

Chapter 20

The role of the visual in the restoration of social order

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This chapter takes as its central theme the processes of re-imposition of social order in the aftermath of a series of high profile riots that occurred in several English cities in 2011. The focus here is NOT on the possible motivations of the rioters themselves, nor is it on the processes of physical restoration of social order on the streets of the affected communities during and immediately after the events of August 2011. Rather it will examine the ontological challenges posed to the *socially included* by the riots and the assumed or imagined motivations of the rioters. It will explore the process by which images associated with news media narratives were interpreted and re-interpreted by readers, copied and shared on social media, and in the process re-imagined the riots and the rioters to produce a set of sense making, ontologically reassuring narratives to restore the breach caused by the riots themselves and provide wider ontological reassurance for the socially included spectator in late modernity (cf Young, 1999).

Contemporary riots and related public disturbances can increasingly be seen as manifestations of the ‘mediated crowd’ (Baker, 2012), with smart-phone wielding perpetrators and citizen journalists at the scene, CCTV footage and conventional photo-journalists and TV crews – all generating increasing amounts of visual images of the riots to be shared, analysed and commented on by an increasingly multi-mediated audience (Greer

and McLaughlin, 2010; Kearon, 2013). In the context of the 2011 riots, one of the characteristics that demonstrates the growing salience of the visual is the extent to which the Police operation to identify and apprehend rioters was itself very heavily reliant on the public dissemination of CCTV footage and other images of the rioters (Heap and Smithson, 2012). The representation and analysis of the riots by news media, the use of social media by the police, the comments made about images on news websites and on social media, the sharing of links to stories and ‘recycled’ images of the riots via social media, internet memes created using images of rioters/looters all indicate a very significant visual element of public interaction and engagement with the riots. That engagement and interaction *with* the riots through the visual images produced *of* the riots can be fruitfully explored using that strand of an emerging *criminological aesthetic* which attempts to ‘.....analyse the images themselves and the relation between the spectator and the image’ (Young, 2010: 83).

There have been extensive attempts to theorise, analyse and explain the behaviour and motivations of the rioters (see for example Angel, 2012; Scambler and Scambler, 2011; Newburn et al, 2015; Stott et al, 2016; Treadwell et al, 2013; Winlow et al, 2015). But what is still notably underdeveloped is an analysis of the visual representation of the 2011 riots which employs that strand of the criminological aesthetic outlined above - which examines those of us who engaged with the riots in a mediated fashion through the images we viewed and interpreted, commented on, shared. Do the images, and the choices that were made about which images to use (and re-use), share and interpret within the wider public discourse around the riots tell us something about motivation and wider social significance – not for the rioters themselves but for us, the audience of spectators/consumers/interpreters?

One of the most obvious ways that we can chart the role of the visual in the restoration of *formal* social order in the aftermath of the riots is in the use of visual images in the Police investigation into the disturbances, the identification and prosecution of offenders and in the wider reassurance of the general public that the forces of law and order were pursuing those who took part in the rioting and looting. Using CCTV footage from a range of public and private sector sources, media coverage of the riots, images produced by ‘citizen journalists’ and even the boastful performative selfies produced and shared on social media by rioters themselves, Police forces across the UK (perhaps most notably in the context of Operation Withern conducted by the Metropolitan Police in relation to disturbances across London) collected and publicly shared a wide range of images of suspected rioters and looters and invited the public to become actively involved in the identification of suspects. This was echoed in the dissemination of these images in national news media and in local media in the areas affected by the disturbances. Social media accounts operated by the Police, and the subsequent news media dissemination of the images were not only used to invite the public to identify rioters, but also to share post-conviction images of individuals successfully detained, charged and prosecuted for offences committed. The narrative of active public involvement in ‘solving’ the challenges posed by the riots was also mirrored in a proliferation of images produced and shared in the immediate aftermath of the riots that emphasised the role played by ‘ordinary’ members of the public voluntarily engaged in the physical clean-up of areas affected by the riots (BBC, 2011; Daily Mail, 2011b). Again, in these cases, images were clearly a very significant part of a wider strategy of reassuring and engaging the public in the restoration of ‘order’ in the aftermath of the riots. So, undoubtedly, there were strong visual dimensions to the processes of restoring order through the very public identification, prosecution and punishment of rioters/looters and the in the re-ordering and restoring of the physical spaces most effected by the riots. But as already indicated, this chapter will focus

more on the role of the visual in the restoration of a much broader aspect of social order in the aftermath of the riots, especially in the context of the ontological challenges posed by the riots to the order, certainties and predictabilities in the lives of the socially included mediated ‘bystander’.

‘Moral collapse’ and the atypical rioter

In their attempts to analyse the 2011 riots to produce a psycho-social model of collective behaviour and ‘crowd events’, Stott et al (2016) highlight the extent to which previous attempts to frame and locate the behaviour and motivations of rioters (theoretically, but also in political and policy terms) have produced a diverse, contradictory and contested range of explanatory narratives. This echoes Ball and Drury (2012:4-6) who argue that in the initial attempts by politicians and policy makers to publicly ‘explain’ the rioters and their motivations there was a tendency to default to two contrasting (but in many respects equally flawed) explanatory narratives for why and how individuals became involved in riots – *submergence* and *convergence*. Broadly speaking, submergence assumes that ‘normal’ individuals can become ‘caught up’ in the behaviour of a crowd, ultimately engaging in atypical violent, dangerous and criminal behaviour as part of the ‘senseless’ collective. Convergence assumes a pre-existing, socially marginal and excluded ‘uncivilised’ minority who are already predisposed to criminal behaviour, and who converge to use group events for deviant purposes. Ball and Drury argue that these two competing narratives were mobilised during and in the immediate aftermath of the riots, but with a growing focus in political narratives on the riots as a convergence of criminal and gang related groups, with the riots reconfigured as a political demonstration that escalated into violence (a *community riot*) which then became a focus for criminal groups intent on looting who turned it into a *commodity riot* (2012:6).

This tension between submergence and convergence narratives is certainly reflected in media coverage of the riots during and immediately after the events. Initially at least there were a significant number of media narratives (with a very strong visual component) that focussed on submergence elements of the riots, and in the process potentially undermined any comforting distinction between a socially included, law abiding respectable majority as horrified audience to (and victims of) the riots, and a marginalised, deviant population of rioter/looters. These narratives portrayed the riots as symptomatic of a wider existential malaise in British society (see for example ‘Rioting and looting: Britain's ‘moral collapse’ in pictures’, Daily Telegraph 2011b), further emphasised by focussing on a small number of atypical ‘middle-class’ rioters whose biographies did not map neatly onto stereotypes of inner-urban disaffected youth criminality (Daily Telegraph 2011a; CNN, 2011). As the first wave of arrested rioters were brought to trial, and as their personal details were revealed, the media response disproportionately focussed on this small minority of rioters (see for example ‘The middle class ‘rioters’ revealed: The millionaire's daughter, the aspiring musician and the organic chef all in the dock’, Daily Mail, 2011d). A number of newspapers particularly highlighted the case of an aspiring young female athlete, who had recently been chosen as an ambassador for the forthcoming London Olympics, who:

‘...was joined in court by a ballerina, an estate agent, a law student, a would-be social worker, a young mother with a six-week-old baby and an 11-year-old girl.’ (Daily Express, 2011, np)

The initial salience of this atypical rioter narrative is in part a reflection of the nature and form of the previous wave of significant disturbances in London in November/December 2010 – disturbances involving university and college students protesting against the trebling of tuition fees by the recently elected coalition government. The media narratives produced

in response to examples of atypical rioters in 2011 echo many of the incredulous and pessimistic media responses to the sight of ‘respectable’ young people (many from privileged family backgrounds) in violent conflict with the Police in central London (see for example Daily Mail, 2010; The Sun, 2010; Daily Telegraph 2010).

Healing the breach – the rioters as ‘the usual suspects’

But quite rapidly the potential ontological challenges posed by these a-typical rioters were defused by the growing dominance of convergence narratives that instead focussed on the *othering* of the rioters by emphasising them as drawn from marginalised and socially excluded residual populations, in what Tyler (2013) charts as the mobilisation of ‘scum semiotics’. Increasingly the focus shifted to the rioters portrayed as mapping neatly onto dominant stereotypical representations of the urban underclass – for example in the explicit comparison of the visual appearance of convicted rioters with characters from the popular TV show ‘Shameless’ (see for example ‘Straight from Shameless: Rogues’ gallery of riot thugs who have already been found guilty by the court’, Daily Mail, 2011c; see also, The Sun, 2011), and in the frequent characterisation of the rioters as ‘Chavs’ (Jones, 2011).

As part of this convergence narrative, discussion of possible motives for the riots shifted from popular protest to looting, with increasingly dominant media narratives focusing on the apparent speed with which the initial protests about the circumstances surrounding the death of Mark Duggan at the hands of armed Police officers became subsumed in looting and the riots as a perceived manifestation of ‘shopping with violence’ (Dower, 2012).

The reconceptualization of the riots as a manifestation of consumerism was not limited to popular news stories, politicians and media commentators. It is also reflected in a range of

academic debates that emerge in the aftermath of the riots attempting to locate the behaviour of the rioters in wider narratives of consumption (see for example Moxon, 2011; Treadwell et al, 2013). In a response to the riots published at the height of the events, Bauman (2011) characterised the rioting (in particular the looting) as manifestations of ‘defective consumption’ and suggested that:

‘For defective consumers, those contemporary have-nots, non-shopping is the jarring and festering stigma of a life un-fulfilled’. (Bauman, 2011:np)

Bauman’s conception of the rioter/looters as ‘defective’ consumers resonates with the popular media convergence accounts of the riots, and I want to build on this point and explore the nature of the ‘defects’ as constructed and represented in visual representations and popular commentary on these images during this period.

What is ‘defective’ about the consumption behaviour of the rioters?

If the images that were produced and shared during and immediately after the riots can be regarded as capturing moments of defective consumption, what do they capture about the *nature* of the defect? How does the use and analysis of the images in popular discourse highlight and interpret these defects? Arguably, the imagery of the riots as presented in popular news media, commented on by the public on the websites of mass circulation newspapers and shared on social media implicitly focussed on the rioters not just as defective consumers, but as *self-constrained* or *self-limited* consumers.

The self-constrained nature of the ‘consumption’ performed in the riots quickly emerged in both the analysis of the impact of the riots and in the visual imagery associated with news coverage, social media posts and related popular commentary. Rogers (2011), in his analysis

of the retailers targeted by rioters during the looting, identified the discount catalogue retailer Argos as the most ‘popular’ shop for looters. This retailer, which Hilton (2016) argues is strongly associated with a ‘lower working class’ customer base, was closely followed (in terms of the incidence of looting) by a range of national high street chains selling sportswear, jewellery, large electrical goods and related consumer products. Rioters also targeted ‘value’ supermarkets such as Lidl. The underlying complexities and local and regional variations in patterns of looting and criminal damage that were identified and mapped by (amongst others) Rogers became increasingly subsumed by an emerging visual iconography of the victimisation and destruction of archetypal working class retail spaces. Numerous images of Argos being looted (see for example Figure 20.1) became increasingly mobilised in news coverage and were augmented by repeated imagery of looters stepping out through shattered shop windows of stereotypically working class shops with armfuls of sportswear, boxes of trainers, large screen TV sets. Popular critique of the act of looting per se is increasingly overlaid with comment and critique around the *nature* of the looted sites and the looted items.

<Kearon Image 20.1 here>

Figure 20.1 - Looters attacking a branch of Argos, London, 2011.

Credit: KeystoneUSA-ZUM/REX/Shutterstock



Commenting on images and accounts of the riots produced by bystanders, the documentary film-maker John Dower highlighted a number of comments specifically focussed on the nature of the looted goods, starting with one (middle class, University educated) witness who: ‘...saw what he thought was a perfect example of how we live today as he witnessed one man dragging a huge flat-screen television out of a hardware shop. The man saw another leave with a bigger TV, so dumped his, and went back in for a bigger one. Karl in Brixton commented that it was "the day you could get the trainers you couldn't afford to." Aymen, from Hackney, describes how kids were stealing J20s, bottles of orange juice, as if they were diamonds...’ (Dower, 2012, np)

Arguably, in these images we see the transition from motifs of society wide moral decline and the submergent a-typical rioter/looter, to the representation of a fundamental crisis within a particular, specific and marginal section of society. The parameters and form of this crisis are mapped out not just through consideration and discussion of the things that the looters

choose to steal, but also what they choose NOT to steal (see for example ‘The shop that no rioter wanted to loot... because it sells books’, Evening Standard, 2011). During a period of fundamental liminality, when externally imposed regulatory constraints have been (temporarily) removed, the looters are essentially represented as acting under self-imposed constraints. When (in theory at least) faced with the opportunity to steal those things that they would never normally be able to aspire to, the looters apparently choose to steal the narrow range of objects they would normally buy. The apparent self-constrained ‘consumption’ practices and behaviours of the looters, their perceived focus on retail spaces in their own local community, the shops they choose to loot and not loot, the items they choose to steal and not steal, constructs an imagined self-identity *of* and *for* the looters that focusses on a series of absences – an absence of judgement and self-control, an absence of intelligence, an absence of imagination, an absence of *taste* (Bourdieu, 1984). One way of further demonstrating this emerging narrative is to examine the changing use and interpretation of a particular image (Figure 20.2).

<Kearon Image 20.2 here>

Figure 20.2 - A branch of Poundland being looted, London, 2011.

Source: INFphoto



Figure 20.2 – an image of the looting of a branch of Poundland (a value retail chain which sells a range of items which cost a pound), was used on a number of occasions to illustrate media coverage of the riots, and was widely shared on social media. The standard imagery of looters spilling out of the broken window of the shop is replicated in a range of similar images used in coverage of the riots. But the use and re-use of this specific image is significant. In the version of the image reproduced here, one of the looters is highlighted. In its early use, the image was presented as part of news stories focussing on that circled rioter – the church-going daughter of a Doctor and a Nurse, who had inexplicably joined in with the looting. As such it featured in the ‘atypical rioter’ narratives explored earlier in this chapter. But subsequently the image was used and shared in different contexts (especially on social media) with a growing focus not on the atypical social status of the highlighted looter, but on the tragi-comic social symbolism of the act of looting Poundland itself (frequently associated with derogatory comments about ‘Chavs’). Where the highlighted young looter does appear in subsequent discussions and sharing of this image, it is routinely with a focus on the self-

constrained nature, the futility and stupidity of her actions – taking the risks associated with looting a shop (she was subsequently convicted and sentenced to eight months in Prison) for the sake of an energy drink and a few bags of potato chips. In the guise of ‘Poundland Crisp looter’ and a range of other more derogatory labels, she was also photo shopped into ‘humorous’ and iconic images which were shared as memes via social media.

This shift in focus of popular critique, away from the act of looting itself to the nature of the sites and items looted (and what they are assumed to indicate about the social status and ‘worth’ of the looter) is arguably nowhere more apparent than in the use of and responses to those images produced by the rioter/looters themselves – images of individuals and groups posing with the items they have stolen, images which I refer to here as ‘looter selfies’.



Figure 20.3 - A ‘looter selfie’ posted on social media, August 2011. Credit: Social Media.

Figure 20.3 is an example of a ‘looter selfie’ that was posted on social media during the riots. It was identified by the police in their search for images, picked up and used in news media stories relating to the looting, and subsequently shared and commented on across social media. As with Figure 20.2, it can be regarded as a transitional image that serves a number of purposes in the changing visual representation and interpretation of the riots. In the context of operation Withern, the image was cropped to focus on the face of the looter, and the edited image disseminated via the Metropolitan Police Webpage, Facebook and Flickr accounts. The uncropped image also featured in a range of news media stories which routinely focussed on the arrogance and stupidity of looters producing and sharing images in which they could be identified (see for example ‘Twit and Twitter: ‘Looter’ posts photo of himself and his booty online as police say tweets were used to co-ordinate riots’, Daily Mail 2011a). But against the wider backdrop of the huge number of riot related images produced during that period, the looter selfies are in many respects unique in that they are not simply images *of* the behaviour of the looters captured and interpreted *by* external agents (the photographer and the audience). These are images ‘authored’ by the looters themselves. As Berger (2008) argues in his analysis of Gainsborough’s *Portrait of Mr and Mrs Andrews* (c1750), the ‘natural’ image can read as a carefully collected (and hence artificial) assemblage of visual clues designed to convey meaning and status to the viewer, especially in the display of possessions.

This image of the looter ‘selfie’ is as artificial as any example of 18th Century portraiture – in the preparation of the selfie, the looter has ‘curated’ the image through the choice, arrangement and display of a range of stolen items intended to convey meaning to the viewer. The items chosen for display, the framing of the selfie to place the focus on the items at the centre of the image, and the implicit subtext that these are all the ‘fruits’ of his active

involvement in the looting out on the streets, can be read as a carefully constructed presentation of self which is designed to convey social status, value and worth in the eyes of the looter, and his peers as the intended audience. In this context, the items the looter has chosen to display merit further consideration. The range of stolen items on display initially appears quite eclectic – DVDs of action movies; violent video games; mass-market ‘designer’ men’s cologne and hair care products; video game accessories; protein ‘milk-shake’ powder used by body builders to help develop muscle mass. But collectively these items present an assemblage of a particular version of young urban masculinity and class, and it is that identity which, in the comments on news websites and when the image was shared via social media, was routinely subjected to a critical popular/populist reading which uses the image, the objects on display and apparent contradictions highlighted in the image to produce a range of inferred readings of the character, social status, taste and social identity of the looter. Again, as with the popular readings of Figures 20.1 and 20.2, this image was routinely subjected to a range of interpretations that focussed on the predictable and unimaginative nature of the items stolen, the poor range, value and quality of the looters ‘haul’, the tragi-comic contradictions of the image (the slightly built young man with the body-builders protein shake, the ‘Gangsta’ who appears to spend his time at home playing video games, the look of joy on the face of the looter when displaying such a banal range of objects, and so on).



<Kearon Image 4 here> Figure 20.4 – A looter poses with a bag of supermarket value basmati rice.

Source: Social Media

The popular critique (and ridicule) of what is perceived as that sense of pride and achievement in the theft of mundane, banal and ‘valueless’ objects, (and, by inference, what the image says about the social status of the looter), which is demonstrated in popular interpretation of the looter images in general and of looter selfies in particular, can also be seen in the popular response to Figure 20.4 In the authoring of the image, the looter draws on elements of the visual iconography of the presentation of self in ‘gang’ culture (Hallsworth, 2013), presenting and performing the threat of urban criminality. The image is coded with the familiar visual motifs of that threat – the looter, a young black male, is dressed in black clothing, his hood pulled up, partially covering his face. He looks directly at the camera

impassively, as he makes a hand gesture reminiscent of a gang ‘sign’. But all of this coded threat acts as a frame for the banal object at the centre of the image. The looter proudly displays a bag of value basmati rice looted from a local supermarket. In many respects this image (which was shared, and commented on, widely on social media) can be seen as emblematic of a significant strand of the public response *to* and reading *of* the images of the riots and the rioters– not as threatening and challenging, but as constrained and predictable, uncontrolled and impulsive, thoughtless and unimaginative, ridiculous and tragi-comic.

The looter as cultural univore

So far in this chapter, I have argued that the potential ontological challenge to social order posed by the prospect of the rioter as ‘one of us’, caught up and lost in the riotous crowd, was in part managed by othering the rioter as defective consumers. I have also demonstrated that it is possible to re-read the images of defective consumption as representations of *constrained* consumption – of looters unwilling (and perhaps fundamentally unable) to fully exploit the deviant consumption opportunities offered by the liminality of the riotous crowd and the overwhelmed Police. Is it possible that the construction and representation of the looter as constrained consumer could be seen as a further step in the restoration and maintenance of social order? Throughout this chapter the underlying focus has been on the criminological aesthetic that links the image and the observer. In order to theorise that relationship further it might be helpful to briefly situate the observer in *their* wider social context.

The fluid, unpredictable and uncertain context within which the socially included are increasingly located has been extensively charted by theorists of late modernity (see for example Giddens, 1991; Bauman, 2000), and the criminological implications for the

relationship between the socially included and excluded in late modernity has also been well charted (Garland, 2001; Young, 1999). In the face of increasing challenges to the sources of certainty, social order and ontological security in the lives of the socially included, we can chart a transition from sources of high modern social status and order rooted in part in the complex *division of labour* to late modern sources rooted in the complex *labour of division*. (Hetherington and Munro, 1998) As sources of social status rooted in the socio-economic realm become increasingly precarious, the labour of division becomes rooted in the realms of cultural practice (Skeggs, 2004). In this context the old cultural distinction of the socially included - their perceived understanding and appreciation of 'high' culture, is replaced by a much more diverse and cosmopolitan engagement with a broad range of 'high' and 'low' cultural forms, in the creation of a new socially included identity as *cultural omnivore* (Peterson and Simkus, 1992). But as Bryson (1996) has argued, omnivorousness as a source of social differentiation cannot be all encompassing – there must be some aspects of cultural practice beyond the realms of the eclectic omnivore which remain the preserve of a marginalised, cultural 'other'. Our ability to move comfortably between cultural forms:

“...only acquires value when it is set up against categories defined as permanent and immobile. 'Other' people are not only 'allowed to carve out special niches' for themselves, they are actively constituted as homogeneous and unchanging” (Ollivier 2008:144)

In the readings that we produce of the looter images, in the lives that we imagine exist behind the behaviours that we witness in the image, we produce a range of normative cultural and moral readings that echo those identified by Scarborough and McCoy (2016) in audience readings of representations of socially marginal groups in reality TV. Our stereotypical construction of the 'Chav' (Jones, 2011), our ridicule of the marginalised subjects of reality TV and our contempt for the Poundland looters, are all manifestations of the fact that as a

source of social status and differentiation, our cultural omnivorousness is dependent on the continued existence of the cultural univore (Kearon, 2012). Conveniently, the univore is trapped in their cultural niche, unable to move beyond it because (unlike us) they are lacking self-discipline and self-control, impulsive, yet ironically self-constraining in the narrow frame and predictability of their cultural habitus (Bourdieu, 1984). In the emerging centrality of cultural omnivorousness as a source of identity, the processes of differentiation become increasingly nuanced. Lahire (2008) extends Bourdieu's work to argue that rather than simply being a source of differentiation *between* classes, critique of narrow, constrained 'illegitimate' cultural practices is increasingly found *within* the same class fractions as the groups being subjected to the critique. Working class critics of the 'chav' univore, construct a version of self in which the *potential* to become a univore has been transcended through the application of 'respectable' self-discipline and self-control, which is contrasted with the impulsive ill-disciplined nature of the univore:

"...the battle of self against self.... the control and the mastery of what is illegitimate in oneself, serves to reinforce a feeling of distinctive superiority in comparison to those who one imagines to have no mastery, no self-control (who give themselves up to their compulsions etc.). Self-control and control of the other thus reveal themselves to be indissociable; the symbolic distinctions and conflicts are as much individual (intra-individual and inter-individual) as collective (inter-class)." Lahire (2008:180)

The final image (Plate 9 - Black Friday, a London supermarket, 2014) is reminiscent of those images already examined, and of the wider body of looter images from which they were drawn. In the foreground of the image, in a retail space, a disorderly crowd jostle for possession of a small number of large-screen TVs. There are some women in the crowd, but it is predominantly young men. Many are wearing sportswear, hooded tops, hats or baseball

caps. A young man clings to a TV box that looks bigger than him, as people around him elbow each other for space. The public comments on the image when it was published on a newspaper website, and when subsequently shared on social media, echo the reading of the previous images – a familiar range of critical inferences are drawn regarding the taste, social class, education, employment status and intelligence of the crowd in its struggle over archetypically ‘Chav’ large screen TVs.



But the behaviour represented is not actually looting. This is an image from the ‘Black Friday’ sales. It becomes clear that the contemptuous critique of the impulsive and irrational, yet self-constraining and predictable behaviour of the cultural univore doesn’t have to be embedded within a formal act of *Deviance* for us to label their actions as *deviant*, and marginal (Raymen and Smith, 2016).

Conclusion

This chapter has argued that the images of the 2011 riots and rioters as they were presented and interpreted by their audience offered up a specific form of order as social and ontological security for the socially included. The rioters were recast and reimagined as not simply constrained by structural and economic inequality but as SELF constraining, their riotous behaviour as simply another manifestation of their unreflexive and self-destructive cultural milieu. The looters in the images are constructed as not simply disadvantaged by their lack of economic capital but primarily by the lack of *cultural* capital, not externally constrained by a lack of choices, but self-constrained by the inability to escape their narrow cultural context, to make choices when offered the opportunity (even if that opportunity is a riot). In the construction of the looters as cultural univores we see a reaffirmation of Young's (1999) argument that the perceived existence of a permanently socially (self) excluded other has become ontologically reaffirming for the socially included. Representing and repositioning the looter as cultural univore is thus an action to restore social order.

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