

pro-social legal principles like citizens' Constitutional rights, as in the Supreme Court cases discussed above. Empathy is likely to be biased and inappropriate when it is simple unreflective empathic distress for someone in the courtroom, as appears to have been the case with the judge in the Nanny trial. Whether empathy in victim-impact or defendant's-good-character statements is appropriate in criminal trials may also depend on whether it is linked to legal concepts but the issue is more complicated when both types of statements are employed in the courtroom, because they argue in opposite directions.

Empathic bias is likely the outcome of natural selection and other evolutionary pressures and must therefore be considered part of human nature. To overcome it will undoubtedly require cognitive effort and socialization, as well as educational practice designed to counteract it. For example, people might be taught to think and consider the consequences for others, including those who are not present before engaging in an action. Or, playing into familiarity bias, one might be taught to imagine that an absent potential victim is one's kin or a close friend (Hoffman (2000)). Law professors could encourage students to consider absent potential victims of judicial decisions and to imagine relatives or close friends among them. In any case, empathic bias must be kept in mind and given consideration in any legal context that might involve empathy.

Empathy and Trauma Culture: Imaging Catastrophe

E. Ann Kaplan

Media scholars have begun to discuss new digital viewing contexts, such as cell phones, ipods, internet, video games, and more (see Marsha Kinder (1991) or Anne Friedberg (2006)) but few have explored processes involved in responding to images of catastrophe in a rapidly expanding visual culture. Scholars have mainly studied exhibition sites, visual techniques, ideological meanings, and how new global networks are structured. Response to an image is partly determined by the way it has been composed—editing, visual style, purpose—and partly by its context for exhibition, but scholars have assumed that cognition—meaning—is primary. My view is that response is also, especially in regard to images of catastrophe, emotional. We bring culturally shaped emotions to reception, and in turn, our emotions are aroused (we might say *constructed*) by images. For the purposes of this chapter, I will focus on empathy as an emotion central to response to images of disaster.

While psychologists often ignore issues of cultural coding in analyzing emotions, these are important for humanities scholars working at the intersection of virtual and social worlds. We need to think about where emotions come from. Sara Ahmed has argued that emotions circulate in cultures and certain emotions become attached to certain bodies (Ahmed (2004)).¹ Teresa Brennan has analyzed what she terms 'the transmission of affect,' and the phenomenon of emotional contagion crucial to public feelings (Brennan (2004)). For these scholars, emotions are not only something that we have prior to, but something that is also produced in, encounters in the social world, which has become increasingly a world of images. Journalism, advertisements, television, movies, the internet, political and religious propaganda, and other sorts of appeals

¹ José Esteban Muñoz (2000) goes further and suggests that there is an unofficial national affect that he calls 'whiteness' (no less powerfully entrenched than the requirement for English as a national language). 'Whiteness', he claims, 'is a cultural logic which can be understood as an affective code that positions itself as the Law' (2000: 69).

enlist the power of images to move their audiences under the radar of cognition. Emotions produced in these ways may be called 'Public Feelings.'

Empathy, as is well known, is a complex pro-social emotion, with limitations. It is by no means always a response that serves the best cause or that necessarily has positive results. And yet, humans would be totally lost without empathy. Martin Hoffman has theorized six stages (summarized in this volume) through which empathy develops in humans, with adults achieving a mature empathy that is my focus here (Hoffman (2000)). Important for my project is Hoffman's demonstration that from childhood and 'throughout adult life empathic distress has a sympathetic component.' For Hoffman, this is crucial 'because the sympathetic component turns empathic distress into a clearly pro-social motive' (Hoffman (2000): 88; see also Hoffman (1986, 2007) and his chapter in this volume). In what follows, working with film and TV-mediated empathic responses to trauma, I will explore the intricate interrelationship of three kinds of empathic response to images. At the two extremes are what I call 'empty empathy' and 'witnessing,' with 'vicarious trauma' an in between response. All three are manifestations of living in a 'trauma culture' (Kaplan (2005)). By this I mean that when representations of victims prevail in a culture, then people other than the direct victims become vulnerable to traumatization through the media—second-hand, as it were. All three types of response demonstrate the different ways in which empathy may be both created and mobilized. I will explore the different kinds of empathic arousal by an image, which depend on the context (situation within which an image is received, what the viewer brings to the image) and aesthetic form (the kind of appeal an image offers, its aesthetic quality).

In this chapter, then, I define, analyze, and critique these three possible empathic responses to images of catastrophe, depending on the form an image takes, where it is placed, and the situation of the viewer. All three responses involve empathy, but what my case studies try to show is that empathy has multiple forms—that empathy is far from a monolithic emotion. I'll discuss how the form of the image, its placement, and context, will influence the type of empathy one experiences. These three responses are (a) secondary or vicarious trauma (VT), a response in which the viewer is shocked to the extent of being emotionally over-aroused; that is, the empathic response to an image of a catastrophe may be so strong and personally painful that the individual turns away, or thinks distracting thoughts, unable to endure the feelings aroused; (b) a response I call 'empty empathy' because of the transitory, fleeting nature of the empathic emotions that viewers often experience; that is, what starts as an empathic response gets transformed into numbing by the succession of catastrophes displayed before the viewer, as in TV newscasts or reading a newspaper; and finally (c) what I call 'witnessing'—a response that may change the viewer in a positive pro-social manner, and that, more than the first two types of response, involves ethics. Witnessing is especially important in what follows because of the special relationship between empathy and 'witnessing'—a term whose common meaning I extend. That is, while much of the research on empathy focuses on processes through which an individual

comes to empathize with another, 'witnessing' requires much more than empathizing with suffering of a person one sees in front of her (whether an image or a live event). It involves feeling so shocked by suffering that one is moved to act. One may feel vaguely responsible, but in any case one is motivated to see that justice is done. In witnessing we understand empathy's potential social impact, especially when it is deeply and enduringly felt. This is in contrast to empathy's fragility which emerges in some of my case studies in the phenomena of 'vicarious trauma' and 'empty empathy'.²

15.1 Trauma Culture and Images of Catastrophe

After 9/11, trauma moved to the center of U.S. consciousness. And the government, and more germane to my argument, the U.S. media, has seen fit to create a culture of trauma through continuing focus on terrorism—which is linked to, and was used as justification for, the invasion of Iraq. I am not denying that terrorism is a serious issue. I want rather to discuss the *emotional* work that media discourses of trauma, war, and terrorism do in the U.S. today. I have chosen to discuss newspaper images and (briefly) TV reports because these are entities we deal with daily, in the course of our everyday movements. Film is still (even with DVD and internet access) a type of activity we have to set aside time for. I have dealt with trauma and film elsewhere (Kaplan (2005)), and some of the theories I outline in dealing with reporting may apply to film. But my aim here is to theorize how empathy is involved in the impact of daily images of catastrophe, although I also look briefly at other sites such as the internet and the museum.³

An example of the daily barrage of images may be found in a randomly selected issue of *The New York Times*. On October 12, 2005, each turn of the page brought a new disaster for the reader to confront, from the earthquake in Pakistan, to poverty in Africa, disasters in Iraq and Guatemala, and on to Hurricane Katrina. Viewing traumatic events has become a worrying national preoccupation. While newspapers, radio, and television have *always* focused on tragic or horrific happenings, media were not as central to people's daily lives as they now are. Images of trauma bombard us daily.⁴ Traumatized people speak to us of their pain and suffering. Twenty-four hour television, like CNN, with reporters all over the world, bring catastrophes to us live, with continuing coverage as they are happening. New digital technologies, especially the internet, make global communication of catastrophe instantaneous. On a day like October 12, do we escape from this series of disasters into mindless entertainment? Do we turn away from such images because they have become routine? What happens to viewers in regard to empathy as we watch reporters interview individuals about their

² Martin Hoffman has begun to theorize 'depth of empathic feeling.' See Hoffman (2008): 449–52.

³ For the purposes of my argument, my case studies are limited to the period 2003–2005. Readers will understand the logic of this as the chapter develops.

⁴ Brian Massumi (1996) asks us to 'Think of the image/expression events in which we bathe. Think interruption. Think of the fast cuts of the video clip or the too-cool TV commercials... Think of our bombardment by commercial images off the screen, at every step in our daily rounds' (234).

pain, sometimes immediately after, or even during, a catastrophe?⁵ If it is true that we are surrounded by spectacles of individual suffering, what effect is this having on the millions of people consuming these images? How is empathy (and its complexities, its limitations, and varied forms) in particular central to understanding the role of images in our lives today?

There are many ways in which the realities of terrorism, war, and catastrophe could be handled by reporters. While I understand a certain serendipity in what images finally appear on our screens and newspapers, the specific form that results is important since empathic response regarding catastrophes will depend partly on images people are given.⁶ Response will also vary according to what viewers bring to an image both in regard to idiosyncratic emotional make-up and to norms of a subject's culture. The generally liberal politics of contemporary Eurocentric cultures together with emotional conventions (initiated by Hollywood) tends to foster sensitivity to suffering. But, as I will show, this is less empathy proper (as may be found in non-Eurocentric cultures accustomed to caring for the community) than the degraded form that is sentimentality.⁷ I am not, then, claiming that all viewers will respond in similar ways to the same images. Indeed, the experience of teaching has confirmed my sense that images are wild cards that can be interpreted in numerous ways, depending on what frameworks a viewer brings to an image as well as on historical and other contexts. Often, as Roland Barthes noted years ago, an image is anchored by some text or commentary (essential for advertisements) but when that is not the case, readings vary widely.⁸ However, I do claim (with appropriate evidence) that the three kinds of response I outline occur frequently, whether in relation to images I discuss or in relation to other images.

15.1.1 The Vicarious Trauma (VT) response

Before discussing VT, it will help to have a definition of trauma as experienced by individuals. In *Trauma Culture* (Kaplan (2005)), I discuss theories of psychic trauma

⁵ Or, for that matter, as we engage with television talk shows with live audiences also having people discuss horrible events, as if it is therapeutic.

⁶ The daily business of putting newspaper or TV reporting together involves numerous processes and rapid decisions. Thus, I am not talking about a specific process on any given day, but rather about an often unconscious culture of reporting that individuals may not even be aware of. It is by analyzing the result that we can deduce certain things about U.S. culture. That is my aim here as I work from select images to theorizing potential response.

⁷ Hollywood's sentimentality involves manipulating viewers' emotions to market films. Viewers enjoy fleeting sadness because they know all will come out right in the end. They do not have to confront the reality of trauma and suffering which cannot have a happy ending. For more on different conceptions of the subject in Eurocentric and non-Eurocentric cultures, see Teresa Brennan (2004), chs 1 and 2. 'The emotionally contained subject,' Brennan says, 'is a residual bastion of Eurocentrism...non-Western as well as premodern, preindustrial cultures assume that the person is *not* affectively contained' (2).

⁸ Indeed, as Sontag (1977) (following Barthes) noted 'even an entirely accurate caption is only one interpretation, necessarily a limiting one, of the photograph to which it is attached.' The caption, Sontag notes, can easily be undermined 'by the plurality of meanings that every photograph carries...and by the aesthetic relation to their subjects which all photographs inevitably propose' (109).

developed at the end of the nineteenth century as the industrial era got underway with resulting train and factory accidents that traumatized passengers and workers. Doctors and psychiatrists of the period debated physical versus psychic trauma, but Freud and his colleague Breuer added to ongoing theories in their studies of hysteria. Freud was later personally involved in debates about shell shock in World War I (Freud, (1919/1948)), and war trauma continued to be debated in the wake of World War II. Much later, psychologists working with Vietnam veterans and with child abuse victims in the early 1970's gathered more data about trauma (Herman (1992/1997)), and finally first in 1984 and then (a more extended account) in 1987 the American Psychiatric Society provided a diagnostic definition.⁹ From all this, literary theorists, such as Cathy Caruth (working with Psychiatry Professor, Bessel Van der Kolk), adopted a working definition of trauma as a shocking event that overwhelms the victim's cognitive mechanism (Caruth (1995)). The event bypasses the brain's meaning-making processes and is lodged in the body, dissociated from ordinary consciousness. In this view, trauma is known by its symptoms—that is through phobias, flashbacks, hallucinations, and nightmares—rather than by memory per se.¹⁰

Little noted in the research is that one's specific positioning vis-à-vis a traumatic event makes a difference in terms of its impact.¹¹ A sequence of varied relationships to the experience of trauma includes the position of bystander (one step removed) or that of a clinician listening to a patient discussing a traumatic experience.¹² Most people encounter large public traumatic events through visually and verbally mediated trauma (i.e. viewing trauma on film or other media, or reading a trauma narrative and constructing visual images from semantic data) (two steps removed), which is why (given my interest in trauma culture) I focus on so-called 'mediatized' secondary trauma in viewing images.

What data can we find about images of catastrophe producing vicarious trauma, and thus contributing to a U.S. 'trauma culture'? And to what degree does Vicarious Trauma involve empathy? Clearly, following the above definition, for the person

⁹ Laura S. Brown (1995) discusses the changes being made to APA's DSM IV diagnostic manual, partly inspired by feminist clinicians like herself and Judith Herman, in regard to Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome.

¹⁰ This definition has been adjusted by those who claim that some traumas are accessible directly, and by others who argue that traumatic events may suffer what memory in general suffers, namely subjection to unconscious fantasies and distortions. These differing views need not trouble us here.

¹¹ I also argue in the book that trauma produces new subjects, that the political-ideological context within which traumatic events occur shapes their impact, and that it is hard to separate individual and collective trauma. I stress further the difficulties of generalizing about trauma and its impact, for, as Freud pointed out long ago, how one reacts to a traumatic event depends on one's individual psychic history, on memories inevitably mixed with fantasies of prior catastrophes, and on the particular cultural and political context within which a catastrophe takes place, especially how it is 'managed' by institutional forces.

¹² That is, (1) Direct experience of trauma (trauma victim); (2) Relative or close friend of trauma victim or clinical worker brought in to help the victim (close but one step removed from direct experience); (3) Direct observation by a bystander of another's trauma (also one step removed); (4) Clinician hearing a patient's trauma narrative (a complex position involving both visual and semantic channels; it involves the face-to-face encounter with the survivor or the bystander within the intimacy of the counseling session) (also one step removed); (5) Visually and verbally mediated trauma.

experiencing a traumatic catastrophe first-hand, empathy is not in the picture. But for the viewer in cultures where feeling for the suffering of others is a norm, looking at an image of catastrophe may *start* with empathy. Martin Hoffman's definition of empathy as 'the involvement of psychological processes that make a person have feelings that are more congruent with another's situation than with his own situation' is pertinent (Hoffman (2000): 30). I am suggesting that what draws the viewer initially to the image of catastrophe is some sort of empathy. However, in the case of empathic over-arousal, including VT, the original empathic impulse to help turns back on the viewer or listener because the shock is too much; it overwhelms and freezes the subject.

I offer three sets of data of varying kinds and degrees of relevance to support the claim that VT as a form of empathic over-arousal is a genuine phenomenon that needs attention. First, data collected by psychologists Hoffman and Friedman from interviews with therapists treating trauma victims allows us to understand secondary trauma symptoms, and how empathy may be involved.¹³ In this data, therapists reporting their work with trauma patients start with an empathic response to the patient, but interestingly (for my purposes here) often use language that sounds as if they are creating a film in their minds of the events people narrate. One therapist said, I quote: 'I created an image in my own mind, like a movie, of what she was describing' (patient thrown from Disneyland ride), and of another case, 'As I write this, I see the picture of the man who hurt her in my mind's eye (the picture I created in my imagination as she spoke);' and a third recounted that she 'had images of her in the situations she (the patient) described. She was usually very articulate so her narrative created flashes of visual images of her traumas, along with the feelings that went with those images.' Others seem haunted by images, as when a clinician reported 'horror and images of faces, body parts, smells of blood and flesh.' One therapist notes that she 'was hyper-vigilant for three days, worried over what she might do, about suicide.' Another respondent said, 'Sometimes after hearing incidents like this, I cannot be exposed to anything else that hints of violence against people as I cannot get enough distance from the event. I think about what if such had happened to me or to my children... I refuse to watch TV or violent movies, as it feels too real to me' (Quoted in interview data collected by Martin Hoffman and Tatiana Friedman at New York University, and used by Hoffman in his chapter in this volume). Here, the border between TV or movie images and the 'reality' of her patient's experiences is blurred for the therapist. The comment confirms the power of visual media to trigger symptoms of vicarious trauma.

But is VT only a result of an interpersonal relationship? Does it apply to viewing images, say on TV? My second data set, a psychological study of student responses to

¹³ The study was done by Martin L Hoffman and Tatiana Friedman at New York University. Some of the clinicians' replies to Hoffman/Friedman's questions suggest that visuality links cinema, victims' accounts, and therapists' responses to those accounts. See also research by L.A. Pearlman and P.S. Maclan on *vicarious traumatization* (1995).

seeing an Australian ethnographic film about circumcision, would support the claim that films can produce vicarious trauma attributed to overwhelming the spectator, leading to the 'belatedness' of response, and spectators avoiding screen images (Step 5 in sequence described in Footnote 12). Richard Lazarus et al., studying stress in the 1960s at UC Berkeley, turned to using film in laboratory experiments because film avoided both deception and 'losing the realism of the naturalistic state' usual in experimental laboratory conditions (Lazarus et al. (1962): 2). Lazarus notes that the 'delay in obtaining a disturbed response was surprising' (he is referring here to the well-known *nachträglichkeit* of trauma (8); later studies by Mardi Jan Horowitz extending Lazarus' use of the circumcision film, cited symptoms now commonly known as vicarious trauma, including again the delayed traumatic reaction to the film.¹⁴ Horowitz noted that 'The period after the traumatic film lead to more reports of film references, and more instances of forgetting' (556).

How common are such over-arousal reactions in response to daily images on TV or in newspapers? And what difference would it make if the subjects in the case of images U.S. publics daily consume involve individuals less remote than Australian Aborigines? The case of the Vietnam War, when some shocking news images were shown, suggests that empathic over-arousal can take place from viewing pictures. Some readers will recall the impact of the image of a little girl having been napalmed running from her village (see Image 15.1). (We now know a great deal about this girl, Kim Phuc, whose book describing her experiences is widely available¹⁵). The form of the image with the little girl's tortured screaming face directed at the viewer, her burned arms held away from her body in extreme pain, perhaps first elicited empathic identification (what if this happened to me?) before shock set in. In this and other cases noted below, I would argue, following Hoffman, that the empathic distress such images cause has a sympathetic component. This makes the element of empathy in VT different from that in other cases to be studied below. Because the sympathetic component in images from Vietnam may have lead to anti-war protests, generally editors of daily newspapers and TV programs shy away from disturbing images partly because they worry about the politics of such over-arousal.

I'll briefly mention three less common instances of images causing a vicarious trauma reaction in which the response starts with empathy involving a sympathetic component, but becomes too arousing as the full impact of the image registers. All require more examination than I can give here. First, images of ethnic slaughter in Rwanda. These are mainly found in documentaries, although the Hollywood film, *Hotel Rwanda*, had several graphic scenes, and others appeared in select newspapers and

¹⁴ It should be noted that these psychology researchers were not interested (as I am) in the pro-social impact of trauma films, in their moral or political import, or the aesthetic strategies that produce traumatic effect in the viewers.

¹⁵ See Denis Chong's (2000) narrative about Kim Phuc in *The Girl in the Picture: The Story of Kim Phuc, the Photograph and the Vietnam War*.



Image 15.1 Vietnam 1972: Kim Phuc running after being Napalmed.

With permission of Nick Ut/Associated Press.

journals. One image of female bodies left in a field that I found on the internet was especially shocking. It showed a mother in the foreground feeding her baby at her breast while dying, and in the background other, presumably raped, women. Elsewhere, I discuss diverse reactions to clips from a Rwanda documentary shown in a class I taught. Students' responses to the images of rape and genocide showed that images can produce powerful and varied emotional reactions in viewers that remain disturbing for days.¹⁶

Second, images of dire poverty in Africa. My example is from Sebastiao Salgado, who is famous for his dedication to documenting the devastating impact of vast numbers of peoples displaced by neo-colonialism, especially in Africa. His photographs can be seen in exhibitions or in the many books showcasing his work. These images are powerful and disturbing, even as Salgado tries to soften the horror through artistic strategies—such as lighting and composition—showing the dignity and grace of people living on the edge of catastrophe.¹⁷ One image comments bitterly on classic icons of

¹⁶ In *Trauma Culture* I discuss responses to images of rape and genocide in Rwanda in a class on trauma that I taught in 2001. A Journalism student presented her research about a Rwandan documentary in which women were interviewed about the violent tragic inter-ethnic war, showing long clips of the film.

¹⁷ The topic of making photographs of pain and suffering is getting new attention—as in a City University of New York conference on 'Picturing Atrocity: Photographs in Crisis' (December 9 2005), or studies of the Brazilian photographer, Sebastiao Salgado. Salgado's amazing (graphic, beautiful) photographs of migration



Image 15.2 A mother gazes at her starved child.

From Sebastião Salgado's *Sahel: The End of the Road, Africa*. Courtesy of Sebastião Salgado/Amazonas/Contact Press Images.

Virgin and Child in showing a painfully thin mourning mother, draped like the Virgin Mary, leaning over a all but dead skeletal child. See Image 15.2.

Finally, images of lynching in the American South (gathered together by James Allen (2000) in his powerful volume *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photographs in America*) are especially disturbing for two reasons. First, they show white people enjoying themselves as at a picnic while the lynching is taking place; and second, the images were made into postcards sent to relatives and friends. One image shows the white people, including children, looking at the camera (some even smiling) while above their heads a black man hangs from a tree. These images are too shocking to be shown in any class,

displaced peoples, and extreme global poverty have provoked a productive debate about photographing victims, their intended audience, and what aesthetics such images should offer, which I discuss briefly below.

although part of me would want to insist that Americans confront our inhumanity that is part of U.S. history.

But to what end, the over-arousal, you might ask? Doesn't the experience simply leave the viewer preoccupied with her own feelings, and unable to complete the empathic impulse of pro-social helping? May empathic over-arousal rather lead to a deadening or denial of affect, or habituation to catastrophe? Let me turn to the second type of response before attending to these questions.

15.2 Empty Empathy

Given the definition of empathy above, 'empty' empathy is empathy that does not result in pro-social behavior but is also not an empathetic/sympathetic response to a shocking image like those above. Here it is perhaps useful to extend Hoffman's empathy definition so as to take into account the difference between empathic response in the here and now of lived experience and in relation to viewing a media image. In the here and now situation, a person observes and is part of the total situation in which a catastrophe happens. This is not usually the case with images. Differences in media empathy partly depend on how far an image is able to convey the situation and context to a viewer. Empathy that is 'empty' is produced by images that occur in at least two ways. First, images that are received in succession. My opening discussion of the October 12 *New York Times* series of pictures of catastrophe is a good example. In this case, one's empathy for victims may be aroused by each image, but then as images come in succession, it dissipates. Each image of catastrophe cancels out or interferes with the empathic impact of the prior image. Second is the concept of fragmentation leading to empty empathy. Here the array of separate images of suffering without any context or background information provided, and focusing on the pain of strange individuals whom we see at a distance cannot elicit more than a fleeting empathy. There is then a rapid diminution of the affect. There is no socio-political context for actually putting ourselves in the situation of those suffering from catastrophe, for experiencing it deeply and enduringly. Succession and fragmentation usually involve either close-ups of suffering individuals or images of an anonymous mass of people. For example, think of the sweeping images (taken from airplanes) of refugee camps in Darfur which appear as dots in a sea of sand. When the camera closes in, it is often on an exhausted western United Nations or other representative, or an overwhelmed white nurse or doctor. While we might empathize with such individuals in their distressful work, we do not have an idea of the whole situation. The 'Others' were only indicated by the 'dots' on the aerial image. To complete the situation, we would need to be presented with the perspective of the 'Other' who remains invisible. That's why images of these kinds only elicit empty empathy.

As I noted earlier, Eurocentric cultures do encourage sympathetic feelings for suffering in others, but while this may be allied to empathy, it does not involve the complexity of, in Hoffman's words (quoted earlier) 'involvement of psychological

processes that make person have feelings that are more congruent with another's situation than with his own situation.' Instead, the person reacts on a superficial level that does not get as far as truly congruent feelings, but instead she remains preoccupied with her own tears. Several humanities scholars have rightly objected to a culture of 'wounded attachments' and sentimentality (Wendy Brown (1995); Lauren Berlant (1997)). The concept of empty empathy illuminates how a certain kind of media reporting encourages sentimentality by presenting TV viewers or newspaper readers with a daily barrage of images of individual pain. Using as my case study for 'empty empathy' the 2003 coverage of the war on Iraq, I'll argue that the media coverage was either characterized by succession and fragmentation and thus aroused only 'empty' empathy, closely allied to sentimentality; or that images deliberately avoided arousing empathy in an effort to elicit emotions in another register—namely supporting U.S. troops presumably in Iraq to help people to a better life. The deliberate censoring of images of U.S. casualties and corpses was not new. Images of casualties were discouraged in World War II as well, but it is especially remarkable in the case of a war that is arguably not really a war as such. Perhaps the Iraq reporting took its cue from what authorities learned from Vietnam reporting, as I note below.¹⁸

A typical kind of coverage involved a reporter interviewing an individual soldier or commander about his or her experiences, but perhaps the most graphic example of reporting resorting to melodrama was the case of Jessica Lynch—a drama that included later doubts about the heroism of the capture. The Lynch story occupied hours of TV time with details of Jessica's life, interviews with her family, and retelling of her original capture by the Iraqis, her wounding, and (supposed) recapture by American forces. Lynch's photograph made the front cover of *Newsweek* (April 14, 2003), with an inside story showing images of Jessica's childhood and of her family. Subsequently, a TV movie was made about the episode.¹⁹ In such an elaborated story, viewers may experience genuine empathy for the individual, but the melodramatic form of the story prevents the empathy from lasting and turning toward the collectivity I'll describe in a moment.

Newspaper coverage in daily images in the March 2003 *New York Times*' 'A Nation at War' section focused on individuals.²⁰ On Sunday March 30 2003, the focus was 'the faces and stories of the first American casualties' (A1, B7). Portraits of the 27 dead soldiers remind one of the portraits of those killed in 9/11. We do not see maimed and bloodied images, but rather neat posed official photographs, situating the soldiers

¹⁸ For more on war photography and its history, see Sontag's last book, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003).

¹⁹ In this kind of media reporting, spectators are asked to peek in on an individual's life in war rather than to think about the ethics of the war, human rights, and other important topics. We are encouraged to identify with specific people—to enter their personal lives.

²⁰ I do not claim the *New York Times* represents a national consensus, but the images I'll discuss were distributed widely across a range of newspapers and media. Many news stories and images are shared via news services, then reprinted as a group in special issues of magazines like *Time* (many newspaper images were gathered into *Time*'s 'Best Images of 2005') and can be found in internet image files like Google's.



Image 15.3 A Marine doctor holds an Iraqi girl whose mother has been killed.

With permission of Daniel Sagoli/Reuters.

as having died in a noble national cause. And there are similar stories to those told about 9/11 victims in the accompanying article. We feel empathy for their loss and for grieving families, but the soldiers are strangers. Sentimental patriotism would seem the predominant fleeting emotion. There is nothing for us to think and feel further about.

Some images may have aroused sympathy for the dangerous plight of soldiers involved in a guerilla war. Images of men with guns on tanks or warily parading through areas where terrorists were suspected, capable of being blown up momentarily aroused fleeting empathy, as did images of soldiers hurriedly forced to put on gas masks because of supposed biological warfare. But heroic images of men on the battlefield or caring for wounded Iraqis or, as in the famous photo of a male marine holding an Iraqi child in his spacious arms, interfered with compassion for the soldiers because they were in the 'strong' helping position. His masculinity in this case was enhanced by the addition of the comforting 'softness' of cuddling the child.²¹ Maleness as protecting, taking care of the small ones is a common trope in war imagery. See Image 15.3.

²¹ I was reminded of two widely disparate images—King Kong in the recent remake of the 1930's film, and the Pieta.

Images of the Iraq War reveal much about how commercial visual media function in relation to the 'real'—that is, we can see that visual media shape how we feel about our lived worlds, how they 'hail' us as particular kinds of U.S.-identified subjects, how in this case they constructed the war for U.S. citizens through highly select images.²² While this is not unusual (images were restricted in the case of World War II), in the case of Iraq it's hard not to see it as political given the lack of consensus about this, as also the Vietnam war. Indeed, as briefly noted, some images from Vietnam evidently did over-arouse and encourage an anti-war sentiment the media did not intend to foster in regard to Iraq. Thus in the first year there were no images of maimed soldiers or corpses littering the landscape after a suicide or other bombings. Only belatedly and in select magazines were such realities offered in graphic stories about (still individual, but real) suffering.²³ Lacking in mainstream reporting was information about reasons for invading Iraq, and its sociocultural impact. Empty empathy prevailed.

The Abu Ghraib images, released unofficially, were shocking but not in the sense of images shown earlier as producing VT. These images, in fact, would require discussion of yet another category, namely voyeurism and sadism, which I cannot develop here. The images were shocking for what they showed about the perverse sexualities and behaviors of soldiers in extreme situations but not in the sense of empathic over-arousal. The images may have even provided some titillation for certain viewers. Susan Sontag suggested that images of the repulsive are alluring (or are seductive, if you prefer) (2003), but she did not discuss why—an area that would surely require looking at Freud and sadism.

The third preferred kind of image to be discussed, namely 'witnessing,' produces a different level of response to catastrophe. My case studies here come first from daily news reporting, and then from images of paintings in a museum.

15.3 Witnessing—and Its Ethics

As one of the few film scholars to discuss vicarious trauma in any depth, Joshua Hirsch notes that despite the mediation involved in seeing images, 'the relaying of trauma to the public through photographic imagery' can be most graphically demonstrated in Susan Sontag's description of her initial reaction to photographs of concentration camps. Sontag describes her life as divided into two parts, 'before I saw those photographs (I was twelve) and after, though it was several years before I understood fully what they were about.' She describes how 'When I looked at those photographs, something broke. Some limit had been reached, and not only that of horror; I felt

²² Journalist reporting follows certain codes (or rhetorical strategies) that govern what is shown and what may be said. Briefly, in the U.S., the genre requires a focus on individual suffering and pain, on the drama of catastrophe as it affects personal lives. Personal stories sell: it's what we want to hear, rather than our feelings being evoked in a way that moves beyond the individual to the collective, in the sense of collective responsibility, not of a mere image community other scholars have discussed.

²³ See Denis Chong's narrative about Kim Phuc in Chong (2000).

irrevocably grieved, wounded, but a part of my feelings started to tighten; something went dead; something is still crying' (Sontag (1977): 19–20).

As Hirsch notes, Sontag's account provides a clear example of vicarious image-induced trauma, such as 'the sense of shock, of numbing, of being forever changed,' along with references to the 'belatedness' characteristic of traumatic reactions (Hirsch (2004): 6). But this is not only a case of VT (similar to those discussed earlier) but also an example of what I call an 'ethics of witnessing.' In line with this ethics, Sontag has been essentially transformed by the experience of seeing the holocaust photographs. Powerful feeling came first, later cognition. She continued to be interested in catastrophes and researching the question of a photograph's impact. The holocaust photographs haunted her as she grappled with questions about morality, meaning, and emotion in images, and one of the last acts of her life was electing to go to Sarajevo in the midst of the ethnic war to see how she could help. Her last book, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, returns to the question of images of horror, inspired partly by the Abu Ghraib photographs that had just appeared. The image of a Goya war etching on the cover suggests that human savagery is not new and recalls the lynching image from the American South that repeats the iconography of a hanging man and an onlooker (see Image 15.4). However, there is an important difference. In the Goya etching the soldier looks up at the hanged man, suggesting a degree of humanity, while in the lynching the white families ignore the hanged man and smile at the camera taking a photo to send to friends.

Sontag's position in her 2003 book has changed less than it may seem. While she still agrees that film and TV images change how we see the world, she adds that because we are 'not totally transformed by images of atrocity does not impugn the ethical value of *an assault by image*' (Sontag (2003): 116). 'Images,' she says, 'have been reproached for being a way of watching suffering at a distance, as if there were some other way of watching' (117). Yet that is not my critique of such images. I am rather troubled by the sentimentality of the distanced but brief and sentimental response, not just that *there is* distance. Indeed, the concept of ethical witnessing requires a degree of distance. But the distance involved in ethical self-examination and character change is a consequence of the affect experience, not a distancing that prevents emotional response. When Sontag says that 'There is nothing wrong with standing back and thinking' (118), she comes close to the ethics I have in mind. If images, as John Leonard notes in a review of *Regarding the Pain of Others*, can be 'an invitation to pay attention, to reflect, to learn, to examine the rationalization for mass suffering offered by established powers' (Leonard (2003): 10), then they are ethical. But neither Sontag nor Leonard specify which images invite us to reflect, learn—a question I turn to next.

I want to suggest that national publics need exposure to images that ask us to do a different kind of work than daily images of victims do, and that provoke a response other than those of vicarious trauma and empty empathy which, we have seen, can be limited. The trouble with images that arouse empty empathy is the passive position such pictures put the viewer in. Even the magnificent photographs of Sebastião

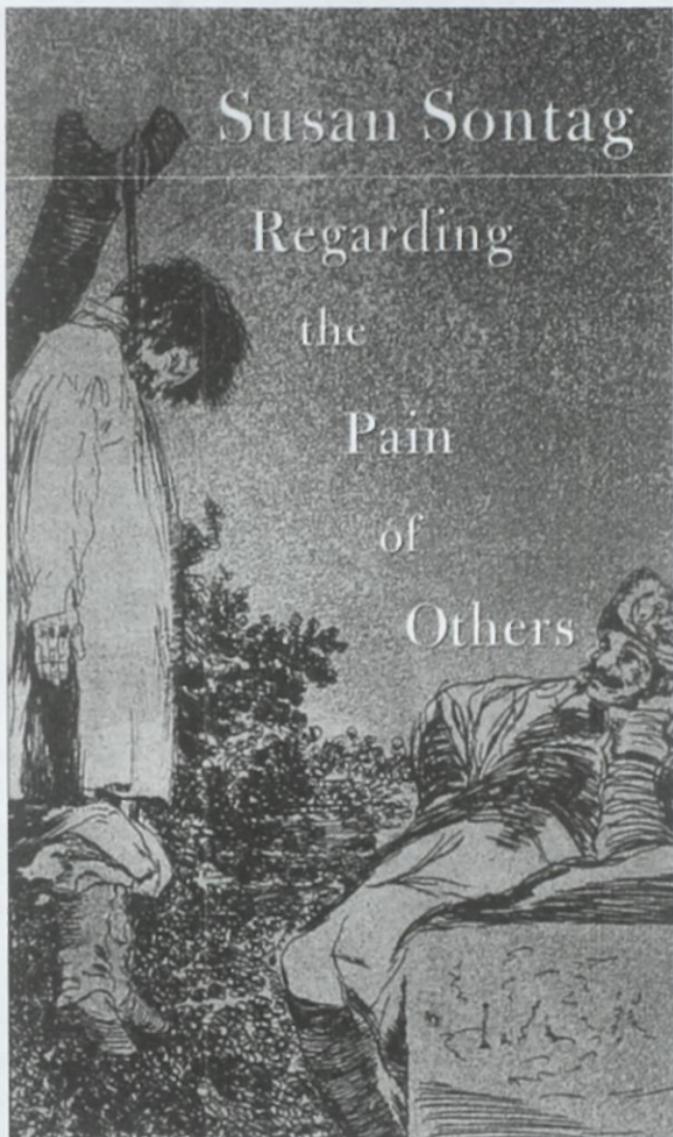


Image 15.4 Goya etching from "The Disasters of War," imaged on Susan Sontag's *Regarding the Pain of Others*.

Courtesy of Farrar, Straus, & Giroux.

Salgado reveal only the victims. While these photographs stress the subjects' dignity and perseverance against all odds, they do not move the viewer to action. They rather make one feel hopeless. Empty empathy is linked to this feeling of hopelessness, of not wanting to believe people have to suffer in these ways, to live like the photos show them living and dying. As one critic puts it, Salgado's interest in eye contact with his

subjects works against his desire for social change in not showing the people angry or enraged about their situation, or showing the perpetrators.²⁴

Witnessing as I conceive it involves an element of both vicarious trauma—the shock of recognition of humans' capacity for evil—and empathy proper, that is as Hoffman put it, a deep and enduring identification with what the victims in the case feel. Just observing would not be witnessing in this enhanced sense. Observing might produce VT, but again that alone would not be witnessing. Something else has to come in for witnessing to take place. The pro-social aspect of empathy sets the stage for witnessing, since taking responsibility for injustice by listening carefully to victims or actually doing something about injustice as Sontag did, is required for witnessing. I'll return to these issues after looking at case studies.

The first Katrina images gestured toward the kind of reporting that might come close to witnessing because viewers had a sense of the whole situation and could vicariously experience the impact on many, not just individuals. It is instructive to compare and contrast the media reporting from images brought to us from Iraq with images from Hurricane Katrina. While from the start, images of the war in Iraq were heavily controlled, resulting in the empty empathy and other emotions, in the case of Katrina the government was so out of the loop, so unaware or uncaring about New Orleans and the dangers certain areas faced, that the reporters were on the ground or in the air sending digital images before anyone at the White House knew or understood the implications of their unconscious carelessness about the largely African American people in areas of danger. One striking difference between the early Iraq photos focused on close-ups of soldiers and these early Katrina images is that here we see individuals as members of groups, not the focus *only* on individuals as in the early Iraq photos. The implicit government control in the case of Iraq has two consequences. First, this control limited what images reporters were allowed to print (at this stage, no images of severely wounded American soldiers, no images of coffins being flown back to the U.S., no images of badly mutilated veterans, etc.).²⁵ Second, government control entailed images taking the forms I discussed that generated patriotic emotions. In the case of Katrina, the early lack of control allowed for a greater variety of forms that generated more complex, varied, and ethical emotional impact involving both empathy and shock.

For example, let's look at a sequence of Katrina images that appeared together in *The New York Times*. First, an image of people crowded outside the superdome waiting to get in allowed us to see the entire situation (Image 15.5). The people here do not form an anonymous group without context as in the shots of camps in Darfur mentioned

²⁴ Nancy Scheper-Hughes (2003) wonders why Salgado doesn't show perpetrators: 'Might the next big book by Sebastião be entitled *Capitalism*, depicting the great, clanking, grinding gears of global capitalism? ... Might we fantasize a series of portraits ... not of children but of the agents of capital?' (42).

²⁵ This very censoring confirms that images do have a powerful emotional impact or else why forbid them?



Image 15.5 Katrina 2005: Outside the Superdome. Thousands of people waited for buses to take them away.

With permission of Nicole Bengiveno/*The New York Times*/Redux.



Image 15.6 Katrina 2005: Inside the Superdome. People settling into the dome.

With permission of Vincent Laforet/*The New York Times*/Redux.



Image 15.7 Katrina 2005: In the streets. After the floodwaters, silent streets tell tales.
With permission of Nicole Bengiveno/*The New York Times*/Redux.

before. We see their bodies and some faces, and can empathize with their plight as they wait for relief. Second, the camera moves inside the dome (Image 15.6). This image allows the viewer to move on from empathic emotions elicited by the dejection and hopelessness of the individual in the foreground to many others further back in the dome. Here the space in the background is shown as well as a close-up of a man in the foreground. Third, photos of the devastated environment without any people in sight suggest much about the suffering and about the general situation as opposed to one person's specific loss (Image 15.7). The doll lying abandoned suggests the haste with which a child was rushed out of the area, and the sneaker too indicates no time even to pick up a shoe. There were also devastating images of corpses floating in the water, or of simple shrines to the dead. There was no government prohibition on images of devastation or of suffering because at first Katrina was considered only a 'natural' disaster. Only later did the (perhaps unconscious) politics emerge in regard to the relationship between lack of preparation for the hurricane and the social group most vulnerable to it.

These first images did not, perhaps could not, fall into the personal story genre that was firmly kept in place for the reporting of the Iraq War. The chaos was such that at first there were no spokespersons for the victims as there were in the well-organized U.S. Military in Iraq, who colluded with government wishes about what to show and say, and what to keep hidden. The people in New Orleans were struggling simply to escape and survive, leaving it to reporters to catch what images they could of the

catastrophe. As time went on, journalists resorted to the personal story but still editorials and columnists in the *New York Times* continued, especially with the investigation into FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency) and into the extent and timing of government knowledge, to discuss larger issues in which emerged emotions like shame about the abandonment of a largely African American population to the horrendous fatal floods.

Images of people left to drown, waiting for busses that never came, of the old people left in retirement communities to die, of those finally seeming to be safe in the superdome only to discover it was insecure and without provisions, aroused my empathy but also anger and shame that this could happen in the U.S. In registering the injustice, I was providing a witness to people's pain. The relatively free flow of images under the radar of government control allowed political knowledge to be felt in a way not possible in reporting from Iraq with their accompanying rhetoric of heroism, bravery, sacrifice.

The Katrina images permitted a certain level of witnessing to unconscious racism in the U.S. through inviting viewers to move from empathic identification with the individual to the group, the community, the context. In experiencing the affect of the images, then, we were lead from empathy with the individual to the mass (perhaps the only way that we can come to empathize with a group), and a model for what we can hope for through 'witnessing.' We had to think about how it was that a mass of people were under such needless duress. We became witnesses to the catastrophe and its injustice.

My final case studies come from paintings in a museum. Jerome Witkin's 'Entering Darkness' was inspired by an account by a Red Cross Nurse, Dorothy Wahlstrom, in Rhonda Lewin's *Witnesses to the Holocaust* (see Image 15.8). This painting at once offers the viewer identification with a protagonist, the Nurse entering Dachau as part of the liberation of camps in 1945, while at the same time, on another level, the painting renders the horror of what the Nazis did through ghastly surreal images beyond the Nurse's single consciousness. In a way, her consciousness is located as just one element of the traumatic shock of the liberators and the western world at understanding what had gone on in the camps. The painting, then, partly expresses horror through the Nurse, but the images also move beyond her purview to mythical, allegorical levels that gesture towards a common trope of revulsion at violence and human devastation of other humans.

Richard Harden's 'My Breath' and 'Falling,' another huge composite painting, is made up of two linked parts, and takes a less realist narrative position (Image 15.9). Here we see first what looks like an innocent field of poppies (although those of us who know Anselm Kiefer's work would immediately suspect something) only to find, as we continue to gaze, what looks like a corpse or skeleton scattered amongst the flowers. The side panels figure nude women, their gaze turned from the viewer, apparently sinking down in a whirling mass of ashes. The viewer is placed so as to

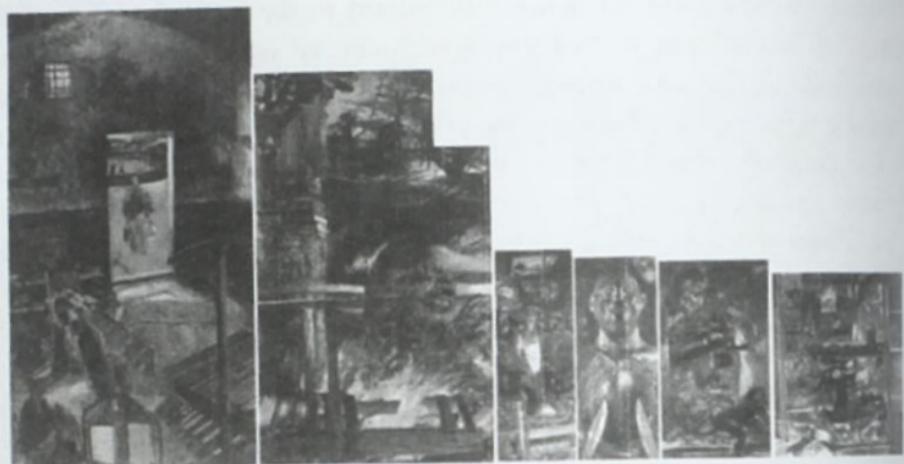


Image 15.8 *Entering Darkness*, by Jerome Witkin.

Courtesy of Jack Rutberg Fine Arts Los Angeles.

Richard Harden's "My Breath" and "Falling"

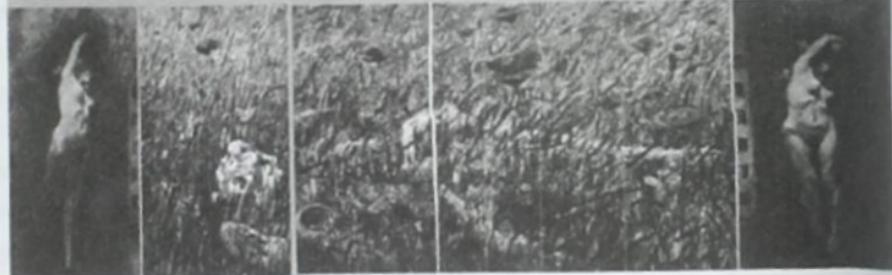


Image 15.9 *My Breath* and *Falling*, by Richard Harden.

Courtesy of Richard Harden.

understand this is a world gone awry: natural beauty contains horror; women, made vulnerable by nakedness and falling amid ashes, brings up Nazi camp associations although this work evidently refers to Kosovo. The uncertainty of which catastrophe is indicated adds to the generalization crucial to an ethics of witnessing, and to a certain distancing effect that is necessary for an ethical impact.

We might call response to these paintings the 'Sontag Effect,' referring back to an earlier discussion of Sontag's reaction to seeing images of Holocaust victims. Don Laub's reflections on his work with Holocaust victims also illuminate witnessing against the simpler experience of empathy or vicarious trauma (Laub (1995)). For Laub what makes the Holocaust so horrifying is that, 'during its historical occurrence, it

event produced no witnesses' (1995: 65).²⁶ Here Laub is not saying that there were no observers but as noted earlier, observing is not witnessing. Arguably the difference involves distance. Inside the camps, there was no distance, no ability to situate what was happening against some other reality. Empathic sharing entails closeness but may lead to the over-arousal of vicarious trauma, or the sentimentalism of empty empathy. Witnessing has to do with an image producing a deliberate ethical consciousness through empathic affect not related only to a specific person or character. For in bearing witness, in the sense I intend here, one not only provides a witness where no one was there to witness before, but relatedly, one may feel motivated to see that justice is done. Witnessing involves wanting to change the kind of world where injustice, of whatever kind, is common. While individual efforts, as in therapy, are immensely important (and therapists, like Laub, are often witnesses of a sort), there is also a need to mobilize the consciousness of large communities, such as the nation state, in which people elect their leaders and vote for or against policies that affect people's daily lives. The concept of empathy has to be extended from identification with a victim in the here and now to identification with groups, and from there to thinking about who is responsible for suffering. 'Witnessing' is the term I use for prompting an ethical response that will perhaps radically change the way someone views the world, or thinks about justice. Vicarious traumatization may be a component of witnessing (as we saw in the Vietnam images), but instead of only intensifying the desire to help an individual in front of one, witnessing leads to a broader empathic understanding of the meaning of what has been done to victims, of the politics of trauma being possible.²⁷

Most images that we see are part of consumer culture, and hence usually participate in prevailing culture codes that promote a focus on individual pain made public. It's as if personal pain is politics, leaving no room for a concept of the collective or of our collective response-ability (see Oliver (2004)) for national or international policies. Iraq War photos imaging individual soldiers and marines on the battlefield mask the Real of what is going on. They create an illusory screen hiding the unconscious that knows but does not know the devastation and loss of life the invasion has caused. We are not invited to understand the situation and its wrongs, as was more possible in the early Katrina images. The Iraq images concealed what they could not show (and still have trouble showing, namely horrible wounds, civilian deaths, impossible missions, etc.).²⁸

²⁶ Most importantly for my purposes, 'it is the encounter and the coming together between the survivor and the listener (standing in for the community) which makes possible something like a repossession of the act of witnessing. This joint responsibility is the source of the emerging truth' (69).

²⁷ One of the therapists in Hoffman's study treated several abused girls. She became an activist against such abuse. Her experiences with her patients thus transformed her and moved her to actively trying to help victims.

²⁸ On Sunday May 14, a *New York Times* article, 'Army Concerned About HBO War Film,' discussed senior military officials' worry over graphic footage of soldiers in a Baghdad Hospital being treated for wounds from roadside bombs and in combat. One HBO official noted that 'Anything showing the grim realities of war is, in a sense, antiwar.' Others however see the documentary as a tribute to the heroism of both soldiers and medical personnel (*New York Times*, Sunday May 14, 2006, p.24).

One of the main characteristics of the witnessing position is the deliberate refusal of an identification only with the specificity of individuals—a deliberate distancing from the subject to enable the interviewer to take in and respond to the traumatic situation (see David Becker (2003)), as in Witkin's and Harden's paintings. When a work constructs this sort of position for the spectator, it opens the text out to larger social and political meanings. Empathic identification with an individual is only the start: the narrative and structure of the paintings lead the viewer on from individuals to collectivities.

15.4 Epilogue

In this chapter, I have drawn on three genealogies—that of the history of images, of the new cultural studies research on public feelings, and psychology research on empathy—showing that images of catastrophe are the point of intersection of these genealogies or archives. Traumatic images are the site where feelings become public. Yet recent humanities research on public feelings has seldom considered the emotional impact of daily viewing of images of catastrophe.²⁹ This is partly because evidence is hard to obtain.³⁰ Witnessing is necessary for national traumas. People as collectively responsible require structures within which often silently endured traumatic experiences can be 'spoken' or imaged, and through which we can change the way we see the world, feeling (through empathic identification instead of only cognizing) injustice as something to be fought against collectively. In other words, one aim of the projects to make caring about injustice a predominant public feeling.

²⁹ In addition, in looking at the three dominant ways of responding to images of catastrophe, I have shown first how public feelings become private (e.g. how the media portrayal of the Iraq invasion as patriotism produces individual patriotic feeling); second, how private feelings become paradigms for public policy (e.g. how love for an individual's white child becomes a public policy that implicitly sanctions racism—as in Hurricane Katrina); and finally, I showed how the public sphere mobilizes individual feeling as (or instead of) political discourse (Berlant (1997)) (Iraq and Jessica Lynch). Overall, I showed how in our era of proliferation of traumatic images, private and public feelings become merged; rationality and emotion are all but impossible to separate. In this situation, it is more important than ever for scholars to study the relationship of viewers to media images, including the emotions involved in increasing ideological bias across corporate media.

³⁰ Rather than neglect this important area of enquiry, as you have seen, I have used what data I found, including case studies drawn from my own and my students' experiences in order to begin the process of theorizing emotional response provoked by public images of catastrophes.

Is Empathy a Virtue?

Heather D. Battaly

Is empathy a virtue?¹ Pre-theoretically, we think that empathy involves caring about, or sharing the emotions of, or knowing another person. To see this, we need only consider paradigm cases of empathy; for example, the empathy of a close friend, or therapist. Empathic friends and therapists care about the subject, share in her emotional highs and lows, and reliably predict her thoughts, feelings, and behavior. Is empathy, so construed, a virtue? Pre-theoretically, we treat it as one. After all, we think that empathy in friends and therapists makes them better people, and that it is morally good to care, know about, and share the emotions of others. We also resoundingly agree that it is morally good for doctors, teachers, and even fellow citizens to be empathic. We regularly praise doctors and teachers for caring about their patients and students, and reproach them when they do not. We also commend the empathic citizen who stops to aid victims of an accident, and judge those who pass by to be of lesser character. Pre-theoretically, we conceive of empathy as a quality that makes us morally good—as a moral virtue, ordinarily construed.²

Philosophers and psychologists have tried to improve on our ordinary, pre-theoretical concept of empathy by making it more accurate and precise. I will argue that if we adopt their current ‘improved’ concepts of empathy, then empathy is neither a moral nor an intellectual virtue. Ironically, our ordinary, ‘unimproved’ concept of empathy is better-suited for arguing that empathy is a virtue; but because it is, as it stands, a vague folk concept, such arguments will not get far. In section 16.1, I provide a conceptual overview which enumerates four different concepts of empathy, the first

¹ I would like to thank Peter Goldie, Amy Coplan and her 2008 seminar students, Jason Baehr and his 2007 seminar students, and two anonymous referees for comments on an earlier draft. I am also grateful to Bruce Russell, the participants of the 2008 Russell IV workshop, and to the participants of the Fall 2007 Carlsberg Foundation UCLA epistemology workshop, especially Nikolaj Pedersen and Mikkel Gerken. Thanks also to audiences at the 2006 Empathy Conference at Cal State Fullerton and the 2007 Conference on Understanding Other Minds and Moral Agency at Holy Cross College.

² Our ordinary, or folk, concept of a moral virtue is silent with respect to whether virtues are, or are not, dispositions. Our folk concept of a moral virtue centers on the notion that virtues are qualities that make us morally good people.