

Unwatched/Unmanned



Drone Strikes and the Aesthetics of the Unseen

Poulomi Saha

A little over halfway through Season 1 of Showtime's war-on-terror thriller *Homeland* (2011–), returned POW turned Al-Qaeda operative Nicholas Brody reveals the cause of his radicalization: Having been held and tortured, he is asked by cell commander Abu Nazir to teach Nazir's young son Issa how to speak English. The plot to conscript Brody through the child intensifies sharply when Issa is killed by an unmanned drone. We do not see the drone or the moment of explosion; we are apprised of it when Brody is catapulted, in slow motion, out of his chair by its force. Indeed, the entire scene operates by way of unobvious insinuation. As Brody walks through the rubble, looking for Issa, children stumble by with bloody stumps in lieu of arms and parents cradle corpses like babies. Though the visible damage is largely debris and smoke, the casualties are clear long before we glimpse Issa's tiny unmoving hand. The scene revels in the sight of horror, as if in stark reminder of narrative television's ability to depict aspects of drone strikes that cannot be seen in real life—that remain unwatchable to the everyday eye.

The stage is thus set for a corrupt American official to announce that these captured images of civilian casualties (i.e., photographs of the attack's aftermath) are all manufactured propaganda. Yet, otherwise, as the show suggests not inaccurately, the American public would not have seen the drone strike's wreckage. Photographic images of bodies after the strike are figured as fabrications, false narratives (or fake news) that falter in the face of the promised technological precision of unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) technology employed by the American government. Photographs can be manipulated, altered, and decontextualized in their circulation—this is a deceitful medium in the hands of an untrustworthy foe. The development of precision drone technology—with devices such as facial recognition and advanced geospatial imaging capacities—produce a fantasy of irrefutable justification. Thus, aerial drones are imagined to be beyond technological oversight.

In eight years, the Obama administration authorized 563 drone strikes and publicly announced that an estimated 64 to 116 civilians and 2,372 to 2,581 combatants were killed between 2009 and 2015. President Obama carried some public and policy favor for his precipitous spike in the use of drone strikes, because they removed from view the spectacle of collateral damage. If drones can be made to identify individuals, to track their movements, and to drop payloads with digital accuracy, then they can absolve the public of having to see their work. The value of the drone's unmannedness is also its liability. At the limits of what the public can see, the unaccountable can occur. Rather than quell criticism, the release of strike data heightened a public demand for transparency. Transparency is a condition of making viewable as much as visible the abstracted form of statistics, incommensurate with anecdotal and reported accounts, that neither added up nor truly disclosed the death toll. Perhaps it is the failure of quantification (however contested) to account for the loss of human life by machines that has given rise to what we might call an aesthetics of drone strike data visualization. Many artworks have attempted to problematize the relationship between technological vision and political belief. For example, Pitch Interactive's "Out of Sight/Out of Mind" (2013) digitizes attacks in Pakistan from 2004 to

2013 as individual flare colliding with and then boring through the axis of a timeline—strikes shot through chronospace.¹ Evoking the breathtaking beauty of a meteor shower, the project startles the affective and physiological response to the idea of an unmanned killing out of abstraction into awe.

“Out of Sight/Out of Mind,” like Jonathan Fletcher Moore’s “Artificial Killing Machine” (2015) installation and the crowd-sourced site Dronestagram (2013), is a prosthesis of sensorial empathy, supplementing and overriding the bureaucratic blinding by which drone strikes are made to vanish.² These projects digitally short-circuit the core of the drone program’s success. The unmanned aerial drone was designed to be a perfect killing machine—not because of its precision but because, flying high above the heads of its targets and their neighbors, off the radar of public scrutiny, it is beyond oversight. Unmanned, autonomous military drones like the MQ-1 Predator and MQ-9 Reaper mobilize the designed exactness of their surveillance capabilities: the combination of spectral sensors, radar, and laser designation has removed the human from the pilot’s seat, lightening its load to allow for longer flights and heavier weapons, and spatially shifting the responsibility of accuracy to a control room. Various members of the operational crew “see” through the transmitted digital image captured by the drone. However, what they see is not what the public will see, when apprised of the strikes later (if at all). What they see is not what the people on the ground see, when they scan the skies for the unpiloted aircraft or when the bodies on the ground are counted. Having removed the man from the machine, unmanned drones now rely on an unwatchable promise of their own accuracy. Claims of civilian casualties and of the collateral damage that seeps through the incision site of surgical precision meet the unseeing wall of a surveillance state that will not reveal what the machine has captured.

“Bugspat,” the name of the program used by the U.S. government to identify and minimize civilian casualties from drone attacks, comes from the term used by drone operators to describe both what targets look like from the perspective of the machine aloft and the effect of that machinic success. The surveilled human on the ground is ins(p)ected before being exterminated. Bugspat is the satisfaction of witnessing the obliteration of a nuisance, a pest, a minor inconvenience. So the installation #NotABugSplat in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan, the heavy bombing of which illuminates the screen in “Out of Sight/Out of Mind,” of an image of an unnamed child—large enough to be seen by a drone—attempts to expand the scale of the aesthetics of drone strike data visualization as it radically rehumanizes the bug into child. Perhaps it is on the scale of the monumental, the vast, that which can be seen from the elevated eye of the drone, that its casualties become seeable. Perhaps this is for the best. Perhaps what we cannot see of what the drone sees, of what the drone destroys, is unwatchable. Perhaps we could not bear to see the decimation of human life, the evidence of perfect annihilation, the proof of contactless warfare. Perhaps the way in which an American public maintains itself and the fantasy of moral authority is by not watching. By handing over the realm of surveillance to the machine who both sees and destroys, we have liberated ourselves from the responsibility to know, to count, to be held accountable.

In the end on *Homeland*, Brody carries out his promise to kill Vice President Walden. He takes one life in retribution for the one life he counted as lost. Nazir sets off a bomb that demolishes the entire CIA, eradicating the global surveillance apparatus and all of its operators. Unlike the artistic renderings of drone strike casualties that translate death into pixelated images, in

Homeland, the casualties of drone strikes are translated into direct violence. Life for life. This too is a calculus of collateral damage and the accounting of what is lost in a drone strike.

Notes

1 Pitch Interactive, "Out of Sight/Out of Mind" (2013), <http://drones.pitchinteractive.com/>.

2 Jonathan Fletcher Moore, "Artificial Killing Machine" (2015), <https://vimeo.com/131357384>; Eric Dupin, "Dronestagram" (2013), www.dronestagr.am/.

Held Helpless in the Breach



On American History X

Stanley Wolukau-Wanambwa

As I write these lines on Saturday, August 12, 2017, a mass of neo-Nazis, Klansmen, and other assorted white supremacists have converged on the town of Charlottesville, Virginia, in a symbolic effort to “Unite the Right.” Last night, they congregated in Emancipation Park wielding tiki torches, chanting “Blood and soil!” and “Jews won’t replace us!” interspersed with healthy sprinklings of “nigger!” as they sought to encircle the protuberant base of a memorial to Confederate General Robert E. Lee. The threat of the statue’s imminent removal—not its destruction, but its displacement—served as a convenient pretext for their subsequently violent and ultimately murderous acts.

These protests occurred in a week when news broke of a Department of Justice effort to recruit lawyers to investigate and sue “universities over affirmative action admissions policies deemed to discriminate against white applicants.”¹ These policies are in keeping with a reactionary need for what Carol Anderson aptly describes as “a narrative of white legitimate grievance.”² Such policies have been the hallmark of the current administration, which sees the exacerbation of unfounded claims to white victimhood as good political strategy, regardless of the horrors that such fictions bring into visceral and lethal being.

All of this is a necessary preface to my remarks on the unwatchable murder scene at the heart of Tony Kaye’s film *American History X* (1998). How else to write about an iconic scene of American Nazi violence in a moment increasingly shaped by a deeply radicalized strain of white nostalgia, which seeks to provide “a sanctuary for White people, a guaranteed matrix of safety, security, and respite,” as Frank B. Wilderson III wrote in an essay on *12 Years a Slave*?³

DENNIS VINYARD: It’s everywhere I look now . . .

DEREK VINYARD: What?

DENNIS VINYARD: This affirmative “blacktion”!

American History X is a film about race relations structured by a notional form of reparation. A young Derek Vinyard (Edward Norton), whose father is fatally shot attending to a fire in a “suspected Compton drug den,” becomes radicalized by a local white supremacist. Sometime later, when his car is being stolen from his home by local black gang members, he opts to arm himself and kill two of the three thieves rather than call the police, resulting in a three-year prison sentence. While he is first enthusiastically welcomed in prison by his Aryan brothers, his puritanical Nazi zeal leads to them disciplining him with rape, and to his subsequent excommunication from their fraternity.

It is noteworthy that in his expulsion, Vinyard becomes a “nigger” to his Nazi brethren, his puritanical zeal resulting in his relegation to the status of that which his entire ideology is

organized to hate. It is especially noteworthy that his survival, in fact his rescue by a fellow black prisoner, occurs in response to the vulnerability that this abject status exposes him to: he is saved by symbolically becoming that which he has abjured and murdered in ritual and violent fashion, which is to say he both is *served by* and *survives through* being positioned *as* a “nigger.” Following Vinyard’s release, another young black gang member shoots his younger brother Danny dead. The calculus of reparation in the film thus hinges not on the body count (two dead on each side of the color line) but rather on the iconic, indeed the spectacular nature of Vinyard’s second murder.

My memory of *American History X* begins with this scene—not the epigrammatic version at the opening, but the brutal second sequence shown halfway through the film. In it, having wounded the second thief with a gunshot, Vinyard drags him unarmed and prone into the street, spinning him through a 180-degree turn so that his head bisects the sweeping curve of the pavement. With a gun pointed at the back of his head, Vinyard screams at the thief to “put your fucking mouth on the curb,” then bids him to “say goodnight!” and stamps on the back of his head with his black jackboots, splitting it open, and eviscerating him in graphic and literal terms.

I remember the crystalline sound of the man’s enamel teeth on the coarse texture of the curb: the way they seemed both to tinkle and squeal in the low-slung cinema where I first saw the film in 1998. I remember how alone I was in that near-empty room. I remember an unbearable ratcheting up of inner tensions, and the instinctive decision to shut my eyes as the film cut from a close-up of the black man’s bright white teeth to a wide shot of Vinyard on a suburban Los Angeles street, clad in bright white boxer shorts, gun pointed at the wounded figure, black jackboot raising up in order to sweep downward and split his skull.

My rejection of this scene’s audiovisual content was so effective that I had believed, through all the intervening years, that the moment of desecration—the murder—was not in fact shown on-screen. I now know that it is. However, my resistance to the film went beyond my inability to witness this rupturing scene. I objected then, and still do, to the film’s self-serving calculus of reparation. The ruptured black body around whose death the entire story pivots ends up freeing Vinyard from the ideological bonds of Nazi captivity: first, by precipitating the aid and care of his former principal, an African American, then by distancing him in his radical zeal from the impure Nazism of his brothers in prison, which engenders his rape and excommunication; then by occasioning the concern of his black workmate in the laundry, whose protection saves his otherwise endangered life.

The price Vinyard pays for his salvation is the death of his younger brother, whom he is able to save from the clutches of white supremacy in a last rite in which he recounts to him his experiences in prison. Thus, throughout the film, black death renders indispensable service to white redemption, so that the structure of the plot can “harness” black bodies as “necessary implements to help bring about . . . psychic and social transformation,” and thus “vouchsafe the coherence” of Vinyard’s “human subjectivity.”⁴

In truth, the film’s logic of transformation and reparation emanates from the sunken heap of that black corpse, its skull collapsed and concave on that concrete littoral. I think that I sensed that calculus in my instinctive evasion of the death-bringing image: that blackness is, or

would always be, figured in and through death, that it is inseparable from violence, integral to producing progress but necessarily exempt from its rewards, and thus that black bodies must serve as the expurgated grounding of white (supremacist) identity.

I resisted—or attempted to resist—my interpellation into that murderous act of splitting, and the frozen frame depicting that immanent death became something both *obscene* and unseen. Obscene in Ross Chambers’s sense, in that it rendered blackness as a “liminal phenomenon” that is “neither completely beyond cultural ken nor squarely acknowledged as integral to the cultural scene.”⁵ The freeze frame fixed and figured blackness as emerging through the violence of erasure, and the image reduced my black male body to death in a moment of seizure *anterior* to the oncoming murder, leaving me held helpless in that breach—unable to watch, and yet incapable of not seeing.

Notes

1 Charlie Savage, “Justice Dept. to Take on Affirmative Action in College Admissions,” *New York Times*, August 1, 2017, www.nytimes.com/2017/08/01/us/politics/trump-affirmative-action-universities.html.

2 Carol Anderson, “The Policies of White Resentment,” *New York Times*, August 5, 2017, www.nytimes.com/2017/08/05/opinion/sunday/white-resentment-affirmative-action.html.

3 Frank B. Wilderson III, “Close-Up: Fugitivity and the Filmic Imagination: Social Death and Narrative Aporia in *12 Years a Slave*,” *Black Camera* 7, no. 1 (Fall 2015): 148.

4 *Ibid.*, 139.

5 Ross Chambers, “Death at the Door,” in *Untimely Interventions: AIDS Writing, Testimonial, and the Rhetoric of Haunting* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004), 24.

Warhol's *Empire*



Unwatched and Unwatchable

J. Hoberman

There is a movie that I have never watched and most likely never will, yet recognize as a cinematic masterpiece and a monumental film-object: Andy Warhol's *Empire*.

In 1964, Warhol liquidated the entire cinematic apparatus, even as he asserted its existence, by making an epic documentary that one didn't have to see to "see." *Empire*, an eight-hour-plus, ten-reel, sixteen-millimeter film, is a fixed-camera contemplation of the Empire State Building that, as the Warhol scholar Callie Angell put it, "has thrived on a purely conceptual level since its creation."¹ Precisely because of its primary existence as a mental image, *Empire* dematerialized the screen.

"Last Saturday I was present at a historical occasion," Jonas Mekas reported in the July 30, 1964, issue of the *Village Voice*. "From 8 P.M. until dawn the camera was pointed at the Empire State Building, from the 41st floor of the Time-Life Building. The camera never moved once."² Although shot with a sound-on-film Auricon camera, the footage would be shown silent and at silent speed.

In a brief essay, the art critic Gregory Battcock declared that Warhol's notoriously unwatched and unwatchable movie demonstrated that the passing of time was "the most important single element that distinguishes film from the other visual art forms."³ The same point was made by Andrey Tarkovsky regarding Lumiere actualités: "For the first time in the history of the arts, in the history of culture, man found the means to take an impression of time. Time, printed in its factual forms and manifestations: such is the supreme idea of cinema as an art."⁴

Seven months after Mekas suggested that *Empire* would become "the *Birth of a Nation* of the New Bag Cinema,"⁵ Warhol's movie had its world premiere on March 6, 1965, at the City Hall Cinema. Ten minutes into the projection, Mekas would write in the March 11 *Voice*, "a crowd of thirty or forty people stormed out of the theatre into the lobby, surrounded the box office, Bob Brown, and myself, and threatened to beat us up and destroy the theatre unless their money was returned. 'This is not entertainment! This movie doesn't move,' shouted the mob."⁶

Rudolph Siegel described a more thoughtful response in a letter published in the following week's *Voice*:

After paying my \$2 admission, I entered a comfortably appointed theatre and to the rousing notes of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony prepared myself for the upcoming presentation. About midway through the third movement the house was darkened and a brilliant white square of light shone on the screen. It remained there, trembling slightly, for approximately 10 minutes, after which some dancing, greyish dots appeared, only to fade and be replaced by the indistinct image of a fog-shrouded Empire State Building. For the next half-hour, along

with the other members of the audience, were witness [*sic*] to this wavering image of what the title of this presentation referred to as Empire. Upon the realization that this was going to be the whole show, I picked up my coat and left.⁷

It is not known how many spectators stayed on or if any were present for the entire film. Certainly the filmmaker was not among them. According to Warhol's studio assistant Gerard Malanga, Warhol stood at the rear of the auditorium "observing the audience rather than the film": "People were walking out or booing or throwing paper cups at the screen. Andy turned to me, and in his boyish voice said, 'Gee, you think they hate it . . . you think they don't like it?' *Empire* was a movie where nothing happened except how the audience reacted."⁸ A single screening was enough to secure *Empire*'s notoriety.

In January 1965, the fashion photographer Howell Conant rented the film, along with several other Warhol films, as research for a *Life* spread on "underground clothes." The same month, Warhol used material from the film as background for a performance at the Film-Makers' Cinematheque which included the Velvet Underground and Nico, "Andy Warhol Up Tight," and subsequent reels from the film were included in Warhol's multimedia presentation "The Exploding Plastic Inevitable."

In December 1965, Gregory Battcock showed at least the first reel to his class at Hunter College; another excerpt was screened in late 1966 by the Atkins Museum in Kansas City as part of the exhibition "Sound Light Silence: Art That Performs." The following April, excerpts from *Empire* were included in the free Festival of New York Films organized by the New York City Department of Recreation and Cultural Affairs at the Regency Theater, on Broadway at Sixty-Seventh Street.⁹

Withdrawn from distribution in 1972, *Empire* seems to have had no further screenings until February 1994, when Callie Angell presented it in Sydney, Australia; a few months later, it was included in a program of newly preserved Warhol films at the Whitney Museum. In a booklet published on the occasion, Angell made a number of illuminating points, two of which are crucial. The first is that, possibly unknown to Warhol and his associates, *Empire* is a sort of clock: a light atop the Metropolitan Life Insurance Tower, to the left of the Empire State Building in the frame, flashes every fifteen minutes and the correct number of times on the hour.

The second is that, again inadvertently, Warhol signed his work. Throughout the movie, members of the crew are briefly visible as reflections in the window, and Warhol himself can be seen at the beginning of the seventh reel. Angell noted that "the fact that this brief appearance of the filmmaker in his own work has never been mentioned in the literature suggests, unsurprisingly, that no one may ever have seen the film in its entirety before."¹⁰

She was the first.

Notes

1 Callie Angell, *The Films of Andy Warhol: Part II* (New York: Whitney Museum, 1994), 15.

2 Jonas Mekas, *Movie Journal: The Rise of a New American Cinema, 1959–1971* (New York: Macmillan, 1972), 150. The inspiration for *Empire* evidently came from eighteen-year-old John Palmer, then an assistant to Jonas Mekas, living on the roof of the Film-Makers' Cooperative, six blocks from the Empire State Building. Palmer gave the idea to Mekas, who passed it on to Warhol. The movie was shot with the Auricon that Mekas rented to make his film *The Brig* (1964). Mekas framed the composition; Warhol approved and turned on the camera. In addition to Warhol and Mekas, Gerard Malanga was present, as was Palmer, who received a codirecting credit (at least initially) because his mother came up with the \$350 necessary to get developed footage out of the lab. See Steven Watson, *Factory Made: Warhol and the Sixties* (New York: Pantheon, 2003), 160–161.

3 Gregory Battcock, "Notes on Empire: A Film by Andy Warhol," *Film Culture* 40 (1966): 39–40.

4 Andrey Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time*, trans. Kitty Hunter-Blair (New York: Knopf, 1987), 62–63.

5 Mekas, *Movie Journal*, 150.

6 Ibid., 180–181.

7 Rudolph Siegel, "Not Art," *Village Voice*, March 18, 1965, 4.

8 Victor Bokris, *Warhol: The Biography* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1997), 207.

9 This chronology is pieced together from material in the *Empire* film file, Archives of the Andy Warhol Film Project, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, as well as Andy Warhol and Pat Hackett, *Popism: The Warhol '60s* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980).

10 Angell, *Films of Andy Warhol*, 16–17.

Squirming in the Classroom



Fat Girl and the Ethical Value of Extreme Discomfort

Katariina Kyrölä

This essay sets up a parallel between two (by now) widespread ways to call for or claim unwatchability: censorship and so-called trigger warnings. My starting point is that the refusal or the prohibition to watch might sometimes not protect at all from what it is meant to protect from. Paradoxically, the gesture of averting one's eyes or covering one's ears can reproduce or even enforce a traumatic reaction. Just ask yourself: have you ever been haunted by what you have *not* seen, or only caught a glimpse of before looking away? A refusal to watch—whether planned and intentional, or a gut reaction in the moment—means you are already deeply affected by the image. And unless you also succeed in blocking out the sounds, they may conjure terrifying images in your mind's eye. What is at stake is not actually the image itself but one's fantasy of it, possibly worse than what actual viewing would be. As queer film theorist Patricia MacCormack has noted in relation to extreme horror, “Even if the eyes are shut, the body is reacting.”¹

Indeed, there can be great ethical value in enduring and staying with extreme discomfort, to keep engaging, even when and sometimes especially when that discomfort derives from portrayals of gendered, sexualized, and/or racialized abuse and violence—rather than take such discomfort as a sign of an ethical need *not* to engage. I am not categorically against or for censorship or trigger warnings but see them as serving various purposes in various contexts.² In this essay, however, I ask if a refusal, a ban, or otherwise denied engagement based on a (potential) affective reaction can actually dramatize that reaction and obscure other issues that should require attention.

This question concretized in my experience of teaching the film *Fat Girl (A ma soeur!, 2001)*, directed by Catherine Breillat. I screened the film for a course on theorizing the relations between media and the body that I taught in Finland in the spring of 2015. The course syllabus included trigger warnings—however, not as warnings about course content, but as a topic. The students read blog posts for and against trigger warnings, as well as the main points of an empirical study by Martin Barker and his research group, who had been commissioned by the British Board of Film Classification (BBFC) to study audience reactions to five films that included sexually violent content.³ One of those films was *Fat Girl*. The students were then asked to compare their own reactions and reflections to those of Barker and his group's respondents, as well as to form an opinion of whether trigger warnings or censorship were necessary in relation to the film.

Most of the students had not heard of trigger warnings before. However, the debates about depicting rape on film and television were a topic familiar to many of them, with TV series such as *Game of Thrones* (2011–) attracting attention for “excessive” or “gratuitous” use of rape scenes as a narrative device. Also, *Fat Girl* ends in a notorious rape scene that has been the film's most debated feature and was censored in some countries.⁴ In this scene, a twelve-year old girl, Anais (Anais Reboux), is raped in the woods by a nameless male attacker after he has brutally killed her sister with an axe and strangled her mother at a rest stop by a highway.

Afterward, Anais claims to the police that she was not raped, and the film ends in a long freeze frame of her face, while cheerful guitar music starts playing and continues in the background of the credits. Otherwise, the murder and rape scene has only the sounds of struggle and eerie ambient noise of highway traffic. The scene can be interpreted to promote the deeply sexist idea that women who are raped actually “want it,” but as Catherine Wheatley has suggested, it also alludes to broader problems in distinguishing between coercion and seduction within normative heterosexuality.⁵

In the course, the students were given access to the censored version of the film, and separately to the rape scene (which is about five minutes long). I did not require them to watch the rape scene, but all of them chose to do so. They were, however, required to reflect on what kind of an ethical engagement a refusal to watch could and could not be. Most students articulated their extreme discomfort while watching the film, but they also claimed that this was exactly how it should be, since sexual abuse and violence on-screen should make the viewer squirm—that is how the body reacts ethically. Since they viewed the rape scene after having seen the censored film, they were in agreement that the scene was “not as bad” as they had imagined it might be.

Instead of the rape scene, many of the students wanted to discuss the more insidious sexual abuse elsewhere in the film, particularly a lengthy scene earlier in the film where a young man (Libero De Rienzo) pressures Anais’ fifteen-year-old sister Elena (Roxane Mesquida) to have sex with him, with Anais in the room. To the students, it seemed hypocritical that the scene that directly portrayed rape was censored while the scene about blurry consent was not even an issue, as the two scenes seemed purposefully parallel to each other. They also echo each other audiovisually: both feature a prolonged medium close-up shot of the “couple,” with the unmoving camera on their right side, without any non-diegetic sound, as if the scene were unfolding in real time in front of the frozen viewer. The very long scene (about twenty-five minutes) with Elena, where sexual persuasion gradually turns into coercion, allows only a brief moment of apparent release when the camera moves to Anais’s face as the young man presumably penetrates Elena. The viewer sees Anais’s blank face but hears the sounds of Elena’s screams, shortly replaced by the man’s moans of pleasure. In my own viewing experience, however, the shift in the camera’s view only opened up space for even more disturbing images, memories of similar dynamics perhaps having been played out on my body at some point in my life, instead of making the viewing experience any easier. Many of the students commented that the viewer had to see both of the two scenes in order to understand the juxtaposition, and I wholeheartedly agreed.

We also discussed how censorship as well as trigger or content warnings seem to address only relatively easily identifiable things represented in an easily identifiable way, like rape depicted as a shocking act of violence by a stranger in the woods, but not more subtle scenes or structures of abuse. At least the rape scene in *Fat Girl* was clearly about rape and the coercion scene was clearly meant to make viewers squirm. In contrast, a lot of films and TV series have scenarios where a male hero forcefully kisses a woman who, after struggling for a bit, “melts” into the kiss and the “seduction”—one classic example being the kiss that Han Solo forces on Princess Leia in *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980), disregarding her requests to stop, with romantic music swelling in the background. In these much more common instances, the framing is that of a sweet encounter and the audience is even expected to go “awww.” In *Fat Girl*, we all agreed, there were absolutely no “awww” moments.

The comparisons with other viewers' reactions, obtained through Barker et al.'s empirical research, made it easier to take some distance from one's own affective reactions, think through their background and potential effects, and avoid the trap of elevating singular personal experiences to anecdotal evidence of how the "audience" perceives the film. This brings us back to the trigger warning debate: how both the pro-trigger warning side and the anti-trigger warning side have been accused of an overemphasis on interiority and the personal, a me-me-me attitude. The pro-trigger warning side has been criticized for idealization and overemphasis of individual victimhood; the possibility of some individuals being traumatized overrides a broader possibility of discussing difficult and hurtful matters in a productive way.⁶ The anti-trigger warning side, however, has also been seen to demand individual responsibility for the ability to deal with offensive or disturbing material, and to learn enough tools to cope.⁷ Without drawing on empirical studies of how different viewers actually react to and reflect on media products, it is too easy to make policies and claim injury based on *figures* of traumatized audiences. Barker et al.'s study showed, for example, that the BBFC had made its censorship or "unwatchability" decisions based solely on "Refuser" responses, ignoring "Embracers" who saw transformative ethical value in extreme discomfort.⁸

The language of trigger warnings, just like the language of prohibition, should be seen as performative. Through the circulation and repetitive framing of certain kinds of scenes as triggering, traumatizing, or "unwatchable," they also become *experienced* as traumatizing. This is not to say that the experiences are not real, deeply felt, and worth taking seriously. But this short reflection on teaching in a context where trigger warnings were *not* (yet) an issue raises uncomfortable questions about the degree to which the very discourse of triggering can produce figures of (potentially) traumatized audiences, and construct specific kinds of scenes as traumatizing, while ignoring the simultaneous coercion and seduction in others.

Notes

1 Patricia MacCormack, "Pleasure, Perversion and Death: Three Lines of Flight for the Viewing Body" (PhD diss., Monash University, 2000), 140.

2 For more discussion on why an against-or-for approach is not productive in my view, see Katariina Kyrölä, "Toward a Contextual Pedagogy of Pain: Trigger Warnings and the Value of Sometimes Feeling Really, Really Bad," *Lambda Nordica: Nordic Journal on LGBTQ Studies* 1 (2015): 131–144, www.lambdanordica.se/wp-content/uploads/were-here2.pdf.

3 Martin Barker et al., *Audiences and Receptions of Sexual Violence in Contemporary Cinema* (Aberystwyth: University of Wales, 2007); Jack Halberstam, "You Are Triggering Me! The Neoliberal Rhetoric of Harm, Danger and Trauma," *Bully Bloggers*, July 5, 2014, <https://bullybloggers.wordpress.com/2014/07/05/you-are-triggering-me-the-neo-liberal-rhetoric-of-harm-danger-and-trauma/>; Valéria M. Souza, "Triggernometry," *It's Complicated*, May 21, 2014, <http://valeriamsouza.wordpress.com/2014/05/21/triggernometry/>.

4 For a summary of the academic discussion around *Fat Girl* and its depiction of rape, see Catherine Wheatley, "Contested Interactions: Watching Catherine Breillat's Scenes of Sexual Violence," *Journal of Cultural Research* 14, no. 1 (2010): 27–41.

5 *Ibid.*, 28.

6 E.g., Halberstam, "You Are Triggering Me!"

7 E.g., Natalia Cecire, "On the 'Neoliberal Rhetoric of Harm,'" July 7, 2014, <http://nataliacecire.blogspot.fi/2014/07/on-neoliberal-rhetoric-of-harm.html>.

8 See also Martin Barker, "The Challenge of Censorship: 'Figuring' Out the Audience," *Velvet Light Trap* 63 (2009): 58–60.