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► **To cite this version:**

Allan Deneuville, Julien Brugeron, Soukayna Mniaï. The framing(s) of empathy in social media and the arts. Hybrid. Revue des arts et médiations humaines, 2024, 11. hal-04553383

HAL Id: hal-04553383

<https://hal.science/hal-04553383>

Submitted on 23 Jun 2024

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Hybrid

Revue des arts et médiations humaines

11 | 2024

Les arts, la littérature et les médias sociaux face aux cadres médiatiques de l'empathie

The framing(s) of empathy in social media and the arts

Julien Burgeon, Allan Deneuveille and Soukayna Mniaï

Translator: Mark Fitzpatrick



Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/hybrid/3628>

DOI: [10.4000/hybrid.3628](https://doi.org/10.4000/hybrid.3628)

ISSN: 2276-3538

This article is a translation of:

Penser les cadres de l'empathie à partir des médias sociaux et des arts - URL : <https://journals.openedition.org/hybrid/3570> [fr]

Publisher

Presses universitaires de Vincennes

Electronic reference

Julien Burgeon, Allan Deneuveille and Soukayna Mniaï, "The framing(s) of empathy in social media and the arts", *Hybrid* [Online], 11 | 2024, Online since 15 April 2024, connection on 16 April 2024. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/hybrid/3628> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/hybrid.3628>

This text was automatically generated on April 16, 2024.



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The framing(s) of empathy in social media and the arts

Julien Burgeon, Allan Deneuveille and Soukayna Mniaï

Translation : Mark Fitzpatrick

- 1 On the 7th of January 2015, after the attack on the satirical weekly *Charlie Hebdo*, graphic designer Joachim Roncin, artistic director of *Stylist* magazine, made a post on Twitter depicting a logo made up of the words “Je suis Charlie” in black and white. The slogan was taken up massively on worldwide social media in the following days, as an expression of solidarity with the victims of the attack, through this claim of identification. Other internet-users responded with the slogan “Je ne suis pas Charlie” as a way of condemning the attacks, while also expressing their lack of support for the editorial line of the satirical paper, or in order to refuse the political and media framing of the attack as an assault on freedom of expression and the Republic as a whole, to which the only appropriate response would be an upsurge of national unity (Truc, 2020).
- 2 Certain members of the public refused to participate in the organized minutes of silence that were held after the *Charlie Hebdo* attack, or other attacks in Europe, citing the absence of such homages for the victims of violence elsewhere, be they in Rwanda, Syria, or in Sudan (Truc, 2016). Indeed, in the wake of the attack on a mosque in New Zealand on 15 March 2019, in which fifty-one people were murdered, commentators drew attention to the lack of any similar gestures to those which followed the *Charlie Hebdo* attack, and to the significantly-smaller uptake of the slogan “Je suis Christchurch.”
- 3 In the case of terrorist attacks, but also of wars, natural disasters, or other humanitarian crises, members of the public who have no direct knowledge of the events, being neither victims nor witnesses, are only able to create their own internal representations of what has happened through the individual testimonies of those who did experience these events, or, more commonly, through consumption of the political and media narratives and framings that are presented to them (Truc, 2020).

- 4 Inequality in the media treatment of different sociocultural groups is persistent, and the ethical motivations underlying this difference are regularly pointed out and critiqued. To denounce the unequal representation in the media of, say, the war in Ukraine, as compared to the war in Yemen, or the marked difference in the welcome accorded to Syrian refugees versus those from Ukraine, in Europe, or indeed the failings of public policy in the face of the migration crisis, or the ecological crisis, is to make a moral judgment as to what deserves our attention: what *should* concern us and engage our empathy.
- 5 In this issue, we shall be looking at the ways in which the arts, literature, and social media are in a position to offer alternative narratives and representations to those presented in the mainstream media. Faced with media silence and the marginalizing representation of certain groups that are deemed Other, the arts, literature, and social media can attempt to play the role of a counter-balancing force by disseminating representations that are capable of promoting empathy for the subjects and objects of excluded minority populations and issues.
- 6 While the media play a fundamental role in setting up a selectivity of empathy through their creation of political and cultural framings designed to direct public empathy, those framings themselves can be subverted in various ways, as discussed in issue 10 of *Hybrid*. The present issue, *Hybrid 11*, is intended to constitute a follow-up to the previous issue cited, and also takes as its focus the concept of Selective Empathy. In the essays that follow, the intention is to further analyze these artistic and literary modes of subversion, as applied to media framings of empathy; two themes in particular are dealt with: the question of the systemic nature of racial injustice, and that of the connections between the arts and ecocriticism.

In a black mirror: empathy in the mainstream media, and its reflection in social media

- 7 Published in 1978, the Nora-Minc report now seems prescient in its assessment:

Today, information that comes down from “on high” is often resisted, as it is perceived as a tool of power and manipulation. It would appear to be necessary to include and engage the audience in the actual production of information, that the consumers of information be also empowered to become producers of it, and that the various media channels take into account the real conditions under which the information is received. This kind of participation will only be accepted if dissenting groups also have the means to produce, process, and transmit their own information. (Nora & Minc, 1978, p. 123)

Reading these lines, with their proposed opposition between the dominant channels of information dissemination and independent networks of information production, we are directly confronted with the question of Selective Empathy and its media encoding in today’s social media landscape.

- 8 Thus, the first article in this issue, by Lucie Bonnet, a doctoral student whose thesis focuses on First Nations Peoples in the United States of America, analyzes the media reception of cases of missing persons among Indigenous women in Alaska, in particular. While traditional media outlets were devoting enormous amounts of coverage to the disappearance of the young Instagram influencer Gabi Petito, Bonnet observes that during the same time-period, and in the same geographic area, numerous

Indigenous women had disappeared or been murdered, to a show of utter indifference and silence in the media. While certainly tragic, the disappearance of Gabi Petito still stands as an absolutely paradigmatic example of what has been called “Missing White Woman Syndrome”—a term which was coined to describe the way in which traditional media will accord far more importance and attention to disappearances of white women, particularly those who correspond to conventional beauty standards and specific socio-economic criteria. These cases are often presented in a sensationalist manner, which feeds into an erroneous perception that white women are *more* likely to be victims of violence or kidnapping than other groups. Of course, the excessive focus on missing white women leads to the increased marginalization of other groups, such as people of color, transgender women, disabled women, people from low-income groups, or Indigenous people, whose disappearances typically receive far less attention in the media (Sommers, 2016). The question of empathy is therefore directly linked to the information to which we do or do not have access. How can one experience empathy with regard to an event of which one has no knowledge?

- 9 It would be possible, therefore, in light of the phrase quoted above from the Nora-Minc report, to examine the way that these framings function in today’s information economy, dominated as it is by social media. Rather than assuming that they have disappeared with the advent of social media, we can in fact observe that they are merely reiterated under different guises. In fact, the disappearance of the young Instagram influencer actually mobilized a massive investigation by internet users. That being said, social media also operate as a series of echo chambers for the production of information and the encoding of reality by those “dissenting groups” (we had perhaps rather say “minorities”) evoked by Pierre Nora and Alain Minc in their report. Bonnet’s article concludes here, on the potential that is offered by social media to create spaces in which attention can be differently distributed, thus opening up the possibilities of engagement of the empathic process towards categories of person usually denied it by traditional media. It must be noted, however, that “social media do not provide some kind of magical ‘safe space’ sheltered from colonialist society for Indigenous people”; indeed, the racism that is rampant in online spaces “also creates the conditions in which the traumas of colonization are activated or re-activated.” It would appear, therefore, that social media do little more than displace the debate around the selectivity of empathy. Where traditional media express empathy according to “professional codes,” which, to quote Stuart Hall, create a situation in which “ideological reproduction [...] takes place here inadvertently, unconsciously, ‘behind men’s backs’...” (Hall, 1994, p. 37), online spaces foster the creation of a certain empathy in the individualised media consumed. This empathy is itself selective, as has been observed in our previous experience of navigating online spaces, creating “filter bubbles.”¹ (Pariser, 2011), the dynamics of which recall the operation of Surveillance Capitalism (Zuboff, 2020). Selective Empathy is no longer the exclusive preserve of corporate mass media, but is now also subtly directed and distributed by the black-box functioning of the algorithms which dictate our online media consumption.
- 10 The possibility of being oneself the source and disseminator of a message does permit—through techniques such as the remix, for example—the subversion of these professional codes of empathy. As a result, empathy, as we encounter it on social media, appears to be following a performative code which is constructed at the level of the individual user, but also collaboratively at the level of online communities. The

very fact that we manifest our empathy through “clicks” is what teaches the algorithm to offer us content that will engage our empathy repeatedly, and reaffirm us in the identities that we embrace, which make us part of a community of belonging and affinity. To show our support of this or that cause—raising awareness about the unsolved murders of Indigenous women in the United States, for example—further populates our feed with content about this issue, and then leads on to further content about similar or related matters. We see then that our own empathy can lead us to experience a “selective perception” of reality, a self-imposed isolation (Barad, 2007) from the social world, at the intersection of the in-group communities to which we belong and the selectively trained algorithms that recommend content to us. Between an empathy that is selectively encoded by the traditional media and that which emanates from the black box of the Almighty Algorithm, one is forced to question the very possibility of internet users becoming “mediactivists” (Cardon & Granjon), infiltrating social media and its representations to offer new visual forms and narratives, thus switching off the autopilot which had been directing their internal representations and their own empathetic processes.

Developing empathy for marginalized or minority groups in the media through art and literature

- 11 Further, as we see in Lucie Bonnet’s article, media representation reflects and participates in the processes of “racialization,” defined as “the production of groups which have a racial designation imposed upon them” (Mazouz, 2020). These processes lead to a “labelling as part of a minority group” of certain people, to whom are attributed certain racially-stereotyped characteristics, and who are then assigned certain predefined roles (Eberhard & Rabaud, 2013). As a form of social relation which exists throughout our society, race actually constructs the way that we see the Other: our socialization teaches us to “categorize others” according to this “framework of perception of the world” (Brun & Cosquer, 2022). Of course, these processes of categorization then lead to “the assignation of value to groups and individuals—though a variable one—in a world in which social hierarchy prevails” (Lazzeri, 2011).
- 12 As Christian Lazzeri demonstrates, the way in which these categorizations operate generates a social divide between the group of those who possess the properties and characteristics which we identify as “similar” or “close” to us, and those whom we place outside the boundaries that we have thus drawn around our in-group. This social divide can then become a “counter-empathetic factor,” which manifests itself in “individual or collective acts of negative categorisation which can actually block empathetic simulation, due to the attribution of negative properties to an out-group member, or a negative evaluation of those qualities that the person possesses” (Lazzeri, 2011).
- 13 If these processes of social categorisation can then, in effect, *disactivate* empathy, Lazzeri also explains that we must distinguish between the cognitive and emotional aspects of empathy. Indeed, cognitive empathy remains always present, notionally, as despite the social gap involved, we do continue to perceive the humanity of the Other and to imagine their emotions: “treating a person like a thing does not mean that we think they *are* one, but rather that we are trying to send that person a message telling them that we treat them *as if* they had no more value than a thing” (Lazzeri, 2011). On

the other hand, emotional empathy *can* find itself suspended due to the social gap or divide:

[W]e *understand* (cognitive empathy) the emotional impact on the Other which are the logical consequences of this attitude, but we do not *experience* them, and this indifference (absence of emotional empathy) creates the conditions in which violence is possible. Indeed, it is often in order to minimise the cost of its own operation that emotional empathy goes into shut-down mode. (Lazzeri, 2011).

- 14 In order to move beyond this selectivity of empathy with regard to certain individuals or social groups, it is therefore necessary to “weaken the boundaries” (Lazzeri, 2011) that are established by the process of social categorization. In the case of racism, for example, Sarah Mazouz (2020) proposes “the creation of a social and political grounding” which would be established with, at its foundation, “the capacity of each individual to identify with the minority experience from which their privilege currently shelters them.” Empathy is therefore the key to attaining awareness of these social power dynamics, by that act of the imagination that is to project oneself into the situation of marginalized and oppressed people, “thus rendering discrimination or even violence much more difficult to engage in” (Lazzeri, 2011).
- 15 When confronted with the media silence, or indeed its narratives which foster racial labelling, social media—but also art and literature—have the capacity to foreground other representations and narratives which are more likely to activate what Sarah Mazouz has called “minority transpositions.” As shown in the article by Pauline Champagnat, this is precisely the objective aimed at by Conceição Evaristo and Eliana Alves Cruz, two contemporary Black Brazilian women authors, whose work she analyses in her text. Champagnat also examines the manner in which these writers have used literature to resist the representation of Black people in Brazil, in a society which is fraught with structural racism. Her article sheds light on the different literary mechanisms which attempt to evoke empathy in the reader, by showing the suffering that is and has been inflicted on Black Brazilians since the time of slavery. As she explains, these literary “counter-narratives” thus have “the potential to denounce, to problematize these Imaginaries, perhaps even to construct new ones.”
- 16 Naomi Toth’s piece also foregrounds the capacity of art to offer us new Imaginaries, a counter-current to the social and media representations that the dominant culture imposes on incarcerated people. She emphasizes the fact that mass-incarceration in the United States overwhelmingly affects Black people, as a function of the racial dynamics which underpin American society, in particular when it comes to institutions such as the police or the justice system. Her article focuses on the work of six artists (Sara Bennett, Russell Craig, Jesse Krimes, Marcus Manganni, Jared Owens, and Sable Elyse Smith), some of whom are Black Americans, which offer alternative representations of incarcerated persons, going beyond the cultural stereotypes of the violent criminal or the dehumanized, objectified victim which are cultivated by the dominant media. In contrast, the work of these artists attempts to promote empathy for incarcerated persons in a dynamic of equality, rather than a condescending pity, by showing the common humanity shared by both incarcerated people and “those on the outside.” As Toth explains, “these artists and their work thus participate in transforming the prison walls into [...] points of contact between the inside and the outside of the prison—a necessary prerequisite for the expansion of the campaign against mass-incarceration.”

- 17 Pauline Champagnat, like Naomi Toth, contends that by creating the necessary conditions for empathy, art and literature can become vectors of increased awareness with regard to issues of social justice.

Empathy, environment, and ecocriticism

- 18 To conclude our reflections on the relationship between the media and empathy, this issue raises the question of how we conceptualize the world as a space that is under threat in the current economic and ecological climate. The iron grip of the financial markets on the structures and ecosystems of the living planet, which attempts to transform all aspects of the environment—everything that makes up the so-called “non-human”—either into a product, or an obstacle to infinite productivity, comes up against the inescapable fact of our environmental resources being finite. This irreconcilable tension, between the absolute demand for productivity and the inevitable depletion of resources, has its roots in the ideological foundations of what H el ene Tordjman calls “Green Growth” (Tordjman, 2022), a concept promoted by economic agents whose primary goal is to safeguard an industrial model which is itself the actual primary cause of the ecological disaster that we are currently experiencing. In the account that it presents of the state of climate emergency, and the strategies that must be implemented, the 2022 IPCC Report clearly enjoins both governments and the private sector to a higher level of engagement and accountability, particularly as regards the development of economic instruments which tackle the failings of the markets, and the question of climate risk disclosure. In fact, this political-economic framing, before relying on a whole legal and financial apparatus, is first of all grounded in a specific conception of the living world, the problematization of which is the jumping-off point for Alice Cuvelier’s article. Cuvelier is a PhD candidate in Philosophy and the Arts in University Paris 1 and University Paris 8; her work shares this concern with the contribution of Elsa Ayache, artist-practitioner and Associate Professor in Visual Arts at University Paris 1 Panth eon-Sorbonne, and Solange Ayache, Associate Professor in British Literature at the INSPE of the Academy of Paris. Alice Cuvelier begins her reflection with the tension between the “representational constants of Ocean inhabitants,” and the “reconceptualization” of this space, which will be effected by “proposing novel visual representations.” In reworking a History of the Ocean as an object constructed by the human imagination, Cuvelier invites us to consider the work of Lynn Margulis, Stefan Helmreich and Donna Haraway on “Endosymbiogenesis,” which shows how “individual animals, plants, and microbes emerge as active participants in the ongoing history of life.” This being said, these persons are also the victims of an empathetic structure which is imposed on them, and which tends to hierarchize the value of their existence according to whether they are “readily identified as ‘fellow creatures’...” Cuvelier’s intervention eventually invites us to consider the species and individuals, the inhabitants of the oceans, which have been relegated to the domain of the “unthought,” by attempting to integrate “biological and ecological knowledge, conceptual narratives, and the methodologies employed for their representation.”
- 19 This call, not so much for mixing, but rather for a symbiosis of knowledge-disciplines, feeds into the ecocritical approach in literature. The study of the relationships between literature and environment, though only developing recently in France, was initiated as

early as 1974 in the United States, with *The Comedy of Survival. Literary Ecology and a Play Ethic*, by Joseph Meeker, and was theorized in the seminal text by Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination*, published in 1995. Ecocriticism, though of course oriented fundamentally towards the environment, is not limited to a monolithic conception of a fetishized, revered, essentialized idea of “Nature,” no more than are the people who inhabit it. It is, rather, an approach that is profoundly anchored in a phenomenology of instability and contingency. Its object, thanks to its very impermanence, inspires a wealth of analysis of artistic creations, the ethical and political dimensions of which are foregrounded by that analysis. Hence the power of this piece—which seems the product of organic processes—created by Solange and Elsa Ayache: it is to be read as the embodiment of the very phenomenon it describes, mixing analysis and artistic practice, scientific discourse and poetic inspiration. Much in the manner of William Rueckert (1978), the first to coin the term “ecocriticism,” which conceives of writing as a vital source, both in the poetic and the environmental senses, Elsa and Solange Ayache invite us to move from an empathetic apprehension of the world to a veritable arborescence of the Other, and of the Self. The transient nature of all that is living, as an element constantly in danger of extinction, forms the core of this jointly-authored essay, which “a reflection on ‘tentacular empathy,’ based on an unfolding of emotions and a proliferation of realizations by a ricocheting or branching off of affect.”

- 20 Elsa and Solange Ayache’s piece presents the artistic creations of the former on the theme of wildfires, and, in parallel, the latter’s analysis of *Blasted*, the play by Sarah Kane. A polyphonic critical intervention, its aim is to “let weave these resonances, to think new modes of creation and communication in scholarship” on art and literature, and to respond to the injunction of Donna Haraway, the theorist whose work links the two articles under discussion here, which entails our “committ[ing] to art science worldings as sympoietic practices for living on a damaged planet” (Haraway, 2016, p. 67).
- 21 Taken together, the articles presented in issues 10 and 11 of *Hybrid*, and the theoretical convergences that they propose, invite us to broaden the field of our reflections on the relationship between the media, aesthetics, ecocriticism, and postcolonial studies. The rejection of the Western ecocritical framework, which would confine us within a “new ‘Green’ Colonialism” (Huggan & Tiffin, 2010), is a key gesture in the renewal of hermeneutic framings for Ecocriticism, in order to “transcend the modern environmentalist vision, which reduces the earth and nature to objects that are totally exterior and separate from humanity,” as Malcom Ferdinand posits. The author of the 2019 work, *Une écologie décoloniale*, which attempts to think ecology through the lens of the Caribbean, invites us to consider the questions of colonialism and environmental destruction concurrently, emphasizing the crucial element—just as the authors mentioned above do—of taking ecology as a complex of narrative and Imaginal modes. Thus, ecocriticism is fed by tributaries from many other intellectual currents, becoming a syncretic object, a symbiosis, as suggested above, between post-colonial studies, feminist theory, gender studies, animal studies, or queer studies. This synthesis, this symbiosis, is the embodiment of the intention of the “Selective Empathy” Conference, to address a broad panorama of different subjects, different tensions, and seems to us highly necessary in light of the increasingly evident

insufficiency of univocal, unipolar methods, which we move to replace with a more holistic consideration of the issues raised by the concept of Selective Empathy.

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NOTES

1. These filter bubbles are created through the operation of algorithms which personalise the content that is presented to a given consumer according to the tastes and interests that they have previously exhibited, creating for each individual a "bubble" in which the information presented is basically similar to what has already been consulted, thus limiting any real diversity of perspectives. See also *Angles morts du numérique ubiquitaire* (Citton et al., 2023, p. 43).

INDEX

Keywords: empathy, media, literature, arts, theatre, painting, visual arts, emotions, performing arts, performance, selective empathy, Alaska, Ocean, Brazil, United States of America, politics, social media, identification, solidarity, racism, eco-criticism

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