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Published

2018

Journal Title

Cultural Studies Review

Version

Version of Record (VoR)

DOI

[10.5130/csr.v24i2.6319](https://doi.org/10.5130/csr.v24i2.6319)

Downloaded from

<http://hdl.handle.net/10072/388251>

Griffith Research Online

<https://research-repository.griffith.edu.au>



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Citation: Buchan, B., Gibson, M., and Howell, A. 2018. The Ethics of Troubled Images. *Cultural Studies Review*, 24:2, 75-78. <https://doi.org/10.5130/csr.v24i2.6319>

ISSN 1837-8692 | Published by UTS ePRESS | <http://epress.lib.uts.edu.au/journals/index.php/csrj/index>

INTRODUCTION TO SPECIAL SECTION: TROUBLED IMAGES

The Ethics of Troubled Images

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5130/csr.v24i2.6319>

Article History: Received 10/10/2018; Revised 10/10/2018; Accepted 10/10/2018; Published 28/11/2018

When a former drone pilot for the United States Airforce was asked to describe his experience of directing lethal strikes on selected targets over distances of many thousands of kilometres, he said:

Ever step on ants and never give it another thought? That's what you are made to think of the targets – as just black blobs on a screen. You start to do these psychological gymnastics to make it easier to do what you have to do... You had to kill part of your conscience to keep doing your job every day...¹

Transmogrified into ants, necessary for killing one's conscience in this militarised context of technologically enabled passive, non-combative killing, human lives become visually framed as *unmoving* targets on lethal screens. The ethical claim of the media image is not new, but the supersaturation of our lives by images and through screens, with multiple opportunities to attend or ignore, to apprehend or misapprehend the claim they make is unprecedented. Though few of us are placed in the position of this drone operator, our responses to violent imagery elicits the same conundrum—a detachment from ethical consideration or an urgent mobilisation of care and concern? As media imagery becomes more mobile and all-pervasive, troubled images proliferate—proximate rather than distant, for the most part—becoming both more palpable and intimate as they compete for our attention. Everyday, our mobile devices become repositories and witnesses to everything from dead bodies to disasters. Images that memorialise and eulogise. That threaten insecurity and send us seeking after security. That advocate. That haunt. Many of these troubled images are user-generated. They are records of the conditions under which people live and die, made by ordinary people with the technological means to capture human interaction of intimidation and discrimination ranging from racism on public transport to police shootings. In a particularly horrific example from 2016, Diamond Reynolds recorded the death of her boyfriend, Philando Castile, on her

DECLARATION OF CONFLICTING INTEREST The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article. **FUNDING** The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

smartphone and broadcast it on Facebook Live to an audience of many thousands across the world.

This special issue of *Cultural Studies Review* brings together an interdisciplinary range of scholarship to investigate the ethical implications of troubled images. While some scholars have begun to engage with cross-platform, user-generated, and co-created representations of political violence, death and mourning, the contributors to this issue seek to chart a new path in their focus on the ‘troubled image’.² Troubled images are those that provocatively depict violence, marginality, and victimization, dehumanization, public death and mourning. Those images are also troubled that invite us to accept, to normalise, or legitimate violence, suffering and victimisation by their very ubiquity. For us, troubled images refer to graphic images that are at once troubling but, more pervasively, troubled—especially but not exclusively in the way that they are produced, reproduced, circulated and repositioned by the technological, social, and cultural apparatus of digital imaging, web-based networks and archives. User-generated and co-created, such images imbibe a nexus of historical, cultural and technological sources of significance that are simultaneously disoriented and disconnected by their constant supersession. Yet, at the same time, as Anna Reading reminds us with her focus on autism and its media representations, the troubled image can also be one that challenges, queers, and questions, in a potentially transformative way. The affordances of media technologies as Reading’s paper argues, has enabled neuroqueer subjectivities to emerge, create and claim their own images and voices for connection, community, education, advocacy and self-representation.

Everyday lived experiences of suffering and violence become media events when nearly every eye has access to a camera and the first response to trouble is to record and share. A sense of immediacy dominates the temporality of these images, even as they bring greater access and visibility to places and spaces of subjection, discrimination and suffering. Such images can be intimate and affective. As Larissa Hjorth and Kathleen Cumiskey bring into focus in this issue, ‘intimacy has always been mediated’ but these new forms of visibility reorient relationships to media and the social, making the image the means of shifting realities, demanding a response. The speed with which troubling images unfold, and the rate of their succession, contributes to a sense of excess and incapacity to identify and commit to sustained engagements. Such images rapidly become yesterday’s stories—giving way to new and equally urgent concerns. At the same time, part of this complex mediated environment, as Grant Bollmer and Katherine Guinness remind us in this issue, is the way that images—data—persists, not just beyond urgency and novelty but even beyond death, haunting the present in a way that troubles notions of agency, personhood.

This experience returns us to the validity of Guy Debord’s observation that in the ‘society of the spectacle’ the proliferation of images not only saturates but mediates and remediates social relations between people.³ Yet the flow of images and the refraction of vision across multiple screens, reflective of diverse perspectives, has also enabled a new kind of digitally shared and mediated public which, for instance, can be used to track tragedy and to reconstruct responsibility – as the proponents of ‘forensic architecture’ seek to do by collating images and footage of bomb clouds, or reconstructing the tragic sequence of events in the Grenfell Tower fire in London,⁴ or The Harvest Festival shooting in Los Angeles. In this digitally networked environment the potential for new social knowledges, new social intimacies and connections, proliferates alongside an aesthetic of distraction. Our social and political world, and our moral and ethical frameworks are mediated by a constant flux of images dispersed through diverse media signifying meaning in the overlaps, coalescences and condensations of visual tropes.⁵

Yet, recurrently purely visual representation gives way to the haptic when viewers are called upon to witness embodied violence, trauma and suffering. Using the work of Emmanuel Levinas, Margaret Gibson and Amanda Howell explore these difficulties and the ethical import of witnessing and responsibility focalised by Laszlo Nemes's extraordinary film *Son of Saul* with its moral centre of the dead child and its aesthetic blurring of images of dead bodies. Also engaging also with the intersection between ethics and aesthetics, but in a documentary with a focus on race and poverty, Keys and Pini explore how the visualisation of suffering and injustice can merely swamp ethical responses by aestheticizing deprivation. At the same time this same flux of images can bid us to new forms of knowledge and communication, like those of the neurodivergent who trouble not just images but 'the hidden assumption of normalcy underpinning communicative ethics'.⁶

The ethical import of troubled images is unpredictable in terms of where, how, for whom, and how long they might provoke actions and responses in many forms. They are considered transitory, sustained, diffuse, or more urgent in response to the uneven forms of affect they mobilise, making different claims on our care, moral outrage, or commitment to protest and campaign. The spectacle of troubled images subsumes the ethical in a succession of shifting affects, rendering some lives and particular bodies more 'mournable' or 'grievable' than others.⁷ Nowhere is this more apparent, Bruce Buchan argues in this special issue, than in the perpetual insecurity projected as the unquestioned backdrop to pervasive images of militarised and militant securitization.

Together, the essays in this special issue help us to mark out a terrain for further investigation. What is at issue is not simply the mediation and mediatisation of the social world by the flow of images, heightened in this digital age, but the ethical demands placed upon us as consumers, witnesses, facilitators and producers of this flow. New ways have to be found to enable us to navigate the sea of proliferating troubled images of violence, marginality, victimization and death by paying closer attention to the framing of images, to what is excluded, to the aestheticisation of suffering, and to its embodiment. Above all, in the spectrum of troubled images new possibilities have to be found to turn suffering spectacle into the medium for the inter-subjective embodiment of virtue, citizenship and democracy. To these ends, this special issue is intended as a contribution and a provocation to further scholarly enquiry and debate.

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