Digital Horizons of War, Violence and Death

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Introduction

This project brings together three rarely intersecting fields: (1) Internet politics and digital cultures (2) theories of war and death (3) cultural studies of affect and emotions.

Despite the growing role of digital media in many aspects of social and political life, surprisingly little scholarship addressed the ambiguous role digital communication technologies play in framing, witnessing and interpreting violent conflicts. In particular, little attention is paid to the ways these technologies create not only engagement and compassion, but also hatred, suspicion or indifference with regards to war, death and human suffering. Using the case of Israeli/Palestinian conflict, this project explores the ways various Web2.0 platforms, such as news talkbacks, blogs and social media, inform understandings and experiences of both conflict and humanitarianism in Israel/Palestine.

The project focuses on a range of political ideals and practices, including nationhood, coloniality, diaspora, internationalism and cosmopolitanism. It pays particular attention to the cultural, political and affective elements involved in the formation of these ideals and practices, in order to understand how they inform both perceptions and practices of conflict and humanitarianism, in Israel/Palestine, and beyond.
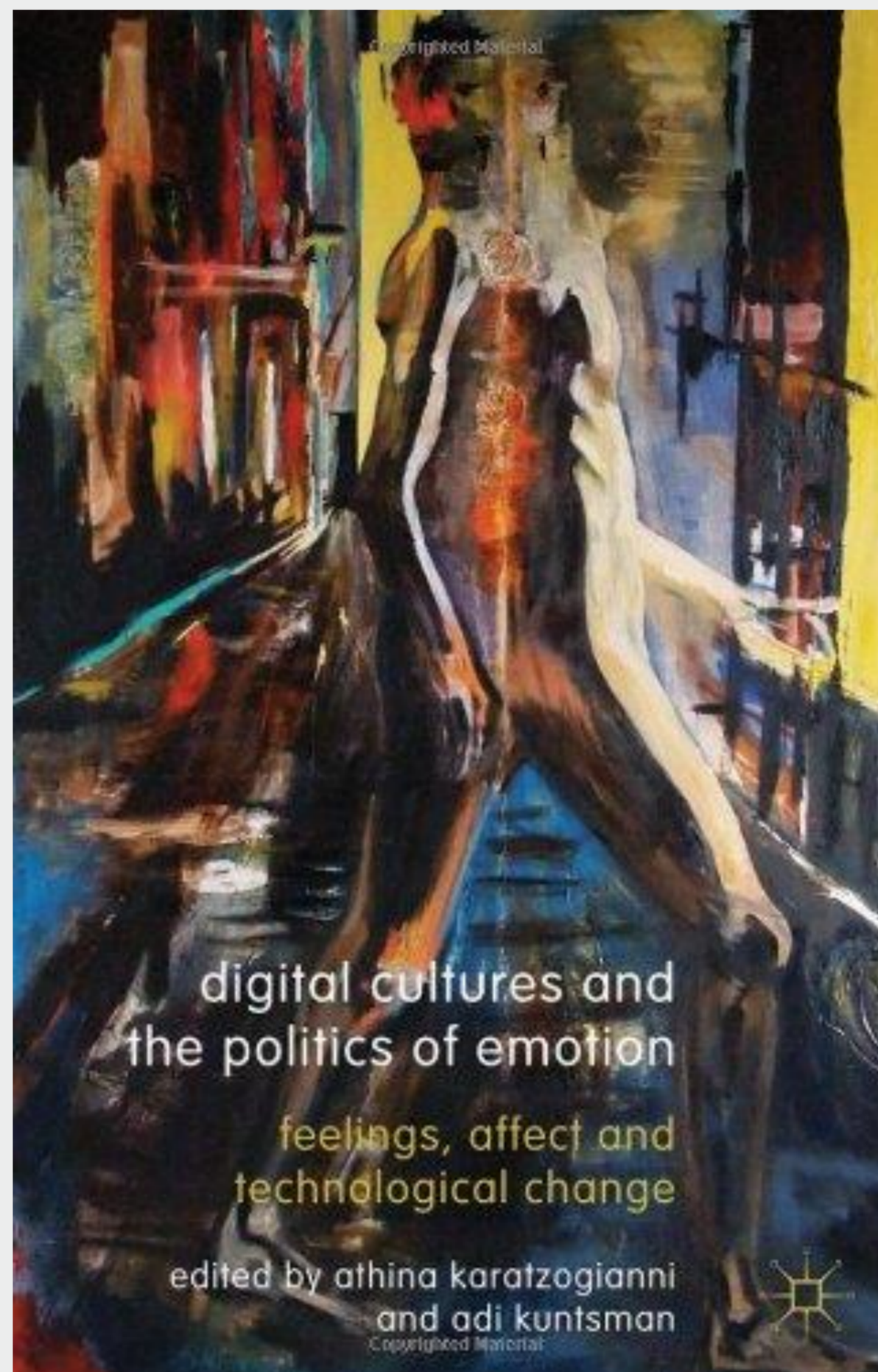
Digital media, violence, feelings

Digital media is fundamentally changing the terrain of politics, due to its reach and speed, and its function in the lives of civilian populations and states alike. In today's digitalised 'global matrix of war' (Kaplan 2009) one has to be particularly attuned to the role of digital media in shifting forms of global and national citizenship, local and cosmopolitan identities, and the affective regimes of connectivity and hatred. It is now abundantly clear that digital information technologies have multiple and often contradictory usages and meanings where politics are concerned.

And yet, most research on war and digital media focuses either on the new tactics of warfare and terrorism in the digital age, or on the changes to traditional media practices in reporting and representing war. **But what about the cultural perceptions of war, violence, victimhood and testimony? What about the shifting notions of local, national and cosmopolitan belonging at the time of instant messaging, digital networks, and global and hyper-mediated wars? What about the changes in understanding, imagining and experiencing the devastating effects brought about by wars and conflicts? What about the constant availability of information through digital media – blogs, social networks, mobile phones – and the structures of feelings such availability creates?**

Outputs and work in progress

During the years of the Fellowship, my work developed – and made contribution – to the three following fields: (1) the politics of emotion in digital media (2) social media and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (3) Everyday digitality of violence and war

1. The politics of emotion in digital media

This co-edited collection, based on a major international conference which I organised, is the result of my several years of investment in bringing together the fields of cultural studies of feelings and emotions with that of digital media and Internet studies. This volume, to which I also wrote a sole-authored introduction, provides a dialogue that cuts across disciplines, media platforms and geographic and linguistic boundaries. Fifteen essays in the volume explore the tensions between cultural studies of affect, public feelings and the politics of emotion on the one hand, and digital culture, new media and information-communication technologies on the other. The book engages with the following questions: how does affect work in online networks and digital assemblages? What are the affective regimes of online sociality and digital media use? What kind of objects and subjects circulate in and shape contemporary digital cultures? What are the structures of feeling that operate in our everyday digital life, and what kind of virtual public spheres do they create? How do digital media shape our everyday experiences and political horizons of love, fear, anxiety, compassion, hate and hope?

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2. Social media and Israel-Palestine

A significant part of my research undertaken during Simon Fellowship resulted in a co-authored book (with Rebecca L. Stein), forthcoming with Stanford University Press.

When Instagram Went to War: Social Media and the Israeli Military Occupation

The book is driven by multiple questions. Firstly, we ask: how does digital culture articulate with the Israeli military occupation? With endless instances of viral exposures of the mundane Israeli brutality towards the civilian Palestinian population – such as 'private' albums of life on-duty, the Instagram photographs, the countless YouTube videos– one wonders: how is the invisibility of the occupation maintained, despite the endless personal exposures that social media has, as of late, made so spectacularly evident?

On a more conceptual level, we ask: how are we to understand the interplay between digitalized and aestheticised 'normalcy' in the midst of military conflict and war? What happens to Israeli military violence when it is networked, when it circulates as a text or an image via the social media grammar of 'likes' or 'shares'? What is at work when the Israeli military occupation is remade as aestheticized digital image? When it is rebranded as Instagram 'retro' chic? When it is remade as an object of circulation on Facebook? When it goes viral on YouTube? When it circulates as a meme, modified and parodied via its networked presence? When the form and fabric of military rule is conjoined with digital aesthetics, structures of feeling, and practices of the networked subject? How, we ask, does Israeli militarism manifest through the digital everyday?

3. Everyday digitality of violence and war

Finally, I am currently working on another, single-authored manuscript, provisionally entitled '**The Cybertouch of War'** (under contract with Routlerdge), where I explore transnational feelings about warfare in Israel-Palestine, as these manifest themselves in daily affective gestures (online chatter, intimate contacts, personal blogs and 'micro-celebrity' Facebook activism). My particular focus there is on the affective absence/presence of death in digital domains. I address issues such as compassion and indifference, forgetting, ghosting and future advocacy.