



Scenes of the bystander

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Many trajectories of thought are opened up by the question of standby. Cutting across these trajectories is the assumption that standby is a condition of being available, of being-on-hand. To speculate with standby is to think about the production and emergence of this condition, about how this condition is undergone and experienced, and about how it generates capacities to act. This special issue is an invitation to explore how standby capacities are distributed across and between bodies, devices, and environments. It is an opportunity to consider the technical, social, and affective infrastructures that sustain standby as a condition of being ready and those infrastructures that may inhibit, prevent, or suspend particular courses of situational action.

This invitation to distribute standby capacities and agencies across multiple assemblages and associations remains haunted, however, by the presence of a stubbornly human figure of ethical and political in/action: the bystander. The figure of the bystander reminds us of how, in certain situations, the in/action of the individual can become the focus for an insistent and unavoidable judgement. The possible in/action of the bystander embodies, in turn, the potential failure of standby as a condition of readiness to act. It is a prompt to ask about how standby as a mode of organizing makes action-in-the-event possible and about the conditions that make such action less likely. And it is an encouragement to think about the friction between an expanded conception of standby and a rather more bounded and more human figure.

The bystander stands by: this claim foregrounds the ethical and political ambiguity of the figure as the embodiment of inaction, passivity, or indifference. In standing by, the bystander stands ready, primed to respond. In standing by the bystander also, in some versions, *stands with*, aligning and orienting themselves with others. But in standing by, the bystander also appears to fail to act. The bystander fails to respond to the ethical or political demands of the event or situation or circumstance as it unfolds insofar as it foregrounds the suffering of another. The bystander is called to account by the performative refrain of an insistent and unavoidable demand: *why, given how things were, did you not act?*

The force of this demand is intensely scenographic. It often revolves around the scene of an event that seems to require a response. And the prominence of the bystander as a scenographic figure owes much to the after-lives of one scene in particular. In the early morning of March 13th 1964, a 28-year-old Italian-American, Kitty Genovese, finishes her shift in a bar in Queens, New York. She begins walking home but apparently thinks she is being followed. She changes her route, but is assaulted on the street by Winston Moseley. A number of people hear the struggle between Moseley and Genovese and shout from the windows of their respective apartments. Moseley leaves the scene, before returning to find Genovese lying in the doorway of an apartment block. He rapes and assaults her again. A neighbor finds her but she dies (Lemann, 2014).

Kitty Genovese's murder became a parable of the bystander in contemporary urbanized society. However shocking, it was not simply the murder that made headlines: it was the non-intervention of those who apparently witnessed it. A story published on the front page of *The New York Times* on March 27th claimed that 37 individuals witnessed the event in one way or another but did not intervene. Explanations centered on the growing sense of alienation, moral indifference and affective detachment in US cities. The case seemed to offer a diagnosis of the ills of modern life, an argument made by the author of the original *Times* story in a follow-up publication (Rosenthal, 2008). Beyond public commentary, this scene became a problem-case through which the figure of the bystander was articulated through the psychological sciences.

The story of the case featured in psychology text-books for decades (Manning et al., 2007). Pivotal here is work by the social psychologists John Darley and Bibb Latané (1968). Rejecting efforts to explain the apparent failure of anyone to intervene at the scene of the Genovese crime in terms of social or urban alienation, Darley and Latané hypothesized that the ‘bystander effect’ emerged because responsibility for intervention (and possible feelings of guilt about non-intervention) became diffused and diluted by awareness of the presence of other witnesses.

To demonstrate the significance of this effect Darley and Latané constructed an experimental situation in which college students overheard the apparent distress of another student. The students were then faced with an implicit choice about whether or not to report the distress to the organizers of the experiment. Darley and Latané found that under experimental conditions the ‘presence of other bystanders reduced the individual’s feelings of personal responsibility and lowered the [sic] speed of reporting’ (1968: 377). They also observed that those who did not respond were no less visibly emotional or agitated than those who did: the former group certainly did not appear more indifferent or apathetic. On this basis Darley and Latané argued that ‘non-intervening subjects had *not decided not to respond*. Rather they were still in a state of indecision and conflict concerning whether to respond or not’ (*ibid.*: 282). Those who had ‘witnessed’ but not intervened in the murder of Kitty Genovese had found themselves neither in a state of inactive passive indifference nor one of decisive non-intervention. Instead, they were in an ongoing state of tensed, unresolved affective disquietude, a state that complicated any straightforward opposition between activity and passivity.

Darley and Latané’s research had an important influence on efforts within the human sciences to make sense of the role and responsibilities of the bystander. It seemed to resonate with emerging efforts to scrutinize the bystander as an ethical and political figure as part of the reflexive project of modern social science, particularly in the wake of the genocidal violence of the Second World War. The Genovese case provided a focus for attempts to understand the conditions under which forms of intervention/non-intervention emerge in relation to violence at a range of institutional, territorial, and temporal scales (Vetlesen, 2000). Subsequent experiments corroborated Darley and Latané’s findings while also providing more nuanced

explanations of the factors shaping decisions to intervene and, at the same time, questioning any neat equation between numbers of bystanders and likelihood of intervention (see Fischer et al., 2011). Notably, in rejecting ‘social’ explanations for the failure of bystanders to intervene, Darley and Latané ignored the role that markers of difference, including race, gender, or class, might have played in generating different senses and possibilities of action and inaction. They also paid insufficient attention to how a strict separation of bystander, victim, and perpetrator is sometimes insufficient when thinking about responsibility and responsiveness (see Bauman, 2003).

It is also worth noting that the details of the attack and murder which prompted Darley and Latané’s research paper, details based upon the report in *The New York Times*, turned out to be quite inaccurate (Lemann, 2014; Manning et al., 2007). Accounts based upon that report, including Darley and Latané’s, too easily assumed that people watched impassively from their windows for the duration of the attack. As various commentators have observed, the initial report

grossly exaggerated the number of witnesses and what they had perceived. None saw the attack in its entirety. Only a few had glimpsed parts of it, or recognized the cries for help. Many thought they had heard lovers or drunks quarrelling. There were two attacks, not three. And afterward, two people did call the police. A 70-year-old woman ventured out and cradled the dying victim in her arms until they arrived (Singal, 2016).

Despite these qualifications the bystander continues to be mobilized as a vehicle for organizational, cultural, and ethico-political change. Increasing numbers of organizations, including universities, have introduced policies and procedures for bystander training: these encourage a form of situational attention, action and intervention in order to prevent the reproduction of forms of micro-violence and harassment. Bystander training can be understood as an effort to generate a kind of standby infrastructure of attention through cultivating sensitivity to forms of micro-violence and to the incipient potential of situations to generate toxic forms of asymmetric

relationality.¹ The aim of this training is not necessarily to go beyond the figure of the bystander, but to allow it to be performed differently, and in ways that anticipate, pre-empt, and prevent the perpetration of unacceptable practices and acts (Byers, 2016). Crucially, these policies are also underpinned by the assumption that bystanders can be trained to think of themselves as reservoirs of possible intervention: ‘in principle, even the most initially passive and remote bystander possesses a potential to cease being a mere onlooker to the events unfolding’ (Vetlesen, 2000: 521).

A concern with the figure of the bystander goes beyond such forms of training. *Objectified*, a 2018 short film directed by Dorothy Allen Pickard, exemplifies how the promise and problem of the bystander can be staged in scenographic form. Produced for the Museum of Homelessness, the film is based upon an exhibition of the same name that premiered at Manchester Art Gallery and which featured 20 objects through which different stories of homelessness are told.² *Objectified* focuses on the relation between lives lived in the ongoing wake of homelessness, the objects around which these lives are organized, and wider responses to these lives. The film is composed of three scenes staged in parallel across and between which a camera pans. The first is a bedroom in which a woman recounts something of the experience of homelessness. She dwells, for instance, on the value of bin-bags as valued devices for gathering and holding a world together. The second scene is a room in which people sitting around a table talk of the experience of homelessness and of mental illness. The third scene is a scientific laboratory of sorts in which a neuroscientist, Dr Lasana Harris of UCL, performs an MRI scan on a subject. The aim of the scan, according to Harris, is to see how the brain ‘responds to pictures of different kinds of people, including pictures of dehumanized people like the homeless’³. Harris suggests that the result of the scans shows that the brain does not respond to these pictures because people do not want to think about the experience of being homeless. He also suggests that

¹ See, for instance, the way in the bystander figures in my own institution, Oxford University: <https://edu.admin.ox.ac.uk/bystander#collapse1654551>.

² See <https://museumofhomelessness.org/2018/07/25/objectified-10-14-october/>.

³ From a transcript of the film ‘Objectified’

listening to stories of homelessness can change how the brain responds, therefore making it possible to modify the bystander effect.

A number of points can be made about *Objectified*. The film and the research on which it is based can be understood through an expanded sense of the situational forces developed in Darley and Latané's study. As Darley and Latané observed, 'if people understand the situational forces that can make them hesitate to intervene, they may better overcome them' (1968: 383). In *Objectified* it is notable that what counts as a situational force is extended, via neuro-imaging, into processes operating below thresholds of attention, raising questions about how, and with what implications, the locus of agency and decision-making is framed via neuroscience (see Harris and Fiske, 2006). Second, *Objectified* offers a reminder of the role of objects as witnesses to the non-eventful duration of particular forms of life (and death) and, relatedly, a reminder of how these objects might participate in the process of narrating lives otherwise. However, and third, *Objectified* exemplifies how the affective situations of the bystander are made explicit, palpable, and potentially modifiable, through the staging of scenes.

This scenographic approach resonates with arguments and experiments across a range of disciplines, from cultural studies (Stewart and Liftig, 2002; Povinelli, 2011; Berlant, 2016) to theatre and performance studies (Hann, 2018) to geography (Closs-Stephens, 2019; Raynor, 2019). In such work the scene is a way of giving form to the feeling of being in relation to the sense that something is happening (or not happening). The idea of the scene also articulates the relation between the situational forces of the bystander and recent thinking about infrastructure as something more than technical. As Laurent Berlant has written: 'infrastructure is defined by the movement or patterning of social form. It is the living mediation of what organizes life: the lifeworld of structure' (2016: 393).

Read through Berlant's writing, scenes are important ways in which situational forces on standby within worlds become collective-affective infrastructures: scenes give tonality and palpable tension to situations in their collective unfolding. Scenographic infrastructures do not provide any guarantee of a benign outcome or, more fundamentally, of any action at all. They can just as easily generate inaction, collective quietude, or failure.

Indeed, the bystander sometimes remains in a tensed state of active inaction because a situational infrastructure sustains this state: as Darley and Latané noted, in particular circumstances, the assumed or recognized presence or absence of others provides what we might think of as an affective infrastructure through which bystanders remain in a condition of standby when something else is required. And, equally importantly, the fact that actions do not cross the threshold of attention sufficient to become a scene might mean they continue unnoticed.

The notion of situation needs qualification, however. It is one thing to foreground the situational forces shaping the bystander effect through scenographic experiments like *Objectified* and, beyond this, to expand the domain of these forces to include processes taking place in the brain. But situations are not always recognized as such, and there is not always a kind of ‘green glow highlighting difficult situations’ (Elk and Devereaux, 2014: np). Equally, the situational forces that might shape a scene are arguably less site-specific than those in relation to which the bystander emerged as a psychological figure. While scenes of proximate attention and witnessing remain important, the multiplicity of platforms and channels for paying attention to and witnessing events as they unfold means that the position of the bystander can no longer be defined solely in terms of a condition of being *at the scene* in a traditional sense. As Zygmunt Bauman put it, ‘bystanding’ is ‘no more the exceptional plight of the few. We are all bystanders now – witnesses to pain-infliction and the human suffering it causes’ (2003: 139).

Bauman’s comment is a reminder of the affinity between the bystander and the witness, particularly in relation to traumatic events (see also Dewsbury, 2003; Carter-White, 2012). The claim that we are now all bystanders and/or witnesses in a mediatized world also needs qualification however, not least because it erases differences in responsibility for a range of actions and events. It mirrors the invocation of the Anthropocene as a way of generalizing responsibility for climate change across an undifferentiated field of humanity. But not everyone is a bystander, and not everyone is implicated in failures to respond, or at least not in the same way. And not responding is not always a failure insofar as this nonresponse is a recognition of the risk of exposure to the violence of particular forms of asymmetrical power. That said, there is evidence that social media provide new standby infrastructures for developing

important forms of attention and witnessing. Carrie Rentschler has shown, for instance, how ‘hashtag activism’ social-media produces a form of ‘networked feminist witnessing’ that ‘model[s] social intervention into racial and gender violence via the transformation of feeling bystanders into media witnesses to gender justice’ (2017: 656).

It is therefore not enough to generalize the bystander or the witness but to examine the differentiated spacetimes of both and the conditions under which these spacetimes emerge. And, relatedly, it is important to develop a multi-prepositional sense of the form of standing by, or of the *stances* invoked by the figure of the bystander. How, for instance, do different forms of standing by, with, for, or against, emerge? This might allow us to grasp how the scenographic spacetimes of the bystander are becoming increasingly elastic, not least as evidence of differentiated participation in processes occurring over many time-horizons becomes explicit. In that sense, to stand by does not necessarily mean standing (or staying) *with* in any straightforward way, because the processes in relation to which the bystander is tensed can operate over decades and centuries. The figure of the bystander is not therefore reducible to situational co-presence, but necessarily becomes implicated in multi-temporal modes of witnessing, participation, complicity, and passivity. Nor is it reducible to a binary opposition between intervention and non-intervention in which the former is simply affirmed as a mode of action. Primed as it is by assumptions about the value and necessity of intervention, the figure of the bystander actually raises important questions about how intervention can reproduce the problems of a range of political positions and formations (Elk and Devereaux, 2014)

The agency of the bystander also needs troubling. It is worth recalling here that the bystander exemplifies the ideal of the actively responsible individual subject who bears responsibility because they possess the capacity to take a decision. The subject, in this analysis, is already defined, delimited, and relatively coherent, even if the state of indecision in which it finds itself is not. The bystander is an affirmation – and to some extent an implied judgement – of human agency as decisional. And yet the technical and media infrastructures through which the bystander now pays attention and witnesses also encourage the distribution and dispersal of decisional agency across devices, networks, and systems that filter and frame how and what

things show up as significant in contemporary lifeworlds. This poses questions about how far the responsibility of the bystander can continue to be framed in terms of individual agency when many of forces that shape the conditions for action/inaction are not immediately legible or palpable as situational, but which remain latent within and across diverse institutions and organizations. It might mean focusing less on the bystander as a paradigmatic ethical figure on standby, but on bystanding as an always provisional form of collective infrastructure for attending to conditions whose incipient violence does not always become the scene of a situation.

The scenographics of the bystander are unsettling and being unsettled. Certainly, scenes of proximity, such as those framing accounts of the murder of Kitty Genovese, no longer provide straightforward infrastructures for disclosing the situational forces that temper and tense the in/action of the bystander. The lesson here is not necessarily to leave the scene behind. It is to devise new imaginative-affective scenarios that diagram different forms of implication in processes and events operating well beyond the orbit of the immediate or the here and now. It requires thinking about the relation between bystanding and the persistence of structures of injustice whose temporalities stretch across pastness, presence, and futurity. It requires reckoning with the inescapability of bystanding as a state of 'knowing that something needs to be done, but also knowing that we have done less than needs to be and not necessarily what needed doing most; and that we are not especially eager to do more or better, and even less keen to abstain from doing what should not be done at all' (Bauman, 2003: 143). This does not mean that the condition of being a bystander is a generalized state in which we already and always find ourselves. Instead, bystanding takes shape circumstantially as a tensed affective orientation towards others. It is the ongoing implication, more or less scenographic, of our stances towards or away from the violence, actual or potential, of many worlds (Laurie and Shaw, 2018).

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