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BOOK REVIEW

The Catastrophe of Images

Allen Meek. 2016, *Biopolitical Media: Catastrophe, Immunity and Bare Life*, Abingdon, UK: Routledge. ISBN 9781138887060. RRP £90.00 (hbk)

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How does recording life through media produce racism? Allen Meek's *Biopolitical Media* situates the contemporary circulation of images of violence, catastrophe and war within the histories of biological racism used to assert the superiority of European liberal humanism. Drawing on a core set of thinkers who examine the relationship between racism, sovereignty and biopower—Michel Foucault, Giorgio Agamben and Roberto Esposito—Meek astutely connects the filming and photographing of raced and other biologically aleatory subjects with European forms of social immunity and political security. Although the work of Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt on empire and global communications technologies is introduced at the beginning of the book to explain new formations of sovereignty and biopolitics, their work is not as consistently threaded through the book's central thesis as the other thinkers. *Biopolitical Media* covers a range of intersecting exemplars: Holocaust photographs; early photographic studies of movement, criminology, hysteria and animals; Nazi propaganda; documentary films such as Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah* and Alain Resnais' *Night and Fog*; psychoanalytic writing and research on trauma and brainwashing; Islamic State media; and critical readings of Walter Benjamin, Hannah Arendt and Susan Sontag that spotlight their usefulness for understanding the role of visuality in creating biopolitical hierarchies.

Although the idea that visual media function to identify 'normal' and 'abnormal' components of populations as a method of biopolitical governance is not new, Meek's book is instructive in its synthesis of work that addresses visuality, trauma and catastrophe from across the fields of psychoanalysis, cinema studies, animal studies and political science. This work is

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used to explain how it is not only the production but circulation and reception of images of violence and genocide perpetrated against racialised others that creates immunity for Western political subjects. Meek's contention is that Eurocentric accounts of shock and trauma 'sustain and intensify the lives of those who see' such images. (3) Catastrophic imagery functions to reassure viewers, via a process of inoculation through image exposure, that they are different from and hence not the subjects of catastrophic events. This separation installs and reinforces a biopolitical caesura between populations who may experience trauma (but are ultimately secure at the level of the population if not the individual) and those exposed to what Agamben describes as 'bare life'. The biopolitical caesura instantiated through media imagery is further reinforced in the use of surveillance technologies to capture, identify and dispose of aleatory bodies who threaten the survival and security of Western populations.

The book follows a broad historical genealogy of biopolitical media. In the introductory chapters, Meek traces the invention of photography and early forms of cinema in relation to their role in the biological sciences and the identification of pathology. Examining the work of Alphonse Bertillon, Etienne-Jules Marey and Jean-Martin Charcot, Meek shows how this visual media transformed 'independent human agents [into] biometric information'. (31) The subject of pathology becomes de-individualised as their body's gestures and appearance becomes transmuted into 'a statistical aggregate' (32) to create what Foucault describes as a 'biological norm'. (21) Given the Foucauldian framework employed in the book, it is unclear how 'independent' agency might be conceived before or outside technologies of governance. Nevertheless, Meek makes clear how subjects of these visual archives were converted into biological types to be reformed or removed from a social body characterised as an organic entity in need of regularisation. Such intervention was underpinned by Social Darwinism, which translated Charles Darwin's theory of evolution and species hierarchy to an explanation of the social and cultural inequalities within European cities, and between Europe and its colonies, as resulting from biological degeneracy. Visual media aided in the construction of racial hygiene as a means of maximising the 'genetic capital' of the population. (36)

In line with Foucault's argument that the decline in royal and theological versions of sovereignty necessitated new and political forms of control over life, scientific intervention and killing was presented as the means for securing the health of the population. The subjection of animals to industrial methods of slaughter and scientific experimentation forms a crucial node in the genealogy of biopolitical media since it 'removed killing from the everyday lives of modern consumers'. (33) A corollary of a social and political life disassociated from death is that images of killing became more heightened and traumatic for metropolitan residents during the later periods of industrialisation. Religious communities who practice ritual slaughter of animals are viewed within this image economy as transgressing the secular ethics of food production and consumption. For instance, a section in the Nazi propaganda film *The Eternal Jew* frames kosher as evidence of a Jewish 'barbarity' that justified this same community's killing and removal from the German social body. Meek suggests that anti-Semitic discourses around ritual animal killing may explain the reception of decapitation videos produced by Islamic terrorist groups as 'shocking' precisely because they dramatise a supposed binary between 'enlightened' sovereign powers of killing based on science and reason and those based on theology and religious duty.

The second chapter follows the historical genealogy of biopolitical media to examine more closely the production of Nazi media. Here Benjamin's work is used to understand the political and social transformations of urban life as necessitating new understandings

of human biology in relation to visual media. For Benjamin, modern industrial societies produced so much stimuli and shock that the benefits of cinema and photography lay in their ability to slow down this processing of information in an immunising fashion. Workers could then readjust their sensory responses productively in line with the mechanic and industrial requirements of modernity. Meek juxtaposes Benjamin's ideas of creaturely life, where photography reveals the slippages of nature, culture, history and time, with the use of photography to stabilise and isolate biological types. The latter was reflected in vitalist conceptions of life (in the *Lebensphilosophie*) which became instrumentalised in Nazi racial politics that drew on media as 'objectively' corroborating the aesthetic and biological superiority of the Aryan race and the degeneration supposedly present in Jewish bodies. Meek discusses how official and amateur Nazi photos of Jewish segregation and genocide created a biopolitical society where immunisation was predicated on the destruction of disposable others. The lack of military action from allied forces when shown these photographs by Jewish and Polish resistance groups in the early stages of the Holocaust is coextensive with a European sovereign biopower that renders an event a 'catastrophe' based on a hierarchy of human life and value.

Chapters 3 and 4 examine the relationship between accounts of colonial trauma and the effect of Holocaust imagery for Western viewers in the postwar period. Meek argues: 'The idea of historical trauma acknowledges the profound effects of catastrophe but its relation to medico-scientific diagnoses of physical and psychical injury leads it to reproduce biopolitical conceptions of the human.' (86) As an example, Meek focuses on Arendt's critique of Nazi totalitarianism and European imperialism alongside her understanding of Australia, America, and Africa as 'without a culture and a history'. (93) In writing about the 'traumatic' colonial encounter between Europe and non-Europe, Arendt's work forms part of a broader literary, political and psychoanalytic literature which reinforces 'Eurocentric conceptions of the colonies as a space of physic regression' and 'dark' impulses in need of catharsis. (98-9) In contrast, Frantz Fanon's 'analysis of colonial trauma as identification with the racial stereotypes produced by the dominant culture' (92) reveals how the psychic shock of colonised subjects is disavowed in Eurocentric paradigms of catastrophe.

The differential value assigned to particular catastrophes of the twentieth century produces biopolitical relations between the subjects of catastrophe and those who document them. Meek argues that heightened visual attention to Holocaust imagery in comparison to the Hiroshima bombing is predicated on the former being an exception to the history of Western liberal humanist equality. Imagery of victims and survivors of the Hiroshima catastrophe were suppressed politically because this event was the direct result of allied military action. Media nonetheless played an important role in recording the biological hazards of nuclear warfare and the wider dissemination of Robert Lifton's ideas about collective shock and trauma producing 'psychic numbing'. (24) The collective fears of atomic warfare, which circulated in American popular culture and political discourse, rendered the threat of mass destruction to Western populations extraordinary while occluding the history of colonisation and allied military actions directed at axial powers. To protect the American social body, research on the biological effects of warfare on racially and geographically Othered populations formed the basis of covert interrogation techniques developed by the American Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). Meek explains how the CIA drew from the psychological methods of torture used by Soviet security agencies on internal state enemies, Nazi experimentation on concentration camp prisoners and Chinese state practices of 'thought reform'. (127) The overarching point he draws from this history is that bodies exposed to bare life remain

productive for American and Western governmental authorities in maintaining security for their populations.

The final chapter considers how the aftermath of the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States intensifies ‘the military-security-media apparatus in order to re-establish biopolitical immunity’. (137) This occurs through the deployment of biometrics and technologies of war such as drones to manage immigration flows and pre-emptively eliminate terrorist bodies that threaten the security of Western polities. Mediations of the terrorist as a figure who can overwhelm ‘a vulnerable population’ (141) help bolster public support for these technologies. The characterisation of images of terrorism and by terrorists as possessing a capacity to go ‘viral’ and requiring censorship (for instance in the US government’s refusal to release images of Osama bin Laden’s assassinated body) reflect biological conceptions of cybernetics as organic. Meek suggests this conceptualisation has resonances with earlier forms of vitalism that ostensibly rendered species hierarchy transparent through visual illumination. Biometrics can then be situated along the same historical continuum as the earlier work of Bertillon and Galton, which catalogued ‘dangerous classes’ (145) in need of removal from the social body.

In recording information that exceeds ‘natural’ human perception, the relationship between visual meaning and identification in security technologies is often contingent. Joseph Pugliese has argued that this contingency is supplanted by a trenchant faith in scientific accuracy to justify the deployment of pre-emptive security measures such as drone killings, which—civilian deaths notwithstanding—can be rendered as a calculated and rational response to terrorism.¹ Meek sees a forthright racism in security technologies. He gives the example of identification programs for entry and exit to the United States that ‘more easily recognize nonwhite faces’. (146) Elsewhere, Joseph Pugliese provides an opposing view arguing that the lighting calibrations of such technologies frequently fail to recognise darker phenotypes, creating an inability for these programs to enrol such subjects.² What Pugliese describes in the context of drone warfare as the bioinformativisation of life points to the disastrous consequences of transmuting threatening populations into data for programmable killing precisely because this programming is chaotic and not precise.³ Meek similarly gestures towards the simultaneously unpredictable and pervasive character of contemporary war in his use of Negri and Hardt’s ideas of the ‘multitude’ and the potential for communication (and security) technologies to decentre state-based sovereignty. But in his arguments for the biopolitical production of immunity through the security apparatus emanating from the United States, his thesis is closer to Pugliese’s account of state violence as very much premised on traditional European territorial claims to juridical legitimacy and the right of self-defence.

The book opens with an acknowledgement of the criticisms levied against trauma studies and biopolitics for their ‘Eurocentrism’ and ‘persistent focus on events such as the Holocaust or the 9/11 attacks’. (4) The book retains this same focus in order to situate the mediation of these catastrophes within the genealogies of European racism that emerge from colonisation. While critiquing the exceptionalism attributed to these events, *Biopolitical Media* refers to

1 Joseph Pugliese, *State Violence and the Execution of Law: Biopolitical Caesurae of Torture, Black Sites, Drones*, Routledge, Abingdon, UK, 2013.

2 Joseph Pugliese, *Biometrics: Bodies, Technologies, Biopolitics*, Routledge, Abingdon, UK, 2010.

3 Joseph Pugliese, ‘Death by Metadata: The Bioinformativisation of Life and the Transliteration of Algorithms to Flesh’, in *Security, Race, Biopower: Essays on Technology and Corporeality*, ed. Holly Randell-Moon and Ryan Tippet, Palgrave Macmillan, forthcoming.

'the' Holocaust (namely the Shoah in Europe) and reproduces its biopolitical centrality to world history, something that has been contested in the colonial turn in Holocaust Studies.⁴ Although the book follows through on its aims to explicate the biopolitical racism in visual regimes produced in the Global North, the role of media in the settlement and governance of Indigenous populations in the South Pacific and contemporary surveillance arrangements under the Five Eyes alliance⁵ between Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and the United States reveal the geographical selectivity in what Walter Mignolo describes as 'regional critical concepts' such as biopower.⁶

The genealogy of biopolitical media outlined by Meek finds its contemporary expression in 'digital media and information networks imagined as both life enhancing and threatening'. (16) This infrastructure is sustained by colonial modalities of extraction.⁷ The role of extraction at both the level of the production of communication technologies and their endpoints in consumption and information-gathering exemplifies how immunity as security from catastrophe continues to be differentially distributed. As a Western academic responding to the atrocities perpetrated against humans and animals in Meek's book and assembling a review through the extractive modalities of the information economy, the biopolitical privilege of immunity produced through medial distance from these subjects is keenly felt.

About the author

Holly Randell-Moon is a lecturer in Communication and Media at the University of Otago, New Zealand. Her publications on popular culture, biopower, gender and sexuality have appeared in the edited book collections *Common Sense: Intelligence as Presented on Popular Television* (2008) and *Television Aesthetics and Style* (2013) and the journals *Feminist Media Studies* and *Refractory*. She has also published on race, religion, and secularism in the journals *Critical Race and Whiteness Studies*, *borderlands*, and *Social Semiotics* and in the edited book collections *Mediating Faiths* (2010) and *Religion After Secularization in Australia* (2015).

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⁴ See for instance Michelle Gordon, 'Colonial Violence and Holocaust Studies', *Holocaust Studies*, vol. 21, no. 4, 2015, pp. 272–91.

⁵ The key set of satellites for this alliance are located at the Waihopai Station in New Zealand. Their operation is documented in the film *The 5th Eye*, dir. Errol Wright and Abi King-Jones, CutCutCut Films, 2016.

⁶ Walter Mignolo, 'The Prospect of Harmony and the Decolonial View of the World', 22 September 2012, <http://waltermignolo.com/the-prospect-of-harmony-and-the-decolonial-view-of-the-world/>

⁷ I thank Tanja Dreher for pointing this out to me. See her 'Alarm Bells Ringing: Cautionary Notes on Indigenous Social Media Research', paper presented at the Australian and New Zealand Communication Association Annual Conference: Creating Space in the Fifth Estate, University of Newcastle, 6–8 July 2016.

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