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Seeing All Evil: The Global Cruelty of Digital Visibility

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Cruelty is a historical constant across world politics. Nonetheless, something has changed. Today, it is possible to observe death, massacre, torture, police brutality, terrorist attacks, drone strikes, and more, in high-definition video. Sometimes, we can watch live. In this article, I ask what it means when the historical sanitization of cruelty, injustice, and violence is stripped away. I do so in three ways. First, I explore how digital media has transformed how knowledge of violence is produced, circulates, and affects those who witness it. I focus in particular on how this visibility of cruelty affectively fractures our ontological security, undermines societal solidarity, and amplifies polarization. Second, I describe how this process is marked by substantive global inequalities vis-à-vis who is "protected" (or not) from exposure to graphic imagery. Third, I ground my discussion empirically through participant observation conducted with members of the militia group Hezbollah that focused on their emotional, affective, discursive, and political reactions to watching videos circulating on social media depicting members of their own group committing war crimes in Syria. The article concludes by dwelling on the worrying possible political futures these dynamics appear to be opening up.

La cruauté est une constante historique dans l'ensemble de la politique mondiale. Néanmoins, quelque chose a changé. Aujourd'hui, il est possible d'observer les décès, les massacres, les tortures, les brutalités policières, les attaques terroristes, les frappes de drones, et bien plus encore, en vidéos haute définition. Parfois, nous pouvons même les regarder en direct. Dans cet article, je me suis interrogé sur la signification de l'élimination de l'aseptisation historique de la cruauté, de l'injustice et de la violence. Je l'ai fait de trois manières. J'ai d'abord exploré la manière dont les médias numériques ont transformé la façon dont la connaissance de la violence est produite, circule et affecte ceux qui en sont témoins. Je me suis en particulier concentré sur la façon dont cette visibilité de la cruauté fracture affectivement notre sécurité ontologique, mine la solidarité sociétale et amplifie la polarisation. J'ai ensuite décrit la manière dont ce processus était marqué par des inégalités mondiales substantielles vis-à-vis de qui était « protégé » (ou non) contre l'exposition à ces images. Enfin, j'ai fondé empiriquement ma discussion sur une observation participante menée auprès de membres de la milice du Hezbollah, qui s'est concentrée sur leurs réactions émotionnelles, affectives, discursives et politiques au visionnage de vidéos circulant sur les réseaux sociaux et montrant des membres de leur propre groupe commettant des crimes de guerre en Syrie. Mon article conclut en s'attardant sur les inquiétants futurs politiques possibles que cette dynamique semble ouvrir.

La crueldad es una constante histórica en la política mundial. Sin embargo, algunas cosas han cambiado. Hoy en día, podemos ver muertes, masacres, torturas, brutalidad policial, atentados terroristas, ataques con aviones no tripulados, etc., en video de alta definición. En ocasiones, podemos ver esto en vivo. En este artículo, se plantea lo que significa que se elimine la histórica higienización de la crueldad, la injusticia y la violencia. Esto se plantea de tres maneras. En primer lugar, se analiza cómo los medios digitales han transformado la forma en que se produce, se difunde y afecta el conocimiento de la violencia a quienes la presencian. Se centra sobre todo en cómo esta visibilidad de la crueldad rompe de manera afectiva nuestra seguridad ontológica, socava la solidaridad social y profundiza la polarización. En segundo lugar, se describe cómo este proceso está marcado por importantes desigualdades globales respecto a quién está "protegido" (o no) contra la exposición a las imágenes gráficas. En tercer lugar, este análisis se sustenta de manera empírica a través de la observación de participantes llevada a cabo con miembros del grupo miliciano Hezbolá, que se centró en sus reacciones emocionales, afectivas, discursivas y políticas tras ver los videos que circulan en las redes sociales y que muestran a miembros de su propio grupo cometiendo crímenes de guerra en Siria. En este artículo se concluye con una reflexión sobre los posibles e inquietantes futuros políticos que estas dinámicas parecen estar generando.

The law of the state, Pierre Clastres (1989, 178) once wrote, "annex[es] unforeseen places for its inscription." To exemplify this, he drew on Kafka's story *In the Penal Colony,* where a torture machine literally carves the sentence of a condemned prisoner into their body. While fictional, Clastres points to a real-world example of the Kafkaesque: the forced tattooing of Soviet prisoners of war "who bore… maxims engraved on their faces. Most frequently, their … foreheads carried in big letters: SLAVES OF KHRUSCHEV."

A message to be felt and seen.

In the summer of 2012, Clastres' discussion found another real-world exemplar: a YouTube video depicting a group of supposedly Shia Muslim Lebanese men forcibly tattooing the forehead of a (presumably, non-Shia) Syrian refugee with religious inscriptions.[1] In the video, the faces of the perpetrators are hidden as the voice of the man doing the inscribing speaks the following monologue:

> This is the father of Abdullah. This is Hussein, this is Hussein. If he [God] loves you, he will take you to

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[1] The video appeared on *YouTube* some time in 2012.

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> heaven. I'm trying to make a Muslim out of you. Not with the regime or against the regime. Tell those who sent you: "look what they've done to me!" Say this to them: "this is a message to those who hate Shia. They sent me to you alive saying, Father of Abdullah (Hussein) if you try to come close to us Shia, we will fuck your mothers …" Say "hi" to *al-Assir*.[2]

Another message to be felt and seen.

This distillation of archaic violence and novel technology, circulating horror globally, and its relation to rituals of societal belonging, is the subject of this article. Digital media platforms have radically extended our capacity to witness "horrific violence" (Duncombe 2020). In doing so, a modern historical shift in which state authorities and media organizations actively sought to hide images of violence from public view has been upended (Foucault 1979; Campbell 2004). Growing attention is thus now focused on how this visibility of violence is deployed as propaganda, generates transnational solidarity, produces emotional reactions, and provokes different government responses (Philpott 2005; Andén-Papadopoulos 2014; Crone 2014; Chouliaraki 2015; Friis 2015; Shepherd 2017; Schlag 2018; Adler-Nissen, Andersen, and Hansen 2020).

Building on those debates, this article has three interrelated goals. First, I seek to move beyond Eurocentric readings of these phenomena, which focus on the reactions of Europe and North America to images of violence. Although some argue that "horrific social media images of terrorist attacks outside the West are far less visible" (Duncombe 2020, 617), this is true *only to the "West" itself*, and understanding this status quo reveals profound inequalities vis-à-vis the level of protection afforded different global publics from exposure to such imagery. Second, in order to further this preoccupation with the unequal experience of the digital mediation of violence, I move away from a focus on "iconic" images (Hansen 2015). Given what is considered "iconic" is always contextually informed, such a focus typically remains Eurocentric and overlooks the quotidian circulation of a far greater number of "non-iconic" images of violence, especially in less-regulated digital environments. Finally, I explore the consequences of the *indiscriminate* nature of digital visibility. While violent videos may intend to send a "message" only to enemies ("*look what they've done to me*!"), digital technology renders them visible to *everyone*. Messages inscribed on bodies today can be seen by all: by the families of the harmed *and* those who harmed them, by the societies of the harmed *and* those of the harmers, by local *and* global publics. What, I thus ask, are the consequences of coming to see all evil?

By unpacking this unequal experience of the digital mediation of evil, this article aims to explore the sociopolitical "cruelty" of that inequality. I use cruelty in multiple senses. First, I refer to the etymological roots of cruelty in blood and physical violence. In the Latin, *cruor* is blood. This is cruelty at its crudest: the infliction of suffering upon bodies. While historians have traced how we have moved from "bloody cruelty to a cruelty without blood," this bloody cruelty has never truly disappeared (Rottenberg 2012, 154). What has vacillated is its visibility. Second, I use cruelty at a more general level (i.e., beyond physical violence) to describe the emotional, affective, and societal consequences of the variegated visibility or invisibility of "bloody" forms of political violence. Specifically, I speculate on how these dynamics lead to a viral fracturing of the ontological security of individuals and the collectives they comprise that risks calling into question the possibility of post-conflict reconciliation, solidifying sectarian boundaries, and accelerating global processes of sociopolitical "dismemberment" even as informational "unification" occurs (Beck 2005).

To reach those conclusions, the article takes an eclectic and speculative approach that reflects the uncertain and emergent state of our digital world. Specifically, the article proceeds in two main halves. The first begins by discussing how images (of suffering) affect (or not) individuals and society, before exploring how digital technologies have shifted those dynamics. I then foreground how these changes are structured by global hierarchies and inequalities. The second half of the paper anchors those discussions empirically by drawing on ethnographic fieldwork conducted with members of the militia group Hezbollah during the Syrian civil war. Drawing on the microsociological tools, I show the divisive affective consequences of the visibility of violence and the ways it risks fracturing the ontological security of societies. To do so, I explore the reaction of my informants to the aforementioned video as well as others that were circulated through social media and reached their eyes as they lounged about in cafés and other quotidian settings. The ways in which such videos of bloody cruelty infiltrate intimate, banal, and usually solidarity-producing spaces are argued to be particularly cruel consequences of the digital visibility of violence. The article concludes by exploring the worrying political "solipsism" (Fierke 2004) that this cruelty of visibility suggests for our collective futures.

The Image of Suffering

What do images do to us? This is an old question. At the advent of the motion picture, for instance, it was described how its visceral aesthetic qualities led audiences to be unable to distinguish between reality and the cinema screen: sometimes they screamed at the image of an oncoming train, thinking it real (Stoller 1997, 77). Less dramatically, this disjuncture between the reality and irreality of images still structures debates over their effects. Within international relations (IR), for instance, Bleiker (2001) shifted attention away from mimetic readings of the representational content of images (*the image of the train reflects the reality of the train*) toward their aesthetic functions (*the train's form evokes fear in context Y and boredom in context Z*). Here, the image is not a neutral signifier but an object invested with multiple situated meanings. Across IR, questions as to how images that relate to conflict, violence, and war gain such a multiplicity of meaning, affect human sentiment differently, and evoke (or not) sociopolitical change have been especially prominent.

Two elements have focused those inquiries. The first is a discussion over whether images of violence can evoke the public outrage and political will necessary to prevent the depicted horrors from continuing or if, instead, their proliferation results in compassion fatigue and a tendency to "look away" from violence (Sontag 2005). The fear is that images of violence might "function most directly to achieve what … [they] ought to have stifled—atrocity's normalization" (Zelizer 1998, 212). To understand this risk, focus is placed on sociologizing the *context* of visual mediation. As (Campbell 2004, 61) writes, how "photographs are used, and what context is chosen in which to deploy them, is vitally important." Such contextual factors include forms of cultural discrimination (i.e., racism) against the suffering of others as well as economies of "taste" (i.e., what is culturally acceptable to depict) and the intertextual relations—the "captions, titles, surrounding arguments

[2] Ahmed al-Assir was a Sunni Imam who led a terrorist group that carried out attacks against the Lebanese army.

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and sites for presentation"—within which images are socially framed (Campbell 2004, 61).

The fact that some images evoke immediate political change (viz. ISIS executions) and others disappear into nothingness (viz. images of the dead in Yemen) is intimately linked to those factors. For instance, Van Veeren (2011) describes the US military's careful curation of the visual regimes surrounding Guantanamo Bay in ways that minimized public controversy over the facility's existence. Indeed, this capacity to "control" images is central to the second focus of the IR literature, which stresses how political actors mobilize visual imagery strategically (Andén-Papadopoulos 2009; Stoehrel 2013). In some cases, this involves deploying images to justify the securitization of particular objects or others (Williams 2003; Hansen 2011, 2015). More generally, however, and following European and North American experiences in Vietnam and Iraq, governments have sought an "almost total disappearance of [images of] the dead" (Campbell 2004, 60).

This latter desire to invisible violence is linked to the capacity for images of horror to evoke strong emotional responses that can threaten the ontological security of individuals and groups in different ways. The aesthetic qualities of images appear to possess a unique albeit ambiguous capacity to affectively shape human beings, if context allows.[3] In this, they can act as "mechanisms that produce [or disrupt] moral solidarity [by] focusing, intensifying, and transforming emotions" (Collins 2004, 102). This is true across different levels. A growing literature in psychology, for example, describes the simultaneously desensitizing and traumatizing effect of sustained exposure to images of violence (e.g., De Choudhury, Monroy-Hernández, and Mark 2014). Moreover, to strengthen the point, it is worth noting that even *perpetrators* of violence must manage visual material carefully. For example, the following advice was given by the CIA to those about to view videotapes of its post-9/11 interrogations:

> Prepare for something not seen previously (USSSCI 2014, 45).

This preparation was necessary in light of the production of "strong feelings of futility" among those involved in the program and the "visually and psychologically very uncomfortable" effect of watching videos of CIA torture, including instances of "tears and choking up" (USSSCI 2014, 473). It was likely fear of the public's emotional response to these images that led the CIA, on November 9, 2005, to destroy the tapes (Mazzetti 2009). Indeed, at a broader level, the release of visceral evidence of state (or other institutional) violence risks revealing its status as a "contradictory institution" founded on "a promise of safety, security and meaning alongside a reality of abuse, control and coercion" (Edkins 2003, 6). The danger of seeing the latter reality is that it provokes a kind of affective trauma in which it is revealed that "the very powers we are convinced will protect us" can "become our tormentors" (Edkins 2003, 4). Yet, as we now turn to discussing, digital media has now radically expanded that danger's prevalence.

The Cruelty of Digital Visibility

The growth of digital technological infrastructures has rapidly morphed the conditions under which images of violence become visible. Arguably, this process began early in the history of the internet, following the rise of websites dedicated to the hosting of user-generated content depicting graphic violence (Tait 2008). While this enabled "access to imagery formerly concealed from public view," it also had to be "sought out" by interested users (Tait 2008, 108). With the proliferation of miniaturized digital devices and social media, however, "we do not have to seek out these disturbing visuals … our daily media passively expose us" to them (Duncombe 2020, 610). We are cybernetically entangled with viral affective networks that serve up violence, often in real time, whether we like it or not (Sampson 2012; Austin 2016, 2020; Della Ratta 2018). The effects of this change are serious. Dreyfus (2009, 11) notes that information was once organized "in a hierarchy of broader and broader classes, each including the narrower ones beneath it" so as to produce "meaningful links." By contrast, digital technologies are "organized horizontally" (through hyperlinks, algorithms, etc.) so that "instead of the relation between a class and its members, the organizing principal is simply the inter-connectedness of all elements. There are no hierarchies … and meaning is irrelevant" (Dreyfus 2009, 11–12). This "causes a dizzying effect that is both mesmerizing and dangerous" as this abundance of information is severed from comprehensible structures of meaning (Watson 2008, 4). As Rentschler summarizes vis-à-vis violence:

> Without a politically mobilizing news media, witnesses are left to "feel" with little to no direction for how to act … people may simply not know … what to do with their vicarious experience of others' suffering. (Rentschler 2004, 300)

There is a paradox in this. Digital media has radically democratized the capacity to produce accounts of conflict and violence. In theory, this multiplication of perspectives would seem preferable to the hegemony of a "politically mobilizing news media" controlled by powerful (centralized) actors that manufacture our consent. Indeed, it was hoped these developments would lead to the rise of "citizen journalists" who would engage in acts of witnessing where "ordinary people document … events they encounter" and mobilize those artifacts to advocate for political change (Al-Ghazzi 2014, 437). As Al-Ghazzi (2014) has noted—however—these hopes were based on an orientalist fetishization of "civil society" elsewhere falling into line with European and North American sociopolitical norms. As that dream collapsed, fear turned to the rise of "digital media-enabled terrorists" (Al-Ghazzi 2014, 442). Indeed, the democratization of the means of producing images has always had highly ambiguous political consequences. The technological affordances of digital media are deployed by *all* actors—governments, activists, soldiers, etc.—and for all purposes, good or bad. As such, the particular "agency and intentionality behind the use of digital media can only be understood in a locally contextualized situatedness" (Al-Ghazzi 2014, 443). However, the horizontal semiotic dynamics of digital infrastructures frequently severs ties to local context and its meaningfulness.

It is perhaps due to this aporia of meaning that most academic and political attention is placed on visual mediations of exceptional events that possess an aesthetics of "shock" that goes "beyond anything we have ever seen" (Sontag 2005; Strange 2006; Tait 2008; Friis 2015; Jacobsen 2020). Indeed, "iconic" images that "stand in an emotionally charged relation with … [the] spectator" are still those most studied (Hansen 2015, 270). Such "visual nodal points" *demand* some form of response from governments and established media organizations (viz. debates over Sarin gas attacks in

[3] It is beyond the scope of this article to review how this actually occurs. For discussions, see Brighenti (2010), Campbell (2004), Sontag (2005), and Crone (2014).

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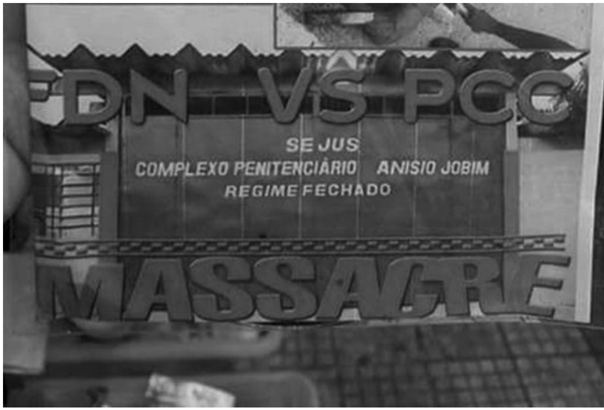

Figure 1. Cover for a bootleg DVD of the COMPAJ massacre in Manuas, Brazil.

Syria), which allows for the post hoc injection of contextual meaning, however crude (e.g., narratives of "good" versus "evil"). It should not be ignored, however, that what counts as an "iconic" image is a contextual question, rarely universally shared across sociopolitical space. Moreover, it is equally clear that digital technologies also expose (some of) us to banal, quotidian, and unexceptional images of horror. Countless violent images do *not* provoke public response or government concern. What of the deluge of images that are *not* "visual nodal points" but nonetheless contain the affective charge of horror? Such images are equally filtered through viral technological protocols that drain them of significatory meaning but are not then the subject of sustained sociopolitical intervention that could inject such meaning. To return to the video with which we began, the Syrian civil war is exemplary of this situation. Indeed, della Ratta describes the war as:

> The first fully developed networked battleground … [where the] entanglement of visual regimes of representation and modes of media production with warfare … has exploited and prospered from the participatory dimension of networked communications technologies. The networks have granted the utmost visibility … to the most extreme violence. (della Ratta 2018, 38)

While basic meanings are attached to visuals emanating from places such as Syria—what crime is being depicted, say—the lack of verification and context, enmeshing in a general situation of uncertainty (war), and sheer quantity appears to verify (della Ratta's 2018, 493) further words that "information is an entropic process that triggers the annihilation of the social" and its basis in sustainable meaning-making practices. Nonetheless, these visual artifacts circulate through "affective networks" that produce intense emotional, psychological, and other effects (Sampson 2012). This is especially true given the digital mediation of cruelty is also a social and embodied process. As discussed below, images of violence often circulate via messaging apps such as *WhatsApp* and are watched on mobile devices passed around in small groups at cafés or restaurants. Thus, unlike the illicit sharing of images between, say, soldiers (MacKenzie 2020), these visuals circulate *openly* through communal and family networks (Banaji et al. 2019). Moreover, they are sometimes spread beyond the internet into the physical world. For example, videos of brutal intra-narco-gang violence at the *Anísio Jobim* (Compaj) Penitentiary Complex in Manaus, Brazil, were originally circulated via platforms such as *WhatsApp* before being sold as bootleg DVDs (Oliveira 2018, 17,38) (see figure 1). Simply: bloody cruelty has not only reappeared but infiltrated the most intimate aspects of life. It moves online and offline, without limit, and is severed from attachment to fixed structures of meaning that might make its presence comprehensible.

Inequality and Digital Violence

The digital mediation of horrific violence is not uniformly experienced but structured by sociopolitical hierarchies. How so? Most efforts to control the visibility of violence follow a classic model of censorship and remediation via mainstream outlets. Digital platforms are scrubbed of raw footage, the depicted events semiotically recoded elsewhere. Content moderation is the most prominent approach to achieve this, using manual (i.e., human) or automated tools. However, content moderation involves hierarchies. First, human moderation is outsourced. There is a global underclass of witnesses to violence employed in low-income states to protect others. As Breslow (2018, 13) writes, a "postcolonial relation" structures moderation and "instigates a form of labour that displaces the potential for witnessing" on subaltern bodies. Second, there is the question of *which* videos are moderated, which skews to those of concern for European and North American publics or governments. Videos of ISIS killings of foreign hostages, for instance, are now quite difficult to access via mainstream platforms. However, it is still entirely possible to access videos depicting equally graphic events that are not "on the radar" of powerful states and their publics across much of social media.

The reasons for these inequalities vary. For example, digital platforms once declared that they would host graphic videos of the Syrian civil war so as to "raise awareness" (Common 2020). More generally, there appears to be far greater concern for the regulatory sanctions of powerful states (Gorwa, Binns, and Katzenbach 2020). Indeed, leaked Facebook documents show that in 2020, only 13 percent of the 3.2 million hours spent moderating content on the platform pertained to material from outside the USA (Scheck, Purnell, and Horwitz 2021). Facebook also lacks staff who speak the full range of languages found in the areas it operates and so cannot moderate all content (Scheck, Purnell, and Horwitz 2021). Relatedly, there are technical inequalities. Computer science techniques for automatically detecting violent videos through text-mining tools are now advanced. However, these tools are biased toward Indo-European languages and often ineffective vis-à-vis non-Latin alphabets. Thus, it is far easier to access such imagery via search strings in, say, Arabic, than English (Azzi and Zribi 2021). Finally, these factors are compounded by the relative capacities of states to control the production of images of violence by their security forces: exercising such control requires very significant financial and logistical resources.[4]

All of the above generates two consequences. First, the vast majority of images of violence that circulate globally depict actors and places *outside* Europe and North America. Second, those most exposed to this disorientating flow of horror are located outside Europe and North America or are subaltern populations therein. In light of this, it is important not to universalize the experience of the digital visibility of violence but instead to understand its differentiated consequences across sociopolitical space. Doing

[4] Notably this status quo might change as a growing set of academic and other literature implicates digital platforms in prompting forms of mass violence, such as genocide. See (Rapp 2021).

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Figure 2. A man reads and a waiter serves customers as scenes of torture are screened on TV in a Beiruti café. This does not depict the area or cafés described below nor those individuals discussed.

so requires we move analysis beyond European and North American "fields" or "regimes" of visibility (Brighenti 2010). Such regimes depict mostly "dead [or violent] foreigners," something that is "little more than a vehicle for the inscription of domestic spaces as superior" (Campbell 2004, 64) by perpetuating a "cross-cultural syndrome in which the 'Third World,' as the site of the 'raw' material that is 'monstrosity,' is produced for the surplus-value of spectacle, entertainment, and spiritual enrichment for the 'First World'" (Chow 1991, 84). This postcolonial critique of the attempt to define the boundaries between the self and other in terms of intellectual, cultural, and moral superiority has long also recognized the role of the media and other forms of information control in its sustenance (Said 1981). Indeed, "racism, and especially institutionalized racism, creates a politics of treatment for visible differences" (Brighenti 2010, 334), one now inflected digitally.

The cruelty of this inequality in the visibility of violence is self-evident at multiple levels. First, there is the generalized disorientation and informational entropy mentioned earlier. While images of violence "have transfixed viewers for generations," today social media circulates images that are "characterized by [a] fragmentation" that generates a void in our capacity to "make sense" of such violence (German 2019, 128). While the consequences of this remain uncertain, I discuss below how it seems that this process is working to "change our own goals and aims, our own ways of relating to one another, our social relations, and the very way we think, act, feel ..." and *see* (Bryant 2011, 17; Austin and Leander 2021). This is particularly true if one accords with the view that images possess an autonomous aesthetic agency (Mitchell 2005; Austin 2017, 2019). Second, there exists the more general fact that the circulation of violent imagery of this kind has conflicting goals. While some may produce such imagery for propaganda or other purposes (Farwell 2010), others have simultaneously placed hope in the possibility of such imagery liberating populations from oppression or at least providing post hoc justice (Pantti 2013; Tenov 2019; Thomsen 2019). Despite the aforementioned co-options of such discourse, many locally situated articulations of such a hope existed/exist, but few (if any) have come to fruition. Moreover, the sheer scope of the visual documentation of such atrocity through digital means doubles this cruelty: it is not simply that emancipation has not occurred but that extensive trauma appears inevitable from directly witnessing and being visually exposed to horrific violence (*see above*).

Finally, all of this culminates in what I term the "fracturing" of ontological security. Theories of ontological security describe the importance of maintaining our "taken for granted" assumptions of life (Giddens 1991, 37). Without those assumptions, a "deep incapacitating state of not knowing which dangers to confront and which to ignore, i.e., how to get by in the world" may emerge (Mitzen 2006, 345). Scholars of IR have deployed this concept to explore how states attempt to secure collective memories, national identity, foreign policy practices, and beyond (Steele 2008; Gustafsson and Krickel-Choi 2020). Originally, however, ontological security focused on how individuals (rather than states) require "routines of various forms" that enable them to "bracket out questions about themselves, others and the object world" (Giddens 1991, 37). As we will see in the following section, the viral digital protocols through which images of extreme violence now circulate can radically disrupt the orderliness of such routines in ways that "generate profound anxiety ... [and] force individuals to confront existential questions" they might prefer to ignore (Rumelili and Celik 2017, 3). Notably, this digital fracturing of ontological security is exasperated by the ways in which these technologies operate through contagious processes that spread emotions "from person to person via ... multisensory affective social atmospheres" (Sampson 2012, 86). In this context, even very local acts of witnessing—a few men in a café watching a horrific video—can have serious "macro-level" effects on political communities. As I now show by returning to the video with which we opened and ethnographically exploring its effects on the quotidian lives of men living in Beirut, these broader social consequences are at the heart of the cruelty of the digital mediation of violence and its global inequalities.

Cafés, Conversations, and Cruelty

Siting in a café, some years ago, in the mainly Shia-Muslim *Basta* neighborhood of Beirut, I began paying attention to a group of men at an adjacent table. The group had been playing a card game and engaging in small talk but soon began crowding around a mobile phone what turned out to be the video that opened this paper. Moving over to join their table, I recorded the conversation that followed thus:

Man 1: That's not OK, *haram* [forbidden]...

Man 2: And why not? Have you seen the Syrians here in Beirut? They are everywhere; they show no respect, no manners, they are hardly Muslim...

Man 1: I don't care, it is forbidden to write holy names like that. And the guy, they are making him suffer. For what?

Man 2: Ya haram [sarcastic], the Syrian traitor is suffering!

Man 1: How do you know he is a traitor? He looks like a refugee to me.

Man 3: [Interjecting] Enough, guys, we don't even know where the video was taken.

Man 2: Exactly, how do you know he is not one of the terrorists in Syria? There is nothing to say this is in Lebanon.

Man 1: He speaks about Al-Assir.[5] What do the Syrians have to do with Al-Assir?

Man 2: You know very well. Yes he might be a refugee, and so what? Like the guy says, we have to make Muslims out of them!

Man 1: Enough ... don't show me shit like that.

[5] See note 2 on *Al-Asir.*

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Man 2: You are too kind … we have to be clear with the Syrians.
Man 1: Enough, yala let's play.

Cafés like these are normal, everywhere. However, conversations like these were not, until recently. Here, a single shaky mobile phone video appeared within the lifeworld of individuals engaged in everyday conversation and provoked a disruptive argument containing debates over ethical prohibitions and clear emotional disjunctures between participants. In the following section, I go into microlevel depth vis-à-vis such ruptures into the ontological security of individuals and the collectives they comprise. But before getting there, let me turn to what I was doing in Beirut. I was in the city conducting ethnographic fieldwork exploring political violence during the Syrian civil war. This took multiple forms. One was sitting in cafés and having conversations with men in *Basta* and other predominantly Shia neighborhoods of Beirut formed part of that work. My goal with such conversations was to gain a sense of how the war was affectively "felt" in places such as Lebanon that were simultaneously "close" (a few dozen kilometers away) and "far" (relatively safe from) the conflict and whose population had divided loyalties over who to support.

To do so, I spent six-or-so months hanging out at cafés such as the one just described, where the topic of the war was common but the environment banal and often boredom-inducing. The men (and, typically for such settings, they were all men) I spoke with were not fighters in Hezbollah but affiliates of one sort or another. I had first been introduced to most of them by a long-term friend in Beirut, which eased suspicions about my research, although they were not quite sure what I was interested in. It is hard to explain that your job involves sitting in cafés with friends and strangers smoking nargileh. But, well, I was interested in Syria: all the foreigners were at that point in time. So, with my gatekeeper's assurances, I was allowed to hang around, smoke—indeed—nargileh, and write field notes. This was helped by my familiarity with Beirut as well as the wider Middle East. Although a foreigner, I had spent around a decade in the region for different reasons, and spoke Arabic, which aided my integration into the groups as well as my ability to judge any dangers such research might pose.[6] As a man, I was also able to hang out in these substantively gendered spaces more so than a woman or those of other genders would be able to. That privilege, however, does translate below into only a partial perspective on the phenomenon I discuss: other spaces (those occupied by women, familial homes, etc.) where these visual materials also circulate were largely closed to me for research purposes, and the dynamics I describe here may indeed, therefore, not be applicable therein.

These questions of positionality aside, it is actually quite hard to explain this account as one might a usual discussion of ethnographic methodology because I was not in those cafés to explore what I'm writing about here. Instead, what follows reflects (Lee Ann Fujii's 2015, 526) understanding of "accidental ethnography" in which "unplanned or 'accidental' moments in the field" revealed something I had not been searching for. My goal was to discuss what men in these neighborhoods felt about the Syrian conflict, how it affected their lives, and their sense of security (car bombings had at one point not been irregular). However, when videos like the one just described became a topic of conversation, I began to focus on them and their effects. Such an unexpected shift in the focus of my research naturally posed issues. All those I was speaking to were aware that I was interested in their lives, that I was making notes, and that I had agreed nobody's identity would be disclosed in texts like this one. And they knew that I eventually became interested in their reactions to videos like the one described above. But this changed something about the research encounter. The classic vision of the ethnographic exercise rests on engaging in long-term immersion that allows—somehow—for a degree of "saturation" in our understanding of a particular world. However, what I now sought to understand were a series of random, unpredictable, and external "breaches" into that reality (Garfinkel 1967). You would be sipping coffee, inhaling smoke, chatting about a wedding, and then a *WhatsApp* ping would shift us into a world of horror. Such breaches—as I show below—were often intensely emotional, reflecting Collins' (2004, 104) view that these interruptions of our lives demonstrate how "conventional social reality is a sacred object" and its violation "call[s] forth the same effects as violating a ritual taboo would have for a tribal member, desecrating the Bible for a Christian, or defaming the flag for a patriot." To some degree, the cruelty of the visibility of violence described above rests within the emotional disorientations caused by this seemingly random process.

Those dynamics raise serious ethical issues. Neither myself nor my interlocutors could be forewarned about when this would occur. How then could possible harm to participants be mitigated? The question is important because although these dynamics were driven by processes outside my control and irrelevant my presence (this would have happened if I was not there), I was nonetheless asking questions. This intensified the already fraught question of obtaining informed consent in conflict settings (Campbell 2017; Cronin-Furman and Lake 2018). In order to address that problem, I took several steps. First, I reobtained informed consent around this "accidental" interest of mine, including affirming that interlocutors were under no obligation to answer particular questions and that participation could be withdrawn at any time. I also avoided asking questions that would force a participant to forthrightly express a political or other view to the group that might put them in danger, preferring instead to engage in "silent listening, rather than on questioning, probing, or prying" (Campbell 2017, 95; generally, I drew here on Spradley 1979).

At a deeper level—however—this "accidental" research risked echoing the critique I have made above of inequality in the cruelty of visibility. As a researcher, I was able to withdraw from, reflect upon, and write about these moments of virally mediated witnessing at will. Such an opportunity was not afforded to my respondents. While no straightforward ethical solution to this dilemma is evident, I sought to address this issue in different ways. First, I would sometimes deliberately shift conversation away from the violent images that would appear in our conversations, especially when one or another member of the group was clearly especially emotional affected or became (see below) the target of the rest of the group's hostilities. Second, I confided in the friend who had initially afforded me access to this space, and knew

[6] I deploy anonymizing methods in this article that go beyond not revealing names, including changing dates and places. It is unlikely that anybody who spoke to me would be in danger given my interest was general and did not involve asking "sensitive" questions. Nonetheless, the political situation in Lebanon makes such procedures prudent. In terms of researcher safety, the specific sites considered did not pose particular risks. All fieldwork took place between 2012 and 2017, and the discussion below is based on field notes taken during observations as well as individual conversations with respondents. The image in figure 2 does not depict the areas of Beirut studied nor those involved in this research but rather an alternative café where images of violence were screened on widescreen televisions at one point. I include this as an affirmation of the generalized nature of the phenomenon I am describing.

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many of the men far better than I ever would, whenever I was concerned for my interlocutors. Finally, I see the act of writing about these dynamics as crucial to comprehending and perhaps—one day—finding better ways to navigate them. An ethnographic—accidental or not—approach is crucial here given its capacity to take the "particular" local and situated experiences of human beings and translate them into "what they suggest about the larger social and political world in which they (and researchers) are embedded" (Fujii 2015, 525).

The Viral Fracturing of Ontological Security

During my time in Basta, considerable time was spent crowded around smart phones watching videos. This included news clips, music videos, wedding videos, and—indeed—videos of violence. Among those videos, many lionized the militant activities of Hezbollah forces. Emotionally, such videos evoked strong feelings of pride, as one remark I recorded demonstrates:

> They are fighting not just for us, you know? They are fighting for everyone here in Lebanon, and for every good person in Syria, and everywhere else. This is the true role of the resistance, there in Syria and here, we protect and bring safety, with the help of God.

Such videos also occasionally prompted sadness when individuals were reminded of friends and, in one case, a brother who had been "martyred" fighting in Syria. Such grief was reflected in not only words ("*I miss him*") but also body language (leaning backwards, sighing), something others in the group would attempt to assuage by affirming the heroic sacrifice of the *shahid* (martyr). This dynamic reflects (Nussbaum's 2001) view that grief is constructed within a communal relation to others, further emphasized visually in the production of videos honoring fallen fighters and the abundance of posters of martyrs that are common throughout Shia areas of Beirut (Deeb 2006). While some might see these artifacts as mere propaganda, it is also clear that the prevalence of such imagery serves to create a ritualistic set of practices of memorialization that assist people in "bracket[ing] out questions about themselves, others and the world" (Giddens 1991, 37). This would seem especially essential in "active" conflict zones, where the unpredictable is ever-present. Indeed, elsewhere in the country, Hezbollah has constructed a memorial called the "Tourist Landmark of the Resistance" that lionizes its resistance and memorializes the dead but does so alongside theme-park-esque facilities for families and children (Rey-García, Rivas-Nieto, and McGowan 2020). Places like this merge the quotidian with acts of remembering, seemingly with the hope of stitching together and protecting the ontological security of the collective. Such a task is especially important given the "other" kinds of videos that circulated during my time in Basta. For example, videos depicting violence perpetrated by Hezbollah's enemies would also often appear and evoke feelings of anger. As one example I recorded encapsulated:

> Dogs. They are all dogs, turning against the president [Asad], and against Syria. Is this what it is to be free, the freedom to behave like savages? Fuck them, and God protect the heroes they are attacking and the martyrs they are sending to him.

What Randall Collins (2004, 78) calls "rhythmic coordination" was in clear evidence as remarks like these were made: respondents pointed at the screen, made tutting sounds, raised their hands in the air, sometimes spat on the ground, and coordinated their verbal expressions of anger. These overt expressions of disgust and anger would also produce a kind of collective solidarity affirming the importance of Hezbollah's "fight" in Syria, something that appeared to work to reaffirm the ontological security of the community in spite of the uncertainty of the conflict and its role within it. In short, responses to videos of this kind were as one would expect and could conceivably also easily be produced by more traditional means of propaganda.

However, there were also videos depicting violence committed by Hezbollah and its affiliates, including the video with which this article opened and extending into far more graphic imagery: the execution of captives with bullets and knives, mass beatings, and far beyond. Videos of this kind were notable for the initial silence with which they were watched by all the groups I encountered, with men occasionally looking up from the video and toward each other with slight apprehension. A discussion would usually emerge quickly thereafter. To stay with the opening video, which was rapidly circulating around the neighborhoods I was hanging out in, consider the following reaction from a different group of men I came to know:

Man 1: This is completely haram. [Nod in agreement from another man]
Man 2: There is no reason behind this, shame on them.
Man 3: Unless he is a takfiri.[7]
Man 4: What is this shit?
Man 1: Even if he is [a takfiri], brother, this is haram.
Man 3: What do you want them to do? Just let him go?
Man 1: How do you know he is a takfiri?
Man 3: How do you know he is not? You think Syria is a playground? You think they are all sweet and nice? They have caused this; their brutality, their evil. I wouldn't do it, but I wouldn't blame anyone who did.
Man 1: What would you say if I came back here with a flag on my forehead?

(Pause)

Man 1: I'd rather be shot.
Man 3: Tattoos can be removed.
Man 1: You know what this means to them, it is even worse. Fuck.[8] He is terrified, it's just an ordinary guy, this is in Beirut, I'm sure.
Man 3: It's in Syria.
Man 1: Where the hell are the tattoo places in Syria? And why is he speaking about Al-Asir, then?[9] This is completely without honor.
Man 3: Look, I'm not supporting it, you understand? It's just, well, we don't even know if it is real, you know all this shit they make up. And anyway, they do much worse things.
Man 2: Let's not argue over this, it's haram but we can't understand why it happened, we have to focus. What do you think all these checkpoints are for? We are in danger, things like this happen sometimes when young guys get excited. It's not good but it's not normal.
Man 4: Let's not become like them … remember what happened here, before: the Christians were cutting crosses into the Palestinians, the Israelis were torturing in Khiam, but we kept our honor.
Man 1: This is not the same, even if it is necessary, there is not the same honor in Syria as in the South[10].

[7] The term *takfiri* is often used to refer to extremist Islamist groups (ISIS, etc.).
[8] This refers to a prohibition on tattoos within Sunni Islam.
[9] See note 2 on *Al-Asir*.

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Table 1. Examples of emotional states observed during watching violent content, gathered from twenty-six instances of observing different groups watching eleven distinct videos of aberrant political violence in Syria

Emotion	*Example*	*Ambivalent Example*
Anger-General	*"This is haram."*	*"But … we aren't there."*
Anger-Other	*"This is their fault."*	*"But … it is still haram."*
Anger-Self	*"Our behaviour here is haram."*	*"But … I can understand."*
Sadness-Other	*"Imagine you are him."*	*"Imagine him? Imagine our martyrs."*
Sadness-Self	*"Look what has been done to us."*	*"But … this is war."*
Reverence-Other	*"We can respect his strength."*	*"Unless he is one of them."*
Reverence-Self	*"Our cause is still just."*	*"… for now."*
Resignation/Aporia	*"What is this world?"*	*"The world they [Syrian rebels] want."*
Shame	*"They have dishonoured us."*	*"But … they do not represent us."*
Fear	*"The future is dark."*	*"Our fighters are there, don't worry."*

Man 2: Enough, now, don't forget about all the faces looking down on you. [Points up to posters]

(Pause)

Man 1: They are sadists.

Man 2: They are not behaving well, but we don't understand. Enough with this Ali, I know the Syrian is scared and we can feel for him if he is innocent, but we don't know, we shouldn't judge what we don't know, especially when the fighters— you yourself were saying before—are protecting us every day.

The conversation above was typical of what I observed during my time in Beirut. To summarize, Table 1 depicts the most common emotional responses I interpreted as emerging at such moments, including clear-cut responses and more ambivalent ones tempered by clauses (e.g., "This is forbidden [haram], *but*…"). Each of those emotions breached the usual process of engaging in "sociable conversation" in which we talk "just for the sake of keeping up friendly contact" (Collins 2004, 79). Such small talk requires a stable "mutual focus of attention" around which expectations are fixed, but the violent artifacts being viewed here instead often evoked disorientation. In this, group conflict often emerged, as some felt emotions of anger against the self (or, rather, the part of the self seen committing atrocities)—"this is completely *haram*"—and others a righteous anger against the other who has made this situation possible: "they have caused this; their brutality, their evil. I wouldn't do it, but I wouldn't blame anyone who did." In evidence here is a clash over "feelings of morality" where "the sense of rightness in adhering to the group, respecting its symbols, and defending both against transgressors" is violated and thus a "sense of moral evil … in violating the group's solidarity" is evoked (Collins 2004, 49). In short, violent artifacts affect group members differently.

Across these conversations, it was when anger was directed at the self (i.e., Hezbollah) by individuals that conflict was most self-evident. In the debate above, for example, one man attempts to justify what is occurring by suggesting the Syrian might be a *takfiri,* to which another retorts that this does not make the situation any better; what follows are questions over the certainty of knowledge ("How do you know he is a takfiri?") and assertions about situational factors mitigating the actions of the perpetrators ("You think Syria is a playground?") as well as attempts by one man to draw an equivalence between himself and the Syrian ("what would you say if I came back here with a flag on my forehead?"). Across conversations like this, a pattern emerged in which the ritual use of affectionate labels for friends—*my brother*, for instance—often complimented disagreements in the *early* stages of the conversation (e.g., "Even if he is [a takfiri], brother, this is haram.") but then disappeared as the argument became more heated, before finally returning as mechanisms of "repair" were implemented (see below). This breakdown in group coherency, in translating a shared focus into a state of collective entrainment fused by shared emotions, reflects the fact that "solidarity is a variable" (Collins 2004, 69). While this variability is present in all conversations, it is amplified in this case by the presence of an outside visual source, whose content disrupts group solidarity.

Importantly, while conversations like these are fleeting, and the emotional responses they engender are mostly temporary, it is the fact that these short interactions reoccurred repeatedly that is problematic and which takes us back to global inequalities in these dynamics. While images of aberrant violence have sometimes pierced the carefully curated image of, say, the US military (viz. the Abu Ghraib photographs), such events are comparatively temporally fleeting, quickly semiotically coded by states and the media, before—typically—falling away from consciousness. By contrast, the events described here occurred in one form or another over two dozen times in the six months I was present, among different groups, and with different videos of extreme violence. Simply put, exposure to graphic imagery has—for some people—become not an exceptional, shocking, or unusual event but part of their everyday life. But what might the long-term consequences of this process be? A possible answer can be found in the ways in which these conversations were "repaired" and came to a close, which I have summarized in Table 2.[11]

These "repairs" emerged for one of two reasons. First, to stabilize the solidarity of the group during the flow of the conversation—such as when, above, the generalized anger that the group expresses upon viewing the video is immediately channeled into a justificatory excuse: "he is a *takfiri.*" As the conversations developed, forms of tacit denial or, at least, casting doubt on the credibility of the footage were in evidence: "we don't even know if it is real." In one instance, reference was made to a video purporting to show a Syrian boy saving a young girl from regime sniper fire, which was later revealed to be a fake produced in Norway (Tomchak and McDonald 2014). While an unsurprising

[10] The "south" refers to Hezbollah's militant activities against Israel in southern Lebanon.

[11] These categories were adapted from Mor (2007).

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Table 2. Observed mechanisms of conversational repair

Repair Type	*Example*
Denial	"We don't even know if it is real, you know all this shit they make up."
Disassociation	"This could be anywhere; Iraq, Iran." "This is a war."
Excuses/Circumstances	
Apologies/Regret	"I am sad for him; if he was here I would apologize."
Reframing	"Compare this to the videos of what they are doing to *us*."
Justification	"He's a takfiri."

Source: Adapted from Mor (2007).

tactic, this mode of repair rarely succeeded. The vast quantity of visual evidence of violence (in Syria, in particular) means that its outright denial was often seen as implausible. Group members would also sometimes "reframe" the video by relativizing whatever form of violence was being witnessed by comparing it to "worse" acts committed by rebel forces. These in-the-moment repairs were rarely effective enough, however, to placate the emotional responses of those viscerally rejecting what they were seeing and, thus, a second form of repair tends to emerge that was used to close these conversations entirely. These mechanisms were often introduced through the intervention of a previously more calm member of the group, who would use clauses that attempted to pacify the objections of some members while offering a clear "way out" of the conflict. As one example I recorded demonstrates:

> Of course Hassan knows it is wrong, Abbas, we all agree, but he is right too, my brother, this is a war and these things cannot be avoided when they are threatening us.

Coupled with such concluding repair mechanisms, however, was usually the silence of one or more members of the group who had been particularly emotionally affected by the video. Such silenced resignation was intensified by the attempts of some group members to shame those objecting to the video. Take the following example from the previously quoted transcript:

Man 1: This is not the same, even if it is necessary, there is not the same honor in Syria as in the South.
Man 2: Enough, now, don't forget about all the faces looking down on you. [Points up to posters]

The reference of the second respondent here was to the martyr posters plastered on the walls surrounding the café and seemed an attempt to imply that the other respondent was dishonoring those who had sacrificed themselves. Here, we see a point of friction in which images (martyr posters), routines (sociable conversation), and ideals (resistance, heroism) that are central to the ontological security of the group are mobilized to criticize and "shut down" those who have been differentially affected by witnessing digitally mediated forms of violence. In this way, we see how many of the concerns about translating understandings of ontological security from the individual to the group can actually be inverted: in this case, it is the necessity of securing the groups' identity that has pernicious effects on those of individuals (Steele 2008). Indeed, shame—a "sense of broken social attunement"—is a particularly powerful way in which to force the deviant respondent into a feeling of having been "ritually punished" (Collins 2004, 110). Such shame was manifest within the body language of those being attacked, who shifted themselves uncomfortably and avoided eye contact with others (Collins 2004, 110). In cases like these, the conversation tended to end in the silence of these discordant voices. In order to gain a deeper sense of the consequences of this silencing, my time in Beirut also involved speaking with those who objected to the content of these videos individually. One, the aforementioned Abbas, described his feelings thus:

> I *love* the resistance [i.e. *Hezbollah*]. My family has been part of it since the beginning. But I am worried. We didn't want this war but it is wrong when people say we were forced to fight; we chose to fight. And then we see things like this. We never see things like this against Israel … Today, I feel we are lost, that we are fighting towards disaster. Once, all Syrians were treated as our brothers. Now we are doing this.

Abbas here expounded on more generalized misgivings within the Shia community of Lebanon over its intervention in Syria, and although there was no obvious break in his identity—he still referred to "we" consistently—his misgivings were clear. It is the silencing of voices such as Abbas' that I think are most telling about the dangers posed by the cruelty of visibility in our digital age. As Fierke (2004, 478) puts it, individual trauma can be seen as a form of solipsism that dislocates the traumatized individual from the group: "the connection between trauma and the inability to speak is now conventional wisdom." Being shamed in this way risks shattering "the individuals' trust in the dependability of their immediate social world and the people in it" as they realize they have "acted on the assumption of being one kind of person, living in one kind of surroundings, and unexpectedly, violently … discover that these assumptions are false" (Huggins, Haritos-Fatouros, and Zimbardo 2002, 52). What is especially worrying about this solipsistic silencing is that discordant voices such as these, which seek to appreciate the fully human person of the other, are precisely those that must be tightly integrated into a political community in order for forms of peaceful reconciliation to emerge. However, as Fierke (2004, 484) continues:

> Individual identity and emotion are bound up in the political unit. The emotions may remain disguised in individuals, but, to be translated into political agency and identity, they must be put into words by leaders, who give meaning to the individual experience by situating it in a larger context of group identity. This may involve an alienation of individual emotion to the state.

These processes of the "alienation of individual emotion" are necessary in order to maintain group solidarity, but they exclude discordant voices. The result, one can hypothesize, is the privileging of less-compromising sociopolitical positions and a form of "solipsism of the group" (Fierke 2004, 488). Rather than taking the visual representation of their own aberrant violence as a moment to pause and reflect on sociopolitical circumstances, that violence is denied or justified so as to allow its continuation. A paradoxical situation thus emerges in which the flood of images of violence unequally afflicting certain parts of the world seems to work to annihilate any possibility of mobilizing such acts of witnessing for positive-political purposes. In short, the cruelty of the digital visibility of violence appears to ultimately rest in a certain "spiral of trauma" (Fierke 2004, 491) that fractures the ontological security of individuals and—in

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turn—the social collectives they form a part of, risking the prolongation of conflict and circumscribing the possibility of reconciliation. When we see all evil—it seems—the temptation (perhaps logically) becomes to see *no* evil.

The Reality and the Record

In Iraqi writer Hasan Blasim's short story *The Reality and the Record*, a refugee arrives in Malmö, Sweden, and is asked to recount his story in order to gain asylum. He describes having been an ambulance driver in Baghdad, before being kidnapped by armed men. The men take him to a room and place a camera in front of him, a flag behind him, and decapitated heads in front of him, staging what seems to be his execution. However, he is not executed. Instead, he is asked to feign his own death for the camera. Shortly thereafter, he makes another video, pretending to be someone else. He is then sold onward to other groups, who repeat the spectacle:

> Throughout the year and a half of my kidnapping experience, I was moved from one hiding place to another. They shot video of me talking about how I was a treacherous Kurd, an infidel Christian, a Saudi terrorist … On these videotapes I murdered, raped, started fires, planted bombs, and carried out crimes that no sane person would even imagine. All these tapes were broadcast on satellite channels around the world. Experts, journalists, and politicians sat there discussing what I said and did (Blasim 2014, 168).

Eventually, the protagonist begins to fixate on the cameraman, suspecting "he was the cameraman for all the groups and maybe the mastermind of this dreadful game" (Blasim 2014, 169). He is then released and makes his way to Sweden. To return to where we started, just as Clastres found Kafka's short story *In the Penal Colony* instructive for theorizing violence, so Blasim's surreal tale is equally informative for our understanding of the dynamics described above. The cruelty of visibility rests on the erasure of meaning, where the "reality" of violence cannot be discerned. Who is doing the killing? Who is being killed? Who is behind the camera? This aporia of meaning aside, the trauma of the process is clear: the possibility of ontological security fractures, individually and collectively.

The digital mediation of evil remains a recent phenomenon. The accounting of its contours given here is thus speculative. Indeed, while it seems clear that this phenomenon has serious affective consequences, tracing those effects faces methodological difficulties. If the fracturing of ontological security through this means occurs at the most micro of levels, in banal café settings, but reverberates to have global effects, studying its dynamics is difficult. This is especially true given that although I have stressed throughout that there is no universal experience of the cruelty of visibility, it is equally clear that this is a transnational phenomenon. Indeed, my account of these processes in Lebanon is *partially* but not *totally* connected to those elsewhere. For example, the global inequalities described in this essay are inflected not only at the level of nation states or regions but also in the domestic politics of North American and European states. Growing evidence—for instance—describes the sustained trauma suffered by Black Americans following repeated exposure to videos of police shootings (Richardson 2020). Finding ways to maintain an understanding of the contextually grounded and local manifestations of this phenomenon without neglecting its systemic world political effects is thus crucial. Moreover, these dynamics will shift over time due to geopolitical and other factors. It is possible, for example, that we are seeing a renewed push toward disappearing bloody violence, as rising powers assert greater control of the media, and world politics is marked by geopolitical battles over the visibility or invisibility of one-or-another state's political violence. Whatever occurs, this account stresses the importance of exploring this phenomenon in the here and now, despite its fluctuations. To do so only when its consequences become self-evident risks too much. In short, the cruelty of visibility provokes a simple question posed at the end of Blasim's (2014, 170) story: what happens next when "the world is just a bloody and hypothetical story, and we are all killers and heroes"?

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