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Introduction: Media Controversy and the Crisis of the Image

Feona Attwood, Vincent Campbell, I.Q. Hunter and Sharon Lockyer

The media are inextricable from controversy. Their emergence and development have been dogged, determined and accelerated by censorship, media panics and public fascination with the seemingly uncontrollable spread of disturbing and taboo-breaking images into everyday life. Yet 'controversy' is a rarely used and much under-theorized term in academic studies of the media, even though controversies over specific images, from 'video nasties' to snapshots from Abu Ghraib, have structured our understanding of the media's power, seductiveness and dangers.

Examining controversial images is important for understanding media because it reveals the workings of censorship and regulation, the construction of social and sexual norms and taboos and the limits and conventions of media forms and genres and how these are challenged and overturned. This collection, which offers a series of instructive case studies of recent media controversies, provides a fruitful starting point for considering key issues of representation, performance and interpretation; wars over imagery; models of media use; shifts in regulation; ethics and aesthetics; modes of reflection and interaction; the relation of pleasure, cruelty, disgust, arousal and horror; and the shifting boundaries of what is and is not acceptable. Controversial images may be 'at the edge' of what is permissible, but this is because the image is now at the centre of concerns about technology, representation and surveillance in a mediascape obsessed with sensation and novelty, the fabrication of shock and conflict, and a fascination with what constitutes the 'real'. Especially important, of course, is analysing the impact of the Internet, which makes controversial images indiscriminately accessible and virally omnipresent and increasingly abolishes distinctions between public and private. The goal of this book is to show how controversial images not only raise questions about media ethics in relation

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to human rights and responsibilities but are intimately involved in fundamental issues such as how relations between the media and its audiences and the global and the local are built and maintained; why clashes between cultures and within cultures occur around and through media; how the development of new technologies disturbs established ways of doing things; and how controversies are created, sustained, managed, exploited, appropriated and enjoyed by a range of interested parties, from politicians and media barons to regulators, critics and fans. The study of controversial images is essential at a time when the media seem ever more invasive and private life ever more closely surveilled, and when consensus about the regulation of media is increasingly hard to reach.

The elements of controversial images

Although a seemingly contemporary concern, the controversial image has a long history, and what has made imagery 'controversial' has been, and continues to be, complex and fluid. We can find examples of controversial imagery in religion, for instance, throughout history. Iconoclasm, the destruction of religious icons and other symbols, has often accompanied important political or religious changes and the term has come to be associated with challenges to convention and tradition. Central to the controversial nature of imagery in this context are concerns about various types of harm that might befall people exposed to these images. The 'media effects' tradition goes back a very long way, with its assumption that images have a special power to bypass the conscious mind and pervert our 'true' natures. Sixteenth-century ecclesiastical discourses emphasized the role of profane images in provoking lust and a concern with dangerous forms of representation can be found in 'religious, then in moral and juridical and finally in aesthetic and medical [...] discourses' (Falk 1993: 2–7). In moral discourses on aesthetics the clear distinction that is made between modes of reception suggests that a presumed lack of distance from images is associated with controversial uses of media. Distance, reflection and contemplation are presented as necessary for an 'aesthetic experience' while closeness to images breaks this bourgeois ideal of aesthetic contemplation (Falk 1993: 7–11).

The 'closeness' of images and the discomfort they may provoke also lies in their ability to disrupt boundaries of various kinds, and the capacity for imagery to disrupt boundaries has expanded over time. Once images remained restricted in their prevalence and accessibility

but now technologies of reproduction and dissemination have enabled physical boundary disruptions. Controversies have dogged new media technologies such as television, videogame consoles and the Internet which reach into spaces previously perceived to be, on the one hand, private and personal and, on the other, under patriarchal or familial control. In doing so, they can disrupt, and arguably democratize, hierarchies of access to knowledge and entertainment, which is one reason why controversy often focuses on young people's use of media technologies. Similarly, controversial images can now reach outwards through those same technologies, crossing geographical boundaries and bringing imagery acceptable in one context into new contexts where it becomes controversial or even profane. As well as crossing physical or social boundaries images may also confuse generic boundaries and conventions, transgress established norms and violate community standards of taste and respectability. They are often popularly described as going 'beyond the limits' or boundaries of 'acceptability', or being on the edge of what is deemed 'appropriate' and 'acceptable' within a specific sociocultural context.

Narrow notions of 'media effects' are often the source of controversies about images, underpinning anxieties about representations that might inappropriately inspire us or deaden our proper responses. All the chapters in this book, however diverse their topics, are united in criticizing the simplistic, often psychological, theories of media effects that underpin popular journalistic discussions of our interaction with controversial images. Such images make things too visible, bringing to light and 'on-scene' what should be kept off- and 'ob-scene'. They may be too graphic or explicit in style or content. Some genres – especially what Linda Williams (1991) calls body genres – are particularly productive of controversy, both because of the way they depict the body and because they have a physical or arousing affect on the body. Studies of the abject (Kristeva 1982) and disgust (Kipnis 1996; Miller 1997) have provided ways of exploring why certain images may be disturbing, and how ideas of the self and its relation to the world are often represented through depictions of the boundaries between the inside and outside of the body and of things that violate that boundary. Academic work has focused on those genres that are controversial because they display and 'move the body' – the horror film (Carroll 1980; Brottman 1997; Jancovich 2002); comedy (Lockyer and Pickering 2005); and pornography (Williams 2004; Church Gibson 2004; Attwood 2010; Paasonen 2011), as well as screen violence to the body (Hill 1997; Schlesinger 1992, 1998; Simkin, 2011). A broader category of 'extreme' or shocking images has more

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recently become the subject of scholarly attention (Boothroyd 2006; Jones 2010). Chapters on shocking art, body horror, reactions to ‘shock’ images on YouTube, porn featuring animals, ‘torture porn’ horror and hardcore film, explore these particular themes around transgressing the boundaries of the body in this collection.

It may be that it is not the image itself that is controversial, but rather the increasing ease with which imagery can be accessed, replicated and manipulated. Moreover, there is what might be called a contemporary crisis of the image, as all images, even photographic ones that seem indexically linked to reality, are now suspect because of digital manipulation and copying. Here controversy may arise within creative industries and media professions over questions of the production, presentation and dissemination of images, linking in to deeper questions of the ethics of the production of media images. Several chapters in this book focus on precisely these questions, from what is or is not acceptable in movies, television programmes, or videogames, to questions about accuracy in news media representations of issues of social importance.

Another significant area in which images often become controversial is in relation to political discourses and matters of public debate. These have most typically manifested in discussions about media effects and violence (Barker and Petley 2001); moral panics (Cohen 1972; Thompson 1998; Critcher 2003) and related censorship campaigns (Barker 1984a, 1984b; Barker, Arthurs and Harindranath 2001); propaganda, free speech, and censorship (Herman and Chomsky 1988; Petley 2007; French and Petley 2008); the role of media technologies in surveillance (Andrejevic 2007; Magnet and Gates 2009); public and political scandal (Montgomery 1986; Dubin 1992; Lull and Hinerman 1997; Thompson, 2000); conflict (Cottle 2006); and war reporting (Hammond and Herman 2000; Thusu and Freedman 2003; Hoskins 2004; Hoskins and O’Loughlin 2010). Of particular interest here are controversial images that appear in the context of news. Imagery in the news, whether still or moving, is often, perhaps surprisingly, absent from many critical and analytical accounts within journalism studies. Becker argues that in the case of news photography this has been because of tensions within debates about the function and purpose of journalism. She writes:

Despite its very visible presence in the daily and weekly press of the past century, photography is rarely admitted to settings in which journalism is discussed, investigated and taught. Whenever the distinction is drawn between information and entertainment, or the

serious substance of a journalism appealing to an intellectual reading public is defended against the light, trivial appeal of the popular, photography falls within the popular, excluded from the realm of the serious press.

(Becker 1992: 130)

This is perhaps all the more surprising when news imagery has been crucial to the capturing and codifying of major world events for well over a hundred years. Moreover, given that the focus of news photography from the earliest days – Becker cites the early case of the sinking of the USS *Maine* that precipitated the Spanish-American War in 1898 (2003: 293) – has been on violence, disaster, conflict and crime, and that imagery of the dead and dying has become routine in news around the world, the lack of critical and analytical attention to news imagery is especially striking (one rare exception being Taylor 1998). Several chapters in this collection, on controversies about suicide bombers, spree killings, and wars, address this gap in journalism studies.

The structure of the book

This collection explores these themes and debates with the aim of incorporating several dimensions of debates around controversies, as a starting point for thinking about controversial images. The eclectic range of material contained in the book is an indication in and of itself of the complexity and fluidity of the notion of a 'controversial image', and the purpose here is not to try and categorize and theorize a universal concept of controversial imagery. Drawing on new perspectives in cultural studies, it considers a wide variety of *types of image* – newspaper cartoons, advertising and fashion photography, music videos, photo-journalism, news media, art works, hardcore porn film, anime, horror and exploitation movies, video games and YouTube reaction videos. It also examines these in a *range of contexts*, taking in controversies over the use of Photoshop in a French magazine and an American fashion campaign; the outrage caused in Muslim countries by the Danish paper, *Jyllands-Posten*; the relations between Bulgarian and Euro-American pop cultures; news reporting in Turkey; British representations of a school shooting in the US; censorship in a range of countries including the UK and Australia; torture porn films in the broader context of a 'War on Terror'; audience responses to an Italian exploitation film and 'video nasty'; and the experiences of British journalists reporting from around the world. The collection is divided into four parts, each dealing with a

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different aspect of controversy, focusing in turn on controversies over representation, the construction of controversy, ethical and aesthetic issues, and finally on audience engagement with controversial images.

Controversy and representation

The first part is concerned with issues of representation and reality. It raises questions about the ways in which the meanings of images are produced, how images can be used to sustain and question ideas about identity, and how the reworkings and recirculations of images work for and against the management of their meanings.

In the first chapter Meredith Jones discusses controversies about the use of Photoshop and its impact on body image, concerns that are based on the ideal of photography as accurately mirroring and upholding reality. As she shows, Photoshop and other digital media have problematized this ideal; images are now frequently digitally manipulated and have become ‘an integral part of the performance of public life’. Jones discusses three examples. The first is a Photoshopped nude image of the philosopher Simone de Beauvoir, which was seen by some as an invasion of her privacy and an expression of gender inequality. Interestingly, the use of Photoshop caused little comment, perhaps because in an image of this sort it works to update and even ‘clothe’ its subject. The second, an excessively distorted image of a model used in a Ralph Lauren campaign, was widely linked to the view that the manipulation of images impacts negatively on women’s body image. The third, an advertising campaign for Dove beauty products and deodorants, apparently criticizing ‘unreal’ images and linking its own products to ‘real beauty’, was hugely successful, though as Jones notes, supportive of the view of beauty and commodification that it was supposedly critiquing. Concerns over the legitimate use of Photoshop highlight a continuing set of anxieties about the ways that representation and reality are supposed to be connected, while demonstrating that, in fact, media and the body are not separate; bodies are mediated, body image is intertwined with images, and we can now be said to inhabit ‘media-bodies’.

In the second chapter, Catherine Collins and David Douglass investigate responses to the ‘Mohammed’ cartoons published by the Danish newspaper, *Jyllands-Posten*, in 2005, which resulted in global controversy characterized by protests and riots, the torching of Danish embassies, the boycotting of Danish products, death threats and actual deaths. Noting that it was the creation of the cartoons and ‘the implications of the act of publication’ rather than their content that led to the

controversy, they discuss the importance of images for a sense of identity and belonging, and how our traditions of interpreting these are still embedded in older Western and Muslim frameworks for making sense of images of the body. For many Muslims, using a framework derived from Islamic religious traditions, the cartoons were about *resemblance* which ‘amounted to an affront, even to blasphemy’, while many Westerners regarded the cartoons as *representing* the Prophet Mohammad and thus having a ‘referential relationship’ to its subject. They conclude that the study of visual interpretation and its relation to different cultural contexts remains in its infancy, and that understanding this is becoming more urgent given the uncertain and difficult times we live in.

Plamena Kourtova’s chapter takes up this question of the role of cultural context in producing the meanings of images. Playing with social norms and expectations around sexual identity and challenging sexual taboos have been the mainstay of numerous Euro-American popular music performers from David Bowie to Madonna to Lady Gaga. Asking what happens when these particular styles and performances are copied and reproduced in different contexts, the chapter focuses on a flamboyant and provocative Bulgarian pop-folk performer, Azis. Although commercially successful, Azis’ music videos have been banned, advertisements for his singles have been censored and his work has been described as ‘savage’ because of its display of homosexuality and homoeroticism. The chapter shows how contemporary Bulgarian understandings of homosexuality, homophobia and identity are both influenced and challenged by nationalism and the West. It explores the ambiguities and complexities of Azis’ image and performance style and discusses how imitation may become a vehicle for negotiating the tensions between the local and global, sameness and difference, the self and Other, and freedom and shame.

The final chapter in this part focuses on official photographs of the Guantánamo Bay prison camps in Cuba and the struggle for definitional control over the War on Terror in the context of a ‘war of images’ where the volume of images that are now produced and circulated makes control more challenging than ever before. Looking at two widely circulated photographs of Camp X-Ray, Bruce Bennett explores the tensions between propaganda, photojournalism and historical documentation in their appropriation and re-interpretation by news media and in their wider reception. He argues that their controversial status rests not so much on their content as on the way in which the photographs embody an information system and a political order in which power is exercised through the choice of particular ways of making the camp

visible while making others invisible. The blurring of roles between military personnel and journalists, and therefore between propaganda and reportage, marks the emergence of a kind of ‘simulated journalism’, though what is also interesting is what happens in the reception and circulation of images like these and the ways in which they continue to be ‘reframed, reworked and reinterpreted.’

Constructing controversies

The second part of the collection focuses more closely on the media framing of events as controversial, and on how this depends on their mobilization and construction within particular frameworks. These include established codes of appearance and their meanings, models for understanding the media – particularly that of ‘media effects’, a developing crisis in the representation of children and a series of overlapping legal frameworks that constrain the way that films are classified.

Ertug Altınay’s chapter explores the case of a failed suicide attack by two women affiliated with a Kurdish guerilla organization in Turkey, how the visual appearance of the women, dubbed by news media ‘the terrorists with highlights’, became a central feature of the way this was reported, and how images of the women seemed to present as much of a challenge to the Turkish state as the attempted bombing. Altınay shows how the modernization of Turkey has involved attempts to control and shape the visual identities of Turks and non-Turks, especially women, and how in that context the appearance of the terrorists proved to be so controversial. Women’s appearance has been considered particularly important in marking the transformation of the country from an Islamic Empire to a secular Western nation state and the remodelling of Kurdish women’s bodies worked to demonstrate the assimilation of the Kurds into this project. Altınay argues that the dress and in particular the ‘highlights’ used as a disguise by the suicide bombers operated as signs of modern, urban Turkish identity; the women ‘seemed to be transformed properly into Turkish citizens’. Their adoption of this style was controversial precisely because it parodied the ‘natural modernity’ of Turks and revealed this code of appearance as an imitation.

In the following chapter, Jeremy Collins examines how particular narratives come into play in news reporting and how news media often utilize ideas about controversial imagery in *other* media as a way of making sense of certain types of events. Focusing on British newspaper reports of the Virginia Tech spree killing of 2007, he explores how the killings were represented as being causally connected to ‘media

violence', drawing on a 'media effects' model that is often used in news media accounts despite the long-standing critiques of it within media research. Collins concludes that the killer Cho Seung Hui's own use of a 'multimedia manifesto', and the links made by media commentators between images of Cho and images in the Korean gangster film *Oldboy* (2003), 'provided a means for the news media to re-present an established explanatory theme in which violence in the "real world" can be explained by, or even blamed on, violent imagery in popular culture'.

Adam Stapleton's chapter examines controversy around the work of the artist, Trevor Brown, in the context of developing legislation on images of minors and fictitious persons. As it notes, arrests of parents who have taken nude photos of their children, alongside the withdrawal of advertising campaigns and the removal of artists' images from galleries because of their representation of children, suggest that anxiety about images of children is 'part of a significant and developing crisis'. Trevor Brown's work plays with the boundaries between childhood and sexuality, using images of dolls, toys, and 'Lolita' girls, and draws from a range of representational forms including children's books, pornography and medical images. Stapleton shows how this kind of representational play is becoming more dangerous because it is framed by new legislation which has moved away from the idea that child pornography is a record of abuse and towards the control of images of 'fictional' persons which have been drawn, painted or generated by computer. In this construction of controversy the law invites us to adopt a 'paedophilic gaze' which has no impact on the actual sexual exploitation of children but serious implications for the way that creative expression and imagination are treated.

Issues of regulation are also taken up in Julian Petley's chapter, this time in relation to the frameworks within which the UK's British Board of Film Classification operates. The BBFC has undergone a quiet revolution in recent years, overseeing in 2000 the de facto legalization of hardcore pornography at R18, passing hitherto banned or cut 'video nasties', leaving controversial films untouched and banning only a handful of extreme horror movies, such as *Murder Set Pieces* (2004), *Grotesque* (2009) and (for a short while) *The Human Centipede 2* (2011) (Petley 2011). But the BBFC still censors a considerable number (up to 24%) of R18 'sex works' or hardcore pornography. Petley analyses the BBFC's censorship policy in recent years, at a time when controversial images are more easily available than ever and censors are easily bypassed by viewing films online. He describes the overlapping legal frameworks within which the BBFC operates and the audience research they commission which,

though having no legal force, further legitimizes their policy of cuts. He concludes that the numerous laws the BBFC must negotiate represent considerable if indirect state involvement in censorship. In addition, because the BBFC goes beyond its proper role of interpreting the strict legal rules and makes cuts to films according to extra-legal considerations such as bad taste, its activities encroach ‘into areas of taste and morality which some may consider should lie beyond its remit’.

Ethics and aesthetics in controversial media

The third part of the collection focuses on the ethics and aesthetics of controversial images, and on forms which have become especially controversial because they stretch the boundaries of realism, as in violent anime, or appear particularly ‘extreme’, as in the pornography of Max Hardcore, the ‘torture porn’ movie, and the images of bestiality that circulate online in adverts for animal porn. These forms are also controversial because of their relation to broader concerns about the ways in which the production of images is connected to the power relations between men and women and humans and animals, and to the presence of real cruelty and violence in the world.

In the first chapter Caroline Ruddell looks at body horror in the Japanese anime film, focusing especially on *Ichi the Killer* (2002), an animated prequel to Takashi Miike’s 2001 live action film. Her concern is with the expanded opportunities animation offers for representing and defamiliarizing the body, and the ethical issues posed by a style of representation that is unconstrained by realism and that allows the impossible to be represented. *Ichi the Killer* shows the body in bits, exploded, an object of horror, and links sex with violence – Ichi becomes aroused when he commits or witnesses violent acts. As well as analysing the destruction and abjection of the body in relation to the genres of horror and porn, with their shared visceral affectivity, Ruddell shows how anime raises particular questions about gender and power because of its distance from Western representational conventions and excessive images of pure physicality. Both male and female characters are subject to bodily rupture and the film’s violence provides a way of dealing with coming of age issues and difficulties with older generations, the reconciling of desires with social norms and the problems of gendered identity.

Gender and power relations are also the focus of Stephen Maddison’s discussion of one of the most controversial manifestations of contemporary imagery – the porn films of US director ‘Max Hardcore’. Although

Hardcore, who was jailed for obscenity in 2009 and released in 2011, remains something of a pariah in the porn industry, Maddison argues that his brutal, anti-erotic but innovative films have been influential in shifting porn towards a focus on bodily distress and the representation of sex as hard and unpleasurable performative work. Hardcore's films such as the *Cherry Poppers* (1994–7), *Hardcore Schoolgirls* (1995–2000) and *Extreme Schoolgirls* (2003–6) series are compilations of scenarios in which Hardcore has sex with adult women dressed as young girls. Anal sex features heavily, as well as deep-throating, gagging, vomiting, urination, enemas, and the use of speculums. Taking Hardcore's films as representative of contemporary porn, Maddison pursues the idea that porn's saturation of culture and its promise of instant gratification is an ideal symptom/image of consumer capitalism, in which an insistence on the pursuit of pleasure through consumption leads only to frustrated engagement with 'an endless flow of content'. Hardcore's work replaces the spectacle of pleasure with 'spectacular involuntary convulsions' and performances of 'blank' domination, raising questions about the significance of arousing images and the role of pleasure in culture.

The subject of Steve Jones's chapter is the most controversial of recent cycles of films – the 'torture porn' movie, a group of over 70 R-rated thrillers, usually classed as horror films and linked by their alleged misogyny and 'gratuitousness', despite being diverse in nature and with a majority of male victims. Originating in a 2006 article by David Edelstein in *New York* magazine, the term 'torture porn' was initially attached to films such as Eli Roth's *Hostel* (2005), with its explicit torture set-pieces, and the *Saw* series (2004–10) but also embraced Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* (2004), *Casino Royale* (2006) and the Fox TV series, *24* (2001–10), in which torture was a significant plot device. It may also be understood as part of a flourishing of violent imagery in all kinds of media in countries around the world, in the context of much easier access to scenes of real violence, suffering and death online. Jones shows that 'torture porn', as a discursive category, is – much like 'video nasty' – both useful in highlighting thematic similarities among otherwise unrelated films and unavoidably pejorative and damning. The journalistic use of 'porn' as a suffix attached to graphic and indulgent depictions of anything, from food to architecture, carries built in disapproval. 'Torture porn' is a scapegoating label intended to Other not just the films but their viewers.

Jones argues that one of the key problems with torture porn was that films such as *Hostel* and *Saw* became *too visible*. Usually marginal and easily ignored, the horror genre found itself moving towards the

cultural centre, perhaps because it resonated with the War on Terror. The use of ‘porn’ as a label marked a demand that body horror should retreat again to ‘the outskirts of the cultural radar’. Jones traces how the films comment on war, the role violence plays in culture and the nature of morality. But he emphasizes that it is not enough simply to argue that the films reflect or critique images of torture; they need to be situated within a more general cultural fascination with cruelty and ‘humilitainment’.

Cruelty is a central concern of the final chapter in this part by Susanna Paasonen. She notes that while pornography is often understood as being at the bottom of an aesthetic hierarchy of cultural forms, what is less well recognized is that there are also hierarchies *within* porn. The depiction of bestiality in animal porn resides at the lowest levels – it is understood as taboo and dehumanizing, and as part of a wider system of representation in which animals stand for the non-human and for the senses. Examining spam adverts for animal porn sites, Paasonen notes how these emphasize ‘hyperbolic nastiness and titillation’ and offer spectacles of the ‘extraordinary and bizarre’. When the ethics of animal porn are discussed, the focus is usually on the female performer and whether her performance is degrading or can be considered consensual. But as Paasonen points out, the animals involved in animal porn are mainly companion animals, farmyard animals, livestock and animal labourers; rather than wild animals they are under human control or are human property. Animal porn tends not to challenge human control over animals, but depicts them as objects of sexual activity and as extensions and mirrors for human desire. At the same time they remain symbols of otherness, and perhaps of ‘realness’ and ‘authenticity’.

Engaging with controversial images

In the fourth and final part the focus moves to various kinds of engagement with controversial images, an engagement that is often understood as dangerous and harmful.

Martin Barker offers a provocative alternative to this kind of thinking through a case study of audience responses to *House on the Edge of the Park* (Ruggero Deodato, 1980), an Italian exploitation film cut by the BBFC for its scenes of rape and sexual violence. Barker emphasizes that audience members approach films, even disreputable ones like this, with different and unpredictable expectations and varying degrees of cultural and subcultural capital. Unexpectedly, audience members often responded to the film on the level of its *ideas*, which spoke to them in

class terms. *House on the Edge of the Park* pitches working-class Others against arrogant and complacent representatives of the middle class, so that the rape of middle-class women becomes a sort of class revenge, as in other 'home invasion' films such as *Straw Dogs* (1971) and *A Clockwork Orange* (1972). These viewers read the film as political rather than simply slavering over or recoiling from the gendered violence that worried the BBFC. Barker goes on to analyse the enthusiastic response of one male viewer, a committed fan of exploitation horror thrillers, whose intense engagement with the film's offer of visceral pleasures would for some mark him out as a 'vulnerable' and therefore 'dangerous' member of the audience. 'Exploitation films like *House*', he concludes, 'create terrains of intensified reflection', though this "'doubling" of arousal and reflection, of excitement and horror, will never be comprehensible to nervous critics'. But Barker suggests that the fan's rapt engagement with the film actually enables him to understand it more fully than 'properly' distanced viewers who, unfamiliar with the tropes of exploitation cinema, are unable to frame the film within the genre's physically and intellectually arousing expectations and pleasures.

Arousal and horror are explored in a very different way in the chapter by Julia Kennedy and Clarissa Smith on YouTube reaction videos. Their case study is what has become known as the *Spankwire* video, a two-and-a-half minute video montage which went viral in 2007–8 and has been described as 'One of the Scariest Videos Out There'. The montage shows scenes of genital modification, fire-play, needle-play and suspension, originally intended as a taster for a body-modification website but recirculated on YouTube and elsewhere for its shock horror qualities. The montage was also the subject of an attempted prosecution as 'extreme pornography'.

Focusing on audience reaction videos and commentaries on these, Kennedy and Smith describe how the montage is seen through the reactions of viewers, becoming in the process a kind of user-generated cinema of attractions and a 'freak show' that exaggerates the exotic and erotic, shock and sensation. What the reaction videos and commentaries appear to demonstrate are the pleasures of being shocked and horrified and the willingness of audiences to participate in these. Reacting to the video becomes part of a game requiring participation, self-scaring, bravery and emotional exhibitionism, and emphasizes a community of experience, suggesting that responses to controversial images may be much more complex than the ones that are often assumed.

Vincent Campbell's chapter offers a case study of a 'moral panic' in video game history. This was the media backlash against *Call of Duty: Modern*

Warfare 2 (2009), a first-person shooter which despite being lauded as a masterpiece of entertainment design caused controversy because it allowed the player to 'become' a terrorist and participate in a massacre at a Russian airport. Campbell shows how the controversy focused on the 'moral condemnation of the narrative context' and the affects that this might produce in players. He pays closest attention to those characteristics of interactivity, immersiveness and sense of presence that are often thought of as the most – indeed uniquely – dangerous aspects of video games. But he argues that far from inciting violence, it is precisely those characteristics that allow the game to complicate players' moral response to the massacre. Videogames are becoming more sophisticated and challenging, sometimes requiring 'self-reflection and moral decision-making' and the controversial scene in *Call of Duty* is notable for its self-reflexiveness about the ethics of killing and morally challenging in offering the player opportunities for reflecting on the narrative implications of 'violent' gameplay. In other words, he concludes, *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* is a threshold game in an emerging art form.

The subject of the final chapter by Paul Brighton is controversial imagery in the context of British television news journalism and the ways in which well-known journalists negotiate the tensions of producing and transmitting potentially controversial imagery. The tradition of public service broadcasting in Britain has left broadcast journalists working within a culture of regulations and guidelines concerning tastes and decency, leading to a recurring 'scenario of the frustrated journalist in the field, seared by his experiences, and the nervous (and, perhaps, back-watching) duty editor'. Interestingly, Brighton notes that despite a culture shaped by guidelines, the boundaries of what can be broadcast shifts over time according to negotiations between editors and journalists, rather than being a fixed set of absolute rules. Exploring accounts from leading figures in television reporting, such as Martin Bell and Kate Adie, he traces how 'reporters operate [...] on an almost intuitive sense of what is and is not broadcastable', yet also find ways to challenge and test 'the limits of what the newsroom teams and the viewing public, whose interests newsrooms may see themselves as protecting, deem acceptable'.

As new media penetrate further into the home, blurring distinctions between public and private, and rendering the obscene or simply culturally unacceptable more easily accessible than ever, it is important that media controversies are not made the excuse for greater censorship and the demonization of 'dangerous' images and the audiences that consume them. The case studies in this book, by offering alternatives to

reactionary notions of ‘media effects’, suggest how we might achieve a more subtle understanding of controversial images and thereby negotiate, more successfully but also more calmly, the difficult terrain of the new media landscape.

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