scene while barking for no reason in particular. The actual police violence depicted on screen is not especially severe, and we are left with second-hand accounts of oppression combined with first-hand evidence of dancing and sport. Perhaps this demonstrates our complicit blindness to the reported killing of the poor, or perhaps it suggests a sense in which even the most vociferous protest sometimes fails to gain a footing in reality, even if the failure is rhetorical rather than intellectual.

More Out of Curiosity

The point becomes even more evident if we contrast the World Cup film with *More Out of Curiosity*, the film about Egypt. Here there is no tension between word and image, since all the violent evidence anyone needs is present from the start. The film is organized into seven 'scenes' with only minimal narrative information provided. The effect is likely to be hauntingly elliptical for those who did not live through the events depicted. But for those of us who did, it is haunting in a different way: like looking at video footage of a family member's last minutes before a fatal accident, followed by additional footage of the funeral and mourning period that followed.

'Scene 1: Football Match' opens with a dark screen, but with the foreboding television audio of the final moments of the now infamous Ahly-Masry match. Fans spill onto the field, and though at first it is difficult to tell what is happening, full-blown mass murder is soon underway. Seventy-four fans died in all, 'STABBED / CRUSHED / AMBUSHED' as Close's trademark white capital letters remind us. Along with these three methods of death, the footage shows pyrotechnics fired perilously into the crowd, and many of us remember tales of some Ahly supporters being pushed from the top row of seats to their deaths below. Though television network personnel initially look and sound confused, the film quickly jumps to a television call-in segment where the gravity of the night's events are obviously being registered. Close's avoidance of subtitles here (other than through a slow-moving use of the white capitals that simplify the caller's words down to their barest essence) is a powerful and successful decision, since one need not know a word of Arabic to understand what is being said. We then see the dead and wounded arriving via train at Ramsis Station in Cairo, in one of the most memorable moments of solidarity and outrage in post-Revolutionary Egypt. In a concluding piece of stock footage, photos of numerous Ultras are tossed onto a red background amidst sentimental music as each is identified by name.

'Scene 2: Backlash' shows us the riots that broke out in the days following the massacre. Here the stakes are obvious enough. Each young protestor shown on-screen has a small but discernible chance of losing his life in the hours that follow, something rarely true for protestors in the Western world. But the familiar white capitals inform us that the death toll from this protest was only six: far fewer than in the recent event it memorialized. A less violent but even more stirring daytime protest is also shown, with Ultras and their supporters chanting slogans at first political, and then mildly Islamic: 'Martyrs in heaven!'; 'They are in hell! You are in heaven!'

In 'Scene 3: Survivor' gives us a more traditional sort of documentary scene. Riding in a car past impoverished Cairo scenery, a man speaks in Arabic of his terrible experience at Port Said, from which he was lucky to return alive, while a translator speaks in a louder voice in English. He speaks of a sudden attack that led him facing three Masry fans who struck him with a heavy bat. Ominously, he speaks of how after ten minutes both Masry fans and police disappeared, leaving the Ultras alone with their dead.

'Scene 4: Capos' begins with a series of violent chants, this time less in protest of the dead than to affirm the proud Ultras identity against accusations of being thugs. Immediately we jump to a night-time scene in a square that seems to be

Tahrir, with the Ramsis Hilton viewed in the distance. The legions of Ultras, chanting to drumbeats with fire emerging from something that looks like a cauldron designed by Dante, might frighten us as viewers if we were not already sympathetic to their plight. In the night-time scene that follows, Ultras turn the tables by using the word 'thugs' in a stirring chant against the police themselves. As the crowd chants 'baltageya!' ('thugs!') with increasing fervour, Close surprises us by projecting the *Arabic* words onto the screen several times in succession. Given that the film is clearly aimed at an Anglophone audience, the Arabic words function more as icons inspiring anger than as words conveying a literal meaning. In a film already overflowing with powerful footage, this scene gives us some of the most powerful images of all.

We turn now to 'Scene 5: Tifos,' a montage mixing crowd imagery with scenes of Ultras painting match banners in isolation, though with the hellish echoes of match chants playing throughout. We jump to a more harmlessly smouldering daytime protest, with 'NO / LEADERS / ALL / LEADERS' appearing successively in the familiar white capitals, in what might just as well be a slogan referring to the Egyptian Revolution as a whole.

'Scene 6: Resistance' begins with a shot of the ever-reborn tent colony in Tahrir Square. In less than a minute, a noose appears on screen. Those familiar with the saga of the Ultras will immediately recognize this as a foreshadowing of the criminal cases against Masry fans in connection with the massacre. But here the outside observer must wonder: by demanding capital punishment against rival fans, are the Ultras departing from their usual sophistication in analysing the root causes of events? Numerous conspiracy theories — and I here I do not mean 'conspiracy theories', but theories about conspiracies — have always surrounded the murderous events in Port Said, and few of these theories imagine that Masry fans were the original source of the fate that befell the Ultras that night. But the issue is briefly delayed: we see another protest in the square, with chants about the attempted killing of the Revolution. Finally, there are pyrotechnics and the throwing of stones at a television station that is literally under attack by the Ultras, with white-uniformed security police seemingly on the run.

'Scene 7: Court Verdict', is the climax of the film, and also provides its most unsettling ambiguity. Amidst great disorder, a green-sashed judge prepares to announce the verdict. The Ultras listen to the radio in silence before quasi-abstract murals depicting many of their slain comrades. After oddly listing some of the Masry fans by their nicknames, the judge announces (in the white capitals translation, anyway): 'DEATH / PENALTY / HANG / UNTIL / DEAD'. A total of twenty-one Masry fans are sentenced to death, though given Egypt's longstanding tendency to hand down many death sentences but implement them sparingly, it has to be wondered whether such death sentences were anything more than an attempt to prevent the Ultras from re-igniting chaos in the capital. We now shift from the courtroom to a scene of the Ultras not yet having heard the verdict. When the verdict is finally read, the scene is one of instant celebration: Egyptian street music breaks out, and shots are fired. Little boys dance wildly with the air of those already in early adulthood. A bearded man speaks sensibly in English, though only in the most general terms, of his satisfaction with the verdicts. The father of one dead Ultra jumps up and down in celebration upon hearing the news, though a short while later he lets us in on his own secret means of getting justice whenever needed:

a gun hidden beneath his clothing. In a culminating scene of protest, the white capital letters tell us that the Ultras were killed because they supported the Revolution. While this almost goes without saying among educated Egyptians, it is somewhat of a puzzle to put this realisation together with the satisfaction at the verdict against the Masry supporters. Surely the soccer fans of Port Said, guilty though many of them no doubt were, have no vendetta against Revolution? The film offers no solution here, though it does stimulate the posing of the question.

Taken together, *Serious Games* and *More Out of Curiosity* touch on the growing entanglement between sport, violence, and money. In the soccer-dominant countries of Europe and elsewhere, there have always been Left or working-class clubs, and those strongly linked to specific religious denominations; in short, the threat of sports-related yet political violence has always lingered just beneath the surface. In the relatively de-politicized United States, politics has only rarely entered the sports world, as in 'black power' salutes at the 1968 Olympics or occasional moral rebukes of athletes refusing to stand for the national anthem. In America, sports violence usually takes a medical rather than political form, as in the growing evidence of severe brain trauma in American football players. Yet it is perhaps even more common, in Europe, America, or elsewhere, for sports to be accused of brainwashing the populace, distracting them into indifferent political stupor. And on this point in particular, Close's two films seem to teach two sides of the same lesson. In *Serious Games* the World Cup appears as the great stupifier, diverting funds better used on Brazil's legions of poor, and preventing the protests from gaining the needed critical mass. In Egypt, by contrast, the purported 'hooligan' violence of the Ultras Alhaway had long since become a truly political violence, as shown by direct Ultras intervention in the Revolution that toppled Mubarak. If *Serious Games* is a case study in the thwarting of politics by sport, *More Out of Curiosity* gives us the opposite phenomenon of sport as a powerful political weapon, and as the site of stratagems that make the rampant corruption of FIFA look like a child's game. For now, it is impossible to say which film brings us closer to understanding the future of sports.

Graham Harman is Distinguished University Professor at the American University in Cairo, Egypt and the author of twelve books, most recently Weird Realism: Lovecraft and Philosophy (2012) and Bells and Whistles: More Speculative Realism (2013). He is the editor of the Speculative Realism book series at Edinburgh University Press, and is co-editor of the New Metaphysics book series at Open Humanities Press with Bruno Latour.



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



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



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



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

Making the News

Stephanie Schwartz

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Stephanie Schwartz is a Lecturer in History of Art at University College London. She writes on modern and contemporary photography and is currently completing Cuba Per Diem: Walker Evans In and Out of Time, a book-length study of Walker Evans's 1933 Cuba portfolio.

Notes

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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



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



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



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

INTERNATIONAL NEW MEDIA GALLERY

