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Showing humanity: violence and visuality in Kashmir

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the burst of visual production that emerged from and around Indian-occupied Kashmir in July 2016, when the Indian paramilitary and police began to implement for the first time a tactic of mass blinding as a way of quelling surging protests against the Indian state. I consider a selection of visual texts that intervene in the optical regime undergirding the Indian occupation, one that has arguably elicited Indian support in part via a systematic erasure of the humanity of Kashmiris who favour self-determination (or ‘azadi’). In the face of this optical regime, I examine the visual and narrative tactics through which pro-azadi Kashmiris stake claims to humanity – by putting wounded Kashmiri bodies on spectacular display, graphically foregrounding Kashmiri bodily vulnerability in acts of public grieving, and seeking to interpellate a global political community through an appeal to a shared humanity. As these urgent claims to a larger human community are voiced, this paper asks what it means for Kashmiris to take on the burden of ‘performing humanity’ in these ways, especially given the explicit cautions in visual studies and human rights scholarship around spectacular exhibitions of vulnerability. Rather than assume that showcasing vulnerability can never incite transformation, I closely examine the possibilities of particular visual forms—photojournalism and digital activism—in relaying vulnerability and attempting to claim and recraft humanity.

KEYWORDS Kashmir; South Asia; violence; visuality; humanity; human rights

Ungrievable life

At the time of this writing, it is just over two years since the killing of the young Hizb-ul-Mujahideen militant Burhan Wani, the so-called poster child and social media star of the ‘new militancy’ in the Kashmir Valley. The Valley is part of the Indian-occupied state of Jammu and Kashmir, and the site of a longstanding movement for self-determination (‘azadi’) from the occupying Indian state, which is operative and widely understood in Kashmir as a colonial regional power. As such, the putatively ‘postcolonial’ Indian state’s ongoing occupation of Kashmir is exemplary of the kinds of multiple and converging colonialisms traced in this issue. The execution of Wani on 8 July 2016 sent the
Valley into a fury of mourning, during which people of all genders and ages burst onto the streets across the length and breadth of Kashmir, protesting in their thousands, despite the brutal suppression they anticipated at the hands of panicked Indian forces. And sure enough, the Indian state responded by launching ‘Operation Calm Down’ to suppress the relentless protests, employing a familiar mix of ‘overt application of armed force against crowds and protestors [and] administrative, policing, and profiling techniques such as nocturnal raids, mass arrests, and widespread preventive detention’ of individual protesters as well as political leaders and civil rights activists (Duschinski and Ghosh 2017, p. 2). By the end of this siege, over 90 civilians were dead, hundreds blinded by pellet guns, and thousands more injured in other ways by Indian paramilitary and police. Typically, this loss of life and limb went largely ungrieved within Indian political and media spaces. Among Kashmiris however, these dead and injured were counted and mourned in the journalistic and social media spaces they have carefully carved out in order to register their own realities.3

Indeed, the ungrievability of Kashmiri human life outside of Kashmir is a common refrain within Kashmir. Kashmiris favouring self-determination frequently connect this ungrievability to the erasure of Kashmiri humanity as a sustaining condition of the Indian occupation. As one Kashmiri resistance leader put it in the early days of the siege, the silence from India and internationally around the mounting loss of life in Kashmir suggested that ‘Kashmiri lives did not matter’ (Essa 2016a). Or, as a young Kashmiri woman phrased it in a recent video addressed to ‘Dear Indians,’ ‘You want Kashmir without Kashmiris’ (Kashmir: India’s Gold Medal 2016). Here, she echoed a very common sentiment in Kashmir. And in the charge, ‘You want Kashmir without Kashmiris,’ is embedded a deep memory of some of the earliest pictorial representations that depict the Kashmir Valley as pure territory, a gorgeous landscape largely devoid of human inhabitants. The literary critic Ananya Jahanara Kabir (2009) has elaborated on the visual history of the camera in Kashmir, arguing that from the earliest nineteenth century photographic compositions to the tourist photographs of today, the visual image that has cemented desire for the Valley ‘foregrounds the Valley’s landscape and occasionally the ruin in the landscape; it prefers to eliminate Kashmiri people, monuments in use, and homes’ (p. 17). When situated on a wider historical canvas, this visual schema repeats India’s geopolitical representation of Kashmir as either a ‘bilateral issue’ between India and Pakistan or else an ‘internal matter,’ seeking continually to render invisible, or at least inconsequential, Kashmir’s human population and its political will while fetishizing the territory.

Suppressing the human political will in Kashmir over the past several decades has not merely been a matter of erasing the human inhabitants from view, but also of actively narrating them into and out of the realm of humanity. Kashmiris appear entirely human in the vision offered by Indian
advertising, in which the hospitable Kashmiri Muslim welcomes and caters to the comfort and pleasure of Indian Hindus. Two recent Indian advertisements offer just such a benevolent vision of Kashmiri humanity—an advertisement for India’s leading online classified platform OLX, and another for the Jammu and Kashmir Tourism Department. In both, a Kashmiri male subject performs an act of extreme and heart-warming hospitality, appearing as an idealized embodiment of Kashmiri humanity. The hospitable Kashmiri is proffered as the mediator of warm human connection between Indian and Kashmiri, recuperable by the collective of humanity denominated by Indian citizenship.

This figure stands in sharp contrast to the figure of the Kashmiri male militant or street protester; indeed it is the pro-azadi Kashmiri whose humanity poses a threat and must therefore be disappeared from view. For example, the anthropologist Mohamad Junaid (2016a) notes that, ‘For years, police and military photographers have circulated pictures of dead Kashmiri militants that show them disheveled and bloodied, with torn clothes and limbs out of joint, presenting the figure of the Kashmiri rebel as a wild, hunted felon. The intent has been clear: criminalize their thoughts and bodies, and show them as existing beyond the pale of society and humanity.’ The Indian state does not perform these ways of erasing Kashmiri humanity alone, but is also joined by ordinary citizens of India. In one example, during the July siege, an Indian Facebook user queried: ‘Can someone tell me the current score of the Indian army in Kashmir?’ From one kind of Indian nationalist perspective, Kashmiri protesters falling to bullets and pellets appear as so many wickets to be bowled over by the Indian armed forces.

Ungrievable life, unrepresentable loss. In Kashmir, as in Palestine, Iraq, or Afghanistan, the norms ‘governing which human lives count as human and as living, and which do not ... are determined to some degree by the question of when and where a life is grievable, and correlativelty, when and where the loss of a life remains ungrievable and unrepresentable’ (Butler 2006, p. 74). To the extent that the status quo of occupation in Kashmir depends upon a minimization of Kashmiri life that both precedes and precipitates violence, the reclamation and reconstruction of Kashmiri humanity outside the logics of Indian occupation has become a key project of political and cultural resistance in Kashmir. In what follows, I attend to some of the strategies that visual producers, aligned in various ways with the work of human rights activists in the Valley, use to claim the human, and indeed to recraft the category of the human itself. In doing so, these visual activists participate in creative work that highlights the ongoing colonial character of the upper-caste Hindu Indian state, much like the Chhara theatre artists in Dia Da Costa’s article in this volume.

In considering how Kashmiris contest their dehumanization, I take legal theorist Samera Esmeir’s (2006, p. 1549) caution against installing a notion
of ‘juridical humanity’ that posits ‘humanity as a status that can be taken away or given back’ by the law. Esmeir’s primary focus is on the law’s translation of humanity into a juridical status, and takes issue in particular with liberal arguments suggesting that expulsion from a juridical order amounts automatically to exclusion from humanity. Such an argument, she notes, produces a juridical status that ‘precedes, rather than follows and describes all humans’ (p. 1544).

She suggests that some modes of humanist criticism also reproduce a juridical humanity when critics writing against dehumanization ‘accept the notion that humanity can be taken away’ (p. 1549). Such work, Esmeir argues, carries a trace of investment in legal status as holding the power to endow humanity.

I want to be clear, however, that in describing the particular modes of dehumanization employed by the Indian state, I do not aim to suggest that Kashmiri humanity is effectively ‘taken away’ at the level of subjecthood. The dehumanization of Kashmiris by the Indian state and its votaries does not mean that Kashmiris themselves have ‘lost’ their humanity. Indeed, Kashmiris frequently invoke humanity as a moral category to argue that it is Indians who have no humanity (Kanjwal 2017), as they regularly register attempts to dehumanize them on the part of Indians. Rather, I seek to describe how the humanity of Kashmiris is discursively erased, and how they contest this erasure in a variety of ways without ever conceding their own humanity as lost. Esmeir usefully suggests maintaining an analytical separation between concepts of legal status and subject that is quite pertinent to my own observations here (p. 1549). At the same time, I hesitate over her suggestion that we should ‘take humanity for granted so that we avoid reproducing the logic of “status-hood”’ (p. 1550). My concern is that taking the human as an ‘ontological fait accompli’ (Weheliye 2014, p. 8) may well obscure the operation of humanity as a relationally produced category. In my own analysis, I take humanity as a performatively constituted category, one that is retrospectively installed through repetitive acts (Butler 1993).

Below I examine a selection from a burst of images published across online news sites and social media by Kashmiris and their global supporters during the summer of 2016. The massive protests on the streets were matched in fervour by online social media production, where the visual images I will discuss shortly attained wide circulation. The Kashmiri attempt to reclaim humanity is a project that extends across many discursive domains in Kashmir, from legal, journalistic, and human rights frameworks to everyday speech and a wide array of cultural representations. Here, however, I focus specifically on recent visual culture and production for two reasons. First, I build upon theoretical frames I have elaborated elsewhere, which situate the Indian occupation as a ‘scopic regime’: an exercise in perceptual management involving ‘techniques of ocular control through which the sight of Kashmiris and others is systematically overseen, neutralized, overlooked’ (Misri 2014, p. 137). This includes a wide variety of forms of visual and perceptual
control, from the censorship of maps depicting the disputed borders, the blocking of journalists and activists from reporting on human rights violations, and the disabling of Facebook pages belonging to Kashmiri activists, to the spectacularization of Kashmiri Pandit pain and the concomitant creation of a terror spectacle around the ‘killable body’ of the Kashmiri Muslim in the mainstream media in India (Zia 2018). All of this amounts to a systematic visual management of what Kashmiris see within Kashmir, what filters out of Kashmir through the media, and how Kashmir is seen from the vantage point of India and globally. Secondly, the emphasis on visuality in this paper emerged as a tragically apposite one as I began this writing during the siege of 2016 when the Indian armed forces introduced a new tactic on the streets—the deliberate blinding of Kashmiri protesters using so-called ‘non-lethal’ pellet guns.

These ‘non-lethal’ weapons are the same pellet guns the Indian armed forces use to disperse protesters. They were introduced in 2010 as a crowd control mechanism during that summer of popular protest, but their use in the siege of 2016 was unprecedented in scale. Each cartridge of a pellet gun can spray up to five hundred small iron pellets, each of which can cause serious injury. The siege resulted in over a hundred eye injuries, and over 90 per cent of those injured were hit above the waist, indicating that military personnel were shooting high in contravention of the Standard Operating Procedure that permits officers to fire at the legs in extreme situations. There are strategic reasons for this tactic: it keeps the body count ostensibly low and thus wards off negative publicity, while keeping protesters off the streets for a length of time. As one senior police officer anonymously confessed to The Indian Express: ‘The use of pellet guns to control protests is preferred to the use of live ammunition. Deaths attract a lot of attention. Plus there is a view that when a protester is hit with a pellet in the eye, it becomes a deterrent. I don’t agree with this, but that is what is happening’ (Jaleel 2016).

Jasbir Puar (2015) notes a parallel motivation behind the very similar intentional practice of maiming rather than killing used in Israel, which ‘keeps the death toll numbers seemingly low on Israel’s side while still depopulating the territory’ (p. 11). Puar adds, ‘Maiming … functions not as an incomplete death, or an accidental assault on life, but as the end goal in the dual production of permanent disability via the infliction of harm and the attrition of the life support systems that might allow populations to heal’ (p. 220). In Kashmir too, armed forces attacks on hospitals following attacks on people confirm the state’s dual strategy of disabling human bodies and infrastructure, all the while presenting itself as ‘letting Kashmiris live.’ Puar (2017, p. 218) calls for ‘inhumanist analyses to make sense of what is biopolitically at stake, especially because war machines already work by manipulating the registers of the inhuman’.
These manipulable ‘registers of the inhuman’ in Kashmir became all too apparent as the history and purpose of pellet guns began to come increasingly to public attention. As one BBC news story explained, ‘Pellet guns—a form of shotgun—were first used by the police as a non-lethal weapon to quell protests in Indian-administered Kashmir in 2010. They are usually used for hunting animals’ (Sultan 2016). Or as a headline in the newspaper Kashmir Age put it, cutting to the heart of the matter, ‘Pellet gun range used to kill animals is used on Kashmiris.’ In the report that followed, the Kashmiri civilian figures as quarry, the human hunted and maimed by birdshot. During the months of siege, Kashmiris became quickly aware that pellet guns, far from being ‘non-lethal,’ are in fact deadly, that they were being used only in Kashmir, that they were designed for hunting animals not humans, and that they were being fired deliberately above the waist in an effort to maim. Taken together, these facts underscored what people in the region have long known: the Kashmiri in Indian eyes is non-human. The mass blinding of youth, and the bandages on their eyes illustrate this fact.

The massive scale of eye injuries as a result of this tactic quickly churned up another spectacle in Kashmir: that of young people, largely men, with bandages on their eyes. The spoken word poet Nilofar (stage name) names this new reality in the anguished poem ‘Teach me how to write azadi’: ‘In Kashmir we are used to counting our dead: raped, disappeared, tortured, orphaned, widowed, imprisoned. This time we add those who are blinded’ (Nilofar 2016). Writing in The Guardian, the Kashmiri novelist and journalist Mirza Waheed (2016) confirmed the newness of this element in the catalogue of violence. Waheed recounted being haunted by two sets of images emerging from the siege: the first, photographs of people washing blood off the streets with buckets full of water; the second, images ‘of scores of young men with bandages on their eyes.’ Of these images, the former was all too familiar, Waheed wrote, while the latter was new, ‘the fruit of “non-lethal” weapons introduced in Kashmir in 2010.’

The designation ‘non-lethal’ may be understood as yet another way of banishing the Kashmiri from the category of human when in fact serious injuries, often resulting in death, are known to have occurred as a result of pellet guns. ‘Non-lethal’ in such a context both betrays and produces an epistemological inability to see Kashmiri life as life. Kashmiri visual producers were thus confronted with what Judith Butler (2006, pp. 33–34) calls the violence of ‘derealization.’ ‘The derealization of the Other,’ Butler writes, ‘means that it is neither alive nor dead, but infinitely spectral.’ On the one hand, Kashmiri life is [coded as] not life and thus need not be preserved or mourned by Indians; on the other hand, Kashmiri life poses a continual threat to the nation-state and so must be obliterated again and again. It is this ‘spectral infinity’ that characterizes the derealization of Kashmiri life. In the face of this, Kashmiri visual
producers were tasked with finding new ways to validate Kashmiri life and living through imagery.

As this new spectacle of youth with bandaged eyes came into view, it raised profound metaphysical questions about what it means to see, literally and metaphorically, in Kashmir. For example, an ophthalmologist at the Shri Maharaja Hari Singh Hospital (SMHS) in Srinagar recounted an exchange with a young patient with grave injuries to both eyes. After hearing the doctor’s silence when he asked if he would be able to see again, the patient added: ‘So I donate both my eyes to the people of Kashmir, particularly to those who can see, yet they are blind. I donate my eyes to the resistance’ (Essa 2016b). Vision here is understood as more than just physical sight, it is the capacity to bear witness to and understand the conditions of occupation, an impulse that underlies so much visual production in Kashmir today.

‘A war of images’

The assault on Kashmiri eyes through the tactic of deliberate blinding occasioned an explosion of visual production proliferating Kashmiri ways of seeing. As newspaper reports streamed in daily from the Ophthalmology ward, medical terms such as ‘ophthalmic’ and ‘ophthalmology’ entered vernacular speech like never before, arguably organizing political consciousness in new ways. As protests erupted and the army’s backlash ensued, everybody became a visual producer: the protesters who displayed their bodies as triumphantly to the cameras as to the army’s guns; the photojournalists and people on the streets who captured these scenes; the activists who launched powerful visual media campaigns; the artists who responded swiftly by thematizing the violence and then placing their work on digital platforms; and of course the thousands of Kashmiris worldwide who curated, archived, and circulated the images, whether as newspaper stories, as albums of downloaded photographs, or as slideshows on personal webpages or blogs. On social media, Kashmiris shared their own images, repurposed dominant media images, provided alternative interpretations of popular images circulating in the Indian media sphere, called on supporters to circulate images within new contexts, and produced visual art and campaigns that emphatically challenged dominant ways of seeing Kashmir, within and outside the region.

While this visual counter-effort extended beyond social media and involved activating and making use of alternative news networks to report critically on Kashmir, social media was the site through which all of this visual activity circulated. In the face of government efforts to muffle newspapers and radio in Kashmir, Kashmiri visual producers directed the vision of a larger global community to fill in for the cancelled sight of blinded Kashmiris themselves. Hunt (2016) rightly understands this image production as evidence of ‘a literal and conceptual skirmish around visibility and blindness,’
and a ‘need to render the various states of blindness inflicted on Kashmiris by the Indian state visible.’ Visual production – specifically thematizing blindness – became a means of bearing witness to the conditions of occupation that had created the spectacle of blindness in Kashmir.

In this outpouring of visual production, the pellet-marked and eye-banded Kashmiri face emerged quickly as an icon of protest across a variety of media, giving visual form to acute everyday articulations in Kashmir about the relationships between sight and perception, vision and political subjectivity, seeing and being human in Kashmir. To take one example, the renowned Kashmiri cartoonist Mir Suhail appeared in his Facebook profile picture with his eye bandaged, in solidarity with those injured by pellets (Figure 1). In a similar gesture, doctors in Kashmir staged a public sit-in with their eyes bandaged to represent pellet injuries (Figure 2).

From this vast sea of visual production that quickly emerged I focus on two visual forms in particular that coalesced around the icon of the bandaged face, the first consisting of photojournalistic images documenting facial injuries, and eye injuries in particular, and the second of digital manipulations of the pellet-marked and blinded face made by individual artists and activist groups. Both forms were deployed to dispute the designation of pellet guns as ‘non-lethal’ (the word often appearing in ironizing inverted commas in the text that accompanies these images).

Tellingly, the disputation of the designation ‘non-lethal’ found in the images examined below is tied not to death (images of corpses, for example) but to disability (specifically blindness), and functions, I argue, as an emphatic rejection of the facile literality of the ‘benevolent’ Indian gesture of ‘letting Kashmiris live’ by using pellets as an alternative to bullets. ‘Is this life?’ these images ask, ‘Is this called living?’ It should also be said that the relentless countering of the ‘non-lethal’ designation by pointing

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**Figure 1.** Kashmiri artist Mir Suhail appears on his Facebook page with his eye and face bandaged. Screenshot of Mir Suhail’s Facebook Page, July 2016. Reproduced with permission from Mir Suhail.
not to dead but to disabled bodies implicitly recognizes that in Kashmir ‘[m]aiming functions as slow but simultaneously intensive death-making,’ particularly in an environment where both infrastructure and bodies are simultaneously disabled (Puar 2015, p. 7).8

Humanity as vulnerability: photojournalism and the case of Insha Malik

Virtually every newspaper story critical of the pellet gun—in Kashmir, India, or internationally—bears a photograph of the pellet-marked Kashmiri body. During the three-odd months of the siege, photographs of pellet injuries accompanied a number of newspaper stories about pellet guns. These were often sampled and circulated on social media and elsewhere online, along with details of the encounters, number of pellets fired, and the scale of injuries.9 These photographs were designed to provide forensic and very graphic evidence opposing the narrative and visual manipulations of the Indian state. Whereas the latter designates pellet guns as ‘non-lethal,’ these photographs presented their violent effects by graphically displaying injuries. The ruptured eye was frequently on display, looking out at the viewer. Some of the wounded pull up or down on their eyelids in order to better show the injury, and the photographed subjects (particularly when they are adult males) often look directly into the camera, which is pointed at them from either the front or the side (Figure 3).
Among the crop of images of facial and eye injuries that emerged early in the siege was that of Insha Malik, who became ‘the face of the debate over the use of pellet guns,’ as the Indian TV channel NDTV put it (NDTV 2016). The story of Insha’s much-photographed injuries is now well known across Kashmir and beyond. The salient aspects of her story pertain not only to Insha’s young age and the seriousness of her injuries (in both eyes) but also to the fact that, unlike the majority of the pellet-injured, Insha was not protesting on the streets but was in her own home when pellets penetrated the windows and hit her. Her innocence thus emblematized her as a sympathetic victim of state violence across multiple constituencies: Kashmiris agitating for azadi; liberal Indian media critiquing the use of excessive force but not the occupation itself; and even the state government, which could acknowledge this injury as an unfortunate by-product of an otherwise legitimate use of force. From an anti-occupation standpoint, she became the ideal foil to the overarching image of terrorist masculinity attributed to Kashmiri men and used to discredit popular protests: she was not in the masculine space of the streets (not even in play, as some boys playing cricket had been when they were hit by pellets) but in the feminized space of the home; she was not male but female; not adult but child—the ultimate innocent, the perfect victim.10

I will leave aside the potentially problematic implications of the gendered production of ‘innocence’ in order to validate human worth in the face of

Figure 3. An injured Kashmiri man looks into the camera as it captures his pellet injuries. Photo credit anonymous upon request. Similar images were published alongside news stories in Al Jazeera and Dawn, in August and September of 2016. For more examples see Essa (2016c) and Khan (2016).
militarized violence against protesters armed only with stones. Here I want to consider how some of the visual rhetoric around Insha’s injuries clearly evoked the contours of the human as a category from which the Kashmiri has been banished. Consider the Kashmiri writer Basharat Peer’s (2016) graphic ekphrastic description of an early photograph of Insha in The New York Times:

The photograph accompanying the article showed a face with red wart-like wounds. Her nasal bridge was a lump of raw flesh held together by black surgical thread. The bloodied lids of her left eye had been sown shut. Her right eye was a red alloy of blood, flesh, bone and metal.

Peer’s cyborgian description of Insha’s face—an alloy of the organic and the inorganic, raw flesh and surgical thread, bone and metal—offers a reflection on debilitating violence as not just a result of but also a form of inhumanization. Contradictory discourses of the human are activated here, as they are in many of the images that graphically display wounds caused by pellets. On the one hand, in Peer’s writing above, blood and bruises function as signifiers of a shared humanity (look, she too is a human being); on the other, the brutalization of the wounded Insha and the transmogrification of her face into an ‘alloy of blood, flesh, bone and metal’ reinforces her distance from humanity (look at what has become of her, she was once a human being). The photograph of Insha Malik bears out perfectly how the burden of proving one’s own innocence, vulnerability, or indeed humanity is borne by the Kashmiri body, which must be exposed to the camera’s gaze in order to be counted as human.

The photograph of Insha described above by Peer was only one of several showing her extreme injuries that appeared in various news reports and then circulated widely on social media among outraged Kashmiris and those in solidarity with them. Such spectacular representations of human suffering are often intended, and popularly thought, to hold the capacity to mobilize outrage and action, and therefore find wide circulation particularly online, where they can be quickly shared. However, visual studies scholars have long debated whether such an effect in fact follows the circulation of photographs of human suffering. Jay Prosser (2012, p. 9), for example, warns that the extreme ‘imbalance in bodily exposure’ between the photographic subject and its viewer inevitably produces the act of looking as a mode of domination, implicating the viewer in what Susan Sontag (2003, p. 60) calls ‘the indecency of co-spectatorship.’ Sontag questions whether such images could ever make visible an occluded humanity, given that they largely come from non-white quarters of the world, while visual norms clearly deter the exhibition of suffering or dead white bodies. Sontag (2003, p. 72) further suggests that the journalistic custom of depicting the injured bodies of non-white subjects ‘inherits the centuries-old practice of exhibiting exotic—that is, colonized—human beings’ in an ethnological mode that historically participated in the
exclusion of non-white people from the ranks of the human. In the Indian case, such shocking images of suffering have also tended to feature the stripped and blood-soaked bodies of Dalits, Adivasis, and Muslims.\textsuperscript{11} Paul Gilroy (2015) offers a related caution about the circulation of images of Black death and pain in the context of the Black Lives Matter movement in the United States: ‘I’m almost as concerned by the constant, compulsive replaying of the event as I am by the event itself. There is a complicity in that gesture which is also part of the way that racism becomes culture.’

The circulation of testimonial images and videos from Kashmir presents a similar conundrum. Such images indisputably play a role in raising awareness about violent conditions that have been carefully screened away from most Indians and indeed many Kashmiris by the scopic manipulations of the Indian state. At the same time, as they pile up, images of Kashmiri pain feed into a growing corpus of pictures of brutalized Kashmiri bodies available for consumption across a range of viewing publics beyond Kashmiris themselves. Sontag argues that ‘the other, even when not an enemy, is only regarded as someone to be seen, not someone (like us) who also sees’ (p. 72). I would argue that the potential risk of voyeurism around such a spectacle is only compounded in an instance like this, where the photographic subject – Insha – being blind, is in fact incapable of ever seeing the images of herself. To sum up, the display of injuries in order to proclaim the humanity of the oppressed or to produce empathy in others is, at the very least, a gesture steeped in unequal looking relations. Therefore, it may be instructive to turn now to another mode of visual production around the 2016 siege, which evolved a powerful way of circumventing this ethical issue as it also undertook to make visible the brutality of pellet injuries.

**Borrowing humanity: pellet injuries in digital art**

If photojournalism, with its focus on ruptured flesh and exposed wounds bases its humanitarian pleas on an understanding of humanity as biological life and species sameness (blood signalling proof of a common humanity), then digital art around pellet injuries calls sharp attention to the differential allocation of humanity across the globe. I will consider two representative examples here: a visual hashtag campaign titled #IndiaCantSee, and a series of digital artworks by Mir Suhail, both of which circulated widely on social media and were reported in the press.

In late July 2016, an advocacy group in Pakistan named Never Forget Pakistan released a photo album on their Facebook page under the title ‘What if you knew the Victim? #IndiaCantSee #LetKashmir Decide.’\textsuperscript{12} Each photograph in the album featured a key public figure ranging from Indian film stars like Shah Rukh Khan and Aishwarya Rai to Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg. All these figures appear with what
seem to be pellet marks on their faces. Next to each image appeared a brief block of text offering a fictionalized account of ‘real stories’ of Kashmiri men and women, which offer empathy with those in the photographs. As the campaign narrative on the group’s Facebook page explains, ‘You know these faces. Does that make the tragedies more important? The stories in the letters are real. The names signed under the letter are real. Just the victim you see in the picture is not real. But do you care what is the profile of the victim for you to sympathise and empathise with them? For you to speak for them?’ (Never Forget Pakistan 2016a). In common with the photojournalistic depictions of injury discussed above, generating empathy was the very apparent objective of this solidarity campaign. However, in contrast to the graphic photographs of Insha and other pellet victims, the #Indiacantsee campaign projected injuries onto the bodies of celebrities—whose humanity is a given—rather than placing on display the exposed and injured Kashmiri body (Figure 4).

In the accompanying text (Figure 5), Kashmiris voice empathy with these hypothetical ‘pellet victims,’ modelling the kind of response they themselves have been denied. For example, in one meme, ‘The Kashmiri Youth’ address Mark Zuckerberg in bitterly ironic tones (Never Forget Pakistan 2016b):

‘Dear Mark,

You have been such an inspiration for us. Staying strong and uplifting our spirits with your resilience. However, we are sorry we have let you down. We tried to

Figure 4. Kashmir solidarity campaign launched by Pakistani civil society group Never Forget Pakistan. Screenshot from Never Forget Pakistan’s Facebook Page, July 2016. Reproduced with permission from Mohammad Jibran Nasir.
post your interview and pictures of your injuries on Facebook to get the word out but Facebook keeps on taking them down citing their ‘Community Standards.’ The Government has also suspended mobile internet and newspapers. We can’t go out due to the curfews. Guess we will just have to wait for an international journalist to reach us. Rest of India may be but Kashmir isn’t allowed to enter the digital age. Get well soon brother.

The Kashmiri Youth.’

Sidestepping the abjection that is inevitably risked with a direct display of the pain of the other, these images, prominently foregrounding their status as *fictional*, mark and attempt to ‘borrow’ from the surplus of humanity with which these celebrity figures are presumably endowed. While the bodies of wounded Kashmiris are prominently displayed in journalistic reportage, as discussed above, these latter works preserve Kashmiri bodies from such scrutiny, envisioning Kashmiris, if only fictionally, as *dispensers* rather than recipients of empathy as a humanitarian affect. The injuries, unintelligible on Kashmiri bodies, are made legible on celebrity bodies, which serve as ready referents for humanity.¹³

Following quickly on the #Indiacantsee campaign, the artist Mir Suhail released a series of digital artworks in August 2016. The images depict the faces of Indian freedom fighters like M.K. Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Chandrashekhar Azad, and Bhagat Singh (Figure 6); film star Sharmila Tagore on the

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**Figure 5.** Screenshot from Never Forget Pakistan’s Facebook Page, July 2016. Reproduced with permission from Mohammad Jibran Nasir.
classic poster of the 1960s Bollywood film *Kashmir ki Kali* (Bud of Kashmir, 1964) (Figure 7); and central figures in famous European paintings, such as Johannes Vermeer’s *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, Edvard Munch’s *The Scream*, Vincent Van Gogh’s *Self Portrait*, Grant Woods’ *American Gothic*, and Leonardo da Vinci’s *Lady with an Ermine*. All appear with their faces marked and eyes bandaged Figure 8.

Like #Indiacantsee, Suhail’s series made its humanitarian appeal by transposing pellet injuries onto the bodies of beloved figures in the Indian national pantheon, Indian popular culture, and European art respectively, implicitly directing its address to Indians as well as the ‘international community’ – a loose descriptor encompassing European human rights institutions as well as a general global public of laypersons. The digital series functions as a challenge to its viewers to act in the name of humanity, to imagine their most beloved icons as similarly wounded. Suhail’s reference to ‘Freedom Fighters’ in his Facebook post is of a course a provocation to Indian viewers to consider why Indian media regards Kashmiri protesters not as ‘freedom fighters’ but as ‘troublemakers’ or even ‘agitational

![Figure 6](image.png)

**Figure 6.** Artist Mir Suhail’s digital manipulation of the faces of Indian anticolonial nationalist leaders. Screenshot from Mir Suhail’s Facebook Page, August 2016. Reproduced with permission from Mir Suhail.
terrorists’ (Navlakha 2010). Paralleling the strategies of the #Indiacantsee campaign, the series also figures its addressees—Indians and Europeans—as suffering from a kind of metaphorical blindness, a failure to see the humanity of Kashmiris, which must therefore be shown.
Conclusion: the politics of recognition?

What does it mean to compel recognition of one’s own humanity under the gaze of Indian and European viewers? This question returns us to routine concerns within human rights scholarship about human rights as a possible instrument of hegemony, undergirded by a Eurocentrism that positions Europe as the arbiter and dispenser of human rights, the preceptor of humanity, the designator of the human. Wendy Hesford (2011, p. 30) sums up the conundrum thus: ‘The history of human rights can be told as a history of selective and differential visibility, which has positioned certain bodies, populations, and nations as objects of recognition and granted others the power and means to look and to confer recognition.’ The politics of recognition can re-inscribe deeply hierarchical relationships within a racialized and gendered visual economy that positions Europeans as the classic (masculine) bearers of the gaze, and their inevitably non-white petitioners as (feminized) objects of the gaze (Mulvey 1999). In the case of Kashmir, it is liberal Indians who might be said to occupy the privileged position of the gazer.

Rather than grant such an absolute unidirectionality to the global or regional gaze around human rights spectacles, however, I am persuaded by Hesford’s (p. 20) suggestion that we might ‘frame human rights as an optic that disciplines as well as empowers.’ Consider, for instance, the direct gaze...
of the photographic subject in Figure 3, who even as he displays his injured eye refuses to be merely a visual object, and evidently participates actively in the creation of this image of his vulnerability. The subject looks back at the viewer who looks at him; the photograph compels us to note the ways in which Kashmiris are not merely objects of the human rights spectacle around their injuries but also often visual producers who play an active role in constructing that spectacle—a spectacle that is taken in not only by ‘the world’ but also by other Kashmiris. For, while the images considered above—both the photojournalistic images that ground their appeal in realist depiction, and the digital manipulations that imagine another world where the effects of colonialism are inverted—are ostensibly addressed to those outside Kashmir (‘Dear Indians,’ or else people in the west), to understand them as only engaged in a limited ploy for recognition from subcontinental and global imperial powers would be to overlook the work they perform in the production of Kashmiri political subjectivity.14 These images are not, I would argue, merely engaged in ‘seeking inclusion’ into the liberal humanist category of the human that lies at the heart of human rights discourses. Nor do they seek equal integration into the Indian national family of humans, as should be clear from the multiple hashtags that accompany Suhail’s digital manipulations of Indian freedom fighters: #KashmirBleeding; #ResistingPellets; #FreeKashmir; #MahatmaGandhi; #BhagatSingh; #Nehru; #ChandraShekhar (Figure 6). On the contrary, by invoking Indian anticolonial leaders of the past, the series points once again to the ongoing presence of colonialism. The claim to humanity is here staked irreducibly on political self-determination from the Indian state as a colonial entity. The images forcefully call attention to the unequal terms on which the human is constructed, and the exclusions upon which it is founded. In doing so, they powerfully decolonize what it means to be human in Kashmir, gesturing towards new ways of envisioning humanity in the occupied zone.

Notes

1. The ‘new militancy’ describes a new generation of Kashmiri militants primarily from South Kashmir. Like Burhan, many of these young men are from educated families, social media-savvy, and are willing to appear with their faces exposed in the photographs and videos they upload, in contrast to a previous generation of militants invested in publicly concealing their identities.

2. For one overview of modern state formation in Jammu and Kashmir, see Kaul (2011). Kaul names the Indian state in Kashmir an ‘empire’ with neocolonial ambitions, one that has elicited an explicitly anticolonial vocabulary from the Kashmiri resistance. He also notes that ‘many of the political and ideological features of classic 20th century anti-colonial movements are in place in the Kashmiri struggle for self-determination’ (p. 67). These include a popular historical accounting of Kashmir as having been perpetually colonized by Mughal, Afghan, Sikh, Dogra, and now Indian rule; and of course, the language of
azadi itself. In a recent volume, scholars belonging to the Critical Kashmir Studies Collective argue for the importance of naming the Indian occupation as such. ‘This practice of naming the brutal modalities of power in Kashmir as occupation is a political and moral choice, a commitment to exposing the Indian performance of democracy, human rights, and citizenship that has continually undermined the basic rights and freedoms of Kashmiris’ (Bhan et al. 2018, p. 35).

3. The performative counting up of deaths and injuries has become a significant act of public grieving in an environment where Kashmiri grief and mourning presents a deep threat to the state, a dangerous ‘anti-national’ affect that emerges frequently at funerals. As Nitasha Kaul (2016a) writes: ‘What is the difference between a funeral and a demonstration? In Kashmir, there is none […] In Kashmir, every funeral is a demonstration and every demonstration is a funeral.’

4. Although Butler’s articulation of ‘grievability’ as a benchmark of the human offers a vocabulary that I have found useful here, it should be noted that Butler’s theoretical frameworks are connected to a longer genealogy of theorizing the human that has gone largely unacknowledged in her own work. For instance, the work of Black feminist Sylvia Wynter has been instrumental in not only problematizing the racialized construction of the human, but also insisting upon a reinvention—rather than a rejection—of the human, a category that Wynter argues has been colonized by the figure of ‘Man’ at the heart of Enlightenment humanism. For more, see Weheliye (2014, p. 22). I thank Shaista Patel for reminding me to register these genealogies.

5. In Butler’s elaboration of performatives as speech acts, ‘performativity must be understood not as a singular or deliberate ‘act’, but, rather as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names.’ (1993, p. 2)

6. Kashmiri social media users were of course using a variety of platforms during this time—Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Flickr, to name just a few. I largely tracked images circulating on Facebook throughout July 2016. The images examined here provide by no means an all-inclusive catalogue. Australian artist Alana Hunt (2016) has published online an extensive (though again, as she emphasizes, not exhaustive) compilation of the image-production appearing on her social media feed in the months following the killing of Burhan Wani along with her analyses. This compilation offers a fuller canvas of visual production during this time.

7. The report further detailed the primary use of the guns: ‘Shotguns were primarily designed for hunting, and can be used to kill a wide variety of animals and birds. Depending on factors such as size and distance of the quarry, cartridges with different pellet or shot size can be used from the same gun. Smaller pellets (called birdshot) have been designed to kill small animals and birds, and are denoted using numbers […] When birdshot is fired, the pellets leave the barrel as a compact group and begin to spread out after travelling a few metres. By the time they’ve covered 30–40 metres, the pellets have spread out enough to cover anything within a one-metre diameter. But within a few metres of leaving the barrel, the pellets are still in a compact group and moving at very high velocity. At this close range, birdshot is extremely lethal, enough to blow a human skull to bits’ (Singh 2016).

8. There is a risk in this rhetorical strategy, to be sure, of reinscribing an understanding of disabled life as tantamount to or even worse than death. Such a
strategy may seem to chafe against disability rights approaches that seek to encode disability as valuable diversity. However, as scholars such as Nirmala Erevelles (2011) and Jasbir Puar (2017) have argued, disability rights and disability studies approaches that simply endorse empowerment and celebration of disability, while important, do not always account for the conditions under which disability is produced, or the increased risk of disablement and the impossibility of recovery faced by specific populations under conditions of war or violence. Puar asks a question that is pertinent in the context of Kashmir: ‘what material conditions of possibility are necessary for such positive reenvisionings of disability to flourish, and what happens when these conditions are not available?’ (p. xix).

9. Stories published in Indian newspapers like the Times of India consistently report on injuries experienced by security personnel, quoting officials who plead that ‘cops are human beings too’ alongside images of Kashmiri protesters throwing stones. See Chauhani (2016) for example.

10. The tenacity of the image of the Kashmiri male ‘trouble-maker’ was borne out by a short Twitter exchange between the writer, Nitasha Kaul, and another user outraged by the former’s posting of a news story about Insha’s injuries (Kaul 2016b). Tweeted the outraged Indian: ‘What was Insha doing? He [sic] was throwing stones at police. He [sic] is still better off being alive.’

11. Recent examples (2017) include the photographs of a blood-soaked Muslim man, Mohammed Naeem, begging for his life before being lynched in Jharkhand, or the image of Farooq Ahmed Dar, who was used as a human shield by the Indian army in Kashmir. In 2007, images of a young Adivasi woman who had been stripped by local businessmen in Guwahati circulated widely online and in the printed press.

12. Solidarity efforts from within Pakistan are certainly fraught, as they are caught within what Nosheen Ali (2016) calls Pakistan’s ‘savior nationalism’—a nationalism that is geared towards saving a community, place or people, which is not yet wholly part of the nation. Yet, as Ali maintains, solidarity from civil society actors must not be brushed off as being simply of a piece with the machinations of the Pakistani state, even if such sympathies have been ‘ironically … cultivated over decades of pro-Kashmiri solidarity in an otherwise exclusionary Pakistani nationalism’. In a recent interview, Mirza Waheed offered a reflection on the meaning of solidarity efforts like these on the part of ‘ordinary Pakistanis’ in support of Kashmir, referring in all likelihood to the very campaign under discussion here: ‘When Kashmiris were being blinded, sections of Pakistani civil society ran an interesting campaign to focus the world’s attention on such a ghastly crime. I hope they have the moral courage to run a similar campaign for the disappeared people of Balochistan’ (Adil 2017). Without discounting the need or importance of such solidarities, Waheed also issued a gentle caution to Pakistani civil society actors to attend to violent nationalism at home as well as abroad. For a more detailed analysis of Kashmiris’ relationship with Pakistan see Junaid (2016b).

13. In the gallery of worthy humans assembled by the campaign, it is noteworthy that only four out of the eleven personalities are women, all of whom are Hindu or, in the case of Sonia Gandhi, white. The campaign perhaps inadvertently registered a gendered hierarchy within the cultural category of the human, such that the most potent icons of the ‘fully human’ are largely light-skinned Hindu men.
14. This does not, of course, simply invalidate the question of whether such images circulated by Kashmiris can reproduce hierarchies of looking (the image of the blinded child Insha Malik). My intent is not to simply valorize subaltern visual production, but to consider its heterogeneous effects.

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