



LONDON.

extreme consumers.

w.self

I am disinclined to overstate the importance of new technologies & the social media associated with them. Nonetheless, there does seem to have been influence upon the recent disturbances by the use of blackberry personal messaging services, Facebook, and, to a lesser extent, Twitter. But I think that over & above this, if one could discount that impact, it's possible to conceive that a 21st century riot of this kind would be what one might clumsily call "despatialised", in comparison with earlier British civil disturbances.

Since time immemorial the British mob has enacted a very characteristic & indeed specific form of riotous street theatre, one strongly linked to territory. That territory may be public space, (the monumental architecture & government-mandated cityscape of central London), or suburban (high streets and enclaves belonging to particular communities). From the Gordon riots to the Chartist demonstrations, from the Battle of Cable Street in the 30s to the disturbances in Brixton in the 80s, riots revolved around defined territory & defined protagonists, and an articulation that was: *The Mob (The People) versus Authority*.

When you come to 2011, the shift in how the city is conceived in spatial terms becomes evident. There is a phenomenon of despatialisation, de-personalisation, deterritorialisation. Instead of a mob that attacks the establishment's territory, the mob moves in a fluid way to loci of (for want of a better term) 'hyperconsumption'. This is the riot conceived of as *extreme consumerism*, & the patterns it follows are already mandated by existing consumer tendencies. Mapped onto the city comes the kind of shopping journeys these people would, were they in funds, have made anyway.

In Croyden, the big retail barns (Ikeas and B&Qs) are located along an arterial road called, rather suitably, the Pearly Way. Here rioters... I don't even think this is the right term... here *extreme consumers*, descended & cleared it out like a cloud of locusts. They then found themselves mugged by professional criminals, who had come armed & equipped with transit vans. *Extreme consumers* were utilised as tack claws, to carry flat-screen tvs away from the site of theft, before being relieved by people who understood how to fence & deal with these things. This phenomenon is hard to imagine occurring at another epoch.

To some extent, the riots could be seen as an extension of what is called 'asymmetrical' warfare. Instead of armies meeting with established rules, on a defined fighting ground, the insurgent conducts attacks in a pattern unforeseeable in conventional warfare. This was true of the Viet Kong, and the so-called war between the US & Al-Qaeda. One can also see the way it relates to how governments view the vulnerability of their own territoriality, traduced by the impossibility of securing land against an enemy using asymmetrical warfare, or maintaining their sovereignty against the massive speed & attack of international financial systems, which undermine the fiscal integrity of states. You could argue all of these phenomena are filtering down to the level of society & civil disturbance.

Ballard explores the idea of violence & extreme consumerism as an outlet for boredom. Merely exchanging money for goods yields an insufficient hit. This is related to the debatable nature of commercial space itself. It has become iconic, temple-like, worshipful, but must retain an absolute permeability & is a site of frustration/desire, as well as satisfaction/repletion. One remembers, of course, Kafka's line: "The leopards invade the precincts of the temple. They do this & profane the sacred idols. They do this so often it becomes incorporated into the ritual."

Will Self is an author & prolific commentator on contemporary British life. Text from interview.

BEIRUT.

why now / what next?

l.eid

"Now that everything had returned to normal, he was surprised that there had been no obvious beginning, no point beyond which their lives had moved into a clearly more sinister dimension."

J.G. Ballard

As the last volley of Molotov cocktails cascaded onto police vans in Tottenham on the 6th of August, I found myself questioning the temporal significance of the London Riots and the effects they may have.

Sitting at a bar in West Beirut, I watched the events unfold on television screens that flickered between the crescendo of uninhibited delinquency that was taking place in my hometown, two thousand miles away, and the brutal suppression of anti-government protests in nearby Syria. "But... what are they fighting for?" asked an incredulous Lebanese friend. My inability to formulate a coherent response, however, was at once revelatory.

Ascribing the riots to a wider agenda is, in my opinion, futile. Whilst the British media often cites the fatal shooting of Mark Duggan by the Metropolitan Police Service as the seed of unrest, it became clear that the flourish of subsequent looting and arson attacks were estranged from the emblematic root of the situation.

For those on the Left, the riots were framed as a product of diminishing prospects within urban communities that feel politically and economically disenfranchised. Conversely, our government believes that the riots demonstrate a collapse of moral values. In David Cameron's rhetoric, they are nothing more than symptoms of a "broken society" infected by a "criminal disease". By attempting to explain the riots through this form of oversimplified body politic, however, do we not risk explaining them away altogether?

Instead, in absence of a coherent mo-

tive, we could look to Marshall McLuhan's cherished dictum for clues on the alleged decadence of our civilisation. If 'the medium is the message', it follows that the riots symbolised an attack on the built fabric of our city, albeit for control of the material possessions that the city itself necessitates. In a Ballardian twist of fate, ordinary citizens turned on their own neighbourhoods to inflict a gratuitous form of violence that was at once both necessary and damaging; both cause and effect. It is perhaps the impromptu materialisation of this hermetic feedback loop that should alarm us the most.

As architects, we should be among the first to observe that many of the areas affected by the riots had undergone, or are in the process of undergoing, significant urban regeneration schemes. Violent criminality in places such as Clapham, Dalston, Peckham, Woolwich, Croydon and so on only serve to extend the parallels with JG Ballard's narratives of a dystopian modernity. At a time when the Mayor of London and the Communities Secretary have pledged a joint minimum of £80m towards post-riot redevelopment projects, we must ask ourselves whether such injections of relatively minuscule sums of money are simply knee-jerk reactions that ignore the problem at hand. Ought we not review the role that urban design, through gentrification and its negative consequences, plays in this type of conflict?

Thankfully, by the time this article goes to print it will be announced that Design for London — the organisation whose very existence was threatened seven months ago during George Osborne's Spending Review — is expanding once again to face the challenges posed by recent events. Nevertheless, the ease, speed and ferocity with which the flash riots spread suggest that their timeliness is not an issue. They happened two months ago but could equally occur in two months' time. The question is, what have we learnt from this pilot episode?

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