During the recent Royal wedding in London, one of the iconic images of the wedding was that of a bridesmaid covering her ears to shut out the cheers and jubilation from the crowd below. The frowning bridesmaid became a much remembered image of the celebrations and was recreated endlessly in the virtual world as a meme and placed in the forefront of images to extend her royal frown. The spread of her image captured the intertextuality and entwined nature of sharing popular ideas in offline and online platforms.

The meme of the bridesmaid mirrored not just how much the internet is a space for cultural appropriation and dissemination but equally a platform for transforming and manipulating images and the emergence of a new image economy. The image and our ability to reproduce and represent it through different modes of cultural representation (whether art or photography) has always been problematic historically.

The images associated with authenticity and notions of witnessing have evoked much academic and literary enquiry into the topic. This image economy has undeniably created new forms of watching and gazing enabling a multitude of phenomena in the online spaces. Technology and image have always had an uneasy relationship through the centuries starting with art history to the creation of multimedia worlds. For Walter Benjamin the ability of the camera to record exhaustively means our ability to ‘see’ is mediated both by technology and what the eye and mind are able to perceive. Annette Kuhn (1985) calls this the ideology of the ‘visible as evidence’, where ‘the illustrative function of photographs leaves opinions, prejudices, fantasies, misinformation untouched’ (Sontag, 2003, p. 75). Mark Danner (cf. Bauman, 2006, p. 106) ascertains that the most powerful weapon of the 9/11 terrorists was ‘that most American of technological creations: the television set.’ The TV can push universal fears of vulnerability and the sense of ubiquitous danger far beyond the limits of the terrorists’ own capacity (Bauman, 2006, p. 106). In our media-saturated world ‘repetition is instrumental in sustaining a sense of the real’ (Deleuze, 1994).

William Mitchell ascertained that visuality and indeed vision can be as a cultural construction that can be learned and cultivated, and not simply given by nature. It is intimately connected to the history of arts, technologies, media and social practices of display and spectatorship and is deeply involved with human societies with the ethics and politics, aesthetics and epistemology of seeing and being seen (Mitchell, 2002, p. 166). The ubiquitous screen culture of our
times creates a possibility to live and communicate through the screen without leaving our habitats. The screen culture and experience in postmodernity become a vital part of symbolic and material exchanges, narratives, eyewitness accounts and memory. The ontological status of an image as bearing witness also calls into account how we valorize the image as a form of visual testimony. Through the ages visual media are often central to the recreation of memory and spaces of commemoration with the emphasis on simulations, replications and virtual experiences (Lennon & Foley, 1999, p. 47).

Visual culture functions both as a memory archive but it is equally implicated in the ‘critique of inadequacy’ in any representation where limits are imposed both through the vantage points, access and what may be visible or invisible to the naked eye. The integration of visual culture into our contemporary consciousness through electronic technologies embedded into our everyday lives thrusts the visual into an arena of the everyday where images work through both individual imagination and collective meaning making. Mobile telephony and the convergence of technologies have contributed to new ways of consuming, producing and engaging with events that happen in the world through images.

The ability to reproduce through technology means that images are consumed in a decontextualized way. In this sense the image can come to us (often stripped of its context) and hence amenable to multiple readings. In postmodernity, the idea of being watched and captured through technology constructs a society where watching is both about power and subjectivity. Watching in postmodernity is not uniform nor is it simply one-sided but becomes a complex mix of phenomena where it is justified under national and public security whilst increasingly questioned by interest groups and civil society organizations as a something which undoubtedly erodes human rights and privacy.

The new image repositories on the Internet are decentred and can be accessible on demand. The uploading of personal videos and images and the staging of these on public or semi-public platforms can entail performative and ludic elements through public display.

This special issue on the Politics of Digital Visual Cultures examines these different phenomena which this new media visuality has enabled both in terms of empowerment and vulnerabilities. My paper on “The Politics of Watching: Visuality and the New Media Economy” raises the broad ethical and meta-question of what it means to consume and produce images relentlessly in the new media economy. It argues that this visuality creates both opportunities and risks by conjoining private and collective rituals and where the image can function as a device for collective gathering as well as means of disenfranchisement. Tina Askanius’ article on “DIY Dying: Video Activism as Archive, Commemoration and Evidence” surveys how ubiquitous camera technologies and online video sharing platforms are radically changing the media landscape in which demonstrations and political activism is happening. Askanius through a series of case studies of people who died in demonstrations namely the G20 protests in London, the December riots in Greece in 2008 and the G8 demonstrations in Genoa in 2001 examines how user-generated videos becomes sites for activist memory, commemoration and collective
trauma as well as a space for counter-discourse and struggle.

Beth Knobel’s and Jonathan Sanders’ article “Samizdat 2.0: The Dymovsky Case and the Use of Streaming Video as a Political Tool in Contemporary Russia” chronicles the fascinating story of Russian Police Major Aleksei Dymovsky who posts a video online to detail the extent of corruption in the country. The authors examine and compare the power of samizdat, underground literature of the Soviet-era and the new-style video samizdat of the Internet era. They opine that the Russian government is becoming increasingly aware of the potential of the Internet which may lead to new steps to further curb freedom of expression online in Russia.

Authors Paula Tavares, Maria João Félix, and Pedro Mota Teixeira article on “Mapping Culture and Compromised Art in the Era of Globalization” provides an overview of the activists art movement from everyday practices to art traditions, from local to global, from street contact to digital. They premise the ‘abundance of social networks’ as the imaginings of a global platform and deconstruct the definitions and concepts such as ‘counterculture’ and ‘activism’ as art. In the process they present other forms of culture, dissect cultural activism and ‘expose paradigmatic examples which relate the dematerialization of the object with the migration of activist art to new media’.

With Bollywood as the ultimate symbol of visuality and visual culture in a globalized world Gil Toffell reviews Amit Rai’s Un timely Bollywood: Globalization and India’s New Media Assemblage (2009) published by Duke University Press. Toffell observes that the notion of ‘media assemblage’ as defined by Rai is unpacked through a complex theorisation of inter- connected elements providing an original and very bold insight into a global machinery. As Toffell points out Rai’s conceptualisation ‘moves across a across a fascinating range of phenomena from DJ culture, exhibition spaces, digital projection to censorship’. At the heart of the concept of media assemblage are the seminal questions of power. In our interview section, Catarina Carneiro de Sousa, a Portuguese artist who is a founding member of the association Caldeira 213, an artistic coalition and a member of the feminist collective ZOiNA, shares her devotion to the Metaverse since 2008. In her interview, Catarina reflects on the use of digital platforms such as Second Life for her work and the ways in which new media platforms have created new forms of interventions, expressions and artistic networks.

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REFERENCES


