Chapter 9
Bearing Witness through Technology:
War and Visual Culture in a Converged World

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ABSTRACT

The convergence of technologies brings a two-fold phenomenon into our technologically mediated world. Firstly, mobile technologies have enabled the recording of war and conflict by bystanders who can then transmit their recordings to the wider world through the Internet. Secondly, this form of bearing witness creates a proliferation of images of suffering leading to a new visual economy that invites new types of spectatorship which reconfigure events and integrate them into mainstream and niche media platforms. This chapter argues that the aestheticization of suffering is a dominant and integral part of our culture and new media technologies illuminate and offer new ways to both engage with and commodify suffering. The commodification of suffering on video-streaming platforms on the Internet results in spaces of perverse obsession with pain and suffering but also performative counter-sites which offer different ways to record and narrate human suffering beyond the vantage point of mainstream media.

INTRODUCTION

Kevin Carter's photograph of a starving emaciated Sudanese toddler stalked by a vulture whilst trying to make her way to a feeding camp won him a Pulitzer Prize in 1994. The picture caused immense controversy when it was published in the *New York Times* and subsequently the world over. As an iconic image conveying the depths of poverty in Africa it invited global spectatorship but equally it ignited debates on the ethics of photography. Ironically, the vulture came to symbolize the photographer aestheticizing a horrific image of suffering in the practice of his craft. The worldwide gaze and criticism of the image may have contributed to Carter's suicide a few months after the release of the picture. Nevertheless the image provided a platform for raising awareness of the poverty in Africa and the vulnerability of the children in such conditions. Inevitably it also

reopened traditional debates about the 'ethics of gaze' and the morality of spectatorship in conditions of suffering.

The aesthetics of suffering occupies a tenuous ethical terrain both in art history and in philosophical discussions of the human condition in relation to our relentless obsession with and pull towards images which depict suffering. Undeniably, the history of human civilization can be depicted by images of death, disaster, war, terror, starvation, disease and countless other tragedies which often become the vehicle to authenticate history and memory. The visual image occupies a space of double subjugation. It denotes both the vantage point of the person who captures the image and equally the secondary 'gaze' of those who consume it and ascribe to it new meanings and values. This double subjugation, along with the problematics of representation and its association with memory and history, often politicizes the image as a value-laden artefact that can thwart reality and realism through the mediation of technology and the ethics of gaze.

Both mobile technologies and the convergence of technologies, which incorporate visuals, sounds and the ability to communicate, interact and publish on a global platform like the Internet, have created the possibilities for new forms of consumption. The ability to record and store images and sound and to upload them on the Internet enables civilians to become image creators when events happen across the globe. The act of recording through mobile technologies and the ability to circulate images across the world craft new rituals in event creation where the bystander, through the act of recording, bears witness through technology. This material act of bearing witness through technology unleashes a new form of moral economy where the images of suffering captured through convergent technologies convey new visibilities where the civilian gaze can narrate events, without the mediation of newsmakers, onto multimedia platforms which can potentially invite non-stop viewing from audiences around the globe.

The civilian bystander equipped with mobile technology becomes an instrument of intervention in representing suffering away from the vantage point of the entrenched media and established newsmakers. The proximity of the gaze enabled through mobile and convergent technologies reconfigures the well-established relationship between news producers and audience. The appropriation of suffering away from the established storytellers heralds the formation of a new image economy where the proliferation of user-generated content is enabling new engagement with suffering and different ways to narrate and publicize it to the world. Multimedia platforms (which enable the upload of images and sounds) beyond creating new forms of visibility elicit new ways to engage with suffering. Often images of suffering become commodified with video streaming portals such as YouTube and additionally become integrated as data into search engines which organize images into a coded archive of information enabling audiences to search and consume through the click of a mouse. This commodification of visuals (whether still or moving) has consequences for both the aestheticization of suffering and our moral engagements with consuming suffering as new forms of visual entertainment often disembedded from its context.

This paper analyses this politics of creation and consumption of suffering where the omnipresent gaze of the technologically mediated mobile body captures events on the move and stages them for worldwide consumption. The consumption of war, conflict and suffering then occupy a liminal world between pleasure and taboo which invite consideration of both the moral and ethical paradigms as well as the political interventions we can make through the consumption of these images. The multimedia platforms which enable new ways of bearing witness through technology and the ability to create 'media events' raise issues of aesthetics, cognitive distance or proximity as well as our ability to empathize and relate to human suffering.

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