

Online Memories, Digital Conflicts and the Cybertouch of War

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Wars, conflicts and commemoration occupy the minds of today's users of new media across the globe; and those in Russia, Eurasia and Central Europe are no exception. Digital reporting of military actions and virtual museums of past wars and genocides; hacker attacks against websites and databases and computer war games; online antiwar organising and digital performances of postwar trauma; flashmobs of political protest or racist incitement and digitalised personal memories and family histories – these are only some of the examples of the ways in which war, conflict and commemoration are narrated, experienced and performed in contemporary digital media. Thus, the aim of the special issue entitled 'War, Conflict and Commemoration in the Age of Digital Reproduction' is to explore these and other phenomena, by looking at various forms and segments of digital media: Internet sites, blogs and forums, online news and discussions, social networks, commemoration sites and virtual museums, digital games, video performance and computer crimes.

The issue brings together ten authors, working in a variety of formats – articles, essays, reports, ethnographic film and digital performance – and reflecting on the following questions: What is the role of new media in understanding, representing, negotiating and remembering (or forgetting) war and genocide? What is the status of testimony, evidence and reportage in the age of digital reproduction? What practices of memory do new information and communication technologies entail? What structures of feeling operate in online reports and debates around military operations and human suffering? How can digital mediations of conflict bring people and communities together, while tearing others apart? And lastly, how can the embodied, physical violence intensify in digital interactions, and how can it be diffused, resisted and remembered?

This special issue was born out of a sense of political and intellectual necessity, posed by recent developments in digital media and its use. Digital media is fundamentally changing the terrain of politics, due to its reach and speed, and its function in the lives of civilian populations and states alike. For example, together with 'citizen journalism', enabled by blogs, the Internet has given a platform to political extremism, racism and neo-Nazism (Back et.al.

1998; Daniels 2009a, b). While Web 2.0 technologies allow non-hierarchical participation, they also, at times, turn the Internet into a digital war zone (Karatzogianni 2006, 2009). In today's 'global matrix of war' (Kaplan 2009), digital technologies are used by both state and non-state actors, often blurring the line between military and entertainment and between control and resistance. Attacks on the ground and in the air now go hand in hand with information warfare, propaganda and racist attacks in blogs and YouTube vlogs; conflicts between states or stateless groups reverberate in cyberattacks by hackers from each side; and testimonies of atrocities are captured on mobile phones and circulated on Facebook, irrevocably changing our modes of witnessing, feeling and remembering violent and traumatic events (Ibrahim 2009; Kaplan 2009; Reading 2009).

Politically, then, the topic of war and conflict and of their relations with digital media is clearly an urgent one. In that respect, Central and Eastern Europe is not unique. The region, however, has its own, very particular, record of past wars and conflicts that scar social and mnemonic fabrics of today's life: World War II, German occupation and the Holocaust, decades under communism, twenty years of post-communist transformation, and waves of conflicts and bloodshed they brought. More recently, the region has witnessed a rise in the right wing nationalism and extremist racism, struggles for sovereignty and independence, 'wars on terror' and localised armed conflicts. Addressing all these *together*, through the lens of shared political conditions, while remaining attentive to each country's unique culture and circumstances, is what encouraged me to assemble this collection.

The special issue is also motivated by an intellectual need to shed light on the role of digital media in these processes across the region. With the growing integration of digital media into most aspects of our lives, we witness an explosion of scholarly interest in the subject, cutting across many disciplines. Similarly, the topic of war, conflict and memory is widely explored. The two, however, only recently began to intersect, for example in the special issue of *Journal of Computer Mediated Communication* (2006), 'War Coverage in Cyberspace' (2006) or in edited collections such as *Digital War Reporting* (Matheson and Stuart 2009) or *Save As... Digital Memories* (Garde-Hansen et.al. 2009).¹ But even when the two fields are explored in conjunction, they mostly concentrate on one narrow aspect – such as war coverage and reportage, or memories – rather than a complex examination of how digital media and computer technologies affect the warfare itself, its social perception *and* the ways of remembrance and commemoration. Such complex approach is precisely what unites the papers in this special issue, when they examine how war and conflicts of past and present are negotiated, performed and remembered on the Internet and in other digital media tools.

Importantly, this special issue challenges the Euro-American focus on most digital media studies. Most newly emerging work focuses on English-speaking countries, and is heavily dominated by empirical materials from the USA and Western Europe. A notable exception is one frequently mentioned central European example, the war in Kosovo in 1999 – the first record of Internet use during conflict. However, such focus on a non-Western European location is largely due to the NATO's role in the events, rather than a sign of breakage from the English-language, Euro-American centeredness. English-language research on digital media in Central and Eastern Europe is scarce as it is, and a focused analysis of war, conflict and

¹ Both books are reviewed in this special issue.

commemoration in digital media is almost non-existent. Against such a lack of literature, this special issue creates a forum for scholars researching the fields of war, conflict, commemoration *and* digital media, while simultaneously addressing linguistic, cultural, historical and political aspects of new media use in the region. Therefore, the issue brings together materials from Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Czech Republic, Eastern Germany, Poland, Russia and Ukraine. Several contributions also explore the place some of these countries occupy in Western media and imagination.

The issue is divided into three sections. The first section, ‘Cyberscapes of Memory and Commemoration’ (articles 4.2-4.4), examines how new practices of remembering, commemorating and negotiating the past emerge on the Internet. The second section, ‘Visuality, Simulation and the Aftermath’ (articles 4.5-4.8), explores the role of various media tools, such as computer games or digital videos, in experiencing historical events and in living in the aftermath of a war. Moving from wars of the past, the third section, ‘Digital Life of Contemporary Conflicts’ (4.9-4.11), examines the Internet as a virtual battlefield of contemporary conflicts. The special issue concludes with a book review section which contains reviews of two recently published edited collections, *Digital War Reporting* (Matheson and Stuart 2009) and *Save As... Digital Memories* (Garde-Hansen et al. 2009). Although not specific to the region, these collections present important theoretical insights into the role of digital media in war, conflict and commemoration.

Cyberscapes of Memory and Commemoration

What is the role of the Internet in cultural practices of memory and commemoration? Are online commemoration sites merely an extension of their physical counterparts, or do they provide new forms of accessing and experiencing the past? Can interactions in cyberspace challenge national and transnational regimes of memory? These are some of the key questions explored by the three contributors in the first section. Engaging with various theoretical frameworks on the study of memory, the three articles in this section (4.2-4.4) address the ways remembering, commemorating and accessing horrific events of the past is taking shape through digital media. All three contributors discuss events related to World War II, Nazism and the Holocaust, focusing on different aspects, such as Jewish victims, systematic killing of disabled children by the Nazis, or the heroism of the Soviet soldiers. They demonstrate how individual and collective memories of this period are shaped by specific national histories and politics, but also affected by transnational circulation of materials and ideas. The authors point out to various degrees of effectiveness of new media tools in facilitating the individual experiences of remembering *and* in shaping collective narratives. They also point to the tensions between local and national frameworks of commemoration and the increasingly internationalised – or transnational, or diasporic – nature of digital memories.

The first article in this section, ‘Virtual Traumascape: The Commemoration of Nazi “Children's Euthanasia” Online and On Site’ by Lutz Kaelber (4.2), follows the movement of commemoration practices from offline locations to online. Kaelber’s article is part of his extensive research on commemoration of the murder of disabled children in several countries of Western and Eastern Europe. In his overall work, he addresses different memory regimes and different political contexts for commemorating children’s euthanasia in West and East Ger-

many, Austria, Poland and the Czech Republic. In the discussion presented in *Digital Icons*, Kaelber describes in detail how these different examples of commemoration – some established and some new, some met with encouragement and some with resistance from the authorities or the community – change shape when they use digital technologies. Utilising the concept of *traumascape* (a site where past memory can be embodied, brought to the present, (re)experienced and changed, Tumarkin 2005), Kaelber maps the role of the Internet in creating what he describes as a *virtual* traumascape. In some of his case studies, commemoration efforts, already existing offline, were expanded to online domains. In other cases, traumatic memories have become open to engagement and active negotiation. But most illuminating are those examples, where virtual commemoration emerges independently of offline sites, and at times, are the *only* forms of available commemoration.

Virtual commemoration is what also lies at the centre of Dieter De Bruyn's contribution, 'World War 2.0: Commemorating War and Holocaust in Poland Through Facebook' (4.3). De Bruyn's article explores the role of social networking sites in individual and collective commemoration by examining two examples of Polish commemoration of World War II and the Holocaust. His analysis of the two cases is embedded in debates about the politics of history in contemporary Poland, on the one hand, and theoretical developments in the field of cultural memory in new media age, on the other. Addressing both national contexts of commemoration – facilitated through the use of language, or specific historical materials – De Bruyn also follows transnational circulation of online commemoration practices, when projects travel across social networking sites to different cultural and linguistic domains. In this process of travel, the effectiveness of virtual commemoration shifts constantly: it depends on the engagement of virtual audiences and their affective responses; on the scale of exposure (from small networks to larger, national and international audiences); and of course, on the effects it can have on broader formations of cultural memory, outside the (often playful) context of social networking sites. Tracing the effects of online commemoration and the movement of commemorative practices, De Bruyn raises broader questions on the role of new media in the formation of cultural memory, and suggests that new media technologies shift the focus from memory as a final product to the process of remembering itself.

The questions of the *politics* of the past, and of national versus transnational frameworks of memory is further addressed in the last article of this section, 'Past Wars in the Russian Blogosphere: On the Emergence of Cosmopolitan Memory' by Elena Trubina (4.4). Trubina's discussion is based on her extensive reading of individual and collective Russian language blogs dedicated to wars of the past. Her main aim is to examine the coexistence of two competing frameworks of memory – the national and the cosmopolitan – in discussions of World War II, or The Great Patriotic War, as it is commonly named in Russia. In many blogging posts about the war, in particular those posted around the time of the Victory Day celebrations, old narratives of Soviet heroism and patriotism are addressed time and again – sometimes with passionate defence and sometimes with sharp critique. Most of these entries and comments reaffirm the nation as one's most important frame of belonging, where narratives of past glory serve as an anchor, collective glue that ties the nation together at the time of uncertainty and political, cultural and economic instability, especially when such narratives are extensively supported by the state. What also emerges in some of the discussion is an entirely different type of approach to the past, an approach that Trubina describes as cos-

mopolitan memory: a way of thinking about the past that acknowledges suffering and loss across nations instead of an exclusionary emphasis of one's own suffering, loss, or victory. Cosmopolitan memory – or more broadly, cosmopolitan vision of war and suffering – is oriented towards universality of human suffering, or, to use Paul Gilroy's words, it is about 'comprehending the universality of our elemental vulnerability to the wrongs we visit upon each other' (Gilroy 2004: 4). As such, Trubina suggests, it bears political and humanistic potential for people in Russia and elsewhere.

Visuality, Simulation and the Aftermath

The second section of the issue (4.5-4.8) continues the topic of war and memory by focusing on the visual and experiential aspects of digital media. In contrast to the extensive use of words – in texts, narratives, discussions and styles of communication – analysed in the previous section, the four contributors to this section focus on how sites of the past emerge in futuristic worlds of science fiction films; how memory can be shaped through simulations of computer gaming; how trauma that refuses words can be communicated through digital performance; and how everyday life after the war can – or cannot – be captured in experimental anthropological documentary.

The section opens with Gérard Kraus' essay, 'Deadly Game along the Wistula: East European Imagery in Mamoru Oshii's *Avalon* (2001)' (4.5), that discusses visual and aesthetic elements of Mamoru Oshii's film on a virtual reality war game, *Avalon*. The film, made by a Japanese director and a Polish crew, is set in Poland; the action moves constantly between a dystopian Poland of the near future, combat scenery of World War II and Poland of today. Kraus' essay takes us through various cinematic tools, used by Oshii, to show how the virtual reality of the game, and the director's fantasy in general, evoke various events in Eastern European history, for example, World War II, the Warsaw ghetto uprising in 1944, events in Hungary in 1956 and in Prague in 1968. Not specifically tied to any particular event or location, these complex spatial and temporal references to Eastern European realities are used by Oshii to explore broader issues of militarisation, control, violence and memory. Carefully tracing Oshii's allusions, inspirations and intertextual resonances, Kraus demonstrates how *Avalon* acts as a tool of revisiting and reflecting upon our relations to history and to cultural memories of war.

Patrick Crogan's article, 'Simulation, History and Experience in *Avalon* and Military-Entertainment Technoculture' (4.6), continues the two main themes, raised by Kraus: that of a heavily militarised society and that of the Eastern European setting of both the film and the game. Departing from the discussion of the virtual reality war game in the film, Crogan takes us to the world of computer games and to what he describes as 'militainment' – the coming together of the military and entertainment industries, where the distinction between real and virtual experiences gets gradually erased. Writing about the contemporary western gaming industry, Crogan positions his analysis in the post-Cold war landscape that shapes both patterns of cultural memory *and* those of the militainment industry itself. Crogan's article examines the ways interactive computer games use the technology of simulation to facilitate the player's encounter with war and military experience, without actually living in a war zone or being in the military service. But it is not simply the mechanism of the gaming that is at stake

here, whether the one described in the film, or that available to use through today's military industry. Rather, Crogan's theoretical journey into ideas of simulation as a technology of experience, perception and memory gives us a more complex understanding of the ways in which past violence gets reinvented and (re)experienced through technology.

The relations between experience, memory and digital technologies are further addressed in the last two contributions that present direct deployment of various tools of digital media. Naida Zukić, for example, turns to digital performance (4.7). Her *The Weight of Meaninglessness* uses the aesthetic language of the performance to communicate experiences of trauma, loss, survival and political agency. Informed by the Bosnian war of 1992-1995 and in particular, by the Srebrenica Genocide, the performance explores the ongoing violent effects of past atrocities on memory and subjectivity. Unlike other forms of cultural memory and commemoration of Srebrenica, both digital and material – such as texts documenting the events, or photos of the murdered victims, or memorials – Zukić explores deep psychic effects of the trauma on the subject, without reducing or restricting these effects to any figurative image, or a coherent, well worded narrative. *The Weight of Meaninglessness* actively performs the work of trauma – a state where words fail and subjectivity is dissolved. However, Zukić also aims to resist the culture of victimhood, and instead focuses on trauma as a possibility of agency. The performance is accompanied by the artist's essay, where Zukić elaborates on some of the theoretical debates that inform her work as an artist and scholar.

Vanja Čelebičić's short documentary, *Roma Snapshots: A Day in Sarajevo* (4.8), continues the exploration of the Bosnian war, this time by following the lives of Sarajevo Roma in the decade after the conflict. As a visual ethnographer, Čelebičić is particularly interested in the tools offered by filmmaking and digital filmmaking in particular for modes of ethnographic research and representation. Her work is motivated by a question: what would it mean to make a film, rather than to write a story about post-war experiences. She focuses on the everyday activities and intimate moments of interactions, situating the long lasting effects of war in the mundane and not in the dramatic. Departing from the anthropological drive to observe and document people's lives, she then moves to more complex modes of representation offered by digital filmmaking, for example, situating several visual narratives side by side, decentring the viewer's attention. Čelebičić is careful in avoiding (in fact, she challenges) stereotypical representations that appear frequently in the media and public imagination, of those living in post-war areas as being defined by their victimhood or survival, confined to the overshadowing memories of the past. At the same time, her film does not ignore the long-term effects of the war, but rather, addresses them in their complexity. Her film is also accompanied by a short essay, where Čelebičić describes her ethnographic methods and addresses broader issues of digital video and visual anthropology.

In addition to the theme of the visual and the experiential, what links all the contributions in this section is the idea of the 'aftermath'. Approached more directly by Čelebičić in her ethnographic film that follows Sarajevo Roma in years after the 1992-95 war, the exploration of the aftermath runs through all four contributions. For Zukić the aftermath is about the possibilities offered by digital performance to think and work through the trauma of the Srebrenica Genocide and to explore broader issues of trauma, abjection and language. For Crogan and Kraus the aftermath is seemingly less immediate, as they discuss the landscape of World War II in the computer game, *Avalon*. Yet as the film, *Avalon*, and the authors' dis-

cussions, skilfully move from the imagined/remembered Poland of the war to a Poland of a dystopian near future and then to the post-communist Poland of today, the aftermath becomes an endless spatio-temporal loop, stretching from the past and bleeding into the present.

Various forms of visuality that draw the viewers into worlds of death, trauma and/or the everyday and modes of simulation that tie together warfare and entertainment show that the 'aftermath' as the experience of time *and* as an analytical lens is elastic, almost liquid (Bauman 2000). No longer limited to immediate experiences that follow an act of war or genocide, the aftermath becomes a way of interrogating war and memory as they move through and mutate in cultural production and entertainment industry. But it also reminds us how profound the impact of war, violence and death is on the very fabric of subjectivity and social life.

Digital Life of Contemporary Conflicts

The concluding section of the issue turns from the memory of past events to wars and conflicts of the present (4.9-4.11). If the previous two sections addressed digital media as a *medium* for communicating, experiencing and remembering fights and atrocities, the authors in the last section analyse the Internet and computer technologies as a *site* of conflicts. The articles in this section show how cyberspace can become a site of fighting, figurative and literal, creating forms of passionate commonality (often based on stereotyping and hatred), invoking old hostilities and, at times, also shaping new ones.

In the early years of the Internet, many journalists, scholars and cyberactivists celebrated the promising democratising and emancipatory possibilities of this new medium, such as the emergence of the virtual public sphere, opportunities for 'digital democracy' and the ways online activism might challenge existing power structures and even undermine authoritarian regimes. With the development of both research on the Internet and the web technologies themselves, such utopian visions gave place to more scepticism and resulted in a more complex and sophisticated analysis of digital media and its role in various conflicts. These developments are reflected in concepts such as 'cyberconflict' (Karatzogianni 2006, 2009), 'web wars' (Rutten in this issue) or 'another war zone' (Kuntsman and Stein 2010) – concepts that aim to capture the transformation of 'information and communication technologies' into technologies of information warfare, the virtualisation of conflicts and symbolic wars over politics, memory and identity. These concepts also remind us that wars and conflicts are not merely represented in digital media, but rather, they operate through it, turning digital media and information communication technologies into a battlefield in their own right. The articles presented here work precisely in tune with such recent developments. As the authors demonstrate, this digital battlefield, albeit virtual, nevertheless feels very real.

Athina Karatzogianni's article, 'Blame it on the Russians: Tracking the Portrayal of Russian Hackers during Cyberconflict Incidents' (4.9), takes cyberconflict as its starting point. Karatzogianni looks at ways real life conflicts, such as protests by ethnic Russians in Estonia against the relocation of the Bronze Soldier of Tallinn in 2007, or the armed conflict between Russian in Georgia in 2008, were followed by attacks in cyberspace. These attacks included extensive use of 'botnets' – automated software agents that generates massive spam, denial of service attacks on computer systems, and defacement of governmental and other official

websites. However, what lies at the centre of Karatzogianni's discussion is not the cyberwarfare itself but the ways it is represented in Western media, specifically English-language media. Surveying over 130 essays from mainstream and alternative media, magazines on IT and computer security, and independent blogs, Karatzogianni's article reveals how these publications consistently portray Russia as a nation of super hackers, responsible for various attacks both locally (in cases of what she describes as 'patriotic hacking', carried out to defend Russia's national interests in the areas of former Soviet control), and internationally. According to Karatzogianni, these representations of the hackers, coupled with concerns over Russia's political and economic power in the region, build up a new Cold War rhetoric, depicting Russian hackers as highly skilful individuals, always linked to either the mafia or the government, or both. The recurring insistence on Russian hackers' involvement in computer crimes and attacks on cybersecurity culminates in Karatzogianni's discussion of the 'Climategate hack' – a leak of confidential documents from the University of East Anglia which, too, was blamed on the Russian hackers, even though their involvement has never been confirmed.

The analysis of Russia's image in the international arena is continued in Olga Baysha's article, 'When the Internet Fails to Connect: A Case Study on a Russian-American Non-Reflexive Discourse' (4.10). Baysha's study examines editorials and opinions published in the *Washington Post* and follows online discussions of these publications by Russian and American readers. Focusing on materials about the Russian-Georgian military conflict of 2008, Baysha demonstrated how these materials were saturated with both anti-Americanism (expressed by the Russian-speaking Internet users) and strong anti-Russian stances (expressed by *Washington Post* writers and commentators). In her analysis, Baysha questions the idealised assumption that a common language and a shared virtual debating space necessarily lead to mutual understanding, cross-cultural contact and eventually, to the formation of a transnational public sphere. Instead, she shows how online interactions can result in a communication failure; how they can intensify, rather than defuse existing hostilities, or even create new ones. Her detailed analysis of miscommunication between the American and the Russian Internet users, which took place on both the political and the affective level, will be particularly interesting for those working on questions of cross-cultural communication and inclusion and exclusion in cyberspace. Baysha brings our attention to the fact that neither access to new communication technologies nor knowledge of English – the global cyber lingua franca – is sufficient for creating an open dialogue and a shared public space on the web.

The final contribution in this section is a project announcement by Ellen Rutten (4.11). Based at Bergen University, the project, entitled 'Web Wars: Digital Diasporas and the Language of Memory', looks at the ways Russian and Ukrainian social media are engaged in digital wars between competing histories and memories of World War II and of the decades of the socialist regime. Conceptually, the project refers to the two themes that shape the special issue of *Digital Icons* – war and conflict, and memory and commemoration. *Web Wars* will focus on how political conflicts in the two countries shape debates about the past, creating what the research team describes as 'online vectors of memory'. What is particularly interesting and promising in this project is the approach to traumatic events of the war and the communist rule not as individual wounds or as localised and geographically bound national experiences, but as a form of transnational 'structures of feelings' (Williams 1977). Digital

commemoration practices, then, affect and are affected by transnational flows and diasporic connections, and here lies another promise of this research: its take on ‘digital diasporas’. Unlike many scholars who use the term diaspora – in online and other settings – to describe a community of migrants or their descendants, Rutten and her team expand the term to describe all web users of Russia and Ukraine, in a move akin to Avtar Brah’s (1996) theorising of ‘diaspora spaces’ as spaces affected by coloniality, displacements and population flows, and including both those who stay and those who move.² And of course, the project’s focus on the passions of memory wars points to the emotional intensity of cyber communication in general, and that of online memories and digital battlefields, in particular.

Passionate Politics and the Cybertouch of War

One topic that emerges from most contributions – even when it is not their direct focus – is the affective element of digital media use. Kaelber (4.2) in his discussion of ‘children’s euthanasia’ uses the concept of virtual traumascapes; De Bruyn (4.3) addresses pain, grief and compassion in his analysis of Facebook commemoration of Jewish victims of the Holocaust; Trubina (4.4) describes the intense emotions with which memories of the Soviet past are narrated and challenged; Crogan (4.6) examines the experience of simulation; Zukić (4.7) performs the weight of the traumatic past on the subject; and Baysha (4.10) shows how different feelings – intense pathos and hostility versus calmness and indifference – create misunderstanding and lack of effective communication. All the authors demonstrate that online communication is saturated with passion, that virtual conflicts move us, and that our use of digital media is about affective investment, as much as it is about information, storage of data or form of communication.

Affect and emotions as a topic and a theoretical paradigm has gained a growing scholarly popularity in the recent years (see, for example, Clough and Halley 2007; Staiger et al. 2010), in what Patricia Clough described as ‘the affective turn’ (Clough 2007). It is not my aim here to address this turn in detail; nor is this special issue explicitly about theories of affect, feelings or emotions.³ However, when discussing war and memory, conflict and reconciliation, the affective dimension is not simply important, it is unavoidable. As all of the contributions demonstrate in one way or another, past and current conflicts, wars and genocide touch us deeply, despite being distant temporally or geographically. What is more, they touch us precisely when they emerge in the seemingly disembodied realm of cyberspace. So how can we think about the role of digital media in these affective formations? In order to conceptualise the mediated nature of passionate politics and to think through emotional effects of war, conflict and memory in the age of digital reproduction, I put forward the concept of cybertouch. The cybertouch of war, violence and death refers to ways in which past and current events can *touch* us through the monitors of our computers and mobile phones, whether by

² For a detailed discussion of Russian language Internet (and in particular, the blogosphere) as a post-Soviet diaspora space, see Kuntsman (2010).

³ The relations between affect, feelings and digital cultures were explored at the international conference, *Affective Fabrics of Digital Cultures: Feelings, Technologies, Politics*, held in Manchester in June 2010 (http://www.socialsciences.manchester.ac.uk/ricc/events/digital_affect/index.html) and are further theorised in the post-conference collection of essays, co-edited by Athina Karatzianni and myself (Karatzianni and Kuntsman forthcoming).

creating an immediate emotional response (sadness, rage, pain, compassion, indifference, etc.) or by leading to long-lasting changes in the ways we remember and experience war and conflicts.

In the rapidly growing and evolving media environments, the touch of digital technologies is constantly changing. Some are specifically developed to simulate the physical experience of touch in virtual realities and others make objects materialise through performative acts of looking and engaging. For example, Michelle White in her analysis of Reborn Doll Artists on eBay shows how words, images and objects in cyberspace can affectively touch the viewer/user (White 2010). Engaging with Eve Sedgwick's *Touching Feeling* (2003), White shows how the crafting, display and discussion of Reborn Baby dolls becomes a form of affective materiality and a connection that transcends computer screens. Yet others involve more literal forms of 'touch', such as those offered by increasingly popular 'touch technologies' in laptops, media players and mobile phones.

The cybertouch of war, too, is open to change: new media horizons can make geographically distant experiences of violence closer, by bringing warfare from elsewhere to the intimacy of one's computer screen. They can transcend the distance of time and history by facilitating interactive engagement with lives long gone, as, for example, discussed in De Bruyn's article (4.3). Sometimes far-off experiences are also brought closer literally – close to the skin– when one brushes through images of war or pain on a touch screen. But these media horizons can also overwhelm and create disorientation (Virillio 1995, 1997) or disaffection, whether the latter is a form of indifference and emotional blockage or a strategy of survival (Manalansan 2010). In that respect, the concept of cybertouch gestures to the multiple possibilities of affective engagement with digital media, possibilities that can lead both to intensification of existing conflicts and hostilities and to their transformation.

The cybertouch of war, then, provides an open question rather than a firm conclusion. In a world where wars, conflicts and digital technologies are intertwined so intimately and in so many ways – through logistics of perception and technologies of simulation, regimes of visibility and tactics of information warfare, modes of surveillance and practices of connection – a critical analysis of mediated conflicts should no longer be limited to questions of representation. Instead, we need to ask: what are the ways to think and write about the touch of suffering, destruction and death – whether distant or immediate – that would resist celebration and repetition of violence? What are the ways to use new and ever evolving digital tools to decouple difference from hatred and commemoration from militancy? What are the ways to live responsibly in the face of ongoing wars and their digitalised circulation? What are the ways to connect affectively with others across the globe, in a way that would promote 'human mutuality and cosmopolitan democracy' (Gilroy 2000, 7), rather than stereotyping, racism and intolerance? I believe that this special issue of *Digital Icons* is just the beginning of a long journey to answer some of these questions.

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