Happy Slapping

– Urban Violence in the Age of Camera Phones
by Peter Mörtenböck and Helge Mooshammer

A new urban phenomenon has allegedly first emerged on the UK garage scene before hitting school playgrounds and public transport in London and other cities in Great Britain in autumn 2004: Usually, an unwitting member of the public is slapped, punched or kicked by a group of teenagers, while another teenager records the incident on a videophone. The footage is then passed on from phone to phone, emailed to friends and sometimes posted on the Internet. What started as a teenage game in South London has reportedly turned into serious online business two years on: In May 2006 ABC brought the news that hundreds of blurry videos showing violent attacks on unsuspecting victims in Arlington (Texas) were for sale on the world wide web. Now a new craze in Texas, 'happy slapping' has apparently spread like wildfire across cities in Europe last year, increasing in scale and brutality. Attacks have become more and more vicious and spectacular, as teenagers try to outdo each other in an ongoing race for shocking images.

In April this year a high school student in the outskirts of Paris wrestled a teacher to the ground, slapping her and threatening her with a classroom chair, while another student captured the event on his mobile phone. A 'happy slapping rape' was reported in June 2005 referring to a case in which a 11-year-old girl was allegedly raped by a group of 14-year-old boys who filmed the brutal assault with a camera phone. Later last year 37-year-old David Morley was kicked and beaten to death by a gang of four offenders while being filmed near Waterloo Station in London. People being tied to trees and set afire, handicapped children being beaten up by groups of teenagers, passers-by being hit in the head while their assailants record pictures of the scene – these are typical scenes of happy slapping incidents captured on mobile phones in the past few months.

Some people tend to blame stunt shows on MTV such as Jackass or its British counterpart Dirty Sanchez for the emergence of happy slaps, but misrepresenting this urban phenomenon as kids being irresponsibly silly or reacting to television programmes conceals the true nature and the appeal of violence in a culture in which a large proportion of reality is produced by cleverly fabricated media events. Mediation is more and more what constitutes the actuality of an event. Accordingly, the whole point of happy slapping is not the act of physical violence as such. There is more to the staged assaults than the sheer amusement of humiliating and degrading another person in front of a peer group. What triggers the true sense of satisfaction in young perpetrators is the fact that happy slaps are made-for-camera events. They are meant to be seen by others. And even if there is no camera phone present during an assault these days, carrying out an attack in the spirit of happy slapping seems to do the job of creating a phantasmatic triangular scene of assailant, victim and distant spectator. There is no better way of showing anti-social behaviour to society at large. Atrocity images have a

common impact on spectators, and the images produced by happy slappers blend in well with a growing array of visual brutality disseminated through today's media reports.

The enacted transgression of lawfulness and 'decency' coincides with the general conditions of a testimonial culture which mobilises a desire to produce authentic events. In her final book, Regarding the Pain of Others, Susan Sontag wrote: "For the photography of atrocity, people want the weight of witnessing without the taint of artistry, which is equated with insincerity or mere contrivance. Pictures of hellish events seem more authentic when they don't have the look that comes from being 'properly' lighted and composed […]. By flying low, artistically speaking, such pictures are thought to be less manipulative – all widely distributed images of suffering now stand under that suspicion – and less likely to arouse facile compassion or identification." (1) There is indeed a certain level of rawness to the footage of happy slapping incidents which reminds one of the popular reality effects of handycams and amateur videos deployed by mass media to testify the authenticity of an event. Like the rise of snuff movies (the allegedly real, often brutal killing of people in front of a video camera) in the 1980s, the spirit of happy slapping brings forth a general anxiety of our time, while articulating it in the most timely and technologically most available manner.

Countermanding a hegemonic visual culture which seems to repress the raw and peripheral, happy slapping photographs and videos give way to complicating an epistemology which posits something as centre and periphery in order to redistribute the sources available to those who occupy narrativity at centre stage. If we were to trust the narratives produced by mainstream media reports, though, we would have to assume that the cult and danger of happy slapping have gradually come to expand

to the whole of the Western world, seeking to produce micro-conflicts in cities everywhere, so that defences have to be put up in an ambivalent and all-encompassing territorial situation. The omni-present enemy generated through these stories figures as the actuator of an ever more restrictive politics of social-based 'urban security' (in government lingo: 'community-based justice'). One consequence, as Negri and Hardt implied in Multitude, is that in the war against such abstract enemies the limits of security measures are rendered indeterminate, both spatially and temporally. Wars against abstract concepts or social practices are acts of governmentality, indistinguishable from most other forms of political activity. Reproducing all aspects of social life, they can be extended anywhere irrespective of spatial or temporal boundaries.(2) In this way the suspension of normal civilian 'rules' in the quest for civilian 'decency' mobilises a form of biopower which flexibly produces or reinforces social hierarchies along prevalent value systems or opinion polls.(3)

Despite the increased attention given to happy slapping assaults London media theorist Graham Barnfield argues that these incidents hardly amount to a new urban epidemic. He implies that happy slapping is rather fuelled by a moral panic which combines a variety of fears pertaining to youth crime, new technology and an array of uncontrollable phenomena emerging in contemporary urban conditions.(4) Instead of engaging with an urban situation which cuts across separate categories of violence and peace, the city of panic (Virilio) seeks to isolate and ghettoise zones of unregulated violence from purified and patrolled zones of harmony. As numerous happy slapping incidents seem to be related to school environments, these are now the first to react on the spread of camera phone violence. In former times schools used to be seen as prototypes of

the disciplinary society, facilitating a sense of protection governed by a regime of discipline. Now they figure as a place of terror, echoing a major shift in common perceptions of urban safety. Using metal detectors and body scanners to search for knives, fire-arms or explosives has become a routine practice in many schools already. But what about the advanced technological tools and lifestyle accessories that are more likely to go unnoticed? The German state of Bavaria and dozens of schools in Ireland have recently barred mobile phones from classrooms, and it can be expected that many other European schools will follow suit. In an attempt to enhance customer satisfaction, Bluewater, Britain's largest shopping mall, has equally considered measures to crack down on intimidating manners by issuing guidelines which are set to regulate social behaviour on its premises, including bans on clothes which obscure the face such as hooded tops and baseball caps. In the heat of a national moral debate in Great Britain, this move was backed by British Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott, who himself reportedly almost fell victim to a happy slapping attack by a group of teenagers in a motorway café.

These developments in the United Kingdom have to be seen as outposts of a series of strategic attempts in an era of government policies to regulate what is regarded as a growing climate of cultural disrespect. Reminiscent of the earlier ill-fated Back to Basics campaign run by the former Tory government, New Labour has initiated so-called Anti-Social Behaviour Orders (ASBOs) introduced by the Crime and Disorder Act immediately upon taking office in 1998. These by-laws define anti-social behaviour as acts likely to cause 'harassment, alarm, or distress to one or more persons not in the same household'. What qualifies as anti-social behaviour, though, remains unclear and dependent on what counts

as 'proper' or 'poor' urban conduct in the eye of the beholder. Unsurprisingly, examples are on record of ASBOs preventing people from sleeping rough, fly-posting, street begging or illegal parking.

A more dramatic effect of ASBOs is their power to spatially control public space simply by imposing forms of conduct (e.g. through alcohol disorder zones) or by banning certain people from entering a defined area. This rearticulation of the urban setting as a place of danger zones and yobbish youths deflects public unease about the general deregulations of 21st century urban life to a perpetuated rhetorics of 'problem areas' and 'problem youths' in cities and helps stigmatise certain groups of urban populations in favour of others. ASBOs are community-based orders which may be issued to prevent the offender from defined anti-social acts or entering specific areas and may involve imposing curfews if deemed necessary. Through recent legislation they are particularly related to a set of ten urban 'Trailblazer Areas' and more than 50 'Action Areas' in Great Britain (including London boroughs Westminster, Camden, Southwark and Hackney), which receive special attention from the governmental Anti-Social Behaviour Unit. By 2006 more than 7.000 ASBOs were reported to the British Home Office, while an increasing number of people have been tagged with electronic devices attached to their ankles to monitor the enforcement of restrictions to stay clear of defined locations such as town centres, victims' homes or football grounds.

Undoubtedly, these measures produce a worrying cartography of urban Britain: no-go zones border upon purified public space. While public space becomes hyper-regulated and homogenised in the interest of middle class life-styles, private space mutates into home detention zones. It is this new biased and unbalanced

demarcation between private and public realms which Rosalyn Deutsche has described as characteristic of the evictions taking place in the name of restoring what is in popular British terminology now called 'culture of respect'. The public sphere is instituted as a means for class-related private interests to control public activities, while conflicts are being homogenised by privatising whole aspects of urban life.(5) Homogenisation as in the case of the 'essential decency of the British character' praised in the British Home Office minister's pamphlet The Politics of Decency (2004) is only effected by exclusions and evictions. Hand in hand with the accelerated privatisation and bureaucratisation of the urban space, legislation and jurisdiction assist in justifying exclusions as natural benefit for 'the public'. The means taken to achieve this end is to single out and tackle those groups of individuals and those urban areas whose existence, according to standards of 'decency', disrupt citizenship and community values. Feeling the urge to appeal to Middle Britain anxieties, politics buys into the logic of urban eviction and presents itself willing to stamp out anti-social crazes like happy slapping.

The wide-spread rhetorics of battling down upheaval caused by unruly youths in British town centres evokes a certain proximity of these events to a more general complicity of contemporary visual culture and urban warfare. Just remember the "The rules have changed" campaign of the British government after the bomb attacks in London in July 2005 and similar political reactions to the recent riots in the French Banlieues in November last year. It is not without reason that cities are entrenched in military imagery and that the resurgence of this imagery comes at a time of social deregulation. From battle fields to strategic lines, from frontier areas to no-go zones, the combined ideologies of social

orchestration and urban planning have always conjured up a language of military warfare to legitimate violent acts of urban transformation and eviction. Hidden in this inextricable unity lies a layer of militarised lawlessness which paradoxically grants the fragile stability of the urban condition. There is a close, even symbiotic relation between social conflict and the way cities have been built as sites of warfare. In taking up different roles looming on the horizon of conflict, the forces of war and the institutionalisation of military apparatuses have shaped the urban to a large extent. As new conflicts emerge from this complicated fabric they direct our attention towards the new ways in which the presence of social exteriority is constituted and expressed.

Clearly, the brutality of happy slapping incidents and the exposure of suffering to be watched cannot be accommodated within idealistic ideas of 21st century citizenship and hence the craze is positioned outside the realm of the urban condition which brought it about, occupying a state of emergency which guarantees a temporary outlet for satisfying the deflected desire of the media and the general public to see these acts realised. Happy slapping has evolved as a generic embodiment of urban danger calling for repeated enactment. It can be seen as a deferral of conflicts on which cities are founded, both physically and socially. The recording, mediation and potential distribution trigger the coming into existence of these brutal acts and not otherwise.

One of the points Susan Sontag convincingly argued, was the impossibility of contemporary warfare to be conceived without well-crafted representations of war. Records of atrocity, photographs or video footage, are immanent elements of strategic calculations, be it that they circulate deliberately or sur-

face unwillingly as was the case with the torture photographs of Abu Ghraib in April 2004, just a couple of months before the craze of happy slapping started in London. More than an incident? Photographs are both a record of the real and its witness. The photographs from Abu Ghraib released to the public two years ago show perpetrators openly appearing in front of the camera as actors of a sadistic performance which stages the coming together of two inextricably linked realms: intimacy and violence. Depicting acts of violence and humiliation carried out by US soldiers, these images bear a striking resemblance to the usual scenes of everyday retaliation, degradation and physical torture in the dominant media-entertainment industries of reality TV and news reports. From people forced into inflicting pain on fellow-inmates by Big Brother through to the broadcasted self-torture of showman David Blaine ('Drowned Alive') and the degrading scenes of imprisoned Saddam Hussein wearing underpants, the line between fact and fiction becomes blurred as acts of humiliation permeate our culture, including many of the measures introduced by state governments themselves, such as electronic tagging and curfews imposed on rowdy teenagers. In the absence of a feeling of mutuality pertaining to issues of respect, kids begin to stage their own narratives of humiliation and degradation along these lines in order to capitalise upon the pejorative sense embodied in happy slapping and in the visual trophies of anonymous warfare which it spawns. They may be aware of the visual imagery of Abu Ghraib, but do not necessarily share and imitate the same sadistic impulses which may have driven the obsessions behind the making of these documents. What they surely do, though, is seeking to stage and manifest an urban condition which has been depicted and proscribed in government and media reports, as if to give evidence to the alleged brutality and danger evaporating from contemporary urban space.

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http://www.networkedcultures.org
http://www.thinkarchitecture.net

(1) Sontag, Susan: Regarding the Pain of Others. London: Penguin, 2004, p. 23-4

(2) Hardt, Michael and Antonio Negri: Multitude. London: Hamish Hamilton, 2005, p. 14

(3) Of course social hierarchies can equally be dismantled by being redoubled through counter-applying the very forces that make them congregate in the first place. This has been demonstrated recently by a map drawn up and circulated by the African Council, an umbrella organisation of African community groups and activists in Germany, following concerns over an incident involving a German of Ethiopian descent who was beaten into a coma at a bus station in Potsdam. Black visitors to the World Cup in Germany have been warned to stay clear of parts of the country where they could be at risk of racist attacks. A 'no-go' map, with a focus on the capital Berlin, this representation of danger zones shifts the roles of those who usually lay claim to map-making.

(4) See Barnfield, Graham: 'Happy Slaps: Fact and Fiction', http://www.spiked-online.com/Articles/0000000CAAD3.htm (28 April 2005)

(5) Deutsche, Rosalyn: Evictions. Art and Spatial Politics. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002 (1996), p. 58