Video Activism 2.0 : Space, Place and Audiovisual Imagery

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Putting Malmö on the Map of Global Activism: Space, Place and Geographies of Responsibility in Online Video Activism

This chapter explores the local embeddedness of global activism. From the perspective of contemporary online political activism, the discussion scrutinizes a series of media texts deriving from the European Social Forum 2008 in Malmoe disseminated by and circulating in global activist networks. The aim is to illustrate how the audio-visual imageries of contestation and community distributed online by adherents to a *transnational* social movement resonate in various ways around the specific *locality* of Malmoe and more generally Sweden.

Combining a theoretical discussion of the role of virtual space and the local place in global activism with an empirical focus aimed at identifying the audio-visual imageries of public dissent, this chapter addresses the user-generated video productions revolving around a specific protest event in Malmoe. The European Social Forum 2008 attracted people from all over the world, who came together in the region of Oresund to take concerted action against what they perceive to be the neoliberal doctrine in contemporary politics and to put forward an alternative agenda more in tune with issues of global justice, democracy and sustainability.

The empirical data consist primarily of a number of activist videos circulating on YouTube all revolving around the ESF2008 in Malmoe in conjunction with a series of news articles and debate chronicles – circulating on alternative media

platforms concerning the Scandinavian governments' and police authorities' handling of public demonstrations and subversive forces. The large-scale event, attracting thousands of people to the region, unavoidably led to divided opinions among the local population. Mainstream media coverage of the forum in Sweden and Scandinavia in general was scarce and by no means dominantly positive towards the event. In many regards, the mainstream media coverage stands, perhaps not surprisingly, in direct opposition to the discursive framing of the event in the media produced by the organizers and participants themselves. In this manner, the counter-debate is also taken into account: integrated into my empirical framework and analytical lens are also editorial letters, anti-ESF Facebook groups as well as news articles critical of the Forum and the larger left-libertarian movement it blends into.

Hence, on a methodological note, a purely text-centric approach is proposed here. As argued by Tom Gunning (2008), however, moving images or any aesthetic object cannot be understood without mediating knowledge of the cultural and historical discourses that surround and penetrate them. Further, the study could no doubt have been nuanced through the use of interviews and similar initiatives. Still, I posit that the texts themselves provide the place where such cultural contexts are actualized and addressed to viewers and readers (Gunning, 2008:193); the texts thus constitute the key cultural terrain and the starting point of the present inquiry.

In this manner, this contribution to the ongoing debate on mediated political activism seeks to explain how the *local* can be differentiated in the audio-visual representations of the European Social Forum; in the universality of its cause and combatants; and in the competing discourses of political resistance they link up with. Further, taxonomies of counter-culture movements have often been constructed on a dichotomy between *aesthetic movements* and their antipode,

revolutionary movements (See, e.g., Desmond et al. 2000). In the following, several arguments are proposed concerning why the scrutinized texts should be seen as the footprints of a larger social movement that is essentially just as aesthetic as it is political in nature. Finally, I seek to avoid a dichotomizing discussion of the dynamics and tensions between the global and the local that saturate the texts by introducing the concept of the *translocal* in order to understand the relation between the two and accentuate how anything global is always local and vice versa.

Digital media and global activism

Optimistic rhetoric on the potentials of the Internet as a vehicle for social change and participatory public spaces for political engagement has been prevalent ever since 'the coming out party' of the popular use of the World Wide Web in the mid-nineties. Although the overly one-sided celebration of its progressive potentials has been toned down somewhat, new information and communication technologies still hold a privileged position in the literature on social movement organizations and enquiries into their communicative and cultural practices.

From a social movement perspective, media technologies are often said to close the distance between people around the world, ultimately leading to a *democratization of responsibility,* in that the global flow of interconnected communication increases the awareness of citizens across the world; encountering 'distant others' is seen as forging tolerance and mutual understanding between strangers. At the same time, ICT's fragment the dimensions of place and time to a certain extent, thereby rendering the exact location in the world and the specific time of one's online engagement of little or no relevance. Illustrative of this process, the different networked sites and platforms used by activist can be considered, albeit virtual, as local *places* of their own that are reachable from anywhere in the world.

These sites constitute a place where you can interact at all hours of the day and night. Anthony Giddens (1990) refers to this process as the time-space distanciation and considers the liberation of space and time as a prerequisite for globalization. He sees globalization as "the intensification of worldwide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa" (Giddens, 1990:64). Media and the development of new media technologies such as the Internet have gradually compressed time and space even further. The global activist networks orchestrating shared political efforts in regional contexts online are illustrative of this process of de-territorialization of social relations in terms of their ability to mobilize civic cultures across space and time.

The rather idle prefix "new" is often attached to the study of any one aspect of contemporary information and communication technology concurrently labelled as, e.g., *social media*, *post-broadcast media*, *participatory media* or *Web 2.0*. This small prefix indicates that something has irrevocably changed in the current media environment, shaping new circuits of production and consumption that are altering existing power structures in visual media. In the search for an adequate conceptual framework, the media texts stemming from this new media landscape have been designated by such terms as *user-generated, open-source or ephemeral*. These designations all emphasize the fleeting, fluctuating and polycentric features of the media texts and in some way or another discursively mark a conversion in the conceptualization of the audience from media consumers to media producers. In the context of online video activism, *ephemeral texts* signify short-form films often no more than a couple of minutes long; these videos both contribute to and challenge the semiotic environment in which they circulate. In this regard, ephemeral texts are texts that exist *beyond*

and between the films, television programmes, documentaries, etc., more commonly isolated for analysis.

From the perspective of online political activism, one particularly pertinent aspect of user-generated ephemera is the rapid proliferation of online videos creating new opportunities for user-generated content to reach a broader audience, further enabled by recent phenomena such as YouTube, MySpace, Facebook, Google Video, etc. Within the past couple of years, these social file-sharing communities have been used in the dissemination of politically imbued videos and images and now in some regards serve as part of the coordinative and communicative platform for activists scattered all over the (mostly Western) hemisphere. Every day, huge numbers of unfiltered activist videos such as mobilization videos, live footage of demonstrations and other forms of direct action as well as short-form, semi-professional documentaries are uploaded onto the Web. Some of them end up in rather obscure corners of cyberspace and with only a very limited click-through rate never make it out of the great unknown. Others are watched, reworked, shared, uploaded on new sites and in new personal networks interminably.

In this manner, new social networking and self-publishing phenomena have yet again rekindled the debate on the role of the Internet in shaping public opinion and forging political participation. The flexible, networked and transitory characteristics of contemporary global activism are well supported by the cognate features of today's social media and the nature and life span of ephemeral media texts. The aspirations of Web 2.0 applications lie in their ability to reinforce the propensity for networked protest orchestrated from the online realm.

Further, this growing body of open-publishing software and file-sharing communities, indicates and demonstrates an increasingly *visual turn* in the nature of what material can be found on the Web, forging an increased *visuality and visibility* of political protest culture. The platforms allow self-made 'journalists' or video activists to distribute live footage or their own small-scale film productions rapidly, easily, and cost-free and on many occasions simultaneously with the events they set out to cover and frame. What is at stake here, on a more general level, is an aesthetization of public protest. This emerging audio-visual repository of interconnected narratives stages popular contestation within a coherent framework and constitutes the basis from which collective identity formation is forged among activist scattered around the world.

Global activism and the geopolitics of place and space

> *"Geographical experience begins in places, reaches out to others through spaces, and creates landscapes or regions for human existence"* (Charles Tilly, 1994).

In recent years, we have witnessed a reinvigoration of the much debated and ambiguous dual concept of space and place understood in conjunction with the changing political landscape of an increasingly globally integrated world (see, e.g., Amin, 2004; Escobar, 2001; Massey 2004; Pickerill & Chatterton, 2006). Theories of global activism often evolve around the binaries of local/global, space/place. However, the globalization matrix with which all aspects of current development and social change seems to be articulated tends to downplay the importance of the local level and the social struggles taking place in a local context. In the traditional conceptualization of the dichotomy of space and place in geopolitics, the local place is often considered a victim of globalization; something that is subjected to the destructive forces of the global capitalist economy (Massey, 2004). This leaves the local sphere with little or no agency.

One of the main goals of the larger global movement to which the forum belongs is to re-conquer the *space* lost by democracy to the sphere of finance.

Implicitly, the organizational structure of the Social Forum process tied to a specific locality of cities around the world underpins how this lost space is to be won back by resistance from below, from the local *place*. Ever since the first forum was launched in 2001, the idea behind moving the forum from year to year has been to gain new supporters and raise awareness of the cause in as many corners of the world as possible. Hence, a great deal of agency is assigned to the local. It is, in other words, in the local realm that the foundation for global resistance is to be forged. Consequently, following Massey, a pertinent approach should encourage us to revise the way we think about the binaries of local and global, space and place and to re-imagine the power differential in these concepts by rethinking local identities as not being subjected to globalization but as being subjected to the *discourse* of globalization and the narratives it dictates. In this regard, I subscribe to Arturo Escobar's (2001) view that the insistent focus in contemporary social theory on concepts such as mobility, de-territorialization, networks, flow, and the abstraction of space brought about by, e.g., digital information and communication technology shouldn't make us lose sight of the continued importance of place-based practices and discourses for the production of cultures.

It is often argued that the contemporary political activism taking place in the online realm is challenging our very understanding of politics and what we have traditionally conceived of as being political in the context of the nation-state or in the framework of supra-national institutions. Following Jenny Pickerill and Paul Chatterton (2006), the kind of political engagement represented by the Social Forum Movement, in an online as well as offline context, is multi-scalar and multifaceted, manifesting itself through global and regional convergences.

For many of the groups involved in the forum, political campaigns are grounded in particular places. (Re)localization is a strong thread and transnational political campaigns 'customize' global issues to a distinctively local context. Activities are thus not simply locally bounded and then networked globally, but from the very outset a product of mobile transnational or trans-local geographies of resistance and solidarity. While some scholars are sceptical about the localization strategies of social movements, arguing that local responses are inadequate to challenge globalization (e.g., Bauman, 2002), others celebrate these tactics. One such example is Escobar (2001), who proposes that place-based struggles are multi-scale, network-oriented subaltern strategies of localization. From an anthropological perspective, he underscores the importance of the emplacement of all cultural practices, seeing how culture is always "carried into places by bodies" (Escobar, 2001), and commends social movements for their ability to turn place-based imaginaries into a radical critique of existing power relations.

Images of contestation and imageries of community

The political location that sparks the present enquiry is Malmoe, Sweden. A specific location in the regional settings of Oresund – yet in the images under study a globally constructed place.

The European Social Forum, the regional counterpart to the 'Word Social Forum', is often presented as an alternative to the World Economic Forum held each year in Davos, Switzerland. According to the 'World Social Forum Charter of Principles' (2001), the social forums of the progressive Left serve to counter the agenda of the economic forums with a *counter* forum that is more in keeping with notions of justice, equality and democracy. These annual global, macro-regional and national events function as an arena where organizations, affinity

groups and networks – radicals as well as reformists – meet in a "real life" exchange of knowledge, experience and ideas to coordinate their shared strategies and campaigns for an alternative world order. In this sense, the forum is both a physical manifestation of a larger social movement often coined as the alter globalization or global justice movement[1] as well as a symbolic event, which marks the political process of a worldwide popular struggle for social and political change at the grassroots level in civil society.

Hence, the various networks of social forums are best described as more of a social process than a social organization per se, a catalyst for political mobilizations. According to the Charter of Principles, the WSF and its regional and national counterpart do not constitute a body representing global civil society. It is a forum that brings together and interlinks the various organizations and movements of civil society. Rather than a conference, an annual event or a social movement organization as such, the World Social Forum is thus seen to constitute a *political space*; a process involving the convergence of a wide range of networks, movements and organizations including both new horizontal network-based social movements as well as more hierarchical Labour organizations of the traditional Left (Juris, 2005:194).

In September 2008, this ongoing process unfolded in the former Labour stronghold Malmoe, in the Southern part of Sweden. According to the organizers, the 2008 version of the ESF attracted a total of 12,544 participants, who engaged in political and cultural activities all over the city from the 17th to the 21st of September. The official ESF demonstration was estimated to have attracted some 15,000 participants (Björk, 2009). In the following, the ESF2008 is approached from a media-centric perspective by looking at some of the web-based activities of the organizing committee as well as central organizations and individual forum participants. The task is to discuss and question whether the act

of sharing these visually strong manifestations of solidarity and antagonism in these often pathos-imbued videos are construed as giving rise to a sense of "de-territorialized" responsibility or potentially serve as a launch pad to increase public debate and awareness of global issues.

The geographies of responsibility in online activism

The videos uploaded onto YouTube concerning the ESF2008 encompass a broad range of modes and styles. While some videos are more or less unedited live footage with little or no added text or audio track, others constitute small-scale documentaries on the forum and the movement in general. Yet another "genre" is made up of the often more professional productions by organizations distributing mobilization videos with a call for action and mobilization in the prelude to the coming event. Videos posted on YouTube are provided with an appurtenant text by the uploader; some examples are: "Thoughts on the upcoming forum in Malmoe in September 2008. With views of the People's park in November, clips from World Social Forum (…)" or as yet another goes "During the European Social Forum days in Malmoe, Reclaim The Streets took over a huge street for a few hours, resulting in a violent rush". These info boxes provide basic information on the content of the video, some contextualization and guidelines as to how the video should be understood in broader terms. Another noteworthy feature of the use of the AV repository of YouTube by ESF participants is that people have often constructed their community username in direct connection to their organization affiliations identifying themselves as for e.g. "attacnico" or "carolineamnesty".

A recurring figure in the narratives of the mobilization videos is that of the *world citizen,* continuously addressed and called to man the barricades in alternative media discourse. In the video "Street party September 19 2008!", the

attempt to construe the appeal for action around the identity of world citizens is very pronounced (see Appendix 11). This video is illustrative of both a recurrent form of dialectic text/image interaction, as well as of the way in which a collective identity is forged by means of images shaping the actors involved in the process of communication as 'citizens of the world' with a political and ethical responsibility to act upon the injustices they are witnessing. This call for action is produced by ESF2008 action.net – a radical Left network built as an alternative to and independent of the official ESF2008 committee, which they considered to have become de-radicalized and bureaucratized (Björk, 2008). The video augurs a Reclaim the Streets Party on Friday night by stating that "we're going to challenge the power at its core and the entire world is invited!" Images and text offer the spectator an opportunity to join a collective of like-minded and act against the 'evildoers' in joint force. The latter are depicted in the form of powerful politicians, employers as well as representatives of public authority, such as the police. The images of demonstrations and street riots are taken from all over the world, but with an emphasis on images revolving around the Youth House riots in Copenhagen, culminating after the eviction and destruction of an anarchist venue and social centre by the city authorities in Copenhagen the previous year. In this manner, the different political struggles of Left-wing activists around Europe are constructed as one. By trying to connect the different protesters and subversive groups visually, the ESF2008 is framed as part of the same, larger 'battle field' against an omnipresent neoliberal logic, which merely takes on different shapes and forms in the different local contexts around Europe. The user is provided with guidelines for how to take action online by consulting the ESF2008 action.net and offline by giving concrete directions for where and when to show up physically in Malmoe if you are "sick of politicians being miles away" or "sick of being messed around with at work", as two of the calls for action go.

Thus, a recurrent theme in the videos is not only that one has the responsibility to act on political matters affecting one's personal life world, but also that political responsibility *per se* is indifferent to one's geographical coordinates. Doreen Massey (2004) provides a platform from which to explore the geographies of political identity and responsibility and examines how these issues tie to the theoretical dichotomy of place and space. She seeks to counter the traditional pairing of global/local in the meta-narrative, which insists on conceptualizing the local place as the grounded seat of genuine meaning and global space as the abstract outside. Responsibility, within her analytical framework, is relational and thereby depends on a notion of entity (e.g., in the shape an individual or political group) – an entity that is always constructed in relation to others. Moreover, and perhaps more importantly, it is a responsibility that implies an extension beyond the immediate or the very local[i].

For the purpose of understanding these modes of appeal to global citizens put forward in the videos, the notion of 'rooted cosmopolitans' is of particular relevance. The designation of rooted cosmopolitans is coined to signify people and groups rooted in specific national contexts but involved in transnational networks of contacts and conflicts. Activists are described as having "multiple belongings" i.e. overlapping memberships linked with polycentric networks and characterized by "flexible identities" spurring inclusiveness and a positive emphasis on diversity (Tarrow and della Porta; 2005; Fenton, 2008). In this sense, the imagery saturating the media texts under study here seeks to expand our space of action and open up the notion of political and moral responsibility towards the geographically (and culturally) 'distant other'. At the centre of attention in these 'calls for action' is the agent's ability to act on behalf of the distant other (the stranger without) and to engage politically in an altruistic or

ethical way, which extends beyond the immediate local context and the boundaries of the nation state.

In this manner, two social and political agents feature both implicitly and explicitly in the texts, by working on two different levels: in the text and in its semiotic environment. First, on a textual level, the protester in the streets who is 'putting his body out there', as portrayed in the video, is manifestly pushed to the fore. Second, operating 'outside' of the text itself is the video activist, who is circulating the digital mediation. Even though the video activist is merely redistributing the text, this agent is construed in the appurtenant self-presentation of the user profiles as an equally powerful agent. S/he is seen as a public actor with a responsibility to act politically and ethically when faced with the spectacle of injustice by spreading the calls for mobilization virally in personal networks.

As illustrated above, the moral and ethical dimensions of issue-oriented struggles within new social movements are much more salient, compared to the classical conflicts between labour and capital. The process of political change, as a consequence of this 'moral turn', has increasingly become a question of changing the attitudes, values and behaviour of citizens after ideally permeating these issues to enter into the formal political agenda. In the words of Bart Cammaerts (2007), new media technology has the ability to change the hearts and minds of people and thereby engage citizens and mobilize the collective forces required to influence the political agenda and achieve change through the formal juridical and parliamentarian procedures of the representative system (Cammaerts, 2007: 218).

In this way, the general critique of the system inherent in the discourses of resistance saturating the texts synthesizes two basic types of critique against

which capitalism has perennially been judged: the social and the artistic critique, which ultimately represent two different time/space responses to achieving social change. Whereas the former draws upon the traditional Marxist claims that capitalism is a source of both poverty and structural inequality, the latter draws on the contention that capitalism is primarily a source of inauthenticity, subtle forms of oppression and false consciousness. This latter form of critique is tied to the practices and tactics of *aesthetic movements,* which privilege space over time, in searching for "timeless and immutable values" (Desmond et al., 2000: 248). Such movements seek to re-appropriate the public space colonized by the logic of commodification and induce a collective display of political concern other than its opponents. The texts show proof of not only attempts to change existing material conditions (as when addressing the concrete working conditions of Swedish workers), but similarly and perhaps more predominantly to change, over time, the general political climate along with the attitudes, values and beliefs of citizens around the world. The Social Forums thus bear the traits of a social movement that is aesthetic in nature rather than essentially revolutionary. By using the potentials of the online realm to create horizontal networks and common venues, adherents and participants challenge the aesthetics of public space rather than the base-superstructure differentiation of society directly.

Tensions between the global and the local

In a mobilization video (a term coined to refer to videos distributed *prior* to a direct action event) by a group of Swedish ESF organizers, the narrative weaves together images of an empty 'Folkets Park' - the main site of the upcoming forum in Malmoe with images from Porto Alegre 2002 – home stay of the second WSF. The dialectical interaction between the images shifting back and

forth between the empty 'Folkets Park' – traditionally an arena that has played a pivotal role to the Swedish labour movement and the development of the social democratic party in Sweden – and the vivid images of the dancing crowds and street actions in Brazil quite literally inscribe Malmoe into the list of places around the world where key events, demonstrations and forums of the movement have taken place – often articulated as battlefields where decisive battles have been fought.

BILD 1   **BILD 2**

(A call for action, "Shape the forum - European Social Forum 2008")

Seattle, Genoa, Porto Alegre, Prague, Gothenburg, Heiligendamn, etc. – all names of the specific cities around the world that represent 'localities' that have come to play a pivotal part in the history of the movement and to some extent have been given a somewhat mythical status in the collective identity of European protest cultures. These are names of cities that resonate in a shared memory of the movement, strike a responsive chord and form part of a common vocabulary among activist. Hence, the ESF in Malmoe ties into a succession of place-based events that have come to mark key points in the history of an ongoing political process. But at the same time, the imageries cut across multiple times and places in a relational rather that place-bound way. In this manner, the audiovisual imageries aim to put Malmoe on the global map of the Global Justice Movement, so to speak, and Malmoe as a location *and* an event is inscribed into the ongoing forum process.

This narrative of Malmoe as a site of agency concurrently ties to a more general imagery of a globally integrated world and Sweden's place within this world order. Blond babies holding red versions of EU balloons intertwine with images of indigenous Bolivian children decorated with Swedish flags. One girl with a

Bolivian flag on one cheek and a Swedish on the other is depicted in various settings around the city and often in the company of a heterogeneous, colourful crowd of people from all over the world marching the streets of Malmoe side by side. In this manner, the texts are saturated with visual imageries of a process of globalization from below; global civil society in joint forces with a sense of belonging based on common values rather than national identities.

The picture painted here, however, is far from unequivocal and all-embracing. By turning our attention away from the user-generated videos themselves and taking a closer look at the immediate semiotic environment of these videos, a different picture emerges and a conflicting narrative becomes evident. The debate taking place around the videos in many ways counters the imageries of solidarity and harmonious heterogeneity dominating the videos produced by forum participants. In these settings, flaming among the debating audiences and a certain degree of linguistic exclusion is taking place, limiting the scope of the debate among global players. In the above, indications of how Malmoe is constructed as a global site of action have been presented. All the while, the narrative of global responsibility extending beyond the nation state is omnipresent; this is often merged with a narrative that revolves around the localized or place-bound struggle and concrete policy making of the local government. Activists airing their discontent with local politicians (often even mentioned by name), working conditions or the general political climate of the region in a certain sense illustrate the lived experience of neo-liberalism through the activist operating within the horizons of a closed local context.

> "We want to focus on a Malmoe of conflict, where union activists
> are peppersprayed by police, where homeless people freeze to death

on the streets while politicians pay millions for christmas lights, a Malmoe where police force kids up against the wall for hours without reason and then have the nerve to lie about it afterwards. A Malmoe where we stand up for one another and realize that only by working together can we ever change society!" (Street party September 19 2008!, Appendix 11)

Similarly, in yet another video, contestation and the demands for action centre on the specifically local context of the forum:

"They are forgetting one thing. To own the buildings, the workplaces, the streets, the prisons, the schools is not the same as being them! We are these streets, we are the workplaces, we're the schools, the prisons, the buildings! We are Malmoe and today we'll show them that the hole fucking city belongs to us." ("Reclaim Malmö", my translation, Appendix 10)

These verbal or written statements within the video and debates that the videos contain or promote are often in Swedish and therefore for obvious reasons the interactions are restricted to the immediate circles of Scandinavians debating with one another. This entails a certain linguistic exclusion, raising questions as to the viability of a functioning transnational public sphere so often envisioned in online debate forums in academic contributions to the area.

Further, these observations remind us that contemporary political activism is not either local or global, but should be understood as facilitated through numerous multi-scalar and networked flows. The different scales are not fixed but should be understood as overlapping and intertwined. Malmoe and Sweden are, on the one hand, globally constructed spaces that are incorporated into a series of

historical events in a larger global movement. On the other hand, the specific locality, political climate and distinct struggles taking place in the region saturate the overall picture painted by the debate around the videos, not only excluding non-Swedish or non-Scandinavian actors in the debate, but mainly revolving around essentially esoteric issues of a specifically local character, rather than raising the broad political issues and visions of the forum movement itself.

Truth Telling

In addition to these linguistically determined struggles, mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion within the texts are further exemplified by the struggles between the different frames of interpretation and truth claims at play. Today, literally everyone with a camera and an Internet connection can turn attention to events and stories they feel are distorted or simply ignored in mainstream media news coverage. In this regard, online content sharing can be seen to democratize access to information and revoke broadcast media of its monopoly on the 'truth'. Self-proclaimed video-activists turn the lens towards things that have traditionally had difficulty finding their way through the agenda setting process, in this manner challenging the power structures in visual media and questioning who decides what images of the world we see and what truths we are presented with. This is particularly true of the proliferation of live footage of public demonstrations into cyberspace, where the handheld camera or mobile phone has become an important political weapon for activists to document, e.g., police brutality or to counterpose the framing of demonstrations as violent venues of aggressive, masked anarchists (the black bloc) when these fractions often comprise only a minority of the demonstrators.

This element of truth telling can be traced in the video productions around the forum in Malmoe as well. People contributing to the ongoing debate both in the

prelude and aftermath of the forum share their version of just what *really* went down and try to shed new light on, in particular, the Reclaim the Streets party on the Saturday of the forum via, e.g., mobile phone uploads. In this manner, the comment field provides space for people to air their opinions on what *really* happened and to present their versions of "the truth". When it comes to the presentation of the videos, however, instead of framing the event as violent or peaceful, these moving images with little or no appurtenant text leave the interpretation and judgement of the actions to the viewer. In one case, a video-clip of the so-called black bloc of the demonstration is sarcastically categorized under "Pets and animals" (Appendix 12), and in yet another a single isolated comment is left in the presentation box saying "This is what your tax money goes to", clearly seeking to direct the interpretation in a certain direction, though without leaving much of a fingerprint on the raw footage as such.

In this sense, truth is elusive and the arena of constant negotiation and struggle. These issues of truth seeking and truth telling so distinctly permeating the videos and the surrounding debate are intimately linked with the long debated question in visual studies of *truth claims* in the photograph. In this regard, the image or the visual representation has a long-standing status as something seen to have an indexical function and thus as depicting 'reality' in a certain sense. Gunning (2004) states that the truth claim relies upon both the indexicality and visual accuracy of the photograph. However, in this so-called digital age dominated by intermediality and intertextuality, media constantly refer to other media, not only in their content, but also in the ways people encounter and use media. In this intertextual media environment, where literally everyone is given the possibility to report on events and become a participatory "journalist", questions are raised of how digitization and remediation challenge, and to some critics' minds undermine, the truth claim in visual representation.

Flaming – opponents from within and outside the enclaves of the like-minded

Within recent years, the mediated spaces of action and debate in political activism have to some extent shifted from taking place in an independent media environment in small-scale alternative media to, as previously noted, increasingly occurring in the context of large corporately owned spaces such as YouTube, MySpace and Facebook. The activist videos circulating in content-sharing communities are in this sense emblematic of a reorganization of political space and mark a shift in the arenas where video and other media texts are circulated and consumed. Moving from the echo chambers of more or less like-minded people to sites of heated debate and dispute in mainstream platforms, opinions tend to collide and tensions to openly occur between people of radically different political and cultural backgrounds.

This very scene is most certainly being played out in the present case. The videos stir up fierce – often extremely polarized – debate among users of the YouTube forum; these debates take place in the commentary fields connected to each video. Supporters of the movement give shout-outs, whereas dissenters use crude language condemning the acts, creating a debate that is moving towards pure flaming or a so-called 'flame war', a term used to designate the distinctive online phenomenon of aggressive and often insulting interactions between Internet users. In particular the issue of violence is continuously raised and heavily debated, often resulting in flaming between the debating users, not only dividing the waters between movement adherents and opponents, but concurrently causing internal conflicts between ESF participants. The demonstrations by 'Reclaim the Streets' on the second day of the Forum, which led to a clash between demonstrators and police and caused material damage

estimated at around 26.5 million Swedish kronor (Westerberg, 2009), are the subject of fierce disagreement between debaters who do not hesitate to smear each other violently in the chat forum.

> "By taking over the streets"? Who the FUCK do you think you are? They're OUR fucking streets, NOT yours! People in Malmoe don't want you, you fucking middle class whiner. You just want to be the ones DICTATING to the rest of us how we should think. You're no better than the NAZIS you claim to oppose. "Oppose"? You ARE them! Fuck you and the BMW you drove in on..."

And the hostile exchanges between flamers debating in the comment fields attached to each video continue to create a series of isolated statements rather than a constructive discussion.

> "It's like a bunch of 5-year-olds in grown up bodies, they don't know what the fuck they're doing, just that they wanna fight and destroy. How about you grow up you fucking wankers, I piss on your cause because it does no good, it only hurts people" ("Street party September 19 2008!", see Appendix 11)

The dominant dispute thus hovers around the issue of violence as a means to obtain political goals and represents not only a conflict between movement opponents and adherents, but should also be understood in terms of an internal dispute between reformist and radicals within the movement. These disputes often deal with the issue of civil disobedience and the use of violence as a political tool to achieve change. Internal disputes between the radical wing of the movements represented by, e.g., the Antifa (Antifascist network) or the so-called Reclaimers (Reclaim the Streets) and the more reformist wing urging

peaceful demonstrations thus take up a considerable amount of space in the ongoing debate carried out online.

BILD 3

Police and protesters clash during a RTS party on the Saturday of the Forum.
"ESF 2008 - Reclaim The Streets in Malmö"

One person responds in the following way to a video documenting a demonstrator getting a beating by others demonstrators for trying to stop the smashing of bank and shop windows:

> "Don't think he deserves it as he's trying to stop the people denigrating what it all stands for! It was a street PARTY where we should demonstrate that parties in the street are possible without anything having to happen and not like what is now reported all over the media. A small group ruins it for everyone else! Is that fair? Now the entire population looks upon the RTS phenomenon (Reclaim The Streets) exactly the way the media wants them to. And especially THE POLICE!" ("RTS Malmoe SEB 2008", my translations, see Appendix 14)

Tolerance, respect and mutual understanding are, to put it mildly, not a dominant feature of the debate streams connected to each video. In this manner, there is a clear-cut gap between the representations of caring world citizens within the videos, images of streets filled with colourful multiethnic crowds of people in concerted action and the actors debating about the videos. The same cleavage seems to permeate the equivocal narratives of spatiality demonstrated in the above, impeding the clear cut identification of the geographical scales put into play.

So how should we then understand these seeming contradictions and tensions between the global and local occurring in these conflicting, parallel narratives? Instead of trying to locate the answer within an either/or framework or a dichotomizing debate between the localizing or globalizing dynamics at play here, one might benefit from taking a closer look at the relations found in the levels in between the two unfolding processes.

Translocal dynamics in the production of Malmoe as a site of agency

This relation (of an in-between) is perhaps best captured by Arjun Appadurai's (1995) concept of the *translocal*. The concepts of the translocal and translocalization allow for an understanding of the different in-between levels of local and global dynamics or rather the *interaction* and *reciprocity* between the two dimensions. In other words, the concept helps to account for the localization of the global and the globalization of the local, in this way avoiding a dichotomized discussion. From the vantage point of alternative media studies, Nico Carpentier (2008) argues that alternative voices in society, with the current proliferation of Web 2.0 applications and user-generated content, have a greater chance of transgressing into the (more rigid) mainstream media channels with their participatory and potentially de-territorializing discourses. Because of their rhizomatic nature, combined with their confinement to the local (and often the urban), community media by way of example play key roles in opening up the frontiers between the city and its "outsides", without giving up on their local embeddedness (Carpentier, 2008), a spatial-political component of digital media that he, leaning on the work of Arjun Appadurai (1995), terms as *the translocal*. In this line of argument, the seeming contradictions saturating the debate around the ESF could tentatively be seen as being due to the ability of user-generated content and participatory media to move into the translocal, i.e. back and forth

between the global and the local. The concept of translocality allows for theorizing the moments, where the local is effectively expanded by moving into the realm of the outer context, which is traditionally not considered part of the local. And his account of the translocal continues: "It is the moment where the local merges with a part of its outside context, without transforming itself into this context. It is the moment where the local simultaneously incorporates its context and transgresses into it. It is the moment where the local reaches out to a familiar unknown, and fuses it with the known." Contrary to related definitions of "fluid" geographical scales such as that of the glocal with its unavoidable emphasis on the global as a starting point of analysis, the concept of the translocal takes the local as its point of departure, thus rendering it more active.

The videos scrutinized here are all small-scale amateur productions connected to the immediate context of their respective local communities. They not only revolve around Malmoe as a locality, but also stem from an essentially local production context whether uploaded by Swedes, Poles or Danes. A case in point, feeding into the idea of the translocal, is one particular video of a group of Eastern European activists and their road trip through Europe towards Malmoe. Images of how they travel along, going through Copenhagen and crossing the Oresund bridge into Sweden, are accompanied by music and their discussions on and expectations of the forum as they move closer to Malmoe. These activists on the move are quite literally transgressing the local and moving around in the global. The bus is the local, but it moves through and travels around in the global. This image - or allegory even - of the bus, is in this sense emblematic of how activist discourses are bound to a specific locality, but travel into the global, they move and enter other localities at the same time. In this manner, any global is always local and vice versa, suggesting that the relation should be understood in terms of a two-way traffic between two dimensions that

are not easily separated analytically. To be sure, what we're dealing with here is a dialectical interaction – not an either/or.

Some Conclusions

Suggesting an understanding of multi-scalar geographies, which moves beyond simple dichotomies of local-good, global-bad, allows for an examination of contemporary political activism as moments of translocalization and an ongoing two-way and intertwined process between local and global dynamics, between space and place. In arguing that the terrain of social movements offers fertile grounds for illustrating key features of place-based dynamics and processes of translocalization, I depart from a number of activist videos on the European Social Forum in Malmoe 2008 and an inquiry into the different discourses stemming from this social movement convergence.

Informed by the concept of geographical scales, I argue that Sweden as a host nation is not the only geographical point of reference within the texts. In the political geography of the European Social Forum 2008, several scales are brought to the fore in an overlapping and intertwining way, integrating the local scale, as well as the Scandinavian, the European and a global scale. These geographical scales merge (but also clash) with images of transnational protest cultures and imageries of political alternatives.

The local has a privileged position in the images of contestation and imageries of community circulating in user-generated videos on the ESF2008, reminding us of the continued importance of place-based struggles and events to the production of global cultures and identities. The texts constantly move back and forth between global and local vantage points. Hovering between both nationalist and cosmopolitan rhetoric, juggling tolerance, community and

pluralism along with hostility and agonistic flaming, the discourses stemming from the ESF2008 leave a conflicting and mosaic impression.

Consequently, contemporary activism is not either local or global, but should be understood as facilitated through numerous multi-scalar and networked flows. The production of Malmoe as a site of agency and resistance in these discourses highlights the continued importance of place-based action to the production of global cultures and identities as well as illustrates how media technologies, such as the video sharing site scrutinized here, enable activists to make visible the manifold forms of production of cultures and identities emerging from local communities around the world.

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[1] The movement against neoliberal globalization links different transnational protest campaigns and provides a shared master frame and a series of organizational structures (SMOs, NGOs and national associations) that interact periodically in transnational events such as counter-summits, world and macro-regional social forums (Della Porta, 2006).

[2] This conceptualization of the notion of responsibility ties to a wider discussion on cosmopolitanism and the far-reaching implications of an increasingly globally interconnected world to issues of morals and ethics in society, raising the question of the need for heightened care for the 'distant other' (For an extensive discussion of this subject see, e.g., Appiah, 2006; Boltanski, 1999; Chouliaraki, 2006; Silverstone, 2006; Benhabib, 2006; Kaldor, 2004; Toulmin, 1990). In this manner, discourses on cosmopolitanism and political geography intersect on issues of the geographies of our political responsibilities and the scope of our space of action.