



UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

Fear: Introduction to special issue

Hill, A.; Mortensen, M.; Hermes, J.

DOI

[10.1177/13675494211033297](https://doi.org/10.1177/13675494211033297)

Publication date

2021

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

European Journal of Cultural Studies

License

Article 25fa Dutch Copyright Act (<https://www.openaccess.nl/en/in-the-netherlands/you-share-we-take-care>)

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Hill, A., Mortensen, M., & Hermes, J. (2021). Fear: Introduction to special issue. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 24(4), 793-800. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13675494211033297>

General rights

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

Fear: Introduction to special issue

European Journal of Cultural Studies

2021, Vol. 24(4) 793–800

© The Author(s) 2021

Article reuse guidelines:

sagepub.com/journals-permissions

DOI: 10.1177/13675494211033297

journals.sagepub.com/home/ecs**Annette Hill**

Lund University, Sweden

Mette Mortensen

University of Copenhagen, Denmark

Joke Hermes 

Inholland University, The Netherlands

Abstract

Fear needs dealing with. Fear demands to be abated, countered or turned into something else, contributing and curtailing how we 'do' being human beings. This special issue of the *European Journal of Cultural Studies* addresses fear within media and popular culture, adopting a cultural studies approach to fear in a variety of socio-cultural and political contexts. A cultural studies approach allows us to enhance the horizon of understanding cultural practices, mediation and the subjective experience of fear as something we need to work through, in a process of recognition and shock, action and reaction, understanding and reflection. This focus on 'working through fear' offers new insights into the intensely subjective aspects of fear as it is creatively explored in representations within drama and documentary, photography and art, and in user-generated content, memes and political satire, and as it is embodied and experienced by people in the context of their realities. In addition, it shows how fear generates energy, anxiety and even desire. Rather than offering a generalizing account, this issue seeks to address fear in specific contexts, localities and from specific roles and perspectives.

Keywords

Affect, creative practice, experience, fear, working through

Corresponding author:

Joke Hermes, Inholland University, 1110 AG Diemen, The Netherlands.

Email: joke.hermes@inholland.nl

Introduction

Fear needs dealing with. Fear demands to be abated, countered or turned into something else, contributing and curtailing how we 'do' being human beings. This special issue of the *European Journal of Cultural Studies* addresses fear within media and popular culture, adopting a cultural studies approach to fear in a variety of socio-cultural and political contexts. A cultural studies approach allows us to enhance the horizon of understanding cultural practices, mediation and the subjective experience of fear as something we need to work through, in a process of recognition and shock, action and reaction, understanding and reflection. This focus on 'working through fear' offers new insights into the intensely subjective aspects of fear as it is creatively explored in representations within drama and documentary, photography and art, and in user-generated content, memes and political satire, and as it is embodied and experienced by people in the context of their realities. In addition, it shows how fear generates energy, anxiety and even desire. Rather than offering a generalizing account, this issue seeks to address fear in specific contexts, localities and from specific roles and perspectives.

The authors in this special issue therefore address the theme of fear within a range of places and cultural and mediated practices, located in the Nordic region of Sweden and Denmark, the online world and a Palestinian refugee camp in Beirut, and the performance of impunity in Indonesia. Topics range from political satire, meme culture, performance documentary, to chemsex pornography and everyday life. These various articles analyse a rich range of representations of fear in different cultures and regions, and the articulation of fear by transnational audiences and participants. We see how researchers apply multi-methods, such as narrative and visual analysis, participant observation, digital ethnography and qualitative interviews, within cultural studies, to find innovative ways of analysing 'cultures of fear' or, perhaps, how fear energizes and is abated in and through endlessly different cultural practices. Authors combine empirical research and cultural theory on issues of identity, power relations, narrative and storytelling. Specifically, authors address the re-narrativizing of fear by documentary film makers and transnational audiences regarding memories of the Indonesian genocide (Annette Hill); ethnographic research of the power of visual culture as a political economics of fear that circulates within everyday life in refugee camps in Syria (Tarik Sabry); the subversion of fear through satirical memes of Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and the representation of terrorism in social media (Ally McCrow-Young and Mette Mortensen); audiences of political satire and their fear of inefficacy within Swedish democracy (Joanna Doona) and do-it-yourself (DIY) chemsex porn and the ways fear, shame and disgust, along with pleasure, are subsumed into an erotic imaginary (Kristian Møller). Taken together, the articles in this special issue demonstrate the wide range of practices and representations which highlight the processes of working through fear, while also going into depth with distinct, radical and prevalent aspects of this theme.

Researching fear

Research on fear in the media and in popular culture has primarily focused on how the news media trade in fear at different levels of intensity, working within the political

economy of emotions and anxieties about ourselves and others, or about individual lives and public institutions. This has led to a significant framework of the politics and political economics of fear, in particular news framing and critical discourse analysis of fear, both past, present and future, which casts a long shadow on the media and its power to shape and influence publics and audiences.

In *Fear: a Cultural History*, Joanna Bourke (2005) asks us to look at fear from different perspectives, addressing historical and cultural contexts to fear as it is associated with pain and suffering, with war, conflict zones and victims of violence. She argues that throughout history, people in power have vested interests in promoting or reducing fear and risk. In relation to journalism and political communication, fear can be linked to visible and invisible risks and threats that can be used in re-enforcing or resisting systemic and symbolic power relations. There is the strategic generation and management of fear in journalism, propaganda, advertising, public relations and political campaigns. For example, David Altheide (2006) in *Terrorism and the Politics of Fear* highlights the discourses of fear in news media and how dominant frames for representing fear impact on social experiences. *The Politics of Fear* (Wodak, 2015) addresses the strategies and half-truths in promoting fear in extreme right-wing ideologies. We see the trade in fear in the rise of populism within Europe or the United States, where the subject positions of 'us and them' can lead to xenophobia and political extremes.

The social construction of fear and insecurity in media representations, policies and regulations, and in popular culture, can highlight conflict and violence, and discourses of identity and othering. For example, research on the construction of Islam in Europe by Spiros and Tsagariousianou (2013) highlights the politics of contestation in media representations and shows how European Muslim citizens negotiate their identities within a climate of fear, making their own media space to engender a sense of belonging. Such work underscores Appadurai's (2006) argument about the geography of anger, where the dynamics of culturally motivated violence impact on feelings of inclusion and exclusion in mediated and public spheres.

Another dominant focus on fear connects with the policy and ethics of surveillance across governmental, commercial and private spheres (Ball et al., 2012). The increased use of surveillance in crime and policing, intelligence gathering and war, or within commercial data gathering and geo location tracking, all highlight the pervasive presence of surveillance and the difficult questions that need to be asked regarding regulation and privacy. Research on social activists, for example, indicates how alternative political movements fear not only digital surveillance of their online identities and actions, but also the surveillance of these movements through infiltration by undercover police (Ball et al., 2012). Such research shows how fear of digital surveillance connects with trust, morality and ethics in political culture.

In terms of popular culture, fear is a dominant feature in popular storytelling such as crime, fantasy or horror genres. In their research on the mnemonic imagination, Keightley and Pickering (2012) note how imaginative engagement or disengagement with popular culture is of vital importance, integrating the practices of narrativization with lived experience. Their research brings to the fore processes of imaginative work in memory studies, where nostalgia or intergenerational remembering have powerful symbolic meaning in shaping the past, and in how we live in the present and imagine the future. For

example, recent television drama about the cold war era, *Stranger Things* (Netflix, 2016 to present) or *The Americans* (FX, 2013–2018), signifies how memories of past conflicts and fear of the other become caught up in current concerns about the war on terror, or the pervasiveness of government surveillance in contemporary society and culture. The imaginative re-working of fear in popular storytelling is a resource for identity construction and making sense of everyday life in the uncertain times of late modern society.

Fear and the researcher

Looking beyond existing scholarship to explore the construction of fear across media and cultural studies, this special issue seeks to come close to fear. As researchers, we are presented with a range of forms and practices within media, cultural artefacts and the media industry. As investigators, we work with professionals and audiences to understand how they represent and engage with fear in contemporary culture. Fear is more than a dominant theme in narratives in media and popular culture; it deeply permeates and colours people's lived and mediated experiences in precarious times.

Therefore, unsurprisingly, as researchers we face a double task: to understand fear and what it means to work through how others recognize, relate to and interpret fear. This is therefore a search for concepts and methods that allow us to analyse fear from a cultural perspective, rather than a political economic perspective, with 'cultural' denoting processes of shared meaning making. Often, the researchers in these articles are reflexively interpreting what the study of fear means within cultural studies for themselves as much as for others and in a broader socio-cultural perspective. That entails that authors approach fear from unusual and challenging angles. The use of ethnography, cultural production and narratology, a cultural approach to genre recognition and evaluation, visual cultures and cultures of viewing, are all ways authors look closely at fear and how it works, and what it relates to, in affective situated contexts.

When we study fear from a cultural approach, we make visible the ways fear is woven into the fabric of culture as a whole way of life, to reference Raymond Williams (2015 [1958]). There is the organization of the cultural production of fear, and the generation of diverse forms, styles, modes of engagement and memories within such cultural productions; and there is also the communicative potential of people as audiences, users and participants, where their cultural and social practices highlight the classic sense of culture as a way of life. For example, Tarik Sabry's ethnographic research of fear within a refugee camp in this issue highlights how they were confronted with their own fears as a researcher in the field; these fears connected to the shock of recognition of the 'other', they were 'thrown' into a subjective experience that signalled risk, anxiety and fear. And as they worked through their feelings of fear, the participants in the study made visible their working through of fear from a different place, the way fear becomes subsumed into everyday life and how people get on in extremely difficult circumstances. To use a traditional approach to a politics of fear in this setting would not make visible the phenomenological experience of fear as felt in the moment, and as a reflexive state of being in this place. Sabry draws on phenomenology and ethnography to explore the working through of fear from both the researcher and participant's perspectives. He finds risk and fear woven into the fabric of everyday life in the refugee camp, at times connecting to the

cultural production of fear by the Hezbollah, at times connecting to the representations of martyrs in the streets and on buildings, and at times articulated in the communicative potential of his participants, a family living with fear as it permeates their way of life.

Working through fear

A common thread across this rich range of articles is the way researchers understand fear as always *relational*: anxiety may lead to fear, and fear can spark feelings of anger and provoke violence; after the process of recognizing fear and feeling it as an intensely physical, emotional and psychological state, there can be actions taken as a result of such fear, security measures for example, or protest for victim recognition and social justice. When working through fear and relations with other affects, feelings and actions, there can also be the identity work of moving beyond fear, for example, in relation to victims of violence, and the work of acceptance and forgiveness as in the opening article by Annette Hill on the documentaries *The Act of Killing* (director Oppenheimer, co-directors Christine Cynn and anonymous, 2012) and *The Look of Silence* (director Oppenheimer, 2014). These affective states, socio-cultural situations and practices connect with a sense that fear is something that cannot be undone; rather it is something that is unfinished and its granular state, those small details and textures, are vital to understanding the raw power of fear as it is represented and experienced in culture and society.

Once seen and felt, fear never leaves us; the emotion of fear and the related affects and feelings of anxiety and anger, or grief and forgiveness, are subjective states we continually work through, drawing on the psychodynamic processes of both experiencing fear for ourselves and others, and reflexively working through conscious and unconscious elements of fear (Frosh, 2011). Working through is connected to psychodynamic terms, such as dream work, which describe the processes involved in gathering psychic material, and recounting and interpreting such material, in order to better understand the relationship between our unconscious and conscious selves. For post-Freudian psychoanalyst Christopher Bollas (1992), dream work is a never-ending process where we dream work ourselves into becoming who we are, thus connecting psychoanalysis and the expression of self-experience. The term ‘working through’, drawing on Freudian theory and used by television scholar John Ellis (2000), is likewise helpful to explain the way media processes the material world into narrativised forms. The idea of dream work, as characterized by Bollas, is similar to the notion of working through by Ellis, but there are some subtle differences; working through describes the state by which we worry over, and return to experiences in order to make sense of them; dream work implies that we are always working on our psyche and that we never fully make sense of our experiences. This meaning of working through, in the context of genre work, for example, suggests that cultural forms are shaped and re-shaped in a never-ending affective and situated process (see Hill, 2007, 2018). It is this constantly ongoing notion of working through fear, as it is narrativised and represented in culture, and recounted and experienced by audiences and publics, that helps us understand the relational and situated meaning of fear and its symbolic power in mediated and socio-cultural contexts.

This continual process of working through fear is deeply embedded in cultural forms. Meme-making is the unexpected example in this issue, addressed by Ally McCrow-Young and Mette Mortensen. The generation of memes is described as a form of activism against the threat of terrorism that doubles as a different kind of working through fear. Rubber duck memes take the well-known and shocking images of ISIS' acts of violence such as executions and subvert their meaning by using humour and the mundane object of a rubber duck. These memes reshape the original meaning of terrorism and a politics of fear, circulating new meanings of resistance through political humour. Such working through of fear is not a seamless process as the original shocking images remain, like a palimpsest, still visible beneath the surface of the meme, thus never quite removing the original affective situated context of the original imagery. Here, then, traces of the original meaning and politics of fear remain, despite the superimposition of new imagery and resistance to the threat of terrorism. What we are left with is a new cultural form of fear, one that is palimpsestic in relation to memory and visual culture.

Spectacle of fear

We contend that fear, before it is anything else, is felt. Clearly, fear also permeates cultural, social and political discourses. The two layers of fear, that is, the individually experienced bodily sensation and the pervasive societal discourse (Bourke, 2005: 8), cut across all cases studied for this special issue. They intertwine and mutually reinforce one another in ways that are difficult to dis-entangle. For this reason, we posited in the previous section that analytical engagement involves 'working through' fear, and, similarly, we suggest that 'spectacle of fear' is an apt metaphor to grasp representations of fear within popular culture as, precisely, this interdependence between emotion and discourse. As such, fear is represented, commodified and marketed. It is aestheticized and politicized, and used to reflect the dark sides, the dangers and the risks, of contemporary society.

An audience perspective, it seems to us, is crucial to fully understand what fear 'becoming spectacle' does to us. The three articles discussed earlier all engage with this theme. They build on what we commonsensically accept as true, which is that, for example, film will use spectacle to attract us. 'Spectacle' is deployed in film studies to designate the extraordinary tableaux by which cinema or the audiovisual more broadly self referentially manifests its power. Neale (2016 [1979]), for example, defines the spectacle as the 'signifying system . . . to stress, to *display*, the visibility of the visible . . .' (p. 283). King along similar lines explains the spectacle in Hollywood cinema as 'the production of images at which we might wish to stop and stare' (King 4, cited after Lewis, 2014: 214). In addition, Miroslav Kosović (2011) has critically revisited Debord's situationist theory in *The Society of the Spectacle* to argue that '. . . on 11 September 2001, a new type of spectacle was born, one based on fear and terror as its defining attributes' (Kosović, 2011: 19, see also Kraidy, 2018). 'Spectacle of fear', in Kosović's (2011) understanding, refers to 'all image-mediated events that are used to spread the doctrine of fear either as a means of economic gain or a political tool' (p. 22). He defines the spectacle of fear as follows:

. . . the audiovisual magnitude of the event and the severity of the psychological trauma inflicted to the spectator, as its chief end product replacing satisfaction. Both of these features ultimately define the effectiveness of the spectacular event, as they provoke fear and excitement, but at the same time build the spectator's psychological immunity, compelling the spectacle of fear always to overshadow its former versions. (Kosović, 2011: 25)

It follows that we have become connoisseurs of fear. The articles by Doona and Møller attend to how this may play out in everyday practices of media use. Joanna Doona addresses 'civic stage fright'. Anxiety, as a constant level of fear, can be understood as driving the use of specific media genres, which, in this case, is news satire. Fear can be identified in how interviewees envision themselves as spectacle, be it as spectacularly embarrassing, as spectacle of misrepresentation or even worse, as not being part of the spectacle of society at all and excluded. Rather than a form of entertainment, watching satire news on television is understood by Doona as her informants' way of coping with being a citizen today.

Kristian Møller takes the intersections of entertainment, media, fear, spectacle and enjoyment even further in the last article in this special issue on chemsex. They engage with videos of gay men using drugs to extend and modulate sex practices that make authorities and moralists deeply uncomfortable. Here is a spectacle that is partly about fear, that induces fear, but where fear is also turned into desire. Møller's analysis of the world of online intimate publics shows how fear may transform. The fear versus desire-responses to drug use that are discussed are in mutual competition; the one a cautious erotic of disinhibition, the other a counter public erotic of transgression. More than sub-limate fear, chemsex user-audiences bring us full circle in how we accept that fear needs dealing with: in this case, to respond to an invitation to enjoy it and cherish its frisson.

In all, this special issue addresses fear from multiple angles: facing and countering fear as a documentary filmmaker and their audience, as an ethnographer, as a meme builder and spreader; fear and anxiety as part of media and political engagement, as embedded in intimate digital spheres; and reflexively working through fear as an object of study and an affective state of being.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This work was supported by Einar Hansen's Research Foundation through the grant "Media and Fear" (Lund University and University of Copenhagen).

ORCID iD

Joke Hermes  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4622-0696>

References

- Altheide D (2006) *Terrorism and the Politics of Fear*. Oxford: Altamira Press.
- Appadurai A (2006) *Fear of Small Numbers: An Essay on the Geography of Anger*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Ball K, Haggerty K and Lyon D (2012) *Routledge Handbook of Surveillance Studies*. London: Routledge.

- Bollas C (1992) *Being a Character*. London: Routledge.
- Bourke J (2005) *Fear: A Cultural History*. London: Fontana.
- Ellis J (2000) *Seeing Things*. London: IB Taurus.
- Frosh S (2011) *Feelings*. London: Routledge.
- Hill A (2007) *Restyling Factual TV*. London: Routledge.
- Hill A (2018) *Media Experiences*. London: Routledge.
- Keightley E and Pickering M (2012) *The Mnemonic Imagination: Remembering as Creative Practice*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Kosović M (2011) Revisiting the society of the spectacle in the post-9/11 world. *Suvremene Teme* 4: 418–429.
- Kraidy MM (2018) Fun against fear in the Caliphate: Islamic state's spectacle and counter-spectacle. *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 351: 40–56.
- Lewis S (2014) What is spectacle? *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 42: 4214–4221.
- Neale S (2016 [1979]) Triumph of the will: Notes on documentary and spectacle. In: Kahana J (ed.) *The Documentary Film Reader: History, Theory, Criticism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp.281–311.
- Spiros S and Tsagariousianou R (2013) *Islam in Europe: Public Spaces and Civic Networks*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Williams R (2015 [1958]) *Culture and Society*. New York: Random House.
- Wodak R (2015) *The Politics of Fear: What Right Wing Populist Discourses Mean*. London: Sage.

Biographical notes

Annette Hill is a Professor of Media and Communication at Lund University, Sweden, and visiting professor at King's College London. Her research focuses on audiences and popular culture, with interests in media engagement, everyday life, genres, production studies and cultures of viewing. She is the author of eight books, and many articles and book chapters in journals and edited collections. Her latest book is *The Routledge Handbook of Mobile Socialities* (with M Hartmann and M Andersson, Routledge 2021).

Mette Mortensen is Professor in the Department of Communication, University of Copenhagen. She is the Principal Investigator of the research project 'Images of Conflict, Conflicting Images' (2017–2021) funded by the Velux foundation. She is the author or editor of eight books, along with six special issues, and has published numerous articles in international journals. She is an editor of *Nordic Journal of Media Studies* and on the editorial boards of several journals and book series.

Joke Hermes is Professor of practice-based research in Media, Culture and Citizenship at Inholland University. She also affiliated to the Media Studies department at the University of Amsterdam. She has authored and edited several books in English and in Dutch and has published widely on popular culture and cultural citizenship, gender and audience research. She is one of the founding editors of *European Journal of Cultural Studies*.