

Shards that Make your Fingers Bleed

Fragmentos que hacen sangrar los dedos

NATALIA BOTONAKI

PhD Candidate, Departamento de Humanidades: Filosofía,
Lengua y Literatura de la Universidad Carlos III de Madrid
nbotonak@hum.uc3m.es

Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3208-1605>

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Resumen

Este artículo aborda el tema de este volumen de múltiples maneras, dando fe de la potencia de la «intermedialidad» en la escritura académica filosófica y política. La intermedialidad puede adoptar muchas formas y puede examinarse tanto en términos de su pérdida como de su posible recuperación. El artículo parte de una preocupación teórica por los espacios intermedios entre dos importantes corrientes del canon filosófico continental que a veces se presentan como mutuamente contradictorias: la teoría crítica y las teorías del afecto. Trata de dilucidar los puntos de contacto entre ambas, y las formas en que pueden complementarse cuando se aplican al estudio de los medios digitales y a la forma en que se han incorporado a las estrategias de movilización. Su objeto de investigación es el modo en que se ha diezariado de forma continua a la población palestina por parte de las Fuerzas de Defensa israelíes, y el modo en que se ha transmitido a la autora a través de medios digitales.

Palabras clave: *Estética, giro afectivo, teoría crítica, reproducibilidad, sinestesia.*

Abstract

This article engages with the theme of this volume in multiple ways, attesting to the potency of “in-betweenness” in philosophical and political academic writing. In-betweenness can take many shapes and can be examined in terms of its loss as well as in terms of a possible recuperation of it. The article parts from a theoretical concern with the spaces in-between two important strands within the continental canon of philosophy which are sometimes presented as mutually contradictory: critical theory and theories of affect. It seeks to elucidate the points of contact between the two, and the ways in which they can complement each other when applied to the study of digital media and the way they have become incorporated in mobilization strategies. Its object of investigation is the ongoing decimation of the Palestinian population by the Israeli Defence Forces, and the way this has been transmitted to the writer over the course of the past year.

Keywords: *Aesthetics, affective turn, critical theory, reproducibility, synaesthetics..*

1. Setting the stage

From October 7th, 2023 to the time of writing (June 2024) and editing (October 2024), my Instagram feed has been saturated with images of the ongoing war between Israel and Gaza which quickly turned into an attack on the Palestinian and now Lebanese population *en masse*. Faced with such content, and increasingly shocked by the discrepancy between what international organisations are advising¹ and the actions taken by Israel as well as the countries arming it, directly or indirectly, there is a need to return to some questions concerning the role that reproducible images of violence play in contemporary politics – and specifically, in processes of politicization of the masses. Not quite an academic article, this essay is also a reflection on how we – both in the specific sense of the academic community and in the broader sense of citizens or people – in the Global North, are being (un)affected by what the Palestinian UN Ambassador called the “most documented genocide in history”². By (un)affected, I am referring to the ways in which many of us oscillate between an overwhelming sense of implication and responsibility and a practical distance which brings with it a “fading out” of the events and of the images we come across as they become indistinguishable against the background of a collage of suffering and misery that is constantly taking place, or that has been historically taking place for decades, centuries, etc. However, this does not stop me from trying to offer a critical look on certain concerns and hopes about the role new technologies play in “processes of politicization from below”³ in the 21st century. I will be engaging with Walter Benjamin’s renowned essay on technological reproducibility through Susan Buck-Morss’s rather unique reading of it⁴. Theoretically speaking, I am interested in the ways in which Buck-Morss’s insight on the implications of Benjamin’s work creates room for a potential conversation between aspects of critical theory and theories emerging within the spectrum of the “affective turn” of academia.

¹ Most notably, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) declared on January 2024, that Palestinians had a right to be protected from acts of genocide.

² *Gaza Is ‘Most Documented Genocide in History’, Says Palestinian UN Rep*, Aljazeera, 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/program/newsfeed/2024/7/17/gaza-is-most-documented-genocide-in-history-says-palestinian-un-rep#:~:text=%E2%80%9CWhat%20is%20happening%20in%20Gaza,meeting%20on%20the%20Middle%20East.>

³ I use this term instead of “protest”, “mobilization” or “activism” for a number of reasons. As far as this article is concerned, it allows us to discuss protest events which take place on and off-line, in different parts of the world, by actors differentially engaged in movement politics, and with different political/ideological backgrounds while also suggesting that these are forming a hybrid but potentially cohesive political identity for participants.

⁴ Susan Buck-Morss, ‘Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin’s Artwork Essay Reconsidered’, *October* 62, no. Autumn (1992): 3–41. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/778700.pdf>

Due to the ongoing nature of the war, it has been difficult to isolate specific events to analyse. I have chosen as my main example the attack by the Israeli Defence Forces (hereafter IDF) on Rafah due to the response it generated on social media platforms where the hashtag #alleyesonrafah quickly emerged⁵. Nonetheless, I will also be referring to events which took place after said attack, when relevant. In the interest of the twofold aim of this essay, I have divided it into five thematic segments, including this introductory one; I have taken some liberties with the titles of said segments, as can be easily observed, in the interest of elucidating the (syn)aesthetic implications of their content. In segments two and three I consider the role of images of war, violence, and suffering in the digital era and introduce the ways in which Buck-Morss's thesis regarding anaesthetization/synaestheticization will be relevant to this essay. I also engage with Susan Sontag and Judith Butler's insightful work on the potential and limitations that images of war have, when it comes to mobilizing people against it. The fourth segment is written from the point of view of a participant observer and is composed of reflections which have emerged from my participation in a variety of protest events over the course of the past few months. In the fifth and final segment I conclude by opening a possible path towards further developing the affinities between critical theory and Benjamin more specifically, with elements found within the affective turn, by focusing on how tactics of resistance could be found in the tactile relationship developed between user and the touch-screen technology which dominates most "smart" devices.

2. All Eyes on Rafah

The IDF launched two separate attacks on Rafah in May 2024. The first took place on the 26th and consisted of two air strikes on the Kuwaiti Peace Camp for internally displaced people, killing 36 and injuring over a hundred; the second happened on the 28th, and was a land operation involving firing tank shells at a location designated by the IDF as a "humanitarian zone", and resulted in 23 deaths and unknown number of injuries⁶. These attacks gave rise to some of the most horrific footage of the war to that day, including the harrowing image of a man holding up the burned and decapitated body of a small child. As this audiovisual material began to circulate, a new hashtag emerged on social media platforms: #AlleyesonRafah. What is the precise content of this demand/command? All eyes

⁵ While my main source of material is the platform Instagram much of the material appearing on it originally appeared on X/Twitter or TikTok; as such I am refraining from naming Instagram specifically, except for occasions when this is deemed necessary for reasons of clarity.

⁶ N/A, Amnesty International, 7 August 2024, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/08/israel-opt-israeli-attacks-targeting-hamas-and-other-armed-group-fighters-that-killed-scores-of-displaced-civilians-in-rafah-should-be-investigated-as-war-crimes/>.

on Rafah *and not elsewhere* is a plausible reading, particularly in light of concerns on the effect new digital technologies are having on our attentive capacity. This has been described in terms of reduced attention spans and a propensity towards what we could call “infinite distraction”⁷. Within a digital environment which offers seemingly infinite amounts of content, the hashtag serves as an index, organizing material and rendering it retrievable from the digital archives. In this sense, the hashtag invited users to access this archive, find out what was happening, and help spread the information. Additionally, it was presumed that this spreading of information could have been of practical use. I recall that on those days, there were posts which claimed that such material could be used in legal proceedings, alluding to the inclusion of social media content in the case made by South Africa at the ICJ. However, according to reliable news reports on the trial, the content that played a most important role or was most often referenced in the trial was not of victims of violence, but of perpetrators. From the point of view of national and international institutions, the violence of war is not considered criminal in itself; what the South African team needed to establish was the intent on behalf of the IDF to go further than “mere” war⁸.

It is not the legal practitioners or institutions that ought to be shown the images of devastation in order to respond then⁹, but rather we, citizens of the “Global North” who must open our eyes to what is being done with *our* taxpayers’ money, by *our* elected representatives, in *our* names and demand that it stops. Perhaps then the message of “all eyes on Rafah” is that in spite of the horror of these images, in spite of experiencing a saturation caused by witnessing so many many dead bodies, so much dispossession, and suffering, we must keep our eyes there. There is a deep-rooted belief that watching images of violence can produce an ethical shift and can effectively mobilize people in response to such horrors. However, and as can be implied by the imperative to keep looking, sharing and so forth, there are also significant limitations to what witnessing can achieve, or to how much of it can be effective. In *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Susan Sontag reflects on the trajectory of war photography in the US and Europe, suggesting that its development as a genre was partially motivated by the naïve belief that “if the horror could be made vivid enough, most people would finally take in the outrageousness, the insanity of war”¹⁰. Ernst Friedrich’s *War Against War!*, published in 1924, was an album

⁷ Dominic Pettman, *Infinite Distraction*, New York, Polity Press, 2016. Pettman’s argument is that distraction is *not* the most disconcerting effect of new media, but rather the orchestrated concentration of attention, an argument for which he is indebted to the work of Jonathan Crary.

⁸ Ryan Grim, ‘South Africa Just Made Its Case at The Hague. What’s Next?’, *The Intercept*, 11 January 2024.

⁹ As [so and so notes] there is also little guarantee that such footage would be sufficient proof. We do not have enough space to fully develop this argument however it is worth mentioning.

¹⁰ Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, New York, Picador, 2003., p. 14.

composed mostly of photographs recovered from military and medical archives showing “dead soldiers belonging to the various armies putrefying in heaps on fields and roads and in the front-line trenches”¹¹; the book was “denounced by the [German] government and by veterans’ and other patriotic organizations” and “acclaimed by left-wing writers, artists, and intellectuals, as well as by the constituencies of the numerous antiwar leagues [who predicted] the book would have a decisive influence on public opinion”¹². In 1938 another medium was put to use – one with enhanced capacity to capture the horror of war in vivid detail; French director Abel Gance released his film *J’Accuse* which “featured in close-up some of the mostly hidden population of hideously disfigured ex-combatants”¹³, and ended with a sequence which repeated Friedrich’s desperate, yet hopeful, demand: “Fill your eyes with this horror! It is the only thing that can stop you!”¹⁴. However, and perhaps for the same reason that audiovisual footage is often insufficient evidence in a court of law, none of these works succeeded in preventing a second devastating war from taking place shortly after their publication.

It is almost at the same time that Walter Benjamin published the “Work of Art” essay first in German, 1935, then in French in 1936, and finally a revised German version, after receiving Adorno’s criticism, in 1939. Much can and has been said about the article, but for the time being let us focus on one of the most fundamental claims Benjamin makes: that, in the process of its technological reproduction the work of art loses its aura and, “in permitting the reproduction to reach the viewer in his or her own situation, it actualizes that which is reproduced”¹⁵. With regards to artworks, and in the context of Benjamin’s more Brechtian phase, this assertion points to a very hopeful and politically potent future for reproductive technologies. However, the essay ends with an ultimatum, a form which Benjamin seldom deploys¹⁶, where he points to the potential violence dormant in these technologies: we must resist the fascist move of an aestheticization of politics, by politicizing aesthetics. We can easily agree with the bitter observation that we have become capable of taking aesthetic pleasure in our own destruction, and, if we are so politically inclined, that this is related to an ongoing process of self-alienation. Buck-Morss’s innovative interpretation rests on the claim that in order to make

¹¹ Ibid., p. 15.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., p. 16.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility [First Version]”, trans. Jennings, Michael W., *Grey Room* Spring, n. 39, 2010, pp. 11–38, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27809424>, p. 14.

¹⁶ This prompts some of his interpreters to consider this a “lapse” and thus diminish the importance of the essay for projects which seek to elucidate a proper philosophy from his work; see for example Caygill, Howard. *Walter Benjamin: The Colour of Experience*. London, New York, Routledge, 1998.

sense of the alternative Benjamin offers in his conclusion, we must attend to a change of the “constellation in which his conceptual terms (politics, art, aesthetics) are deployed, and hence [a change of] their meaning”¹⁷. Through an elaborate and poetic investigation in technological developments which act on our senses, she gradually argues that we must retrieve an understanding of aesthetics which foregrounds it as “indispensable to the self-preservation of both the individual and the social group”¹⁸. How might such a change be achieved?

3. The infrastructure of horror and its mediation

Judith Butler’s work on grievability offers itself as a segway before we continue to work with Buck-Morss. For Butler the change is an ethical one and it happens when we manage to have a visceral and then emotional response to the mediatically reproduced horror and suffering of the other. In *Frames of War* she observes that “it would be a mistake to think that we only need to find the right and true images” in order to convey the reality of unfolding horror, and be ethically summoned to stop the suffering taking place¹⁹. Instead, we must attend to how “normative schemes of intelligibility establish what will and will not be human, what will be a liveable life, what will be a grievable death”, schemes which operate through a production of “symbolic identification of the face with the inhuman” and through “radical effacement [which creates the illusion] that there never was a human”²⁰. Shock is deployed in these processes, as in the “shock and awe” strategy of the USA in Iraq, when an abundance of audiovisual material of the attacks was reproduced in order to glorify attacks on a mostly noncombatant population, to render said population inhuman and, in Butler’s parlance, ungrievable. Comparing this to the responses elicited by the audiovisual records of the Vietnam War, Butler insists that the core difference lies in that these were “pictures we were not supposed to see”, whose importance lay not in their “graphic effectivity” but to their ability to point “somewhere else, beyond themselves, to a life and to a precariousness that they could not show”²¹. It is images which work as indices to a negated reality that have the capacity to move us, she claims. The “openness” of social media platforms, meaning the fact that anyone with a device and a connection to the internet can access them and introduce material into them, renders them potentially central to such efforts.

¹⁷ Buck-Morss, ‘Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin’s Artwork Essay Reconsidered’, p. 5.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 6.

¹⁹ Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, London, New York, Verso, 2004, p. 146.

²⁰ Ibid., pp. 146-147.

²¹ Ibid., p. 150.

The footage disseminated across a variety of social media over the course of the past year, is recorded by Gazans themselves, and serves as an implicit response to dehumanizing reporting by mainstream media, similar to that which Butler described in her work on war²². Being able to transmit their own records of the devastation, the indexical function is heightened as the material does not only point to an unravelling event, but also to the hand “holding the camera or the cell phone, face-to-face with those they oppose, unprotected, injurable, injured”²³. Technical reproducibility in the time of the smartphone, further accentuates the ways in which the means available do not have merely a reproductive function, but rather produce subjects where hegemonic structures erase them. However, for this indexical function to have an effect, we must overcome shock. Another aspect of #AlleyesonRafah and the urgency with which it transmits its message, has to do with what many social media users experienced by scrolling through so many images and videos of violence and devastation. At some point, the constant apparition of horror and devastation on our screens, screens we hold in a single hand while engaging in a number of activities with the rest of our body becomes so jarring that we must succumb, either to despair and depression or to defeat and acceptance. This is the effect of shock, which Buck-Morss argues was central to Benjamin’s “understanding of modern experience [as] neurological”²⁴. For Benjamin the shock that Freud was identifying among soldiers returned from the fronts and trenches of World War I was the experience of modernity *par excellence* as the technology created an environment which “exposes the human sensorium to physical shocks that have their correspondence in psychic shock, as Baudelaire’s poetry bears witness”²⁵. Thus, a process of *anaesthetization* is put in motion. For Buck-Morss what this process does is it acts in such a way that the *synaesthetic system*, which translates perception into experience through connecting it to sense memories of the past, has its purpose *reversed* and begins to numb the organism to protect it.

It is through this formulation that we can begin to see the potential overlap between critical theory and the affective. Buck-Morss’s emphasis on a synaesthetic system, challenges subject-centred philosophy, albeit without entirely undoing it. Her “neurological” reading suggests that, rather than searching for dyadic structu-

²² I cannot go in full detail, however, it has been repeatedly pointed out that news outlets such as CNN, BBC and newspapers such as *The Guardian* repeatedly use the passive voice to describe the killing of Palestinians, naturalizing their deaths. An open letter was published to denounce such practices prior to the current phase of the war and is available here. <https://medialetterpalestine.medium.com/an-open-letter-on-u-s-media-coverage-of-palestine-d51cad42022d>. A second open letter published in November, 2024 is available here <https://www.protect-journalists.com/>

²³ Judith Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, Cambridge, London, Harvard University Press, 2015, p. 92.

²⁴ Buck-Morss, ‘Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin’s Artwork Essay Reconsidered’, p. 16.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 16-17.

res of message/receiver we must attend to the already plural aspect of any aesthetic experience, by observing how both receiver and object form part of a synaesthetic network which connects cognition, sensory perception and world. This bears more than a passing resemblance to the way Chiara Bottici describes transindividuality. Botticci points out that in the Spinozist proposal of transindividuality, “[h]uman beings are nothing but particularly complex individuals resulting from movements of attraction or repulsion” which is to say “they are not given entities, but rather processes, webs of affective relations, which are never given once and for all”²⁶. Thus there is a subversion of certain normative interpretations of the relationship between world and human, which in turn have political consequences by disrupting structures which pose “the social versus the individual”²⁷. While essential for a radical reappraisal of shared vulnerability, grievability and so on, there is risk with this formulation as it may obfuscate the differential of power and influence which exists within such networks. Simon Mussel claims that some theorists working with affect go so far as to “vehemently” [...] refuse all relation and social mediation” thus neglecting the role that “conflicts, struggles, and contradictions of life under the baleful totality of capitalism”²⁸ have in the formation of such networks. It is precisely because of such risks that critical theory in general, and Benjamin’s work in particular, may be a useful complement to theories which seek to foreground the ontological component of our inherent interconnectivity as living beings. Bearing this in mind, we can hopefully come to see some further consequences of Benjamin’s artwork essay. His explicit reference to fascism in the Artwork essay points to the way specific political (and economic) forces, act upon the process of reproducibility, interfering with what might amount to its quasi-utopian potential. This potential could be said to remain dormant within the relationship between technology and humans, but not in a way that necessarily implies its emergence; neither in a way that relies solely on the infinite contact points between the two. There still exist in an undeniable force acting on it, imposing limits or otherwise shaping its effects. What might be proven useful and politically potent however, is to understand how the violence within (and perhaps on) mediation and the violence directed against humans, are all part of the same operation. Consider the following: the organization Access Now produced a report of the internet shut-downs in Gaza since October 7th; among other findings, the report suggests that “outages across Gaza resulted from direct attacks on civilian telecommunications infrastructure (including cell towers, fiber optic cables, and ISP offices), restrictions on access to electricity (through infrastructure attacks, denial of service, and bloc-

²⁶ Chiara Botticci, *Anarchafeminism*, London, UK: Bloomsbury, 2022, p. 128.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 130

²⁸ Simon Mussel, *Critical Theory and Feeling: The Affective Politics of the Early Frankfurt School*, Manchester, UK., Manchester University Press, 2017, p. 185.

kading of fuel required to run generators), and technical disruptions to telecommunications services”²⁹. One of the biggest telecommunication service providers in Gaza, PalTel, released an announcement on October 27 informing users that “all telecommunication services, including landline, mobile, and internet have been lost [...] due to the continuous intensive bombardment that caused cutting off all remaining fiber routes that connect Gaza to the rest of the world”³⁰. Other reports point to the undoing of journalism in the strip, by means of attacks on members of the press. On February 1st, the UN’s media centre condemned the IDF’s attacks on journalism in Gaza in a press release, which featured reports of their independent experts according to which by that date over 122 journalists and media workers had been killed and dozens of Palestinian journalists had been detained; furthermore, harassment, intimidation and attacks on them had proliferated³¹. Another international organization, the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), is currently exploring the toll on Gazan journalists and as of June 7th (2024) confirms the death of 108 journalists and media workers (including two Israelis and three Lebanese), 32 reported injured, 2 reported missing and 44 reported arrested, with 33 of them still under arrest at the time of the report’s release³².

The above series of associations seeks to make an epistemological claim about the need for affect and critical theory to work in conjunction. Affect theory tends to foreground the ontological dimension of our networked existence in the world and theorists such as Bottici appear to suggest that this has immediate political implications. I wish to suggest instead that for the political dimension to emerge, and so as not to succumb to utopian speculation which fails to attend to the present in its often harrowing realities, we must remain engaged with certain theoretical pathways forged in the 19th and 20th centuries. Materialism of the historical vein remains pertinent, as does critique. To echo Ernst Junger, as does Sontag in her aforementioned work, but with a slight twist, we could say: the bombs which decimate the population of Gaza, are the same bombs which decimate the infrastructure necessary for this catastrophe to be recorded. The synaesthetic network is composed of bodies and technological means of production and reproduction which are deployed for destruction and for the manipulation of the ways in which this is perceived. The funding of these bombs, often comes from the same institutions

²⁹ Marwa Fatafta et al., ‘Palestine Unplugged: How Israel Disrupts Gaza’s Internet’ (Access Now, 10 November 2023), <https://www.accessnow.org/publication/palestine-unplugged/>.

³⁰ *Idem*.

³¹ N/A, ‘Gaza: UN Experts Condemn Killing and Silencing of Journalists’, Office of the High Commissioner, United Nations, 1 February 2024, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2024/02/gaza-un-experts-condemn-killing-and-silencing-journalists>.

³² N/A, ‘Journalist Casualties in the Israel-Gaza War’ (Committee to Protect Journalists, 17 October 2024), <https://cpj.org/2024/06/attacks-arrests-threats-censorship-the-high-risks-of-reporting-the-israel-hamas-war/> ; <https://cpj.org/2024/06/journalist-casualties-in-the-israel-gaza-conflict/>.

or enterprises which then fund media outlets, in order to ensure that what reaches is rendered unrecognizable. And even further, as the network reveals itself, it is often that same technological infrastructure, deployed for the purposes of annihilation, that sustains these devices we scroll on, through which we are shocked into numbness which we may be momentarily overcome. The effects this can have for a politicisation of the masses will be assessed once they have become part of history. In what follows I will be making some suggestions about what they may be, further pursuing the implications of a synaesthetic experience of the world as seen against the background of a transindividualist ontology.

4. Solidarity Ltd.

One underlying message of #AlleyesonRafah and the demand that we watch and share footage of the devastation there, is that it can jolt us out of our apathy and inspire grief and outrage capable of mobilizing *us*, citizens of western democracies, to wield our power and demand from our governments to either stop participating in the war or make use of legal and institutional mechanisms, such as embargos or sanctions, which will presumably oblige Israel to stop it. While impactful actions have taken place I consider that we ought to think of expressions of solidarity less as a means to stop the war and more as a way to publicly come to terms with the end of the fantasy of an enlightened West. The violent suppression of peaceful sit-ins of major US universities, the draconian (and severely disconcerting) legal measures taken by countries such as Germany to limit people's ability to protest the decimation of Palestine, ultimately point away from Palestine, and toward our own flawed political systems. Once again, we are asked to watch and disseminate material recording these events, but the index now refers us back to our own, less violent, but nonetheless real and urgent, predicament. While this might have salutary effects by animating us to engage in serious political contestation of policing, corruption or outright lying in politics, and so on, it also often results in a personification of issues (so and so politician is at fault), or in an otherwise overtly abstract approximation (it's capitalism)³³ and neither seems like sufficient response to what we are witnessing.

On May 1st, in the context of the student occupations of US campuses, I came across a post, originally appearing on X, on my Instagram feed. The post has a photograph which appears to show men gathered in protest, holding signs in Arabic, as well as larger banner showing a white police officer arresting a protester wearing

³³ This is not meant to suggest that historical-materialism is no longer useful as a critical tool; however, it *is* meant to indicate a fatigue with the insistence on there only being *one* possible course of political action, particularly in the current shape that global capitalism has taken.

a *keffiyah*, and is emblazoned with the words “they can arrest you, but they can never break your spirit!”. The caption above this image reads as follows: “In a surprising turn of events, Arabs are now sharing their support for the America Spring.” Whether or not the image is real or has been tampered with is unknown, as is the original creator of this meme – hence my inability to credit them. However, that is not significant since it circulated its way into my hands, in Madrid, and must thus have traversed other corners of the international community of social media platform users. What appears to be the message – a message which can be ironic or sincere – is that those in whose name we (the citizens of the Global North) once protested, those to whose fights for just democracy we were expressing solidarity a bit over a decade ago, are now compelled to stand in solidarity with us, outraged by the state of our decaying democracies.

A lot more can be said about this meme, but what I want to focus on is the naivete of its premise – namely that the state of “our” democracies is not intimately linked with the fraught and bloody politics which have given shape to the Arab world as we have come to know it. The meme upholds an us/them division, separating the two, abstractly recognizing international solidarity as the only possible connection between them. Through it, the naivete of solidarity itself emerges. While as political subjects in the Global North we assume the role of politically emancipated and thus responsible and powerful agents as compared to the homogeneous “Arabs” this meme conjures from its imagination, we are being forced to acknowledge that our political power is depressingly limited, especially when international affairs are concerned. As the world knocks on our smartphone screens and screams are heard amidst our incessant scrolling, we must recognize the need to rethink what it means to be parts of a networked world. One (Marxist) response would be the imperative to organize; however, it appears that this is not happening – not in the scale necessary for it to take effect. In the meantime, more horror will ensue, and we will continue to watch it until we gradually come to experience it first hand.

Tactic/Tactile³⁴

I would contend that in order to grapple with what we have been witnessing – and the numerous other occasions when such horrors have unfolded before our eyes over the course of the 20th century – we must lean into the affective without sacrificing our capacity to view how certain structures of power and influence continue to act on us and shape our capacity to perceive the world and act within it. When it comes to suffering in particular, a rational and structured understanding of what drives it is essential but also insufficient. Referring to the diaries of a surgeon who worked as a field doctor performing amputations, Buck-Morss highlights how he speaks of having experienced “an ‘excess’ of sentiment’ [which is not to be confused with] emotionalism”³⁵; rather, she claims, it was “physiological – a sensory mimesis, a response of the nervous system to external stimuli which was ‘excessive’ because what he apprehended was *unintentional*, in the sense that it resisted intellectual comprehension”³⁶. The tendency to respond to the suffering of others is suppressed or undone by processes of rationalization which act as an anaesthetic upon us. At the same time as we have become more open to matters concerning mental health, we are also insisting that the problem lays within individuals or within dyadic relationships of abuser/abused, harmed subject/offender, perpetrator/victim and so on and neglect the intrinsically networked causes and effects of harm, abuse, and violence. Buck-Morss’ points out that our capacity to experience some part of another’s suffering, produces the response of rationalistic anaestheticization – something I assume we can all attest to, even if we might want to contest the theoretical formulation. As we become more exposed to such suffering, we might become more adept at becoming numb to it, to unknown social, psychological and political effect.

Perhaps however, there is something to be rescued from our current technosocial moment. Tobias Wilke also turns to Benjamin’s reproducibility essay and rescues

³⁴ I would like to point out that when presenting this paper at a seminar of the investigation project, it was kindly pointed out to me that *haptic* is what best describes our relationship with touch screens. I have not been able to delve into the differences between the two terms, however, in lieu of a proper response I would like to offer the following piece of information, in defence of my insistence to use this term in spite of its implausibility. Curious about the phonetic similarity between *tactile* and *dactyle* (from the Greek *dáktylos* meaning finger) I came across an entry in the Merriam-Webster dictionary which references P. Chantraine’s *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue grecque* in which Chantraine alludes to a proposed connection between *dáktylos* and the Germanic verb represented by Old Norse *taka*, “to seize, grasp”, and the Gothic *tekan*, “to touch”. Bearing this in mind, I contend that the association between *tactility* and the touch screen is apt although further research would be needed to confirm said hypothesis.

³⁵ Buck-Morss, ‘Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin’s Artwork Essay Reconsidered’, p. 15.

³⁶ *Idem*.

from it a detail that was nearly lost³⁷. In the original German versions of the text, when talking about architecture Benjamin writes that “[b]uildings are received in a twofold manner: by use and by perception. Or, better, tactilely [*taktisch*] and optically. There is at present no concept for such reception so long as one imagines it according to the kind of aggregate reception that is typical, for example, of a traveller before a famous building. On the tactical side, there is no counterpart to what contemplation is on the optical side”³⁸. Wilke points out that the word *taktisch* was considered an error by the editors of his *Gesammelte Schriften* who, in correcting it, obfuscated a crucial aspect of his argument. *Taktisch* “combines the two very different meanings of ‘tactical’ and ‘tactile’ into a single, ambiguous whole”³⁹. What Wilke’s discovery suggests is that the tactility that Benjamin evokes when talking about it as a mode of perception can have tactical function. The statement that there is no direct counterpart of for contemplation, thus points towards a possible future. Are there any potential modalities and forms of political action and organization to be found in the time of the smartphone that we need to pay attention to? Sontag claimed that a “more reflective engagement with content would require a certain intensity of awareness – just what is weakened by the expectations brought to images disseminated by the media, whose leach out of content contributes most to the deadening of feelings”⁴⁰. We must, I believe, search for a type of awareness that allows us to overcome these debilitating expectations of visibilization, and a *tactic* to engage with them politically.

It may just be that the touchscreen is the technology capable of performing the task of medium in the sense that, according to Tobias Wilke, Benjamin used the term long before it became a term associated with the media as we today mean it. For Benjamin, says Wilke, “the medium names the comprehensive force field that links human sensorium to world and that is constituted in doing so by the interplay between natural (physiological, physical) and historical (social, technological, and aesthetic) factors”⁴¹. In this formulation of Benjaminian “media” these emerge as pre-existing bridges between those aspects of the affective and the critical we have been trying to argue are complementary and necessary for each other. Benjamin noted the importance of habit for tactile/tactic reception; while many of us have become very accustomed to carrying devices such as the smartphone, our habits have so far been dictated to us. Perhaps a first step is to realize that these handheld devices, are often held by hands recording a war that is experienced in the present,

³⁷ Tobias Wilke, ‘Tacti(ca)Lity Reclaimed: Benjamin’s Medium, the Avant-Garde, and the Senses’, *Grey Room* Spring, no. 39, 2010, pp. 39-56, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27809425>.

³⁸ Benjamin, ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility [First Version]’, p. 33.

³⁹ Wilke, ‘Tacti(ca)Lity Reclaimed: Benjamin’s Medium, the Avant-Garde, and the Senses’, p. 41.

⁴⁰ Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, p. 82.

⁴¹ Wilke, ‘Tacti(ca)Lity Reclaimed: Benjamin’s Medium, the Avant-Garde, and the Senses’, p. 40.

made by the hands of exploited workers, and the minerals in them are mined by the subaltern who we hardly ever hear about; and further that the world which is transmitted to us through our screens, is being compromised by the very technologies which allow for the transmission, as vast amount of energy are consumed for its upkeep. Neither rationality nor sensibility alone can help us navigate the present and encounter a political plan to drive it away from catastrophe. The ontological and/or the affective element in theory help us recover the force of an ethical imperative to sustain and protect our networked existence; the critical element elucidates the ways in which such networks often produce complex and violent hierarchies which must be resisted and dismantled. If, as Wilke suggests, Benjamin used the term *taktisch* to remind us of the imperative to remain aware of the tactical potential dormant in (syn)aesthetic perception, perhaps it would not be wholly unwise to search for it in those interfaces with which we physically as well as cognitively and emotionally engage with daily. Perhaps, it is worth it to pursue an examination of the effects of technological mediation in the era of the smartphone not only in terms of the potency or lack thereof of the images transmitted (or of their reality, authenticity, credibility, spectacular nature and so forth) but rather in terms of the ways they may be mapped onto complex networks with which we are implicated at a corporeal and economic-political level.

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