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Exploring the politics of visibility: Technology, digital representation, and the mediated workings of power

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Abstract: For the better part of the past decade, global social movements have drawn popular attention to the power of image production and acts of representation, particularly the ways ubiquitous cameras challenge the exercise of power This essay lays out a theoretical schema for interrogating a broader "politics of visibility" at work in the early twenty-first century, most readily apparent through the activities of smartphone-enabled and visually-savvy activists. As new media technologies have opened up new strategies of representation, these modes of representation have been incorporated into existing media practices that delimit the ways in which the consequentiality of various movements and political projects can be understood. Theoretically revisiting the concept of visibility, this essay critiques the relationship between technology and the production of knowledge in media studies before arguing that the visibility of an event presages a consequentiality partially determined by the ways in which it is rendered perceptible and thus, intelligible.

Keywords: post-structuralism, digital protest, mobility, politics of visibility, visuality

Amid the social and political upheavals of recent years, digital images, circulating quickly across social media networks, drawing attention to acts of injustice, have been ascribed a particular kind of social agency. During the Arab Spring protests of 2011, commentators in academia and the mainstream media argued that these visuality of the movement, abetted by smart phones and digital networks offered a new form of social organization that presaged democratic mobilization and governance (Castells 2012; Ghonim 2012; Shirky 2011). Elsewhere, encamped in public parks, Occupy Wall Street protesters documented their movement and its politics, as well as key moments of conflict between the police and protesters (Creech 2014; Wark 2013). In Spain, the *indignados* movement utilized digital technologies and visual media to mobilize action around anti-austerity politics (Antentas 2015). More recently, #Blacklivesmatter protests have drawn a renewed vigor to the idea that by at least allowing individuals to document previously

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unseen realities, the smartphone camera has reconfigured politics through the production of visibility (Bock 2016). Scholars of the digital right-wing populist movements reactionary political projects have also noted that one of the key tactics reactionaries online has been to flood digital infrastructures with various forms of visual media (Milner 2013; Nagle 2017). On a separate scale, live streaming video has been used to build solidarity across social movements, creating an experiential visuality that pulls geographically disparate individuals into the intimate sociality of various social movement projects (Thorburn 2014, 2017).

As visuality has become a site of political and cultural contest, the technical and cultural conditions underlying the production of visibility require more strategic and analytic consideration. Visual phenomena are by no means natural indices of objective reality, but claims to objectivity, or at least empirical veracity, have long abetted political projects that build their rhetorical force around what counts as a matter of unimpeachable fact. If to see something is to experience it, and to experience it means to account for it, then techniques and technologies that bring visibility to previously unseen issues, phenomena, and events also make them coherent objects which institutions of power must account for.

In the following pages, I articulate a theoretical argument that offers a way of understanding the overlap of digital technologies, practices that produce visuality, and techniques of power – in short, a *politics of visibility*. This term describes the conflation of a seemingly natural phenomenon (what is visible, and thus perceptible and intelligible) with the dynamically shifting power relations of political representation, deliberation, and even social unrest. In order to understand the political consequentiality of visibility, it is necessary for media and cultural studies to reinvestigate the means by which events become settled objects of public knowledge, especially in a world where the visibility of these events is linked to their ability to be perceived, understood, and articulated as consequential. To that end, the following argument proceeds in two parts. First, this essay interrogates visibility as a philosophical concept, parsing the relationship between ideology, reality, and techniques of perception. Then, it turns to the corpus of media and communication studies to understand visibility as an object of research in order to understand how making things visible constitutes a legitimate strategy of mediated power.

1 Visibility as politically-inflected praxis

In order to understand how the perception and sensibility of events can have material and political consequences, we must find a conceptual language that explains how disparate political events and spectacles carry their nascent political

possibility in the modes of visibility that produce phenomena, events, and issues as knowable objects. By interrogating the notion of visibility and the means by which it is produced, we can begin to understand how the production of visibility might be opened up for the articulation of political possibility.

As a way of setting up an example, take the confluence of image production and power evident in the workings of the smartphone camera. In the hands of a savvy operator, the device takes on a strategic aspect that situates its user in active relation to other social actors and practices. For instance, as Bratich (2014) interrogates the collection of strategies and techniques of representation bound up within the Occupy Wall Street movement, he argues that forms of political possibility embodied by the technologically-augmented activities of the movement dialectically contended with the "*dispositifs* of dispersion" deployed by police to re-subjugate the movement to dominant political logics (2014: 69). Considering media devices as socially situated objects connected to other extant practices, then, means acknowledging the fact that an individual may use devices as part of a broader assemblage of material and social relations to strategically reconfigure the workings of power in ways that offer alternative modes of representation that can, at best, challenge contemporary politics, or, more realistically, temporarily evade established modes of subjugation (Guattari 2009). Following Hardt and Negri (2017), these devices place visibility within a broader machinic ontology, producing "subjectivities of knowledge *and action*, and demonstrating how their production emerges in material connections" that make apparent sites and possibilities of social struggle and contest (2017: 121, emphasis added). In short, the visible is made political in part by our ever-expanding ability to apprehend its techniques of production, but understanding it as such requires denaturalizing the concept of visibility and making it subject to broader relations of power.

1.1 Visibility has always been political

Visibility gains its political character partly through the tacitly complicated relationship between perception and reality. Naturalizing the relationship between perception and reality is foundation of empiricism's broader epistemological authority, and, as Merleau-Ponty shows, perception, and thus visibility, gains much of its power from an assumed empiricism. As he argues, human perception gives rise to forms of reason and rationality that offer a productive understanding of the world based on what can be observed, arguing that "The perceived world is the always presupposed foundation of all rationality, all value and all existence" (Merleau-Ponty 1946: 13). Such a claim relies upon a key dualism in Western thought: the difference between objective reality and human perception and

representation of that reality. Perception's claims to objectivity often go unquestioned, but, as I will argue, this assumption of neutrality and direct ontological correspondence to the real word belies complex relations of power which can in turn be effected by what is rendered visible and thus worthy of attention.

Whereas Merleau-Ponty complicates perception as a philosophical given, others have drawn attention to the manipulation of perception and visuality as a strategy of significant political consequence. As Benjamin writes, much of mass culture works as a type of perception-laden machine of ideological consequence, whose purpose is to maintain a dominant power structure that "makes it possible to set a goal for mass movement on the grandest scale while preserving traditional property relations" (Benjamin 2008 [1936]: 41). For Benjamin (2002), cultural production projects a form of false consciousness onto society at large through its access to the broader visual grammar and vocabulary. As Buck-Morss (1992) notes, Benjamin's (2002) work, particularly *The Arcades Project*, provides a method for intuiting and perceiving the relations of power in the aesthetics of mass-produced culture, itself a project in training the reader to perceive the problems of modern class relations in the expressions of culture. Granted, Benjamin perceived capitalist power relations on the surfaces of French advertising and architecture, but as Buck-Morss notes, Benjamin understood power relations and the aesthetics of mass culture as simultaneously and dialectically constituting one another. Simply speaking, visible phenomena serve as evidence of social and political conditions, but also create the ideological realm where these relations are envisioned, expressed, and taught.

Berger attempted to popularize Benjamin's thoughts on visibility and the relations of power, and in doing so, brought Benjamin's work to bear more directly upon the production of mass media texts and images, further revealing the relations of power made accessible through acts of visibility. He notes, "If the new language of images were used differently, it would … confer a new kind of power. Within it, we could begin to define our experiences more precisely" (Berger 1972: 33). Because Berger finds a specific and historically constructed power relationship within the aesthetics of the visible, he traces a contemporary visual order in which "publicity is essentially eventless. It extends just as far as nothing is happening … Publicity, situated in a future continually deferred excludes the present and so eliminates all becoming, all development. Experience is impossible within it. All that happens, happens outside it" (Berger 1972: 153). Berger's argument bridges the distance between Benjamin and later post-modernists like Baudrillard, as he envisions the way that the modern mass media create a simulacrum of capitalist consumption, where no other kind of hope or satisfaction or pleasure can any longer be envisaged within the culture of capitalism" (Baudrillard 1994: 153). It is here that the visible acts as an alternative to actual politics, as if representation displaces actual possibility.

For delineating a working politics of visibility, these disparate authors offer varying means for recognizing that social reality is deeply connected to the way that things are perceived, and that perception is tied to technologies and practices of seeing. As Jay (1994) rightly notes, a claim that images alienate individuals from reality retains a necessary rationalist split between reality and perception, and thus preserves an ideal of objectivity that locks social agents and individuals within a strictly structural system that makes no affordance for agency. Tagg (1993, 2009) has shown that as relations of institutional power and modes of visual representation reify and constitute one another, they create systems of meaning that grant individual acts of visuality their power, but also constrain the ways in which new representations may disrupt those structures. Visual representations, gathered in aggregate, kept in archives, and produced by trained technicians, produces an epistemic basis upon which the legitimacy of contemporary relationships of power rely. Visuality is productive because it is evidentiary. What is needed here is an understanding of not just how images reproduce relations of ideology and power, but how practices, techniques, and technologies of seeing and producing visuality situate individuals and objects within a visual regime whose practices embody and the exercise of power.

1.2 Apprehending the technologies and techniques that render things visible

By understanding visibility as inimically related to power, we can come to understand how subjects may, in Foucaultian terms, challenge power by apprehending the technologies and techniques of knowledge production, or in this case, visibility production (Rose 2001). Caspar and Moore's (2009) work on the micropolitics exerted upon human bodies through regimes of visibility is useful in this regard in that it turns to visuality, as a technique of knowing something as foundational to the workings of power. As Foucault (1979) notes, power works through modes of knowledge and visibility as both a type of control and as a counter-point to that control, and thus capturing the apparatuses of visibility also opens up the possibility of affecting the relations of power that produce and are produced by modes of image production and techniques of seeing.

To return to the example of the smartphone camera, many of the strategic uses of smartphone cameras gain their power through acts of witnessing, itself a complicated practice within the history of visuality. As Peters argues, witnessing "has two faces: the passive one of *seeing* and the active one of *saying*," and thus works by articulating an event or representation in terms of a collective morality at the heart of liberalism (Peters 2001: 709). Historicizing and theorizing the use of

mobile phone cameras in the Black Lives Matter movement and protests against police violence, Richardson (2017) notes that activists engage a long history of black witnessing, using digital tools to call upon the power of a black public that has long been constituted through alternative modes of mediation and collective representation. To witness is to ultimately make an appeal, borne in truth, to a collective humanism, and to activate that humanism through technologies of documentation and networks of publicity (Allan and Dencik 2017; Zelizer 2010).

In the context of the smartphone camera, witnessing affords a strategy that mobilizes affective truths in the hope of spurring action. Yet, access to the political and legal institutions that can mobilize the action spurred by acts of witnessing is politically unequal, as are the broader wells of public sympathy acts of witnessing appeal to (Blaagaard et al. 2017). The growth of digital infrastructures has also increased the urgency with which individuals may draw attention to these inequities, where "citizen camera-witnessing derives its efficacy and moral force from the individual's willingness to stand before the world and risk bodily injury to attest to the (alleged) truth" at a previously unconceivable scale (Anden-Papadopoulos 2014: 766). As the technologies of witnessing and publicity are tied closer to the human body through the smartphone camera, the challenge becomes finding ways to preserve the power of the human body to act as a referent capable of implicating broad regimes of global power and inequities, to strategically leverage subjective immediacy in ways that visualize the inequities of power with urgency (Kraidy 2016).

By anchoring its representational authority to the human body, witnessing, especially smartphone camera witnessing, bears the discursive and epistemic power of irrefutable evidence. But the notion of evidence is itself fluid, and shows how the power of witnessing may be stifled as representations interface with the institutions of law and politics. In the example of the Occupy Wall Street Movement, acts of digital representation offered both a political and ontological strategy rooted in using digital technologies to create a critical mass of documents circulating across political networks that served as evidence of both the movement's political consequence and the structures of economic inequality the movement sought to grant visibility to and critique (Creech 2014). As Wark (2013) has argued, such practices extend from a long history of image spectacle production indebted to Debord (1967), who argued that contemporary relations of power could be made sensible and challenged if technologies of image production were deployed with the intent to make these nebulous relations visible.

Deleuze and Guattari (1983) also offer a means for further understanding visibility and visuality as a strategy for challenging power. The creation of visibility as a technique for perceiving the world and articulating consequential meaning is configured within a complex assemblage of relations that include human

practices, shifting material realties, and the technological possibilities that make that reality perceptible. Each of these elements is fluid and shifting, affording different strategies at specific moments. For example, in Egypt during the Tahrir Square riots of 2011s Arab Spring, shifting modes of image and video capturing and distribution enabled by the Internet and smart phones helped produce a shifting politics of representation within Egypt that escaped state apparatuses of communication control, thus articulating these politics within a media system beyond the borders of Egypt, while within these networks of communication, the human body remained a potent signifier of both popular challenge and authoritarian domination (Kraidy 2016).

Furthermore, Guattari's work (1992) offers a way of understanding how the intelligibility of mediated events exist within an assemblage of linguistic, political, technological, and psychological systems that gives form to the way events are understood, and in doing so, recovers potential consequentiality in acts of representation. He states that, "technological machines of information and communication operate at the heart of human subjectivity, not only within its memory and intelligence, but within its sensibility, affects and unconscious phantasms," and in doing so link the semiotic reality of media-based representations to the material, political, and technological conditions that delimit those representations (1992: 4). It is at the level of the individual that these multiple practices converge, and in their complexity and convergence can be apprehended and made new in a way that affects the broader structures of meaning making.

Along these same lines, Latour (2004) offers a way to understand that strategies of perception and visibility exist contingent upon, but not determined by, shifts in technologies of knowledge production. Latour's key move is to dissolve the distinction between idealized, transcendent reality and human modes of perception, instead arguing that the distinction between material reality and the ability to perceive that reality matters less than how the tension between reality and perception produces real political projects. Though in many ways beholden to liberal democratic praxis, Latour's work attempts to account for the consequentiality of representation within systems of knowledge and power. Following Latour's (2004) own schema of political consideration, assembly, and representation, as laid out in the *Politics of Nature*, communication and media practice become a realm of public meaning-making, where phenomena and events are constructed, made sense of, and taken into account. Yet, for something to start making sense, there must also be a system, grammar, ethic, or esthetic by which it can be understood and its potential consequentiality considered (Latour 2005).

The key precept here, though, is that changes in perception, i.e., changes in what is made visible, possess real ontological and political consequence precisely because the images we see no longer form a veneer over objective reality. Instead,

they give new form and complexity to what seemed stable and determined precisely because they unsettle seemingly static understandings of certain phenomena. By understanding visibility as something that is produced through established practices of meaning making connected to broader relations of power, we can then recover the visible as a consequential object of study within media and cultural studies.

2 Media studies and the recovery of visibility

To interrogate visibility as a practice infused with political potential, it important to first locate notions subjectivity and agency within technologically-mediated modes of communication. As Milan (2015) argues, a politics of visibility works by mobilizing a collective identity across networks of media distribution. Doing so requires both the strategic apprehension of media technologies and forms, connecting these forms to longstanding projects anchored around identity.

Because perception and representation are bound up with the technologies that render them possible, it is important to recover a sense of agency from technology itself (Kittler 2009). Media research that deals with technology conventionally posits that changing devices, software, and interfaces, as well as technologically reliant modes of production, consumption, and distribution fundamentally shift the ways that communication functions in society (Czitrom 1982). For instance, McLuhan's (1964) emphasis on the medium over the message belies an unabashed optimism and belief in technology that is easily countered by Postman's (1992) own deep pessimism about media technologies' effects on culture and civil society.

Research that attempts to overcome the split between the human and the technological takes various conceptual tacks, often positing the role that technology plays in shaping communication as a practice. Some of the work that follows in this vein, such as that of Jenkins' (2006) work on convergence, may be wide and varied in its empirical range, but often these works continue to maintain an understanding of technology as a structure that determines forms of human interaction. More recently, others such as Packer and Crofts-Wiley (2012) have tried to complicate this notion of technological over-determinism by positing a communications-based materialism that looks at the logistical practicalities opened up by technological changes as historically and cultural contingent upon politics, regulation, and economic interest. In doing so, Packer (2008) offers a way of thinking about the material aspects of communication practices as phenomenal aspects that must be negotiated in order for a broad variety of practices to take form.

Still, the specter of technological essentialism lurks. Couldry (2012) has tried to overcome the ontological split between technological possibility and human agency by investigating the ways technologies, human activity, and structures of power emerge within a co-constituting structure that is rebuilt and remade at the level of individual practice. He keeps from subverting technology to power structures by revising traditional social theories, arguing that digital media communication provides a range of empirical phenomena that complicate traditional understandings of mass communication phenomena in a way that necessitates revisions in many of the disciplines fundamental assumptions and theories. Couldry gets at an important point for understanding the role of technology in the production of visibility: that the field of phenomena to be considered when dealing with digital communication and technology must be multi-scalar and multi-vocal, focused on not just the shifting material realties, but also the historical, professional, social, and cultural configurations in which these technologies emerged.

Accomplishing a study with such aims is in many ways overwhelming, but it gets at the necessity of attempting to describe the range of forces, structures, and networks that individuals are configured within in order to understand the way that digital technologies change what can be seen as part of a meaning-producing assemblage. Haraway's Cyborg Manifesto (2010 [1983]) is perhaps one of the most influential works exploring the overlap of human and technical agency, in that it posits a complicated system of relationships between the human and technological, relationships that complicate governing practices and structures of power precisely because they trouble and destabilized the constitution of individual subjectivity. It is in this sharply realized complexity that Haraway finds possibility:

> The cyborg is resolutely committed to partiality, irony, intimacy, and perversity. It is oppositional, utopian, and completely without innocence. No longer structured by the polarity of public and private, the cyborg defines a technological polis based partly on a revolution of social relations in the oikos, the household. Nature and culture are reworked; the one can no longer be the resource for appropriation or incorporation by the other. (Haraway 2010 [1983]: 455)

By recovering subjectivity in a distinctly Deleuzian way, Haraway opens up the possibility for understanding how an individual's creativity and singularity can allow her to operate as a reordering agent capable of changing the organization of the assemblage in a way that causes rippling changes across networks of technology and power.

The notion of assemblage, then, allows us to posit visibility as the consequential product of overlapping and sometimes tacit relations – a site of action and analysis. As Slack has argued, "As the concept of assemblage suggests, what we have to offer is the recognition of the co-constitutive work of the machinic and the enunciative, the consequences of territorialization, and the possibilities of

escaping territories that rigidify, block, and subdue. That is what communication can become" (Slack 2012: 155). It is the linkage of technical potential and human action that grants gravity to statements such as Deluca et al.'s observation that "with a smartphone in her pocket, an Occupied activist camping in Zucotti Park or Chicago or Oakland can become a panmedia outlet, a decentered knot of video, photographs, and blogging that documents and creates and circulates the Occupied events" (DeLuca et al. 2012: 487). Such statements articulate a coherent subjectivity within the politics of visibility, imagining not just the subject, but the means by which they may effect broader social forces through consequential practice.

2.1 Media practice and the production of public knowledge

While an understanding of technological assemblages opens certain analytic possibilities, in order to understand how objects, issues, and phenomena are rendered broadly visible *and* consequential, it is important to consider how media practices act as a mode of public knowledge production, where rules and conventions create a discrete and bounded public sphere. Journalism is a useful example in this regard, because of its common role as a gatekeeping practice for the liberal democratic public sphere (Shoemaker and Vos 2009). It is a role that has relied on a claim to objectivity, in many ways rooted in late-nineteenth century empiricism (Schudson 1978). In fact, it is this very claim of objectivity as fundamental to the practice of democracy that has historically offered a fruitful site for contestation (Couldry 2000). Concerns about journalistic practice reveal a deeper, culturally situated assertion that the forms of knowledge produced by journalistic texts, practitioners, and institutions have political and epistemological ramifications deeply related to the way that liberal democratic power is conceived and exercised (Carlson 2017). If we are to understand how technologies produce new forms of visibility, we must also understand how the media practices they are embedded within have been able to claim epistemological authority in the first place.

Concerns about the production of true, objective, or neutral information have been a part of journalism's professional configuration since at least 1915, when, Schudson (1978) asserts, objectivity was defined as a specific professional method that would enabled dispassionate individuals to produce more credible information. In contrast to claims of journalism's neutrality, broader arguments about the public benefit of journalism have been a prevalent concern for the profession's major practitioners, scholars, and critics since at least the early 1800s (Nadler 2016). Arguments about journalism's role as a public institution often offer programmatic solutions for how professional values like objectivity, verifiability,

accuracy, and transparency are embodied in professional practices, as most recently canonized in Kovach and Rosentiel's *Elements of Journalism* (Kovach and Rosentiel 2001). These values, in their professional embodiment, offer guidelines for making visible phenomena legible within the routines of media representation, but also act as key sites for normative intervention and institutional vulnerability (Patterson 2013). For instance, across various historical moments, those invested in a normative model of a press devoted to the public interest voiced concerns about the impact that commercialization would have on the integrity of news production as the demands of the market caused individual reporters and editors to abandon principal values like independence and objectivity (Baldasty 1992).

Critiques that attempt to recover the values of the public good from the practice of journalism also serve to preserve its integrity as a key truth-producing discipline located within the larger relations of liberal democracy. For example, in their analysis of journalistic practices, Edy and Snidow argued that, "from a Foucauldian perspective, the institution of journalism is a set of social practices that produce and define knowledge and that legitimate ways of knowing about political and public life," and by necessity thus "generates both dominant and subjugated knowledges" (Edy and Snidow 2011: 818). Journalism marks events as objects of legitimate consideration and gives a way for these events to enter into a larger range of governmental rationality and practice. Nolan's (2003) understanding of journalism clearly lays out how it fits within other techniques of government and self-government within modern neoliberal societies:

> Firstly, it constitutes one such "positive and interpretive discipline" in its own right, with characteristic (albeit multiple) modes of knowledge production and transmission, that provides an ongoing critical commentary that is widely recognized to be a highly influential element in the "dialogical self-critique" of liberal-democratic societies. Secondly, it also provides a mechanism through which various other disciplines and critical discourses enter into public dialogue and contestation. (Nolan 2003: 1371)

Journalism then, as one example of media practice, grants meaning to new phenomena and acts as a site of contestation where the politics of visibility operate. It provides the milieu through which societies, political institutions, and diverse groups of citizens come to understand themselves and, as such, offers a space where visibility can work to render certain phenomena and groups as politically consequential.

2.2 Communication and dissent

If technologies help render phenomena visible, and media practices help grant meaning, then projects of dissent and protest offer a way of understanding how

those visibilities are made *political*. Downing's exhaustive cataloging of media use among dissenting social movements offers an approach that considers how key forms of media-based dissent emerge among existing material and social relations. For instance, in the Iranian revolution of 1979, people shared cassette tapes with instructions, messages, and information, in order to coordinate a movement against the shah (Downing 2001: 34). Downing points out that in order for these cassette tapes to be utilized as effective tools for organizing social action, they had to move along existing social networks, organized by leaders who could determine what information and messages would most effectively mobilize followers. Here, a communications technology (the cassette tape) augmented existing practice in a way that allowed the movement to achieve mobility against the forms of power it attempted to resist. Since dissenting movements have access to the same grammars, aesthetics, ethics, and means of communication that preserve existing structures and relations of power, these tools can be used to articulate dissenting politics and appeal to an amorphous disaggregated mass of publicly held political will whose popular meaning is apprehended by existing media practices.

Still, the focus on possibility from within existing media systems may beget overly optimistic, if not utopian, formulations. For some, the possibilities that digital communications portend only hasten an inevitably progressive new reality (Kostakis 2011; Mousa 2010; Tkacz 2010; Ubayasiri 2010). Others reveal a distinct split between the possibilities of digital technologies and the political aims of various groups, often taking a view that power flows from the technology itself in a way that supersedes the political efficacy of dissenting groups or the various forms of power that dominant groups hold (Giroux 2011; Howley 2008).

To offer a more nuanced perspective, Kellner (2003) has coined the term 'technopolitics' to denote the strategic uses of technology to both engage in democratic politics by expanding the public sphere, as well as attempts by those in power to use communications technologies to limit the modes of communication and dissent while also attempting to produce and police the public activities of citizens. He is careful to note that "if revolution is to have a future in the contemporary era it must incorporate technopolitics as part of its strategy, conceiving of technopolitics, however, as an arm of struggle and not an end in and of itself" (2003: 190). It is no wonder then, given the deserved pessimism directed toward traditional media outlets by Kellner and others, that they in turn find democratic possibility within the seemingly limitless technological potential of new media technologies. From within technology, dissent represents a practical tension as individuals attempt to move beyond the bounds of state-restricted activity. As Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter (2010) succinctly note, "the possibilities of virtual play exceed its imperial manifestations." To understand something as a form of possibility means to also take into serious consideration the way

blossoming forms of organization and politics take as their fertilizer the multitudinous practices and modes of communication that already exist. As Wolfson (2014) shows, digital technologies have offered activists a field of productive restraints that, if navigated artfully, offer a means for challenging structures of power from networks that have not yet been fully captured by more technocratic projects. The production of visibility, then, is one such mode for navigating these structures, but as Tufecki (2017) notes, it is also subject to new and emerging constraints within technical structures.

Therefore, centering specific objects as the site of analysis allows researchers to illustrate how perceived possibilities are contingent and observed actions are constrained and strategic. To return to the example of the smartphone camera, the fact that the device masks sophisticated technological operations with a user-interface that naturalizes the production and distribution of images affords myriad representational strategies, depending upon context. By masking complex image production and distribution practices, the smartphone has allowed for certain strategies of image production to gain cultural power, as distilled in David's claim that "camera phone videos also enable us to see that which was often intended to remain veiled or hidden" (David 2010: 97). Such statements, though, gain their sense of truth from the ways in which the seeming simplicity and ubiquity of the device afford broader strategies of collective image and truth production. This is the crux of the contemporary politics of visibility, in that the device operates as a site drawing attention to the ever-present tension between seemingly inert technologies and the structures of meaning, politics, and culture they are often celebrated for disrupting. By considering the device as an apparatus embedded in broader relations of power, and a site where these relations play out, scholars may begin to see how shifting strategies of visuality gain political and social consequence.

3 Conclusion

In order to take up the "politics of visibility" as an assemblage of technology, practice, and systems that grant intelligible meaning to events, issues, and phenomena, this essay locates within the image a political effectivity that ties directly to relations of power. Though it is often tempting to take visibility for granted, images and the practices that render them consequential instead offer a particular site for understanding how techniques of representation are inflected with broader relations of power. By interrogating these techniques, observers can begin to understand the possibilities and perils various projects encounter as they strategically apprehend the visual as a site of contestation, as well as the ways in which

modes of visuality work to delimit political potential and possibility. For interested critics and scholars, this means attending to an ambivalence in visibility, noting that it is through the production of meaning that the politics of visibility play out, whether as a protest movement that strives to no longer be ignored or a video of a police shooting too easily ignored by a jury.

The purpose here is to open up moments of visibility as an object of analysis, to identify the conditions surrounding visual production as a relevant site for understanding political praxis. Considering visibility as produced by an assemblage comprised of technologies of representation, the intentional and strategic use of those technologies, and the media systems representations circulate within, opens up the possibility for understanding not only *what* representations and their attendant politics might mean, but also *how* they are made to mean, with an eye to how those representations are in turn rendered politically consequential or impotent. Representation, visuality, and image production, then, should not be taken for granted as natural processes; they involve various technical, esthetic, cultural, social, and political elements. For scholars and observers interested in the ways in which visuality inflects contemporary politics, considering visibility as comprised of a broader relation of technical realities, systems of meaning, and techniques for making meaning within these constraints offers a means for understanding how producing visibility has emerged as an effective and recurrent political strategy in the early twenty-first century.

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