Media-N | Media-N | The Journal of the New Media Caucus
Fall + 2017: Volume 13, Number 1, Pages 5–18
ISSN: 1942-017X

Social Media and the New Newsreel

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ABSTRACT

The online circulation of raw footage from live streams, cell phones, and police dash-cams has fueled much political dissent in recent years, from Occupy Wall Street to the protests surrounding the deaths of Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Sandra Bland, and others. This essay looks at experimental moving image works made in response to these contemporary dynamics of protest. It offers a comparative analysis of short digital videos by Jem Cohen and Alex Johnson, both of whom embrace the newsreel as a radical genre, making direct reference to earlier generations of filmmakers who did the same. Cohen's *Gravity Hill Newsreels* (2011) offer a series of immersive observational studies of the Occupy demonstrations and Zuccotti Park encampment. In a more directly referential mode, Johnson's *Now! Again!* (2014) appropriates Santiago Alvarez's *Now!* (1965), a Cuban newsreel made by animating photographs depicting the civil rights struggle. Johnston juxtaposes this imagery with media coverage of protests in Ferguson, Missouri after the death of Michael Brown in August 2014.

Fifty years ago, radical filmmakers of Alvarez's generation urged newsreel audiences to recognize themselves as a social body, sharing a stake in the struggles depicted on screen. Today, the currency of "newsreel" as a political mode of experimental media is less certain. Although the experimental videos at issue here could be read as nostalgic for conditions of cinematic exhibition long since eclipsed by the dominance of social media, I argue instead that they engage the current mediation of political unrest in order to explore the indeterminacy of the social body to which it gives rise. Calling attention to rifts in the visual field and the seams that bind one historical moment to another, these works are guided by a desire to grasp the historicity of newsreel as a form enlisted to play a participatory role in social protest. In each case, newsreel provides new forms for responding to urgent events that cut against the temporality and visual codes of social media, opening up new space to share the world differently.

The circulation of footage from live streams, cell phones, and police dash-cams online has fueled much political dissent in recent years, from Occupy Wall Street to the protests sparked by the deaths of Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Sandra Bland, Philando Castile, and others. As newspapers cede ground to social media newsfeeds and the new habits of participation and protest they foster, connectedness seems increasingly to rely on what Wendy Chun describes as "asynchronous yet pressing actions." [1] Urgently posting, sharing, and commenting, Chun argues, users of social media decisively "puncture" the non-continuous time of the network, even as these actions threaten to undermine agency "by catching and exhausting users in a never-ending series of responses." [2]

Take for example the use of the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter on Twitter, which first spiked dramatically in November 2014 after the shooting of twelve-year-old Tamir Rice in Cleveland and the announcement just two days later, that officer Darren Wilson would not be indicted for the death of Michael Brown. Since then #BlackLivesMatter has coalesced into a social movement and become a rallying cry at protests, fueling much discussion online. Use of the hashtag has peaked a number of times since, always in direct response to breaking news, including the deaths of Sandra Bland and Freddie Grey. [3] In many cases, documented confrontations with police have heightened the sense of ongoing crisis; the hashtag #Icantbreathe was tweeted more than 2 million times, while video of the choking death of Eric Garner at the hands of police that inspired the phrase received more than 1 million views in its first year online. Diamond Reynolds used Facebook to live stream a routine traffic stop that left her boyfriend Philando Castile dead. She finally shut down her account after the video reached more than 3 million views. [4] These numbers, however provisional or incomplete, provide vivid and distressing evidence of the way, as Chun argues, "new media thrive on crisis" while at the same time rendering crisis habitual. [5]

This essay will look at recent efforts by two filmmakers, Jem Cohen and Alex Johnston, in order to challenge the temporality of relentless crisis online by embracing newsreel as genre, treating it as what Maeve Connolly describes as "a repository" for "cinematic memory." [6] As the Internet becomes what Chun calls "a mass medium to end mass media: a mass personalized device," Cohen and Johnston each turn to this older form of mass media to reimagine how collective agency might take shape differently in response to pressing injustices. [7] Their short digital videos envision collective forms constituted through actions that unfold in the streets, while simultaneously seeking new ways to mediate these events on screen, online and elsewhere. Both filmmakers negotiate the temporality of network crisis by making reference to the work of politically engaged filmmakers of an earlier generation who also appropriated and reinvented newsreel as a genre. In the process, both Cohen and Johnston develop formal mirroring devices that exploit disruptions in the visual field where new collectivities provisionally take shape.

Cohen's *Gravity Hill Newsreels* (2011) offer a series of immersive observational studies of the Occupy demonstrations produced during the uncertain weeks of protest before the Zuccotti Park encampment in lower Manhattan was cleared by police. Shot in the reflective, first-person style for which Cohen is known, each of the twelve short videos in the series is dedicated to a different filmmaker whose work serves as an important touchstone for the project, including Chris Marker, Dziga Vertov, Joris Ivens, Agnès Varda, and Santiago Álvarez among others. In a more directly referential mode, Johnston's *Now! Again!* (2014) appropriates Álvarez's short film *Now!* originally produced in 1965 as a special issue Cuban newsreel depicting the civil rights struggle in the United States. Johnston takes up and remakes Álvarez's film, juxtaposing the original with online media coverage of the protests that erupted in Ferguson, Missouri after the shooting of Michael Brown in August 2014. In both cases, newsreel provides filmmakers with a rich history to draw upon as they seek temporal logics and collective forms that might cut against those that govern the unrelenting dynamics of crisis online. [8]

Commercial newsreels first emerged as a form of mass media in the early 1910s and quickly developed a stable set of conventions that endured for nearly sixty years. [9] The typical commercial newsreel was approximately ten minutes long and included anywhere from five to ten unrelated stories: reports on news events of immediate interest, both scheduled and

unanticipated, as well as stories of general interest or visual oddities included primarily as entertaining filler. [10] With the advent of sound, an unseen, authoritative narrator replaced the use of intertitles. [11] Released once or twice weekly depending on the national context, commercial newsreels were included as standard fare in block-booked feature film programs in cinemas across the world. [12] Newsreels as a genre not only reached mass audiences, they also transformed them into a subject whose collectivity could be depicted on screen.

In the 1930s, Walter Benjamin recognized the potential of the newsreel to bring the masses "face-to-face with themselves" in "great ceremonial processions, giant rallies and mass sporting events, and in war." [13] Politically-minded filmmakers, often working in the form of self-organized groups, attempted to make good on the newsreel's promise of depicting the masses as the protagonists of history, a possibility otherwise held at bay by the demands of spectacular entertainment or propaganda. The Film and Photo Leagues of the 1930s and the radical newsreel collectives of the 1960s sought to reclaim or refurbish the newsreel as a political form. In the process, they created alternative networks of distribution and exhibition. [14] In 1967, New York Newsreel released a statement declaring their distribution strategy: "At the start we will use existing networks like SDS, the Underground Press Service, anti-war groups, the Resistance, community projects . . . to find various groups around the country (and abroad) who can use the films effectively, can show them frequently, and who have sufficient contacts in their cities to get the films out to other different groups, like churches, film clubs, anti-poverty groups, neighborhood organizations." [15]
These endeavors urged audiences constituted outside the regular circuits of mass distribution to recognize themselves as sharing a stake in the struggles depicted on screen, often in strikingly vivid vérité style. Robert Kramer, a member of New York Newsreel described the group's ambition to make films that "explode like grenades in peoples' faces" adding with slightly less bombast, "or open minds up like a good can opener." [16] The invocation of newsreel today by a new generation of filmmakers might read as nostalgic in a moment dominated by streaming video and hashtags, but these recent works revisit the mobilization of radical newsreel in the past as a means for envisioning new filmic forms attentive to the mediated conditions of protest in the present. In the process, they raise questions about what binds a collective together or one historical moment to another.

Collective Mediations

In late September, 2011 Jem Cohen began shooting footage of the Occupy movement as it was coalescing in downtown Manhattan. Cohen is best known for quiet, observational films built up of short, striking glimpses of life caught unaware, almost always shot on super-8 and 16mm film. Many of his most celebrated films are set in New York City, including *Lost Book Found* (1996) structured around the discovery of a mysterious notebook and *Little Flags* (2000), which depicts an ecstatic tickertape parade at the end of the first Gulf War. *The Gravity Hill Newsreels*, named for Cohen's production company, were an unusual undertaking for the filmmaker. He was commissioned to produce them by the IFC Center, a cinema in the West Village dedicated to independent and foreign films. Each week during the ongoing Occupy protests, he delivered a new newsreel to be screened before featured films playing at the theater. These short videos, varying in length between two and seven minutes, provided a contemplative, intimate view of a movement still in the process of unfolding. Given the extremely tight turn around involved in getting these images to the big screen, Cohen opted to shoot with a borrowed digital video camera rather than with the Bolex he typically uses. Embracing the imperative to deliver a short film

every week to the theater, he found, as he told one interviewer, he "had to quickly explore the idea of what newsreels had been and could be." [17]

Curious, observant, but far from propagandistic, these works completely reinvent the newsreel form, rendering it absorbing and visually surprising at the same time. Rather than offer a series of quick, unrelated stories narrated by titles or voiceover, each newsreel in the series serves as a cinematic study of some aspect of daily life for the occupiers (meetings, music, rain, camping out at night). Taken as a whole, Cohen's *Gravity Hill Newsreel* offer a nuanced and impressionistic sense of the strange temporalities that characterized the ongoing occupation: anticipation, busyness, tedium, and ultimately the endurance of much uncertainty. Cohen often lingers over moments that precede or unfold after an event of consequence has taken place, for example in *Gravity Hill Newsreel* No. 8, filmed on November 15, 2011 during the aftermath of the police raid that cleared Zuccotti Park. This approach allowed Cohen to develop a form both timely and enduring. As a result, his newsreels move easily between different spaces of exhibition and viewing contexts. In addition to screening in the conventional theatrical context at the IFC Center each week, the series was, and continues to be available online through Vimeo. It has also been exhibited in the form of a multi-channel gallery installation, as well as a film program at a number of film festivals and museums. [18] Cohen's project differs from the efforts of earlier generations of political filmmakers to gather new audiences outside of the conventional circuits of commercial film distribution. Instead his newsreels cultivate space within, or even at the margin of those channels, for a new audience to emerge.

Cohen describes his efforts as a rejection of the slick production values that characterized much of the indy media being produced within the movement, which for him trafficked too readily in the language of advertising. [19] His approach also stands in stark contrast to the considerably less-polished visual culture of Occupy: galvanizing viral clips of spectacularized violence, on the one hand, and the more mundane, haphazard documentation captured for its own sake by countless cell phones and digital cameras held aloft in the crowd, on the other. Cohen's patient, searching mode of observation is well suited to the process oriented rhetoric of the occupiers and their inclusive strategies of address. One of the most significant of these strategies, the human microphone or "the people's mic," featured in *Gravity Hill Newsreel* No. 6 ½ , involves the repetition and amplification of short phrases spoken by a single speaker and then repeated by groups of people spanning across a crowd. Homay King describes this mode of speech as a choir that does not preexist the process, but rather "comes into being through this practice" of speaking together. [20] Cohen's newsreels offer a glimpse of how such collective processes gather force and unfold in time unpredictably – sometimes tentatively and at other times with great speed.

In *Gravity Hill Newsreel* No. 2, Cohen captures the shifting tone of a demonstration at Times Square held on October 15th, 2011. Later that evening confrontations with police would briefly erupt, as they had in previous weeks when, for example, footage of two women pepper-sprayed by Officer Anthony Bologna went viral, energizing early support for the movement. [21] Cohen's film instead conveys the sense of an event still coming into being, and through that event, a new kind of collectivity. People mill around, some take pictures or carry signs. One reads, "You are the 99%." The directness of this address jumps out against the ubiquitous electronic messages that blink and scrawl across the towering screens that surround Time Square. People stand watching, unsure if something is happening or not. Others pass by without any indication that they can be counted among the swelling ranks of demonstrators. Small illuminated screens of digital cameras and cell phones capture and individuate the shared collective experience,

evidence of the powerful urge in the age of the Internet to "(cor)respond to events" in one's "own time," as Chun observes. [22]

Figure 1. **Gravity Hill Newsreel No. 2***, 2011, Jem Cohen, Digital Video, Image copyright of the artist, courtesy of Video Data Bank, www.vdb.org, School of the Art Institute of Chicago.*

Cohen's attentiveness to the built environment yields a striking counterpoint to the proliferation of individual cameras taking pictures at the scene of the protest. He uses the reflective surfaces of the city to capture a picture of this new social body as it comes into being. [23] Midway through the short newsreel, figures begin to drift past the corner of a building clad in mirrored glass. One by one, each is swallowed up into the interstice separating it from its reflected double. Every time this happens, it registers as a rift in space marking an impossible elsewhere, a space of possibility held open for the 99% to appear. Cohen makes deft use of the audio track to signal the significance of this micro-rupture in the visual field. Slowly atmospheric sound gives way to the sparse strains of a score by Guy Picciotto, subtly amplifying the impact of this enigmatic visual phenomenon. Cohen's careful framing captures the dynamics of social visibility set into motion by the protest. He tests the limits of a picture's capacity to visualize an emergent and still uncertain social collectivity, neither a mass nor a network of individuals – but instead, a gathering of untold potential, emerging through the process of negotiating its own mediation.

On October 23, 2011, a week after the events captured by Cohen in the second newsreel of his series, Judith Butler addressed the occupiers at Zuccotti Park speaking of new urgent "politics of the public body" catalyzed by the Occupy movement. "We are coming together as bodies in alliance in the street and in the square. As bodies we suffer, we require shelter and food, and as bodies we require one another and desire one another." Butler distinguishes this politics of the public body from the electoral process and its logic of representation: "We sit and stand and move and speak, as we can, as the popular will, one that electoral democracy has forgotten and abandoned. But we are here, and remain here, enacting the phrase 'we are the people.'" [24] Butler downplays the dynamics of mediation that catch Cohen's eye. She describes a process of coming together inaugurated in and through the experience of shared bodily vulnerability. What she performatively claims in the affirmative: "we are the people," Cohen's film presents as a

question, something still to be determined. Are we a "we"? How does a "we" become "the people"? How does it feel to move and speak together as "the people," "the "99%"? What makes doing this seem possible or impossible? Cohen's sustained attention to the gathering crowd as it passes into a space beyond the visible gives vivid cinematic form to these questions.

When Cohen began filming the Occupy Wall Street encampment and protests, the movement was already being documented "to an almost ridiculous degree" as he put it in a short essay on the project published in *Artforum*. [25] Finding few works that rendered the tentative process of coming together as bodies in alliance he observes, "The mainstream media cycle is inherently against focused attention and complexity. It's already falling off, another reason I feel we have to make these things for reasons and angles and timelines outside of the usual ones. I'm interested in how these newsreels will look twenty years from now." [26] It might seem counter-intuitive to invoke newsreel in the name of such an endeavor, given its associations with didacticism and exigency, particularly in its most radical incarnations. Significantly, Cohen doesn't align his project with the radical film collectives of the American New Left, who in the words of New York Newsreel's Robert Kramer, were committed to provoking visceral reactions of "disgust/violent disagreement/painful recognition/jolts." [27] Many of the films that generated notoriety for the group, such as *Columbia Revolt* and *Black Panther* convey what Michael Renov describes as "an aura of revolutionary romanticism" born of what he calls the "spectacle of solidarity and community it offers." [28] While recognizing the power and allure of such spectacles, Cohen favors a mode of shooting which fixes upon moments where solidarity is far from secured, offering instead glimpses of a social collective caught up in the flux of its own emergence.

Gravity Hill Newsreel No. 2 is dedicated to Sandor Krasna, a pseudonym used by Chris Marker in his film *Sans Soleil*, which he employed to subvert "the omniscient, anonymous 'voice' of the classical travelogue" (a voice not unlike the narrator of the conventional newsreel). Marker's early travelogues such as *Letter from Siberia*, had, as Marker put it once, "bluntly used the first-person." [29] In *Sans Soleil*, Marker sought to establish what he called "a new distance" through the device of citing letters from a fictional character. These missives from Krasna are discussed by the film's narrator in the past tense, but *Sans Soleil*ends by establishing what Marker describes as "a new frontier in time" suddenly provoked by the film's final question: "Will there be a last letter?" Completed in 1983, *Sans Soleil* followed a period of intensely collective production for Marker. In 1967, he gathered together a group of filmmakers including Jean-Luc Godard, Alain Resnais, Agnes Varda, Joris Ivens and William Klein to make *Loin du Vietnam* [Far From Vietnam] in protest of the American escalation of the war. It was the first major production of the film cooperative SLON (Société pour le Lancement des Oeuvres Nouvelles) [Society for Launching New Works]. The following year, during the events of May 1968, Marker helped to coordinate a group of over thirty filmmakers, including amateurs, activists, artists, and writers, alongside more established filmmakers like Godard and Resnais, to produce a series of unsigned ciné-tracts. These short experimental newsreel-like films were made quickly and with limited means in direct response to the restrictions of the Gaullist press during the uprising. [30] Marker would continue to produce a number of politically engaged films internationally with SLON after the completion of *Far From Vietnam* and the events of May 1968. In these SLON productions, Marker's playful, poetic voice goes mute and the camera begins to function more like an anonymous instrument preserving sounds and images for posterity. [31] *Sans Soleil* signaled

Marker's return to first-person filmmaking, but only by way of a distanced, fictionalized other, Sandor Krasna.

Cohen's newsreels reconcile these distinct modes of filmmaking; like the ciné-tracts they are made in the spirit of urgency and meant to be seen right away, before unfolding events harden into history. At the same time, they retain traces of an idiosyncratic eye-witness, but do so mutely and always from a paradoxically intimate distance. Cohen's newsreels are sensitive to the way recorded images and sounds can unexpectedly enact ruptures in time that profoundly alter the conditions of identification. They synthesize these different modes to open "a new frontier" in the crisis bound temporality of social media. His newsreels chart event horizons and collectivities still in formation, participating in rhythms and temporalities that are both urgent and at the same time paradoxically resistant to the lure of recurrent "nows."

Historical Disjunctions

While Cohen's newsreels pay homage to an eclectic cannon of filmmakers that includes Marker alongside other filmmakers, such as Santiago Álvarez, Alex Johnston's *Now! Again!*made entirely with found material, including Álvarez's film *Now!* takes a more directly mimetic approach. Álvarez briefly worked as a cameraman with Marker on the SLON film *The Battle of the Ten Million* (1970), but is best known for the films he produced while heading up the weekly Latin American Newsreel division at the Cuban Institute of Cinematographic Art and Industry (ICAIC). Johnston employs the form of the diptych to juxtapose Álvarez's film with corresponding digital photographs and footage of protests in Ferguson sourced online. The images that appear in Álvarez's film were themselves appropriated, many from American newsreels and issues of Life Magazine surreptitiously sent to Álvarez by comrades in the States. Some of this material was far from breaking news in 1965, such as the iconic photographs by Charles Moore of police attacking Civil Rights protesters with dogs in Birmingham, Alabama first published in 1963.

The newsreels produced in Cuba during this period emphasized depth, synthesis, and formal inventiveness over and above the timeliness prized by commercial newsreels. Many of the newsreels produced by the ICAIC focused on a single story or issue that would have some staying power even if reported some time after the fact. In part this had to do with the conditions of distribution in Cuba, where limited resources restricted the number of prints that could enter into circulation at any one time. While most commercial newsreels in capitalist contexts would circulate for a few weeks at most, in socialist Cuba newsreels were made to circulate for longer, sometimes indeterminate periods of time. Making films in Cuba after the revolution required working within a number of constraints. Álvarez helped transform these constraints into strengths, which in turn distinguished Cuban newsreels from their capitalist counterparts.

Joshua Matlitsky identifies *Now!* with a shift in Cuban nonfiction filmmaking away from efforts to consolidate a national identity toward a new transnational imaginary rooted in racial justice. [32] The original film's critique of race relations in the United States served to underscore the progressive attitude toward race promoted by the new regime in Cuba. Reprised by Johnston in 2014, *Now!* becomes an indictment of the persistence of racial injustice nearly fifty years on, that also implicitly argues for the productive value of the temporal delays that shaped Álvarez's conception of what newsreel could be and do. Johnston's appropriation of Álvarez's film

redoubles the original's shift in emphasis away from the immediacy of news events toward urgency framed in terms of the longue durée of history.

The title *Now!* is borrowed from a song by Lena Horne that serves as the film's soundtrack. A rousing call for Black liberation set to the tune of "Hava Nagila," it was reportedly banned from the radio in some states upon its release. [33] The first verse calls for action over words: "*If those historic gentlemen came back today: Jefferson, Washington and Lincoln and Walter Cronkite put them on channel 2 to find out what they were thinkin,' I'm sure they'd say, thanks for quoting us so much, but we don't want to take a bow. Enough with the quoting. Put those words into action, and we mean action now!*" Álvarez's film, *Now!* answers this call with scenes of solidary in the face of violent repression. It opens with footage of the Watts Riots shot in high contrast. These images, captured under the glare of floodlights, are momentarily inverted in a snippet of film negative, cinematically evoking a state of emergency heightened by the obscene violence of cops chasing after protesters with billy clubs. Johnston employs a two-channel diptych format to juxtapose these scenes of Watts in Álvarez's film with color video footage of police in Ferguson amassing at night. Red and green light spills across streets, transformed into highly militarized zones of conflict by the presence of riot squads. The double screen format emphasizes the historical link between these two moments in time, but also allows for disjunctions and contrasts to emerge, such as the striking difference between billy clubs in Watts and armored body gear in Ferguson. [34]

Figure 2. **Now! Again!,** ***Alex Johnston, 2014, Digital Video, Image copyright of the artist***

Some of the most unforgettable footage in Álvarez's film captures scenes of older black women solemnly engaged in non-violent protest being dragged through the street unceremoniously by police. Johnston pairs this civil rights era footage with exuberant chants of "Hands up! Don't shoot!" in the streets of Ferguson, referencing eye witness reports that Brown had his hands in the

air when he was shot by Officer Wilson. Johnston's comparative format makes space for vital questions about how the tactics of civil disobedience have been transformed by gestural memes that performatively re-enact confrontations with police through embodied signs. Yates McKee describes the performative gesture of chanting "Hands up! Don't shoot!" with hands raised in the air as a "viral form." The gesture, he argues, is "a forensic trace from the scene of a black death at the hands of police that has been taken up and generalized by the living." It deploys vulnerability as a form of resistance, while also reversing the interpellating force of the command, addressing it back to police, indicting them in advance of continued violence. [35]

Johnston's film places these contemporary protest tactics into dialogue with older modes of civil disobedience from the 1960s. Through juxtaposition, *Now! Again!* invites viewers to look again at images from the civil rights era that have since become iconic. It invites questions that have elsewhere been articulated by the historian Martin Berger. His revisionist study of media coverage during the civil rights movement asks how and why certain images from that struggle endure. For Berger, the answer to that question has much to do with what spectacles of excessive police violence against black protestors reveal about moderate and liberal white anxiety. He demonstrates that photographs of black protesters offering no resistance to police were more likely to appear in periodicals intended primarily for white readers, whereas in the black press, reports of the same events were illustrated with photographs showing black protestors actively resisting police. The most widely reproduced images of civil rights struggle elicit white sympathy for dignified and embattled black protestors, Berger concludes, but only by way of depicting racism as excessive brutality, rather than as systemic inequality in which even liberal, sympathetic whites would be implicated. *Now! Again!* spurs a new round of immensely important questions about how contemporary protest is mediated (by whom and for whom), and by extension, what challenging structural racism might look like today. [36]

Johnston's *Now! Again!* invites this reflection against the grain of Álvarez's film. It calls attention to the way the logic of substitution lends "Hands up! Don't shoot!" its political charge, looking beyond the question of why images endure, to think about what kinds of possibilities or limits they expose, and for whom. Kashif Jerome Powell identifies the replacement of one bodily experience for another as a form of "surrogation," a logic that he argues, fundamentally structures black experience. [37] For him, the essential difference between contemporary tactics of protest and those employed during the civil rights era is borne out in the distinction between the act of placing one's body "in the *somewhere* that could only be imagined through a politics of justice" (for example the restricted lunch counter occupied during a sit-in) and the performative gesture of taking up Brown's absence in death (enacted through hands raised in the air). Powell is concerned with the way contemporary tactics of protest such as "Hands up! Don't shoot!" risk intensifying what he identifies as "affective ecologies of nonexistence" and related "melancholic inhibitions." The vital question for him is: "how to occupy the space of the Transatlantic afterlife, not to reiterate its affects, but to expose sites of justice to come." [38]

Chants of "Hands up! Don't shoot!" recur throughout the footage Johnston pairs with Álvarez's film. These shots of demonstrators lined up, sometimes pressing against police barricades, with hands raised are immensely affecting, especially when paired with Horne's call for solidary and action. Johnston's film, however, leaves open space for reflecting on what links one moment of crisis to another that Álvarez's film more readily forecloses. In *Now!* scenes from the Jim Crow era— lynch mobs and Klan rallies — punctuate the montage of civil rights protest. At one point in *Now!* there is a quick almost imperceptible dissolve from the clasped hands of an anguished

looking protester to a pair of rope bound wrists. In the images that follow, the camera jumps back and pans up to reveal that the hands belong to a bloodied black man who is tied up and surrounded by a throng of white men who pose proudly for a gruesome group portrait. Through the use of the dissolve, civil rights protesters in Álvarez's film appear to seamlessly carry forward the bodily memory of racial violence experienced by previous generations of black Americans. The sequence, made up entirely of re-photographed still images, culminates with a striking shift from still to moving image. A fire burns, consuming a man's corpse on a pyre. Is this same man? Álvarez's montage assumes the answer doesn't matter.

Figure 3. **Now! Again!,** ***Alex Johnston, 2014, Digital Video, Image copyright of the artist***

Johnston's film restages this drama of surrogation in parallax. The footage of the burning corpse is the only moment in *Now! Again!* in which a scene from Álvarez's film appears simultaneously on both channels of the diptych. In the shots preceding this synch point, Johnston pairs a photograph of a woman in Ferguson whose hands are raised in the air in the "Don't shoot" gesture, with the woman in Álvarez's film whose clasped hands dissolve seamlessly into those of a man about to be lynched. Johnston pans up to the sky above the woman's head before quickly dissolving to a still image of Brown's uncovered body lying in the street. This subtle edit refuses the complete collapse of her body into his. In doing so, it registers the slight but important tension between actively performing surrogation as form of protest on the one hand, and being made helplessly subject to it by history, on the other, while also leaving room for questions, such as those posed by Powell, about what kinds of spaces these performative modes of protest imaginatively occupy and how. The side by side format of *Now! Again!* maintains a nearly invisible break between past and present in the thin gap that divides the double frame. This visual fissure further disrupts the seamless passage between past and present set in motion by spectacular bodily violence in Álvarez's film. Though its subtle reworking of Álvarez's montage, Johnston's *Now! Again!* invites critical reflection on the way shifting protest tactics condition collective action across time.

Figure 4. **Now! Again!***, Alex Johnston, 2014, Digital Video, Image copyright of the artist*

Now! Again! can be found online at Now: The Journal of Urgent Praxis, a collaborative publishing platform inspired in part by the film. [39] Johnston's piece appears there alongside a growing collection of short videos that address the police shootings that have continued to catalyze protests since Ferguson, among other pressing issues such as mass shootings and protests against the Dakota Access Pipeline. The journal's website includes an editorial declaration calling for the "transformative re-birth" of radical newsreel as "a laboratory, a training ground, and a set of proposals." Like Johnston's film, the journal Now!takes an expansive view of immediacy, insisting that urgency has nothing to do with "newness." The statement proclaims, "Now! aims to spur the creation of texts traveling just below the velocity of social media. The thoughtful pause can gather force." [40] The gap between video channels that structures Johnston's *Now! Again!* functions as a visual pause, gesturing toward a space held open for "sites of justice to come," while acknowledging the difficulty of sustaining what Powell calls "the ethics of imagination" that this radical praxis requires. [41] *Now! Again!* demonstrates the possibility of fostering space for reflection without diminishing the power of a call to action. The journal creates a space online that intersects with, but also functions apart from the social media platforms where video perpetuates responses to crisis that become habitual. At the same time, the collective behind Now: The Journal of Urgent Praxis has begun programming screenings of work that appears on the site at micro-cinemas and other unconventional venues, gathering audiences alongside those cultivated online. [42]

To conclude, both Johnston and Cohen mine the history of political newsreel to look again at how collective political dissent takes shape, and in doing so, both filmmakers call attention to the increasingly pervasive dynamics of crisis that characterize social media. Each filmmaker's work cultivates space within and beyond the "mass medium" of the Internet today, inspired by efforts to negotiate the confines of mass media in the past. Cohen's *Gravity Hill Newsreels*glimpse an uncertain future, a social body caught up in the flux of its own mediation. His use of carefully observed mirrored surfaces brings forth an emergent collective form that neither revives romantic spectacles of solidarity, nor capitulates to the rhythms of crisis online. By contrast, Johnston's *Now! Again!* employs mirroring effects to make space for looking again at protest tactics past and present. He continues Álvarez's project of generating a historicized now,

distinguished from the presentism of an ongoing series of "nows." Through appropriation, *Now! Again!* makes clear the necessity of rethinking *Now!* in the context of viral memes that embody the dynamics of crisis, both online and increasingly in the streets. These recent turns to newsreel leave nostalgia behind, enlisting the historicity of cinematic form in the mediation of contemporary protest, and in the process, find new ways to envision the world differently.

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2. Chun, *Updating*, 17
3. Pew Research Center, "Social Media Conversations About Race," August, 2016, accessed August 23, 2016. http://www.pewinternet.org/2016/08/15/social-media-conversations-about-race/.
4. Helen Margetts, "Social Media Has Made Politics Impossible to Predict," Zocalo Public Square, November 17, 2015, accessed September 1, 2016, link. Also see Helen Margetts, Peter John, Scott Hale, and Taha Yasseri, *Political Turbulence: How Social Media Shape Collective Action* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2016), 43-4. Eli Saslow, "For Diamond Reynolds, Trying to Move Past 10 Tragic Minutes of Video," *The Washington Post*, September 10, 2016, accessed September 12, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/stay-calm-be-patient/2016/09/10/ec4ec3f2-7452-11e6-8149-b8d05321db62_story.html.
5. Chun, *Updating*, 17
6. Maeve Connolly, *The Place of Artists' Cinema: Space, Site, Screen* (Chicago: Intellect Books, 2009), 10.
7. Chun, *Updating*, 27
8. Chun distinguishes the complex temporality of "imagined networks" from the consistently "homogenous time" that Benedict Anderson associates with the formation of imagined communities in the era of print mass media. Ibid., 74
9. By 1930, up to three-quarters of the American population saw newsreels weekly as part of the program of shorts screened before the feature film. These numbers remained more or less consistent through to the end of the Second World War. By comparison, the size of television news audiences during the height of its "golden age" in the 1960s was about one-third of American households. Scott L. Althaus, "The Forgotten Role of the Global Newsreel Industry in the Long Transition from Text to Television," *International Journal of Press/Politics* 15, no. 2 (2010): 202-3.
10. A UNESECO report from 1952 catalogs a list of typical newsreel fare used as filler between reports of more timely news: "items dealing with local customs and traditions, pictures of bathing beauties and ''pin-up girls," religious of traditional festivals, ceremonies, and political or economic reportages without an obvious topical bent, such as 'surveys of the year.'" Peter Baechlin and Maurice Muller-Strauss. *Newsreels across the World.* (Paris: UNESCO, 1952), 18-9.
11. Holly Rogers, *Music and Sound in Documentary Film* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 47.

12. Raymond Fielding, *The American Newsreel: A Complete History*, 1911-1967, 2nd Edition (North Carolina: McFarland & Company, 2006), 82.13. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility" in *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, eds. Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Y. Levin (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2008), 54. For an extended analysis of this passage, see Samuel Weber, *Mass Mediauras: Form Technics Media*, (California: Stanford University Press, 1996), 76-107.
14. See Russell Campbell, "Film and Photo League Radical cinema in the 30s" *Jump Cut* 14 (1977): 23-25 and Bill Nichols, *Newsreel: Documentary Filmmaking on the American Left.* (New York, Arno Press, 1980).
15. New York Newsreel, "Initial Statement of the Newsreel (1967)" in ed. Massimo Teodori, *The New Left: A Documentary History* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1969), 387–388.
16. Robert Kramer, "Newsreel," *Film Quarterly* 21, no. 2 (winter 1968-9): 46.
17. Steve Macfarlane, "Interview with Jem Cohen" The White Reviews, October 2014. accessed March 1, 2016. http://www.thewhitereview.org/interviews/interview-with-jem-cohen/.
18. The newsreels were installed as a multichannel installation at the TIFF Bell Lightbox in Toronto, February 22 – March 23, 2012, in conjunction with the Reel Artists Film Festival. The series has also screened as a theatrical program of shorts at various international film festivals and art centers, including Viennale Vienna International Film Festival, Jihlava International Documentary Film Festival (Czech Republic), Seoul International Film Festival, Doclisboa, and EMPAC in Troy NY.
19. Macfarlane, *Cohen Interview*
20. Homay King, *Virtual Memory: Time-Based Art and the Dream of Digitality* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2015), 172.
21. Al Baker and Joseph Goldstein, "Officer's Pepper-Spraying of Protesters is Under Investigation" *New York Times*, September 28, 2011, accessed August 2, 2016,http://cityroom.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/09/28/police-department-to-examine-pepper-spray-incident/" .
22. Chun, *Updating*, 27
23. Bennet Schaber observes how films such as *Lost Book Found* "make the constructed, built environment speak" in order to reveal it as "an emblem (in another vocabulary, a dialectical image) in the actuality of a moment pregnant with its own alterations, alternations and alternatives." See "Film Democracy: Jem Cohen @occupywallstreet" *Scan Journal of Media Arts Culture* 10, no. 1 (2013), accessed September 1, 2016, http://scan.net.au/scn/journal/vol10number1/Bennet-Schaber.html.
24. Yates McKee, *Strike Art*, (New York: Verso, 2016), 85.
25. Artforum.com, "Jem Cohen," November 14, 2011, accessed Aug 15, 2016, http://artforum.com/words/id=29529.
26. Ibid.
27. Quoted in Michael Renov, "Newsreel: Old and New: Towards an Historical Profile," *Film Quarterly* 41, no. 1 (1987): 24.
28. Ibid.
29. Chris Marker: Notes from the Era of Imperfect Memory, "Letter to Theresa by Chris Marker – Behind the Veils of *Sans Soleil,"* accessed March 1, 2016, link (The letter cited in this post include all subsequent quotes from Chris Marker on *Sans Soleil*.)
30. These visually inventive short films, produced with limited means and under great time pressure, made a formal virtue of necessity. Each tract was the length of a single roll of 16mm

film, edited in camera to simplify the process of production. The mode of filmmaking required careful planning, as a result, the remediation of existing photographs and other media was privileged over footage shot in the midst of unfolding conflict. Évelyne Sullerot, "Transistors et barricades," in *Ce n'est qu'un début* (1968), eds. P. Labro and M. Manceaux (Paris: Maspero, 1968): 131. Also see, Viva Paci, "On vous parle de…ciné-tracts (2008)" in *Chris Marker et I'imprimeire du regard*, eds. Viva Paci and André Habib (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2008), 167-77.
31. William F. van Wert, "Chris Marker: the SLON Films," *Film Quarterly* 32, no. 3 (Spring, 1979), 38-46.
32. Joshua Matlitsky, *Post-Revolution Non-Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 124.
33. Peter Rist, "Agit-prop Cuban Style: Master Montagist Santiago Álvarez" *Offscreen* 11, no. 3, March, 2007, accessed March 2, 2016, http://offscreen.com/view/agit_prop_cuban_style. Also, see "Albums by Lena Horne, Randy Weston Banned by South African Government," accessed, May 3, 2016, http://www.randyweston.info/randy-weston-resume-pages/randy-weston-uhuru-afrika-banned.html.
34. Author, phone conversation with Alex Johnston, March 21, 2016.
35. McKee, *Strike Art,* 216-7
36. Martin Berger, *Seeing Through Race: A Reinterpretation of Civil Rights Photography*(Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2011).
37. Powell borrows the term "surrogation" from Joseph Roach. Kashif Jerome Powell, "Making #BlackLivesMatter: Michael Brown, Eric Garner, and the Specters of Black Life—Toward a Hauntology of Blackness," *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies* 16, no. 3 (June, 2016): 255.
38. Ibid., 259
39. Johnston is one of the co-editors of the journal along with Kelly Gallagher and founding editor, Travis Wilkerson. The journal's editorial board includes Thom Andersen, Nicole Brenez, Toshi Fujiwara, John Gianvito, Minda Martin, Jurij Meden, Vanessa Renwick, Can Tuzcu, and Billy Woodberry. Wilkerson was inspired in part by Johnston's film to establish a new online venue for exhibiting timely work beyond the limits of social media, on the one hand, and the schedule bound time frames of film festivals, on the other. Author, phone conversation with Johnston.
40. "Declaration," *Now! A Journal of Urgent Praxis,* accessed March 1, 2016. http://www.now-journal.com/declaration/.
41. Powell, "Making #BlackLivesMatter," 258
42. Screenings of work that appears in *Now: The Journal of Urgent Praxis* online have been programed at the Interference Archive in Brooklyn and Other Cinema in San Francisco.

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