

## Witnessing invisible wars

### The harm of images in the dust of counter-terrorism

In recent decades, the question of how citizens relate to wars abroad has been treated as a question of what states do and do not allow their populations to see, and how what *is* made visible is represented in ways that legitimise state violence. Witnessing war, then, is a matter of fostering public assent. This critical analytic implies a political ethics: if images and narratives of war dehumanise the victims of state violence, then what is needed is to reassert the humanity of others, to right the wrongs of the state's false images. As the 'War on Terror' recedes into the shadows of covert drones and special forces, this critical stance reaches its limits. In a media landscape dotted only with the smoke, dust and rubble of actions that are rarely seen or confirmed, the *harm* caused by war's public representation becomes unclear. Do images of debris and rumours of secrets legitimise state warfare? If not, what *do* they do?

To answer these questions, this talk draws inspiration from the prose writings of W.G. Sebald, and explores the odd affinities between contemporary counter-terrorism and lynching in the twentieth century United States. By reflecting on how each practice became publicly visible and comprehensible, the talk challenges the idea that the violence of representation is a product of state hegemony, and must be resisted by recovering others' humanity from documents of their suffering. This unending quest to do justice to the past will miss how dust already shapes our present.

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