Rhetorical Insurgents: Biopolitics and the Insurrectionary Rhetoric of McLuhan’s Cool Media

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Abstract: This essay examines the subversive political potential of censored cartoons by the Guantánamo prisoner, Sami al-Hajj. In McLuhan’s terms, these cartoons constitute cool media, which I read as a rhetorical response to biopolitical (Foucault) forms of governmental power. I conclude by reflecting on the ethical demands of such media.

Keywords: Marshall McLuhan, Michel Foucault, biopolitics, cool media, Sami al-Hajj, cartoons, Guantánamo, insurrection


Mots clés : Marshall McLuhan, Michel Foucault, biopolitique, médium froid, Sami al-Hajj, dessins, Guantánamo, insurrection

When a community is threatened in its image of itself by rivals or neighbours, it goes to war. Any technology that weakens a conventional identity image, creates a response of panic and rage that we call “war.” Heinrich Hertz, the inventor of radio, put the matter very briefly: “The consequence of the image will be the image of the consequences.”

McLuhan, Letters 387

This paper makes an argument for the productive and potentially subversive political power of what McLuhan called “cool media.” In the age of high definition and broadband Internet, such an assertion might strike contemporary readers as out of date; but there is
no necessary correlation between high technology and “hot media.” Extending McLuhan’s understanding of cool for the age of social media and seemingly ubiquitous networks, I argue that we must take account of cool networks, cool content, and the user’s cool relations with them—relations that are highly participatory and that blur the distinction between active producer and passive consumer. At the heart of my argument lies the claim that cool media have an almost salutary power to threaten the high-tech biopolitical order of things and that, consequently, cool media are potentially the most threatening to the conventional image of identity—an identity that today is disorientated and in transition, producing as much as consuming the panic and rage known as war.

Cool media, I argue, have the uncanny power to convey panic and rage, to expose rather dramatically the loss of identity, and to tie this loss to the reciprocal and reversible relations that characterize the instantaneity of global communication media. McLuhan’s distinction between hot and cool is deceptively straightforward. “A hot medium is one that extends one single sense in ‘high definition’” (McLuhan, Understanding Media 22). In other words, “hot media do not leave so much to be filled in or completed by the audience. Hot media are, therefore, low in participation, and cool media are high in participation or completion by the audience” (23). Written in the 1960s, McLuhan’s examples of hot and cool media tend to strike contemporary readers as highly unintuitive. For McLuhan, television in the 1960s was a quintessentially cool medium, a “depth experience,” since early television images were low resolution: “The mosaic form of the TV image demands participation and involvement in depth of the whole being, as does the sense of touch” (Understanding Media 354). The “whole being” suggests a synaesthetic experience, one that involves multiple senses simultaneously, blending them, even reversing them. Today, our HDTVs are high resolution, a frenzy of hot visual surfaces, rather than cool depths; HDTV does not involve the whole being but primarily extends the sense of vision while de-emphasizing the other senses. Nevertheless, in what follows I demonstrate how McLuhan’s understanding of cool media is freshly relevant today, in an age saturated by the hotness of high definition, broadband telecommunications, and ubiquitous social networking, such as Facebook and Twitter. While McLuhan’s understanding of cool content still holds, I argue that we must extend his insight to take account of the eminently cool networks of (re)production and our place within them.
The epigraph above, cited by McLuhan as Hertz’s Law, is formulated as a rhetorical scheme known as an anastrophe, a figure of speech where the words are inverted for emphasis, to disrupt or to extend meaning in novel ways. This is a “media trope” (Murray, Introduction) par excellence, a figurative extension that demonstrates the inherent reversibility of all media, here inverting the image and its consequences to trouble their causal relation, to suspend any certainty over which term is consequent, which antecedent. Readers of McLuhan will hear, in this rhetoric, his critical call to understand and to read media as the reversible relation between figure and ground (see Gibson). If the consequences of an image include demonstrable effects and affects, it is no less true that these constitute, at the same time and in their own right, an imaginary field, an environment that, in no small way, (pre)conditions the meaning and the force of the consequences. Image and consequence, figure and ground, stand in the same reciprocal relation as medium and message because “the ‘content’ of any medium is always another medium” (McLuhan, Understanding Media 8) and “because it is the medium that shapes and controls the scale and form of human association and action” (9). Thus, any technology—any media environment—that exposes the precariousness of imaginary identity by exposing the reversibility and inescapable dependence of the image on its consequences is bound to be met with escalating violence. It matters little whether these technologies are warheads or web sites. Hence, the dark, atavistic face of the global village: the rise of tribalism and the loss of individual autonomy, agency, and rationality as political and cultural identity are tied to collective and shared images that effectively shape and control the scale and form of human association and action. As McLuhan wryly remarks, “Village people aren’t that much in love with each other. The global village is a place of very arduous interfaces and very abrasive situations” (Understanding Me 265). The consequence is violence: “a highly traumatic process . . . a crisis of identity, a vacuum of the self, which generates tremendous violence—violence that is simply an identity quest, private or corporate, social or commercial” (McLuhan, “Playboy” 249).

The following cartoon image, by McLuhan’s account, is an instance of cool media. Its content is cool because it is low resolution, it lacks detail, and its meaning relies on the participation of the viewer to fill in or complete what is missing. But as I suggest below, what makes this image cool is not just its content. We must also consider the cool and highly participatory circuits of production and con-
This image is part of a series of cartoons titled *Sketches of My Nightmare* that emerged from the American concentration camp at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba. It was published in the *Guardian* newspaper in the United Kingdom and in *Convergence Magazine* in Toronto, Canada, as well as in a Swedish national newspaper. It was circulated widely over the Internet. The political prisoner (“enemy combatant”) named Sami al-Hajj drew these cartoons. An Al Jazeera cameraman, in November 2001, Sami al-Hajj was detained by Pakistani Intelligence and handed over to US forces while he was covering the US war in Afghanistan. Al-Hajj was imprisoned for over six years in Camp Delta at Guantánamo Bay. He was subsequently released without charge. The cartoons in question were sketched during his 465-day hunger strike, during which time he was force-fed by the medical staff at Camp Delta. “Scream for Freedom” depicts the inhumane treatment of al-Hajj and other hunger-striking...
prisoners, who were twice daily strapped into what they called a torture chair and fed—if that is the right word—through a 110-cm tube forcibly inserted into one nostril so that liquid food could be administered. Each prisoner remained shackled to the chair for up to two hours so that he could be force-fed again if he vomited.

What you see above, however, is not the original cartoon as sketched by al-Hajj. The US Army banned Sami al-Hajj’s original cartoons, presumably because they were deemed to pose a threat to national security—and likely in light of the incendiary effects of the Danish cartoons depicting the Muslim prophet Mohammed published by Jyllands-Posten in late 2005. The reproductions of al-Hajj’s sketches were drawn by the British cartoonist Lewis Peake and based solely on verbal descriptions by al-Hajj’s lawyer. So these particular cartoons are interpretive reproductions. In a straightforward sense, they depict the routine medical treatment of Guantánamo prisoners engaged in a hunger strike, including force-feeding. What we learn through further images is that this force-feeding was not motivated by the prisoner’s health but rather by the state’s desire to keep the prisoner alive—at least nominally, technically, biopolitically. The state had to ensure that if al-Hajj died, his death was not politicized or politicizable. His life and death had to be thoroughly medicalized, abstract, reduced to the barest form of life, to biological life.

The images in Figures 2a and 2b are titled “The Inflatable Man.” The prisoner in the upper image is starving and emaciated, a skeleton, already dead. In the second image, after the prisoner has been force-fed, he becomes fat. Al-Hajj and other prisoners have explained that the medical staff was interested only in a prisoner’s weight, since this number was the sole political measure of a prisoner’s life and health. Al-Hajj says,

All they care about is the prisoner’s weight. “Are you sick? Are you in pain?” Who cares? It is all about the number on the scale. At the top of the drawing there is a skeleton again, but this time without hands or feet. The top of the head, the cranium, even the eyes are gone. Our lives depend on the doctors, but we get nothing from them. So we’re going mad. (qtd. in Worthington)

Al-Hajj also reports that the staff often misrepresented a prisoner’s weight by including shackles and sometimes pushing down on the scale.
Figure 2a: Interpretive reproduction of Sami al-Hajj’s “The Inflatable Man, part 1” by Lewis Peake; courtesy of the artist

Figure 2b: Interpretive reproduction of Sami al-Hajj’s “The Inflatable Man, part 2” by Lewis Peake; courtesy of the artist
I focus on these cartoons because they constitute cool media far beyond their mere content. Certainly, they tell a story of national security, of imprisonment, of the ways that life and death are regulated, and of how the body is treated medically and legally in a state of war or a state of emergency. The history of these images also tells the intricate story of global mass media: how images are caught up in the circuits of global capital and high-tech telecommunications networks, how they feature in newspapers as media content to be consumed, and how they become contested sites of freedom of expression used to criticize (or condone) national policies and security measures. We immediately read in them the need to question the ethics of torture and the inhumane treatment of prisoners as well as the geopolitical relationships that enable places like Guantánamo to exist. On yet another level, the cartoons pose a question of violence and agency: Who is responsible for this violence? Who are the gatekeepers of life and death? And in whose name are these acts committed? We get no answers when we stare into the faceless medics depicted in the cartoons. Thus, on a deeper level, we might ask how the cartoons allegorize not just the corporeal conditions of life and death in our mediatized and biopolitical context—the image of particular consequences—but also how our own relation to these images forms the ontological and, in some sense, temporal (pre)conditions of their message—the consequences of the image.

We must attend not only to the production of violence but also to questions of production and agency at the level of the image itself. While the content of the images tells a story (many stories, to be sure), more interesting for me is the cool form of the images—as productive texts that call for a rhetorical reading within an ethical register. A rhetorical approach is the occasion to reorient our understanding of new digital media, globalization, and the production of global identities across multiple domains. The cartoons are a privileged site of analysis precisely because they have been mediated and remediated, circulated and recirculated. It is not so much what these images say; it is not so much their purported content; rather, it is how they say it that is significant. Because they are low-tech and incomplete, we cannot passively consume them; the user completes or fills in the content, but when she does so, the images engage her reflexively, holding open the possibility that this magical act of completion or filling in is itself brought to light. The story of the complex and fragmentary production and circulation of these texts stands as a rhetorical figure for our own involvement in them, since
we in turn (re)produce their meaning and participate in their circuits of exchange; and through this engagement, we, in turn, are invited to situate ourselves reflexively in the social and biopolitical networks that constitute the (pre)conditions of the production and reproduction of them. These images do not merely depict a living death: they enact it. They rely on us to animate or vivify them, to add flesh to the lifeless forms. And they demand that we acknowledge our own finitude by pointing to the limits of our sovereign authority as interpreters and citizens in order to induct us into the lives—and deaths—of others. We, too, are responsible, in fragmentary and indirect ways, for the conditions that make possible the production and reproduction, the circulation and recirculation, of these images; we, each of us, are circuits in the communicative and political networks without which Guantánamo would not exist, without which these images would not and could not have been produced and reproduced. On their own, these images are nothing—lifeless, banal.

The images are cool, then, not just because the cool content is remediated in a simple sense, as “the representation of one medium in another” (Bolter and Grusin 45)—in this case a sketch remediated in a newspaper or on a computer screen. Technically, these sketches are not remediated as such: they are severed forever from the originals, from the hand and from the mortifying experience of Sami al-Hajj. Here, rather, I point instead to what I would call remediality, a phenomenon to be understood quite apart from the details of particular contents and their re-presentation and quite apart from the kinds of material details that form the elements, the working parts, of our communication systems. I am suggesting that the network itself is a species of rhetorical figure, an interpretive ground with consequential effects and affects that must be understood as the general (pre)condition for networked subjectivities—for subjects operating as interconnected nodes, switches, resistors. These terms are no doubt feeble metaphors by which we struggle to understand the advent of new subjects of distributed agency, intelligence, and responsibility (although these latter terms, while conventional, are no less metaphorical).

“Subjectivity” is the wrong word here. Subjectivity is an artefact of the binary logic that once characterized the literate mentality, as McLuhan would say. “Subject” inevitably conjures up an object over and against which it must be understood. We are no longer subjects in this sense. Objectivity is impossible. This loss of subjective identity is clearly theorized by McLuhan, who connects subjectivity
to the effects of media innovations throughout history. According to him, in the history of western culture, there have been three major epochs created by revolutionary innovations in communication media. The first was the literate revolution that occurred between the seventh and fourth centuries BCE following the adoption of the Phoenician alphabet by the ancient Greeks, which catapulted their culture out of oral patterns of speech and thought to make way for the dominance of literate modes of communication. The second was the Gutenberg revolution that came in the wake of the invention of the moveable type printing press in the mid-fifteenth century. Gutenberg’s innovation accelerated the processes of change associated with literacy and firmly established a subjectivity that accorded with a literate mentality—predominantly visual, logical, and linear. This subjectivity arose in tandem with new kinds of social organizations, educational institutions, and cultural expressions, and individuals began to be held accountable for their private actions (McLuhan, Understanding Media 39). The third was the electric revolution that began with the invention of the telegraph in 1844 and continues to this day, progressing through the advent of radio, film, the telephone, and the computer. In the electric age, the focus on the individual shifts to the group or “tribe” and responsibility undergoes a reversal in which the individual is now privately responsible for group action. Each revolution—each epochal shift—has involved discontinuity, dichotomy, and antagonism between two radically different media systems and cultures, with extreme clashes along the frontier between the two worlds. McLuhan refers to these frontiers as “break boundaries,” zones of “merging,” “tension,” and “interplay.” The ongoing electric revolution is the most dramatic: “The greatest of all reversals occurred with electricity, that ended sequence by making things instant” (Understanding Media 12).

McLuhan’s electric revolution resonates powerfully with the nineteenth-century paradigm shift that Foucault discusses, as the west shifted from a political power organized around sovereignty toward a power understood as biopolitical. McLuhan and Foucault offer largely complementary theories; each account fulfills the other. The political dimensions of power and discourse, as understood by Foucault, are only intimated by McLuhan, while McLuhan’s understanding of media helps to fill in lacunae in Foucault’s analysis, since the rise of biopolitics is scarcely conceivable without an understanding of contemporaneous revolutionary advances in media technologies and telecommunications. Foucault’s biopolitical forms of governance began to supplant sovereign and disciplinary styles of political power just as McLuhan’s electric revolution was getting
underway, displacing literate modes of communication. Foucault describes disciplinary power as “individualizing” subjects through the exercise of social organizations, educational institutions, and cultural expressions linked to discourses of power/knowledge through institutions such as the prison, the school, and the hospital. In McLuhan’s terms, we might say that Foucault’s disciplinary power is aligned with individualistic patterns typified by the literate mentality, with forms of communication and knowledge that rely on linear and logical processes, focusing on the private individual conceived as a subjective interiority (McLuhan notes the rise of the novel as a technique for “privatization” and individualism). In many respects, Foucauldian discipline is an extension of sovereignty that emanates from a centralized power typically dominated by the sense of vision, such as that figured in Jeremy Bentham’s panopticon, which operates “to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power” (Foucault, Discipline 201). In more general terms, Foucault writes, “discipline tries to rule a multiplicity of men to the extent that their multiplicity can and must be dissolved into individual bodies that can be kept under surveillance, trained, used, and, if need be, punished” (Lectures 242).

In the mid-nineteenth century, biopolitics and electric communication and media technologies arose together in response to the same basic need: “It is as though power, which used to have sovereignty as its modality or organizing schema, found itself unable to govern the economic and political body of a society that was undergoing both a demographic explosion and industrialization” (Lectures 249). Because disciplinary power was centred on the individual body, it became increasingly impracticable as a form of social governance. More wide-ranging techniques were called for, and new electric technologies were enlisted in the service of biopolitical governance; but reciprocally, these technologies also informed biopolitical techniques, including “the corporation, with its impersonal empire over many lives” (McLuhan, Understanding Media 23). Biopolitics and the electric revolution must be thought together.

The break boundary marks an epochal shift and a stunning transformation in power’s relation to—and eventually over—life itself. While the slogan of sovereign power was the power “to take life or let live”—that is, the sovereign’s political right to revoke the life of a subject or to let him live—the formula of biopolitical power is “to make live and let die” (Foucault, Lectures 241). The focus has
shifted dramatically: it no longer concerns the sovereign’s imperial hold on the individual body but rather involves a decentralized and polymorphic power that regulates the masses, the population, man-as-species, the “race.” The sovereign’s prerogative to kill or let live is gradually replaced by the diffuse political power to make live—that is, to bestow life, to foster it, to protect it by regulating human reproduction, fertility, productivity, public health and hygiene, accidents, medicine, and the like. In sum, biopolitics does not treat individual bodies; bodies are “massified,” bodies are “regularized,” and “bodies are replaced by general biological processes” (249). Together with electric technologies and nascent communication networks, a system of biopolitical techniques emerges:

The mechanisms introduced by biopolitics include forecasts, statistical estimates and overall measures . . . regulatory mechanisms must be established to establish an equilibrium, maintain an average, establish a sort of homeostasis, and compensate for variations within this general population and its aleatory field. In a word, security mechanisms had to be installed around the random element inherent in a population of living beings so as to optimize a state of life . . . maximize and extract forces. (246)

So while we find disciplinary techniques (such as surveillance and force-feeding) deployed in places like Guantánamo, these prisoners are not “individualized” but rather are de-individualized or “massified,” treated as interchangeable members of a dangerous population, a security risk to be managed and regulated in the name of life. Al-Hajj’s skeletons bring this to the fore, turning a post-sovereign gaze back on the viewer, whose life—and the life of his or her own population—is “preserved” by the torture these images depict. Thus, the cool images expose the tortured logic of biopolitics: not only are these acts committed in the name of the lives of those who view them, but the viewer, as a node in the network, is also responsible for the meaningful (re)production of the images, (re)producing that name in intimate proximity with the tortured gaze, image and consequence.

In this regard, the global electric telecommunication network, as theorized by McLuhan, is the perfect image of biopolitics: it is a diffuse tribal system without individuals, a system in which nobody acts as such, and nobody is acted upon. The network itself is cool as ice; not only do networked subjectivities fill in the content, they are the content, and the network is nothing without the pluripotent
participation—the endless intersection—of one and all. In its effects, its consequences, it operates of its own accord, mindlessly—almost magically. Old binaries are destabilized, if not obsolesced: subject and object, active and passive, antecedent and consequent. In this sense, all media are biopolitical, they are the lifeblood—the flesh—of the new tribe. Sequential temporality does not make sense in the network age. As McLuhan quips, “Instead of asking which came first, the chicken or the egg, it suddenly seemed that a chicken was an egg’s idea for getting more eggs” (Understanding Media 12).

In this context, Sami al-Hajj’s images offer a trenchant critique of our mediatized and biopolitical culture—a culture ostensibly committed to the preservation and sanctity of life. The prison camp is the extreme face of biopolitics, a place where the boundary between life and death is defined and regulated, where those who do “not cherish life,” as G.W. Bush’s Attorney General once said, are sent to die a living death (Hersh 5). The images bear directly on biopolitical power conceived as the power “to make live and let die.” They demonstrate that the death of one population has become a necessary part, a consequence—a (pre)condition—of the life of
another. At the same time, however, death is hidden; it is covered up and disavowed. The official biopolitical story is that nobody dies and certainly nobody is killed, at least, not directly, not in any way that we can see; these crimes are outsourced to penal colonies like Guantánamo, through the “extraordinary rendition” of enemy combatants to Bagram Air Base and Abu Ghraib Prison, obfuscated by the state bureaucracy and covered up by one media spectacle after another. Making live and letting die: These deaths are never caused as such; officially, they are merely allowed to happen—passive events. They are dismissed as collateral damage or as merely neutralizing a security threat in the War on Terror. Those who die are figured as a biological threat and so their death is justified in the name of life. As Foucault writes, in the biopolitical age, “[W]ar is about two things: it is not simply a matter of destroying a political adversary, but of destroying the enemy race, of destroying that [sort] of biological threat that those people over there represent to our race” (Lectures 257).

For me, al-Hajj’s images seem to speak on behalf of the dead. They threaten to expose the demonic face of our biopolitics, to disrupt its logic, and to lay bare the abstract death at the heart of biopolitical life. They speak to our wilful ignorance, our connected complicity, and demand that justice be served not just for the living but for those who have died—who have been murdered—in the holy name of life. In sum, they are an instance of what I have termed “thanatopolitics” (Murray, “Thanatopolitics”), the insurrectionary power of the dead to expose and interrupt the mortal consequences of biopolitics.

I have claimed that the coolness of these cartoon images has an almost magical political power. This is an effect of the kinds of integrated subjects we now are, situated within and distributed across biopolitical media networks. To the literate mentality—the modern, sovereign individual—this will seem irrational, to be sure. In her book, Regarding the Pain of Others, Susan Sontag opens with a similar problematic. She refers to Virginia Woolf’s (highly literate) discussion of Ernst Friedrich’s popular book, Krieg dem Kriege [War against War], which was published in many editions and translated into many languages throughout the 1920s. The book includes reproductions of numerous gruesome, high-resolution photographs of mutilated soldiers, casualties of World War I. It was intended as a kind of hot media shock therapy, the images meant to wage war against war, to end war for all time. It was a European bestseller. Why, Sontag seems to ask, did images such as these fail to prevent
the atrocities of World War II? Was the public already desensitized to media representations of pain and suffering? And if these detailed photographs, culled from German military and medical archives, were unable to halt the rising tide of violence, how, we must ask, could simple low-resolution cartoons have any effect whatsoever?

One year later, Sontag’s New York Times Magazine article, “Regarding the Torture of Others,” offered something by way of an answer. Publication of this essay followed the wide distribution of photographs of torture—and state-sanctioned murder repackaged as “prisoner abuse”—emerging from Abu Ghraib Prison in American-occupied Iraq. Speaking of the Abu Ghraib photographs, Sontag boldly declared, “[T]he photographs are us!” Sontag refused to allow the Bush Administration to dismiss these events—and the photographs of them—as an isolated occurrence committed by “a few bad apples,” as President Bush himself phrased it. She pointed instead to the wider culture, a culture, she writes, in which such events are “systematic,” “authorized,” and “condoned.” “The photographs are us”: Sontag’s strategically gliss, almost childlike, phrase sought to shake Americans from their complacent individualism. For me, her article gestures toward a different kind of politics and a different kind of ethics: she points to a responsibility that extends beyond the immediate sphere of my own individual influence, beyond the contours and limits of my own discrete body. We are responsible not just for the actions of these soldiers, she suggests, and not just for the widespread transmission of these images through the Internet and on TV. More than this, we are responsible for the very (pre)conditions that enabled these actions to take place, and so we must claim these images, in some sense, as our own. It is a cultural responsibility. We are honour bound not to defend freedom in the narrow and narcissistic sense in which freedom privileges the sovereign, autonomous individual—and individual life—above all else. Rather, we are responsible, we are honour bound, in a wider sense.

It is no coincidence that the Abu Ghraib image that is burned into our collective consciousness is the image of the hooded figure standing on a box, electric wires extending from under the hood. We remember this photograph from among hundreds of others—faces of the dead, gloating US soldiers, prisoners who have been forced to cover their bodies with their own excrement—because the hooded figure is cool. It involves us deeply; it is synaesthetic; it is participatory. Identity withdraws from the image: the withdrawal is a consequence of the (pre)conditions of the image’s pro-
duction and reproduction but it is also an image of the consequences of those (pre)conditions, and an image of the consequences of our own threatened identity. For the identity in crisis is surely our own as, on the one hand, we cling to the tattered remnants of a sovereign western gaze, while, on the other, we arrive abruptly at the limits of our sovereign interpretation; our own bodily integrity is no longer a measure, an irreducible point of reference, because the violence of the acts and the unending violence of their reproduction are, quite literally, senseless, bodiless. The hooded figure shares more with al-Haji’s cartoons than it does with photographs whose contents are hot. While photographs, Sontag tells us, seem to enjoy an element of objectivity because they are “a record of the real” and while photographs are said bear witness “to the real—since a person had been there to take them” (Regarding the Pain 26), these cartoon caricatures have been emptied of photographic objectivity. They do not bear the trace of the real; they close that gap—they are a real trace, these hands, this body. If the cartoons bear witness, they do so in a quasi-magical way, since we are cut off from their origin and swept up into the circuits of their production and reproduction. They have no unique point of view. So if they bear witness, this witness, too, is produced by us, and we must bear witness reflexively and to a system of which we ourselves are a part. When we coolly transmit and retransmit these images, we have no control over the ways their meaning will be completed or filled in; we have no way to ensure the authority of our own authorial intentions, which haunt the network. Nevertheless, we are responsible for our involvement—for the radical, unplanned for, and unintentional effects and affects of our actions—not quite as responsible individuals or autonomous subjects, but as part of the life of the network, a form of life in which multiple readings are bound to circulate.

I have focused on al-Haji’s images mindful that I myself participate here in their production and reproduction, mindful (or simply hopeful) that I have inducted my reader into unanticipated circuits of responsibility, contributing to other sets of interpretations. I am tempted to say that the hooded—or veiled—figure serves as one of the key media tropes of our day, from Abu Ghraib to the iconic photographs of hooded prisoners at Guantánamo. To be clear, I am not advancing a normative claim about the use of cool media. I remain agnostic in this regard. My gesture is Foucauldian: I am offering an analytics of power relations in the age of mediatized biopolitics. I join contemporary affect theorists who claim that the gulf between thinking and feeling represents a false binary—one
that is, nonetheless, a very real one, an effect of living on the break boundary between the literate mentality that characterizes “thought” and the new tribalism that seems to celebrate depth of “feeling” with little substance. It is too simple, perhaps, to suggest that these terms must be refashioned.

To offer a final example by way of conclusion, I turn to a brief reflection on Neda Agha-Soltan, the twenty-six-year-old Iranian woman who was shot and killed in the streets of Tehran on 20 June 2009. In her essay discussing the viral mediatization of the grainy video footage of Neda’s death, Nima Naghibi questions the rhetoric of liberation that often inflects the political uses and benefits of social media technologies. Naghibi asks, “But what does it mean to celebrate a medium that makes us feel faster than we think? What are the implications of participating in a medium that encourages us to place emotion before carefully considered thought?” (58). Naghibi is mindful not to reinscribe a false binary between thought and feeling, but her questions are haunting. How did “Neda” attain iconic status? What are the biopolitical and networked (pre)conditions that allowed for the “unscrupulous appropriation of the remembered’s name and identity” (60–61), as so many did through Twitter feeds, on their Facebook pages, and across countless blogs and web sites, where images of Neda circulated and recirculated in (and often as) someone else’s image and identity? The well-known grainy video images of this young woman’s death constitute cool media not simply because they are low-resolution. Significantly, they depict a veiled young woman, a cool image, a withdrawing identity—one is tempted to say “private”—that soon became very “hot” as she was literally unveiled across media networks. Naghibi speculates that the world

really claimed Neda only after seeing the famous unveiled photograph of her, along with those of her on vacation in Turkey with her boyfriend. Before that, when the graphic and violent video of her death was broadcast, people reacted in horror and with compassion towards the sight of a young woman gunned down in the street. (66)

I would suggest that the cool, veiled image had, for a moment, a greater power to disturb, to suspend the certainty of our sovereign gaze, to throw the viewer’s identity into crisis, and somehow to force the viewer to account for the biopolitical and mediatizing circuits of which she or he forms an integral part. The hot, unveiled
image, on the other hand, went viral, but it failed to disturb — rather, the recognizably “western” and “democratic” and “liberated” face of the unveiled Neda proved to be an easy site of sovereign (neo-colonial) identification, shoring up what we already think we know about freedom and oppression, democracy and barbarism, us and them. Indeed, it is this flattening of Neda’s name and identity that Naghibi interrogates, and I believe she is right to suggest the term narcissism. McLuhan might have described this media event as an instance of “Narcissus narcissism” (see Understanding Media, 41–47; “Playboy” 237), which is especially dangerous with hot media. “Narcissus narcissism” is narcissistic because we fall in love with our own image, and it is narcotizing or numbing because we fail to see that these media and these images are simply extensions of ourselves. We must not forget that the myth of Narcissus is a story of death, even suicide.

I hope that this paper has demonstrated the renewed political relevance of cool media in a biopolitical media environment that is otherwise too hot to handle. When we reflect on the revolutionary political potential of the cool, countless examples surely come to mind — the use of social networking sites and Twitter during the Arab Spring of 2011 or the grainy live-video feed of Cairo’s Tahrir Square broadcast by Al Jazeera throughout the long night of February 2. Such an analysis is beyond the scope of this paper. My approach has been diagnostic rather than prescriptive and, in this respect, stands alongside McLuhan and Foucault. I have suggested that cool media can be salutary, in some respects, prompting a rather different comportment in light of the problem McLuhan understood so well: “Electric speed in bringing all social and political functions together in a sudden implosion has heightened human awareness of responsibility to an intense degree” (Understanding Media 5). How, then, to make sense of human responsibility in an age of convergence, when biopolitical and media networks together usher in unprecedented ethical challenges? How shall we define ethical life and our own (inter)subjective belonging? Literate, sovereign forms of responsibility are fast becoming obsolete: law, democracy, geopolitics, medicine, education — all rely on epistemological paradigms that are firmly rooted in a literate mentality defined by the principles of abstract — even atomistic — individualism, autonomy, and rationality. This form of subjectivity is in crisis, as we navigate the break boundary of the electric age, the “age of anxiety” (5). A new anatomy of criticism is called for, one that understands and critiques the effects of mediatized biopolitics while resisting the
urge to return to the sovereignty of modern subjectivity with its regimes of truth. Cool media, I have argued, invite us to reconsider the ethics of the image. And cool media call us to account for the anatomy of biopolitical life, to understand surfacing images through the depths of their consequences, and to open new forms of ethical relation—forms of life, I hope, that will be more commensurable with emergent subjectivities that are scarred, still, by mortal finitude, even as they circulate almost infinitely.

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