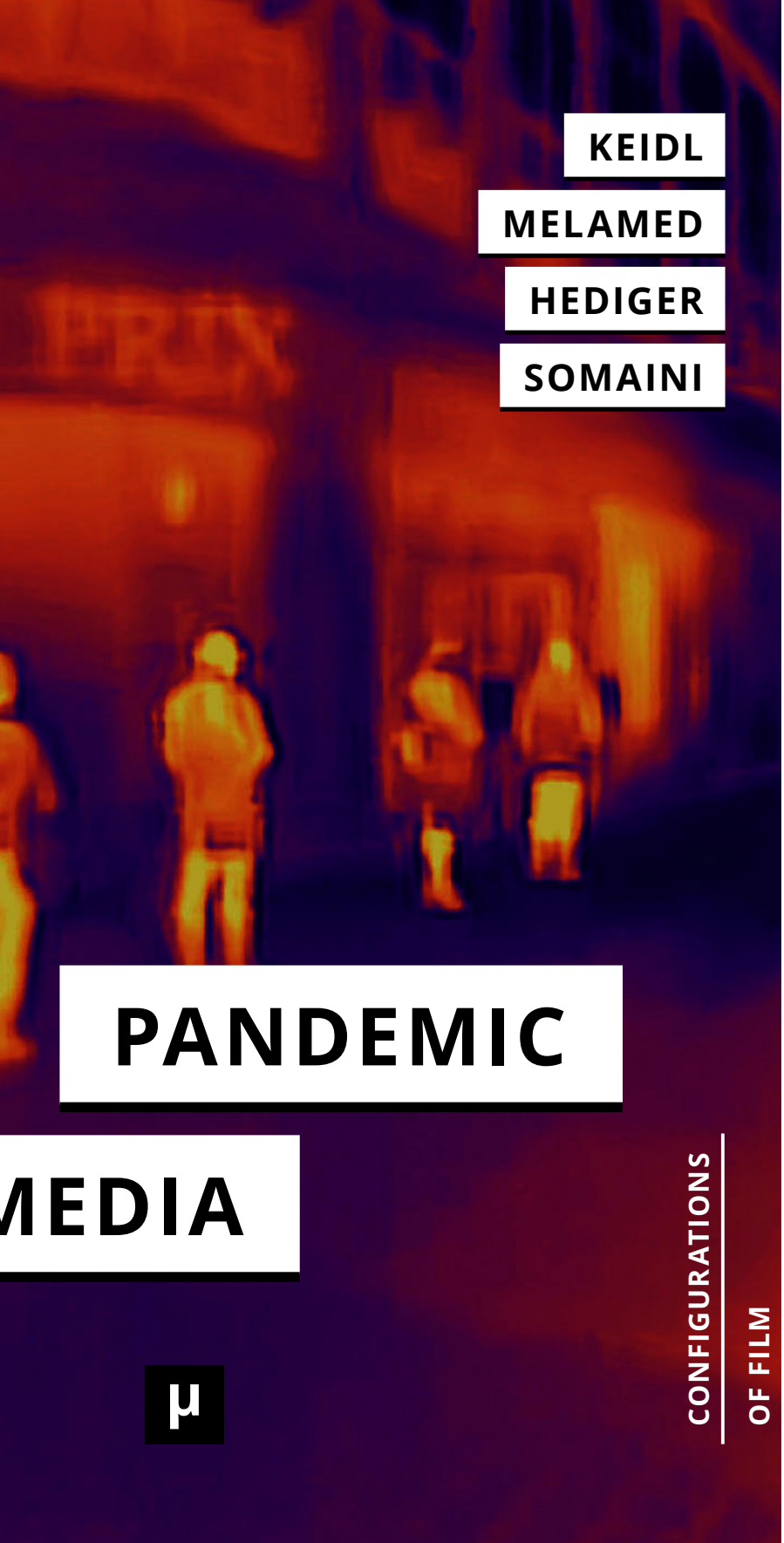

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Configurations of Film Series

Pandemic Media: Preliminary Notes Toward an Inventory

edited by
Philipp Dominik Keidl, Laliv Melamed, Vinzenz Hediger, and Antonio Somaini

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ANTOINE D'AGATA

THERMAL IMAGES

THERMOGRAPHIC CAMERA

BIOPOLITICS

CARE

[8]

The Fever of Images: Thermography, Sensuality and Care in Pandemic Times

Alice Leroy

In the midst of the pandemic crisis, while disturbing figures and pictures of intubated patients and mass graves in rich western cities at complete standstill invaded the traditional and social media screens on the one hand, and governments massively invested in pervasive surveillance technologies on the other hand, the French photographer Antoine D'Agata went walking alone, with a thermographic camera, along the empty streets of Paris and in the intensive care units of hospitals in France. The pictures he took testify to a totally different experience both of the media and of the disease: not one of surveillance, identification, and intervention, but one of consideration, sensuality, and care.

First, we hardly see anything. Against a dark bluish background, glowing spots light up the center of the image. After a while, a kneeling figure emerges, the bust and the head turned towards an iridescent and indeterminate shape, like a kind of sun crushed on itself. Taking a closer look, we soon see recognizable

shapes surface. These shadows and these lights outline the folds of a dress, perhaps a loose blouse, covering the entire body of the kneeling figure. The head is underlined with a kind of turban, or a hairnet, which conceals the hair. From the blouse a hand rises, stretched towards a luminous disc which it touches gently, as if to caress it. This luminous disc is a face from which all the features have been erased, as if swallowed by light. Around this face, darker shades outline the hair, the shoulder and the rest of the body covered by a sheet. It looks like a religious scene, a figure of devotion kneeling at the bedside of a recumbent figure. However, we are not in a church or a museum, but in a hospital. These bodies are not of stone, but of flesh and blood, and that is why they appear surrounded by light in the night of thermal images. This photograph was taken in an intensive care unit at the height of the COVID-19 crisis in France. It belongs to a double series produced by photographer Antoine d'Agata during the eight weeks of lockdown in the country, in the depopulated streets of the capital and at the heart of hospitals in Paris, Bordeaux, Marseille, and Nancy.

On March 16, 2020, on the eve of the lockdown, Antoine d'Agata decided to settle in the deserted offices of Agence Magnum, for which he works in Paris. He slept in these premises for two months, and began an intensive and obsessive wandering across the city emptied of its inhabitants, equipped with several devices and in particular with a thermal camera. At first, he wandered the streets in the early morning or at nightfall and saw a new social geography of the city taking shape. The regular distances between the silhouettes, the isolated or fleeing passers-by, the bodies struggling to inhabit a space that had become uninhabitable, and then the last of men, those who had no refuge and for whom a bench, a corner of a building, or a sidewalk were the only place to sleep. In the city engulfed by the thermal spectrum, an abstraction of colors going from hot to cold, the decor disappears and further isolates the bodies, fragile witnesses of a world that sinks into the night. In parallel with this series, D'Agata went to the intensive care units of hospitals, overwhelmed by the influx of patients. The violence expected in these clinical spaces is proportionally opposite to that of street images. Because in the abstraction composed by the thermal camera, not only do the hospital system and its morbid decor of technologies and tubes disappear, but so do all the details singularizing the suffering of the patients, an entire organic life metamorphosed into spectral clarity. All that remains in this ballet of shadows and lights are the gestures of care, applied with a gentleness which finds its most essential expression there.

Thermal imaging, however, belongs to a set of biopolitical technologies which have a long history. Discovered in 1800 when Sir William Herschel, followed by his son John, tried to measure heat beyond the visible spectrum (Vollmer and Möllmann 2010; Ring and Jones 2013) thermography is literally based on the

detection of invisible radiation from the electromagnetic spectrum. Our eyes can only see visible light, but they can neither detect ultraviolet nor infrared light. The primary source of infrared light is heat. Any organic body emits heat; even non-organic bodies, objects, stones, and even ice, as long as they have a temperature above absolute zero (-273.15 degrees Celsius or 0 Kelvin), produce infrared radiation. We perceive infrared radiation as heat whereas the infrared thermal imaging camera captures it as data and represents it in the form of images. The first infrared-sensitive cameras were designed in the early 1940s with electronic sensors and used as (then poor) anti-aircraft defense. But it was not before the early 1970s that these night vision systems succeeded in framing thermal images on a real-time basis. This was the time when the US Military invented the Forward Looking InfraRed (FLIR) systems, targeting and navigation technologies that were able to detect objects at distances up to 3 km and soon equipped aircrafts and warships (Vollmer and Möllmann 2010, 95). These systems defeated all visual obstacles—night, fog, smoke—and were then logically used not only for aerial reconnaissance, but also for monitoring, tracking, and targeting—or, in the parlance of US special operations, to "find, fix, and finish"—their objective (Parks 2014, 18).

Among the numerous technological gadgets that then became prominent in war movies, thermal imaging came to represent an ambivalent mode of perception, at the threshold of visibility. It is no coincidence that a film reinvesting the genre of man-hunting like *Predator* John McTiernan (1987) granted an alien this more-than-human vision and made it the greatest threat ever faced by a group of elite soldiers. The strangeness of such a mode of perception was so incommensurable with that of human senses that it most surely relied on that of an other-than-human being, like a machine or an alien, than on a man, even if that man was Arnold Schwarzenegger. Ironically enough, one of the US Military's drones, equipped with infrared sensors able to detect heat-bearing objects and bodies, was then to be named "Predator" in 1995 and used during operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. The film also confronted an analog medium, that of film, with a digital and quantifiable image, since computer technology had entirely redefined the level of resolution of thermal imaging. This split is not only between two different mediums but also between two opposite modes of perception. In his reading of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's last book, *The Visible and the Invisible*, which he comments on in his *Seminar*, Jacques Lacan says that the split that matters in Merleau-Ponty's book is not between the visible and the invisible, but rather "between the eye and the gaze" (1973, 73). It does not have much to do with the limits of our perception (the fact that we perceive only a fragment of the electromagnetic spectrum), but rather with the reversibility in vision. Observing is also always being observed. It does not matter to Lacan whether this gaze is materialized or not; it could belong to a living being, as well as to a machine, or it could even be an internalized or imagined gaze. What matters though is that

this being-under-a-gaze is primary. "I see only from one point, but in my existence, I am looked at from all sides," writes Lacan (1973, 72). Aircraft and drone pilots see bodies and forms they would be unable to detect were they not equipped with night-vision or thermal camera systems. Their experience of this augmented vision occurs through a gaze that simultaneously places them under observation, making them objects that are seen. Their omnipotent eye paradoxically designates their own vulnerability as bodies permeable to other gazes, especially those of machines. Thermal images participate in this Lacanian dissociation between the eye and the gaze, causing us to experience ourselves like glowing forms in the night, potential targets and vulnerable beings.

Indeed, before these technological enhancements deployed the electromagnetic spectrum in a series of visible images, the very first thermal medium is our own body. "The significance of body temperature lies in the fact that humans are homeotherms who are capable of maintaining a constant temperature that is different from that of the surroundings. This is essential to the preservation of a relatively constant environment within the body known as homeostasis" (Ring & Jones 2013, 2-1). In the history of medicine, fever was one of the most frequently observed symptoms of a disease. Physicians from the time of Hippocrates used mud on the skin to measure, in a very approximate and subjective manner, the raised temperature of a body, before Galileo invented a "thermoscope" from a glass tube, a predecessor to the thermometer. By producing heat, the organic body thus acts as a medium itself, and by collecting data on different populations of bodies, thermal cameras act as instruments of another form of biopolitical control. Following a Foucaldian perspective, Nicole Starosielski has shown how thermal technologies were part of a vast apparatus and a long history of social control. She analyzes a military technology experimented with by the United States in Afghanistan in 2010, the Active Denial System, also known as the "Heat Ray," which consists in irradiating a human subject with "a millimeter wave beam, a microwave." The radiation leaves no visible mark or burns on the body but it generates a powerful sensation of pain:

> Unlike other 'non-lethal' means of control, such as taser guns and tear gas, the Active Denial System works at a distance, a means of weaponizing the spectrum to generate thermal sensations. The system is akin to existing forms of torture by media: sound cannons that damage the hearing of protesters and strobe lights used in prisoner interrogation. And like the techniques of psychological operations, the heat ray is described as a psychological, communicative, and affective tool, one that conveys an impression of being burned without actually being burnt. (Starosielski 2019, 2)

This thermal violence operates invisibly and at distance, as a kind of 'no-touch torture.' The Heat Ray's absence of traces opens a legal vacuum: how can a government or a military authority be hold accountable for an action without visible evidence? How can it be accused of torture with no physical mark of injury? But beyond these ethical concerns, Starosielski shows that this technology belongs to a long-standing history of intimate and perverse modes of punishment. She recognizes as a predecessor of the Heat Ray the sweatbox, an apparatus designed to detain someone in a very close space, about the size of a coffin, with restricted access to air, water, and food, which was designed by slavers on the ships and plantations before being adopted in prisons and schools. The sweatbox happens to be selectively destined to colored bodies: "what sets [it] … apart from other techniques of racist violence during this period, such as lynching, was its invisibility and indeterminacy" (Starosielski 2019, 10). What she identifies as "thermal violence," and which characterizes racialized techniques of disciplining black bodies, also appears as exposing bodies to an invisible and nonetheless pervasive form of violence that does penetrate deep into the body.

How do Antoine d'Agata's images take into account and respond to this long history of thermal violence and bodily discipline? Against this "politics of exposure," which Starosielski identifies with thermal military technologies, his pictures account for the vulnerability of the body and the precarity of life. Grounded in a history of tracking and targeting, thermography has been described as a hunting device, of which we know how it can disembody its subjects, dispossessing them of their envelope of flesh and the singularity of their features. Quite the opposite here: preserving the anonymity of hospital patients, the image only restores the carnal and deeply empathetic dimension of the care they receive. The hospital represents the opposite of what we see on the streets, because the euphemistic violence of one responds to the paradoxical sensuality of the other. The pandemic risk assimilated the sense of touch to a path of contamination, justifying the introduction of a new gestural lexicon of "social distancing." On the contrary, Antoine d'Agata's thermal images revealed the actions of the caregivers, who were most exposed to the virus, as the last bulwark against the alienation of touch. In the end, these images are not informative, they are evidence of the meaning of "caring": to stand closer, to pay attention, to give help and consideration to the suffering ones. The "poverty" of these images in low definition is therefore neither a gap, nor even a break in style, it simply describes another level of reality, not the emergency and the horror of the pandemic as it has been portrayed on all screens, but rather a space-time where life and death merge in almost liturgical gestures. Reflecting on the powers of mourning and violence, Judith Butler writes:

> The demand for a truer image, for more images, for images that convey the full horror and reality of the suffering has its place and importance. The erasure of that suffering through the prohibition of images and representations more generally circumscribes the sphere of appearance, what we can see and what we can know. But it would be a mistake to think that we only need to find the right and true images, and that a certain reality will then be conveyed. The reality is not conveyed by what is represented within the image, but through the challenge to representation that reality delivers. (2004, 146)

D'Agata's thermal camera series precisely deals with that challenge by showing vulnerable bodies through a traditional military tracking system. It features no graphic violence or abstract shades, but the gentle sensuality of a gesture of attention to others. They contrast both the frightening pictures that were produced by drones surveilling deserted cities, and the terrible images of the loss of sociability gestures in pandemic times. Using a surveillance and recognition technology, designed for scientific and military purposes, the photographer makes counter-use of it. By detecting the infrared radiation emitted by the bodies, the camera does not try to locate and identify them, but on the contrary to abstract them from the hospital context, and to protect their identity (so as not to expose people who are already in situations of extreme distress). "This is not a battlefield and we are not at war," say the images of d'Agata; in this theater of operations that is the hospital, the only gestures that matter are those that recognize the vulnerability of the bodies and that take care of lives. One day, when we remember these forgotten gestures, disappeared with the advent of a digital era which also saw the prohibition of physical contact, these images will compose a sensual atlas of the gestures of attention and care.

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Philipp Dominik Keidl, Laliv Melamed, Vinzenz Hediger, and Antonio Somaini (eds.)
Pandemic Media: Preliminary Notes Toward an Inventory

With its unprecedented scale and consequences the COVID-19 pandemic has generated a variety of new configurations of media. Responding to demands for information, synchronization, regulation, and containment, these "pandemic media" reorder social interactions, spaces, and temporalities, thus contributing to a reconfiguration of media technologies and the cultures and polities with which they are entangled. Highlighting media's adaptability, malleability, and scalability under the conditions of a pandemic, the contributions to this volume track and analyze how media emerge, operate, and change in response to the global crisis and provide elements toward an understanding of the post-pandemic world to come.

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