

Embodied Cognition and Empathic Experiences in War Communication

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Using the perspective of phenomenological-enactive embodied cognition, this paper examines the role of the body in constituting specific social interactions via specific media ecologies (war imagery) during the times of (refugee) crisis. Such media ecologies give affordances that can amplify social beliefs and turn subjective judgments into an intersubjective action. We consider the human body in relation to war media as playing an important role in sustaining social experiences and relations. To that end, the article explores the fundamental experience of empathy, combining the theoretical perspectives of phenomenology and enactivism with the examples from war imagery and refugee embodiment. It is shown that the classical phenomenological tradition offers different yet useful conceptualisations of empathy. We also argue that war images and/or messages should be viewed as means/tools for, rather than representations of, the enaction of certain important experiences. Hence, the article connects the analysis of the affection by war imagery with the subsequent social interactions in the context of refugee crisis.

Keywords: embodied cognition, war imagery, empathy, vulnerability, refugees

‘In the case of the Other, “what” I actually see is not a sign and not mere analogue, a depiction in any natural sense of the word; on the contrary, it is someone else...’

(Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*)

INTRODUCTION: INTER-CORPOREALITY TODAY

In this paper, we will draw on some classical phenomenological concepts to investigate the role of empathic experiences in war communication, war imagery and refugee crises.¹ We use the term ‘war communication’ in a loose manner, first demarcating the specific media ecology that mediates phenomena related to war and analysing specific components of the war mediatisation process, such as images, narrativity, mediated social interactions, etc.

¹ The goal of this paper is not the analysis of concrete images. Moreover, because of the sensitivity of the topic and major ethical reasons we will NOT use war or other imagery in this research, trusting the reader’s memory and imagination to fill this gap while following the conceptual apparatus and argumentation.

Secondly, although modern war communication has its own history (at least from the Crimean War 1854–1856), in the present text we concentrate on the ongoing situation of the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the following refugee crisis.

The sensitivity of this topic is so great that even the very possibility of speaking about it might be called into question: can and should we reflect and communicate on these atrocities in an academic manner, as opposed to, say, engaging in a direct action of some sort? In this crucible of risk brought about by the pandemic, climate change, and finally war, human embodiment, and its fundamental embeddedness in the environment, becomes a new ground for understanding and action. This also means that today, as never before, the academic conceptualisation of human interactions must be attuned to circumstances, which demands new ways of conceptualisation.

Our present juncture leads us to ask a wider question: what are the consequences of the fact that our reality (which is constructed through social processes), with empathy forming a constitutive part of it, is shaped via media? What becomes of social, intersubjective relations if they are so thoroughly mediated? (Couldry, Hepp 2017). In this light, the present paper seeks to examine how and to what extent war images mediate intersubjectivity and sociality. But before turning to the structural and geopolitical elements of war communication, we need to establish the conceptual basis, which, in our case, consists of the phenomenology of intersubjectivity and empathy along with its embodied, enactive and critical extensions.

Under the umbrella of Embodied Cognition a lot of concepts and arguments have been coined that may be fruitfully applied to the study of social interactions in specific media ecologies (Navarro, Briedis 2022). The notion of embodied cognition stresses the unity of embodied action, perception and cognition in a certain skillfully available Environment (*Umwelt*). Cognition here is not inference based but relies on 4E – it is Embodied, Enacted, Extended and Embedded (Clark 1997; Gallagher 2005, 2017; Varela et al. 1991; Chemero 2009; Barrett 2011; Zahavi 2019). Such cognitive structures as memory, emotions, and even empathy are here seen as *affordances* tied to the *feedback* (variations in the power to act resulting from the collision with other bodies) of *I can* (or *I cannot*). Public spaces (Navarro, Briedis 2023), other people, and even institutions *afford extension* and can legitimately become part of one's cognitive system (that is, cognition not in the head but extended in the environment).

Embodied cognition enables us to view war communication ecologies in an anti-representational manner, conveying historical and social lessons to bridge the gap between personal and social-cultural dimensions, enacting a socially relevant imagination. This in turn poses new challenges to problems related to the cultural fusion of horizons and the conditions for democracy and peace. A special place here is reserved for empathy viewed as a structure of embodied cognition and social affordance. Disagreements on the accounts on empathy notwithstanding, we will focus on those points that can be productively applied to interpreting experiences relevant to the media ecology of war.

WAR IMAGES: ENACTION AND AFFECTION

Along with the transformations in the phenomenology of empathy, we consider what features are specific to the mediatisation of empathy in war imagery since images constitute a field of affections for the viewer as well as affordances to enact various meanings.

Today, human cognition is not seen as a passive, cold, rational calculus, but rather as a process of constant attunement to the world by certain affections, feelings and senses. Affect prompts feelings, which also have a cognitive value – they provide directions for action and

feedback on how things are going. Enaction in turn is the subject's response to media-given affordances since it presupposes that the subject would skillfully use media to bring forth (enact) certain important experiences. Hence, media modes (Images, Language, Rituals, Symbols, etc.) do not represent objects in a depictive manner as the only important originals but are instead tools to enact certain experiences. The action, skillful movement of the body, in turn, enacts various socially relevant meanings based on primitive causal impressions.

According to Michotte (1963, 1991), causal impressions found social interactions. But an impression is not depictive; it modifies not the body image, but the body schema (Merleau-Ponty 1962; Gallagher 1986). How do they then transmit the socially loaded knowledge, say, empathic affection? Images of war loaded with the affective affordances and modifying potential of primitive causal impressions prepare the ground for grasping more complicated narrativity. Hence, there is an important cognitive tie between primal causal impressions and complex social narrativity. That is why, unlike popular opinion, narratives are not just stories or interpretations of facts; they are based on embodied memory, that is, causal impressions pre-reflectively recalling and reapplying certain fundamental embodied but socially significant patterns of behaviour.

Stressing the role of narrativity for shared intentions, Gallagher suggests that 'narrative plays an important role here, since it is rare that joint actions are conducted on the basis of lists or instructions. <...> Narratives address the *why* question as well as the *how* question' (Gallagher 2017: 469). After simple social-physical interactions, which become inscribed in the body as memory of I can (do it again), re-use as the moment in the process of being extended by media (images) forms a fundament for further sophisticated operations, such as grasping of complex narrativity. In this regard, Ricœur's idea of imagination should be understood as the capacity for affective anticipation, rather than as representation. Hence, it is embodied and affective but also social and narrative.

Today the dominant element of the horizon is often presented as a narrative, which, together with discrete facts, constitutes a hermeneutic circularity of the subject's interpretations. This *homo narrans* is embedded in the mediated and narrated environment (media ecology). Narratives organise information and identity and presuppose (give meaning to) action, reducing complexity and thus fostering better understanding of the phenomenon at hand. They resonate with audiences and ground both individual and shared understanding, even if these are often based more on emotion than on logic. By creating an *imagined* aim, narratives mobilise society. By including a unified vision of a certain aim, narratives provide a solution to one of the central challenges in politics: the problem of collective action in the pursuit of common public goods.

It is important to distinguish between a narrative and a mere topic or theme. Narrative is not so much about the story but the moral or deeper meaning that individuals draw from a specific story. As narratives always take some form of communication, they appeal to basic causal connections. The key functional roles that these stories play include conflict, desire/goal, complicating actions, progressing actions, and resolution. Key character functions include protagonist and antagonist. How the protagonist deals with these successes and obstacles is part of how a narrative system expresses values and cultural norms.

In the present moment, as an example, Russia appears as an antagonist to the West. In interpreting itself against the terms set by the West, Russia tries to reinforce its own identity and image of prosperity. Such prosperity, of course, is invested in the national image rather than in the people. The affluent West is then posited as the enemy; the other main enemy is presented

as 'Fascism', which is given as the reason for continued military battles against the alleged 'Nazification' of Ukraine. All of this serves to perpetuate a particular narrative system, which is designed to direct the Russian populace's subjectivity.

Against neutrality in the face of images, in his famous book on photography, *Camera Lucida* (1981), R. Barthes delivers an enigmatic, poetic style of reflecting on the photographic imagery but at the same time suggests a few effective tools for deciphering the nature and inner workings of basic narrative experiences. Barthes stresses how photography stands in opposition to neutrality (contra Husserl's formulation of affection by image as 'as if' real experience (perception) which for Husserl presupposes lesser emotional blow and engagement), especially in relation to embodiment: 'if only Photography could give me a neutral, anatomic body, a body which signifies nothing!' (Barthes 1981: 12). Furthermore, according to Barthes, 'in the Photograph, the event is never transcended for the sake of something else' (Barthes 1981: 4).

(War) images create specific bodies and mortify them: you can see how fragile the body is. That is why, for Barthes, the essence of an image is death. The viewer of this imagery needs to put the experience into some functional horizon (inform, represent, surprise, cause, signify, provoke, etc.), for without a function it is horrifying. However, after framing the function for the viewer, the latter is left with his own enactive strategies to make meaning out of an image (Dant, Graeme 2002). Barthes delineates the crossover of two structural parts of image apprehension, which roughly correspond to the inner and outer horizons distinguished by Husserl: *studium* and *punctum*. *Studium* stands for the wider education and knowledge related to the thematic field (Gurwitsch 1964) of the subjects imaged. *Punctum* in turn is personal; it makes a viewer add something to the image. *Punctum* is the detail from the personal background that rearranges the image as the field of intensities. *Studium* is passive while *punctum* affects and awakens the former. It also awakens the viewer from the typicality of *studium* to the personal *punctum* as the moral *I can*. Furthermore, the photograph's immobility forces us to mix imaged subjects as both real and alive, and this mixed affect can have an enormous impression on the viewer. Photograph redirects our experience in a temporal mode attesting that something was alive in that time and place.

Here we empathise with few temporal modalities. Moreover, we empathise with someone who saw the subject of the photograph in the flesh. Hence, even some of our memories or experiences are not directly ours; we make them so. Images can trigger 'distant suffering' (Chouliaraki 2006). In this regard, cultural trauma theory states that media users are also moral agents encountering the mediated suffering of others. Conversely, even if you lived through something, many memories of that event may come from the media. In this sense, empathy in war communication has a historical dimension, as it includes distant others – that is, not only our actual contemporaries but also those distant people who become our peers via the simultaneity and synchronisation of concerns. Considering these issues, the next part will explore the following questions: does functionality exhaust the affection by war images? And how do we respond to an imaged empathy?

HESITANT WITNESSES: THE VULNERABILITY OF BODILY EXPERIENCE AND ITS ETHICAL IMPLICATIONS

Angus reflects on contemporary mediatisation as another crisis precisely because today's digital culture 'approaches a pure transparency without delays or silences that could initiate emergent meaning' (Angus 2021: 319). The speed of transmission of information (McLuhan 2001) reduc-

es the capacity for productive responses. However, war imagery significantly increases the number of experiences that interrupt this otherwise seemingly endless flow of information.

Referring to disturbing images, Barthes states that 'name cannot really prick me. The incapacity to name is a good symptom of disturbance. The effect is certain but un-locatable, <...> it is best to look away or close your eyes' (Barthes 1981: 53). Here we see the importance of non-present or non-depictive structural elements of image (empathic) apprehension already thematised by previous phenomenologists. Barthes distinguishes between images (photograph) and cinema while elaborating further on the dynamic, temporal and embodied features of image apprehension: 'Do I add to the images in movies? I don't think so; I don't have time: in front of the screen, I am not free to shut my eyes; otherwise, opening them again, I would not discover the same image' (Barthes 1981: 55).

This *hesitation* (Al-Saji 2009: 112) is brought on by the specificities of the medium (static imagery) and the subject imaged (war atrocities), as bodily affection interrupts the habitual pattern of social beliefs but also enables one to recognise this pattern. War images as the enaction of affects are full of such breaks in the natural flow of experience. However, such moments enable us to see our usual perceptual orientation toward others; even perceptual discrepancies in the motoric process of image awareness can disclose a social position. As with the invisible, the unspeakable is not opposed to but conditions speech. The unspeakable is still grasped on the bodily level but it is difficult to translate to higher levels. This is embodied cognition in the face (Levinas) of the unspeakable and in the invisible, which also brings hesitation and interruption in perceptual-cognitive habits that ground the possibility of hermeneutic distance and change. Perceptual and affective shifts become necessary for unlearning to see others, to see not just others but *with* others.

The world shows itself in different modalities of being with others. We learn many of these modalities in a habitual manner, but some are especially challenging as being-for the other (Levinas 1991). Levinas is yet another pupil of Husserl who developed his own phenomenological take on empathy. In Levinas's work, though, Husserl's transcendental subject becomes a moral subject, and responsibility for the other is taken as coming from the other. If, for Husserl, the affection by the other remains in a mode of information, for Levinas what he calls 'sensibility' signifies the ontological openness, the possibility of giving up your body for the other, as a mother or a soldier might do. This relation for Levinas is not theoretical but ethical, and it is imprinted in the sensible givenness of the other's embodied being. Here the relation between sensibility and signification remains dependent on the Other, not because of his depictive similarity of units of information, but rather on account of a moral demand. War images deliver the affects of sensibility beyond space, time, and pictorial similarities. Moreover, as with E. Stein, the empathic relation to the imaged situation may open one to another time, space or world.

The animation of sensibility in the Levinasian sense does not require direct perception or pictorial representation. The face of the other (as in war images) is not an image that needs to be first represented and interpreted; rather it is a call, an imperative to enact those acts of perceptions and interpretation. Levinas (1991) thinks that the more secure and content the subject (enjoying his life in the affluent West, say), the better placed he may be to answer the call of the other because of a meaningful contrast to the former's being. This initial contentment that is shattered by the imagery must be understood as both economic security and the comfort afforded by the natural attitude. Another crucial component of the other's moral intrusion is the element of sensibility; it is embodied even if it is not given via direct sense intuition.

This relates to empathy in the context of war imagery deeply, since for Levinas the basic manifestation of the embodied otherness is vulnerability (Levinas 1991).² This experience of the other as a call is challenging and connects embodied cognition with social responsibility. It disturbs the viewer, displacing him from his natural situation and attitude. Here again the *displacement* (Ingarden 1989) by war images correlates with the call to move to care for another world, as the other is no longer inscribed in it solely as another intentional object. As we saw, for Levinas corporeal gestures of care or hospitality are more fundamental than representations and inferences. Bodily vulnerability generates the call for meanings-acts of care, i.e. not the epistemological access to the other (Husserl 1999), but acts that respond to the moral call of vulnerability and are embodied in a concrete habitual manner. The relation between carnality and responsibility might be triggered by war imagery as a visceral reminder of the other, resulting in a concrete embodied praxis of care.

In Husserl's work, the living body's motility grounds subjectivity. But, for Levinas, to perceive someone stumbling and falling is to inwardly sense my power to hold them. To perceive the identity of another human is to perceive what they need to exist and to endure. Hence, there is an imperative in otherness which is connected to my powers and demands a pure communicative relation between individuals, that is, the embodied face-to-face relation. But what does embodied cognition (the empathic mode) have to do with moral imperatives? To address this question, let us consider some examples.

After Russia's invasion, many Ukrainian refugees left their homes and were scattered across Europe. Some settled in Lithuania – a process that we witnessed firsthand. Bodies exhausted having seen the destruction of their homes, not only because of the empirical atrocities that they faced on the ground but also because of the loss of the basic principles of human coexistence and interaction schematisation. Those migrating bodies are mostly mothers, children, the elderly and disabled people, whose first welcome to another country is to have their basic bodily needs met – clothing, shelter, sustenance and hygiene. In countries like Lithuania, people fleeing the war found new homes and new families in circumstances when the usual means of schematisation and communication fail. It must also be stressed that those deep feelings of uncertainty also plague the hosting families. How do these people survive, meet and proceed if the usual scripts of social situations are completely irrelevant when various rational identifications (cultural, social and political) that were previously taken as a sign of excuse or escape are no longer available?

Even minimal ethnographic observations show that in this situation, instead of discussions and rationalisations, hosts and refugees spontaneously engage in embodied interactive rituals, such as sharing food, providing activities for children, crafts, singing, dancing and offering manual work; that is an embodied way of fusing the cultural horizons (Gadamer 1989) in order to preserve shattered identities; it is also a way of regaining trust (Warren 2020) and keeping alive the possibility for something new. However, following Levinas, we may say that in situations when usual communication fails, these embodied rituals bring back certain things that are more fundamental than individual biographies or even cultural identities.

² It is important to note in this regard that, according to Levinas, violence is not primarily about hurting and even annihilating a human being, but about destroying her life-world continuity. This in turn forces victims of violence to play the roles that they do not recognise and perform actions that prevent from an authentic action.

Although individuals have their own history and style of acquiring and managing these basic, early life, embodied impressions about the social environment and expected behaviour, no one can escape the need to rely on using them in dealing with more sophisticated social situations later in life. Especially when elaborate discourse is impossible, or the experience is radically new and overwhelming, this embodied cognition starts to fill in the gaps. Bodies remain 'wise' even when one's conceptual frame fails brutally and completely – as, for instance, in the experience of *dissociation*.

In the interactions between refugees and hosts, one can see this supplementation of the painful or failed rationalisation of events by shared, synchronised movements. This shows that in border situations of social cognition, embodied interactions deliver the direct perception of the other (Gallagher 2008). Taking interaction seriously involves focusing on how participants engage with one another and constitute shared goals, not on how each figures out the other, as is seen in the refugee situation.

Refugees and hosts have no social script about how to inter-act (as, for example, in supermarkets, funerals, etc.), and the apparent improvisations depend more on embodied, emotional affection rather than on individual differences or even the semantic content of language. Affection here signifies the constant background, pre-reflective experience of being attuned to the world as having affordances to act, to have a sense of being the author of one's own choices. It is obvious that the brutal destruction of home leaves refugees with a very low sense of authorship for their own actions and life. They are bodies affected by war in a proper sense.

Hosts, by delivering the experiences of home and family, can reignite and amplify refugees' sense of authorship (Velleman 2007) of their own life which was significantly reduced by war. Through embodied interactions, hosts trigger the refugees' capacity of the lived body to re-enact its former experiences 'as if' they were immediately present. Moreover, this radical situation for both hosts and refugees of a 'relatively low codification' (Bourdieu 2008) of interaction leaves space for individuals to create specific means to resolve any breakdowns in communication. Here emotions, instead of rational discourse, serve cognitive goals, for example, feeling and showing anger in this situation testifies that you care about something and demonstrate what you value; emotions position you in such a way that the others can identify you. Again, all of this shows that when the usual social script is rendered unusable, people rely on a certain type of re-use.

Primitive physical experience of the home as a house is another important example here. Home space is a lived space, it is centered around a person's embodiment, characterised by qualities such as safety, privacy, or rest. According to Bachelard (1994), the home is a space for imagination, but not the one that protects us in an illusory manner; rather it is that which connects the individual to the universal environment. 'Childhood house is the first Universe', Bachelard writes. Hosting families provide the means for refugees to re-enact these experiences, at least to some degree. This constitutes a crucial difference between refugees staying in places of helpless waiting (refugee camp, hospital, social care centre, etc.), and the modified experience of home, which grants safe contemplation and a gathering-in of memory and future imagination. This structure of re-use serves as the ground for empathy and intersubjectivity.

When individuals interact in the above-described ways, the coordination of their body movements, gestures, gazes, etc. can gain such momentum that it overrides the individuals' intentions. This has the effect of weakening the psychological boundaries between the self and the group and enhancing the sense of community and identity.

CONCLUSIONS

We cannot be intelligible and integrated without others; this is a fundamental condition of self-apprehension. As such, classical phenomenology provides the grounds for the critical attitude. The natural attitude prefers perceptions and hides mediation, the genesis of values, and other modes of givenness.

Embodiment disclosed as the ground for cognition changes the status of war images from depictive contemplative representations to tools. As such, war images should be seen as means of affection concerning new empathic and/or ethical challenges. If so, then vision amounts to acting while knowing affordances for a purposeful action for the other.

Mediated empathic experience is not static but embraces potencies of an object's givenness and action. War imagery can not only fulfill a perceptual lack but also extend social and ethical meanings. Consequently, empathy is not so much about disclosing other subjectivities and/or consciousness; rather it is to do with pre-reflective synchronising with teleological, value-based behaviour.

However, in empathic experience it is important not just to understand the other, but to have the urge to respond to their vulnerability. Even hesitations on the level of rational discourse *caused* by war imagery may *motivate* alternative embodied empathic ways of intersubjectivity, disclosing the vulnerability of the body, as can be seen in the examples of refugees fleeing war.

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Kūniškas suvokimas ir empatiškumo patirtys karo komunikacijoje

Santrauka

Straipsnyje, remiantis fenomenologijos ir enaktyvizmo priegomis prie kūniško suvokimo, analizuojamas kūno vaidmuo, kuriant ir palaikant socialinius santykius specifinėse (karo) medijų ekologijose. Tokios medijų ekologijos (karo eigos, nusikaltimų, migrantų krizės ir kt. vaizdavimas) geba transformuoti subjektyvius socialinius įsitikinimus į intersubjektyvius veiksmus. Taigi, kūniškumo analizė karo komunikacijoje papildo, o neretai ir oponuoja racionaliam socialinio žinojimo ir santykių diskursui. Vienas pagrindinių šio tyrimo akcentų yra fenomenologinis-enaktyvus empatijos tematizavimas karo vaizdinimo ir migracijos kūniškumo kontekste. Susiejant karo vaizdinių poveikį su migrantų krizės procesais parodoma, kad klasikinės fenomenologinės empatijos refleksijos karo medijų ekologijoje pasirodo ne kaip nešališkos tikrovės reprezentacijos, bet kaip kognityviniai įrankiai bei socialinių patirčių, santykių ir veiksmo projekcinės galimybės.

Raktažodžiai: kūniškas suvokimas, karo vaizdinimas, empatija, pažeidžiamumas, migrantai