Horror, Mutilation, and the Relational Constitution of Political Violence

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Abstract

Mutilation recurs in warfare in ways that the economy of killing does not explain. Reading historical accounts of wartime mutilation alongside Adriana Cavarero's phenomenology of horror and empirical research on responses to images of mutilation, we argue that mutilation is a form of violence directed past its immediate victim, at those who experience the image of the body afterwards. The affective state it generates is better described as horror, and it arises from the perception of embodied integrity collapsing in the body of another. We propose that mutilation is politically effective because said horror travels across networks of spectators, a step beyond the individual spectator that we take on philosophical grounds.

Keywords**:** Horror, Mutilation, Disgust, War, Embodiment, Violence

1. Introductio*n*

At the beginning of the seminal text in the philosophy of war, *On War*, Prussian general Carl von Clausewitz defines war as "an act of force to compel our enemy to do our will" (Clausewitz 1976: 75). Although seemingly simplistic, it is a formulation few have transcended, and one that introduces a problem concerning the relation between violence and coercion. As Sharma (2015: 334) notes in his reading of Clausewitz:

> Clausewitz famously defined war as the continuation of politics (or policy) by other means. By this he meant that war is a political activity in which violence and coercion are being employed as a (but by no means the only) tool to achieve particular objectives. (. . .) how violence translates into political outcomes is far from obvious. If we define war in terms of fighting (or casualties) we are assuming that which requires explanation. Part of the problem of explaining war is precisely how violence and fighting leads to particular political ends, for, as Clausewitz noted, violence has no logical end unless understood in its political context. (Sharma 2015: 334).

Sharma's interpretation stresses that while violence is the means by which war seeks to compel, the way it translates into political outcomes is not evident. Violence cannot be assumed

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to generate specific effects just by virtue of physical force. Indeed, the effects of violence frequently extend beyond those directly subjected to the violent act. The same act of violence may compel both the violated body and the unhurt spectator, one through direct force and the other through the effect produced by its spectatorship. As Clausewitz observes, war cannot be understood as violence for its own sake, since absolute destruction would eliminate the very population over which domination is to be imposed (Clausewitz 1976). Violence in war transcends extermination. It is communicative, it acts upon populations through the effects it produces on spectators along the social relations that connect embodied subjects.

Violence may be understood as intentional, non-essential, unwanted, and harmful behavior capable of producing physical and psychological injury (Hamby 2017). It encompasses multiple forms of injury and aggression, among them mutilation. Scientific and philosophical literature refer to the act through concepts such as body envelope violation, bodily transgression, bodily fragmentation, and bodily mutilation; we use the term 'mutilation' throughout to designate forms of violence in which the body's integrity is deliberately violated to the point of fragmentation. The term 'war' is used in its broader sense, to refer to organized political violence generally, and not to interstate conflict specifically.

The position proposed in this text is set out within a relational-naturalist framework. 'Relational' names an ontological commitment about how subjects are constituted, and 'naturalist' a methodological commitment to the continuity of philosophical and empirical inquiry. The framework conceives the human subject as relationally constituted, with the embodied subject emerging as the singular intersection of biological, social, symbolic, and territorial relations (Latour 2005; Haraway 2016). This paper argues that mutilation holds a singular position within war because its usefulness exceeds the destruction of the individual body and spreads into the relational structures through which embodied subjects and political domination are constituted. While war is often understood primarily through the production of death, the historical persistence of body fragmentation indicates that mutilation performs a function irreducible to homicide. Drawing on historical accounts of mutilation in warfare, Adriana Cavarero's phenomenology of horror, and empirical research on body envelope violations, we claim that mutilation produces an affective state adequately characterized as horror, and that this horror emerges from the perception of embodied integrity visibly collapsing in the body of another, confronting spectators with the vulnerability of their own

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embodied condition, and, finally, that mutilation is effective because it is a form of political-relational violence that produces horror, and this horror propagates across networks of spectatorship.

2. Historical Accounts of Mutilation in Warfare

The historical material that follows is of illustrative and not probative character. It is not a representative sample of warfare practices across history and cultures, but is meant to pose instead an explanandum: a practice that is tactically superfluous, materially uneconomic, and possibly dangerous to those who perform it, that appears however across societies with virtually nothing else in common. Although recurrence does not prove a mechanism, it does make the absence of one conspicuous. Throughout the history of warfare, violence has rarely been limited to the production of death. In war across cultures, the bodies of victims have been violated in ways that appear to exceed the tactical requirements of killing. Such practices suggest that, in conflict, the body is apprehended as a medium through which violence is communicated in the pursuit of domination. The history of ancient and contemporary warfare provides several accounts in which images of mutilation have served this political end.

Assyrian inscriptions describe practices such as the flaying of living rebels and the hanging of their skins on city walls, the construction of towers of decapitated heads outside conquered cities, and the impalement and dismemberment of enemy bodies for display (Bleibtreu 1991). In ancient Greece, the stacking of severed heads and the exposure of corpses to wild animals were common practices (McHardy 2024). These were aimed at the enemy's honor and social memory. Within Greek culture, the ideal of the *kalos thanatos* (beautiful death) stressed the preservation of bodily integrity through heroic death in battle; mutilation represented its inversion: the transformation of the fallen body, now unidentifiable, into a sign of humiliation (Muller 2020). Greek literature follows the same logic, as in Homer's *Iliad* the dragging of Hector's corpse by Achilles is among the most emblematic representations of postmortem dishonor in ancient literature. Although Homeric texts are not historical records, they are widely understood to preserve elements of earlier Greek martial values and imaginaries surrounding warfare (van Wees 1992). Ancient Romans mutilated and exposed traitors' corpses on the public staircase known as the *scalae gemoniae*, where civilians could actively participate in further mutilation of the bodies before dragging them with a hook into the Tiber

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River (Barry 2008). They also implemented live mutilation displays such as crucifixion, and made spectacles consisting of wild beasts mangling the bodies of prisoners left at their mercy in the Colosseum.

Practices of mutilatory punishment were also systematized within Imperial China through the execution method historically known as *Lingchi*, often translated as 'death by a thousand cuts' or 'death by slicing' (Brook, Bourgon, & Blue 2008). It was used for approximately a millennium, until its prohibition in 1905. Lingchi centered on the prolonged public mutilation of the body through successive lacerations to maximize physical suffering while delaying death for as long as possible. Although primarily a judicial punishment rather than a warfare practice, Lingchi operated as a technology of political control directed against those perceived as enemies of the imperial order.

During the Sierra Leone Civil War, rebel groups frequently amputated the extremities of civilians using machetes. Unlike forms of violence directed solely toward killing, amputations often left victims alive, so that their mutilated bodies continued to carry the message of the violence done to them. Multitudes of civilians were also burned alive or permanently disfigured during large-scale attacks such as the 1999 invasion of Freetown (Mitton 2012). A contemporary instance is described by Carlin (2012) in the context of Mexico's drug war, where the mutilated bodies displayed by criminal organizations and by the state alike operate as images addressed to an audience:

> All of it — drug cartel public executions, beheadings and burnings, the government's carefully orchestrated spectacle of mutilation — serves to create an aura around forms of power that belong to the current state of things and the maintenance of this status quo. Violence of this kind is a power consolidated in the convergence of specific objects and images that not only incite horror but instill a sense of awe in the observer. [. . .] it is never enough merely to kill. Instead, killing must occur in visually excessive and spectacular fashion. (Carlin 2012: 514).

Carlin's account responds directly to the problem posed by Sharma (2015: 334): how does violence translate into political outcomes? If Clausewitz is right in defining war as an act of political will, the historical persistence of mutilation suggests that, in certain contexts, it has been politically more effective than homicide. The explanation cannot be limited to the subject upon whose body it is enacted; any account of why mutilation persists in warfare must treat it as a political-relational form of violence.

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3. Mutilation as Political-Relational Violence

An act of violence is political-relational when it satisfies the following three conditions simultaneously. The first is that the intended effect of the violent act is directed beyond the body of the person subjected to the physical harm, and onto the broader network of relations for which that body constitutes a node. The second is that the act must be legible, meaning that its display is to be read, and what is destroyed is selected according to what will be read. And third, the act exceeds what the elimination of the target would require, and that surplus is the medium through which the first two conditions are met. When all three conditions are met, the act re-signifies the node, and the appropriate unit of analysis is no longer the individual node but the network of spectators.

It is important to clarify that, although similar, political-relational violence is not the same as necropolitics or torture. Necropolitics is coined to name the sovereign distribution of exposure of death across populations (Mbembe 2003). Torture, for its part, undoes the victim's world from within through the infliction of pain, and its political product is either the confession or the demonstration of a regime's power over bodies (Scarry 1985). Political-relational violence differs from torture in this sense, as it may dispense with living victims since it can be directed at corpses as well. Sentience is a condition for torture, whereas in the mutilation of a corpse the entire act is surplus, and nothing in it is addressed to the victim but to those who will perceive it. Likewise, not every mutilatory act sustains the three conditions together. For example, a body that is dismembered in order to dispose of it, or to prevent its identification, undergoes the same physical act as one dismembered for display, but lacks the second condition since it is carried out so as not to be read. Ultimately, necropolitics, torture, and political-relational violence are not mutually exclusive phenomena, and often happen hand in hand as part of the same violent act.

From a relational perspective, the body is the material node within a network that constitutes the subject, and the network configures the node. As a node, the body functions as a sign, meaning that it performs semiotic work upon other subjects, not only by virtue of its representational content but through its altered materiality. The mutilated body is an effective sign because its materiality conveys something no intact body can convey. Mutilation operates materially upon the body it destroys, but its wartime efficacy does not end there. Once altered, it acts upon the entire relational network for which it serves as a node: family, community, army, nation, direct and indirect witnesses. A mutilated and publicly displayed body performs political work upon hundreds, thousands, or millions of people who would never have been affected by the mere death of that individual. The killed body is removed from the network, which reorganizes around an absence, but the mutilated body remains within it as an image to be seen and recounted.

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If the political efficacy of mutilation runs through the reception of the mutilated body, then it is contingent on a reception the perpetrator does not control. This follows from the second condition, that the perpetrator can select what is destroyed according to what will be read, but not who will read it, nor how. In her analysis of war, Scarry (1985: 121) describes the injured body as referentially unstable: its reality cannot be denied, but what that reality is taken to substantiate is settled afterwards. An image of mutilation can generate a range of distinct effects. Even when the goal is to assert domination over the population of spectators, with the image as its medium, that same image can produce opposing effects, such as social mobilization. Nothing in the three conditions restricts political-relational violence to war, and one of the clearest cases of this reversal comes from outside it.

One case of bodily destruction as political-relational violence occurred in 1916. Jesse Washington, a seventeen-year-old Black farmhand, had already been convicted and sentenced to death when he was dragged from a courtroom in Waco, Texas, castrated, and burned in the town square before some ten to fifteen thousand spectators. Nothing that was done to him was needed for his elimination. A local photographer sold pictures of the scene as postcards; that July, the NAACP reprinted them in *The Crisis* under the title 'The Waco Horror', and they became central to its campaign against lynching (Bernstein 2005). Lynching photographs were made by whites for white viewers and served to normalize the violence they recorded, but anti-lynching activists put the same images to the opposite use (Wood 2009). Control over the production of the image and over its first circulation did not secure its reading. The historical record shows mutilation to be a practice both persistently attempted and sometimes self-defeating. There may be conditions, such as control over the circulation of the image and an audience that is already positioned to read the sign as the perpetrator intends, under which the mechanism produces domination rather than other effects; we propose this as an object for further study. If mutilation derives its efficacy from the effects produced upon spectators, the question remains what, precisely, the spectacle of bodily destruction generates in those who witness it, and how.

4. Horror and the Mutilated Body

In *Horrorism*, Adriana Cavarero provides a phenomenological account of horror that characterizes its specificity as an affective response to the destruction of embodied singularity. She notes that the term horror derives from the Latin *horreo* and the Greek *phrisso*, both associated with reactions such as gooseflesh and freezing in the presence of bodily destruction. On her account, horror emerges when violence turns toward the undoing of the body's recognizable human form, which she denotes to be an 'ontological offense'. The mutilated body is horrifying insofar as it appears as the collapse of embodied integrity, ontologically offending our very conception of what it means to be a singular being.

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> Above all, what repulses the body is its dismemberment, the violence that undoes and disfigures it. The human being, insofar as it is an embodied being, is here offended in the ontological dignity of its bodily existence and, more precisely, of its singular body. Even when transformed into a corpse, death does not offend dignity, or at least not so long as the dead body preserves its symbolic unity, that extinguished yet still visible and recognizable human semblance that remains for some time before the pyre or burial. What is unwatchable above all, for the being that knows itself to be an irremediably singular body, is the spectacle of disfiguration that the singular body cannot endure. As its bodily symptoms attest, the physics of horror has nothing to do with the instinctive reaction to the threat of death. Rather, it concerns the instinctive repulsion toward a violence that, not content with killing, because that would be too little, seeks to destroy the uniqueness of the body and attacks its constitutive vulnerability. What is at stake is not the end of a human life, but the human condition itself insofar as it is embodied in the singularity of vulnerable bodies. (Cavarero 2009: 23–4).

From Cavarero we take it that the affect generated by mutilation is a distinct state whose object is the undoing of bodily singularity and which is registered in the body of the witness as a reaction to the ontological offense against what constitutes a singular individual. Our first addition to her claim is naturalistic: we ask whether the bodily signature she derives from etymology and from the work of other philosophers — petrification and freezing before the offense — has been reported in studies of body envelope violation. Our second addition is political; while she holds that violence loses its strategic character, we propose that horror is produced to an end, and that this becomes legible once we pose the question of what the mutilated body does to the relational network. Where she develops her phenomenology from the standpoint of the victim, our framework is written from that of the spectator, at whom the practice of mutilation is directed.

Cavarero's account advances several interconnected phenomenological claims regarding the relation between mutilation and horror that can be complemented by empirical evidence. First, her claim—that mutilation imagery elicits a distinct affective state commonly characterized as horror—can be examined in light of current scientific findings on responses to body envelope violations. Second, her distinction between death and mutilation raises the question of whether mutilation generates an affective response distinct from the fear of mortality. Third, her characterization of mutilation as an ontological offense against dignity (the embodied singularity of a person) requires specifying what is perceived as violated through the spectacle of mutilation, and why the destruction of the body's unity invokes such affective intensity in spectators.

In order to address Cavarero's first and second claims—that mutilation provokes an affective state more adequately described as horror, and that this reaction is not generated by death but specifically by the destruction of the body—it is necessary to understand why her account constitutes a novel and

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significant intervention. Within the scientific literature, mutilation, more commonly categorized under the heading of body envelope violation, has traditionally been treated as a disgust elicitor rather than as a source of a different affect. One reason for this is that horror, the affective category we review here, lacks an agreed experimental framework through which it can be systematically studied in participants. Consequently, researchers often see no need to distinguish horror from disgust, assuming that the intense repulsion elicited by mutilation imagery is sufficiently explained within the broader category. Disgust itself, however, is far from a conceptually unified category. The heterogeneity of disgust elicitors has led to the development of several classificatory subtypes, such as core and animal-reminder disgust, amongst others. Core disgust elicitors are characterized by a perceived threat of oral incorporation joined by a sense of contamination. This category includes spoiled food, bodily waste products such as feces, and small animals associated with filth or decay, such as rats and cockroaches. Animal-reminder disgust refers to stimuli that confront individuals with their own mortality and animal nature. Practices and attitudes surrounding sex, death, and violations of the body envelope are usually subsumed within this category (Olatunji et al. 2008). Cavarero's account challenges this reduction: for her the response provoked by mutilation is not exhausted by repulsion, and what emerges instead is a state characterized by freezing and petrification.

The affective reaction elicited by body envelope violations remains comparatively understudied within the literature on disgust. Most studies address the topic using experimental paradigms in which participants are exposed to images depicting different categories of disgust-eliciting stimuli, so that the responses can be compared. Other studies also incorporate fear-inducing stimuli to determine whether this emotion could play a role in the reaction to body envelope violations. Existing research on body envelope violation perception comprises a limited number of neuroimaging and electrophysiological studies, and a larger number addressing the physiological and cognitive dimensions of the affective response elicited by viewing such images.

The few neuroimaging and electrophysiological studies on the matter support the claim that the response to images of mutilation is not adequately reduced to disgust. Both contamination and mutilation images activated the anterior insula bilaterally, which is consistent with a shared disgust-processing substrate, but mutilation images recruited broader cortical activation, encompassing the occipital, thalamic, parietal, and prefrontal regions. The activation of the right superior parietal cortex was present for the mutilation condition but absent in the contamination and fear conditions, a finding of interest since the parietal cortex is associated with body schema and spatial embodiment (Wright et al. 2004). Furthermore, in a machine-learning analysis of fMRI responses, the bilateral superior parietal gyrus, particularly in the right hemisphere, was the strongest contributing feature, alongside the inferior parietal cortex, supramarginal gyrus, angular gyrus, and precuneus (Portugal et al. 2023). Inferior

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parietal activation was also stronger to mutilation than to contamination stimuli (Schienle et al. 2006). Compared with the contamination condition, body envelope violations produced wider recruitment of the visual cortex, including the middle and inferior occipital gyri and bilateral cuneus, which can be interpreted as heightened visual processing (Wright et al. 2004; Schienle et al. 2006; Portugal et al. 2023). Electrophysiological findings indicate greater attentional maintenance during the mutilation condition: mutilation stimuli induced the highest levels of cortical activation across all tested conditions, in central, parietal, and occipital regions (Sarlo et al. 2005). Mutilation generated broader bilateral activation, interpreted there as greater attentional capture. These findings, however insufficient to establish in their own right a theory of horror, are consistent with the hypothesis that mutilation imagery engages processes related to the perception of embodied integrity.

Evidence from physiological measures converges on a configuration at once defensive and attentional, which may be described as immobilized vigilance. A study found that mutilation images elicit a 'freezing' posture and induce heart rate deceleration, the latter a parasympathetically mediated response that persisted after stimulus offset (Azevedo et al. 2005). Body envelope violation stimuli likewise produce cardiovascular defensive responses rather than the gastric reactions typical of core disgust, despite comparable subjective disgust ratings across the two categories (Shenhav & Mendes 2014). This result also indicates why the reduction to disgust has gone largely unchallenged, since the two channels on which the classification ordinarily rests—self-report and facial expression—are precisely the ones that fail to discriminate between the two kinds of stimuli, while the visceral profile dissociates them. The cardiac component is the finding common to both studies, and its direction suggests a response organized around threat processing rather than contamination avoidance.

The behavioral and cognitive evidence points toward the same direction. Mutilation stimuli elicit avoidance behaviors, such as blinking and narrowing of the eyes, while simultaneously sustaining fixation on the injured regions of the material shown (Son et al. 2025). Mutilation images also distort temporal perception, being experienced as lasting longer than neutral or standard disgust stimuli, which is consistent with heightened attentional engagement (Grondin et al. 2014). Reactions to injury, moreover, form a psychological category distinct from pathogen disgust: injury stimuli generate reduced contamination-avoidance behavior, and participants describe their reactions in terms of empathy, vicarious pain, and horror (Kupfer 2018). This converges with the conclusion drawn from the cardiovascular data, that disgust toward bodily injury is tied more closely to the perception of pain than to contaminants (Shenhav & Mendes 2014), so that two studies using different measures arrive independently at the same anti-reductionist result.

The neuroimaging, electrophysiological, physiological, and cognitive-behavioral literature converges on a state characterized by heightened perceptual processing and sustained attention, as well

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as freezing responses of which at least the cardiac component is parasympathetically mediated. The vocabulary participants reach for—empathy, vicarious pain, horror—in addition to all the cumulative evidence from the reviewed studies, is, we suggest, closer to Cavarero's account of horror than to disgust. Our reading of the dialogue between the empirical literature and the phenomenological account, however, has several limitations. First, none of the reviewed studies was designed to test a phenomenological thesis. Furthermore, horror is not an operationalized construct in any of them; what was measured were responses assumed to belong to disgust or fear. In this light, when we claim that the findings converge with Cavarero's account, we mean that the multidimensional profile they describe resembles the one she describes. A second limitation is that inferring a mental state from a pattern of neural activation is a form of reverse inference (Poldrack 2006). The parietal recruitment reported is compatible with the region's established association with body schema, but activation of a region does not establish which of its associated functions is engaged on a given occasion, as the same region is implicated in spatial attention and in the coding of peripersonal space. Our reading of the parietal findings is an interpretation, but is not, however, only ours, as Wright et al. (2004) propose that the parietal response reflects the viewer processing the image by mentally re-enacting the bodily condition of the victim, which is the embodied reading we defend. Third, there is a wide ecological gap since participants view images inside a scanner and know themselves to be safe; the image is not a confrontation with an event occurring before them. The studies do not measure the transmission of an affective response through a social network over time. The propagation thesis advanced in section 3, and restated in the conclusion, is a philosophical extrapolation from findings about individual perception.

Since the profile described differs from the one expected on the commonly assumed animal-reminder disgust category, we take it to be adequate to associate mutilation with the affective state of horror. Cavarero's second claim—that horror is generated by the destruction of the body and not by death as such—is addressed next. Death has often been theorized to generate disgust insofar as dead bodies can be sources of contamination and disease, which would explain why death-related stimuli frequently share neural substrates with contamination disgust, particularly bilateral insular activation associated with pathogen avoidance. Corpses and body fluids may produce repulsion because they represent a potential biological threat. However, evidence suggests that mortality, considered independently from contamination, is more associated with fear than with disgust. Reminders of death primarily generate responses related to anxiety and existential threat, while disgust reactions emerge more when the image presents decomposition, and with it cues of infection such as blood and exposed tissue (Kollareth & Russell 2017). The heightened affective response induced by body envelope violations may arise from the convergence of two dimensions: fear generated by mortality and repulsion

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generated by the contaminating potential of the opened body. However, even this combination appears insufficient to account for the distinctive intensity of the response. The evidence reviewed suggests the presence of an additional component linked to embodiment itself, which is the confrontation with the visible fragmentation of the body. Following from this, the petrifying quality often reported in response to mutilation imagery may emerge from the direct perception of our own corporeal integrity collapsing in the body of the mutilated other.

Cavarero's third claim—that mutilation constitutes an offense against ontological dignity through the assault on embodied singularity—can be taken up in this light. If we understand the body as the material locus through which the person exists and is identifiable to others, then the destruction of that body is significant beyond physical injury. It undoes the unity of the embodied person by disrupting the form through which its singularity is expressed. The horror associated with mutilation, therefore, reflects the perception that the very notion of personhood has been violated. Personhood, as we understand it, is inseparable from the embodied condition through which the individual is recognized by others. This is reflected in ideals such as kalos thanatos, in which dignity in death depends on the preservation of bodily integrity and recognizable form. And it is precisely the state of horror produced as a consequence of the ontological offense that, we argue, becomes instrumental in war contexts. Images of mutilation are intended as weapons directed at extending the violent act beyond the destroyed body and into the bodies of spectators. Their efficacy lies in their capacity to draw heightened perceptual and attentional resources and to confront the spectator with their own corporeal vulnerability. An image of a corpse whose formal integrity is preserved may generate fear or indignation; but the image of a body torn open and stripped of its recognizable human form generates a distinctive affective response, and one that lends itself more to political use.

5. Conclusion

What images of mutilation attack is the singularity through which one person exists as that particular subject and no other (Cavarero 2009), and the mutilated body affects its spectators because embodied singularity is relationally constituted. Bodies exist as nodes within networks of relations that configure them as specific persons within a shared world. To undo embodied singularity is a means to target the relational structures through which that singularity is constituted and sustained. The spectator experiences a distinctive affective profile, that of horror, on recognizing the vulnerability of their own body and identity in the body of the mutilated person. On the account proposed here, what propagates

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is a recognition whose content is shared: the vulnerability disclosed in the mutilated body is the same vulnerability that constitutes every other node of the network. We argue that mutilation is a political-relational form of violence whose effectiveness arises because the horror it generates propagates across spectators through their shared vulnerability. The mutilated body extends its effect beyond the immediate victim by reorganizing the affective field of those who witness it. The evidence reviewed reaches as far as the individual spectator; the step to the network is ours, taken on philosophical grounds and offered as a hypothesis about affective transmission that should be addressed empirically. War has persistently resorted to mutilation, which we have characterized as a technology of domination operating through the propagation of horror across relational networks of spectators. How effective that technology has been is a question for historical research; whether horror propagates as we describe is one such research could answer.

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