

**Kitty Genovese, 1964**  
**An Interview with Carrie Rentschler**

*Dylan Mulvin (McGill University)*

Carrie Rentschler's current book project is on the 1964 murder of Kitty Genovese and, in her words, "the work cultural intermediaries did to craft the story of the murder and its bystanders into a case study." Rentschler's research focuses on how useful the construction of the case was in the milieu of the mid-1960s, even though the main story told via this case is not completely true. The case is known for the 38 witnesses who apparently watched or heard Genovese being assaulted with a knife by Winston Moseley and then raped. Through this telling of the murder story, the case became the basis for the so-called "bystander effect" in psychological research and a popular allegory for the dangers of social anomie in urban life. Below, we discuss her current research and the ways the context surrounding the Genovese case shaped the social, cultural and technological understandings of witnessing in the 1960s.

**Dylan Mulvin** Your previous research dealt with issues of mass mediated witnessing. Based on your current research, how would you characterize witnessing before and after 1964, the year of the Genovese murder?

**Carrie Rentschler** First let's start with a working definition of "witnessing." I like John Durham Peters's, which he defines in his article "Witnessing" as "the means by which experience is supplied to those who lack the original." For Peters, the term's significance lies in the ways it intensifies broader problems of communication—the exchange that occurs between

experience, representation, interpretation, and judgment. The transition from witness as a sensorial experience to testimony based on that experience in the form of speech, writing, or other embodied performance is a difficult, and imperfect, juncture. The “truthiness” of testimony is evaluated via testing rituals, some through threats of punishment (“do you swear to tell the whole truth and nothing but the truth, so help you God?”) others via pain and its threat (such as the mistaken belief that torture will get detainees to reveal useful information): both are untrustworthy means of evaluation. In the process of remembering events, we humans are also quite adept at changing details just through the process of re-telling and re-remembering them. As a result of this transformative quality of memory, others have suggested that technologies, like surveillance cameras, can act as better witnesses than people. The idea is that the mechanical witness “just records” what it sees or hears; it has no interests in what it sees or hears like a person would. It doesn’t feel pain. It doesn’t *care*. The memory problems of a CCTV system or digital camera can be solved, so to speak, via back up media and replay technologies, something you have been looking into with your current research on the adoption of video replay in the late 1960s.

Witness is also a term with many genealogies—legal, technological, religious, and scientific—and what we mean by witness is in many ways determined by the contexts from which we take the term. One can be a witness in a trial; recording technologies serve as so-called mechanical witnesses to events, in such things like atrocity photography or cell phone photos of police brutality; one can pay religious witness to a baby being circumcised or a friend getting married; and according to my friend Joan Leach, the notion of scientific witness provides yet another conception of witnessing and the testimony on which it is based. Scientific testimony is

grounded in a primarily male and so-called “gentlemanly” culture of scientists oriented around the belief in the credulity of other scientists and what they report of their experimental findings. Across all of these contexts, witness, and the testimony from which it is formed, is a mediated phenomenon—mediated by the State, by legal rules and procedures, by consensus-based beliefs and the rituals in which they are enacted, by technologies of recording and representation. The authority granted to witness testimony, however, is often based in assertions of its unmediated character, the “modest witness” of which Donna Haraway speaks: the objective, non-partisan, disinterested subject who testifies within a context of reception that hides, denies and misrecognizes the contestable quality of testimony and its representation. Since the 1992 publication of Elihu Katz and Daniel Dayan’s book *Media Events: The Live Broadcasting of History*, media studies scholars have increasingly scrutinized the mediated character of witnessing and its testimonial contexts and contests.

To answer your question, then, it is difficult to say that witnessing changed meaning, or took on different form, before and after 1964. But some key ideas were being formulated around this time that still shape how people think about what witnessing and testimony are as practices and why they matter. The immediate period preceding and just after 1964 is a key conjunctural moment, what one author calls the “the turn to the 60s.” My interest is in the ways an emergent problem definition took shape around the inaction of bystanders, shaping ideas of witness in the process. I’m looking primarily at the United States, because the crime happened in New York City and because the key actors and cultural intermediaries that crafted the Genovese murder into a case study were working in American academic and media institutions—not exclusively, but centrally. And in 1963, two key

publications articulated the problem of bystander inaction in response to the Holocaust, and the 1961 Eichmann trial, respectively: psychologist Stanley Milgram's first article from his obedience to authority studies, and Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem: An Essay on the Banality of Evil*. Arendt argued that Nazi evil, embodied by Adolf Eichmann, was not the result of a pathological psyche but should rather be understood as the effect of the systemic, and bureaucratized practice the Nazis developed in their orchestrated commitment of crimes against humanity. Milgram's experiments demonstrated that everyday people could be compelled to torture others via experimental conditions that he modeled on the authoritarianism of the Nazis. Both authors were part of a critical, politically liberal intellectual and political milieu that grappled to understand evil as the product of bureaucratized authoritarianism, in Nazi Germany and beyond. Within this milieu, several writers and thinkers were particularly concerned with fascist and authoritarian tendencies in the U.S. that they analogized to Nazi Germany.<sup>98</sup>

The Kitty Genovese murder occurs within a year of the publication of Milgram's study and Arendt's book, and in the midst of white supremacist/police violence against civil rights protesters and workers, the political and cultural aftermath of the JFK assassination, a growing law-and-order movement fronted by Barry Goldwater (Republican nominee for president), and urban riots in New York and Philadelphia, among other key events. To make sense of why and how bystander inaction became such a concern for cultural critics, social scientists, and policy makers, I am looking at the context in which the problem was defined: not as a failure of the supposed 38 witnesses to see or hear Winston Moseley's assaults against

<sup>98</sup> There is a wonderful book on this topic, titled *American Dreams and Nazi Nightmares*.

Genovese, but their failure, the story goes, to call the police. Whether or not these witnesses really did see or hear the assaults or fully understand what was happening is rarely asked. Instead, based upon news coverage in which residents of the neighborhood said they “didn’t want to get involved,” the dominant message of the story was that everyday people will not be bothered, and will not expose themselves to any perceived risk, on behalf of another person. In recent years, the veracity of the story of the 38 witnesses has been called into question. We know with some certainty that two calls were made to the police regarding Moseley’s attack on Genovese, one early in the assault (to which the police apparently did not respond) and one near the end. At least two women came to Genovese’s aid as she lay dying.

In light of these revelations, how did a case based on the idea that 38 people watched and stood by while a man killed a woman have the lasting cultural and political effects it has when the story is so inaccurate? One answer is that the murder story was a convenient political fiction—it is simply too useful in its dominant form to be changed. Another, as one social psychologist argued, is that the story does not need to be accurate in order to speak to larger truths about apathy, another version of the convenience explanation. Another still, and one I am particularly interested in, is the way that early reports of a story become durable over time, even in the face of counter-narratives. To get at this, I’ve been looking at the kinds of cultural labors that are used by various media producers and other cultural intermediaries to replicate the story of the 38 witnesses. In the process they also subtly transformed its meaning via performances of re-enactment and creative projection.

The case revives the hoary issue of how we conceive of personal and social responsibility for violence committed against others, and what the

epistemic and political conditions are, and can be, for responding. Questions of mediation suffuse these issues. I always come back to Nietzsche's critique of the desire to locate a responsible "doer behind the deed." I think that his and other's critique of the substantialized subject enables us to better understand agency and action in more broadly social terms, terms that do not reduce subjectivity to the individual and his or her personal failings. It also enables us to conceive of mediation in terms that link humans, technologies and infrastructures. I want to rethink witness as a social, and larger-scale phenomenon, beyond the individual who sees, hears and otherwise experiences the world, and yet still recognizes the significance of individual agency.

**D.M.** I see two trends during the 1960s with regards to the appropriation of video technologies, which I think are consistent with what you are describing. First are the headlines in newspapers, trade journals, and academic studies that read something like "HUMAN EYE INADEQUATE – VIDEO AN IMPROVEMENT" and go on to explain all the various ways people don't, in fact, see like pigeons. This isn't a new story, of course, but what *is* novel about the conjuncture of the 1960s is just how widespread the adoption of video systems is in both workplaces and homes. All of this occurs, coincidentally, within an environment of increasingly close scrutiny of publicly circulating audiovisual recordings, made newly available and repeatable through television broadcasting—a phenomenon that is signaled by the Kennedy and Oswald assassinations and the obsessive deconstruction of the Zapruder film footage.

The second trend I've found is how video recording and playback is universally seen to keep people honest. Lawyers are repeatedly told to use videotaped depositions on opposing witnesses—not only for the useful

recording but also for the conditioning effect it has on the testimony. Newspapers run stories of reckless drivers being pulled over, ready to protest, shown a video of their driving, then laughing and gladly accepting the ticket. This is—as per the conventional history of videotape—the decidedly pre-Rodney King version of the mechanical witness’s self-evident truthfulness.

These are anachronistic footnotes in the larger, social history of witnessing and judgment making that you are talking about, where the question of accounting for the responsibility to act, vis-à-vis witnessing, is more complex. Except that I think they are of a piece with the construction of the failure of witnessing that is attached to the Genovese murder, if the failure to act, in this case, is expressed as a human weakness—inherent and true, as per the psychological discourse—that is exacerbated by the pressures of mid-1960s urban living. Witnessing, then, becomes an entry point for a discussion of the human failure—biological, social, psychological—to both perceive and act.

This brings me to one part of your description of the Genovese case and its aftermath. You’ve said elsewhere that the Genovese case is situated, to the present day, at the media/psychology interface; you’ve also begun to talk about how Stanley Milgram’s work is important in contextualizing the Genovese case in the intellectual and political milieu of the 1960s, so I wonder if you could say a little more about the media/psychology interface and your approach to the role, function, or place of psychological discourse in and around the Genovese murder and its construction as a “signal crime.”

**C.R.** The Kitty Genovese case is such a well-known allegory about public apathy and the difficulties of communicating collectively within large-scale, highly distributed societies, because of psychological research and the teaching

of psychology. For the social psychology of helping, the Genovese murder is an origin myth. A group of British social psychologists has argued that the dominant account of the murder's bystanders still orients the kinds of questions that are asked and the assumptions that get made in psychological research about inaction in emergency situations. To this day, the Genovese murder is taught in introductory Psychology courses in units on the bystander effect and the diffusion of responsibility. It's a story that thousands of people are learning every year, in countries around the world. Pedagogy is a powerful cultural technology—too often we underestimate the broad-reaching effects it can have. Combined with popular representations of the case, the Genovese murder has been sustained in cultural memory.

Psychological research on helping in emergency situations achieved great visibility because researchers John Darley and Bibb Latané used the Genovese murder to model hundreds of testing conditions around various emergencies (e.g. smoke billowing from an adjacent classroom, a person collapsed in a hallway). Darley and Latané coined the term “bystander effect” to describe findings that indicated that a person is less likely to intervene into a potential emergency when they perceive that more than one other person is also proximate to the situation. They surmised that the bystanders to the Genovese murder were not apathetic people; instead they may have each thought that someone else would intervene, and separated as they were in their own apartment units, they had no way to communicate collectively. This effect modeled what they referred to as the “diffusion of responsibility” in groups. Yet this so-called group of bystanders was a not a group in any of the ways we critical researchers would define. They did not identify as collective, they did not take form as a public or even an audience, and they certainly were not a “class,” an identity or a movement. One news editor referred to the

Genovese bystanders as a “clump”—not a very elegant term. Social scientists may find clumps of data, but not people! To psychologists, the bystanders were an aggregate of individuals, not unlike how early audience research considered radio and then TV audiences as aggregates of individuals within households. One key weakness of social psychological research, then (and there are many), is its underdeveloped definition of the group as a *social* unit. Social groupings tend to get defined as little more than intermediaries between individuals and populations. Many social psychologists also believe that people are all essentially the same, and that research will reveal the universal psychological truths that shape human behavior.

The field of psychology has given us some of our most durable notions of individualism and of mass belief, and this legacy shapes what I am calling the media/psychology interface. As a “science of democracy,” as Nik Rose calls it, psychology has been central to the administrative practices of governance. Public opinion research developed by psychologists powerfully shaped media making in places like the U.S. starting with WWI, and in Britain post-WWII. Governments and corporations alike use polling to make decisions about policy and industry; each is invested in the business of persuasion and marketing, what Benjamin Ginsberg called the domestication of mass belief. By the 1950s and 1960s, ad agencies were bringing psychologists on staff and the larger ones were building in-house psychology departments. From today’s vantage point, it is easy to see the complex integration of media making and psychology because their relationship is so blatantly displayed in what we see and hear, from the mundane therapeutics of the TV talk show to the pseudo-scientific filmic representation of people meters in campaign electioneering. It is difficult to overestimate just how big of a role psychology plays in defining

and organizing the fundamental practices of media industries, their workers and their other products.

The media/psychology interface takes other form as well, and in ways that are worth excavating in more concerted fashion. We need to better understand the ways in which our ideas about subjectivity, sociality and mediation come to us already processed by psychological ways of thinking. The field of psychology was an early adopter of film and videotaping in laboratory experimentation, a topic on which TV historian Anna McCarthy has also researched. There were significant overlaps between popular culture and social science during the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century that were visible in things like the use of hidden cameras in the TV program *Candid Camera* and in social psychological research settings such as Stanley Milgram's 1961 obedience to authority experiments at Yale. Both ostensibly recorded human behavior as-it-happened, without the visible apparatus of recording, a kind of early version of reality TV. ABC's reality TV show *What Would You Do?* is the offspring of hidden camera research surveillance and candid camera TV programming.

Psychologists' own research questions are shaped by media coverage of unusual and high profile cases of human behavior—usually of a criminal nature, like the Genovese murder. Some, if not a majority, of the work of defining case studies is being done by journalists and news editors. The fact that media industries define and pre-constitute cases to be studied is not something on which most researchers in the social sciences tend to reflect. Psychological research often gets a lot of play in the media as well, from popular self-help authors to laboratory experimenters, of whom Milgram, Darley and Latané are great examples. Milgram also made several films. His 1972 "The City and the Self" achieved some critical acclaim. Psychological research around the Genovese case and other well-known experiments like

Phil Zimbardo's Stanford Prison experiment and Milgram's obedience to authority study have also been represented in various pop cultural forms, from made-for-TV movies to educational films and YouTube videos. My point is that the production of psychological knowledge, and the techniques of psychological research and reporting, are thoroughly intertwined with popular practices of media representation, and with industrial uses of media technologies for social surveillance. The history of mechanical witness you are doing of the 1960s adoption of CCTV systems and videotape replay technologies tells a parallel tale to this other history of the media/psychology interface.

**D.M.** One thing I've been interested in while studying this period is the way that video recordings, as instantly accessible and repeatable, are portrayed as an example of postwar North American abundance, and grouped together with the other products of instantly available consumer culture. Yet, while video feedback loops are used in all sorts of industries as a means of improving performance, efficiency, and reliability, there is another view expressed about video accessibility—the ability to rewatch favourite recordings *ad infinitum*—that is alternately portrayed as a boon and a moral hazard. The latter, social unwieldiness of recording/playback technologies is complemented by the technological unwieldiness of surveillance systems, which quickly became too large and too complex for any human infrastructure to properly monitor or catalogue the system's output.

Shortly after the Genovese murder, during the buildup of war in Vietnam, there were the now familiar warnings that television would transform the war into a kind of repetitive spectacular, “the instant replay war,” and that the genres of television broadcasting would shroud the realities

of combat. It seems to me that this is inseparable from the story being told about the Genovese murder; on the one hand you have the fear that the flow of television is habituating home viewers to extreme events, and on the other hand, that the realities of mass witnessing actually forestall the ability to act, and might even engender anomie. What fascinates me about the Genovese case is its almost singular standing as the archetypal story of failed witnessing in this environment, and the way that it has remained effective in perpetuating a whole ensemble of assumptions about the social capacity to act in the face of extreme circumstances.

So to finish our discussion, perhaps you can say a little more about the political effectiveness of the Genovese murder and your approach to writing its history. Our discussion has been prefaced with the idea that the Genovese murder is too convenient and effective a fiction and origin story to be radically overturned—despite the ambiguities surrounding the actual witnesses and outright falsehoods that have stuck with the story’s retelling. Lawrence Grossberg is fond of describing the practice of cultural studies as the practice of “telling better stories.” Considering the tenuous connection to facts and the political efficacy of its fictiveness, the Genovese case seems like a perfect example of a *bad* story. I’m wondering if you could say a little more about how you balance what seems like a history of pragmatic political articulation on the one hand and the practice of telling better stories on the other. In other words, as a project, how have you approached the history of the idea of the failed bystander in comparison to the story of a real person named Kitty Genovese?

**C.R.** I try to resist the urge to dismiss the story of the witnesses to the Genovese murder as a bad narrative, but in so many ways it is just that. It is “bad” not only because it is largely untrue; it is also flawed because of the

kinds of effects it has and for the ways in which it is used—at the time it took responsibility off of the local police and placed it on the residents, many of whom were middle aged and elderly. The story of the bystanders was not that they didn't hear or see the first assault, it was that they had failed to call the police. Among other things, the Genovese case is a story of policing in New York City. My impetus for writing a history of the Genovese murder and the conditions of its production into a case study is to interrupt the ways the story has been told by starting from the largely unquestioned belief that there were 38 actual witnesses to the murder. Part of writing history does involve, on some level, offering a corrective version of events, but I am not sure the Genovese story can be replaced with a revised version. Thus far, previous efforts have not been able to dislodge the dominant account of the 38 witnesses, which is still a useful fiction in reports of bystander inaction and group violence.

Another view says history ought to make available *more* and *different* stories, and that to do so is a noble and important cause. Both correcting the historical record and adding to it have been key tasks of feminist studies, ethnic and area studies, sexuality studies, among other fields of study. The answer is not to write histories that are truer to the events, at least not as an endpoint in and of itself, but to examine the political and institutional investments that create and sustain some versions of history as having more veracity over others. This is what Clare Hemmings argues in *Why Stories Matter: The Political Grammar of Political Theory*. Providing correctives to existing narratives and multiplying others does not go far enough in dismantling the power of dominant stories. To tell the story differently, I focus on the people and practices that have sustained, challenged and revised the account of the Genovese murder. I look at the media and performance

culture that produced the case as one of bystander inaction. In this way, the stories characters are shifted to those responsible for crafting accounts of the murder and its witnesses, and the narrative arc follows the content and movements of their productions.

It isn't possible to tell the Genovese story with complete accuracy. There is just so much that is not known about the case, and cannot be known. Whichever witnesses did exist, like those who testified at Moseley's trial, are dead. Besides these people, we do not know who other witnesses were by name. The *New York Times* editor responsible for putting a reporter on the story of the witnesses, Abe Rosenthal, is dead, and so is the reporter, Martin Gansberg. This is a problem most historians face: their subjects are no longer living. We can never fully get to, or recreate the experience of our subjects; we cannot get into their heads, into the interiors of their subjectivity.

Instead we can examine the conditions in which their subjectivities could take form, and we can examine the ways others left traces of those subjectivities—and the imagination of what they could have been—behind. What is interesting to me is just how many people have tried to do this with the Genovese case, not by trying to identify the witnesses (e.g. tracking them down, naming them), but by projecting and fantasizing about who they were, what they may have seen or heard, and how they decided to (not) respond. The witnesses to the Genovese murder are “historical subjects” that may not have even existed; they are unverifiably real. And to me, this is what has made the case so interesting, and so useful, for so many. How do you retell a story about bystanders when you cannot know who people were, and whether they really existed or not? You have to think about witnessing—and the capacity for witnessing—differently, as a practice that is distributed, mediatic, de-subjectified rather than ontologized.

The other issue for me is thinking about how to bring Kitty Genovese to life in a case defined by the conditions of her death. Her family speaks at Moseley's parole hearings, and her girlfriend, Mary Ann Zielonko, delivered a moving radio portrait remembering Genovese on the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of her murder. Bit by bit more of her life is being revealed, but we still know so little about her. Because I study crime victims, I always have to remember that there are still people alive for whom this case is quite personal.

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