

'Opferbilder'. The visualization of victimhood after 1945

St. Antony's College, 62 Woodstock Road, Oxford

Conference programme

Friday, May 13, 2022

Welcome and Introduction (9.00 – 9.15): Petra Terhoeven

Panel I (9.15 – 10.45): The Human(itarian) View. Chair: Paul Betts

Tobias Weidner (Göttingen), "Humanist Photography and Victimhood After 1945"

Lia Börsch (Freiburg), "NGO Photography in the 1980s. The Example of Amnesty International"

Panel II (11.00 – 12.30): War and (In)Justice. Chair: Patricia Clavin

Andrea Brazzoduro (Torino), "Harkis as 'Innocent Victims': Representing a Victim-Centered Narrative of the Algerian War"

Vladimir Petrovic (Belgrade), "From Persecution to Prosecution: Forensic Aspects of Yugoslav Wars' Victimhood Imagery"

Panel III (14.00-15.30): Sexual Violence. Chair: Ruth Harris

Alexa Stiller (Zurich), "Post-Violence: The Visual Representation of Victims of Mass Rape – the Example of Tuzla 1992"

Alexandra Fergen (Oxford), "The First Sexism Lawsuit in The Federal Republic: Cover Images, 'Sex-Objects', and the West German Illustrated Weekly *Stern*"

Panel IV (16.00 -17.30): Terrorist Violence. Chair: Sebastian Gehrig

Petra Terhoeven (Göttingen), "Image Operations. Martyrs, Perpetrators, and (Alleged) Victims in West German Left Wing Terrorism"

Hannah Rudolph (Göttingen), "Icons of a Wounded Nation. The 9/11 Widows in US-Media"

Saturday, May 14, 2022

Panel V (9.00 – 10.30): “Different” Victims? Chair: Jane Caplan

Eva Klay (Göttingen):

“Contested Visualization. Depicting the Victims of Technological Disasters”

Mieke Roscher (Kassel):

“Who’s the Victim Here? PETA’s Controversial ‘Holocaust on your Plate’-Campaign and the Ambiguous Semiotics of the Animal Image”

Panel VI (11.00 – 12.30): (New) Media. Chair: Martin Schulze Wessel

Annette Vowinckel (Potsdam):

“From Empathy to E-Commerce. A Critical View on the International Fund for Concerned Photography”

Davide Rodogno (Geneva):

“After Alan Kurdi Went Viral (2015-2019)”

Final Discussion (12.30 – 13.00)

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"What are the consequences of this representation of the world through pain?"¹

In the course of the 20th century, the perception of people who have been harmed by violence or who are forced to lead their lives under permanently threatening conditions has undergone a fundamental change. With the extensive loss of transcendental, but increasingly also inner-worldly instances of meaning for human suffering – such as the (self-)sacrifice on the altar of the fatherland – pain and violent death became the cause of moral outrage, from which claims for help and compensation could be derived. The planned conference will try to examine to what extent this change was also caused by a higher (or a different) visibility of suffering people. Images, so the thesis, promoted substantially the partial replacement of the cult of the dead hero in favour of the myth of the innocent victim as a new moral leading figure, be it in the form of the traumatised survivor or the mourning relative. But they also slowed down, undermined and differentiated this process in a multitude of "Bildakte" (H. Bredekamp) that need to be examined more closely and above all contextualized comprehensively. The central importance of the visual for the social constructions of victims and the strong emotions associated with it is already evident in the intensively conducted debates on an ethics of showing and regarding images of violence that have accompanied the history of photography since its beginnings. "What can be shown, what should not be shown – few issues arouse more public clamor," Susan Sontag summed up in her famous essay "Regarding the pain of others".²

According to current research, it was primarily the rise of the human rights paradigm since 1945 which, against the background of accelerated globalisation processes and the spread of victim-centred legal and medical interpretation patterns, has led to the "charismatic authority" (T. Bonacker) acquired by victims of violence in many areas. The gradual assertion of knowledge about the potential long-term psychological consequences of 'traumatising' events has also promoted the assertion of today's understanding of victimhood. Since about the mid-1970s, 'victims' have been identified as a subgroup of the population with specific characteristics and problems: by state authorities, in the media, in research. In both criminology and psychiatry, separate victimological sub-disciplines have developed. In many countries of the western hemisphere, interest groups have been formed by and for victims. They have developed campaigns within the framework of a 'politics of victimhood', usually on specific occasions and supported by committed experts. At the same time, conflicts within the global South, such as the civil war in Nigeria (1967-1970) and the famine catastrophe in Ethiopia (1984), but also the devastating war of the USA in Vietnam (1964-1975), advanced to international media events, which brought the figure of the innocent victim beyond the borders of one's own country into focus and led to a globalization of consciences. Since the 1980s, so-called truth commissions have been working in South America and Africa within the framework of transitional justice proceedings to heal the psychological wounds that violent pasts – military dictatorships, civil wars and genocides – have caused in many victims. Significantly, respect for the 'dignity of the victims' simultaneously became the central criterion for judging visual representations of poverty, hunger and war – and accordingly also the guiding principle of the vast majority of photographers and

¹ Didier Fassin, *Humanitarian Reason. A Moral History of the Present*, Berkeley 2012, p. 29.

² Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, New York 2003, p. 54.

filmmakers working in the field.

Despite undisputedly positive aspects, however, the processes outlined above can by no means be written as a linear success story. *Firstly*, it is becoming increasingly clear that justice and social recognition for the injured parties are still distributed in a highly selective manner.³ The social construction process which leads to the recognition of individual victimhood is very much dependent on pre-existing power structures. In the face of growing victims' competition in an increasingly narrow "market of suffering" (S. Goltermann), there is a danger that the most vulnerable actors at the lower end of social hierarchies will not be able to assert their claims and will be much less visible. *Secondly*, societies tend to tie the status of victim to the condition of 'innocence' or moral purity, which in turn can lead to the exclusion of less 'ideal' victims, but can also encourage completely unrealistic representations of victimized people by themselves or their advocates. Since victims also function as 'memory entrepreneurs' – that is, they try to enforce their specific interpretation of past events – dichotomically constructed images of victims and perpetrators threaten the understanding of complex historical dynamics and sometimes even stand in the way of social reconciliation processes. *Thirdly*, the ongoing process of social labelling can permanently push people into a victim identity that makes it difficult for them to leave their position of (supposed) weakness, passivity and neediness in favour of other linguistic registers and repertoires of action. *Fourthly*, it is the trauma discourse, which in principle also includes perpetrators, that harbours the danger of depoliticising eminently political facts and can hinder the assumption of political and criminal responsibility for violent acts. On the other hand, the increasing victim-centeredness can also blatantly weaken the position of the accused and, especially in criminal law, encourage repressive tendencies. *Fifthly*, there is a sometimes considerable gap between the discursive appreciation of victims on the one hand and the actual implementation of victim-centered measures and practices on the other. Since the proximity to victims promises moral and political prestige, the danger of their instrumentalisation in favour of the interests of third parties is high. *Sixthly*, the threat of Islamist terrorism since the turn of the millennium has led in some Western societies to hypertrophic, universalising victim imaginations, which fuel exaggerated fears and have resulted in far-reaching measures of securitisation. "Are we all victims now?" asked the Liverpool-based criminologist Gabe Mythen in 2007 polemically: "No, but they're working on it."⁴ Especially in the USA, the tendency to see the entire nation as victimized by the Islamist attacks of 9/11 led not only to the well-known 'war on terrorism', but also to a "cult of true victimhood" with paradoxical consequences.⁵ In fact, many victims, not only in the United States but also in European societies, are now exposed to more or less explicit tendencies of 'victim blaming'. These trends should save us from being overly optimistic about the supposed irreversibility of the processes described.

³ According to the Belgian sociologist Luc Huyse „the simple fact of being physically, psychologically or economically harmed is a necessary, but not a sufficient element [to become a victim]. Other factors play important roles. Social norms and customs, developed in politics, law and culture, partly shape the selection of those who will be allocated the victim status, Luc Huyse, Victims, in: D. Bloomfield et. al. (eds.), Reconciliation after Violent Conflict. A Handbook, Stockholm 2003, pp. 54-66, here 57-58.

⁴ Gabe Mythen, Cultural victimology: Are we all victims now?, in: Handbook of Victims and Victimology, Routledge 2007, <https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9780203118207.ch18> .

⁵ Alyson Cole, The Cult of True Victimhood. From the War on Welfare to the War on Terrorism, Stanford 2006.

Against this background, the participants of our conference are invited to review, differentiate and, if necessary, correct the outlined observations by examining historical case studies based on image sources. These can be drawn from different geographical and temporal contexts, with a focus on the last third of the 20th century to the present which can be shifted further into the past if necessary. Methodological suggestions are provided by visual history, moral history and the history of emotions. It is true that the relevant historical, sociological and victimological research on the figure of the victim has hardly taken into account photographic, filmic or artistic sources so far, at least for the period after 1945. Valuable preliminary work, however, can be found in studies on the relationship between photography and humanitarianism, on modern terrorism as a war of images, and on 'atrocities pictures', including war photographs and visual representations of the Holocaust. The historiographical engagement with 'humanitarian photography', photography in the service of human rights activism, and especially fundraising, whose mission 'by definition' was the visualization (or visual 'production') of victims, offers a multitude of points of reference for our case studies. The reservoir of images created here is likely to have set the general direction for the visualization of victimhood and the development of a 'human gaze'. Nevertheless, the one-sided focus of previous research on humanitarian policy seems reductive in view of the large number of images of victims that we are faced with in the most diverse contexts. The conference would therefore like to call upon as many of these contexts as possible – from political violence, terrorism and war to ordinary crime, the penal system, technological and natural disasters, domestic violence and violence in gender relations, animal protection. The following questions should serve as guidance:

Visual strategies, narratives and conventions in defining victimhood and suffering

- By which characteristics can victims be recognized in a picture – even if they might not be explicitly termed that way? What visual narratives arise around them? How is vulnerability, but also resilience and resistance, visualized?
- How are the representations of victims and perpetrators related? How can images reinforce or undermine dichotomous victim narratives? How is 'innocence' portrayed?
- Despite the global rise of the victim paradigm, very different victim policies and cultures seem to have developed in different societies, which have hardly been researched so far. To what extent are these different 'cultures of victimhood' supported by images? What role do national image cultures play, including their specific "violent cartography" (Michael J. Shapiro)?
- The ambiguity of the term 'Opfer' in German (sacrifice/victim) refers to the religious dimension of victimhood. How strong were and still are representations of sacrifice and suffering based on religion? What role do concepts of salvation/salvation/martyrdom etc. play?
- Differentiation into 'good' and 'bad' victims occurs mainly by enabling identification processes on the one hand, and the creation of otherness on the other. How did media

images construct proximity and distance and thus contribute to victim hierarchies?

- According to Susan Sontag, the representation of 'own' and distant victims of violence follows different rules. How can these rules be described, and how appropriate is this differentiation in the age of globally available images? What did it mean to respect the 'dignity' of victims in different historical contexts?

Victims as public figures and political actors

- How much agency was given to surviving victims of violence in photographic practice and in the formulation of official image policies? How far did their "charismatic authority" extend in enforcing the right to their own image? What is the relationship between self-interpretation and pictorially fixed victim roles?
- What role did images play in the development of a politics of victimhood in the campaigns of victims' organisations or their advocates?

Ethics of practice

- How does the "victim's turn" appear from the perspective of photographers, picture agencies and picture editors? How did their photographic practice and their rules of showing and hiding atrocities changed over time?
- What did the rise of the trauma concept mean for the visualization of victimhood and suffering? What was and is the relationship between injured bodies and 'invisible' psychological wounds in visual media? Can 'trauma' be visualized?