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Book review for *Media, War & Conflict*

Gürsel, Zeynep Devrim (2016) *Image Brokers: Visualizing World News in the Age of Digital Circulation*. Oakland, California: University of California Press. ISBN: 9780520286375 (paperback); ISBN: 9780520286368 (hardback)

This book's opening pages introduce us to Jackie, a photo editor at Global Views Inc., on 21 March, 2003. She's busy working at her desk when a courier arrives to deliver an envelope containing several unprocessed rolls of film shot by a professional photographer two days earlier (documenting protests in California organised against the impending US-led invasion of Iraq). Exasperated, she pushes the envelope to one side, and returns to the task at hand. A week will pass before the rolls are developed, digitised and archived – imagery effectively disregarded and rendered obsolete, thanks to the gathering momentum of the digital news cycle. Jackie, it transpires, is a professional image broker, employed by a 'visual content' provider, whose multifaceted role entails her acting as an intermediary for images with her colleagues to negotiate, commission, evaluate, edit, license, and sell potentially newsworthy photographs. In so doing, Gürsel explains, the image broker is a mediator for views of the world, collectively framing our ways of seeing.

This glimpse into routine, everyday decision-making over which imagery will be selected to be made available – and crucially what will be cast aside – taking place on the day the US military launched its 'shock and awe' assault on Baghdad is illustrative of several themes examined throughout this book. 'By early 2003,' Gürsel writes, 'having the capability to transmit digitally was essential for a photographer to even get an assignment in Iraq,' a shift rapidly becoming the norm in a period of 'major technological and professional transformation in the news media' characterised by considerable uncertainty (p. 2). The book's primary mode of enquiry is informed by doctoral fieldwork conducted from 2003 to 2005, including at the aforementioned Global Views Inc. (GVI) in New York, the Paris headquarters of Agence France-Press, the editorial offices of 'Newsworld' magazine (a pseudonym to aggregate fieldwork and interviews at three US news magazines), and three photojournalism platforms (Barnstorm, Visa pour l'Image, and World Press Photo), amongst other institutional sites. 'As I watched what began as a war that had to be covered digitally become a digital war of images,' Gürsel recalls, 'I grew increasingly convinced of the political potential of visual journalism,' recognising it was 'far too important a practice not to be scrutinized and engaged analytically' (p. 3). Striving to make sense of what was happening to photojournalism in this emergent digital environment, she brought to bear her anthropological skills in ethnography to unravel how the imperatives of digitalisation were recasting the production and distribution processes underwriting the transmission of visual content. 'The business of news images can be seen as a global industry,' she points out, 'the raw material comes from many different locations, the labor is often mobile, and once packaged, the products can travel around the world as complete packages or as material to be repackaged as part of new assemblages' (p. 7).

This corporatist conception of news images as specialised products – where non-news organisations (such as GVI) play a pivotal role in their commodification and circulation – proved rather jarring for photojournalists, of course, many of whom were accustomed to describing their craft rather differently. In addition to de-mythologizing photojournalism, this new emphasis on digitalization was similarly disruptive for familiar assumptions about news

images' alignment with truth. Gürsel maintains they be regarded as 'formative fictions,' that is, 'constructed representations that reflect current events yet simultaneously shape ways of imagining the world and political possibilities within it' (p. 11). It is not apparent to me where the fictive dimension resides, however; indeed, one can privilege a factual image's narrative or even aesthetic significance for influencing how future events are imaged in anticipation of certain preferred framings, for example, without invoking the language of fictitious representation. In contrast, Gürsel finds employing the term 'fiction' to be generative, namely 'as a way to explicitly push against ideas of photographs as indexical representations showing the world as it is,' while also observing 'photographs that become news images can be unmade and used in commercial contexts or remade as other news' (p. 330). Both fair points, in my view, but even before our current troubles over notions of 'fake news' and 'alternative facts' in the Trump era, use of the word 'fiction' in this regard misses the mark. More positively, at various moments in Gürsel's treatment, tensions around facticity are shown to invite closer scrutiny of issues which otherwise risk eluding more traditional categories, such as when she captures in rich detail how image brokers creatively visualise audience engagement when mediating interpretive possibilities. That is, they make their choices on the basis of projected expectations about what viewers know, care about, or find emotively resonant, and in so doing, self-reflexively work to construct (rather than simply reflect) the significance of the event in question.

More than a decade has passed since Gürsel completed her principal ethnographies, which necessarily limits the relevance of her findings to current debates, yet helps to recover evidence furthering our understanding of the early days of digital photography during the so-called 'War on Terror.' The largely invisible labour of image brokers is rendered visible through thick description, often in ways which encourage fresh thinking about longstanding concerns. She shows how image brokers struggled to cope with multiple 'crises of visualization' during this period, searching for ways to maintain Western readers' interest in distant wars that continued for much longer than initially anticipated (and where official claims about weapons of mass destruction, for example, proved impossible to illustrate). A more critical reading of these crises would have been welcome, however, starting with contrary, against-the-grain questions exploring the extent photojournalism's transformation under commercial pressures undercut the visual power of its truth-telling. Digitalisation brought with it certain forms of politicisation, with ideological implications seldom touched upon in sufficient depth here. Still, read on its own terms, *Image Brokers* rewards us with valuable insights into areas which have not received adequate scholarly attention to date, not least the uneven materialities of the institutional networks through which international images of war, conflict and crisis flow.

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