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“Dying in Full Detail”:  
Mortality and Duration in Digital Documentary

By

Jennifer Catherine Malkowski

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the  
requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Film and Media

in the

Graduate Division

of the

University of California, Berkeley

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“Dying in Full Detail”: Mortality and Duration in Digital Documentary

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By Jennifer Catherine Malkowski

## Abstract

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By

Jennifer Catherine Malkowski

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In examining one of documentary’s greatest taboos, the recording of actual death, this dissertation engages with the moving image’s temporality, its potential to preserve the past, and the major impact of its technological shifts on American visual culture. While film’s technological limitations and expense make it a difficult medium for capturing death, the digital age’s affordable and user-friendly cameras – along with DVD and YouTube distribution – support previously unfeasible projects. More accessible than ever, documentary death footage evokes a fundamental issue of film and digital media: the illusory promise that we can preserve what we record. In the face of death’s finality, this promise is achingly seductive; but it is also rife with cognitive dissonance, since the moment saved is a person’s last. A documented death is simultaneously a rare *memento mori* in a death-denying age and a pledge that some spectral form of immortality is possible – that we can hold on to what would otherwise be lost and retrieve it anew with each viewing.

The first half of my dissertation historicizes death in documentary film and photography from 1839–1975 and then analyzes digital-era documentaries on natural death. The combination exposes a cultural fixation on the “moment” of violent death, at the expense of the *process* of dying that typifies the end of life in modern America. In the second half, my study of duration shifts to the technology itself, identifying distinctive digital temporalities. Digital technology can record for very long periods and at very little cost, as it does in the 10,000 hours of footage shot to capture Golden Gate Bridge suicides for *The Bridge*, a work whose innovation and ethical transgressions both lie in its sublime aesthetics. In contrast to this capacity for length, death footage distributed on YouTube must be brief and spectacle-oriented to succeed, and is often stripped of cultural and political circumstances.

Paying close attention to both content and contexts, I argue that the burgeoning combination of death and the digital illuminates crucial qualities of each. Death’s totality remains beyond representation, as even advanced technologies can capture it only in fragments, but digital media’s partial successes – or instructive failures – in documenting death highlight unique digital temporalities. Further, I make an intervention in reigning theories of the digital as “disembodied” or “immaterial” by emphasizing the visceral impact of watching this bodily transformation – an impact not dulled by our awareness that digital images are transmitted algorithmically rather than indexically.



For Joy, my grandmother,  
who died a good death

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## Introduction

“The representation of a real death is [an] obscenity . . . We do not die twice.”

– André Bazin, “Death Every Afternoon”<sup>1</sup>

“Don’t take pictures o’ that – whattsa matter with you?!?”

– Unidentified spectator of jumpers from the World Trade Center on 9/11<sup>2</sup>

The two quotations presented above are separated by many factors: almost half a century of history, mode of address, circumstance, level of formality. The first appears in print, written by prominent film critic and scholar André Bazin in a published 1958 review, and addresses a hypothetical circumstance in a theoretical mode: if one were to film a human death as it happened, that filming would be obscene. The second is spoken by an anonymous, off-camera individual in raw footage taken during the 9/11 attacks. The hypothetical has become actual, the theoretical has become practical, and a man watching individuals jump to their deaths from a burning skyscraper chastises a fellow witness who has chosen to record that fearsome sight (one of many witnesses who did). In this moment, a tension becomes starkly apparent between the expanding technological capability to record death and continued social prohibitions against doing so, adding urgency to Bazin’s words. Together, these quotations hint at the strength, breadth, and longevity of concerns about the documentary capture of death – an act that has long mesmerized and repelled those who make, view, and think about documentary images, but an act that has become increasingly practical with advancements in digital technology.

“‘Dying in Full Detail’: Mortality and Duration in Digital Documentary” will consider the consequences of that new practicality, examining documentarians’ recent pursuits of death with equipment that promises to capture its “full detail.” In *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, Rainer Maria Rilke composes the phrase I have appropriated for my title. In context, its meaning refers to a style of dying rather than a style of displaying death, as in my title. Rilke uses the phrase to describe waning death rituals at the turn of the twentieth century: “Who cares anything today for a finely-finished death? No one. Even the rich, who could after all afford this luxury of dying in full detail, are beginning to be careless and indifferent; the wish to have a death of one’s own is growing ever rarer.”<sup>3</sup> Rilke and historians alike characterize the twentieth century as an era of death’s denial in the West, a time when the “full detail” of life’s end was little attended to and kept from the public eye – nowhere more so than in the United States. As the century approached its end, though, documentary image makers seemed poised to reveal death’s detail more fully and more often than ever before. Technologically, they were enabled by accessible and affordable digital production and distribution. Culturally, they were empowered by a turn away from hidden and homogenous hospital dying back toward an individualized “death of one’s own” – and by the American public’s unabated curiosity to see images of violent death, which had sustained them in fiction film through the century’s suppression of natural death.<sup>4</sup>

Written near the peak of that suppression in 1958, Bazin’s argument against documenting death evokes themes of temporality and duration – themes central to the moving image and to death, and especially crucial in the combination of the moving image and death. In its unabbreviated version, Bazin’s quotation is a bold condemnation of documentary death coupled

with a less novel condemnation of pornography: “Like death, love must be experienced and cannot be represented (it is not called the little death for nothing) without violating its nature. This violation is called obscenity. The representation of a real death is also an obscenity, no longer a moral one, as in love, but metaphysical. We do not die twice.”<sup>5</sup> Bazin focuses on death as a “lived” experience that cannot be successfully mediated by a documentary camera, drawing an ethical line in the sand and demanding that some aura for the death moment be preserved. He also connects the sacred quality of death to its singularity within each lifetime, continuing: “Before cinema there was only the profanation of corpses and the desecration of tombs. Thanks to film, nowadays we can desecrate and show at will the only one of our possessions that is temporally inalienable: death without a requiem, the eternal dead-again of the cinema!”<sup>6</sup>

For Bazin, filmic reproduction profanes death, and yet he acknowledges, “Death is one of those rare events that justifies the term . . . *cinematic specificity*.”<sup>7</sup> Although it is theoretically associated with photography’s stillness more often than cinema’s motion, death, after all, is the culmination of a particular process of duration and change: dying. It seems perfect, on that level, for capture by the technology that “mummifies change,” as Bazin famously wrote elsewhere (although I will demonstrate that video and digital video [DV] have proven more adept at that capture).<sup>8</sup> To “mummify” this most drastic and most mysterious of changes is a quest that has attracted many cameras. The curiosity, I believe, is not just about a desire to see death, but also a desire to find out whether a camera could really *show us* death – a liminal event that is frequently written about as being unknowable and “beyond representation.” But recorded death does not function only as fodder for philosophical discourse about death or representation – it is also frequently marshaled into service for political purposes. Nor does one recording of death serve philosophy *or* politics as well as another. Whether or not we consider it a “metaphysical obscenity,” documentary footage of death makes a profound impact on its viewers and sometimes even on global politics. As painful as such footage can be, we cannot afford to shield our eyes; we must struggle to understand the experience of looking at mediated death, and we must look at it closely enough to untangle the knot of ethics, aesthetics, and context that colors the way each recording is received.

For Bazin, to re-present the sight of an actual death would be an acute “cinematic perversion,” but during the era in which he wrote, the problem was more theoretical than practical.<sup>9</sup> Despite the American public’s desire to see such a documentary moment (manifest since the early years of cinema), to catch hold of one on *celluloid* was quite difficult due to technological limitations. Cameras were not especially mobile, they required expertise to operate, their film stock was very expensive, and they could run for only a few minutes per reel. Technology thus mediated between the “stop” of ethical condemnations and the “go” of audience desires, keeping the archive of documentary death images sparse through the mid-twentieth century. That balance began to shift in the U.S. during the 1960s as nascent trends in media solidified: the widespread adoption of home movie cameras brought the public greater access to recording technologies, and television’s continuing infiltration of American living rooms provided more possibilities for the distribution and exhibition of moving images.

These trends have expanded astoundingly in the decades since, as digital technologies have filled these roles and created still others; in a new media environment, instances of recorded death are no longer the rare lightning strikes they once were. Beginning in the 1980s, when both consumers and professional documentarians started adopting video widely, and continuing through today’s ubiquitous cell phone cameras, recording devices became substantially more versatile, affordable, and easy to operate. As videotapes and reusable digital storage supplanted

reels of film, operators could record far more material at far less cost and with far fewer interruptions for changing reels. The democratizing effect of these technological shifts has meant, in practice, that vastly *more* cameras are blanketing public space in the digital age, more ready to capture death wherever and whenever it may occur. A further effect of advancing digital technologies is the accessibility of broader distribution for professional documentaries on DVD and for everyone on free sites like YouTube. This cheap and easy chain of digital production, distribution, and exhibition has allowed an unprecedented amount of documentary death footage to reach the public. This footage includes low-budget chronicles of long dying processes, often shot in part by the dying people themselves or their loved ones. Mounted surveillance cameras have documented many deaths, usually without sound or much visual detail. We have also seen suicides, fatal confrontations with police, war deaths in Iraq and Afghanistan, and sometimes even surreptitiously recorded executions. From shots of jumpers plummeting from the World Trade Center in 2001 to clips of police shooting protestors that fueled Middle East revolutions in 2011, documentary death footage has played a prominent role in twenty-first century visual culture.

That such instances have multiplied dramatically in the digital age and that public access to death footage has expanded at a remarkable rate are undeniable realities of our time, but realities whose implications are not readily apparent and are perhaps difficult to face. Difficult or not, the fact that a life ending in front of a camera has become a common sight on YouTube – a sight that is frequently mobilized for *political* purposes – calls for a critical reassessment of documentary death. This reassessment must eschew all-purpose labels like “metaphysical obscenity” in favor of a more detailed analysis – one that examines the content of individual clips, considering both ethics and aesthetics, and accounts for the ways in which these clips circulate and the ways they are received.

“Dying in Full Detail” undertakes this reassessment, analyzing the products of documentary death’s new accessibility in American visual culture to argue that the thriving combination of death and the digital exposes essential components of each. Traditionally framed as “beyond representation,” death retains that distinction even amidst image technologies that can record it more fully than ever. Death remains fragmentary: enigmatic and internal, with external signs that the camera doggedly pursues. Especially elusive (and illusive) is the “moment of death,” a supposed point of transition from living being to corpse that has fixated image-makers and audiences, and that obscures the more frightening reality that dying is a durational process – a long one, for most Americans. In grasping at death, digital technologies likewise reveal their own unique temporalities. DV has the capacity to record hours and hours of footage inexpensively, enabling it to chronicle the long process of dying from disease or to record pedestrians patiently at the Golden Gate Bridge until one jumps off it. Yet this capacity exists in tension with the conventions of Internet video, one of the primary avenues of digital distribution. On YouTube and similar sites, the brief, spectacle-oriented video is king. The celebration of those qualities curtails videomakers’ options for displaying death’s duration or its frequent resistance to spectacular visibility and reinscribes the overexposure of violent (rather than natural) death.

Further, I also hope to frame digital technology in a way that suits its actual application in the documentary form. Scholarship on digital cinema tends to focus on the highly visible realms of special effects and image manipulation in big-budget fiction film. The changes digital technology has enacted in documentary have been less publicly apparent but equally impactful, vastly expanding what professionals can do with their limited budgets and extending

documentary authorship to non-professionals. With most documentaries, viewers' Bazinian faith in the direct correspondence between objects in the world and their representation on screen does not seem to be shaken by digital capture – which is to say, viewers remain suspicious of digital documentary in basically the same ways they have been suspicious of celluloid documentary. They question whether the editor has tinkered with a chronology of events or whether incidents have been staged for the camera, but I have seen no evidence in viewer response to the works analyzed in this project that they are wary of overt digital manipulation on any meaningful scale.<sup>10</sup>

Along these lines, I strive to demonstrate that reigning theories of the digital as “immaterial” and “disembodied,” compared to indexical media, feel inappropriate in the face of documentary death – to point out the limitations of this rather esoteric conception of digital media.<sup>11</sup> Watching blood pour out of Neda Agha-Soltan's nose and mouth in a YouTube clip of her 2009 death, for example, it hardly matters (to me or to any of the YouTube viewers who wrote comments on that video) that sequences of ones and zeroes are communicating this event rather than silver-halide grains on a strip of celluloid. Knowledge of such differences – for those who have it – does nothing to lessen the impact of watching a life end, a digital sight that feels decidedly embodied, and painfully so.

As much as video and digital technologies have enabled documentary death, the drive documentarians do or do not experience to capture these sights and the willingness or unwillingness of audiences to look at them are products of culture – in this case, cultural attitudes toward death in the U.S. Succinctly summarizing the state of mainstream U.S. death culture around the turn of the twenty-first century, Robert Kastenbaum writes, “We have succeeded more than most societies in reducing the presence of the dead. In part this has been accomplished by keeping people alive longer. In part, though, we have cultivated techniques for keeping not only the dead but also the dying from general view. For most people in other times and places, death and the dead were more a part of everyday life.”<sup>12</sup> The story of how the U.S. got to this point – embracing denial, distancing its culture from those “in other times and places” – is oft-told, but bears repeating in the present context. The following overview will establish the necessary background for considering documentary death images in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in Chapter One, and will help elucidate late-twentieth century changes in U.S. death culture and revisions to the notion of “the good death” in Chapter Two.

Contemporary U.S. death culture is historically informed by the shape death culture took in medieval Europe, when Christian church leaders pushed the crucial importance of life's end by directing all believers to keep it firmly and continuously in mind. Societal norms for what makes a good death were soon defined by Christian ritual, which, by the fifteenth century, was disseminated as a set of monolithic guidelines for the dying and for their souls' caretakers.<sup>13</sup> Those spared the misfortune of a sudden death – which would deny them time to repent sins and receive deathbed rites from a priest – could follow instructions from the *Ars moriendi* (*The Art of Dying*), a popular tract of illustrations and text dating from about 1430.<sup>14</sup> The tract first establishes its central premise, acknowledging in its opening line that Aristotle claimed the death of the body to be our greatest loss, then asserting the Church's opposing view: “it is in no way comparable to the death of the soul.”<sup>15</sup> The majority of the text describes the deathbed as a place where angels and demons battle over the soul of the dying, each trying to persuade him (and it is

always a him, in this era) to take a certain attitude toward his death: to lose or retain religious faith, to cling to his worldly possessions or realize the virtue in letting them go, and so on. There are five specific temptations, with the *Ars moriendi* elaborating on the Devil and Angel's rhetorical pitch when each temptation arises.

Thus, even in an age when the time spent being terminally unwell was far shorter, on average, than today – perhaps a matter of days, or even hours, compared to months – there was still a sense of dying as a process.<sup>16</sup> It had multiple phases in the form of temptations that had to be overcome before the soul's salvation could be wholly secured. Though the *Ars moriendi* presents these phases as universal, this is nevertheless the period in which hints of individuality, of variance from one dying person to another, began to appear in cultural attitudes toward death. The most well-known historian of those attitudes in Western culture, Philippe Ariès, dubs the twelfth- to fifteenth-century period as the age of “one's own death,” in which the individual – his particular life and sins, and his particular attitude toward deathbed temptations – began to matter in dying.<sup>17</sup>

Across the Atlantic as colonization of the Americas proceeded, the spirit of the *Ars moriendi* survived and intensified in Puritan New England, where death was seen as simultaneously the route one must traverse to reach Heaven and also “agony and punishment.”<sup>18</sup> David Stannard describes the way in which even the youngest children in Puritan communities were taught harsh lessons about salvation and damnation, a practice that reflected the very real possibility that they would die as children. Thus, they had to heed the *Ars moriendi*'s instructions “to contemplate the art of dying frequently . . . and to bear in mind one's deathbed illness.”<sup>19</sup> As Stannard describes, all sources of information – parents, teachers, books – “focused with a particular intensity on the possibility and even the likelihood of their immanent death.”<sup>20</sup>

Staggering death rates continued in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century U.S. and kept death ever-present in American consciousness. Infectious disease tore through populations, especially those in growing urban centers. Burden Lundgren and Clare Houseman colorfully explain the sense in which “nineteenth-century Americans lived and died in a cauldron of uncontrolled endemic and epidemic diseases of contagion. Tuberculosis, diphtheria, scarlet fever, whooping cough, enteric disorders, measles, smallpox, and malaria were endemic, and often epidemic, in every American city.”<sup>21</sup> Faring even worse than children in seventeenth-century New England, for example, those in 1870 Philadelphia had a one-in-three chance of dying before their tenth birthdays.<sup>22</sup> These hardships were aggravated by the widespread threat of sudden death – still fearsome in its refusal of time for the soul's preparation – caused by diseases like cholera, which could kill within hours of the onset of symptoms, and for a few overwhelming years by the massive casualties of the American Civil War.<sup>23</sup> A nineteenth-century young man's diary entry about cholera expresses the terror these threats brought: “To see individuals well in the morning & buried before night, retiring apparently well & dead in the morning is something which is appalling to the boldest heart.”<sup>24</sup> Widespread diseases like tuberculosis frightened, too, with their seemingly random selection of victims from all classes, ages, and previous states of health.<sup>25</sup>

Nineteenth-century Americans coped with their ever-present mortality by building a culture, as Ariès describes, in which the process of dying was charged with fierce emotion: joy that the dying person would be passing into eternity and salvation, but sharply-felt and loudly-expressed grief on the part of those from whom he would be (temporarily) separated.<sup>26</sup> Concern for the soul's fate was still the primary ingredient of the good death, but the presence of the



living at the deathbed was now a fiercely cherished source of support rather than the distraction from religious contemplation it had been in the *Ars moriendi*. To attend the bedside of the dying was a privilege granted to many, and those attending often expected to see life end triumphantly and emotionally – with deaths that failed to meet those expectations sometimes causing disappointment, according to Ariès.<sup>27</sup> This period of American death culture hardly foreshadows the denial and suppression of death that would follow in the twentieth century. Discourse on mortality was robust and highly public, because death itself was robust and highly public, and because strong religious faith enabled Americans to conceive of death as an exalted event that would lead to a glorious reunion in Heaven.

Death's highly public and emotional status in the nineteenth century is also reflected in shifting patterns of memorialization. Gravestones, tombs, and monuments became increasingly elaborate and individualized, even featuring sculpted portraits or scenes. Survivors also felt the need to preserve traces of the departed's *bodies* – a desire we will see shadowed in the natural death documentaries of the late twentieth century.<sup>28</sup> Chapter One explores the use of postmortem mourning photographs for this purpose, but these indexes of the body were joined by other corporeal mementos, most commonly hair, gathered in locks or woven into elaborate designs.<sup>29</sup> In the efforts to hold onto the perishable body of the dead, one elaborate plan even arose for a vitrification process that would convert the skeleton of the deceased into a glass-like substance that could be used in creating medallions or a portrait to commemorate that individual.<sup>30</sup>

The body remained centrally important in twentieth-century U.S. death culture, but as the object of intense medical intervention in addition to its role as a site of postmortem fetishization. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that intense medical treatment of the body was the prime facet of a broad suppression of any visible death culture for more than half of the century, as a “brutal revolution” in attitudes propelled the country into its much-analyzed era of death-denial.<sup>31</sup> Assessing the state of death culture in the West in 1955, noted anthropologist Geoffrey Gorer asserted, “The natural processes of corruption and decay have become disgusting, as disgusting as the natural processes of birth and copulation were a century ago; preoccupation about such processes is (or was) morbid and unhealthy, to be discouraged in all and punished in the young.”<sup>32</sup> While the decay of the body in natural death became taboo, Gorer saw the destruction of the body through violence everywhere in the culture, leading him to make another connection between death and sex. Gorer condemned the representations of violent death that flooded twentieth century media as the “pornography of death.” In both sexual pornography and death pornography, Gorer asserts that, “the emotions which are typically concomitant of the acts – love or grief – are paid little or no attention, while the sensations are enhanced.”<sup>33</sup> The natural death documentaries analyzed in Chapter Two position themselves against the culture Gorer describes, striving to bring the physical and emotional realities of natural dying back into the public eye.

Death began to recede from that public eye in the early part of the century through two major medical factors. First, death rates declined thanks to improvements in medical care and the control of epidemic diseases – as well as better housing, nutrition, and hygiene.<sup>34</sup> As Americans played witness to fewer deaths in this era of longer life, “the final days of dying, once calmly familiar to everyone, [became] existentially disturbing in ways they once were not,” as Stephen Post asserts.<sup>35</sup> That decreased exposure to dying stemmed from a second factor, as well. The rise of hospitals in the early twentieth century and their promise of life-saving medical intervention through the doctors and machines they housed led to death's spatial displacement

starting around 1930, from the home to the hospital.<sup>36</sup> Here, the dying would be hidden away, first in the hospital itself – where they were operated on and died in open wards, in full view of other patients – and then in an even deeper layer of concealment as the need for income drove hospitals to offer private and semi-private rooms.<sup>37</sup>

The style of death that was possible in a twentieth-century American hospital was radically different from the one possible in a nineteenth-century American home, necessitating changes in how the good death was conceptualized. The personal, spiritual preparation for life's end that had been a central component of a good death since the Middle Ages was compromised by a new feeling among doctors and family members that it was best not to inform the dying person of her or his immanent demise – the awareness of which could, it was thought, interfere with medical treatment and hospital routines. The unconscious and speedy end thus became the best manifestation of death, a sharp reversal from the fear of sudden death dominant in earlier centuries.<sup>38</sup> Friends, family, and even neighbors, who had been fixtures of deathbeds at home, were now discouraged from gathering beside them and permitted in limited numbers at set visiting hours.<sup>39</sup>

These changes in customs are symptomatic of how the emotional and spiritual needs of the dying and their survivors were subordinated to the demands of medical care. That Americans abided by this shift in values perhaps speaks to the creeping secularization of U.S. culture and a redistribution of faith – away from God and the certainty that loved ones would reunite in Heaven, and toward science and the promise that loved ones could delay their earthly parting. But doubt in the afterlife also frames the time a dying person has left as the last chance to affirm and enjoy bonds with the living – a chance withdrawn by the constrictions of hospital dying, as coming generations would start to realize. In hospital dying for much of the twentieth century, “spiritual rites of passage” were replaced by “metallic ones” as machines became primary and nurses were taught to do their jobs with mechanical efficiency.<sup>40</sup> Personifying this newly medicalized natural death (arguably more frightening than violent death in the twentieth century), Ariès asserts, “The death of the patient in the hospital, covered with tubes, is becoming a popular image, more terrifying than the *transi* or skeleton of macabre rhetoric.”<sup>41</sup>

Enduring death in a hospital covered with tubes would likely be easier if it came within hours, like nineteenth-century cholera. But as the medical establishment became more and more successful at prolonging life, a protracted period of suffering and dying was the unfortunate side effect. Death's duration lengthened more dramatically than at any other point in U.S. history, the implications of which process-oriented, natural death documentaries attempt to show. The leading three causes of death in the U.S. in 1950, for example, would likely result in a great deal of hospital time as death approached: heart disease (which kills only a portion of its victims through sudden heart attacks), malignant neoplasms (cancer), and vascular lesions.<sup>42</sup> For most Americans in this era, the “moment of death” was thus a tiny fragment of a long process of dying – a process that seems to proceed “in slow motion,” as Michael Kearl puts it, compared to other historical eras.<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, the “moment” – if it ever really had been identifiable – was now obscured by a swarm of drugs and medical procedures that seemed to divide dying into pieces.<sup>44</sup>

Lacking the first-hand exposure to dying and the dead that their ancestors had, Americans could not help but rely on other sources of information about what death – this essential and shared human experience – looked like. Cinema has been one of those sources. As Jay Ruby surmises, “Long before most Americans ever see the actual body of a dead person, they see photographic and electronic representations of death – a few are actual, most make-believe.”<sup>45</sup> I would add that of the make-believe majority, most are violent. Throughout “Dying in Full

Detail,” the interplay between “actual” and “make-believe” moving image representations of death will be important, as will the porous aesthetic boundaries between these modes of filmmaking. Having seen little in life or documentary to challenge mainstream, fiction film’s visions of death, viewers may find that these “make-believe” visions color their expectations of “actual” death footage, unsurprisingly, when it finally does start to appear with any regularity.

“Dying in Full Detail” is about the documentary camera’s pull toward death’s most apparently visible forms – toward displaying dying and dead bodies on screen – and the impact its footage makes on American visual culture. This project focuses on death that is embodied and enframed, but such displays are complemented in documentary history by other important and eloquent works that approach death more obliquely. Derek Jarman opts for a screen of flat color rather than images of his bodily decay in his audio-centric chronicle of his own death, *Blue* (1993). In *Grizzly Man* (2005), director Werner Herzog encounters a tape on which a young couple is heard being killed by a bear, and he rejects it on-camera, telling its owner “you must never listen to this . . . you should destroy it.”<sup>46</sup> Perhaps Bazin’s greatest ally in his argument against recording death is Claude Lanzmann, who pointedly made his nine-and-a-half-hour Holocaust opus *Shoah* (1985) without the shots of corpses that fill other classic Holocaust documentaries, such as *Night and Fog* (1955, Alain Resnais). Lanzmann states unequivocally, “If I had stumbled on a real SS film . . . that showed how 3,000 Jewish men, women and children were gassed in Auschwitz’s crematorium 2, not only would I not have shown it but I would have destroyed it.”<sup>47</sup> Instead of relying on archival images, Lanzmann evokes past death in the present – grasping at it through the spaces and actions that connote it for living witnesses and perpetrators. His method has been critically lauded and adapted by other documentarians working with past genocides, especially Cambodian filmmaker Rithy Panh in the haunting *S21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine* (2003). Death forms the core of all of these documentaries, but the filmmakers restrain it from surfacing visually or aurally, refusing to create Bazin’s “metaphysical obscenity.”

Another set of works that will also remain in the background of this project lie on the other end of documentary death’s spectrum of elision and display: works that are popularly referred to as “death porn.” Rather than finding creative ways to evoke death without showing it, as the above documentaries do, death porn delights in its graphic display, always striving for a “maximum visibility” of bodily pain and destruction that parallels the “maximum visibility” of bodily pleasure Linda Williams writes about in pornography.<sup>48</sup> The most well-known example of the cult genre is *Faces of Death* (John Allen Schwartz), a controversial 1978 release that presents itself as a compilation documentary exploring the profound topic of death, “our own destiny” that we refuse to recognize. An “expert” is presented, Dr. Frances B. Gröss, who has “compiled a library of the many faces of death” for our edification and narrates these clips. *Faces of Death* quickly communicates its more macabre intentions through the type of footage it uses: gory animal deaths, corpses and autopsies, blatantly staged human deaths (an electrocution, an alligator attack, a cult leader cutting open a follower’s chest and eating his innards), and very occasional actuality footage of human death. Still more unsettling than this mix is the way that footage is presented, often with jokes from Dr. Gröss or a comical soundtrack. Actuality footage of a suicidal jump from a building ledge, for example, is accompanied by a jaunty jazz score with the musical count, “and a one, two, one two three four,” timed to signal the woman’s jump.

Death porn films of this ilk are catalogued with encyclopedic detail by David Kerekes and David Slater in their 1995 book, *Killing for Culture: An Illustrated History of Death Film from Mondo to Snuff*, but since the book's publication, death porn's quantity and reach has expanded dramatically with the help of digital technology. High-traffic websites such as Rotten.com gather the Internet's goriest images of actual death (along with non-fatal wounds, deformities, and other spectacles of bodily disfigurement) and Internet users often tag relevant streaming videos with the search term "fatal fail," helping death porn fans locate such material.

Makers of death porn recognize a pervasive curiosity about death in an era of its reduced visibility, but break the "real death" taboo for the sake of taboo-breaking and its accompanying titillation. To delight in such an act when the subject matter is actual death is ethically quite different than to do so in relation to sex, as pornography does. The pornography industry – at least, its reputable companies – stages taboo acts of unsimulated sex that are performed by consenting participants who know that the footage will be distributed. This basic level of informed consent is not a privilege that can be granted to people dying suddenly and violently in front of cameras, as in *Faces of Death*'s few actuality shots, and the ethical stakes of using such footage are therefore extremely high. To present it with a mood of frivolity or as a source of pure audiovisual pleasure is to open oneself up to well-justified ethical condemnation.

The works I analyze in this project generally fall between these two extremes of cautious omission and unabashed enjoyment in their approach to actuality footage of death. These documentarians labor in an ethical and aesthetic borderland, though one increasingly populous in the digital age, striving to represent the unrepresentable, directly and ethically. Not all succeed, as some lose their tenuous grasp on an ethical engagement with death. But all share a conviction, as do I, that images of actual death can do a kind of cultural work.

In writing about the intersection between death and documentary, I am informed by those who have done so previously in studies of photography (Roland Barthes, Susan Sontag, John Berger) and, more rarely, of film (Bazin, Amos Vogel, Michael Renov).<sup>49</sup> None have been more important to this project than Vivian Sobchack, whose 1984 essay (and its revised 2004 version) "Inscribing Ethical Space: Ten Propositions on Death, Representation, and Documentary" provides an early and ambitious exploration of the topic. In a mere 18 pages of the *Quarterly Review of Film Studies*, Sobchack provides a cultural context for death documentary, ten theoretical propositions about it, and a taxonomy of six "gazes" through which the camera might look at actual death, evaluated in relation to ethics.

These gazes, which I will reference in multiple chapters ahead, deserve a brief overview here.<sup>50</sup> Sobchack grants ethical approval to five of these ways of looking, starting with the "accidental gaze," which applies to death footage captured by chance without a cameraperson's intention to record it. The "helpless gaze" indicates that the cameraperson was restrained from intervening in the death recorded, usually by physical distance or the law (in the case of recorded executions). Whether helpless or not, the cameraperson who records death with an "endangered gaze" is doing so at the risk of her or his own life, and thus paying an appropriate price for the ethical privilege. An extreme extension of the endangered gaze, the "interventional gaze" shows the cameraperson emerging from cover and safety to record death – sometimes dying while doing so. Finally, the "humane gaze" is more of a stare, "marked by its *extended duration*" and often employed to film natural death.<sup>51</sup> Sobchack praises these instances of the humane gaze in which documentarians have been invited by the dying – a situation in which the opportunity to consent is possible, where it is impossible in most of the cases these gazes describe. Each of the preceding gazes is ethical, according to Sobchack, because death's recording neither indicates

the cameraperson's complicity nor interferes with death's possible prevention. In fact, Sobchack encourages viewers to look for signs of an ethical position "inscribed" into the footage itself – a zoom that indicates physical distance from the death, or an obscured view that signifies the cameraperson's endangerment and need to take cover. The "professional gaze" (attributed to professional journalists, in this essay), however, does not inscribe acceptable ethics into its content and does not receive automatic ethical approval from Sobchack. Instead, its content is "marked by ethical ambiguity, by technical and *machinelike competence* in the face of an event that seems to call for further and more humane response."<sup>52</sup>

With this taxonomy of gazes, Sobchack contributes a welcome insistence that, contrary to Bazin's implication, not all recorded deaths are recorded equally. *How* death is documented matters, and viewers can evaluate the ethics of each instance by examining the circumstances and attitude of its recording – often implied in the material itself, through cinematography. Although her assessment of documentary ethics prescribes close reading as a necessary tool, Sobchack herself does little of it in "Inscribing Ethical Space." Her intentions seem to be broad and theoretical, and her ambitious coverage of an extensive topic in 18 pages leaves little room for detailed analysis of actual footage. Additionally, far less of that footage would have been available and accessible to a scholar writing on this topic in 1984 than one writing on it today. Using her essay as a vital foundation, this project affirms Sobchack's insistence that the way death is recorded makes a difference, engaging in the type of close reading that she lacked the space, access, and perhaps desire to undertake in "Inscribing Ethical Space." Further, the works I analyze present opportunities to expand Sobchack's list of gazes, as new ways of looking have emerged in the documentary form that are uniquely digital.

The first half of "Dying in Full Detail" concentrates on the duration of death itself that is illuminated in its recording. Chapter One contextualizes digital efforts to record death through a history of photographic and filmic attempts from the invention of the daguerreotype in 1839 through the end of the Vietnam War in 1975. The chapter unifies disparate images – Civil War and lynching photographs, early cinema's execution films, images from Nazi concentration camps, film of Kennedy's assassination, and news coverage of the Vietnam War – through their struggle to capture the "moment of death." I argue that such attempts form a collective and enduring fantasy for documentarians and their audiences, one that cannot be fully realized because cameras cannot isolate a definitive "moment" within a necessarily durational process of dying. The relative paucity of success in capturing death on celluloid also highlights film's specific technological limitations in that task.

Chapter Two examines a contrasting practice that gained traction with the rise of video and then DV: the long-term chronicling of natural dying. With newly affordable and user-friendly equipment, both professionals and family members began to bring cameras to the bedsides of the dying, who collaborated in recording their own deaths. Their documentaries – including the filmic precursor *Dying* (1978, Michael Roemer), *Silverlake Life: The View from Here* (1993, Peter Friedman and Tom Joslin), and *Sick: The Life and Death of Bob Flanagan, Supermasochist* (1997, Kirby Dick) – challenge the primacy of the "moment of death" by systematically excluding it. Instead, they implicitly assert the importance of process and duration, detailing the illness that precedes this "moment" and the mourning that follows it. I argue, though, that this exclusion also hides the death phase of dying's process because that

phase does not align neatly with America's post-1960s revision of the good death as the individualized death.

In its second half, my project shifts from consideration of how the digital reveals death's duration to how death highlights the possibilities for duration in digital video. Chapter Three analyzes *The Bridge* (2006, Eric Steel), a documentary that exploits the durational powers of the digital in order to record death in a new and ethically volatile way. With two stations of continually-staffed DV cameras, Eric Steel surveilled San Francisco's Golden Gate Bridge for every daylight minute of 2004, watching for the frequent suicides this structure draws. Culled from 10,000 hours of video, the startling suicide footage included in *The Bridge* elicited both a barrage of ethical criticisms and a surge in activist efforts to erect a suicide barrier at the Golden Gate. While many of *The Bridge*'s harshest critics condemned the mere act of recording and displaying these suicides – a common response to death documentary – I argue that the film's ethics are fully entangled with its aesthetics. Steel uses Hollywood conventions to frame suicide as sublime, both terrible and magnificent, and to elevate one graceful jumper into a position as the film's "star." These choices have serious ethical implications in relation to suicide, which social scientists have shown to spread when the act itself is romanticized.

Shifting away from the 10,000 hours shot for *The Bridge*, Chapter Four analyzes death videos as short as twelve seconds that have been widely distributed on YouTube. In 2009, two deaths in public space were recorded on (mostly) cell phone cameras from multiple angles, posted to YouTube and other streaming video sites, and firmly integrated into activist movements. First came the death of a young African American man, Oscar Grant, in Oakland, California at the hands of transit police. A few months later, Iranian protestor Neda Agha-Soltan's fatal shooting was recorded in Tehran while she was demonstrating against her country's election results. Although both sets of videos show politically charged deaths, they generated significantly different responses on the Internet and in the news media: global outpourings of sympathy and support for Agha-Soltan, compared to a more regional wave of activism for Grant. By contrasting these disparate responses, I argue that a dramatic aesthetic presentation draws more attention to some death videos than others and that the "context" for such videos that YouTube does not provide can mislead as often as it informs.

The spectacle of "dying in full detail" is what mainstream fiction film has claimed to deliver, what pre-video documentary largely failed to deliver, what we in the U.S. have lost first-hand exposure to, and what we are curious to see now with the help of digital cameras and distribution. But the promise of spectatorial plenitude in the digital age – that new technology can show us not only death but just about *everything* "in full detail" – cannot hold. Just as we expect too much from death as a mystical, transcendent moment, we also expect too much from technology. Digital technology does display the end of life more often and in different ways than its indexical predecessors, photography and film, but "full detail" remains a fantasy in relation to death, not a visible reality that cameras can capture.

## Chapter One

### Capturing the “Moment”: Photography, Film, and Death’s Elusive Duration

“[D]eath is the unique moment par excellence.”

– André Bazin<sup>1</sup>

On screen, a young actress snorts cocaine in a bathroom stall, then vomits and drops to the floor; she convulses violently, flopping around on the dirty tile until her body stills. An elderly man wheeling his recycling bin to the curb stops and grips his chest; a few seconds later he falls on his lawn, motionless. A dog walker on rollerblades reaches exhilarating speed rolling down a sloped suburban street, but collides with a car at the bottom; vaulting over the cracked windshield, her body then lies frozen on the pavement amidst the sound of barking dogs. Each sequence ends in a slow wash out as the screen gradually brightens to pure white, with black letters that provide a tombstone’s report: Rebecca Leah Milford, 1980-2001; Benjamin Srisai, 1935-2002; Pilar Sandoval, 1970-2005. These death scenes open three different episodes of Alan Ball’s *Six Feet Under* (2001-2005), an HBO drama about a family that runs a Los Angeles funeral home. Every episode begins with a “death of the week”: a mini-narrative that lasts between 30 seconds and 5 minutes, ends in a death, and later links up with the main narrative (usually when the deceased becomes a customer at the funeral home). By the end of its five-season run, *Six Feet Under* had amassed scores of these scenes. While the tone and ways in which people die vary with each opening segment, an unwavering but compassionate fascination with the *moment* of death – that inscrutable point when a living being becomes a corpse – unites these segments and sets them apart from most other fiction fare.<sup>2</sup> Benjamin Srisai’s 50-second story epitomizes this focus. It contains no dialogue, no other characters, and only one discernable audiovisual or narrative attraction: a sustained close-up on his face as he dies, first expressing simple pain and then a wide-eyed mixture of shock and wonder (see Appendix, Figure 1.1). *Six Feet Under*’s impressive accumulation of these moments over its five-year run seeks to provide viewers with an answer to a powerful question, one that brushes up against the curiosity to know how death will feel: what is it like to watch a life end?

Part of my project’s premise is that fiction film and television have long been the main resources for Americans asking the above question because individuals’ access to unmediated dying declined so dramatically in the twentieth century.<sup>3</sup> Considering the remarkable distortions and exclusions enacted by these representations of death in the entertainment industry – which rare productions like *Six Feet Under* sometimes attempt to correct – the documentary mode seems a better candidate than fiction for providing enlightening, mediated views of the end of life. However, the pre-video/digital history of documentary photography and film contains few images of death itself. Documentarians proved more capable of showing the before and after – the living person and the corpse. The images that have managed to poise themselves between these states often become icons, achieving that status precisely because they seem to depict the alluring “moment” of death that is so extremely rare in the history of photography and film.

Examining this history has convinced me that documenting violent death was less a “road not taken” by indexical media, and more a route attempted with equipment unfit to traverse it. Indeed, within this history a sort of multi-generational quest emerged as image makers sought to

freeze the “moment” of (violent) death in a photograph or contain it within a strip of film. What *Six Feet Under* stages with ease over and over again in the twenty-first century is a moment filmmakers and photographers had to struggle mightily to document in the nineteenth and most of the twentieth centuries – not just because the contingencies of reality made it more elusive than in fiction, but because of technological limitations. Cameras remained cumbersome and complicated for much of cinema’s history, and celluloid film stock was expensive. This pursuit of death was indeed a technological one, with its history unfolding alongside developments in production and distribution equipment. It was a series of attempts – usually on a battlefield, where death was most predictably found – to get the right kind of photo or film camera into the hands of a skilled operator lucky enough to find himself in death’s vicinity, followed by efforts to bring the resulting image before the eyes of a wide public. Alongside its technological component, the quest was also characterized by ongoing battles with government censorship and the propriety of distributors and exhibitors. And it did not yield a fully linear progression toward the most graphic spectacles – lynching photographs from the late nineteenth century, for example, are far more explicit than battle images from World War II. Accounting for these nuances, the history of documentary efforts to capture the “moment” of death is still most revealing in its failure – or rather, its scant and partial successes. These expose the limitations of indexical media’s capacity to record this fully embodied event – despite their theoretical reputation as technologies of embodiment and materiality, in contrast to the digital.<sup>4</sup>

Photographic and filmic documentary’s true “road not taken” in this history is its potential to depict natural death. While its scattered views of violent death were more realistic and often more political than fiction film’s, the documentary form raised no parallel challenge to fiction in relation to natural death. Documentary’s initial use in the mid-nineteenth century to help people contemplate and mourn death almost wholly disappeared (at least, from the public eye) for most of the twentieth. In my second chapter, I will return to recordings of natural death and their resurgence in the era of video, but I introduce it here because its imagined archive of absent and hidden images must haunt any discussion of these depictions of violent death. For all that documentary displays of lethal violence promised to *reveal* about death, they simultaneously helped to *conceal* their newly-shameful counterpart of natural death, participating in its broad displacement from public life and discourse in the twentieth century.

The crucial challenge that death from age or disease poses to the very concept of the “moment” of death is another reason to keep natural death firmly in mind during this journey through violent death’s documentation. The *Six Feet Under* death sequences hint at this challenge on a stylistic level: whether the death depicted is sudden or gradual, violent or natural, it is always followed by a slow transition to a pure white screen. In its notable protraction, this type of transition underscores death’s necessarily durational rather than instantaneous character, even if that duration is barely perceptible to those who witness it. The notion of life’s end as an instantaneous event that could be identified and isolated in a documentary photograph or a frame of film footage could only be upheld when the body was subject to acute violence rather than withering disease. For in the latter case, how could cameras make that one moment evident? The visual difference between a barely-moving person about to die and a motionless corpse lacks contrast. Anxiety about this blurred line between alive and dead became manifest in the nineteenth century with fears of premature burial, and took a new direction in the twentieth century through medical debates about defining death for the purpose of organ donation.<sup>5</sup> Such manifestations of uncertainty about death’s timing cast doubt on the existence of a “moment” of death available for documentation by all these eager image makers and highlight a subtle



psychological function of this photographic and filmic quest. Graphic documentation of violent “*moments*” of death served as a comforting fiction for a viewing public that would – increasingly, as the nineteenth and the hyper-medicalized twentieth centuries progressed – be more likely to experience their own demises as long and painful *processes* of dying.<sup>6</sup>

What follows will track the camera’s pursuit of these “moments” of death in documentary images that circulated in the U.S. from the invention of the daguerreotype in 1839 through the end of the Vietnam War in 1975. In framing this pursuit, I borrow Linda Williams’ usage of three temporal modes in “Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess.”<sup>7</sup> Williams proposes a collection of “body genres” that are built on specific psychoanalytic fantasies, and that ask spectators’ bodies to mimic the sensations displayed on screen: melodrama solicits tears from the audience, pornography solicits orgasms, and horror solicits shudders. Williams associates each genre and its fantasy with a distinct temporal structure drawn from the psychoanalytic theory of Jean Laplanche and J.B. Pontalis. Melodrama investigates the fantasy of the self’s origins and the quest to return to them – most symbolically, to the mother’s body; the genre’s pathos stems from these quests being “‘too late!’ . . . always tinged with the melancholy of loss.” Pornography works through the origins of desire and the fantasy of seduction by creating a “utopian fantasy of perfect temporal coincidence: a subject and object (or seducer and seduced) who meet one another ‘on time!’ and ‘now!’ in shared moments of mutual pleasure.” Horror tackles the origins of sexual difference and the fantasy of castration, featuring a monster that strikes “too early!” when the characters are not prepared, just like the knowledge of sexual difference that one can never be ready first to confront.<sup>8</sup> Like Williams in “Film Bodies,” I am analyzing works that target “the spectacle of the body caught in the grip of intense sensation or emotion” and that owe their maligned status partly to that bodily spectacle.<sup>9</sup>

The ways we talk about death can align with these temporal modes readily: it usually feels to loved ones like it arrives “too early” (especially violent death), “on time” for a lucky few, or occasionally “too late” for those who most want to spare the dying from pain. In my use of these modes, though, the desired synchronicity is between actual death – with all its contingencies – and the camera that records it. When the shutter snaps or the film rolls “on time,” the camera seems to capture the exact transition point between alive and dead. This scenario most often proves to be a “fantasy of perfect temporal coincidence”; in documentary death’s history, the image-maker’s actions almost always occur “too late.” Only in the 1960s, at the intersection of great technological development and plentiful violence, did the American public begin to see “on time” encounters between documentary cameras and death.

#### “[Keeping] Company with Death”: Corpse Photography and the Temporality of “Too Late”

Connecting the “too late” to melodrama, Williams sees in it the inevitably frustrated desire to return to one’s origins, to the body of the mother. In melodrama, “Origins are already lost, the encounters always take place too late, on death beds or over coffins.”<sup>10</sup> Just as a coffin announces an encounter in melodrama that arrives too late, when the corpse that this container is designed to hide appears in documentary photographs, the same temporal mode is suggested: death and the camera meet too late for the former’s display. Underscoring the finality of death, the corpse is an all-too material reminder of the “too late” – of our ultimate failure to stop death, our tardiness, perhaps, with medical help or intervention in the violence that caused it. The

corpse lies there, seemingly outside of time in its utter stillness and imperceptibly slow decay, stubbornly remaining a body that has ceased to *embody* an individual being. The corpse photograph, then, makes a kind of accusation to its creator and viewer: too late to stop the death it signifies, they are also too late to display/witness that death. Such a photograph can drive home the moral failure of preventing death and also the questionable desire that it prompts to *see more*, to see the lost object of death itself.

Williams' "too late" mode, with its lost object, is the one most in harmony with the film medium she discusses – and also its technological ancestor, photography. For film and photography, the past itself becomes a lost object in these media's poignant attempts to preserve it. Through these attempts, photography in particular develops a special relationship with death, in both its ontology and its history. Roland Barthes slowly draws out the ontological aspect in *Camera Lucida*, through observations that each photograph "produces Death while trying to preserve life" and creates an "anterior future" – a moment in the past when the death that will befall (or has already befallen) the subject casts a pall over the photo's present.<sup>11</sup> Susan Sontag distills these ideas beautifully, writing, "Photographs state the innocence, the vulnerability of lives heading toward their own destruction, and this link between photography and death haunts all photographs."<sup>12</sup> And Bazin hints at the special relationship with still greater economy in his insight that the photograph "embalms time."<sup>13</sup> The vibrancy and charged sense of aliveness of the present are the qualities that make people want to preserve it, but the photograph turns that life into death, freezing time and depriving it of its animating motion. Thus, photographs that make death their direct subject, rather than their subtext, provide some cathartic acknowledgment of this tragic transformation – a factor that perhaps contributes to the popularity of death photography in the pre-cinema nineteenth century. As Sontag puts it, "Ever since cameras were invented in 1839, photography has kept company with death."<sup>14</sup> In the nineteenth century it kept company with corpses, as demonstrated by three major sets of images: postmortem photographs used in mourning practices, views of dead soldiers lying unburied on Civil War battlefields, and photographs that celebrate lynchings by displaying mutilated African American corpses. Then, as photo and film cameras coexisted in the twentieth century, the Holocaust brought a concentrated and high-profile resurgence in the practice of documenting corpses.

### *Postmortem Mourning Photographs*

Providing the camera's first sustained look at corpses, postmortem mourning photographs are the only major cluster of images to document natural death during indexical media's long period of dominance, offering a rare glimpse of death in familial, domestic space. In *Secure the Shadow: Death and Photography in America*, Jay Ruby collects and analyzes these images, which feature recently deceased corpses that are handsomely dressed and usually posed as if asleep. They rest on beds or in the arms of grieving loved ones who sometimes accompany the dead, especially infants or children (Figures 1.2-1.3). Professionally produced, either in studios or through house calls, postmortem images appeared in force at the start of the camera's history and remained common late into the nineteenth century.

Their popularity rested on a number of factors, with technology chief among them. The invention of the daguerreotype brought personal portraiture to the American middle class, as it was no longer the product of expensive hours of posing and painting.<sup>15</sup> Considering the technological limitations that constrained early photographers, corpses actually made ideal portrait subjects. While the living could find the total bodily stillness required of them during

prolonged exposure times difficult to maintain, the dead would not prevent a sharp image with their movement. They presented an opposite challenge, as photographers labored to position the deceased with a “lifelike” appearance in the convention of “the last sleep.” Thus, photographs that depict the living and dead together shepherd them in divergent directions, each in the service of a pleasing picture: the corpse is arranged as if alive, while the living subject must discipline her or his body to imitate death’s stillness. These sitters underwent a rather literal version of the metaphorical experience Barthes describes much later as a “micro-version of death”: the subject’s feeling in being photographed that he is transformed into an object, just as a dying subject is transformed into the object of a corpse.<sup>16</sup> Unsurprisingly, the resulting expressions on the faces of these living sitters – even in portraits disconnected with corpses and mourning – tended to be rather grim.<sup>17</sup>

Cultural attitudes toward death also bolstered the rise of postmortem photography, and their striking dissimilarity to current attitudes can make these photographs seem macabre and unhealthy. While it is hard for us to imagine a time when parents brought their dead infants into a portrait studio, or when studios advertised postmortem services in the newspaper, the mid-nineteenth century was, in Ariès’ words, the “age of beautiful death.”<sup>18</sup> Death was largely seen as a Romantic passing into an immense eternity where loved ones reunite.<sup>19</sup> A sense of familiarity with death and corpses was widespread, as the household bedsides of the dying were heavily populated by family and community members.<sup>20</sup> The death of a loved one was seen as a tremendously painful event, but it was endured through the promise of reunion and through highly public, emotional, and elaborate mourning practices.<sup>21</sup> Postmortem photographs became one of those practices. Indeed, these portraits went beyond just depicting death as occurring in domestic space; because they were often framed and displayed openly, they also infused that domestic space with death’s documentary signifiers.<sup>22</sup>

In *Secure the Shadow*, Ruby articulates a crucial tension at the intersection of mourning and photography: “Mourners are always confronted with two seemingly contradictory needs: to keep the memory of the deceased alive and at the same time, accept the reality of death and loss.”<sup>23</sup> He argues that nineteenth-century mourners addressed those two needs with two separate types of images: “memorial photographs” of the living person to preserve happy memories, and the postmortem photographs to keep the reality of that person’s death ever-present. In my view, these two functions actually unite, balancing delicately, in the ubiquitous “last sleep” pose – one that seems, in some respects, in line with death-denial. Barthes broadly asserts that the frenzied pursuit of a “lifelike” appearance in photography reveals the medium’s attempts to deny death; on a smaller scale, perhaps posing a corpse as if reclining in a “last sleep” does likewise. But if Ruby’s claim that postmortem photos confirmed death while memorial photos preserved life were accurate, then why did studios go to such lengths to create “sleeping,” lifelike corpses?

I am more convinced that these photographs carry a tone of complex and ambivalent disavowal of death rather than simple denial. If the latter were a customer’s goal, a picture of the subject while living would function more smoothly, or the postmortem views would omit signs of death (survivors in mourning attire, mourning accessories such as rosaries, flowers, candles). Serving Ruby’s dual function in a single image, postmortem photographs present a convincing sleep through which to remember fondly the person’s life *and* serve as a species of *memento mori*. This species offers a reminder not only of one’s own impending death, but also of the fact that the dearly departed in the photo really *has* departed. In this role, the postmortem photographs seem to ward off disavowal, encouraging loved ones to continually acknowledge

and accept the death that has occurred, even as the photographs engaged in the purest form of the new medium's preservational function, as described by Bazin: a promise to let the living retain some piece of the dead.<sup>24</sup>

This promise resonates most poignantly in the subset of postmortem photographs that had to serve both of Ruby's mourning functions simultaneously, by necessity: those in which no other photograph of the deceased had ever been taken (especially common with infants). In them, the "last sleep" gesture is easiest to assimilate, as it simulates the *life* together that the family imagined but barely experienced. Here, death has come too early and the camera, failing to provide a picture of the living person, too late.

### *Civil War Battlefield Photographs*

During the long era of the postmortem portrait (which remained popular through the late nineteenth century), photographic tardiness took on an additional form with the American Civil War – a form that would become very familiar in the history of war coverage – when cameramen missed out on shots of death in battle. Hopes of photographing such "moments" of death settled into the realities of photographing corpses, which were plentiful. As Drew Gilpin Faust details in *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War*, the bloodiest battles killed such a massive number of soldiers that the task of burying the dead often overwhelmed those who survived.<sup>25</sup> As "the needs of the living increasingly trumped the dignity of the departed," corpses were left exposed on the abandoned battlefields where Gardner and his colleagues in Mathew Brady's employ could easily and safely photograph them.<sup>26</sup> Here corpses' stillness once again proved useful – essential, even. It was a minor convenience to photographers working with domestic, civilian death, but in the context of war it made corpses one of the few battlefield spectacles that early cameras could document. Roaming those battlefields, photographers were constrained by the usual long exposure times and more: the wet-plate collodion process of the day necessitated mobile darkrooms for immediate processing, so these were hauled around in horse-drawn carriages (Figure 1.4). It took twenty stress-filled minutes from the beginning of negative preparations to the end of processing for each individual image.<sup>27</sup> The era's equipment was thus profoundly unsuited for capturing the frenetic motion of combat, nor would it have been advisable for photographers to spend twenty minutes processing their plates in the middle of a battle.

Indeed, the technology to document war seemed to be invented "too late" for each conflict of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, always lagging behind the technology to wage war and out of sync with censorship of war images. Gardner, for example, could likely have done wonders with the equipment that photographer Ernest Brooks or cameraman Donald Thompson brought to war in 1914 – lighter weight, faster shutter speeds, some handheld capabilities, using film that did not require immediate processing – but by that time a new style of fighting enabled by new weaponry made good action shots nearly impossible.<sup>28</sup> Battle was by then a long-range affair, with spread-out configurations of troops, and excruciating trench warfare that favored advances under cover of night or obscured by smoke or weather conditions. As Brigadier-General Russel remarked in a 1918 memo: "When conditions are good for fighting they are, of necessity, poor for photography, and vice versa."<sup>29</sup> In terms of censorship, as well, the necessary photographic equipment to capture battlefield death was developed once a window of opportunity had already closed. In the Civil War, Brady's men were self-financed, publishing and exhibiting their own work and thus avoiding newspaper and newsreel staffs' rigid codes of

propriety about displaying death that later war photographers would have to face. They also had President Lincoln's permission to photograph at will. His administration worried about newspaper accounts that could give away troop positions, but photos of the anonymous corpses of past battles seemed to pose no threat in enemy hands and thus went uncensored.<sup>30</sup> Comparatively, cameramen at the fronts of the Second World War, whose equipment gave them greater options for documenting death, were cut off from distribution of such images by the U.S. government, which had learned since Lincoln's era about the rhetorical power of war corpses. Censorship in this war was the "most systematic and far-reaching" in U.S. history – according to George Roeder's indicatively titled *The Censored War* – with the government fully suppressing images of war casualties for much of the conflict and then cautiously releasing some in a bid to raise funds and support on the homefront.<sup>31</sup> Not until Vietnam would a minimal synchronicity of image technology, war weaponry, and loose censorship produce a significant archive of documentary death from the battlefield.

The Civil War provided some of the very first encounters between a camera and violent death, and the resulting images reveal photographers' attempts to integrate this spectacle into the culturally dominant traditions of beautiful (and natural) death. To that end, as both Franny Nudelman and Mark S. Schantz have noted, *Gardner's Photographic Sketchbook of the Civil War* borrows heavily from postmortem photographers' strategies.<sup>32</sup> In particular, the "last sleep" aesthetic features prominently in the photos *A Sharpshooter's Last Sleep* and *Home of the Rebel Sharpshooter*, each of which shows a dead soldier in repose on the ground (Figures 1.5-1.6). In their composition, Gardner labored diligently to imbue the dead with the peace of slumber and the safety of domestic space. His efforts are apparent in the way the soldier's head tilts gently back in *Sleep*, the angle that makes his body seem to sink into the soft grass, and the familiar personal objects that lie close to him: his cap, rifle, tin cup, and blanket. These objects echo the comforting toys placed with dead children in postmortem portraits: a favorite doll, rocking horse, or ball. *Home* has similar connotations, with the soldier's arm resting lightly on his stomach, his head cushioned, and his body protected by the stony enclosure that surrounds him.<sup>33</sup> Apparently unable to find bodies that naturally looked this peaceful, Gardner rearranged corpses with impunity – in a manner that may offend our twenty-first-century sense of documentary ethics (and our general squeamishness).<sup>34</sup> This practice seems to have been a kind of open secret – not directly disclosed, but often visible in a simple comparison of images.<sup>35</sup>

Visual connotations of "beautiful death" in Gardner's work were bolstered by his long and evocative descriptions that accompanied each photograph, such as this text for *Home*:

Was he delirious with agony, or did death come slowly to his relief, while memories of home grew dearer as the field of carnage faded before him? What visions, of loved ones far away, may have hovered above his stony pillow! What familiar voices may he not have heard, like whispers beneath the roar of battle, as his eyes grew heavy in their long, last sleep!<sup>36</sup>

Here Gardner's soothing language works to make this well-preserved body look peaceful, but elsewhere, more extreme rhetoric is needed to create the conventional "lifelike" appearance. *Field Where General Reynolds Fell* (an image by Timothy O'Sullivan that Gardner reprints in *Sketchbook*) shows corpses in a more advanced state of decay than the sharpshooter's: noticeable bloating has distended their midsections and faces (Figure 1.7). Their grotesque appearances do not dissuade Gardner from writing a propagandistic description that frames these (supposed)

Union soldiers as noble and lifelike: “The faces of all were pale, as though cut in marble, and as the wind swept across the battle-field it waved the hair, and gave the bodies such an appearance of life that a spectator could hardly help thinking they were about to rise to continue the fight.”<sup>37</sup> Gardner must have experienced some cognitive dissonance in writing this redemptive text, since he had penned a much harsher one for the “rebel” corpses in the previous plate – which Nudelman points out are the *same* corpses, photographed from the opposite side without even a change of uniforms.<sup>38</sup>

Also in the description of *Field* are traces of photographers’ frustration with being always and inevitably “too late,” with their technological inability to capture death itself. From the faces of the dead Gardner works backwards in time, vividly imagining the “moments” of death that his camera could never document:

Some of the dead presented an aspect which showed that they had suffered severely just previous to dissolution, but these were few in number compared with those who wore a calm and resigned expression, as though they had passed away in an act of prayer. Others had a smile on their faces, and looked as if they were in the act of speaking. Some lay stretched on their backs as if friendly hands had prepared them for burial. Some were still resting on one knee, their hands gripping their muskets. In some instances the cartridge remained between the teeth, or the musket was held in one hand, and the other was uplifted as though to ward a blow, or appealing to heaven.

When read with regard to its specific historical context, this passage is very revealing about Americans’ desire to see “moments” of violent death in the Civil War. It was not just that photographers were eager to enframe them: the families of slain soldiers were desperate for detailed information about just these moments. While today we associate the desire to witness real death with morbid curiosity, Faust explains that nineteenth-century Americans believed that specific circumstances of the passage from life to death were extremely important and could forecast the soul’s fate in the afterlife. To have one’s son, father, husband, or brother meet death on some distant battlefield and to be cut off from its witnessing was immensely painful for the many Americans who lost loved ones this way. They wanted to aid the dying in passage from this life, to analyze last moments for clues about salvation, and to absorb the lessons the dying could impart only at that time.<sup>39</sup> Being physically present with a dying man provided answers to crucial questions: Was he calm and courageous? Did he acknowledge and accept his fate? Did he demonstrate faith in God and a belief that he was saved? Did he remember his family?<sup>40</sup>

Faust demonstrates the way fellow soldiers, nurses, doctors, or chaplains would try to compensate for kin’s absence at a soldier’s “moment” of death by describing it in detailed condolence letters, and I would argue that *Gardner’s Photographic Sketchbook* strives to serve a similar function for a broader national audience of mourners. While he did not witness the deaths he describes, Gardner relies on a practice common during the war of carefully scrutinizing the faces and bodies of the dead to retrieve information about their last moment of life. Faust explains, “Many observers believed, as one war correspondent put it, that the ‘last life-expression of the countenance’ was somehow ‘stereotyped by the death blow’ and preserved for later scrutiny and analysis.”<sup>41</sup> Strikingly, in an age when photographs failed to display the “moment” of death, the belief arose that death itself created an equivalent: it “embalm[ed] time” on the face and rescued that moment for the type of prolonged contemplation a photograph provides. As

Gardner reads these faces “stereotyped by the death blow,” we can see him hopefully posing the previous paragraph’s list of questions in the text for *Home*, and answering them in the *Field* passage (both quoted above). In the latter, he admits that some soldiers “had suffered severely,” but claims that the greater number died with brave dedication to the cause (“their hands gripping their muskets,” “the cartridge remained between the teeth”), showed evidence of their salvation (“as though they had passed away in an act of prayer,” “as though . . . appealing to heaven”), and had their bodies cared for (“as if friendly hands had prepared them for burial”). Gardner’s written descriptions thus attempt to soften the blow of looking at these corpses not just by adding peaceful and lifelike connotations, but by assuring viewers that lost “moments” of death *could* be indirectly grasped through the same photographs that failed to display them directly.

Considering how far from beautiful war death really was at this time – thanks to newly mechanized weapons that could rip through flesh dramatically and the disfigurement an exposed corpse often suffered from decomposition and foraging animals – those documenting it had to expend tremendous effort and creativity to evoke the era’s notion of “beautiful death” in their photos. That they did so is a testament to how desperately the country needed this comforting framework at a time when its citizens were dying in unprecedented, unthinkable numbers.<sup>42</sup> That their equipment made them perpetually too late to witness the “moment” of death itself, and that the post-moment corpses required ample reframing (through staging and textual rhetoric), make Civil War photographs the first in a long lineage of disappointments as documenting violent death continually frustrated indexical image makers.

### *Lynching Photographs*

A generation after Gardner beautified corpses of the war that ended slavery, a very different death documentation practice took root, which opposed African American rights and avoided conventions of “beautiful death”: photographing the mutilated bodies of lynched black men and (some) women. While these images continue the tradition of displaying death through corpses, they differ widely in both production and distribution from any others discussed in this chapter. In the great majority of cases, neither the people producing lynching photographs nor the people circulating them did so because of grief, the main motivation for mourning images. Journalistic incentives to (profitably) disseminate news of tragic violence were not the driving force, either. Even when we might call the motives of profit-driven professionals into question, journalistic photographs usually at least *claim* sympathy for the dead – through an accompanying story or caption – and a desire to educate, not titillate. Lynching photographs make no pretense of sympathy; they were made and circulated to celebrate, not mourn, the murders they document.

The lynchings depicted are mainly white-on-black, occurring in the American South from about 1882-1930 – preceding and overlapping with the influence of cinema.<sup>43</sup> The extreme violence meted out was ostensibly punishment for the alleged crimes of the victim (with the rape of white women, or just the perceived threat of such rape, being the classic justification). But it was more deeply motivated by the economic and social threat blacks seemed to pose as a new social order eroded their self-effacing deference to their former “masters.”<sup>44</sup> Members of white lynch mobs that hanged, beat, cut, shot, burned, and stabbed African Americans to death were rarely prosecuted, even though they did not conceal their identities.<sup>45</sup> Indeed much photographic documentation of lynching splits the viewer’s attention between two subjects: the mutilated body that hangs by its neck and a crowd proud enough of their actions to pose below it, presumably a mix of perpetrators and spectators, often also a mix of men, women, and children (Figures 1.8-

1.9). In use, the photographs' mode of address was primarily celebratory, spreading evidence of lynching successes to create an "imagined community" of supportive whites, and secondarily threatening, attempting to intimidate African American communities.<sup>46</sup> They circulated with very little censorship or interference from the U.S. government until 1908, when the Post Office prohibited their mailing – a seldom-enforced law that had no impact on extensive underground circulation.<sup>47</sup> While the postal network helped spread evidence of a lynching after it occurred, the convenient technologies of modernity – telephones and telegraphs, newspapers, cars and trains – also worked to announce impending lynchings and transport lynch mobs to their sites.<sup>48</sup>

Photography was also one of the key technologies that shaped lynching practice, serving two major functions. First, it circulated visceral proof of the event to those not in attendance, significantly expanding its unifying (for whites) or threatening (for blacks) power.<sup>49</sup> Second, it provided a physical trophy or souvenir for those who participated, making an otherwise ephemeral experience material – and commodifiable.<sup>50</sup> As Leigh Raiford elaborates, "lynchings spawned a cottage industry in which picture makers conspired with mob members and even local officials for the best vantage point, constructed portable darkrooms for quick turnaround, and peddled their product 'through newspapers, in drugstores, on the street . . . door to door.'"<sup>51</sup> Both amateurs (after Kodak's 1888 introduction of the personal camera) and professionals photographed lynchings, and eventually, either type of image could be printed commercially as postcards, for public sale or private distribution. That lynching postcards sold well enough to justify their mass production paints a grim picture of white Southern morality in this period. On the use of the postcard format, Dora Apel laments, "The statement about community values and civic pride made by such postcards cannot be underestimated: usually postcards picture the best a community has to offer."<sup>52</sup>

In all three phases of the life of any image – production, distribution, reception – lynching photographs prompt the most upsetting and urgent historical questions. Jacqueline Goldsby affirms that at the most basic level, what we desperately want to know is "who took them, who looked at them, and why."<sup>53</sup> Regarding Goldsby's first question, a 1986 mixed media art piece by Pat Ward Williams voices current viewers' concerns about their production context.<sup>54</sup> Scrawled notes encircle four views from the same photo that was published in *Life* magazine. It displays a lynched man whose torso is chained face-first to a tree trunk and whose hands are bound separately, pulled back harshly behind his body. Williams writes, "WHO took this picture? Couldn't he just as easily let the man go? Did he take his camera home and bring back a BLOWTORCH? . . . WHO took this picture? HOW can this photograph EXIST? *Life* answers – Page 141 – no credit." One detail that recurs in a number of lynching photos hints at particularly disturbing answers to Goldsby's questions. Perpetrators often covered genital areas with cloth in a strange gesture toward presenting "appropriate" views of their corpses – a gesture additionally charged by the fact that these victims had usually been lynched for the alleged sexual crimes. But what viewer would be so disturbed by genitalia, or even castration wounds they might see, alongside such graphic death and mutilation?<sup>55</sup> In this confluence of death and sex, we see lynching participants carefully avoid any trace of the sexually pornographic while creating some of the most explicit corpse images in documentary history – perhaps evidence of how much more taboo sex was than death in the nineteenth and early twentieth century.

Introducing a recent book of lynching photographs, Hilton Als asks, "Who wants to look at these pictures? Who are they all? When they look at these pictures, who do they identify with?"<sup>56</sup> The question of identification is particularly troubling because most of the lynching photographs are gruesome postmortems, picturing only a body whose disfigurement distances it



greatly from a living person.<sup>57</sup> Identification with corpses, Vivian Sobchack argues, is generally quite challenging. She writes, “Our sympathy for the subject who once was is undermined by our alienation from the object that is” – a reminder of one reason that corpse images feel “too late,” that seeing life in the act of being extinguished feels, uncomfortably, more satisfying.<sup>58</sup> Goldsby makes a similar claim to Sobchack’s, tailored to the lynching images themselves as they contrast to the gentler postmortem shots made earlier in the nineteenth century:

Failing to restore positive bonds between the viewer and the dead, lynching photographs do not as a rule seek to summon the dead back to an imagined life. Rather, a particular kind of ‘scopic aggression’ rages in lynching photographs, thwarting any such sympathetic identification between the viewer and the black (dead) subject.<sup>59</sup>

In these photos, there are no aids to identification: no illusion of peaceful slumber, no reminders of favorite outfits or trinkets to accompany the corpse, no home or homelike setting, and certainly no final glimpse at the pristine facial features of the deceased. Potential mourners are denied these comforts that photographic technology regularly provided in the nineteenth century. Instead, the brutalized corpses hanging above the mob or lying in ashes on the ground are intended for hostile display, with maximum visibility of wounds and other marks of humiliation.

The postmortem temporality of lynching photographs presents an interesting enigma in this history, because – more than any other death photographs in the nineteenth century – they seem poised for “on time” synchronicity. Less predictable and organized than official executions, lynching deaths were still more predictable, more fixed in their location, and safer for photographers to approach than battlefield deaths. Why, then, do these images overwhelmingly, almost completely, favor views of the dead rather than pursuing the moment of death? The frenzied movement necessitated by such violence may have interfered with stable camera positions and shutter speeds – at least in the early years, possibly establishing an enduring convention. Perpetrators’ fears of cameras catching them in the act of murder could be a factor, but their impunity in posing for lynching photographs and the general lack of prosecution in lynching cases cast doubt on that interpretation. I suspect that the radically different aims of lynching photography from most death documentary work are more the cause. For these photographers and audiences, the “moment” of death is subordinated to other equally gruesome attractions: a clearer and more comprehensive record in wounds of the violence inflicted both before and after death, and perhaps a guarantee that the allegedly threatening black man had been fully and finally subdued. The type and variety of violent acts inflicted on the body also make the actual occurrence of death less central and less identifiable, tucked away somewhere in a series of blows, lacerations, burns, and so on.

The fact that cameras, wielded by both professionals and amateurs, helped turn lynching’s extreme racial violence into portable, commercial spectacle makes this an exceptionally bleak chapter in the history of death’s relationship with image technologies – and one that highlights an unsettling trend. Among government censors, image distributors, and the general public, attitudes toward documentary death depend partly on the social and racial positioning of the deceased. The idea of publishing photos of white American soldiers who had been shot could cause considerable hand-wringing in 1917 or 1944 – would America’s citizens be able to handle the sight? This concern becomes almost absurd when one acknowledges that a

number of these citizens already had seen far more gruesome photos of lynching deaths. Indeed, they may even have had the postcards.

### *Concentration Camp Photographs*

With the dawn of the twentieth century came the era of the moving image, a time when the once-useful stillness of corpses became something of an aesthetic liability. Even including photographs, few of this period's iconic images of death or war – the ones that most characterize America's collective memory – are of corpses. I'll close this section with one set that proves an exception, a high-profile revival of documenting corpses that caught and sustained worldwide attention: the photographs and film taken in Nazi concentration camps. British and American forces began this documentary work when they entered camps on the Western Front in April, 1945, and were later joined by the civilian press. The images they captured were comparably graphic to lynching photographs, but – in an unprecedented occurrence – were quickly published and widely viewed in newspapers, magazines, and newsreels. In a country that had carefully suppressed most photos of military corpses in both world wars, documentary death suddenly flooded mainstream media as never before. Though numerous, the images were also relatively homogenous, characterized by naked corpses stacked “like cordwood,” jumbles of limbs filling mass graves, and the gaunt survivors who shared living space with the dead (Figures 1.10-1.11).

What changed upon the liberation of the camps that allowed for such unchecked display of graphic death from a government that had routinely suppressed it for decades? Three major factors contributed, starting with the availability of atrocities to easily photograph and film. A Buchenwald or a Bergen-Belsen offered more visible horror than cameramen could possibly record. The corpses themselves were plentiful still life subjects, allowing varied configurations and time to compose shots (as nauseating as that prospect was). Combat photographers and film cameramen in WWI and WWII constantly encountered problems the camps did not pose: action they were not quick or close enough to capture, visibility inadequate for film stock, restricted movement, threats to their lives and equipment, and prohibitions about what they could not record. By contrast, the greatest challenge cameramen at the camps reported was overcoming their own revulsion, aided by cameras that allowed them to “close one eye from the horror,” as one operator put it.<sup>60</sup>

The second key to this explosion of published death images was the discovery of atrocities of such raw immorality and confounding scale. Experiencing seemingly universal shock and disgust when met with the sights and smells of the camps, eyewitnesses felt an overwhelming desire to communicate them but struggled with how to do so. After visiting Ohrdruf, General Eisenhower sent word to Washington about “unspeakable conditions . . . I can state unequivocally that all written statements up to now do not paint the full horrors.”<sup>61</sup> He and other influential visitors aggressively encouraged the U.S. government to “let the world see,” in Eisenhower's words.<sup>62</sup> Beyond just letting the world see, the Allies also forced the Germans to see the crimes perpetrated by their own government. Mandatory tours of the camps and their dead for locals were common, later joined by mandatory screenings in the American and British occupied zones of films documenting the atrocities.<sup>63</sup> As Roeder surmises, “only by seeing could the true but unbelievable become credible” – and for those not present, only documentary images would suffice.<sup>64</sup>

However, observers' drive to bring these images into the public eye would not have been sufficient without the third factor mentioned above: the political usefulness of documenting Nazi

atrocities at this point in the war. As previously noted, the American government was not timid in suppressing war images that did not serve its notion of the public good. But just as the prohibition on showing dead Americans lifted when the U.S. needed to reinvigorate its citizens, other newspaper and newsreel precedents disappeared when the U.S. needed to convince the world that the Nazis had committed horrific atrocities. Impaired by a “hangover of skepticism” from WWI propaganda and by overly cautious reporting on the camps, the public had been hesitant to believe *written* accounts of the Germans murdering millions of Jews and other innocents in death camps.<sup>65</sup> To provide more effective visual evidence, authorities set many prohibitions aside.<sup>66</sup> They let the public see heaps of corpses, and of the most gruesome varieties: decaying corpses, children’s corpses, corpses with their faces clearly exposed, and naked corpses (nudity having always been a sticking point in the display of atrocities).<sup>67</sup>

Predictably, since they dealt with a complex system of genocide and murder, the images brought both successes and failures. If the camps had to be seen to be believed, then seeing them through photographs and film did help quantifiably increase American belief in the atrocities, as shown by Gallup polls of November 1944 and May 1945.<sup>68</sup> On the whole, the images from the camps made deep impressions upon shocked audiences, and James Agee’s atypical review of some of the footage in May 1945 seems the exception that proves the rule. Making vast generalizations about “the effect of the atrocity press and the atrocity films as it can be observed in everybody, by everybody,” Agee derides the films as (factual) propaganda that will extract a simplistic desire for vengeance from the masses. But then he admits, “I have not felt it necessary to see the films themselves.”<sup>69</sup>

Hence, the successes of the images – as much as one hesitates to call explicit photographs of murdered human beings “successful” – were quickly apparent in 1945, while their failures emerged more slowly, in retrospect. Captions were often missing, inadequate, or inaccurate – sometimes even contradictory between two sources publishing the same image. Views from one or several camps would be used to illustrate stories about another, thus reducing public awareness of the plurality of camps and their specific identities. Similarly, names of and information about the individuals pictured (dead or alive) were rarely provided – though news sources, admittedly, may have had little access to this information.<sup>70</sup> Haste and sloppiness in 1945 has had unfortunate consequences decades later, as Holocaust deniers fixate on these errors in their efforts to discredit documentation of the camps.<sup>71</sup> In a more general problem that Barbie Zelizer articulates, the images’ seeming interchangeability – the way different camps stood in for each other and one shot of piled corpses could be used to illustrate several different stories – conveyed the feeling that the Holocaust was a singular and unified atrocity from which the press could (and did) make broad claims about the nature of human evil.<sup>72</sup> They favored these large, symbolic meanings and shed specific contexts, in keeping with the main political use of the death images: convincing a skeptical public that the Germans had heinously murdered millions of innocent people in organized death camps.

Perhaps more than any set of images in this section on corpse photography, those from Nazi concentration camps exude the poignancy of arriving “too late.” Unlike the infants who died of disease or the African Americans whose murders were ignored by their government, the camp deaths were both preventable and had capable parties working to prevent them. Thus, the vast expanses of dead bodies in these images underscore the human cost of U.S. delay in entering the war, making the American viewer complicit in this tardiness. On another level, the encounter between the camera and death again happens “too late,” with the Holocaust archive’s near-total absence of images showing Nazi victims’ actual murders. Such images would have mattered –

not only as evidence for the courts or for skeptics, but in the hard lessons each of us experiences in trying to comprehend this event.<sup>73</sup> As some invested in its history have lamented, our understanding of the Holocaust is skewed toward concentration camps that allowed for survivors who could speak of their suffering at the war's end.<sup>74</sup> These camps loom larger in our collective memory than extermination camps like Treblinka, where death came quickly to arriving prisoners and their killers opted not to snap its picture.

While the Holocaust sharply revived the power of corpse photography, it also contributed to a waning in that power over the following decades. Partly, the decline came from familiarity: photographed bodies of the starved or slain have been used to represent so many famines, genocides, and varied atrocities that one corpse-strewn patch of ground starts to blur into the next. The Holocaust photographs scarred a young Susan Sontag, who was casually confronted by them in a Santa Monica bookstore in 1945.<sup>75</sup> But they would become a powerful factor in the process of anesthetization she theorized, the process by which repeated exposure to images of suffering and death drains our reserves of compassion.<sup>76</sup> The other factor in the declining impact of corpse photography was in place long before the camps were liberated: the motion picture. As its name implies, this medium sought out movement, one attraction corpses generally could not provide. That liability is highlighted by footage that overcame it, the most memorable film clips from the camps: the nightmarish sight of the dead becoming animate, a churning mass of limbs, as bulldozers pushed huge piles of corpses into mass graves. These shots hint at film's actual target in documenting death: death in motion, exemplified by the "moment" of death.

### The Ultimate Change, Mummified: Film Strives to Encounter Death "On Time"

Slightly more than half a century after daguerreotypes became the first indexical images to document corpses, the invention of film brought this new capacity to register time and movement, crucial dimensions to a comprehensive representation of death. Film's ability to render movement – what Laura Mulvey calls "the commonly accepted sign of life" – seems to align it with vitality and the living, in contrast to photography's aforementioned alignment with stillness and death. There are, however, significant ontological complications with that analogy.<sup>77</sup> First, Barthes' "anterior future" observation applies to film as well as photography: film also makes an imprint of the past that will progress into a fatal future. Second, as Mulvey elucidates in *Death 24x a Second*, a projected strip of film's apparent movement covers over the underlying stillness of the photographic frames that comprise it (24 per second of film). If a photograph signifies death, then by its nature film also does so – "24x a second."<sup>78</sup> Rather than being a pure embodiment of life, film is thus characterized by "the co-presence of movement and stillness, continuity and discontinuity."<sup>79</sup> Bazin evoked the lurking morbidity of film's apparent liveliness in his pithy descriptor "change mummified" – a parallel to his notion of photography as that which "embalms time." If the capacity to "mummify" change is the fundamental power of film, then an "on time" encounter with death – where the camera rolls as life expires – should be its most coveted target. For what is death, if not the most profound and enigmatic form of change in human existence?

From film's beginning, its makers pursued death with intensity, but found themselves often thwarted by technological and political factors. The brief discussions above of efforts on WWI and WWII battlefields illustrate both factors: impractical equipment and stringent censorship combined to leave us with few documentary images that illustrate the wars' infamous

death tolls. Photography accompanied film into the twentieth century in this pursuit, with renewed ambitions to accomplish what its technological descendent could not: to extract death itself from a stream of time and arrest its motion, freezing this “moment” for contemplation. The thrill of being this precisely “on time” in catching death captured the imaginations of photographers and their viewing public, as the instant fame of rare successes demonstrates. In film and photography’s quest for synchronicity with death, two key periods emerge: cinema’s first decade, when reenactments and animal deaths filled in for absent documentary images, and the 1960s, when cameras seemed finally to achieve this controversial aim.

### *Early Cinema*

Early cinema’s practitioners recognized the draw of death’s change and frequently put it on screen in the period before longer narrative films became dominant (around 1907). As Scott Combs notes, “A discernable undercurrent to cinema’s early projections is a curiosity to see what death would look like on screen. From nearly the moment of its invention, cinema got busy staging deaths that looked real.”<sup>80</sup> “Looked real” was standard, since footage of death eluded actuality filmmakers for many reasons. Executions offered spectacle and crucial predictability, but by the development of cinema were no longer public events, nor was their recording permitted. Recording war deaths – from 1898’s Spanish-American War or 1899’s Philippine-American War – was a tantalizing prospect for filmmakers and audiences, but once again beyond the capabilities of the era’s cameras (detailed below).

As usual, after the late nineteenth century, recording natural death was an overlooked or unwanted option. Perhaps its profile as a tame, domestic form of death was both the quality that made it possible to document and the quality that made it unappealing to filmmakers and audiences who wanted to see this new technology pushed to its limits. The cinema also quickly developed a reputation as a technology not only of change and movement, but of spectacle, too. Natural death signifies a change of the most meaningful order, but not a particularly *visible* one. A soldier slain in the heat of battle could offer a stark contrast between energetic motion and deathly stillness, but the apparent contrast between a person dying of tuberculosis and her corpse would be minimal. Vivian Sobchack affirms this advantage of violent death as one of her ten propositions about documenting death: “The most effective cinematic signifier of death in our present culture is violent action inscribed on the visible lived-body.”<sup>81</sup> Though it was harder to predict and record, violent death offered not just the spectacle that audiences craved but, seemingly, the brevity that early film technology and exhibition practices required. This technology dictated a fixation on the “moment” of death because it was incapable of putting much more than *a* moment on display, with most films lasting under a minute. Thus, to harness the powerful change death presented, early filmmakers were compelled to frame that change as instantaneous, or nearly so, rather than as a gradual process.

These criteria came together in a string of execution films that allowed audiences to glimpse violent “moments” of death that looked real and could be fully contained in short films.<sup>82</sup> In their attempts to stage death realistically, some of these films also showcased what the new medium could accomplish by manipulating, rather than just recording, time – as discussed by Combs in “Final Touches” and Mary Ann Doane in *The Emergence of Cinematic Time*. As both point out, films like *The Execution of Mary Queen of Scots* (1895, Thomas Edison) or *Execution by Hanging* (1905, Mutoscope/Biograph) could only present a believable “moment” of death (by beheading or hanging, in these examples) because they used two shots –

one of a live person and one of a dummy – spliced together to look like one.<sup>83</sup> Though this illusion is playful and practical, its logistics also reinforce the idea of death as a distinct moment. After the splice, the victim became a dummy that was incapable of independent movement, the cinema's primary sign of life. At actual hanging executions, death did not always arrive so promptly and definitively: if the fall did not break the victim's neck, she or he could flail wildly on the rope until asphyxiated.

During this period, electrocution's technological innovation promised to end that prolonged suffering elided by execution films. Combs explains that the method's advocates assured "that its death would be 'instantaneous and painless' and 'devoid of all barbarism' . . . A switch would now clean up, as it were, visible death by taking dying out of it, by omitting the live writhing of a body still in pain."<sup>84</sup> Two prominent electrocution films, *Execution of Czolgosz with Panorama of Auburn State Prison* (1901, Edwin S. Porter/Edison) and *Electrocuting an Elephant* (1903, Edison), aim to convey the deadly power of electricity to audiences. Though the level of pain or barbarism they depict is not easily judged, I would argue that both films undermine the technology they seem to celebrate by calling electrocution's instantaneity into question. Thus, they undermine the idea of death as an identifiable moment through electricity's promise and visible failure to deliver it. The films' deviations from instantaneity were also reported in actual electrocutions. Combs describes New York's first – of William Kemmler in 1890 – as a mismanaged execution that horrified onlookers; Kemmler's body seemed to still after what should have been the fatal jolt, but then began to moan and move shortly afterward.<sup>85</sup>

No cameras captured President McKinley's shooting by Leon Czolgosz at 1901's Pan-American Exposition, nor were any permitted to record the assassin's death by electrocution. To alleviate that failure and lend itself an air of authenticity, Edison's *Czolgosz* reenactment opens with a documentary shot (even advertised in the film's title): a slow pan around the exterior of Auburn Prison, the site of the execution, taken on the day of the execution.<sup>86</sup> The remaining two minutes show an actor portraying Czolgosz led out of his cell, the electric chair's current being tested with a row of light bulbs, and then the prisoner being strapped in and electrocuted. The actor playing Czolgosz does not moan or move after his electrocution like Kemmler, but to guarantee that he his body will permanently still, his executioners send multiple and discontinuous jolts through him. The electrocution itself feels quite prolonged at 25 seconds as its victim cycles through stiffening with the current and relaxing with its cessation thrice before the officials shut off the machine.<sup>87</sup> The Czolgosz performer is recorded from a distance with the chair's straps obscuring his face, and his body stills in the same manner after each convulsion, so the film provides no sign to tell the audience if and when Czolgosz actually dies. If death by electricity strikes instantaneously, then when among those three jolts was the fatal instant? Officials onscreen quickly labor to resolve this disquieting uncertainty as two men each feel Czolgosz's pulse and listen for his heartbeat with a stethoscope (Figure 1.12). Combs uses these characters as examples of the film camera's inability to prove bodily death without assistance – even in cases of violent death like Czolgosz's. Adept at rendering surfaces, the camera cannot access the body's depth, cannot expose the hidden stoppage of organs that brings death. Combs argues that it needs a human "registrant" who can confirm death by proxy for the audience.<sup>88</sup>

Such a person does not appear in *Electrocuting an Elephant*, and indeed this actuality ends without a clear resolution about whether the elephant is yet dead. The elephant in question is Topsy, a performing animal who had killed three men (the last of whom had tried to feed her a lit cigarette butt) and was put to death at Coney Island's Luna Park in front of 1,500 spectators.<sup>89</sup>

Unlike *Czolgosz*, *Elephant* offers the audience a spectacle of actual death – undoubtedly because animal life was valued far enough below human life that viewing an animal’s death in 1903 was not strongly taboo.<sup>90</sup> The film enabled cinema spectators separated from the execution by space and time to watch it along with the 1,500 who were physically present. Slightly over a minute in length, *Elephant* shows Topsy walked to her site of death, then cuts to another shot of her standing in chains (Figure 1.13). A long, tense stretch of Topsy just standing there is suddenly broken as she goes rigid and smoke billows up from the ground. She falls forward stiffly, but the film continues for another 30 seconds, fixated on the downed animal’s body. This lingering gaze contains significant details: the elephant that should be dead is continuously twitching, an obvious splice (when a man suddenly appears behind her) reveals that she continued moving for longer than the footage’s 30-second duration, and the film’s end comes without any apparent motivation, before the body fully stills. Such details prompt questions in the audience about just how long it really took this electrocution to finish its work. While Topsy’s stiffening with the current might seem an instantaneous death blow at first – an “on time” meeting between the film camera and animal death – *Elephant* leaves its viewers without confidence in that interpretation. Combs perceptively extends this uncertainty to the filmmakers themselves, arguing that with the splice at the end it is “as if the camera operator were unsure whether her dying had concluded, or indeed, what might constitute a conclusion.”<sup>91</sup> Doane notes that, “Part of the lure of electricity is the lure of an escape from process, duration, work.”<sup>92</sup> *Czolgosz* and *Elephant* expose the false promise of that escape; the death that electricity enacts is still a durational process in which the “moment” of transition remains uncertain. The public’s and cinema’s attraction to this promise of instant death is a rather ironic fad to begin the twentieth century, a century that would prolong the length of the dying process dramatically with the escalating medicalization of death.

While the extreme popularity of execution films did not endure past cinema’s first decade, attempts to display war death began in force early in film history and continued unabated through the ensuing century’s many violent conflicts. As discussed previously, “attempts” is the key word for many decades, as image technology continually failed to keep pace with killing technologies. Considering the staggering number of violent deaths modern warfare generated in WWI or WWII, film and photography very seldom recorded them, and images that did emerge were subject to levels of censorship unknown to previous war photographers like Gardner. Here I will concentrate on the hopes for documenting war death that the film camera introduced at its emergence, and the realities of what it could actually show the American public.

These hopes had to be readjusted quickly during the Spanish-American and Philippine-American wars of the late 1890s when actuality recordings of faraway American battles never arrived. In *Picturing American Modernity*, Kristen Whissel details what those specific hopes were, how the conditions of war and the constraints of the era’s technology frustrated them, and how filmmakers turned to dramatic reenactments to satisfy spectators’ appetites for battle footage. Evincing those appetites, Whissel quotes a 1900 article from *Leslie’s Weekly* anticipating the footage that might come back from the Philippine-American and Boer wars:

The American Biograph is taking a prominent part in the two wars which are now occupying the center of the world’s stage . . . We are promised some vivid, soul-stirring pictures of actual, gruesome war . . . Imagine the historical value of a moving picture of the charge at Balaklava, or of the advance upon Gettysburg. There will be other Balaklavas and other Gettysburgs, and the Biograph may get there just in the nick of time.<sup>93</sup>

The author leaves little doubt that death – the chief quality that makes wars “gripping” – is among the sights he wants to see in these “vivid, soul-stirring pictures of actual, gripping war.” And his prediction that “the Biograph may get there just in the nick of time” to witness major assaults also hints at the exciting contingency of war death, an event one must have quick reflexes to witness and especially to record.

This writer also references “all the involved processes of photography” that may frustrate the Biograph operators’ success in bringing views of war home to American spectators; in practice, these processes, combined with war’s realities, did dash the hope of documenting death. Whissel explains that cameras produced crowd-pleasing actualities of troop preparations, but “as the ground campaign got under way first in Cuba and later in the Philippines heavy, bulky motion picture cameras proved difficult to transport across the campaign trails that troops carved out of rain-soaked tropical landscapes. Moreover, the conditions of modern warfare placed limits on both human and machine vision.”<sup>94</sup> In Cuba, for example, these obstacles to vision included the jungle’s thick foliage, the black gunpowder smoke that enveloped American fighters, and the near-invisibility of the Spanish (who used smokeless gunpowder that did not give away their positions).<sup>95</sup> Thus, American soldiers severely lacked the visual information needed for their military success, and any documentary cameras that managed to traverse the rough campaign trails would find conditions woefully unsuitable for filming.

When the promised films of “actual, gripping war” failed to materialize, the conditions preventing their creation were not reflected in the reenactments that compensated for their absence. A trio of 1899 Edison shorts, for example – *Advance of Kansas Volunteers at Caloocan*, *Capture of Trenches at Candaba*, and *Filipinos Retreat from Trenches* – instead feature clearly visible enemies firing from orderly lines with just enough gunpowder smoke for dramatic effect, but not enough to hamper the American soldiers who advance on and defeat them with confidence. These reenactments also feature ideal viewing positions that would have been absurdly dangerous for actuality cameramen: directly in the crossfire in *Caloocan* and in the trench alongside enemy soldiers in *Candaba* and *Retreat*.<sup>96</sup> Though Whissel’s analysis focuses on how they frame American military might, I would add that displaying the spectacle of death is equally central to these reenactments. Extending their fiction of uninterrupted vision on the battlefield, death happens right in front of the camera, nearby and fully enframed. Several Filipinos are downed by American bullets early in *Candaba* and *Retreat*, and their bodies lie in the trench through the end of these films. Another short, *Shooting Captured Insurgents* (1898, Edison), combines war and execution reenactments, showing a Spanish firing squad line up and fatally shoot several Cuban prisoners (a propagandistic film likely designed to showcase Spanish brutality). Though the Filipino and Cuban deaths are fully displayed, only American death is individuated and ennobled, as when an American color-bearer gets a particularly spectacular death scene in *Caloocan*: filmed from behind he stands alongside his fellow soldiers and waves the flag high, dominating the frame, until he is shot. At that instant, the Stars and Stripes dip as he throws his arms in the air and falls (Figure 1.14). The flag gives this “moment” of death an added air of patriotism and gravitas, while the blocking and shot distance afford it full visibility. *Caloocan* provides a vision of the footage actuality filmmakers must have hoped they would get: footage in which the contingencies of battle, death, filming conditions, and camera technology would perfectly align and the enigmatic “moment” would be imprinted to celluloid “on time.”

#### *Interlude: From Reenactments to Fakes*



In *Caloocan*, the actor pretending to be hit by enemy fire does so through war's most familiar "moment" of death pose: he spreads his arms wide and falls backward. It is a pose that highlights and responds to the central challenge of representing death in film or photography (a challenge shared by genres and movements as varied as melodrama, pornography, and German expressionism): how to externalize the internal, bringing it into the visible world that cameras can access. The pose appears frequently in nineteenth-century paintings of war – among battling figures in sweeping Civil War landscapes, or as the centerpiece of Frederic Remington's well-known Spanish-American War piece, *Charge of the Rough Riders at San Juan Hill* (Figures 1.15-1.16).<sup>97</sup> A fixture of artists' imaginings of war death, the dynamic pose did not surface in war's underwhelming actuality material until 1936, when it appeared in a photograph – photography being just as much a participant in the twentieth-century quest for the "moment" of death as cinema. In that year, the French magazine *Vu* published a Spanish Civil War photograph that would be widely reprinted (including in *Life*) and rise to iconic status quickly.<sup>98</sup> Robert Capa's *The Falling Soldier* shows a loyalist militiaman on a desolate hillside collapsing backward, presumably hit by enemy fire (Figure 1.17). Capa catches him in mid-fall, head thrown back and arms splayed, with his rifle just dropping from the hand that could no longer raise it in defense. Gravity's work in progress reinforces the sense of transition the photo exudes, of passage from one state to another: standing up to lying prone, soldier to casualty, alive to dead. Here, at last, was the enduring object of desire for generations of documentary photographers, filmmakers, and audiences: death itself, strikingly enframed.<sup>99</sup>

Or so it seemed. Although some doubt remains, the evidence accumulated over decades of *The Falling Soldier*'s study points persuasively to this photograph being staged. Another Capa photo published under it in *Vu* shows, under close inspection, a different soldier fallen in exactly the same spot, suggesting multiple takes.<sup>100</sup> There are descriptions of the man identified as the falling soldier being killed in action elsewhere, two days after the picture was taken. Capa claims he took it at Cerro Muriano, near Córdoba, but in-depth comparisons of the photographs and Spanish hillsides by Manuel Susperregui place the event 35 miles away, near Espejo. Espejo was far removed from the war's action on that day, making Capa's claim that the soldier was killed by machine gun fire implausible.<sup>101</sup> One remarkable aspect of this debunking is the passion and longevity of interest among scholars and the public in proving whether Capa's shot is a documentary image or a fiction. A Capa biographer calls it "the most debated picture in the history of photojournalism," and major new research on the photograph has been published as recently as 2009, provoking still-heated discussion.<sup>102</sup>

Whether or not the image is staged, it exhibits undeniable artistry in representing war; but the uproar about its origins shows artistry to be insufficient in the context of the event purportedly captured. Through this photograph's reception, we can see a historical shift from the late nineteenth century, when staging or reenactment in Gardner's American Civil War images and Edison's battle films did not cause such a stir. The public's willingness to accept (or disinterest in investigating) these works as legitimate views of war – perhaps not precisely "real," but as close as was practical – transformed into greater suspicion as the twentieth century progressed. In WWI, for example, the appeal of troop mobilization footage, which was easy to record and pleased 1890s audiences, had worn thin as demand for actual battle scenes grew. Some exhibitors resorted to advertising footage of real fighting in program descriptions, then disappointing customers with those tired shots of mobilization or soldiers' leisure time – taken "too early" in relation to the desired spectacle.<sup>103</sup> Filmmakers staged battle scenes to

compensate, sometimes as entertainment and sometimes as propaganda, but when staging was detected these films were increasingly seen as deceptive fakes rather than innocuous reenactments.<sup>104</sup> More articles were published decrying them and teaching the public how to detect their tricks – and perhaps, based on the tone of these articles, greater efforts were made to pass staged scenes off as genuine.<sup>105</sup> Raymond Fielding quotes several of these articles, including a harsh 1914 letter published in *Moving Picture World* from a representative of the Universal Film Manufacturing Company: “Anything you see in America of any consequence is a fake. I don’t care what it is, if it is relative to the trouble now on the Continent . . . One of my reasons for writing this letter was the reading of a trade paper advertisement. In my opinion the advertiser is very foolish to try to fool the American people in that manner with some old fake-up junk.”<sup>106</sup> Capa himself actively courts credulity among his viewers, attesting to *The Falling Soldier*’s authenticity through interviews about its creation.<sup>107</sup> Plus, the image does not aesthetically announce itself as staged (as Edison’s films did through implausible camera positions), and in fact its blurring points to the contrary – implying an aesthetic sacrifice to the unpredictable conditions of battle.

What the Capa controversy reveals, then, is that actual death – not some elegant evocation of heroism or sacrifice in war – is *The Falling Soldier*’s main attraction, and the extent to which viewers *care* if its documentary recording is authentic. Sontag puts it bluntly: “The point of [*The Falling Soldier*] is that it is a real moment, captured fortuitously; it loses all value should the falling soldier turn out to have been performing for Capa’s camera.”<sup>108</sup> That such an unmasking would compromise the photograph’s value so completely gives it a different value to historians. As Caroline Brothers argues:

No longer the documentation of an individual death in a particular battle at a specific time and place, the photograph bears the traces of something broader, of the desired beliefs of a particular historical era. The fame of this photograph is indicative of a collective imagination which wanted and still wants to believe certain things about the nature of death in war . . . that death in war was heroic, and tragic, and that the individual counted and that his death mattered.<sup>109</sup>

I would add that this collective imagination also wanted and still wants to believe that dying can begin and end in the same instant, and that this instant can be “embalmed” in time by photography.<sup>110</sup> *The Falling Soldier* and its history tell us that the public embraced the sight of a documented “moment” of death, but that such a moment – and one so aesthetically striking – was not likely to stumble into a photographer’s viewfinder at just the right juncture. In the 1930s, it had to be staged; it would take several more decades before photographs and films truly captured the bodily spectacle Capa sought.

### *The 1960s*

Though the 1960s may not have been the figurative “amusement park, full of barely controlled chaos and recklessness” of its reputation, it did bring a great volume of violent deaths into American public life via assassinations, political protests, and the war in Vietnam.<sup>111</sup> Two, in particular, were famously filmed have been seared into collective memory: the 1963 assassination of President Kennedy and an impromptu prisoner execution on a 1968 Saigon street. Within the sparse history of documenting death on celluloid that I have outlined, these

two bits of footage seem like macabre miracles, unlikely products of contingency. Undoubtedly, they owe much to chance, but developments in technology, politics, and broadcast journalism had also converged to create a somewhat more favorable environment for death and the camera to meet “on time.” The actual death footage that emerged in these two cases did not much resemble the straightforward, clean, and noble vision of death play-acted on Capa’s Spanish hillside, but the ‘60s images ignited public interest just as well, demonstrating an appetite for grittier views of real death. The hold they had and still have over American memory and imagination, I argue, stems largely from the intense type of violent death they document: a gunshot to the head. As a killing method to record, the headshot gives audiences a rare combination of grim attractions. It can display the death blow in gruesome detail, since it is inflicted on a vulnerable and exposed part of the body *and* it offers an apparent “moment” of death that is far more identifiable than most (among the few types of death whose claims to instantaneity feel plausible). In the decades since, fascination with headshots has only grown, as digital technologies have made their simulation more convincing in movies and their execution a fixture of video games.<sup>112</sup>

The headshot that killed President Kennedy on November 22, 1963 was recorded by local businessman Abraham Zapruder, who brought his Bell & Howell 8mm home movie camera to watch the President’s motorcade move through downtown Dallas.<sup>113</sup> Although other witnesses caught parts of the event in home movies or photographs, Zapruder’s 486 frames of film are by far the best record of the President’s death.<sup>114</sup> Despite complaints about its amateur cinematography, the film keeps Kennedy clearly enframed almost continuously from seconds before he was first hit in the neck to seconds after the subsequent wound to the head killed him.<sup>115</sup> We see Kennedy waving to the crowd as his open-topped vehicle progresses along the street and then his wave transforms into a grasping at his neck. Jackie notices that something is wrong and leans in to her husband, at which point the fatal bullet strikes and a small explosion of blood and tissue erupts from his head (Figure 1.18). A faint, sickening shimmer in that spot remains as his body slumps – the half-recognizable sign of exposed brain matter and torn skin, one assumes. Jackie recoils and crawls out onto the trunk; as a Secret Service agent climbs onto the moving car’s bumper and pushes her back in, an underpass swallows up the vehicle and Zapruder’s film ends. A closer view than captured by anyone else, Zapruder’s film still feels distant in its recording of death. The President and the First Lady seem small in the frame, their forms and facial expressions melting into the celluloid’s characteristic grain. This lack of proximity feels both frustrating and merciful, denying and sparing the viewer a clearer view of the President’s brains splattering the car or the horror on Jackie’s face. In Combs’ terms, she would be the film’s “registrant,” a surviving person who reacts to the death in a way that confirms it has happened for the viewer. In documentary footage of a headshot, though, the registrant becomes a supplemental figure; for once, death can signify itself directly, because it is visible and real.

The images shot by Abraham Zapruder spring to mind instantly for many of us when we think about the Kennedy assassination, even connoting the over-familiar, the too-obsessively scrutinized because of the way they are endlessly dragged into service by factions in the “who killed Kennedy?” debate.<sup>116</sup> This current sense of the images as iconic and over-familiar obscures their absence and even *suppression* from public view for years following the execution, with the most stringent censorship centering on frame 313: the “moment” of death headshot. While Zapruder’s film offered the most explicit “on time” meeting of a camera and death in history up to that point, its delivery to audiences was decidedly late.

After making his recording, Zapruder went through an intense, nine-hour ordeal to have the film developed, copied, and delivered into the hands of officials who he knew would need it as evidence.<sup>117</sup> The next day, he was hounded by press representatives wanting to buy the rights; he chose Time Inc. and sold the company the original film and its copyright for \$150,000 plus 50% of earnings from future sales.<sup>118</sup> From that point and for the next twelve years, Time Inc. would maintain exclusive legal rights to the film and would severely limit how much of it the public could see.<sup>119</sup> The company would trickle out different frames from the film through *Life* magazine, first with four pages of fuzzy black and white reproductions in the November 29, 1963 issue. A week after it happened, this was the first clear look the American public had at the assassination itself – but only at the parts Time Inc. was willing to share. The magazine's publisher, C.D. Jackson, reportedly “was so upset by the head-wound sequence” that he decided it should be kept from public view “at least until emotions had calmed.”<sup>120</sup> Hence, the November 29 photo spread, ironically titled “Split-Second Sequence as the Bullets Struck,” omits frame 313's actual bullet strike; it skips from 270 to 323.<sup>121</sup> *Life* then commences a teasing routine of getting closer and closer to showing the headshot without actually doing so: its October 2, 1964 issue prints a color enlargement of frame 309, and then its November 25, 1966 issue does the same for frame 312. This frame's caption reads, “In the next frame, the President received his fatal headshot.”<sup>122</sup> Outside the underground circulation of illegally-made copies, access to frame 313 seems for many years to have been limited to the small, low-quality, black and white reproduction printed in 1964's Warren Report – the published findings of the official committee investigating the assassination (Figure 1.19).<sup>123</sup>

And these details of the headshot's suppression only consider stilled frames, when the most impactful way of viewing it requires the motion its original medium provides.<sup>124</sup> Though the headshot itself can be identified as happening in frame 313, the spray of blood we see exploding outward connotes the individual frame's, the instant's, inability to fully *contain* this spectacle of death. Without seeing the motion of his body's recoil backwards and its lifeless sinking into Jackie's lap, we do not feel we have really seen Kennedy's death. Again, an apparently isolated “moment” of death – even the staccato death of the headshot – calls out for its enveloping duration. The public – or the majority of them, who did not attend the screenings of bootleg copies that began with some regularity in 1969 – would not see that duration until 1975, when Zapruder's film was finally screened *as a film* an amazing twelve years after the death it documents. At that point, it was shown without Time Inc.'s permission on national television, airing on Geraldo Rivera's talk show, *Good Night America*.<sup>125</sup> Thus, as much as Zapruder's film represents a leap ahead in the history of documenting death from a production standpoint (technologically enabled by the home movie camera), it also testifies to the impotence of such recording abilities without the more accessible distribution and exhibition that digital technology would later provide.

In the years since the Zapruder film's halting release from Time Inc.'s captivity, the headshot so long hidden from the public became the focal point of the obsessive scrutinizing it received – gazed at over and over again as a still frame and as a moving image, at regular speed and in slow motion, from Zapruder's actual distance and blurrily enlarged.<sup>126</sup> The emblematic representation of this scrutiny appears near the end of the feature film *JFK* (1992, Oliver Stone) in a scene based on a real incident. Attorney Jim Garrison plays the headshot repeatedly – accompanied by his refrain that borders on incantation, “back and to the left” – for a courtroom full of horrified spectators. The horror and the fascination with the Kennedy headshot stems not just from its grisliness, but from our strange access to the brutal slaughter of such an important

public figure. It is one thing to see a skull blasted open, but it is another to see the skull blasted open of a U.S. president whose composure and charm in front of cameras was legendary. Significantly, the lure of this bodily spectacle is a quality the film's enthusiasts do not have to admit publicly or even acknowledge to themselves. Investigating Kennedy's murder gives them license to look and look again at its recording. The death's perpetual replay – the “eternal dead-again of the cinema” that Bazin so detested – is thus culturally redeemed by its function as evidence, saving its obsessive viewers from the stigma of morbidity (though usually consigning them to the category of “conspiracy theorists”).<sup>127</sup>

In the days following the assassination, Americans had no good images of the death they were struggling to process; they could, however, see documentary footage of a different death that perhaps cathartically channeled their curiosity and filled in for the absent images of Kennedy. Home movie cameras had expanded film technology into the wider public in a way that enabled Kennedy's death to be recorded, and days later nascent *video* technology would allow the public to see his accused assassin murdered on live television. As Lee Harvey Oswald was being transferred from city jail to county jail on Sunday, November 24, Jack Ruby emerged, wielding a gun, from the masses of gathered reporters and fatally shot Oswald in the stomach.<sup>128</sup> On that weekend, all the major networks were covering the assassination story continuously, but only NBC was at that moment showing the Oswald transfer and caught the murder live. The other networks replayed it from videotape within seconds by using new “instant replay” technology developed for televised sports.<sup>129</sup> There seemed to be far less anxiety among exhibitors about showing Oswald's murder than Kennedy's, perhaps because Oswald was seen as an accused assassin less deserving of dignity than a head of state or because it had been inadvertently shown once already in live broadcast. The fact that this murder was much less graphic than Kennedy's – and that the footage doesn't show Oswald's actual death, which happened later at the hospital – could also have contributed to the decision, underscoring the visual power of a fatal headshot compared to other gunshot deaths. Whatever their rationale, the networks replayed Oswald's murder throughout the day, intercut with other coverage.<sup>130</sup>

Television presents a new distribution medium in this history, but one with many of the same challenges in displaying real death as newspapers and newsreels: like them, TV broadcasts were subject to editorial propriety, government censorship, and commercial interests. However, live television and the emerging video technology that supported it presented a new frontier for death footage, as Oswald's murder shows. This was a wilder, more lawless sphere, where the camera's chance “on time” encounters with death could be recorded and broadcast in the same breath. The element of instantaneity denied journalism's gatekeepers – television producers, in this case – the opportunity to prevent death's transmission. Before the institution of a brief delay in the broadcast of live events that reinstated this gatekeeping power, other live television deaths followed Oswald's, including the 1974 suicide of Florida newscaster Christine Chubbuck and the 1998 suicide of Daniel V. Jones that ended his stand-off with police.<sup>131</sup>

Although it wasn't transmitted live, television's coverage of the Vietnam War kept the spectacle of violent death in the public eye as the '60s progressed and into the '70s. Beaming it into American homes in this “living room war,” television aired the type of footage camerapersons in previous wars expected, but never had the means or permission to actually deliver to audiences. As reporter Leonard Zeidenberg observed, on the eve of 1968's bloody Tet Offensive, “Certainly the everyday horrors of war have never been so easily available for viewing – crisply edited down to essentials, flashed on the home screen . . .”<sup>132</sup> The accumulated scenes form a veritable cornucopia of war's disturbing visual attractions, including death: troops

crawling around and firing their guns in combat, tanks discharging ammunition into buildings, enemies being wrestled to the ground and taken prisoner, G.I.s tossing live grenades into NLF tunnels and then yanking out bloody corpses, rural huts set alight and engulfed in flames, a Buddhist monk setting *himself* alight and engulfed in flames, bombs cascading out of American planes to pepper the ground far below with explosions, children's limp bodies being stacked in a village square, burned children running naked down a country road, an impromptu bullet-to-the-temple execution that drops a man to the ground and briefly turns his head into a red fountain of blood.<sup>133</sup> Here were the authentic images of "actual, gruesome war" predicted in cinema's infancy, so many wars ago.

Such images reached American living rooms because of a confluence of technological advances and slackened censorship. Chief among the technological advances was television itself, which replaced theatrical newsreels as Americans' primary provider of war footage. TV had become a popular and highly trusted news source, and those with color receivers (sales of which hit their stride in the late '60s and early '70s) got added attractions: the jungles were green, the explosions orange, and the blood was red.<sup>134</sup> The footage from Vietnam that fueled this young medium was enabled by developments in film and sound recording and in transmission equipment. New "lightweight" sound cameras (40 pounds) allowed small TV crews to travel through the difficult terrain alongside G.I.s.<sup>135</sup> In transmitting this footage back to the States, the networks could pay \$5,000 per five-minute segment for satellite broadcast from Tokyo, or they could fly the 16mm reels back to New York and delay their airing by about two days.<sup>136</sup>

Despite the sense among government officials that the "horrors of war" now on display were heightening American qualms about this far-away conflict, Presidents Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon all refrained from implementing official wartime censorship practices.<sup>137</sup> The challenges were too great: the absence of a declaration of war, the cost of implementation, and a concern that South Vietnam would abuse censorship powers.<sup>138</sup> Instead, they gave the press easy credentialing and access to both briefings and combat zones, in return for their adherence to basic guidelines that mostly protected military strategy.<sup>139</sup> This was a rare freedom in documenting and displaying death that had disappeared for all wartime image-makers since the American Civil War – a freedom less useful in the 1860s than it became in the 1960s, when technology allowed for the recording of more than just days-old corpses lying in fields.

The favorable conditions that produced more recorded death than previous wars, however, did not produce as much as one might expect – or as the popular understanding of this war indicates. While memory may retain the more gruesome images best, televised footage of death in Vietnam was actually quite rare; even the more inclusive category of "heavy fighting" was only shown in 3% of news reports from Vietnam.<sup>140</sup> Michael J. Arlen, who wrote a column on television for the *New Yorker* during the war, writes that typical footage was not very spectacular: "[it was] composed mainly of scenes of helicopters landing, tall grasses blowing in the helicopter wind, American soldiers fanning out across a hillside on foot, rifles at the ready, with now and then (on the soundtrack) a far-off ping or two, and now and then (as the visual grand finale) a column of dark, billowing smoke a half mile away."<sup>141</sup> With better cameras and little government oversight, image-makers still had to contend with the logistical disincentives of going out into combat areas, the dangers they faced upon arrival, the legendary invisibility of the NLF, the contingencies of where and when death would appear, and the whims of the TV networks. For all they did show, the networks were nevertheless an obstacle in screening death; still beholden to their advertisers and wary of presenting controversial material, they seemed to

volunteer censorship beyond what was sometimes asked of them by the government.<sup>142</sup> Assessing TV coverage of the Vietnam War, Charles Pach, Jr. contends plainly, “Those who remember graphic scenes of death and suffering simply recall a war that television did not show.”<sup>143</sup>

The discrepancy between American recollections of the war’s images and what the historical record actually bears out seems, to me, less about the faulty memories Pach blames than a mental privileging of quality over quantity. For among the few “graphic scenes of death and suffering” that television *did* show, there are some truly indelible images. Those that became most iconic show the chief of South Vietnam’s National Police, General Nguyễn Ngọc Loan, executing handcuffed prisoner Nguyễn Văn Lém on a Saigon street. The impromptu execution happened on February 1, 1968 during the bloody Tet Offensive that brought the war’s violence into Saigon. Partly because Saigon was swarming with more reporters than anywhere else in Vietnam – most press people having already been based there before Tet began – the event was captured by multiple cameras, both on film and as a photograph. Vo Suu recorded the execution on film for NBC.<sup>144</sup> This footage qualified for the expensive Tokyo satellite broadcast, making it to the nightly news on February 2 where it was seen by up to 20 million viewers.<sup>145</sup> Photographer Eddie Adams snapped a picture, *Saigon Execution*, that would run in almost every major newspaper and would win him a Pulitzer Prize (Figure 1.20).<sup>146</sup>

Finding the next step in documentary death’s evolution after the Zapruder film, Suu and Adams’ images take us *closer* to a gruesome headshot. Adams’ *Saigon Execution* does so by focusing on Lém’s facial expression, getting the viewer near enough to register its painful details: eyes cringing, mouth contorted, and skin on the bullet’s side of his head seeming to buckle under the impact. Squinting to see such visual information in the Zapruder film, one never finds it, but in *Saigon Execution* it is readily available for contemplation. Suu’s film footage gives the spectator a sense of being part of the crowd, mixed in among the witnesses and participants who shift around the camera as Loan casually shoos people away with his handgun to make room for the killing he’s about to do. One of the dispersing soldiers even walks in front of the camera in a tense moment of *almost* blocking our view of the single shot, delivered point-blank to Lém’s temple as he stands maybe ten feet from our position. His body drops heavily, in unison with Loan’s gun arm. The General walks away but Suu’s lens lingers on the most disturbing consequence of this new proximity to violent death: Lém’s skull is spouting blood as his heart continues to pump, the stream actually propelled upward a few inches into the air before it sloshes onto the pavement (Figure 1.21). The blood fights gravity in this fountain-like form for a full three seconds after the body hits the ground, then tapers off into a subdued flow. Significantly, NBC had a further 17 seconds in which Suu zoomed in on the bleeding skull, but *The Huntley-Brinkley Report*’s executive producer Robert Northshield found that “awful rough” and truncated the clip.<sup>147</sup>

Representing a tiny fraction of documentary images from Vietnam, the shots of death seem to survive most fully in our collective memory. Adams’ *Saigon Execution* makes, for example, Marita Sturken’s shortlist of the war’s three most-recalled images in her study *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering*.<sup>148</sup> Sturken’s list does not include Suu’s *moving* images, despite Vietnam’s reputation as the television war. Others, including Zelizer and Andrew Hoskins, also claim that war photos endure more strongly than film footage.<sup>149</sup> Photographed and filmed, the execution scene with General Loan reveals differences between still and moving images of death and why the former endure. Sturken offers several convincing reasons for *Saigon Execution*’s primacy in our recollections, compared to the

parallel film footage: the photograph freezes the moment when the bullet penetrates the man's head and allows us to linger on his facial expression, while the film includes more footage before and after of the prisoner walking and later the body on the ground spurting blood from its head. It is that frozen facial expression and our ability to *contemplate* it in a corporeal photograph that Sturken prizes over the ephemeral nature of television – at least, television in the decades before VHS recorders and other such devices.<sup>150</sup> Next, Sturken mentions that the film footage is “extremely difficult to watch,” implying that the photograph is less wounding to contemplate.<sup>151</sup> It seems to me that whichever medium was *more* wounding in this context would be the one remembered, the one seared into the mind, but perhaps Sturken's counter-intuitive claim reveals a complex interaction between memories of the film and the photograph. Adams' photo may loosely serve as a screen memory for NBC's footage, allowing us to recall the victim's grimace while forgetting the blood that surged from his temple a second later.

Sturken also argues that the photo affirms the still camera's ability to capture the “moment” of death – a potential that, as discussed above, may make it psychologically appealing to American audiences.<sup>152</sup> Such a photo helps them invest in the notion of death as a moment, keep faith that it still takes such a temporal form in an age that greatly obscured this “moment” through painful medical treatments that extend both life and the dying process. Where Americans during the Civil War feared an instant death that they would meet without spiritual preparation, Americans during the Vietnam War may have found this type of death more alluring as it was growing more scarce.<sup>153</sup> Thus, I argue that audiences are drawn to “on time” documentary images in which this “moment” that has largely evaporated in their own lives seems visible, definite – in this case, projected onto the body of a racial Other in a distant land. Where is that “moment” in the NBC film footage? If we play the clip without pause or slow motion – operations that viewers could not have performed in 1968 – then it disappears, swept away in a durational *process* of dying, however brief that duration is. There is even a sense in which the frightfully powerful fountain of blood in Suu's film subtly undermines the appearance of instant death – that some involuntary force in Lém's body remains vigorous after the “moment” that seemed so definitively contained in Adams' photograph. The blood's movement, in this sense, echoes Topsy's persistent twitching in *Electrocuting an Elephant*. Here, still, is the specter of duration, of dying, haunting even the headshot and its relatively convincing “moment” of death.

Though Adams' photograph and Suu's film footage provide distinct and medium-specific experiences of viewing death, both are more visceral than informative. Northshield, the executive producer who put Suu's film on *The Huntley-Brinkley Report*, himself acknowledged that the news value of the film was not its political implications, but rather its striking shots of death.<sup>154</sup> When the scene is reproduced, the details of each man's identity and the back-story to the execution are usually ignored. A specific image of a high-ranking South Vietnamese officer, who is weathering a major military offensive, executing an NLF prisoner who allegedly murdered the officer's friend and friend's whole family thus becomes a generalized symbol of the chaos and injustice of the war.<sup>155</sup> As Sturken notes, Vietnamese kill Vietnamese and the battle represented is that of man against man.<sup>156</sup> In this iconic image, so cemented in American memory as epitomizing the Vietnam War, one element is conveniently absent: America itself. The slain, wounded, and traumatized soldiers who worried the American public are nowhere pictured, nor is any representation of the *American* violence and imperialism that was so deeply involved in Lém's death and in all the deaths the war produced.



## Conclusion: Figurative Wounds

In the thirteen decades surveyed above, photography and film cameras pursued death (almost always violent death) persistently and caught it rarely. When the “moment” of death did seem to arrive in 1960s headshot images, its impact was sharp – making footage and photos legendary. And yet, the mythical instant is never quite as revelatory as we might hope. Stilled in Adams’ photo or Zapruder’s (long-suppressed) frame 313, it feels captivating but also incomplete, disconnected from the movement that makes change apparent. When motion is restored in Zapruder and Suu’s films, the “moment” of death we thought we saw slips away – enveloped into the duration of dying. The camera’s ability to deliver death, then, is always partial, fragmentary – even in the rare cases when it manages to fully enframe that bodily transition.

Such cases were rare in the era of indexical media’s dominance because the contingencies of where, when, and how death will happen and the miniscule target of the “moment” of death demand more advanced recording technologies. Documentary death crops up with greater regularity in the digital age partly because digital video makes it more practical to record – as mundane as such a statement sounds in the context of a very powerful subject. Compared to indexical media’s history, there are now many more cameras in circulation, able to cover different areas of public space. The cameras are mobile, capable of quick activation, and affordable and user-friendly enough that many people buy and operate them. They also store their records in a form that is capacious and cheap, giving operators the freedom to keep recording patiently until death occurs. Film and photography progressed in these directions, too, during their histories: we saw how Kodak’s introduction of personal cameras in the late nineteenth century yielded more lynching photographs and how the adoption of home movie cameras in the mid-twentieth century provided our best record of the Kennedy assassination. But celluloid never mastered the above capabilities as thoroughly as digital has, the evidence of which is in the greater volume of recorded death to be explored in the chapters that follow.

With actual death, digital technologies would help image-makers not just in overcoming logistical challenges to recording it but also in bypassing political obstacles to displaying it. As President Lincoln did not yet understand in the 1860s and as President Johnson bitterly comprehended in the 1960s, the visual record of a slain human can have tremendous political power. And it will have the greatest opportunities to accumulate that power when the body seems caught at the point of transition, the illusory “moment” of death that will make the front page and ensnare the public’s attention. In the preceding history, we’ve seen that in a top-down distribution system, these volatile images are routinely suppressed by government censors or withheld by compliant news editors. Though hardly a cure-all for these challenges, we shall see significant changes in displaying death come from the Internet’s more bottom-up configuration and ability to rapidly transmit photos and videos across any earthly distance.

Throughout this chapter, I have endeavored to write about not just when and how cameras met death – “too late” in corpse photos or “on time” with the “moment” of death – but why Americans wanted them to and how they experienced these mediated encounters. It is no coincidence that in adapting Williams’ temporal modes, my project brushes up against pornography, the genre she associates with “on time” bodily spectacle. Like pornography, the why and how of looking at documentary death has long been subject to moral interrogation, with parallel accusations of prurience and morbidity leveled against their audiences. And like images

of sex, images of actual death must satisfy a vague standard of “redeeming social importance” to avoid dismissal as “death porn.”<sup>157</sup> While perhaps not all should be “redeemed” (particularly the lynching photographs), the images discussed in this chapter have all had a social impact and have done more than display the salacious attractions of grisly death. Mourning photographs in the nineteenth century “secured the shadow” of people cameras had often been too late to record in life, helping families grieve for individuals they lost. Civil War battlefield images aided grief on a national scale for a population suffering unprecedented losses, and tried to reach back to the undocumented “moments” of soldiers’ deaths to forecast their souls’ fates. Lynching photographs aimed to intimidate blacks and fortify white power in the South, but also revealed cruelty and cowardice in white Southern communities. Concentration camp images evidenced a genocide and struggled to communicate its impact to those so far removed from the camps. Zapruder’s film documented a murder of worldshaking importance and has been a crucial tool in its fraught investigation. And the recording of Lém’s summary execution in Saigon fueled a powerful movement to end the Vietnam War.

And yet, we must not lose sight of the severe limitations of documentary death images, of their inability to fully reveal death or to fully connect us with the person depicted dying. As Sontag perceptively wrote in 1977, “To suffer is one thing; another thing is living with the photographed images of suffering.”<sup>158</sup> Related to this sentiment is a point where my borrowing of Williams’ temporalities parts ways with their original use. Williams emphasizes the way in which bodily sensations connect subjects and spectators. She notes, for example, that weeping melodrama characters can produce tears among the audience, too, physically aligning on-screen bodies with the bodies watching them. Though we may tense and cringe sympathetically with the person dying on camera, similar to Williams’ observation that we scream or get shudder watching death in horror films, there would be something disingenuous about advancing this parallel – a difference between cringing and bleeding. When a life is actually ending on screen, there should be a higher threshold for claiming a shared bodily experience.

In considering that threshold, we should remember the gesture of one viewer of documentary death images: German filmmaker Harun Farocki. Having seen images of Vietnam’s napalm victims, he responds to this experience of spectatorship in his 1969 short film *The Inextinguishable Fire*. Reading a news report about the war’s violence aloud on camera, Farocki then expresses concern that, “If we show you pictures of napalm victims, you’ll close your eyes. First you’ll close your eyes to the pictures. Then you’ll close your eyes to the memory. Then you’ll close your eyes to the facts. Then you’ll close your eyes to the entire context.” Searching for a way to communicate the devastating effects of napalm on the human body, Farocki settles on playing the victim himself, picking up a lit cigarette and grinding it into the skin on his forearm in a shocking documentary moment. A narrator intones, “A cigarette burns at 400° Celsius. Napalm burns at 3,000° Celsius” – in other words, even this bold action cannot adequately convey the pain at which it grasps. Farocki’s startling self-injury evokes, for me, the inevitable point at which photographic and filmic images of death and suffering no longer feel adequate. However much these images *can* communicate, whatever impact they *can* have on the directions of politics or the course of wars or the worldview of an individual, they remain deeply limited. We can write about their tactile qualities – how viewers are scarred, jolted, or branded by looking at them. Yet, as Farocki implies: relative to the events these images depict, perhaps the sense in which they wound the viewer – the sense in which they burn themselves into memory – is hopelessly figurative.

## Chapter Two

### The Art of Dying, on Camera: Natural Death Documentaries

“We die with the dying:  
See, they depart, and we go with them.  
We are born with the dead:  
See, they return, and bring us with them.”

– T.S. Eliot, “Little Gidding”<sup>1</sup>

When cameras capture violent death, the backgrounds against which they do so are variable: a bustling street, a battlefield, a police station hallway, a train platform, and so on. With natural death, spatial possibilities close down.<sup>2</sup> There is one iconic place where almost all lives end from disease or age on-camera, in either fiction or documentary film: the deathbed. Douglas Sirk’s *Imitation of Life* (1959) offers an archetypal deathbed scene, familiar from so many Hollywood melodramas. In the film’s closing moments, wealthy white actress Lora is summoned to the bedside of her beloved African American friend and housekeeper, Annie. A sentimental score plays throughout the scene in Annie’s bedroom, where people gather: Lora, close family friend Steve, Annie’s minister, her doctor, and another servant. The doctor listens to Annie’s heart with a stethoscope and shakes his head gravely to Lora, who becomes distraught. Annie herself is ashen and fatigued, but propped up in bed and alert (see Appendix, Figure 2.1). Animated by important tasks at hand (“I’ve got to talk, I’ve got to!”), she puts her affairs firmly in order: Annie instructs Lora and Steve to find her estranged daughter, Sarah Jane, and deliver her substantial inheritance and Annie’s apology for her perceived failings as a mother. Careful not to forget anyone, Annie bequeaths a pearl necklace to Lora’s daughter, a mink scarf to the minister’s wife, and a “nice, clean fifty-dollar bill” for the milkman at Annie and Lora’s old apartment (to whom Annie has been sending money every Christmas, “in both our names”). She directs Steve to a document in which she has already planned out her funeral, then gently ignores Lora’s desperate protestations that Annie won’t be dying for a long time. Her head drooping and eyes closing, Annie says her last words: “I’m just tired, Miss Lora – awfully . . . tired . . .” As she trails off, Lora’s panicked reaction confirms what we already know from conventions established by so many fiction films: Annie has just died.

The opening scene of the documentary *Silverlake Life: The View from Here* (1993, Tom Joslin and Peter Friedman) responds directly to this model of on-screen death and the way it has shaped American expectations for their own deaths and the deaths of their loved ones. The film chronicles the physical deterioration and eventual death of its HIV-positive co-director, Tom Joslin. Living with AIDS himself, Tom’s partner Mark speaks in the first moments of the film, interviewed well after Tom has already died. Describing what he did immediately after Tom’s death, Mark explains, “I wanted to close his eye, because it’s very strange seeing a dead person staring, and I tried, just like in the movies, to close the eyelid. It doesn’t close – it pops back open! As I said to Tom, ‘I apologize that life wasn’t like the movies.’” Already having seen through Tom’s dying process how little death is “like the movies,” Mark feels renewed surprise that even this small detail – the ritual of closing the dead’s eyes, restoring some sense of peaceful slumber – has been a fiction.

Mark is typical of late-twentieth century Americans in his reliance on fiction film as a guide to what natural death is like. He continues the recourse to fiction in the absence of personal experience with the dying process that suffuses much of twentieth-century history in the West. As early as 1915, Sigmund Freud remarked of the culture of death denial that he perceived (in Europe): “So we have no option but to find compensations in the world of fiction, in literature, in the theatre for that which we have lost in life.”<sup>3</sup> Such a reliance is necessitated by two factors: mainly, the twentieth century’s well-documented removal of actual death from the public eye, but also documentary’s sluggish response, its failure to rally against that removal and to project recorded dying onto American screens.<sup>4</sup> The previous chapter detailed the quest to capture, in photographs and on film, violent “moments of death” in a documentary mode – a quest that has proceeded without interruption since the mid-nineteenth century invention of photography. By contrast, natural death (or its corpses, at least) had documentary exposure in the first few decades of photography through postmortem mourning photographs, but virtually disappeared from the public eye during the twentieth century.<sup>5</sup> Until Michael Roemer’s *Dying* aired on PBS in 1976, there were precious few documentary images of natural death circulating in American moving-image media.<sup>6</sup>

While violent deaths in fiction film and occasionally documentary may have provided release for cultural anxiety and curiosity about death during an era of its pervasive denial, they did so at a remove from the way most American viewers’ lives would actually end. Far from serving a true *memento mori* function, these highly mediated images of violent death, I would argue, helped to repress awareness of the latter. And fiction film’s typical deathbed scenes – especially classical Hollywood’s – were misleading in preparing Americans for the natural deaths they would witness and experience, as Mark’s story demonstrates. These scenes’ points of disjuncture with likely reality are many (and included in *Imitation*): the nostalgic representation of death at home in an era dominated by hospital death; the appearance of reasonable health in those at death’s door; the absence of dementia, disorientation, or unconsciousness in the final hours.<sup>7</sup> Robert Kastenbaum labels this convention “healthy dying,” free of apparent symptoms.<sup>8</sup> Most of all, fictional deathbed scenes tend to tailor death’s duration to narrative, rather than realistic, dimensions. The process of dying is condensed so that a character like Annie, who had been vaguely ailing for a time from an unidentified malady, becomes a terminal case just minutes before her death, which is clearly identified as a definitive moment.

Fiction film’s deviations from the attributes of actual dying may reflect the *difficulty* of the latter’s representation as much as any desired distance from realism. As noted in the previous chapter, a slow and natural death in bed is an inherently *uncinematic* sight, bereft of the physical motion that defines the medium’s “moving image.” Vivian Sobchack emphasizes this difficulty in her foundational 1984 essay, “Inscribing Ethical Space,” through its ten propositions about death in documentary. Propositions two through four draw out the ways in which a violent and abrupt cessation of motion provides “the most effective cinematic signifier of death in our present culture.” Sobchack elaborates: “Death can only be represented in a visible and vigorous contrast between two states of the physical body: the body as *lived body*, intentional and animated – and the body as corpse, a thing of flesh unintended, inanimate, static.”<sup>9</sup> As the natural death documentaries discussed in this chapter make clear, the “lived body” on its deathbed is rarely “intentional and animated” as the moment approaches when it will become a corpse; between these two states, there is no “visible and vigorous contrast.” Hence the need for what Scott Combs terms the “registrant,” an on-screen witness who will confirm that death – not

always visible to the audience – has occurred. Registrants can be human beings – the doctors with their stethoscopes and pulse-checking in *Execution of Czolgosz*, or Lora with her horrified expression in *Imitation of Life* – or even, in recent decades, machines. With the advent of EKG and EEG monitors, cinema could rely on machine registrants in hospitals to supply a substitute for the contrast Sobchack describes: though the body remains still before and after death, the lines on the monitor jump around and then flatten.<sup>10</sup>

If the gesticulations of an electronic line on a small monitor seem a poor substitute for the “visible and vigorous contrast” that violent death provides, that lack speaks to something almost masochistic about moving image-makers’ attempts to document natural death. Ontologically, their media aspire to embody movement – with film hiding the inherent stillness of its frames in the apparent motion of its projection.<sup>11</sup> The drive to display natural death, then, careens toward exposing the medium’s own failures in the face of such a powerful metaphysical event. The camera will not be able to show death “in full detail,” the invisible physicality of it that would not register even if the lens were to penetrate the body itself.<sup>12</sup> Buried in this effort to reveal death, is there an impulse to admit to what the moving image *can’t* do? To let it confront a phenomenon “beyond representation” and lay its limitations bare?

Answers to these questions are complicated by a fascinating deviation from film and photography’s quest for the violent “moment of death” when documentary once again takes up the challenge of representing natural death, as it had in the mid-nineteenth century. The “moment” that would presumably read as a disappointing failure of moving image technology is simply absent from almost all of these documentaries. Its absence, though, is not an act of insecure avoidance – anxious that the climax of bodily death will not read as climactic on screen – but rather a purposeful attempt to redirect public attention. These documentaries step back from the contained and intriguing “moment” and train their cameras on the gradual transformation of an individual that precedes it, and sometimes the grief of survivors that follows it. Instead of grasping for the “moment of death’s” non-spectacle of spatial movement, they shift their focus to the temporal, pursuing full detail through *duration* as new image technologies vastly improve documentary’s temporal capacities. Duration becomes central in these works’ presentation of full detail because as much as natural death contracts space to the deathbed, it expands time from a “moment” (or the illusion of one) to a prolonged process – a process that gets progressively longer with advancements in medicine.<sup>13</sup> The stretching out of time, then, characterizes two stories of developing technology in the twentieth century that meet in the natural death documentary: the stories of medicine and the movies.

At a logistical level, honestly chronicling a long process of dying calls for equipment that can record hours and hours of material at little cost, and that can roll for long stretches of time. Offering a cheap and versatile alternative to film stock that appealed to under-funded documentarians (and enabled some to become documentarians who never could have afforded to with celluloid), video and later digital video (DV) became excellent formats for recording natural death. Documentarians of the 1980s and beyond *could* embark on natural death documentaries because of video and digital technologies, but they *did* largely because of the cultural factors that surround those technological factors: new conceptions of death and dying in the U.S., as well as trends toward subjectivity, psychological intimacy, and autobiography in documentary.

Among those new conceptions of the end of life was a subtle reshaping of “the good death” to accommodate the conditions under which Americans died in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Departing from the step-by-step instructions for dying that the medieval *Ars moriendi* provided and from the universal stages of confronting mortality that

Elizabeth Kübler-Ross introduced in 1969, the good death now reacts against those one-size-fits-all models in favor of customized dying rooted in individuality. When death is meant to be a final expression of one's unique personhood, the natural "moment of death" becomes an obstacle to that expression. Conscious and alert right to the second when her body gives out, *Imitation of Life*'s Annie remains fully herself, personifying her unshakeable goodness and distinctive spirit in her last moments. Most actual natural deaths, though, do not allow for such individuality at the end, as body and mind take leave of life asynchronously. The perceived "moment of death" becomes terribly conventional, erasing individuality as unconscious and often emaciated bodies labor to breathe and then stop. Misleading as a representation of long processes of dying, neither cinematic nor individualized, the "moment of death" that was a sought-after spectacle for documentarians capturing violence becomes taboo in natural death documentaries. As we shall see, just as video and digital technologies enable cameras to wait for death, to be finally "on time" in meeting it, documentarians turn those cameras off.

#### "A Death of One's Own": Individualizing the End of Life<sup>14</sup>

As detailed in the Introduction, the U.S. arrived at in a state of "death denial" in the mid-twentieth century by way of a long evolution in cultural attitudes: from medieval Europe's focus on the soul rather than the body, with its *Ars moriendi* (*The Art of Dying*) spiritual instructions; to the nineteenth century's vision of "beautiful death" as a romantic and temporary parting; to the hyper-medicalization of death as it moved from the home to the hospital in the twentieth century. With changing conceptions of "the good death" came new fears of bad deaths, articulated by death historian Philippe Ariès as follows: "The death of the patient in the hospital, covered with tubes, is becoming a popular image, more terrifying than the *transi* or skeleton of macabre rhetoric."

This frightening type of high-tech, modern hospital death is hardly the sort that Annie experiences in *Imitation of Life*, despite the film's time period. Though her friends see the middle-aged woman's death as coming "too early," in most respects *Imitation* presents a version of "the good death" that predates its 1959 production year – one whose deep-seated nostalgia shines through in the light of the above history. First and foremost, it is Annie herself – not her doctor – who directs how her death will proceed, telling those assembled what to do and when to keep quiet and listen. When an inconsolable Lora tries to persuade her that she won't die for a long time, Annie brushes away the comment, refusing to be coddled with the statements of denial that were so common in the mid-twentieth century. In keeping with the long-established spiritual expectations of Western dying, she shows appropriate concern for her soul's fate. She affirms, "I'd like to be standing with the lambs, and not with the goats, on Judgment Day," and demonstrates generosity and goodness through her actions – the carefully selected bequests and her longtime kindness to the old milkman. Annie wraps up her affairs (even presenting a detailed funeral plan) so as not to burden her survivors, for whom she provides. In a moment reminiscent of nineteenth-century beliefs that approaching death would provide wisdom to the dying, Annie tells Lora, "our wedding day and the day we die are the great events of life." While twentieth-century patients could die alone or with only medical staff in their hospital rooms, Annie dies – anachronistically – at home accompanied by loved ones.<sup>15</sup> Yet, in keeping with the extreme importance placed on deathbed attendance in the nineteenth century, Annie registers the tragedy that she cannot say goodbye to her estranged daughter, Sarah Jane – whose absence

looms through a large photograph on the nightstand (Figure 2.2). Lastly, Annie finds death's optimal duration, concluding earthly business and then promptly dying. There will be no trips to the hospital, nor will Annie be covered with tubes and punctured by needles, lingering for months; she simply closes her eyes and is gone. Between her nostalgic death scene and actual deaths in the U.S. at that time, between even the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in U.S. death culture, there is, as Ariès remarks, a reversal as complete as that of a photographic negative.<sup>16</sup>

In the late 1960s the “brutal revolution” of modern hospital dying that is pointedly *not* pictured in *Imitation* began to generate a significant backlash in American culture – a backlash that would include come to include natural death documentaries. Doctors came under more criticism in what Peter Filene calls “a diffuse rebellion against the medical dictatorship . . . partly spiritual and partly secular.”<sup>17</sup> The spiritual and secular elements of this rebellion shared a common goal: redirecting attention to the person dying (whether her psychology or her soul) rather than the just her body.

Leading the charge was Dr. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, a Swiss-born psychiatrist who sought to rehumanize end of life care in the U.S. with her 1969 book *On Death and Dying*. Published during a boom in psychotherapy, the book draws from Kübler-Ross's interviews with over 200 terminally ill patients. Kübler-Ross includes portions of these interviews in the book, but also distills them into her famous five stages of psychological reactions to the news that one is dying. According to Kübler-Ross, patients will first experience denial and isolation, followed by anger at their diagnosis, then will attempt to bargain (with God or with doctors) for more time, slip into a state of depression, and finally accept the fact that they are going to die. Though seen as a revolutionary approach in her time, Kübler-Ross' creation of the five stages in some ways returns us to the prescriptions of the *Ars moriendi* and its five temptations. It imposes a structure onto the dying process that has nothing to do with doctors, medicine, and machines – a fierce battle to be fought in the mind of the dying person that ends with a psychological or spiritual reward (dying at peace or ascending to Heaven). Like the *Ars moriendi*, Kübler-Ross embraces the spirit of the *memento mori*, affirming that, “we should make it a habit to think about death and dying occasionally, I hope before we encounter it in our own life,” and offering her text as an aid to such contemplation.<sup>18</sup>

Interestingly, around the same time that Kübler-Ross was recentering death in the mind of the dying, on a psychological level, doctors were busily doing the same, on a physical level. As Margaret Lock explains in her fascinating study, *Twice Dead: Organ Transplants and the Reinvention of Death*, the innovation of heart transplants in 1967 brought to a head the moral and medical debates about when a patient becomes “dead” that had been simmering since the implementation of artificial ventilators and other life support technologies.<sup>19</sup> These had raised questions about when life support should be withdrawn from patients who were biologically alive but were unlikely ever to regain meaningful consciousness. Such patients – once called “living cadavers” and then “brain-dead” – soon became the target of doctors performing organ transplants, who needed well-oxygenated organs extracted from biologically functioning bodies.<sup>20</sup> As the first heart transplants began to take place, with much fanfare, in the late '60s, it became clear that doctors needed a revised legal definition of death to protect themselves from charges of murder when they removed still-beating hearts from patients in irreversible comas.<sup>21</sup> But designating the “moment of death” with legal precision was a fraught task. As a 1968 article in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* lamented, it is “mandatory that the moment of death be defined as precisely as possible . . . [but] when all is said and done, it seems ironic that the end point of existence, which ought to be as clear and sharp as in a chemical titration,

should so defy the power of words to describe it and the power of men to say with certainty, 'here it is.'"<sup>22</sup> For documentarians trying to pinpoint that "moment" with only a camera, such identification would prove troublesome; but here we see medical experts, with full access to the internal biology hidden from documentary cameras, also unable to reduce death to an identifiable "moment" with certainty.

The question of defining this "moment" was resurfacing after it had seemingly been resolved at the turn of the twentieth century, as Lock describes. Doctors in that era finally put to rest fears of premature burial that stemmed from a shaky understanding of the boundary between alive and dead. These fears had persisted since the fourteenth century plagues but intensified in the eighteenth with the introduction of artificial resuscitation – a procedure that cast doubt on the permanence of "death" as it was then determined.<sup>23</sup> Customs arose to safeguard against death's vague temporality: waiting periods before burial, bell and flag alert systems for those waking up in buried coffins to use, and even mutilation of the corpse (at the deceased's request) to guarantee death.<sup>24</sup> It must have come as a relief to consumers considering a coffin-bell purchase when doctors in the late nineteenth century agreed that death could confidently be declared when heartbeat and respiration ceased.<sup>25</sup>

Within decades, though, the artificial ventilator, "brain-dead" patients, and organ transplant procedures shattered this sense of certainty. Legal and medical forces collaborated to redefine death in relation to brain function, pushing the brain to usurp the heart's role as the single-organ linchpin of human life.<sup>26</sup> This move, coincidentally, dovetails with Kübler-Ross and others' efforts to refocus on the individual in death, with the brain conceived of as the organ that contains unique personhood. Doubts lingered, though, about the besieged idea of life and death as "unequivocal, dualistic categories" governed by a single organ and divided by a distinct moment.<sup>27</sup> These doubts crop up periodically in the U.S. through high-profile patients such as Karen Ann Quinlan, Nancy Cruzan, and Terri Schiavo whose statuses as "brain-dead" are hotly disputed. From her study of brain death, Lock concludes, "Clearly, death is not a self-evident phenomenon. The margins between life and death are socially and culturally constructed, mobile, multiple, and open to dispute and reformulation."<sup>28</sup> Between the twentieth century's aggressive medicalization of the dying and its redefinition of the boundaries between life and death, we see the "moment of death" further destabilized by a prolonged process of dying whose endpoint is not entirely clear.

In the face of this sprawling and ill-defined process, one understands Kübler-Ross' impulse to provide some temporal structure through her five stages, as well as to rehumanize our relation to dying bodies. Her work was both warmly embraced and fiercely criticized in the U.S., exposing a passionate concern about the country's deficient death culture, but divided opinions about how to improve it. The ensuing decade saw a flurry of discourse on the end of life in the apparently death-denying nation: books and articles, college classes, support groups, and the emergence of hospice and palliative care as alternatives to the chilling vision of hospital dying that Kübler-Ross spread with *On Death and Dying*. So much was written and said that Michael Simpson, compiling a bibliography on the subject, quipped in 1979 that, "Death is a very badly kept secret; such an unmentionable topic that there are over 650 books now in print asserting that we are ignoring the subject."<sup>29</sup>

The seeds of change planted in this 1970s flurry of thought about death and action to reshape it have grown into a modest movement that continues into the twenty-first century. Its proponents are united by a core set of beliefs: that dying people themselves had been lost amidst the hospital's network of tubes, lines, and machines, the barrage of treatments intended to save



their lives, the plethora of doctors and nurses attuned to bodies but not emotions, and family and friends who were not prepared to discuss approaching ends. Thus, the writers, teachers, and caregivers involved in what Tony Walter calls “the revival of death” work to *individualize* dying, transforming it from a cold medical routine to a process undertaken and experienced differently by each unique human being. This objective makes Kübler-Ross an ambivalent figure for the movement; she helpfully redirected attention to the personhood and emotions of the dying, but also collapsed end-of-life experiences into a rigid, step-by-step format meant to apply to everyone. In this sense, Kübler-Ross looked like another expert authority figure trying to control the dying – just from a psychological rather than a medical perspective (though the tone of *On Death and Dying* itself, where the stages are put into context, does not give that impression).<sup>30</sup> Both the success of Kübler-Ross’ work and the opposition to its five stages were so widespread that when Larry Churchill wrote about the individuality of each death in 1979 and asserted, “Nobody dies by the book,” “the book” he referenced was no abstract tome but rather *On Death and Dying*.<sup>31</sup> Other contributing factors in the early stages of this “revival of death” include consumer advocacy groups – which empowered patients to demand more from their medical providers – popular exposés on the funeral industry, and the general waning of trust in authority figures (like doctors) during the period.<sup>32</sup>

Doing more than simply criticizing the reigning model of death in the U.S., the new movement also sought to once again reshape the good death, working toward what Kastenbaum refers to as a *nova ars moriendi*. No force has been more influential in that endeavor than the modern hospice movement, which has been offering dying Americans an alternative to hospital death since the early ‘70s and has inspired the growth of allied palliative care programs within the medical establishment itself. The first hospice organization in the U.S. was founded in 1973, modeled on Cicely Saunders’ work in England, but with one key difference: hospice in the U.S. would begin and remain oriented toward at-home rather than in-patient care, partly because of a greater desire for independence and distrust of medical institutions in the U.S.<sup>33</sup> Although hospice does not exclude life-extending medical treatments, it is principled upon the notion that slightly prolonging biological life through invasive procedures does not necessarily prolong meaningful living – that helping the dying enjoy their remaining time by subduing pain may be a higher good. Dying is a process to hospice, but a process judged by the quality of life it provides, not by how long it can last. Beyond just controlling physical symptoms, hospice strives to treat “the whole person,” attending to patients’ psychological needs as well as medical ones.

The philosophy of hospice aligns smoothly with the emphasis on individuality in the *nova ars moriendi*, with one of the major guidelines for its care set down in the early years being that “the terminally ill person’s own preferences and lifestyle must be taken into account in all decision making.”<sup>34</sup> Kastenbaum, who was personally involved in those early years of hospice, provides a perfect specimen of hospice rhetoric when he describes the organization in *On Our Way*: “Hospice patients and their families were not placed on a conveyer belt for the assembling of a standard-issue death. Both the dogma of religion and the efficient production model of industry were eschewed by the founders of the modern hospice movement.”<sup>35</sup> Though the variety of deaths hospice actually provides may not be as wide as the rhetoric of unique deaths implies, the promise of a customized experience – well aligned with America’s focus on choice in consumerism – has helped grow the movement substantially in the U.S. since its introduction.<sup>36</sup> From 1990 to 2009, the number of hospice providers in the U.S. has climbed

from 1,604 to 5,000, and at least one in three U.S. deaths (from all causes) now happen under hospice care.<sup>37</sup>

Hospice is a major factor in the post-‘60s “revival of death” and the individualized *nova ars moriendi*. It is part of a significant (but not culturally dominant) push to acknowledge dying as a process too long for Americans to disregard and long enough for them to experience meaningfully and as individuals.<sup>38</sup> Finally abandoning the idea of death as a problem that America’s can-do determination will overturn (a tantalizing hope in the heady years of the early twentieth century’s rapid medical advancements), the culture has turned toward other national values, making death a locus for individual expression and consumer choice.<sup>39</sup> In this way, the new good death still follows a key principle by which it has often been revised: embodying a given society’s highest values.<sup>40</sup>

The rhetoric of this *nova ars moriendi* grounded in individualism is everywhere apparent in discourse on death. In scholarship on death culture, Kastenbaum writes about a recent movement “predicated on the value that the good death should be one’s own, not the standardized demise doled out by the establishment”; Walter notes that “in a culture of individualism that values a unique life lived uniquely, the good death is now the death we choose”; Carlo Leget asserts, “we have become very sensitive to the unique wishes of each authentic individual”; and Ernest Becker frames the end of life as the last opportunity for individuals to discover and express their true selves.<sup>41</sup> With varying degrees of a tongue-in-cheek tone, others have extended this trend even further in less scholarly works: a 1974 self-help book called *To Die with Style!*, or the infamous Timothy Leary’s *Design for Dying* that posits “Designer Dying” as “the hip, chic thing to do . . . Even if you’ve lived your life as a complete slob, you can die with terrific style.”<sup>42</sup> Even the acclaimed television series *Six Feet Under* (2001-2005, Alan Ball, HBO), discussed in the previous chapter, relies on the appeal of highly individualized deaths to keep its viewers’ interest: each episode begins with a different death, leading to a large accumulation and variety of death stories in the show’s five seasons.

In a culture increasingly framing death as individualized, a call has also sounded for a gathering and sharing of those unique experiences. Larry Churchill’s 1979 essay provides a tidy shorthand for this desire: “stories over stages.” In this call, echoed by many other writers, there are shared hopes for both the dying and the living: that talk and other expression about dying will be liberating to those facing life’s end (especially with an audience of eager listeners), and that having examples of the *nova ars moriendi* to reference will help the living plan ahead for their own good deaths.<sup>43</sup> Here we arrive at the function documentary plays in this culture. These works oppose the fetishized “moments” of violent death that other documentarians have pursued, the “standard issue” death that has characterized modern hospital dying, and even the equally standardized initial steps away from that model that Kübler-Ross took. The natural death documentaries instead tie together many strands of post-‘60s U.S. death culture: they tell the stories death scholars have called for, challenge the centrality of the “moment of death” by excluding it in favor of the long dying process, and model the *nova ars moriendi* with its focus on highly individualized dying.

Lest initial description of these works sound too uncritically celebratory, some darker undercurrents of this video corpus deserve mention, for there are perils as well as benefits to the turn toward individualized death rather than shared rituals and expectations for the end of life. First, the stories that *are* told by natural death documentaries are unsettling in their exclusions, not of death’s unpleasant realities but of the full range of people whose death stories could be told. The dying people featured in these documentaries tend to be men more often than women,

whites more often than people of color, and middle class more often than working class (queer sexualities, by contrast, are represented strongly – even disproportionately). These trends align with similar trends in scholarship on U.S. death culture, and with the sense in which death’s naively-touted “universality” usually comes back to the deathbed of this dominant version of the Everyman.

Second, it would be apt to interrogate further other, less sunny reasons *why* U.S. death culture comes to embrace the notion of individualized dying and celebrate the good death as that which best expresses unique personhood. While the increase in discourse post-‘60s death culture has brought might seem to signal a renewal of the *memento mori*, a fresh willingness to keep the end of our lives in mind through their beginnings and middles, the current fashion for highly individualized death stories embodied in these documentaries subverts this *memento mori* function. In the *Ars moriendi* or Kübler-Ross’s five stages, we are all equally implicated. Rather than prompting us to look ahead to our own deaths, these films may instead allow a damaging distance between us and the dying – an implicit, and likely unintended, assurance that since we are so different from this singular human being, we cannot be seeing a preview in these films of the dying that awaits us. Rather than filling the traditional *memento mori* role of the proverbial skeleton that shadows our steps through life, they become tools of disassociation, allowing us to gaze at the death of another without the burdens of identification and the vision of our own demise that identification would connote.

### A New Machine at the Deathbed: The Camera

The first significant natural death documentary to be made in the U.S. (that I am aware of) is less guilty of two offenses above than most that would follow it. Michael Roemer’s *Dying* – made on 16mm film (as discussed below) with NEH support and airing on PBS in 1976 – strives to represent individualized dying through a representative range of U.S. citizens rather than highlighting one dying person. The filmmakers include footage from the lives of three terminal cancer patients in the Boston area, recorded over a period of five to six months each: Sally, a 46-year-old white woman; Bill, a 33-year-old white man, married and with young children; and Reverend Bryant, a 56-year-old African American grandfather.

Sally’s segment comes first, showing the woman – whose head has been shaved for an operation and who looks old beyond her years – in her room at either a hospital or a physical therapy center.<sup>44</sup> She speaks directly to the filmmaker, reporting that she has a brain tumor, that there’s nothing that can be done for it, and “all you have to do is wait.” And wait she does through a death of a languid, slowly unfolding duration – one that resonates with the present-tense of the film’s title, *Dying*, which underscores the idea of death as a process, not an event. Sally spends some time at this institution learning how to walk and function in her somewhat debilitated body, joking with nurses and encouraging other patients, staring out the window as she listens to Beethoven. Then she moves home to the care of her elderly mother, where she spends quiet days watching her mother bake, and listening to music while her mother knits. As these days of waiting stretch on, Roemer accelerates time with shorter and shorter chunks of Sally’s life as death seems to approach. In these scenes Sally moves from sitting in a wheelchair drying dishes to sitting and being fed by her mother to lying in bed, seemingly unable to speak. The passage of time is signified through Sally’s body in two poignantly opposed progressions: her hair grows longer, and her motor functions shut down. Though Roemer’s editing seems to

propel us in an orderly and measured way toward Sally's death, its "moment" is neither shown in the film nor arrives in the timeframe we expect. On-screen text informs us that Sally became comatose late in 1974 and died on June 24, 1975 – *two years* after her initial hospitalization and at least six months since the last footage of her that Roemer includes.

The next segment, titled "Harriet and Bill," begins with uncertainty as the title couple is shown in the waiting room of a doctor's office speaking with each other tensely. Harriet is visibly upset, but the next shot of Bill on an exam table lets the audience know that he is the one dying. The segment follows Bill and Harriet through their family routines: taking their young sons to the lake, having family meals, and going to medical appointments. Because the two are featured as a couple, one might expect this segment to center emotionally on death severing the bonds of romantic love. But this nineteenth century model of dying is nowhere in evidence. Seemingly an even *older* lens for viewing death is in place, as Harriet reacts to Bill's demise less as an emotional blow than as a disruption of social and economic life. She tells Bill's doctor, "I would rather be left now, and then I would have a chance to maybe get them another father or something" and confesses, "I'll tell you the truth: I prayed that that chemotherapy wouldn't work . . . if he's gotta go, why can't it just be quick and get it over with?"<sup>45</sup> The duration of twentieth-century dying once again features prominently, and once again the camera leaves Bill well before his death, with only on-screen text telling us its date. The last shot of him shows him reclining on a lawn chair in his yard – looking basically healthy – staring into the distance and ignoring Harriet.

*Dying's* final segment observes how Rev. Bryant, an African American grandfather and pastor of a Baptist church, copes with terminal liver cancer. Roemer's crew is with him when his doctor delivers the bad news, records his momentary despair, and continues with his quick psychological recovery. Bolstered by religious faith, a loving family, and a deep sense of satisfaction about the life he has lived, Rev. Bryant speaks with Roemer about how he will proceed, knowing that he will soon die: "I don't think that Rockefeller could be as happy as I am. I'm the happiest man in the world . . . The time I have on the topside of this earth, I'm going to try to live it out the happiest and the best that I know how." He decides to take a trip to the South with his family to see his childhood home and his parents' graves, preaches a sermon on dying, then takes to a deathbed set up at home with family life bustling nearby. The expected on-screen text informs the audience that Rev. Bryant died on January 23, 1975, but rather than stopping there, the film ends with a long sequence shot at Rev. Bryant's funeral. As a choir sings and person after person walks past his open casket, affectionately touching his hands, Roemer ends *Dying* with a safeguard against Geoffrey Gorer's "pornography of death" (though the film has already fully distanced itself from that label), taking care not to show death without an accompanying emotional response of grief.

Made in the mid-'70s, *Dying* is historically situated not only in a decade of death's fierce "revival," but also in a period of transition for documentarians. In the U.S., the style of direct cinema – enabled by smaller, lighter, and more versatile film and sound recording equipment – that felt so fresh in the '60s was by that time experiencing significant revision and opposition (though many documentaries are still made in this style today). The documentary form seemed to become invested in deeper explorations of its subjects' psychology and biographies than the "fly on the wall" production mode could easily achieve. On one level, then, a turn toward the psychological over the physical manifested in both death culture and documentary filmmaking during the '70s. The most common manifestation in the latter was a willingness to let subjects acknowledge and interact with the camera and crew, especially in the increased use of

interviews.<sup>46</sup> Staying true to the basic observational mode that direct cinema exemplified, Roemer nevertheless felt free to defy the movement's dogma of using only natural light, and includes interview segments that allow for more direct communication from the dying. This latter technique deviates from direct cinema practice but is ideologically essential for a post-Kübler-Ross death culture in which speaking and listening to the dying is of utmost importance. Interviews and warm lighting help Roemer frame most of the film's deaths as good ones, disassociated from the aesthetic sterility and emotional distance a direct cinema style might evoke.

Though the style may still have felt too detached for some (Ariès critiques *Dying* for "reducing [death] to the state of an ordinary thing"), the film garnered gushing reviews from critics.<sup>47</sup> It provoked very emotional responses, characterized by the reminiscences of Susan Kubany, an employee at WGBH, where *Dying* was produced: "I refused to allow anyone to watch 'Dying' alone. At last count, I had seen it 97 times, possibly more than any other person. Critics with whom I had had solely a professional relationship, sobbed in my arms at the end, close friends for having shared such an experience."<sup>48</sup> Though it has limited distribution today, *Dying* outlived its initial PBS run and its reels were made available for the era's popular thanatology college courses, accompanied by suggested discussion questions.<sup>49</sup>

In the history of U.S. death culture and of documentary, *Dying* represents the entry of a new machine at the deathbed – a place smothered by the technology gathered there in the twentieth century. Death's "revivalists," especially in hospice and palliative care, were busily thinning the tangle of tubes, lines, and beeping instruments that surrounded the dying, reacting in part to a fear Kübler-Ross's articulated: "we displace all our knowledge onto machines, since they are less close to us than the suffering face of another human being which would remind us once more of . . . our own mortality."<sup>50</sup> The documentary camera, though, was one machine that promised to reproduce and display the face of the dying rather than obscuring it – to carry its sign of "our own mortality" to audiences. In another way the camera is merely a stopgap in addressing this aspect of twentieth-century America's virulent death denial, for machines typically allow us to avoid two aspects of the "suffering face" of a dying person: the face as sign, signifying death, but also the face as outlet for interactive communication. As Kübler-Ross emphasizes throughout *On Death and Dying*, there is an awkwardness and fear associated with actually *talking to* the dying – a fear that the camera allows us to indulge, letting us gaze as voyeurs at the "suffering face" without having to respond to it.

Considering the documentary camera's aptitude for contributing to a *nova ars moriendi*, there are two different types of impact this machine can have: it can be a tool for the dying to use in assembling their individualized good deaths, and it can transmit their death stories to the living in the imperative mode of the *memento mori* or the instructive mode of the *Ars moriendi*. For the dying, the camera, its crew, and the audience its presence implies provide listeners – outlets serving the philosophy of "expressive death," whereby the patient must talk and be listened to in order to cope well with the end of life (a sort of "talking cure" for the mortally incurable).<sup>51</sup> That function is apparent in *Dying* with Sally, who has plenty to say and not many loved ones around to say it to, with Rev. Bryant, who relishes the chance to take stock of his life verbally, and with the soon-to-be-bereaved Harriet, who takes advantage of the camera's venue on multiple occasions to confess her desire for Bill's death. More than just a counselor or confessor, though, the camera also supplies Sally, Bill, and Rev. Bryant with an additional layer of temporal structure in the long and amorphous process that so defines twentieth (and twenty-first) century dying. Overlaying five or six months of a documentary's shooting schedule onto this process

means they have appointments with people who are not doctors and a way to mark time other than through physical deterioration.

Lastly, the camera offers a sense of purpose to those who invite it to their deathbeds – a way to make a rote biological process *mean* something other than just “the end.” A sense of lost purpose and the amount of time most dying Americans have to feel it makes dying a demoralizing experience in a nation that places such value on productivity and individual accomplishment.<sup>52</sup> When Sally says of her brain tumor, “all you have to do is wait,” her “have” takes on two meanings: waiting is the only task she is assigned, and waiting is all she has – the only opportunity now extended to her. The purpose Roemer’s film gives Sally is especially clear, as she seems to want to be remembered as someone who died well. The camera gives Sally a compelling reason to strive for that experience, to discover and embody her own “good death.” At times, she seems to be overtly performing the role of the irrepressibly cheerful dying woman who is not afraid of what’s ahead, appearing as almost a ham as she jokes with the nurses or shouts carefully pronounced encouragements to another physical therapy patient. While this kind of “acting for the camera” is the dreaded possibility that direct cinema style tried to guard against, Sally’s behavior is framed more accurately by the principles of the related documentary movement, *cinéma vérité*. *Vérité* documentarians use the camera not as an invisible recorder but rather as a tool of provocation, helping authentic feelings and behavior to emerge that would otherwise remain hidden. Even if Sally’s positive attitude looks a bit artificial, Roemer thinks of the film as giving her a reason to nurture it and to find enjoyment in the last portion of her life: the promise that her actions will travel beyond a small circle of medical staff and family, benefitting others who will one day find themselves in her position.<sup>53</sup> As Combs elegantly writes of films in general, “the cinema wants to solve the basic problem of the loneliness of death, to mediate the event of someone’s death so that it communicates to the outside world.”<sup>54</sup> As Sally’s case demonstrates, this project in documentary takes on a poignancy and urgency it does not carry in fiction.

And what will the living – those for whom Sally performs – take from natural death documentaries like *Dying*? How do they contribute to the *nova ars moriendi*? At the most basic level, this initial documentary look at natural death seeks simply to expose what has been hidden away in decades of cultural denial. Roemer describes himself as having been hesitant to undertake the film because of his own extreme fear of death: “so that viewpoint was really the starting point, to make a film that would perhaps help people – all these people who were afraid. To serve them best, we thought we should make a film that dealt with dying people.”<sup>55</sup> In presenting two examples of the good death through Sally and Rev. Bryant, *Dying* also speculates on some of its common features in 1976: both die at home rather than in a hospital (aligning with the fledgling hospice movement), both acknowledge that their lives are ending and strive to make their remaining time enjoyable and meaningful, and both rely on family members for support.<sup>56</sup>

Though *Dying* may seem instructive through its models of the good death, the film – and all natural death documentaries – must contend with a tension inherent in the post-‘60s *nova ars moriendi*. If the good death is now the individualized death, then the very notion of an *ars moriendi* becomes obsolete; the dying cannot rely on shared rituals and norms, nor pattern their own deaths directly on others they have seen unfold (either in life or on film). As A.H. Hawkins articulates, “Perhaps one reason why dying seems so difficult today is that individuals are expected not only to confront their own death – in itself a task arduous enough – but also to *create* a death . . .”<sup>57</sup> In the heyday of the *Ars moriendi*, good dying had to be learned, but now it

must be forged by each dying person anew.<sup>58</sup> In this light, the good death we cannot replicate (Sally's, Rev. Bryant's) becomes perhaps less instructive than the bad death we can strive to avoid, arguably included in *Dying* through Harriet and Bill's segment. Roemer himself, who wrote about *Dying* as being designed to help the living get past their fear of death, does not seem to regard it as instructional in the next step, in *how* to die well. His remarks echo the spirit of individualized dying that was strengthening in 1976: "You can't learn to die as though it were a skill. People die in the way they have lived. Death becomes the expression of everything you are, and you can bring to it only what you have brought to your life."<sup>59</sup>

The above quotation from Roemer, with its assertion that dying is "an expression of everything you are," mirrors the emphasis *Dying* places on different facets of its title experience: specifically, that the process foregrounds psychology and selfhood more than physicality. In line with the '70s death culture that reacted against previous decades' tendency to focus on *only* the dying body, Roemer's film favors the mind, offering "dying in full detail" on a psychological but not physical level. Without hiding the body, Roemer nevertheless deemphasizes it, largely through timing. He excludes the "moment of death," the climax of bodily dying, and even footage apparently shot *near* the "moment." Scenes that show the subjects in a state of heightened physical debilitation (near the end of the Sally and Rev. Bryant segments) are few in quantity and markedly shorter than others. And Bill exhibits few physical symptoms of illness at any point in his segment, giving us the impression of "healthy dying" that Kastenbaum criticizes in fiction films. Only at rare moments in the film is the dying body displayed *as* a dying body in any graphic way. The most notable comes a few moments into Sally's segment when she happens to turn her shaved head to the side and we see, with a shock, a sprawling, craterous indentation on her skull – presumably the site of a previous surgery on her tumor.

Instead of showcasing the dying body, Roemer strives not to let it overshadow the dying person. This objective is most apparent in a gorgeous close-up he creates to present Rev. Bryant's passionate distillation of the value of his life and how he will savor what remains of it. The tight shot's larger-than-life composition and warm, beautiful lighting disconnects Bryant's broad smile and still-vibrant eyes from the rest of his withering body. Disorienting us from where we are in the timeline of Bryant's long process of dying, the shot grasps at *timelessness*. It encourages us to focus on Bryant's own words – his feelings about his wife, his assertion that he is happier than Rockefeller – which transcend the blunt statement his decaying body makes.

While critical reception of *Dying* was overwhelmingly positive, Stefan Fleischer's harsh 1978 critique of it in *Film Quarterly* offers an important counterargument. Noting the psychological orientation of Roemer's film, Fleischer objects,

But dying is not first of all a mental problem. The most brutal and the most inescapable fact about dying (particularly obvious with a slow death from a wasting disease like cancer), consequently the fact most systematically repressed, is the nature of the physical process itself – pain, incapacity, and the withering away of flesh.<sup>60</sup>

Fleischer supports this argument by selecting and disregarding parts of the film carefully: he complains that *Dying* excludes physicality and conveniently ignores Sally's segment (with its all-too-apparent skull crater and journey toward complete debilitation); he chafes against Roemer's too-positive psychological vision of death, but only minimally accounts for the frightening vision of "bad death" through psychology the film explores (Bill's). Nevertheless, the essay exposes an

interesting level of unrest in the fledgling death revival culture. Though the cultural context of *Dying* would seem to align it smoothly with the rebellion, led by Kübler-Ross, against the body-obsessed, hyper-medicalized death culture of the mid-twentieth century, Fleischer's critique exposes an emerging backlash. He expresses a feeling that the pendulum had swung too far in the other direction, from obsession with the body to an obsession with psychology. Moving into the '80s and '90s, with the dual influence of the AIDS crisis and the widespread adoption of video and DV, natural death documentaries would return to the body of the dying.

“Death 24x a Second,” Death 30x a Second:  
How Film and Video Record Death Differently<sup>61</sup>

Before examining subsequent natural death documentaries shot on video, it is helpful to consider the fact that *Dying* was shot on film and to ask how these different formats enable certain kinds of documentary work on death. Though changing production conditions mostly in degree rather than kind, video does seem to have made a new relationship possible between death and the moving image. In the case of natural death, there are four main areas in which shooting death on video or DV instead of celluloid matters: cost, durational capacities, crew requirements, and aesthetics.

With a videotape (and its later DV variations) costing a small fraction of the equivalent reels of film stock, the former's adoption by documentarians brought the price of projects down considerably. In this form of filmmaking that has rarely attracted big budgets and box office returns, that change made a dramatic impact on the types of projects documentarians could pursue and how they could execute those projects. The consequences of this price difference between film and video are plainly articulated by Ross McElwee, another documentarian experimenting with new modes and subjects during a period of technological transition. Of his meandering, autobiographical documentary *Sherman's March*, he writes: “I shot perhaps twenty-five hours of film [over five months]. I did not have a very big budget and had to marshal my film stock carefully. I sometimes wonder how much more footage I would have shot if I had been shooting video.”<sup>62</sup> The cost of film stock or videotape is an issue of particular importance for natural death documentaries because of the length of the dying process. To chronicle it thoroughly – and to do so for multiple dying individuals, as several of the natural death documentaries do – requires a significant commitment of time and footage. Further, even among documentary viewers, this topic remains a hard sell. Writing favorably about *Dying*, Michael Kearl laments, “Such shows, however, are rare. The emotions and fears they evoke are too great, their exhibition too ‘real’ for the comfort of their escapist viewers, to garner the viewer ratings required to subsidize their production.”<sup>63</sup> In his attack on *Dying*, even Fleischer acknowledges that if Roemer had tried to make “an ugly film” that, in Fleischer's view, would be appropriate to the ugliness of death as a physical process, it may never have aired on PBS or been funded in the first place.<sup>64</sup> Roemer himself says bluntly, referencing his own fears of death, “I assumed most people wouldn't want to see this film right from the beginning, because I didn't even want to make it.”<sup>65</sup> *Dying* carried a sizeable \$330,000 price tag (about \$1.2 million in 2011, adjusting for inflation), but was made under the auspices of WGBH and the National Endowment for the Humanities. The very few natural death documentaries shot exclusively on celluloid share this type of pedigreed patronage – most notably, well-established documentarian Frederick Wiseman's *Near Death* (1989).<sup>66</sup>



It is economically unsurprising, then, that a greater concentration of natural death documentary production in the U.S. did not appear until advances in video and DV technology in the '80s and '90s combined with the previously discussed cultural forces. At that point, micro-budget projects became possible – usually arising out of the wish to document one specific person's death rather than beginning as an idea for a documentary that then found dying patients to record (as *Dying* and *Near Death* began). Examples include *Sick: The Life and Death of Bob Flanagan, Supermasochist* (1997, Kirby Dick) and *Southern Comfort* (2001, Kate Davis), in which filmmakers were drawn to the stories of two fascinating individuals who were dying. *The Andre Show* (1998, Beverly Peterson) and *Death: A Love Story* (1999, Michelle LeBrun) were prompted by deaths within filmmakers' own families: of an adopted HIV-positive son and a husband, respectively. And *Silverlake Life* features a filmmaker turning his camera on his own slow dying. Davis emphasizes how crucial affordable video equipment and tapes have been to this kind of documentary work: "*Southern Comfort* is an example of finding a story and just going and taking a small camera and doing it. I had no support when I started, no funders were interested. I figured I'd show it to a few people and I'd be lucky if I got it on PBS . . . But with a DV camera, one can shoot a film for virtually nothing."<sup>67</sup>

Though video's capacity to shoot for long periods at a stretch would become more essential to the death documentary discussed in Chapter Three, *The Bridge*, it also plays a role in natural death documentaries. The expanding duration of dying as a process recommends a recording device that can be patient – able to sit and wait with the dying, unsure of when important moments in this process will occur and how they will signal themselves. An anecdote mentioned by David Kerekes and David Slater in their study of cult films, *Killing for Culture*, helps illustrate this point. Describing a documentary called *On the Bridge* (1992, Frank Perry) about the director's battle with cancer, they explain, "Perry talks of how he toyed with the idea of filming his own death, pressing the trigger of the film camera when he felt himself slipping away. This because the film magazine would only be 10 minutes duration."<sup>68</sup>

In addition to reducing costs, video reduced the need for a crew of trained operators to create a death documentary. In each of his visits to Sally, Bill, and Rev. Bryant, Michael Roemer had to bring a three-person crew to deal with the camera, sound, and lighting equipment.<sup>69</sup> Video shooting allowed for less intrusive, more intimate encounters at the deathbed. Peterson and LeBrun are able to be alone with just their dying loved ones and a camera, and easy-to-use DV cameras make that possible for nonprofessionals, too, in Kirby Dick's *The End* (2004). Dick follows the final months of five hospice patients partly through professionally shot footage and partly through what the dying and their families record on cameras he lends them. Also taking advantage of user-friendly cameras, *Silverlake Life* and *The Andre Show* include diary-camera segments shot by the dying themselves, alone with just the camera. Even a debilitated AIDS patient and a young child, in these films, have the minimal strength and knowledge required to videotape themselves. Video cameras thus allow for the kinds of stories (over stages) Larry Churchill calls for: stories told directly by the dying.<sup>70</sup>

With all the practical advantages video and DV provide for death documentarians, there is one outcome of this technological transition that is more ambiguous: the changed aesthetic qualities of a video image, compared to a celluloid image. This contrast is starkly apparent in Wim Wenders and Nicholas Ray's death documentary, *Lightning Over Water* (1980), which was shot on both 35mm film and Betacam videotape. As the image switches back and forth from film to video (a fairly early, low-definition type of video), the audience must readjust over and over to the soft, under-saturated video with its intermittent lines of interference or discoloration.

Comparatively, the film stock looks crisp and rich (Figures 2.3-2.4). The contrast resonates with the dying Nicholas Ray's declining health – his body a shriveling remainder of the strong form it used to hold. The contrast within *Lightning* is echoed in a comparison of *Dying* to a later DV film like *The End*. The color 16mm image in *Dying* is vibrant, sometimes even breathtaking, as when warm evening sunlight washes over Rev. Bryant and his family as they look for his parents' graves in a Southern cemetery. Its quality matches Roemer's positive tone perfectly, emphasizing the vibrancy of Sally or Rev. Bryant even in the face of their deaths. *The End*, by comparison, displays the dying with a marked flatness and colors that appear washed-out – visual qualities we associate with low-budget DV, but also with the space of the hospital and its sterile, clinical feeling. Even in segments that strive for a positive tone, it is hard to overcome the mood created by our aesthetic confinement in drably presented deathbed interiors.<sup>71</sup>

### The Return of the Body, and of Spectacle, in *Sick* and *Silverlake Life*

Ontologically, theorists typically associate film – which creates images indexically – with materiality and embodiment; video – which creates images algorithmically – is framed as a medium of immateriality, disembodiment. While these distinctions are technical and not intended to comment on the objects that film and video project onto screens, it feels significant, nevertheless, that video would be the medium to expose the materiality of dying. That exposure happens most dramatically in the 1990s with *Silverlake Life* and *Sick*, films that function as a corrective to Roemer's pioneering *Dying*, with its absence of bodily scrutiny. Video is the medium that accomplishes this task for two main reasons. First, as discussed above, it provided a means for doing low-budget documentary work on difficult subjects – like dying – that might not attract institutional funding. Second, its rise as a viable tool of documentary production coincided with a period of increased discourse on dying bodies in the U.S., due to the developing “revival of death” and especially to the massive *memento mori* the AIDS crisis represented for many Americans. *Silverlake Life* and *Sick* do restore the physicality of death to a place of prominence, but still retain the whole-person orientation of Kübler-Ross. Further, by focusing on dying people with non-normative sexualities and eccentric ways of coping with mortality, they exemplify the post-‘60s exaltation of the individualized death – perhaps at the expense of contributing to a *nova ars moriendi* or reminding the audience of their own inevitable demises.

Kirby Dick's 1997 documentary about his dying friend, *Sick*, is the more explicit of these two in its exposure of the dying body, even though the disease that afflicts Bob Flanagan is mostly invisible to the camera. Cystic fibrosis (CF) is a genetic disease that continually fills the lungs with mucus, causing difficulty breathing, coughing fits, and usually death by the age of twenty; it leaves no external marks of illness like the visible lesions that HIV would dot across the bodies of *Silverlake Life*'s subjects.<sup>72</sup> Though *Sick* does offer montages of Bob coughing violently and follows him to his last trip to the hospital when he dies at age 43, the film is most notable among death documentaries for its circuitous representation of internal pain from a fatal disease through the external pain of S/M sexual practices. With a death sentence hanging over him since childhood, Bob learned to cope with a pain he could not control through pain he could master, as a sexual submissive – a sort of make-shift, eccentric palliative care. Together with his dom partner Sheree, Bob turns this interaction between CF and S/M into installation and performance art, displaying his consensually battered body for audiences at both S/M clubs and high art galleries, and for Dick's documentary camera.

Bob's end is foreshadowed after his forty-second birthday and a big solo gallery show in New York, when Sheree shoots a video of him in which he is depressed and refusing a birthday spanking. In another intimate, late-night video from some months later, an upset Bob asserts to Sheree that he is now feeling too sick to submit to her – sexually or even mentally. Soon Bob checks himself back in to the hospital for what turns out to be the last time. Dick and his camera follow him there, in accordance with Bob's condition of participation in this documentary: that Dick would have to continue the project through Bob's death.<sup>73</sup> The progression toward that "moment," though, is unpredictable, as we see Sheree and nurses tending to Bob in a coma, and then a later time when he has regained consciousness. He tells Sheree he loves her and then wonders aloud, "Am I dying? . . . What is going on? This is the weirdest damn thing . . . the stupidest . . . I don't understand it."<sup>74</sup> A subsequent scene of Sheree comforting a spastically breathing but otherwise unresponsive Bob seems to be leading into "moment of death" footage (Figure 2.5), but the image cuts out, accompanied by the click of a manual slide projector.

Instead, *Sick* makes a return to the previous century's popular form of the postmortem photograph, showing a montage of shots that Sheree took in the hospital of Bob's corpse, with the slide projector sounds as accompaniment. We see his body lying in the hospital bed – eyes closed, mouth open – medical staff checking him with a stethoscope and moving him onto a gurney, then his naked body in a new hospital location where Sheree photographs close-ups of his face, his chest, and his genitals (arranging his hands to touch them). The recourse to still images once Bob's body has stilled concludes this saga of embodiment rather poetically, and the close-ups of his tattoo- and piercing-adorned genitals and "S" chest scar where Sheree once carved her initial reassert Bob's individualism in this sterile environment, even in the absence of his personhood.

Blending a long and slow process of dying from disease with the prolonged and painful pleasures of S/M – and doing so in public, through sexually explicit art – certainly qualifies as the unique, post-'60s "death of one's own." By playing Bob's sexual pain and his CF pain off each other in *Sick*, Kirby Dick solves the central aesthetic problem of the natural death documentary, reinvigorating it with the visual spectacle of pain and bodily destruction that violent death provides and natural death does not. We do not see bullets piercing flesh or bleeding fatal wounds, as the works in Chapter One show, but rather needles piercing Bob's penis, heavy weights suspended from his genitals, letters carved into his chest, objects pushed into his anus, and so on.

Although "moment of death" footage is once again absent, Dick offers two substitutes for this missing piece of Bob's story. The first is a discussion of Bob's *Wall of Pain* art piece (Figure 2.6), which shows a concern for temporal exactness that "moment" of violent death photographs share: Sheree and Bob set up a camera with which he will take a photo of his face at each precise moment that she strikes him with a paddle, flogger, whip, crop, etc. The second is a scene that begins without an establishing shot on an extreme close-up of Bob's penis resting on a wooden board. Bob's hands quickly enter the claustrophobic frame holding a nail, which he drives into the head of his penis with a hammer, anchoring it to the board. After a moment, he pries the nail out with the hammer and Dick cuts to an elaborate low-angle shot from which Bob's profusely bleeding penis drips blood onto a clear barrier above the camera (Figure 2.7). A song called "Hammer of Love" strives to maintain Bob's irreverent, gallows-humor spirit during this challenging scene. The violent penetration of Bob's penis showcases the height of his endurance, the most squirm-inducing performance of suffering the film can display. Thus, while the expected climax of the death story in *Sick* (Bob's "moment of death") is omitted, I argue that

a spectacular climax for his sex story is showcased in its place – not temporally in the film’s timeline but structurally in its visual and emotional progression.

*Silverlake Life* features nothing as visually spectacular, but also engages in pointed form of bodily display. As previously noted, *Silverlake Life* chronicles the life and illness of HIV-positive partners Tom Joslin and Mark Massi. Finding a purpose in the time he has left, Tom becomes determined to make this documentary – which is carried on after his death in 1990 by Mark, and by Tom’s former student Peter Friedman after Mark’s death in 1991. Where Roemer asserted that his dying subjects “directed the film and gave it its direction,” direction by the dying is literal here.<sup>75</sup> Tom and Mark shoot most of the footage themselves, capturing intimate moments at home, trips to doctors’ offices and alternative therapies, arduous errands, two vacations, and visits from friends and family. At many points in the film, Tom, Mark, or their doctors examine their deteriorating bodies, and the camera does, too, offering clear shots of Mark’s back covered with KS lesions or the one that grows over Tom’s eyelid, sealing it shut (Figures 2.8-2.9). Eventually, Tom’s health worsens to the point that he begins hospice care at home – a moment he denotes as starting a grim countdown to death, based on what he says is the average survival time after hospice care begins (two months). Mark continues recording footage, and for a while Tom is able to keep up his diary-cam entries. Then after we’ve seen Tom lose all his energy and most of his ability to speak, *Silverlake* cuts abruptly to a shot of Tom’s corpse lying in their bed, with Mark informing us that he just died. The documentary lingers with Mark for a while, Tom’s funeral and some of Mark’s grieving. When he receives Tom’s ashes (taping the experience with a tripod-mounted camera), the body asserts its materiality one more time: Mark cuts himself while opening the delivery box and then must handle and contain the ashes that spill from a punctured bag.

The sense of political urgency that suffuses *Silverlake Life* – the passionate desire to showcase the love between Tom and Mark *and* the lesions that ravage their bodies and signify their coming separation – stems from this particular death’s integration into the larger casualty list of the AIDS crisis, whose victims struggled for support and visibility. In the ‘80s, that crisis interrupted the simplified narrative of death in the twentieth century U.S. That narrative, as we’ve heard, posits a nation in a state of death denial, where lives end later, less frequently, and out of public view. AIDS brought a return, for some, to the culture of the nineteenth century epidemic: people were infecting each other and dying on a massive scale. The public perceived that death was mostly befalling gay men, and while that group was not fully integrated into or accepted by mainstream U.S. culture, it was vocal and creative, making its plight known through activism and art. AIDS also challenged the narrative of twentieth century death by refuting the idea that traditional support systems for the dying had disappeared. As Walter generalizes, dying becomes unmoored in the twentieth century because “community and religion, the two underlying supports of habitual ways of dying and grieving, are in long-term decline.”<sup>76</sup> Yet for men like Tom and Mark dying of AIDS, the queer community and the networks of support it provided were essential. This discrepancy again reveals the bias toward straight, white, middle-class dying in much scholarship on the subject, which seems to exclude a thriving sense of “community” based on sexuality and ethnicity in the U.S. Multi-pronged strategies for getting the public’s attention and sympathy during the crisis emerged from that queer community: activists exposed the scale of the problem through projects like the AIDS quilt, but also sought to humanize the disease’s victims. This latter approach demanded death stories, and especially highly individualized death stories like *Silverlake Life* that would distinguish one dying gay man

from all the others, making one death “in full detail” matter where abstract thousands might fail to make an impact.

Such a project would have seemed more possible in the early 1990s than a few decades prior because documentary began to yield autobiographical work at roughly the same time that U.S. death culture began to valorize the individualized death as the good death, in the 1970s. Both death culture and documentary in this era were reacting against the sterile, scientific discourses that dominated them: body-focused hospital dying and the objectivity-obsessed direct cinema. Fueled by the influence of American avant-garde filmmaking, second-wave feminism’s principle that “the personal is political,” and a general inward turn in ‘70s American culture, documentarians began to point their cameras at themselves.<sup>77</sup> Joslin himself was part of this trend early on with a documentary about his coming-out process, *Black Star: Autobiography of a Close Friend* (1977), clips of which are shown in *Silverlake Life*. Between his production of *Black Star* and the posthumous release of *Silverlake Life*, an abundance of intriguing autobiographical documentaries had appeared, from filmmakers such as Michelle Citron, Ross McElwee, Su Friedrich, Marlon Riggs, and Sadie Benning. And *Lightning Over Water* had pioneered the combination of real death and autobiographical filmmaking.

By using the machine that has most defined his life, the camera, as a tool in his dying, Tom (and other filmmakers who do likewise) revives the customs of previous centuries, in revised forms. Ariès and Kübler-Ross each paint historical pictures in which the crowd that used to gather at the deathbed suddenly dissipates in the early twentieth century, leaving the dying increasingly alone. They see this dissipation as a problem for two reasons: it deprives the dying of companionship and support, and it prevents the living from witnessing death. With his camera, Tom repopulates his deathbed with virtual witnesses.<sup>78</sup> This act clearly contributes to alleviating the second part of the above problem, exposing audiences to a condensed and mediated version of a dying process. Though these witnesses are temporally and spatially separated from Tom’s actual deathbed, the thought of their eventual presence – elsewhere and elsewhen – seems to give Tom strength as he dies, the sense of purpose that soothes the pain of endings in post-‘60s death culture.

Tom and others who document death also reconnect the process of dying with a nineteenth-century process of grieving: the meticulous production of art- and craftworks to aid in mourning. In *Forget Me Not: Photography & Remembrance*, Geoffrey Batchen discusses and reproduces examples of these works: locketts and frames to hold photographs, or elaborate patterns woven from the hair of the dead. Mostly made by women, the primary guardians of memory in that era, these works lingered over the bodies of the departed (directly, through hair, or symbolically through photographs) to cope with their loss. Of these activities, Batchen writes, “No doubt the time spent in crafting such things was part of the period of mourning, a time of contemplation and creative activity that helped to heal the bereft as well as memorialize the dead.”<sup>79</sup> Work to make these mementos contributed to a gradual process of *working through*. Those customs and their functions are revived and revised in works like *Silverlake Life*, *Death: A Love Story*, and *The Andre Show* as loved ones work through a death by documenting it – aided by the laborious work of shooting, editing, and distributing. Batchen points out that the type of mourning crafts produced in the nineteenth century supported the grief function in terms of duration, too: “The labor of embroidery ensures that the act of remembrance would be painstaking, extended through time, deliberated.”<sup>80</sup> The process of filmmaking, like the process of dying, is long and multifaceted, allowing this channeling of grief to unfold and evolve over

time. In the case of *Silverlake Life*, the healing labor is shared by the dying, put to use by Tom in coping with death and by Mark and Peter in grieving.

That this labor is done on video rather than film is again significant, and not just in terms of production costs – though the boxes of cassettes full of footage that Peter Friedman assesses with his camera make clear the project's economic unfeasibility on celluloid for a filmmaker of limited means. Shot in the late '80s and 1990 and then released in 1993, *Silverlake Life* is the first natural death documentary of the home video era, when the American public had affordable access to home video cameras for their own shooting and VCRs for home viewing. Made mostly at home for an audience who might view it at home, *Silverlake Life* exudes the intimacy of home video combined with a professional filmmaker's aesthetic sense and structural intentions.<sup>81</sup> One of the powers of the video camera Tom and Mark exploit is its mobility. With it, a very ill man can still function as a full crew, shooting image and sound with a single, affordable machine, as we see in *Silverlake Life*'s first-person camera sequences. Tom, for example, shoots what he sees as he walks into a store to complete an errand – capturing the exterior, the aisles, and his frustrating effort to pry apart a stiff stack of plastic tubs (he only needs to buy one of them). The oppressive and disorienting confinement to point-of-view shots in this sequence underscores the pain of confinement in a dying body. The location of the body is emphasized as a confusing and unpleasant place, for the audience in terms of spatial disorientation and for Tom in terms of suffering and a progressive debilitation.

Elsewhere, it is the immediacy of video rather than its mobility that becomes important. Some of the footage used in *Silverlake Life* is shot off of a television monitor rather than just edited into the film. That extra level of mediation indicates a deliberate emphasis on the act of viewing, on the everyday primacy of spectatorship. And because video is the format, image creation and image spectatorship can happen simultaneously. This point is made when Tom and Mark set up a camera, point it at themselves lying in bed, and run it directly through a monitor. We see them looking off-screen at the very same image of themselves that we are seeing, but they are watching it as they create it (Figure 2.10). The content of the clip is mundane, with the two of them talking about filming themselves, arranging the composition, examining marks their disease has made on their faces, and making funny hand motions to simulate trees. The fact that the content is so understated stresses that the real importance of this clip is not what we see but how we are seeing it, how it is constructed, and the comment it makes on the role of media in our lives. We are seeing the moving image directly realize its dual function as window and mirror, with the instantaneity of video providing for the latter possibility. Michael Renov perceptively makes this point about a close relative of the autobiographical documentary, the essay film: "Durable, lightweight, mobile, producing instantaneous results, the video apparatus supplies a dual capability well suited to the essayistic project: it is both screen and mirror, providing the technological grounds for the surveillance of the palpable world, as well as a reflective surface on which to register the self."<sup>82</sup> *Silverlake Life* carries this dual function through on a larger scale, as discussed above, providing an informative window on death for the living and a therapeutic mirror of death for the dying individual.<sup>83</sup>

Here, media and life are intertwined, as video is a tool that both records life and shapes it. As we have seen, both aspects were essential to the camera's role in Tom's death, where the camera documented and helped him cope with dying, molding it into a meaningful and individualized process. The interplay between creation and spectatorship in *Silverlake Life* asks us to rethink the power dynamic between moving image producers and consumers. In the early stages of an age in which non-professionals could increasingly cross that line from consumer to

producer with video technology, *Silverlake Life* models how to do so – and why to do so. Media producers in Hollywood told Mark that he could close the eyes on a corpse and they would stay shut, as discussed above. But Mark has the power to make media, too, and he can tell us that Hollywood is lying – about this aspect of death and so many others.

The extent to which *Silverlake Life* could only have existed in its current form on video is demonstrated in the shots of most immediate proximity to the absent “moment of death.” The film cuts from Tom in a severely depleted state on his deathbed to Tom’s corpse – still lying in bed but with his glasses removed, a sign of an end to his spectatorship and subjectivity (Figure 2.11). Here, we bear witness to an outpouring of grief from Mark, who has been attending to Tom and is also running the camera. Mark records, but also speaks, in a quavering voice interrupted by sobs:

[*Moan*] This is the first of July, and Tommy’s just died. [*Inaudible*] when he died, and I sang to him. I sang to him, [*singing*] “You are my sunshine, my only sunshine, you make me happy when skies are gray. You’ll never know dear how much I love you, please don’t take my sunshine away.” Isn’t he beautiful? He’s so beautiful. I love you, Tommy. All of us – all of your friends will finish the tape for you, okay? We promise. We promise. Bye! Bye, Tom!

This scene, full of raw emotion that both draws us in and shakes our resolve to keep watching, illustrates a tension between the dual role people play as documentarians and mourners in such intimate documentaries of natural death. Despite the irrepressible emotion in his voice, Mark begins with a faint attempt at objective reporting. He gives us the facts – “This is the first of July and Tommy’s just died” – but uses a fond nickname for his subject/partner. Mark maintains a third-person report of events for a short while, but after reenacting the way he sang to Tom, he slips back into direct address, speaking directly to the corpse’s “the object that is” as if it were “the subject that was.”<sup>84</sup> The handheld camera, which Mark has operated elsewhere in the film with professional steadiness, shakes uncontrollably – seeming to respond to the tragic stillness of Tom’s body with a compensatory, frenetic motion.<sup>85</sup> The cause, of course, is Mark’s sobbing, as *Silverlake Life* fulfills Sobchack’s call for documentary to register its response to death visibly, to offer “signs of the filmmaker’s situation and stance” through cinematography.<sup>86</sup> Also securing itself against Gorer’s criterion for “the pornography of death” – the display of death without accompanying grief – *Silverlake Life* builds grief into its very bones, manifesting it not just in what we see but in how we see it through Mark’s fragile point-of-view. In this scene, the one-man camera crew is himself actively and openly grieving for the subject of his documentary that is also the object of his affection – emoting in a way a film crew’s presence would likely inhibit, and recording in a way a filmmaker from outside the circle of loved ones (like Roemer) never could.

Despite the tension between Mark-as-documentarian and Mark-as-partner that pervades this scene, the documentary itself and the act of documenting at this moment interject a promise for the future into this scene of parting with the past. Mark promises Tom that he and Tom’s friends will “finish the tape for you,” fulfilling the meaning-making function that the camera has brought to Tom’s death. As a filmmaker, the camera helped define Tom’s life and through *Silverlake Life* helps him forge a unique, individualized death. Both his life and his death will now be preserved – for a time, at least – on video. *Silverlake Life* thematizes the act of preservation it is performing through two moments that open and close the work. In the first,

Mark naps on a couch in his apartment after Tom has died – just before we see him talk about closing Tom’s eye – and the camera pans right to a monitor on which a videotape from Tom plays. The screen shows what we later learn is the first footage Tom shot for *Silverlake Life*: a close-up of himself with an electronic matte laid over the shot, framing his face in a heart shape with the words “Mark, I love you” written alongside it (Figure 2.12). Thus, even within *Silverlake Life*, we see the footage shot for *Silverlake Life* serving one of its main functions, preserving a trace of Tom to comfort Mark and other loved ones after he dies. This function is performed even more poignantly in the final scene, when Tom has (again) died and Mark has just been interviewed about sensing his presence in the apartment. The film closes with a scene from *Black Star*, a musical number in which Tom and Mark – younger by almost fifteen years – do a lightly choreographed dance to the doo-wop song “I Met Him on a Sunday,” ending arm in arm looking at the camera. This scratched and dated celluloid clip, displayed through a full-length video feature, enacts a restoration to health and life for Tom and Mark – both dead at the time of *Silverlake Life*’s release.

In *Silverlake Life*, video aligns with, rather than diverges from, its technological predecessor, film: it preserves. Video, too, derives from the “mummy complex” that Bazin saw in the roots of the plastic arts.<sup>87</sup> For most who have experienced loss, it matters little how a moving image returns their dear departed – through an indexical process or not, if they are even aware of that difference. It matters only that a camera has “secure[d] the shadow,” allowing a partial return across the border between death and life.<sup>88</sup>

### Conclusion: Individualism Guards Against Identification

In *Sick* and *Silverlake Life* we see the cultural pendulum recenter – back from the extremes of body-fixated hospital dying in the mid-twentieth century and overwhelmingly psychological discourse about dying in the post-Kübler-Ross 1970s (including *Dying*). Exploring both physical and emotional aspects of natural death in a documentary mode, these films also exemplify the revised good death, the “death of one’s own.” Highly individualized stories about dying, they focus on men outside the sexual mainstream finding novel ways to cope – through documentary production or the controlled pain of S/M – with dying slowly at a relatively young age. A large portion of the small subgenre of American natural death documentaries share this penchant for eccentric end-of-life stories: *Lightning Over Water*, with its celebrity death of director Nicholas Ray; *The Andre Show*, in which the dying party is a young HIV-positive boy who has been adopted by a filmmaker; and *Southern Comfort*, which features a female-to-male transsexual dying of ovarian cancer in rural Georgia.

But in aligning so well with the individualized aspect of the new good death, these films sacrifice much of their *memento mori* potential. The *memento mori* cautions, “remember you will die,” but neither Bob Flanagan nor Tom Joslin is the Everyman who dies a widely relatable death. “You” are not likely to feel implicated by seeing two men in their forties waste away from CF and AIDS – diseases that are genetic (and detectable from childhood) or preventable (because we always rationalize that we will not catch those).<sup>89</sup> As a number of psychological studies have shown, contemporary Americans – even those in medical professions who witness death often – are much more able to describe the likely deaths of others realistically compared to the idealized deaths they imagine for themselves.<sup>90</sup> Viewers of *Sick*, *Silverlake Life*, and the other documentaries about unique natural deaths may thus mourn their subjects at a comfortable



distance, sympathizing without identifying. A refusal to frame dying as an experience that can be generalized is both the strength and the liability of these documentaries in their usefulness to America's "revival of death." A quotation from Elisabeth Bronfen about death "by proxy" in art is apt here, applied not to a death's fictional nature – as in Bronfen's work – but to its distancing individualization: "Even as we are forced to acknowledge the ubiquitous presence of death in life, our belief in our own immortality is confirmed. There is death, but it is not my own."<sup>91</sup>

In her brief consideration of natural death documentaries in "Inscribing Ethical Space," Sobchack describes them as "unblinkingly record[ing] the subject's death."<sup>92</sup> As demonstrated above, however, the camera's eye *does* blink in these sagas, and always at the same point. Its blink effaces the "moment of death" in *Dying, Sick*, and *Silverlake Life* (and in every American natural death documentary I have studied), keeping the focus on the process of dying and avoiding the false sense of climax that such a moment would likely present. The "moment of death," however, is not just absent because it might steal the show or even because – as discussed previously – it is so difficult to identify and isolate. In the attempt to present death as heroically individualized, the closer the camera gets to the "moment of death," the more demoralizing challenges to that notion of individualism generally appear. Roemer's idealistic view that "People die in the way they have lived [and] death becomes the expression of everything you are," cracks and break apart if brought too close to the biological end of life. By that time, in an age of modern medicine, all sense of unique personhood has usually evaporated from the dying body. While *dying* might be "the expression of everything you are," its conclusion in death tends to be an act of bare mechanics – shifting patients from alive to dead in a routine sequence that presents precious few opportunities for individualism.

This darker reason for the "moment of death's" absence becomes apparent in the Canadian documentary *Dying at Grace* (2003, Allan King), which provides a useful counterpoint to the American films discussed above. *Grace* uses a strictly observational, direct cinema style that keeps the audience at a greater emotional distance from the dying than the interview-laden and frequently autobiographical American films. King tracks the dying processes of five patients at the Toronto Grace Health Centre's palliative care unit. One seems to draw the camera in a bit more than the others, and her death provides the climactic final scene of the film. Eda Simac has remained warm, upbeat, and even helpful to the other patients in the unit through her long battle with breast cancer. She seems, in most ways, to be dying a model good death of the post-'60s era: doing palliative care rather than accepting desperate and painful life-prolonging treatments and maintaining her unique and lovely personality through this difficult experience. Had Roemer been making this documentary, he may have stopped filming around this point, as *Dying* showed no footage or very little of the dying after a certain stage of debilitation. As King presses on with Eda, though, her ability to forge a death that is an "expression of everything [she is]" falters as the pain and medications to suppress it become too much. Her resilient smile disappears as she transitions into a state of moaning distress, then later simple unconsciousness. Not a personal failing, Eda's loss of self is a consequence of modern dying and, ironically, especially of hospice and palliative care, whose mission to provide comfort and suppress pain requires medications that inhibit alertness and eventually consciousness.<sup>93</sup> Like all of the five patients featured in *Grace*, Eda's individual personality falls away as she becomes just a (well cared-for) barely-living body in a bed.

The final shot of this two-and-a-half hour journey delivers what *Grace* has not shown up to this point and what no American natural death documentary shows: an attempt to pinpoint and display the "moment of death." Eda is shown in close-up, unconscious with her eyes half-open

and mouth gaping, her breaths coming as intermittent spasms – until they stop coming. The sheer rarity of this documentary sight on-screen and its placement at the very end of a long and emotional film gives this sight a certain power, but in other ways this climax does not feel climactic. Eda's body looks almost exactly the same as those of the other four patients that we've seen approach the very end, exhibiting what have, by this point in the film, become rote *conventions* of the last phase of death: lying in a bed, unconscious, eyes open but staring blankly, mouth gaping, breathing raggedly (Figure 2.13). An accumulated conclusion of these scenes is unavoidable: an individualized "death of one's own" must be crafted long before the process of dying comes to an end. Modern death's final phase is, so often, hopelessly routine – an experience of sparse biology common to all those who used to be individuals, and one that would not fit comfortably in documentary stories about individualized good deaths.

Chapter One's conclusion referenced filmmaker Harun Farocki's attempt to react to documentary images of violent death – napalm deaths during the Vietnam War, whose brutality and injustice seemed to foreclose any possibility of an "appropriate" response. Farocki chose a gesture of self-injury, burning his arm with a cigarette to endure what he acknowledged to be a hopelessly partial version of the effects of napalm on human bodies. In the face of natural death, less frequently characterized as "unjust" and usually less politically charged, the stakes and requirements of our role as viewers change. Their documentary representation generally does not solicit an active response, does not function as a call to arms. As we watch these processes of dying, a simpler reaction than Farocki's seems adequate – one that can be wiped away without leaving a scar. We cry. In this way, the tiny subgenre of the natural death documentary is kindred to Linda Williams' "body genres," which encourage a physical connection between the bodies on screen and in the audience through mimicry. Here, we are meant to imitate not the dying but the living who mourn them, passionately shedding tears as Mark does in *Silverlake Life*. For now, we mimic the bodies of the living with our tears, a cathartic release that lets us keep a safe distance from the more difficult revelation implicit in the bodies dying on screen: that in time we will mimic them, too. As Sally remarks in *Dying*, "All you have to do is wait."

Chapter Three  
“A Negative Pleasure”: The Sublimity of Suicide in *The Bridge*

“An act like this is prepared within the silence of the heart,  
as is a great work of art.”

– Albert Camus, on suicide, *The Myth of Sisyphus*<sup>1</sup>

In the midst of the classic documentary *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* (1927, Walther Ruttmann), a strange and significant fictional moment intrudes. The film thus far has been a lively tour of this modern city, capturing all manner of urban sights: the desolate streets at daybreak, masses of citizens pouring in and out of train stations, the briskness of machine labor in factories, weddings and funerals, lunchtime at the zoo. But now the sky darkens, the wind luffs out café awnings and blows dead leaves into a violent spiral. Offering no establishing shot, Ruttmann cuts to the tightly framed body of a woman leaning precariously far over a bridge railing. A point of view shot follows, with a straight-down look at the churning water below, before Ruttmann returns us to the woman with increasingly close shots of her crazed, tormented expression. We see an object drop into the river with a splash that alerts passersby, who swarm at the railing and scan the surface of the water. The woman does not reemerge, nor does any ripple linger. Indeed the water’s violent churning has subsided, as it flows lazily past the struts of the bridge (see Appendix, Figures 3.1-3.2).

While other scattered snippets of *Berlin* hint that they could have been staged or reenacted, the bridge jumper scene is the only one that departs so overtly from the film’s documentary mode.<sup>2</sup> It exudes the feeling of fiction with its impossibly positioned close-ups, the woman’s exaggerated performance, the brief shot of the “jump” that doesn’t look like a body falling into the water, and the sheer improbability of capturing this event on film. The jarring intrusion of this conspicuously staged moment in Ruttmann’s mainly documentary work speaks to the strong desire to record “real death” that I traced through the history of film and photography in Chapter One. In the particular case of public suicide, the idea that a camera might glimpse the emotional decision to end one’s life and capture the ensuing dramatic plunge was obviously compelling to Ruttmann, as much as it might feel ghoulish to viewers. Ruttmann’s inability to document an actual suicide and his recourse to a fictional mode is also consistent with that aforementioned history, reflecting the technological difficulty of recording such an act in 1927. Because a documentarian could not know when the next attempt would be made, the best she or he could do would be to stake out a bridge and keep the camera ever-ready to roll when a pedestrian seemed to contemplate the drop. But to burn through pricey film stock monitoring an individual who *might* jump off the bridge would be a very costly endeavor. There would be no chance of leaving a camera set up to run automatically because of the short rolls of film and the need for manual adjustment with varying light levels and focus settings. To staff and supply this hypothetical operation would, in other words, be prohibitively expensive and impractical.

Advancements in moving image technology since 1927 have radically changed the status of that hypothetical operation. As observed in relation to natural death in Chapter Two, video and digital video make the act of waiting for death with a camera rolling newly practical and

affordable, and in Chapter Four I will demonstrate that the saturation of public space with digital recording devices has produced a dramatic increase in documentation of violent death. The case of recording public suicide at bridges where such acts are known to occur straddles these two scenarios of documenting death. Like the former, it involves prolonged periods of waiting for a moment that is bound to arrive, but with unpredictable timing. Like the latter, it depends on camera surveillance of strangers in public space, and on a great deal of contingency. In this case: who will jump, when, how, and how much of the act the camera operator will be able to enframe.

Susan Sontag, among others, saw the broad shift that would allow for such a project approaching in 1977, writing briefly in *On Photography* about video and its “potential as a tool for surveillance in public places” as “momentous.”<sup>3</sup> Sontag, who was deeply invested in how we view images of suffering and death, didn’t live to comment on the startling realization of Ruttman’s imagined scenario that arrived in theaters in 2006: a documentary called *The Bridge*. Its director, Eric Steel, aggressively put video surveillance to work capturing jumps at San Francisco’s Golden Gate Bridge, the world’s “most popular” suicide site. Recording on four digital video cameras simultaneously during all daylight hours of 2004, the production captured close-up views of multiple suicides – footage of actual deaths that became the film’s backbone.

News of his project became public in January 2005 when bridge officials leaked the story to the *San Francisco Chronicle*, and Steel was quickly embroiled in multiple controversies. The Golden Gate Bridge District condemned him for falsifying permit information (he claimed to be making a series of documentaries about American national monuments), word spread that he had not informed his interviewees about his footage of their loved ones’ suicides, and media coverage questioned whether Steel had made a “snuff film” at the magnificent landmark.<sup>4</sup> Steel protested the snuff charges, saying that his accusers misunderstood “the difference between filming death for the entertainment of others and filming it for the education of others.”<sup>5</sup> The film’s release brought polarized reviews; Stephen Holden of *The New York Times* praised *The Bridge* for “[juxtapos[ing] transcendent beauty and personal tragedy as starkly as any film I can recall,” while *The Guardian*’s Andrew Pulver wrote, “This could be the most morally loathsome film ever made.”<sup>6</sup>

Though this documentary is hardly as unproblematic and straightforwardly profound as Steel professes, it would be a mistake to dismiss *The Bridge* as snuff. While its attempts to “educate” are less pronounced than Steel claims, its capacity to “entertain” is greater and more interesting than he can safely admit. Despite its unsettling lack of self-awareness, *The Bridge*’s efforts to entertain signal an important break with an established dichotomy in documentary displays of violent death. Before *The Bridge*, there had been disreputable films allowing audiences to enjoy the audiovisual pleasure of real death and reputable films asking audiences to bear witness to real death as something terrible. Recall the Introduction’s discussion of the *Faces of Death* (1978, John Allen Schwartz) compilations for an example of the reviled variety; on the reputable side, one would include documentaries such as *Night and Fog* (1955, Alain Resnais) or *Hearts and Minds* (1974, Peter Davis). Steel’s film explores the territory between these two poles, perhaps acknowledging that in an increasingly crowded marketplace of documentary death, conventional portrayals no longer command the attention they once did. Using the Golden Gate Bridge itself and techniques associated with fiction film to enhance the beauty of recorded suicide, *The Bridge* trains audiences of mainstream documentary to overcome the impulse to view these shots as purely horrific. The result is a documentary that presents bodies falling fatally through space as a *sublime* spectacle – simultaneously magnificent and horrible. Further, both the internal structure and external reception of *The Bridge* expose a desire

for real deaths to resemble their fictional counterparts, prioritizing one jump scene that embraces the aesthetics of Hollywood.

More broadly, the vehemence of reactions to *The Bridge*'s jumper shots, whether inspired or revolted, reveal that bodies dying on digital video feel no less visceral to audiences than bodies dying on film. No one questions the referentiality of the footage, suspecting meaningful manipulation, nor does anyone treat its sights as "immaterial" or "disembodied" – favorite terms of new media theorists writing on digital cinema. In the face of *The Bridge* and other digital death documentaries, theoretical hand-wringing about whether events are transferred to the screen algorithmically or indexically comes to feel extremely esoteric.<sup>7</sup>

#### How to Record a Suicide in 10,000 Hours or Less: Logistics and Ethics in Shooting *The Bridge*

To record almost two dozen suicides for *The Bridge*, Steel devised a rigorous and methodical production plan. He and his crew kept four digital video cameras trained on the bridge's pedestrian walkway every day from dawn to dusk during 2004. The cameras were split between two stations overlooking the structure from nearby coastland – one on the northeast side, one on the southeast side – and each station was continually staffed (Figure 3.3). Each operator manually controlled a camera fitted with an extreme telephoto lens, which they zoomed close enough to track individual bridge walkers. The operator decided whom to follow in these telephoto views, "[using] whatever instincts he or she possessed to try to determine who might climb over the rail," as Steel explains.<sup>8</sup> The other camera was framed for a wide shot of the bridge, only requiring the operator to change its tape every hour. The crew recorded footage of most of that year's 24 suicides, striving for maximum visibility in their cinematography: zooming as close as possible to try to capture the act in its entirety, from the climb over the railing to the splash in the water below. In addition to this elaborate bridge surveillance, Steel shot around 120 hours of interviews with the jumpers' friends and family (and also with medical and psychiatric professionals speaking about suicide, though none of their interviews made it to *The Bridge*'s final cut).<sup>9</sup> Rounded out by vivid shots of the Golden Gate Bridge from many angles in all manner of weather conditions, the production accumulated more than 10,000 hours of footage.<sup>10</sup> That gives the 93-minute documentary a staggering 6,500:1 approximate shooting ratio – a statistic that, among other things, demonstrates beyond a reasonable doubt that *The Bridge* never could have been made on celluloid.

During his production phase, Steel went to great lengths to conceal his surveillance of the bridge from the public. As he explains, "My biggest fear was that word would get out about what we were doing and someone that wasn't thinking clearly would see it as an opportunity to immortalize themselves on film."<sup>11</sup> In that scenario, Steel would have become the snuff filmmaker he is accused of being, in a strange way, by capturing real deaths that were indeed staged for his camera. The other side of his covert operation, though, is that the production records jumpers without their knowledge, let alone informed consent – a factor that combines with their impending deaths to give them no agency in their representation.

Making sure to avoid actively attracting jumpers does not ethically exempt the production from intervening in the jumps that happened on their own. Unsurprisingly, the intense "fly on the wall" technique that the extreme telephoto lenses enable has attracted a great deal of suspicion about low-level complicity in the recorded deaths. Crew members all had the bridge

patrol's emergency number on cell phone speed dials and would reportedly call in whenever someone began to climb the railing. By setting rail-climbing as the criterion for making a call, though, the production's involvement would almost always be too late, as many of the depicted jumpers express little hesitation once they make that climb. This element of intervention exists in tension with the larger goal of the project: to get the footage he set out to capture, Steel must train his cameras on some suicides that he cannot or does not prevent.

Here a return to Sobchack's "Inscribing Ethical Space" is beneficial, as Steel's gaze straddle a few of her categories for ethical or unethical recording of actual death.<sup>12</sup> His is "the helpless gaze" in the sense that visible distance from the event prevents direct intervention; but Steel chooses his own vantage points and thus prevents *himself* from direct intervention (critics have suggested that if it were a real priority, one camera operator would have been walking the bridge). In a rare moment of intentional ethical vulnerability, Steel undercuts his own intervention strategy by including footage of another image-maker on the brink of documenting death whose location *on* the bridge saves a life. An amateur photographer snapping away on the walkway notices a woman climbing the railing. After a brief moment spent photographing the event, he leans over and pulls the woman back over to the walkway. Interviewed in the film, he describes his initial hesitation to intervene: "when I was behind the camera, it's almost like it wasn't real, because I was looking through the lens." He reports being fixated on how great the material was, but then realizing, "I had to actually get out of that mode of thinking and . . . do something to help her." Unlike this man, Steel and his crew try to both record and act, presumably calling the bridge patrol with one hand and keeping the other on their tripod arm. Thus, *The Bridge's* gaze is also the "interventional gaze," visibly evidenced by the shots of bridge patrol officers that they've called in and by the shaky camerawork after some jumpers climb the rail, which presumably signifies a distracted operator calling the patrol. But a disturbing parallel observation is unavoidable: the polished camerawork of some other jumper shots implies that attention went to the footage rather than intervention. The latter scenario exemplifies Sobchack's "professional gaze" – one that she isolates from the others as being not wholly acceptable. This gaze fails to meet Sobchack's fundamental requirement for justifiable death documentation: the film "must indicate that watching and recording the event of death is not more important than preventing it."<sup>13</sup>

In this ethical borderland between interventional and professional gazes, *The Bridge's* operators implicate themselves every time their tilt downward follows a falling body a little too smoothly. To accommodate this unique and uniquely digital mode of documenting death that Steel employs, I would propose an addition to Sobchack's list: the expectant gaze. Characterized by the new technologically-enabled ability to simply run a camera and *wait*, the expectant gaze is accompanied by an ambivalent desire for death to occur. The documentarian looking in this way has primarily sought out an opportunity to record a life ending, not an opportunity to save one; it is the death he expects, not rescue. Any gestures to the contrary – such as this crew's calls to the bridge patrol – can be commended, but must be reconciled with the project's broader aim.

As 10,000 hours of footage was edited down to feature-length, the offbeat project took on a fairly conventional documentary shape, typified by its six-minute opening sequence. We begin with our whole visual field obscured by fog, which shifts quickly through a time-lapse effect, intermittently thinning to allow one of the Golden Gate Bridge's towers to peek through. Its thick steel struts ascend skyward, complemented by the narrower vertical and diagonal lines of its support cables, and its red-orange hue gleams in the late afternoon sun (Figure 3.4). Cars fly down its road with the accelerated frame rate, and a boat's wake streaks the water below. The

contemplative score accentuates this beauty and mystery with strings holding sustained notes, and gongs and cymbals shimmering underneath. As fog rises up again, Steel transitions to a closer view, and a calmer day's activity: birds fly over the bridge, kayaks and a cruise ship pass under it, and a variety of pedestrians cross it. A sparse, plaintive piano part enters the score, inflecting the scene with sadness as the camera lingers on a middle-aged man looking over the edge. Shortly, he swings himself over the low railing, holds on for a second or two, and lets go. The camera tilts down unsteadily as the operator struggles to anticipate the rate of his fall; his flailing body leaves and reenters the frame a few times and then hits in a shower of frothy sea water (Figures 3.5-3.6). A kitesurfer floats through the frame and we slip into an interview with him and his friend – supplemented visually with a montage of kitesurfing at the Golden Gate, and aurally with a half-lively, half-melancholy indie rock track. The kitesurfer, who saw the splash, explains how strange it was to realize that he was enjoying “a real celebration of life” through sport while “that person was at the lowest of the low of their life” (Figure 3.7).

This opening sequence introduces a structure and tone that are representative of the film as a whole. As we adjust to the daily life of this particular public space, we see its normality disrupted by a shocking event. After a brief moment to absorb it on our own, the event is folded into a narrative frame through interviews, which both highlight its unusual quality and also attempt to contextualize it within the range of “normal” human experience. We're cued to feel sad that the event took place, but also to recognize what a visually interesting and extraordinary spectacle the film is providing for us. If this deeply conventional documentary format feels uncomfortable in *The Bridge*, it is because the ethical and emotional volatility of the film's death footage cries out for some kind of formal acknowledgment of the content's singularity. This disjunction between mundane form and explosive content is particularly loaded because of suicide's status as a supremely taboo type of death – one with many proverbial land mines surrounding its representation.

### “Prepared within the Silence of the Heart”: Suicide and Its Aesthetics in History

In discourse on suicide, Albert Camus' book-length consideration of the topic, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, is most often quoted for its opening line: “There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy.”<sup>14</sup> *The Bridge*, as we will see, hesitates to take a side on Camus' “fundamental question,” but it does plunge into territory acknowledged more cryptically on the following page of *Sisyphus*: the relation between suicide and aesthetics. Camus writes of suicide, “An act like this is prepared within the silence of the heart, as is a great work of art.”<sup>15</sup> He stops short of granting suicide artistic status, but proposes an intriguing link between preparing one's own death and an artist's creative process. *The Bridge* expands on that link by documenting one suicide that could rightly be judged a work of art, and by strengthening such a judgment with its own aesthetic interventions.

Some historical context for suicide itself and for the ways it has been represented helps illustrate what is new and controversial about these interventions. Compared with the types of death considered in previous chapters, representations of suicide tonally depart from both the abrupt injustice of violent death and the routine sadness of natural death. On the (ironically extensive) list of topics often referred to as “the last taboo,” suicide has long been characterized by various stigmas. These have contributed to the difficulty of its study because surviving loved

ones, and even doctors and coroners, have been reluctant to officially record individual deaths as suicides. Nor can those who have committed suicide be interviewed, of course, adding another methodological obstacle.<sup>16</sup>

The act found its greatest acceptance in the classical era, though willingness then to view some suicides as heroic was by no means universal. Rather, ancient Greece and Rome hosted a plurality of opinions on suicide, contrasting to the monolithic, anti-suicide stance of Christianity that would dominate the following centuries.<sup>17</sup> In the Middle Ages, the notion of suicide as a rational choice lost favor, replaced by a widespread belief that those who took their own lives had been tempted to do so by the Devil.<sup>18</sup> Not only a sin, suicide was also a severely punished crime – or as severely as was practical, with the criminals already dead. Common penalties in Europe (many of which spread to the New World colonies) included refusal of religious rites and burial, confiscation of inheritance by the state, prosecution of “accomplices,” and assorted desecrations of the corpse.<sup>19</sup>

As the seventeenth century dawned, Shakespeare’s eloquent soliloquy on suicide, “To be, or not to be,” began a new era of reframing “the question” as again worth asking rationally – a perspective that political, religious, and legal authorities had long been working collectively to crush.<sup>20</sup> Suicide became a hot topic in the salons of the European aristocracy, and a popular act, as well; historian Georges Minois reports that from 1680-1720 rates rose among the aristocracy “to the point that suicide seemed a genuine fashion.”<sup>21</sup> Debates expanded beyond the salons during the eighteenth century, accompanied by a flurry of philosophical essays.<sup>22</sup> Secular, even-handed consideration of suicide was less forthcoming in the American colonies, where religious condemnation still dominated.<sup>23</sup> On both sides of the Atlantic, though, courts were quietly reducing harsh punishments by delivering *non compos mentis* verdicts that would exempt the deceased from blame and protect the family’s assets.<sup>24</sup> The trend of attributing suicide to insanity and melancholia had been building since the seventeenth century and took root firmly in the nineteenth, when the main current of discourse on suicide shifted from courts and churches into medical journals, and when legal and religious punishments were largely dropped.<sup>25</sup>

The twentieth century saw many changes in the understanding and treatment of suicide, with intensified study of the problem – and it was overwhelmingly seen as a problem rather than a rational or heroic choice – in psychology and sociology.<sup>26</sup> In the latter, Emile Durkheim’s landmark publication of *Suicide* in 1897 framed the title act as a social problem that could be treated best with broad societal reforms, not individual psychological treatment. Because of the book’s prestige as a foundational sociological text, it brought much subsequent attention to suicide in the discipline, including the birth of modern suicidology with a flurry of research in the 1960s.<sup>27</sup> Psychiatry chose a different path, producing many theories to explain suicide and many “cures” for suicidal tendencies. Neuropsychiatrists promoted gruesome surgeries in the first half of the twentieth century (ranging from tooth extraction to colon resections and hysterectomies), which gave way to psychotropic drugs innovated in the 1950s and their descendents in today’s pharmacological treatments.<sup>28</sup> Despite this large amount of scholarship on suicide in general, Minois argues that the past century has also seen a regression in willingness to discuss and acknowledge individual suicides.<sup>29</sup>

That silence on individual suicides has two implications: repression and a refusal to acknowledge the act amongst friends and family of suicide victims themselves, but also a lack of examination of individual suicides in public discourse. In relation to the latter form, one of *The Bridge*’s most striking and controversial features is its commitment to broadening the sense in which its subjects are committing suicide *in public*. Leaping from an open-air structure full of



tourists in broad daylight is an inherently public act and that aspect seems integral to the Golden Gate Bridge as a suicide destination. Its jumpers are willing to be, and perhaps even want to be, highly visible and watched as they end their lives. But *The Bridge* amplifies that public quality immensely by screening individual suicides for a mass audience, challenging Minois' taboo.

Retracing the broad historical strokes above, one can discern that despite suicide's reputation as an act committed privately, even secretly, there has been a charged interplay between public and private throughout its history in Western civilization. The most famous suicides of the classical era were practically social affairs, with death happening amidst a large entourage of companions and servants. Plato's account of Socrates' death (which he chose over exile) in *Phaedro* describes the philosopher drinking his hemlock surrounded by grieving, but respectful, friends; Petronius' suicide appears similarly well-attended in Tacitus' Roman *Annals*, with friends reading poetry and sharing a last meal with him.<sup>30</sup> This social quality of classical suicide is apparent in Jacques-Louis David's 1787 painting *The Death of Socrates* (Figure 3.8), which crowds the philosopher's bedside with people. Robert Garland's *The Greek Way of Death* even describes an incident in which an aged woman invited Roman general Sextus Pompeius to attend her self-poisoning, "in the belief that his presence would render her death 'more distinguished.'"<sup>31</sup> That a suicide could draw an accepting audience speaks to the act's frequent absence of shame and separation from mental illness in the classical era. In another public element, citizens in some parts of ancient Greece could request permission from the senate to kill themselves, receiving hemlock free of charge if their reasons were deemed satisfactory.<sup>32</sup> The fourth-century scholar Libanius records Athenian law on suicide as follows: "If your existence is hateful to you, die; if you are overwhelmed by fate, drink the hemlock. If you are bowed with grief, abandon life. Let the unhappy man recount his misfortune, let the magistrate supply him with the remedy, and his wretchedness will come to an end."<sup>33</sup>

As described above, Europeans of later eras would never be invited to die by the state if they found their existence "hateful" and were roundly punished through the nineteenth century for abandoning life. But the suicides of the Middle Ages and Early Modern period, too, had important public aspects in the form of posthumous rituals. Durkheim's research details the aforementioned desecrations of suicide victims' corpses, which were performed all over Europe:

[In France] at Bordeaux the corpse was hung by the feet; at Abbeville it was dragged through the streets on a hurdle; at Lille, if it was a man, the corpse was hung after being dragged to the crossroads, if a woman, burned . . . [In England] it was customary to drag the suicide's body, pierced crossways with a stick, through the streets and bury it on a highway without any ceremony . . . [In Zurich] if the man had stabbed himself, a bit of wood in which the dagger was fixed was driven into the body near the head; if he had drowned himself, he was buried under five feet of water in the sand.<sup>34</sup>

Many of these gruesome practices emphasize their performance in public space, often as a presumable deterrent for suicide among others in the community.<sup>35</sup> Here we see the public display of suicide corpses being used to discourage suicide (though in a manner that clashes with our twenty-first-century morality), but in a later section I will argue that *The Bridge* performs a parallel public display with very different aesthetics and questionable results.

Most pertinent to issues of ethics and aesthetics in *The Bridge* are the public aspects of suicide from the eighteenth century to present, which center on the role of media. The

flourishing of the popular press just before the eighteenth century provided opportunities to disseminate details about individual suicides nationally, beyond the range of a mutilated body hanging in a town square. While the press could have been used in the same spirit as corpse desecration, its role in publicizing suicide seems more sensational, even salacious, than bluntly horrifying. At the risk of piquing interest rather than repulsion, British newspapers not only printed suicide rates, but also “articles on the most interesting, strangest, or most striking cases of suicide, inquiring into their circumstances and causes” and fueled the aristocratic fashion for suicide by reporting heavily on the most famous deaths.<sup>36</sup>

Extreme examples appear in the *Illustrated Police News*, an early British tabloid that showed a penchant in the 1860s and ‘70s for covering the most visually spectacular suicides in graphic detail. Ron M. Brown’s *The Art of Suicide* reproduces a number of these illustrations.<sup>37</sup> One issue shows a woman’s head severed from her body and sitting apart from it in a pool of blood, with the caption “Suicide on a Railway,” while “Shocking Suicide at Crystal Palace” shows a man tumbling through the air in terror next to the famous London structure. The awkward mechanics of self-crucifixion and self-beheading are painstakingly displayed in multiple issues (Figures 3.9-3.10). The bizarre illustrations of this last pair bring supposedly real suicides before the public eye, but at the same time hyperbolically – almost comically – underscore suicide’s profile as a private act. The men in these images struggle alone in dark garrets, trying to enact modes of death designed to be *public* spectacles, with attendant staff, as solitary suicides.

The *Illustrated Police News* serves even more directly as a grim precursor for *The Bridge*’s displays of real suicides in its images of women jumping to their watery deaths from bridges (Figure 3.11).<sup>38</sup> These striking engravings share many visual markers with *The Bridge* in depicting death: a vantage point floating below the bridge and toward one bank, a falling body that dominates the frame’s center, and pedestrians on the bridge who witness the jump without intervening. In the *Illustrated Police News*, reporting “news” is a transparent excuse for lurid displays of death (a dynamic similar to some accusations about *The Bridge*), but it is significant that these illustrations claim journalistic authority.<sup>39</sup> Central to their appeal, it seems, is their grounding in actual events – regardless of the reader’s level of credulity.

While images from the *Illustrated Police News* or *The Bridge* can be easily reviled as distasteful, the debate about whether and how individual suicides should enter public discourse has higher stakes than matters of taste. The public silence about individual suicides that Minois identifies in the past two centuries partly stems from a resurgent belief in “suicide contagion,” a phenomenon whereby people exposed to an individual suicide – potentially in person, but usually through the media – are compelled to imitate that suicide. An 1845 issue of the *American Journal of Insanity* (!) confidently asserts that, “No other fact is better established by science than that suicide is often committed from imitation,” and continues with a vivid warning against newspaper reports describing individual suicides: “A single paragraph may suggest suicide to twenty persons. Some particulars of the act, or expressions, seize the imagination, and the disposition to repeat it, in a moment of morbid excitement, proves irresistible.”<sup>40</sup> More than a century later, Joost A.M. Meerloo’s 1962 study *Suicide and Mass Suicide* subscribes to the same belief, asserting plainly, “Every suicide can start a chain of suicides.”<sup>41</sup> His comment that “the suicidal tendency is infectious. It arouses the suppressed self-destructive inclinations in everybody,” reveals the Freudian underpinnings of theories on suicide contagion.<sup>42</sup> A bold and controversial contribution to psychological explanations for suicide, Freud’s *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* posited in 1920 that the life-preserving sexual instincts were in constant

tension with destructive “death instincts” – instincts that could account for behaviors like suicide, sadism, and masochism.<sup>43</sup> Though they are at work in each human being’s unconscious mind, the death instincts are more effectively repressed or sublimated by some than others (a parallel argument to Freud’s 1905 take on sexual perversion in *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*). As integrated into belief in suicide contagion, Freud’s theory identifies publicity on individual suicides as triggering these innate impulses toward self-destruction.

Though scholars are not in full agreement, suicide contagion has been largely confirmed as a real effect by suicide statistics in the past few decades – a conclusion supported by the 2009 *Oxford Textbook of Suicidology and Suicide Prevention*, which devotes a chapter to synthesizing current research on the phenomenon. Crucially, its authors add that there is “substantial evidence that non-fictional media reports on suicides exert a stronger imitative effect than fictional ones” and that the manner in which suicide is represented can impact on the rate of imitation greatly.<sup>44</sup> The latter conclusion carries the type of life-and-death consequences we do not usually associate with journalistic and aesthetic choices. Drawing on this research, the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention has published guidelines that encourage the media to discuss suicide, not suppress it, but to do so in a manner that will reduce the likelihood of imitation.<sup>45</sup> Central to these recommendations is the well-supported theory that substantial attention to *individual* suicides can encourage imitation; thus, the guidelines discourage reporting on “a particular death . . . at length or in many stories.”<sup>46</sup> They also caution against “inadvertently romanticizing suicide,” which another textbook, the *Comprehensive Textbook of Suicidology*, echoes with a warning about “the praise, glorification, or otherwise rewarding of the original stimulus suicide” in its depiction.<sup>47</sup> The guidelines continue, “Research indicates that detailed descriptions or pictures of the location or site of a suicide encourage imitation.”

These guidelines seem unable to even conceive of suicide documentation on *The Bridge*’s scale, offering no specific clauses about showing graphic footage of public suicides – but extrapolating disapproval from their other recommendations is hardly a stretch. In trying to humanize and individuate his jumpers, Eric Steel engages in precisely the style of representation that has been shown to increase suicide, as he also does with the darkly beautiful shots of the bridge as a suicide venue. Especially problematic is his relentless focus on one jumper, Gene Sprague, whose story structures the film and whose death, I will argue, is romanticized – and perhaps not inadvertently.

### “Nobler in the Mind”: The Sublime Suicide’s Eighteenth Century Roots

Warnings against the romanticization of suicide primarily target the news media, but they also have interesting resonances in literary history, where *The Bridge*’s sublime suicides find precursors. The written word was occasionally employed to beautify suicide in the classical era, and indeed many of that era’s heroic deaths were probably much more disturbing in person than in surviving accounts. For example, Plato describes Socrates’ death as gradual and peaceful, aesthetically integrating it into the profound experience of the philosopher’s last hours. However, Charles Panati points out that Plato’s passage undoubtedly stylizes this event: “[death from hemlock poisoning] is marked not only by ascending motor paralysis, as Plato recorded, but also by intense nausea, vomiting, and limb-flailing convulsions – unpleasanties that are found nowhere in Plato’s noble end to the life of his friend and teacher.”<sup>48</sup> Such positive accounts of suicide as Plato’s fell out of favor under Christianity, which made Judas rather than Socrates its

model of the act and generally emphasized its horror.<sup>49</sup> But by the eighteenth century a new strain of romantic depictions of suicide emerged, with Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's character Werther as its exemplar.<sup>50</sup> David Phillips, the researcher whose 1974 study elevated suicide contagion out of the realm of myth, named the phenomenon "the Werther effect" after the melancholy character.<sup>51</sup> While Goethe's immensely popular epistolary novel *The Sorrows of Young Werther* allegedly inspired a wave of suicides after its 1774 publication, it can inform our consideration of *The Bridge* more through its complex aestheticization of suicide as sublime, both magnificent and horrible.<sup>52</sup>

One of the most satisfyingly precise-yet-versatile labels in the study of aesthetics, the sublime has been described and revised in a long lineage of theorizing. Edmund Burke provides a succinct and eloquent definition: "not pleasure but a sort of delightful horror, a sort of tranquility tinged with terror."<sup>53</sup> Building from Burke's writing, Immanuel Kant refines the sublime to:

. . . a pleasure that only arises indirectly, being brought about by the feeling of a momentary check to the vital forces followed at once by a discharge all the more powerful . . . since the mind is not simply attracted by the object, but is also alternately repelled thereby, the delight in the sublime does not so much involve positive pleasure as admiration or respect, i.e. merits the name of negative pleasure.<sup>54</sup>

Unlike some of his tamer categories of aesthetic judgment, the sublime for Kant seems to be a visceral experience – wrapped up not just in the mind's operation, but in the movements of the "vital forces." There is a certain disturbing harmony in a "momentary check to the vital forces" that accompanies the sight of a permanent check to those forces for another human being, as in *The Bridge*.

In *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, Goethe's mixture of beauty and horror are a bit more diffuse than Burke and Kant's aesthetic category strictly requires, but its depiction of suicide nonetheless unites these two characteristics controversially – as *The Bridge* would again centuries later, with renewed controversy because of its documentary authenticity. *Sorrows* is composed of letters written in the last two years of the fictional title character's life, before unbearable love for a married woman, Lotte, drives him to commit suicide. Because the reader is strictly confined to Werther's own introspective narration of his life for most of the book, his poetic musings about a noble and romantic self-inflicted death seep into her expectations for the end of his story. Early in the book, he indicates his moral acceptance of suicide and frames it as a form of natural death – arguing that psychological pain drives life to its end just as organically as the physical symptoms of disease. Then later, as Werther plans his own suicide, an excerpt of his last letter to Lotte demonstrates his anticipation of death as noble and beautiful:

It is decided, Lotte, that I shall die, and I am writing you this calmly, without any romantic exaltation, on the morning of the day when I shall see you for the last time . . . [Yesterday] a thousand plans, a thousand hopes raged in my soul, but finally it was there, firmly, wholly, the one last thought: to die! I lay down, and this morning, in the peace of awakening, it is still firm, still strong in my heart: to die! – It is not despair; it is the certainty that I have suffered enough, and that I am sacrificing myself for you . . . When you walk to the top of the mountain, on a

fine summer evening, remember me; and then look across the churchyard and to my grave, where the wind gently sways the tall grass in the light of the setting sun. – I was calm when I began to write this letter, and now, now I am weeping like a child, when all this comes so vividly to mind.<sup>55</sup>

Werther cannot maintain his promise to write of his death “without any romantic exaltation” for even two pages, as he quickly lapses into a maudlin description of his future grave that moves him to tears. When he prepares to kill himself, he carefully arranges the aesthetics of his death scene so that it will realize his grand expectations: he dresses in his smartest blue frock coat and yellow waistcoat, places Lessing’s play *Emilia Galotti* open on his desk, and leaves a bottle of wine next to it with only one glass drunk from it (perhaps to indicate that he enjoyed his last moments, but that he did not take his life as an intoxicated whim).

In the final two pages of the novel, though, all of Werther’s anticipation of his noble suicide is crushed under the weight of its reality, as starkly described by the unnamed, fictional editor who has collected and published his letters. Werther shoots himself in the head with a pistol at midnight in his bedroom, but survives in a mutilated state for a further twelve hours. Significantly, for comparison with *The Bridge*, Goethe based the details of Werther’s death – and even their exact phrasing, in some cases – on an eyewitness account of his own acquaintance Karl Willhelm Jerusalem’s actual suicide, giving these concluding pages an almost documentary feel.<sup>56</sup> *Sorrows*’ “editor” reports: “When the doctor arrived, he found the unfortunate young man on the floor, past help; his pulse was still beating; all his limbs were paralyzed . . . and his brain was laid bare. They bled him needlessly; the blood flowed; he was still breathing . . . his lungs still gave forth a dreadful rattling sound, now weak, now stronger . . . Werther died at noon.”<sup>57</sup> Certainly, this passage lacks “romantic exaltation.” By exposing the bodily horror of Werther’s death in two pages of bare prose, Goethe frames suicide as an act “nobler in the mind” than in its execution: he equates beauty and romanticism with Werther’s decision to die, but horror with the process itself. He does, however, infuse the scene with a bit of emotional catharsis: Werther’s strangely prolonged demise allows for a romantic deathbed scene, with friends weeping over his expiring body, that he would have loved – and that most suicide victims do not experience.

Beauty must have outweighed horror for many of the book’s eighteenth-century readers, because a wave of “Werther fever” washed over Europe with legions of fans embracing and admiring the troubled character. Bruce Duncan emphasizes that it was “a phenomenon that included not just enthusiasm for the novel, but also a desire to emulate its hero.”<sup>58</sup> Martin Swales attests that due to the book’s popularity “silhouettes appeared, drawings, engravings, everyday objects were decorated with scenes from *Werther*, and so on.” Young men dressed in Werther’s trademark blue frock coat and yellow waistcoat, readers made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem’s grave, and Goethe became an international celebrity.<sup>59</sup> Goethe himself regarded the novel and its popularity as youthful embarrassments, to some extent, especially because the author had drawn so many of Werther’s sufferings from his own life – including the character’s suicidal impulses. He was concerned about the suicides the book was allegedly inspiring, and in its 1775 reprinting he added warnings to the reader not to follow Werther’s example.<sup>60</sup>

What is at stake in these aesthetic choices is the implicit challenge suicide brings to the notion of the “good death” discussed in the previous chapter. Werther’s legions of young men who so strongly identified with him (the young Goethe included) and who spoke and wrote in defense of his choice to die argued that one could die a good death from suicide – as does Werther himself within the text. But as we see from “the Werther effect,” using style to frame an

individual suicide in that category risks inviting imitation. Though he did not attribute much importance to suicide contagion, Durkheim blamed this kind of cultural acceptance for heightening the suicide rate and prescribed a harsh regimen of social stigma: “Where such acts are loathed, the feelings they arouse penetrate the recital of them and thus offset rather than encourage individual inclinations . . . examples become truly dangerous not as example but because the revulsion it should inspire is reduced by social tolerance or indifference.”<sup>61</sup> Few today, myself included, would endorse public loathing and revulsion as suicide prevention strategies. But the alarming power that the aesthetics of documentary suicide hold over individual lives and deaths is worth keeping in mind as we return to *The Bridge* itself – an aesthetic work that, unlike all of the previous examples, carries the weight of recording actual death directly.

### Calibrating Sublimity in *The Bridge*

As the previous sections demonstrate, the dominant tone in representing suicide – especially specific, non-fictional suicides – has been resoundingly negative for many centuries. Works that dilute suicide’s horror by exploring its potentially positive aspects – beauty, nobility, a release from suffering – meet intense controversy as a result, as Goethe’s *Sorrows* did.<sup>62</sup> The loudest controversy about *The Bridge* fails to reach this level of complexity because it fixates on the fact that a documentarian would display actual suicides on screen without considering *how* they are displayed. That a respectable documentary on the festival circuit could display them as sublime in 2006 indicates a marked evolution in the fledgling conventions of documenting death.

Connotations of sublimity waft through many reviews of the film: “a beautiful, wrenching, horrifying work of cinema,” “an emotional and aesthetic whirlpool of horror, fascination, beauty.”<sup>63</sup> Richard Brody of *The New Yorker* adds, “These images of death are grotesquely, irresistibly fascinating; their poetic, vaguely unreal gracefulness contrasts poignantly with the despair they imply.”<sup>64</sup> The jumps themselves, as we witness them in *The Bridge*, have the potential to evoke both of Kant’s two categories of the sublime: the mathematical and the dynamic. Experiences of the mathematical sublime overwhelm us with their magnitude – like the expanse of a starry night sky in nature, or the broad bulk of the pyramids among human-made objects.<sup>65</sup> Magnitude is a particularly affecting element of jumps off the Golden Gate Bridge, as the bodies we see fall traverse a vast distance that truly can influence the “vital forces” when contemplated, as Kant describes. Dynamically sublime sights are those that awe us with their overpowering force rather than their overwhelming magnitude – like a lightning storm or a volcanic eruption. The suicides may affect viewers as dynamically sublime through the crushing force of gravity that drives the bodies downward as they contort, and the powerful impacts with the water that send up breathtaking bursts of white against the bluish-gray bay. The dynamic quality of this method of death is, in fact, morbidly well-suited to cinematic representation: cinema is an art distinguished by its capacity to convey movement, and the jumpers achieve death by movement of a profoundly visible and dramatic nature. Movement itself is the lethal force, in a much more palpable way than a bullet from a gun. Kant emphasizes that to experience the dynamic sublime, one cannot oneself be in physical danger from the event witnessed but must be “a safe distance” away: watching a volcano erupt from within the lava’s range produces not “delightful” horror, but just the regular kind. Again, cinema – still a century away from invention at the time of Kant’s writing – proves to be an appropriate medium for the

dynamic sublime, offering its viewer a practical “safe distance” from a powerful force while reducing that distance with technological zooming functions.

Documentary death is undoubtedly adept at “repel[ling]” the mind with its horror, and it becomes even more taboo when its potential sublimity is acknowledged – when a documentarian can demonstrate that the mind can also be “attracted by the object.” Documentaries that show death with one or the other of these qualities, but not both, are the most common variety of their uncommon breed. *The Bridge*’s tenuous balance of the two puts it in a different category, one whose terrain has been even less explored. But, as Kant insists, the sublime is an aesthetic judgment, not an intrinsic quality; it is a particularly difficult judgment for documentary audiences to feel comfortable making about such taboo material. David E. Nye asserts, in agreement with Kant, that “One person’s sublime may be another’s abomination” – an idea that certainly applies to how reviewers and the public have judged *The Bridge*.<sup>66</sup> Steel seems to understand that difficulty, and he relies on three major tools to make audiences receptive to the sublimity of suicide: the sublimity of the Golden Gate Bridge itself, anesthetization to the shock of seeing death, and stylistic techniques from mainstream, commercial cinema.

In the film’s opening sequence, described earlier, the magnificence of the Golden Gate Bridge seems to contrast to the horror of people jumping from its span. Introduced as a majestic site, the Golden Gate immerses visitors in a dramatic intersection of the best that nature and architecture have to offer. It provides recreation, transportation, and an unrivaled vantage point for Bay Area sightseeing. Only the ominous score and the fog prepare us for the death footage, which – preceded by shots of happy tourists and followed by shots of happy kitesurfers – in this first instance feels like an upsetting and anomalous disruption of normality in public space. In an atmosphere of communal pleasure like the Golden Gate Bridge – one associated with our national identity and the promise of the American West – an instance of such acute, individuated despair is difficult to process. For the pedestrians on the bridge, it seems difficult to even *detect* amidst the surrounding sensory overload.

This factor in suicide at the Golden Gate recalls a painting Steel cites as an inspiration for *The Bridge*: Pieter Bruegel’s *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* (Figure 3.12). Bruegel’s landscape is packed with sumptuous sights, centered on a brilliant blue expanse of water, bounded by cliffs and a port city, and dotted with islands and ornate ships. The foreground is densely populated by a farmer and his horse plowing a field, a shepherd and his flock, and a fisherman. The sun blazes hot in the background, hinting at the title character’s doom, but none of the men in the foreground seem to see him where he sinks into the blue water. Like the Golden Gate’s visitors, they are too engrossed in the activity and beauty of the day to detect a small pocket of tragedy in their landscape. At the Golden Gate Bridge, the massive structure immerses its audience and juts out in all directions, its architectural lines constantly soliciting them to look left, right, up, down, and outward to the bay and skyline. Additionally, every view brims with dynamic motion: cars, bicycles, and people traverse the span, which sways in the wind, and below the water churns and boats pass. The unrelenting clamor of cars makes the site’s sonic environment just as overwhelming. Like death itself, the totality of this place seems beyond the capacity of representation. What Steel’s zoomed-in digital camera can accomplish is the opposite: with the overwhelming magnitude and dynamism of the Golden Gate rendered elsewhere in the film, these shots filter it out and isolate individual anguish. They make visible the deaths that are otherwise lost among the stimuli of teeming environments, highlighting what neither Bruegel’s laborers nor the Golden Gate’s tourists seem to notice.

The first such shot, of the middle-aged male jumper in the opening sequence, feels like a violation of the site's spirit, evocatively described by Nye in *American Technological Sublime*:

The *San Francisco Examiner* editorialized that the bridge is "a gateway to the imagination," noting that "in its artful poise, slender there above the shimmering channel, it is more a state of the spirit than a fabricated road connection. It beckons us to dream and dare. First seen as an impossible dream, it became a moral regenerator in the 1930s for a nation devastated by depression" . . . "can do proof" that the nation's "inventive and productive genius" would prevail. It was, and is, an outward and visible sign of an ideal America.<sup>67</sup>

Nye does not mention the estimated 1,300 suicides at the Golden Gate since its construction in 1937.<sup>68</sup> Their terrible counterpoint to the bridge's stunning beauty is a lens through which this optimistic description reads very differently. The "moral regenerator in the 1930s for a nation devastated by depression" appears in *The Bridge* as a prominent reminder of a different kind of depression still devastating that nation. Its beckoning to "dream and dare" connotes its darker lure for those daring enough to kill themselves in such a frightening way. As a sign of a can-do, ideal America whose "inventive and productive genius" could solve any problem, the bridge looks newly frail. This perspective on the structure harkens back to Durkheim's assertion that most suicides stem from society's failure to integrate individuals into a system fully, to give their lives collective meaning. The unseemly pilgrimages that Steel records to this landmark, this symbol of national pride, for the purpose of suicide illuminate its social failure. Documenting the loss of human potential that goes unprevented at the site, Steel's digital cameras provide the too-visible proof of the gap between America's ideal and its reality.

In *The Bridge*, suicide adds an element of terror to the bridge's beauty, but the bridge in turn lends an element of beauty to the terror of suicide, pulling both into the realm of sublimity. The Golden Gate provides a magnificent final view for those about to die, and imbues their deaths with beauty, at least as they appear to witnesses: their trajectories trace the vertical lines of the bridge downward, and the mutilation of their bodies on impact is screened out by a splash. This screening out is crucial to *The Bridge*'s aesthetic scheme, because corpses would pull sublimity back into horror – especially these corpses, which are much the worse for wear after their fall. Those contemplating suicide at the bridge often imagine an instant, clean death, but the reality is very brutal: the body impacts the water as if it were concrete, from that height. The fall splinters bones that then shred internal organs; those that survive drown either in the water or in their own blood as it fills their lungs. The coast guard recovers only some of the corpses, and those that are not located quickly can have their eyes and cheek flesh eaten off by crabs. All of these details are described in "Jumpers," a *New Yorker* exposé on Golden Gate suicides that *The Bridge* credits as its inspiration; but they are notably absent from or downplayed in the film, communicated to the audience only partially by a young man who survived the drop and discusses his injuries.<sup>69</sup> Where Goethe emphasized the physical suffering and gruesomeness of Werther's suicide, Steel seems unwilling to acknowledge the violence of the act he records. He refrains from showing all but one oblique glimpse of a body being retrieved from the water. In a documentary so aggressively pursuing views of public suicide from multiple vantage points, this omission reveals a great deal about its aesthetic priorities. The Golden Gate thus promises to lend grace and a public venue to an act that is usually messy and private, and *The Bridge* cooperates by suppressing any unsettling remnants that resurface.



But just as the beauty of the Golden Gate distracts its pedestrians from seeing suicidal despair, the initial shock and horror of seeing a jumper's descent – even without its violent landing fully displayed – can mask these aesthetic elements. To train his audience to look past the horror and see beauty intermingled with it, Steel attempts a gradual anesthetization through repetition of these fatal jumps. Susan Sontag first wrote about gruesome photographs' potentially anesthetizing effect in 1977's *On Photography*:

To suffer is one thing; another thing is living with the photographed images of suffering, which does not necessarily strengthen conscience and the ability to be compassionate. It can also corrupt them. Once one has seen such images, one has started down the road of seeing more. Images transfix. Images anesthetize.<sup>70</sup>

This numbing effect troubled Sontag enough that she ended *On Photography* with an arresting, but underdeveloped, call for an "ecology of images," which she later conceded will, of course, never come: "No Committee of Guardians is going to ration horror, to keep fresh its ability to shock."<sup>71</sup> Even with a switch to moving images, when we watch a dense, temporally bound collection of those sights in a single documentary, that numbing process can potentially happen very quickly. *The Bridge* needs it to happen quickly, so that a spectacle that seemed horrific in the film's opening moments will feel sublime by its closing scene. Key to this audience transformation is repeated viewing of the difficult sight, which *The Bridge*'s audience potentially experiences on two levels: the many jumps they see while watching the film, but also similar images they have seen beforehand. Chief among this latter category are the 9/11 jumper images, which may have shocked viewers more because of several factors: the jumps as desperate alternatives to being burned alive, the longer descent, the knowledge of a more gruesome landing on concrete, and their association with a traumatic attack that caused mass death.<sup>72</sup>

Repeated viewing of a difficult sight is also a strategy for comprehending the sublime. For example, Nye gives an account of activist Margaret Fuller's attempts to absorb the sight of Niagara Falls in 1843. Prepared for the experience by drawings and a panorama, Fuller stayed at the Falls for a week and viewed them many times from multiple angles. "Before coming away," she wrote, "I think I really saw the full wonder of the scene."<sup>73</sup> *The Bridge* takes a similar approach to acclimate viewers to the sight of real death and allow its potential sublimity to well up. It displays one very specific variety of death many times and from multiple angles and distances in the film's 93 minutes: five different jumps are shown with zoomed-in closeness, and another four appear in extreme wide shots of the whole bridge.

These wide shots are a particularly interesting component of *The Bridge*'s anesthetization process, because they not only show us an additional jump, but prompt us actively to look for it. The first of these "postcard" views, as Steel calls them, frames the entire bridge in a static shot and leaves it onscreen for a long 45 seconds. Tucked away somewhere in the time and space of this long, expansive shot is the tiniest dark speck falling from the bridge, followed by a small, brief splash (Figure 3.13). Knowing the film's topic of people jumping off the bridge, we expect that sight in any sustained view of the structure; but Steel pushes the spectator to *want* to see suicide by setting up this challenge of finding it in the shot. One of these postcard shots even begins with two pedestrians who are being interviewed about their encounter with a jumper on the bridge saying, "we didn't see him jump" – an editing choice that admonishes us not to make the same mistake, to look carefully for the splash. Bruegel's *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* shares this macabre *Where's Waldo?* quality, its title prompting the viewer to hunt through the

landscape for Icarus's tiny, sinking shape. Through *The Bridge*'s many iterations of suicide's display, the event we viewed as a rare spectacle in the opening sequence, intruding upon the tranquil normality of the bridge's daily life, is thus slowly infused with a sense of typicality. The jumps even accumulate a limited set of conventions: people pause to look down before jumping, leap feet first, and flail their arms and legs on the way down.

In structuring these repetitions, Steel uses a genre template typical of Hollywood fiction films, which are adept at dispensing spectacle. *The Bridge*'s prime spectacle, recorded suicide, becomes the backbone of the film's structure: all other elements are arranged to complement the jumper shots, the way narrative is arranged around song-and-dance numbers in musicals or around sex acts in pornography. And like those other genres' prime moments of spectacle, the jumper shots in *The Bridge* are meted out at relatively regular intervals, so that the viewer never has to wait too long to see another. Perhaps one shouldn't be surprised by the prioritization of these moments, because the project is so firmly rooted in the aesthetics of visible death. Asked at a film festival Q&A if he thought about leaving the jumper footage out, "Steel said no because his whole concept was 'to be able to show what it looks like *from the outside*'" (my emphasis).<sup>74</sup>

As always in documentary, what something "looks like from the outside" is filtered through the filmmakers' choices about how to look at it. Structures and stylistic techniques that we associate with mainstream, fiction film play a major role in how *The Bridge* aestheticizes its documentary footage of suicide – an influence that is best illuminated by contrasting *The Bridge* to another documentary on suicide at the Golden Gate. Far more experimental than *The Bridge*, *Suicide Box* is a 13-minute short created by Natalie Jeremijenko and an artists' group called the Bureau of Inverse Technology and shown as part of a larger installation at the Whitney Biennial in 1996. The project includes clips of jumpers from the Golden Gate Bridge, but they were recorded by an automated camera triggered by the jumpers' vertical motion (using technology originally designed to improve missile guidance) – not by an elaborate, fully staffed set-up such as the one Steel uses. The results are interspersed with footage of daily life at the bridge, and accompanied by text at the bottom of the screen that describes the project with the detached style of a scientific report.

*Suicide Box* showed its footage of fatal jumps, just as *The Bridge* does and ten years before it, but did not generate much public controversy, as far as I can tell. Certainly Jeremijenko did not have to appear on *Dr. Phil* to defend herself, as Steel did! A major factor here is *Suicide Box*'s limited circulation, confined to high art circles, as opposed to *The Bridge*'s release in some movie theaters and as a DVD widely available for rental or purchase. But another factor, I argue, is that *Suicide Box*'s footage employs none of the stylistic tools typical of Hollywood for spectacular representation, while *The Bridge* employs many. *Suicide Box* eschews a polished look throughout, diminishing the sensuous beauty of the bridge with its cheap video aesthetic and handheld cinematography, but the jumper shots are particularly ragged. These appear as brief, black and white, static views of bodies falling in extreme long shot – appearing just as black specks against the sky.<sup>75</sup> They are cut together roughly, one after another, with only the indistinct noise of electronic equipment running on the soundtrack. The resulting scenes are basically degraded versions (blurry, no color, limited sound) of what we would see if standing where the "suicide box" witnessed these jumps (Figure 3.14).

*The Bridge*, in contrast, uses its technology to *enhance* human vision, and to add greater visibility, drama, and suspense to how we would perceive the event in-person. It zooms much closer, offering clear, full-color shots that "see" from a vantage point inaccessible to humans and reveal details like facial expressions and nervous fidgeting. The frame is mobile rather than

static, directed to follow the jumper and give us the best possible view of her or his descent, striving with difficulty to keep the human body centered and in focus. Music provides audiences with cues for how to feel about the jumps, combining a yearning, minor-key score with melancholy pop interludes. Steel also uses foley effects from fiction film's toolbox, adding the sound of a splash in post-production to accompany each jumper's impact on the water. The mise-en-scène does its part, too, as the magnificence of the Golden Gate is used to set the mood for the jumper footage – especially when displayed with ethereal fog, a lightning bolt, or a hopeful rainbow to generate specific emotions.

The accumulation of these techniques is crucial to the final revelation of sublimity that ends the film. Building to a scene of brazen escalation, Steel saves his most spectacular footage until the audience will be most primed – by the accrued sublimity of the Golden Gate, by the adjustment to watching death – to encounter a sublime suicide. Then he can enfold beauty and horror into the suicidal act rather than dividing them between intention and act, as Goethe does. This particular suicide is committed by Gene Sprague, a man shown over and over throughout the documentary, pacing the bridge. Appearing at regular intervals, just like the jumper shots, he walks along clad in all black with his long dark hair whipping erratically in the wind.

Because no other jumper's story spans the entire length of the film, one starts to wonder while watching *The Bridge* for the first time what makes Gene's so remarkable. Like most of the jumpers, Gene had a history of mental instability, had talked about committing suicide, and struggled with finances and relationships. Other jumpers in the film are more memorable for the content of their stories: one had a friend who fears that she contributed to his death by giving him her prescription medication and cutting short a social visit when he said he was feeling suicidal; another was just 21 years old and had direct conversations with his sympathetic father about whether he should kill himself and how; another, Kevin Hines, lived to narrate his journey of despair to and off the bridge, which ends with hope through his survival and newfound direction working in suicide prevention. Building suspense by drawing out Gene's story out over 93 minutes, *The Bridge* turns him into its protagonist – and thus adopts another convention of fiction film. The way Steel structures his footage and mediates Gene's image implies a disturbing judgment: that Gene's jump is more significant than the others, that his life and death are worthy of greater attention. In short, he is the star of *The Bridge* where the others are supporting players.

When we finally see his suicide, the reason it has been withheld and hyped for so long becomes clear. Unlike the other four furtive jumps seen in close-up – described by one IMDb commenter as “pitiful little leaps” – Gene's is uniquely graceful.<sup>76</sup> He sits on the railing with his back to the drop and then smoothly hoists himself into a standing position atop it. For a second, he balances there – his tall frame, clad in black leather, complementing the vertical red struts of the cables. Maintaining his straight-backed stance, he tips his weight resolutely toward the bay and gently falls backward with a high diver's grace. Spreading his arms straight out in the first second of his descent, Gene does not flail wildly like the other jumpers in freefall; during the drop, he holds his chosen pose remarkably well as his body twists slightly in the wind and lands with a towering splash. Gene's suicide is, in a word, spectacular.

For the compassionate viewer, there is always an element of horror in watching real people die on camera. While none of the deaths examined in this project have been easy to watch, I would not hesitate to call Gene Sprague's the most aesthetically beautiful. Significantly, it is also skillfully documented. Unlike the other jumps, every visible instant of Gene's – from his climb onto the railing through his splashdown – is enframed by Steel's

cameras, which offer clear views of the event from two different angles (Figures 3.15-3.16). With perfect Hollywood style, Steel sutures these two shots together with a match cut, and even maintains the 180° line, conveniently visible in the form of the bridge itself. Hence, a serendipitous confluence of aesthetics wins Gene the role of protagonist in *The Bridge*: his jump provides the greatest spectacle, and the crew records it with the most skill.

A brief comparison with mainstream, commercial cinema underscores the sublime aesthetics of this sequence, and their association with that branch of filmmaking. Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958) might seem the most natural match with *The Bridge*: it features a suicidal character who journeys to the Golden Gate Bridge, appears entranced by the site, and leaps into the bay. Further, she seems to have been infected by a hereditary strand of suicide contagion (as we are told that her great-grandmother killed herself and may be possessing her) and, just like *The Bridge*'s subjects, she is unknowingly being watched by a vaguely creepy voyeur. The missing ingredient in *Vertigo*, though, is the spectacle of freefall that is so important to *The Bridge*; Madeleine makes her leap from the shore underneath the structure, at Fort Point, and only falls about ten feet into the water, out of the camera's view (Figure 3.17).<sup>77</sup>

Mainstream, fiction cinema has frequently found beauty in the spectacle of bodies falling through space toward violent, and usually fatal, landings (though it has an important documentary precursor in the high dive sequence of Leni Riefenstahl's 1938 opus, *Olympia*). Films of the past two decades, especially, have exhibited a keen interest in this sight, intensified by the seamless realism new digital effects provide. Examples include *Cliffhanger* (1993, Renny Harlin), *City of Angels* (1998, Brad Silberling), *Vanilla Sky* (2001, Cameron Crowe), *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* (2001, Peter Jackson), *King Kong* (2005, Peter Jackson), *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* (2009, David Yates), and *The Twilight Saga: New Moon* (2009, Chris Weitz), to name a few.<sup>78</sup> The final scene of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000, Ang Lee), resonates strongly with *The Bridge*, as it depicts suicide-via-bridge-jump and stylistically softens the horror of that event. For his location, Lee uses an ornate bridge, shrouded by fog and immersed in an awe-inspiring natural environment. A young Chinese warrior woman, devastated by the emotional destruction she has wreaked upon fellow warriors, has been drawn to this mountain-top bridge by a legend that those who jump from it will float away and have their deepest wishes come true. But there is sadness, not hope, in her eyes as she shares a few parting words with her lover and then springs over the railing. The actress's movements combine with practical and digital special effects to portray the grace of this suicidal leap. Her body strikes an open pose, her hair and clothes flow in the wind, and the camera swoops around her to provide multiple views of her slow-motion descent, eventually losing sight of her in the thick fog (Figures 3.18-3.19). An evocative score plays under the event, and we are even guided in how to react to the sight from an on-screen witness: her lover, who appears saddened but also deeply moved.

Many of these techniques common in fiction film are borrowed for presenting *The Bridge*'s finale of documentary death. Gene himself begins this appropriation, as the only one of these suicidal individuals paying attention to aesthetics. With a touch of Hollywood flair, he arrived at the bridge in costume – his outfit an expressionistic signifier of his dark thoughts – and his jump is as deftly choreographed and executed as a dance move in any big-screen musical. Gene's consideration of appearances connects with the intensely public quality of this suicide venue, where an estimated 76% of jumps are witnessed by someone on the bridge.<sup>79</sup> Prevention advocates comment that it may be chosen by people who want to be stopped, to be talked back over the railing. But, as mentioned above, it may also be chosen by people who want to be *seen*

killing themselves. Whether Gene planned his exit for his witnesses or for his own satisfaction – a parting gesture of success and control in a life that lacked those qualities – he gave his audience a true performance. Unbeknownst to him, that audience would drastically multiply when Eric Steel preserved the moment of his death on digital video and used it as the climax of *The Bridge*.

The audiovisual mediation of Gene's already-striking suicide in *The Bridge* strives to elicit a sublime interpretation. Steel anticipates that his target audience may need one last dose of assistance in getting past the horror of recorded suicide, and to amplify beauty he relies heavily on his audio track. The last spoken words in the film, played over Gene's image just before he stands up on the railing, are from his older friend Caroline, who has been a source of calm and well-articulated wisdom throughout her interviews. Speculating on why he chose the bridge, she says, "Maybe he just wanted to fly one time." No longer dark and brooding, the score now lets its string instruments rise to higher and higher notes, before fading out to silence with Gene's fall. With these elements familiar to us from fiction fare like *Crouching Tiger* – the euphemistic framing of a deadly fall as "flight," elements of the environment that conceal the violence of landing (fog or a splash), the inspirationally swelling music, the survivor who is saddened and moved – *The Bridge* tries to create an environment in which viewers can finally accept the "negative pleasure" of this sublime suicide.

This closing sequence demonstrates that despite exploiting digital technology in an effort to master contingency, *The Bridge* ultimately owes much of its shape to chance. The film is able to build to such a sublime release only because its crew was lucky enough to record this one immaculate jump, and to record it with more skill and better camera coverage than others. Even with two people training four cameras on the bridge all day every day for a year, the odds that they would capture a performance like Gene's seem slim. With documentary death's mystique somewhat dulled by the many contributions of video and digital to its archive, Gene's jump restores a feeling of "I can't believe they caught that on camera" reminiscent of Capa's *The Falling Soldier* and Adams' *Saigon Execution*.<sup>80</sup>

### A "False Romantic Promise": *The Bridge*'s Reception and Gene's Posthumous Fame

As we have seen, acknowledging any potential for pleasure in viewing documentary death usually destroys a film's reputation, and putting any positive spin on real suicides can be an even greater taboo. Aware of the ethical quagmire he creates by showing lush close-ups of actual suicide, Steel is eager to disassociate his footage from any unseemly fascination with the sight of death. In an interview, he asserts that *The Bridge* will disappoint viewers looking for graphic death footage: "I don't think it's used or incorporated in a way that will satisfy someone's voyeuristic urge to see it." Adding, "If it were exploitation, I could have put together a clip-reel of people jumping off the bridge and sold it on the Internet," Steel references disreputable "death porn" like *Faces of Death* and fights to keep his film out of that category.<sup>81</sup>

We have also seen that linking documentary death to activist or humanitarian causes can often secure respectability. To show death as sublime without having his documentary dismissed as lurid trash, Steel's strongest option is to make such a link between *The Bridge* and suicide prevention. This source of "redeeming social importance" had already been prepped before the film's release by decades of Bay Area activism aimed at erecting a suicide barrier on the bridge.<sup>82</sup> Several local organizations had been lobbying the Bridge District to that effect, and Bay Area filmmaker Jenni Olson was actually finishing up a documentary, *The Joy of Life*,

advocating for a suicide barrier at the Golden Gate while Steel was shooting his footage. As with *Suicide Box*, this film is more experimental than *The Bridge*: its first 27 minutes are contemplative shots of San Francisco locations with voiceover narration about a butch lesbian's sexual escapades, then its concluding section on suicide is a very legible advocacy piece. There, Olson accompanies static 16mm shots of the bridge (without anyone jumping off it) with narration about its history of suicide: the number of people who have jumped, the duration of their falls, the fatality rate, the bridge's design history, and the decision to build such a short guard rail. Having firmly established a problem, Olson's script then details a solution: a suicide barrier. The narrator deflects the claim that people prevented from jumping would just kill themselves elsewhere (citing a sociological study that demonstrates otherwise), she scolds the Bridge District for continually resisting a barrier project, and she describes how other former suicide landmarks have been fitted with effective barriers.<sup>83</sup>

By contrast, *The Bridge* offers no such information; confined strictly to the world of the jumpers and their loved ones, it makes no mention of a suicide barrier. It was certainly put to political use by established barrier advocates after its release, and Steel often emphasized its major impact in the barrier campaign to the press, but the film itself scrupulously avoids activist engagement.<sup>84</sup> This absence coexists uncomfortably with Steel's claim that *The Bridge* is not snuff because it shows death to educate, not to entertain. A related absence of interviews with experts – in medicine, psychology, sociology, and suicide prevention – puts an undue burden on grieving loved ones to educate the audience about suicide and severely limits the type of knowledge that can be presented. In a bit of well-stated wisdom about the “education” provided by images of suffering and death, Susan Sontag argues, “To designate a hell is not, of course, to tell us anything about how to extract people from that hell, how to moderate hell's flames . . . moral indignation, like compassion, cannot dictate a course of action.”<sup>85</sup> The effect of these absences is palpable in records of the film's reception, such as comments from Steel's most eager pupils on *The Bridge*'s official message board. Many there express sympathy for the jumpers and a wish that something could be done to solve this problem of suicide at the bridge. But in my examination of all 856 entries on the board, I found that only 23 made any mention of a suicide barrier – and a number of these wrote about a hypothetical barrier idea, without awareness of the actual barrier campaign.<sup>86</sup>

In crafting *The Bridge*, Eric Steel relentlessly pursues documentary death footage, directly displays it, and then refuses to provide a straightforward reason for why audiences should be looking at it so intently. As such, he risks having the project's ethics and tastefulness attacked. They were, sharply and in volume, but the project also achieved a measure of respectability unknown to previous films with the above characteristics, playing at major film festivals.<sup>87</sup> Assigning *The Bridge* a label Steel worked hard to avoid, but modifying it to fit that new target audience, one viewer wrote about it as “*Faces of Death* for the Starbucks crowd.”<sup>88</sup> In arguing that pro-barrier activism was an afterthought for the makers of *The Bridge*, my intention is not simply to diminish their benevolence, but to emphasize that the film itself has different ambitions – ambitions that perhaps are worth the price of these attacks for Steel and for its fans.

The end results of those aesthetic ambitions – Gene's ascent to star status in the documentary, and the amplification of sublimity in his death – have indeed had a powerful effect on the film's reception. Their impact on the viewing public resonates with comments from an interviewee in *The Bridge*, who speaks about the “false romantic promise” of a Golden Gate Bridge suicide, and laments about her friend Daniel, “I think it drew him with this idea of being

famous.” Daniel did not become famous, but Gene Sprague has become more famous than one would expect for a man posthumously portrayed in a limited-release documentary. In addition to the large percentage of comments on the film’s internet message boards that discuss him prominently, he is also elaborately memorialized on two different websites that receive intimate R.I.P. messages and virtual flowers from strangers who have only seen him in *The Bridge*.<sup>89</sup> One of these sites reports that a third site used to exist, but its owner closed it down “because of the over zealous people who saw the film and glorified his suicide.” A number of small-time singers and bands have recorded songs based on his appearance in the film and posted them online, including one titled “Maybe He Just Wanted to Fly One Time.” His image has been duplicated many times as clips from *The Bridge* are posted to YouTube and tagged with his name.

To forge a celebrity out of suicide footage, and to infuse the act itself with the beauty of the Golden Gate Bridge, dramatically disregards the aforementioned media guidelines for depicting suicide and all the reputable research about suicide contagion. Through the language of those guidelines, Gene’s suicide in *The Bridge* is “a particular death [that] is reported on at length” and is “romanticized” through Steel’s presentation of it – effectively so, as evidenced by viewer responses. An eighteenth-century commentator’s fear about *The Sorrows of Young Werther* and its suicide applies well to this twenty-first-century text, as J.J. Engel worried that audiences would “take the poetic beauty for moral beauty.”<sup>90</sup> The threat posed in *The Bridge* exposes a categorical difference between documentary displays of war death and of death by suicide, and it also exposes the error of applying the former’s default justification to the latter. Most displays of war death implicitly attach themselves to the axiom that parading the horrors of war will promote peace – that seeing visual evidence of the human bodies that war rips apart will galvanize a naïve public into active opposition.<sup>91</sup> While seeing displays of war death is thought to diminish war, seeing displays of suicide is proven to *multiply* suicide. In this context, when Eric Steel is asked why he could not tackle his topic without the death footage, his reply takes on a disturbing new resonance: “[O]nce there’s an actual film of someone jumping off the bridge you can’t just forget it; the image won’t disappear.”<sup>92</sup>

Trying to enlighten an apathetic public that does not pay attention to suicide, his campaign to implant “the image [that] won’t disappear” also reaches suicidal people. For some of them in viewing *The Bridge*, the aforementioned 1845 warning from the *American Journal of Insanity* seems to apply: “some particulars of the act, or expressions, seize the imagination.” Tangible traces of that impact appear on the film’s official message board, where a large number of posters evocatively describe being “mesmerized” or “entranced” by the sight of the jumpers, often repeating the phrase “I can’t get it out of my mind.” Though some on that board credit *The Bridge* with convincing them *not* to kill themselves, at least eight describe its spellbinding effects as empowering suicides or suicide attempts. One man writes, “I hope I can find the courage to do what those tormented souls did - take control of their own destiny. Barring the use of another method, perhaps someday I too shall join their ranks.” Others mourn the loss of loved ones to the Golden Gate, whose recent viewing habits they describe: “After my friend spent hours obsessively watching this movie, she made the leap. Draw your own conclusions.” Another woman writes, “My daughter jumped from the Bridge on August 1, 2008. She had watched the movie over and over for months . . . I believe it became in a sense, hypnotic to her.”<sup>93</sup>

To pioneer the documentary display of sublime violent death, as Eric Steel has done, is also to take great ethical risks with viewers’ emotions, and even their lives. But the specific risks and rewards of a project like *The Bridge* are complex and wholly entangled with aesthetics. To extract them requires a willingness to critically analyze documentary death footage rather than

dismiss it as obscene at the outset – even if analysis elicits a negative verdict in the end. Such dismissals carried low stakes in an era when documenting death on film was a seldom-realized fantasy. But as the digital age matures and the public gains access to real death “on demand” – in theaters, on DVD, streaming, downloadable – media scholars must fully address these multiplying texts.

### Conclusion: The Diver in Reverse

In his richly worded condemnation of documenting death, described in my Introduction, André Bazin at one point moves from generalities to a hypothetical example of the act he so detests: “I imagine the supreme cinematic perversion would be the projection of an execution backward like those comic newsreels in which the diver jumps up from the water back onto his diving board.”<sup>94</sup> For all the manipulative devices Steel applies in *The Bridge* – and for all of its politically anemic, ethically suspect, dangerously romantic aspects – the one cinematic tool he selectively rejects is a manipulation of time like the one Bazin describes. Time’s flow is not decelerated, frozen, repeated, or reversed at any point during the jump footage, despite the use of such manipulation elsewhere in the film. There is no mystical slowing down of the moment of death, nor will any of these “divers” be returned “up from the water” to their points of departure. Temporally, then, death unfolds routinely and irreversibly in *The Bridge*, in contrast to its depiction in the mainstream, fiction film scenes listed above, all of which use slow motion. Unlike these fictional descents that are filtered through composite effects and computer generated images, the falling bodies of *The Bridge* defy the supposed immateriality and ephemerality of digital technologies that so many media theorists write about so often. Despite being transferred to the screen algorithmically instead of indexically, these individuals plummet with the heavy weight of their embodiment, pitched downward with unattenuated speed.

And yet, in the digital age, we also hear that moving images are infinitely malleable, never fixed as a final product that will remain untouched. *The Bridge* has not remained untouched, and its “remixing” in a few YouTube videos yields one particularly interesting example that defies Bazin’s notion of “the supreme cinematic perversion”: a 2007 music video from metal band *Seether* cut together with footage from *The Bridge*. The original *Seether* video includes shots of a young man contemplating suicide from a rooftop. Halfway through, he makes the leap – tipping backwards just like Gene, but in slow motion. By the end, though, the band’s belted-out determination to “rise above this” has the power to reverse his descent, returning him to the rooftop unscathed. In the YouTube remix, the roof jumper’s shots are replaced by footage from *The Bridge*, with Gene appearing prominently.<sup>95</sup> He makes his jump, and then is restored to his starting point by rolling the video clip backwards – like Bazin’s newsreel diver coming “up from the water back onto his diving board.”

This amateur editor’s optimistic revision of *The Bridge*’s irreversible suicides, however naïve or offensive, speaks to something deeply rooted at the intersection between death and documentary: cinema’s illusory promise to preserve what it records, to hold onto what would otherwise be lost and return it to us anew with each viewing. In the face of real death, this promise is achingly seductive – even when the only moment that gets preserved is a person’s last, as in *The Bridge*. Its footage of suicide at the Golden Gate, like *all* documentary images of death, is rife with cognitive dissonance. A rare *memento mori* in a death-denying age, it is also a



simultaneous pledge that some spectral form of immortality is possible – that we can hoist the dead back over the railing through a video clip played in reverse.

## Chapter Four

### Streaming Death: The Dynamics of Dying on YouTube

“Photographs of an atrocity may give rise to opposing responses. A call for peace. A cry for revenge. Or simply the bemused awareness, continually restocked by photographic information, that terrible things happen.”

– Susan Sontag<sup>1</sup>

There is an axiom that threads through the history of documentary media, a belief that is widely reaffirmed by each new generation of image-makers. To discard or doubt it, perhaps, would shake the form’s foundations too dramatically. The belief is in the ability to decrease war and violence through the documentary representation of war and violence – that if a photograph, say, can perfectly communicate “the horrors of war,” then its viewers will come to oppose war and promote peace. In the documentary *The Devil Came on Horseback* (2007, Annie Sundberg and Ricki Stern), an ex-marine turned military observer, Brian Steidle, carried that belief with him as he journeyed to the Darfur region of Sudan in 2004. There, he documented the genocide raging in the area as the Janjaweed militia tore through villages, burning homes and killing and raping residents. Unable to capture graphic shots of fatal attacks as they happened, Steidle nonetheless trained his digital camera on countless corpses. He documented the corpses of young and old alike, bodies felled by gunshot, beating, burning alive, and so on – all in painfully detailed color photographs. Deliberating about what to do with his images, he remained confident that, “If these photos were released to the public, there would be troops in here in a matter of days.” Once the horrors of war have emotionally worn him down, Steidle returns to the U.S., allows his photos to be published in the *New York Times*, does interviews with major news channels, and goes on the road to present on and answer questions about the crisis in Darfur. On this circuit, he brings with him several huge binders filled with the photographs (see Appendix, Figure 4.1): page after page of grisly corpses, evidencing the atrocities that the photos themselves endeavor to halt. But the images do not have the impact that Steidle *knew* they would; as he sees it, they fail to inspire tangible action on behalf of Darfur. Instead, many of their viewers seem to come away with only Sontag’s “bemused awareness . . . that terrible things happen.” The documentary thus draws to a downbeat conclusion as Steidle arrives at an insight in the vicinity of Sontag’s, reflecting,

I definitely look at the world differently now. I knew that bad things happened; I didn’t know that people would stand by and allow them to happen. I honestly thought as I wrote an email home that if the people of America could see what I’ve seen there would be troops here in one week . . . [T]hat’s not true at all. They’ve seen it now and we’ve still done nothing.

The credits roll soon after this statement and include – perhaps as a persistent challenge to the viewer or in a moment of unintended irony – a nudge toward action with a web URL: “There is a growing movement to end the crisis in Darfur. You can make a difference.”

A 1900 passage from *Leslie's Weekly*, quoted in Chapter One, anticipated, with excitement, the new motion picture camera's entry onto the battlefield: "We are promised some vivid, soul-stirring pictures of actual, gruesome war."<sup>2</sup> In hundreds upon hundreds of still images, Steidle delivered the traces of "actual, gruesome war," but was dismayed to find them somewhat less than soul-stirring to his American audience. The intervening century has, in fact, brought so many "pictures of actual, gruesome war" that new entries into that realm need to meet a higher threshold of vividness to stir the soul – to drive home more than just a fortified awareness "that terrible things happen." While Steidle's binders full of photos are certainly gruesome, the images are ultimately too familiar in their subjects and aesthetics to make the impact he wants. Because the period of history spanned by camera technology is so crowded with atrocities and the violence that produces them, corpses and their documentary traces have become almost clichéd signifiers of the terrible things that happen in the world. Steidle's images recall the Rwandan genocide most immediately but also share qualities of corpse photography in general – back to the Holocaust and even to Gardner's battlefield photographs from the American Civil War. As discussed in Chapter One, the corpse photograph can feel like an image made "too late": a still representation of a still object that can only gesture toward the last moments of the person who once inhabited it, moments that are conspicuously absent from the photo.

Nevertheless, corpse photos are certainly among the types of documentary death images that have been employed in activist causes. Ida B. Wells appropriated lynching photographs (which were overwhelmingly made and distributed by perpetrators rather than opponents of lynching) for use in anti-lynching pamphlets. Photos and footage of corpses from the Nazi concentration camps were essential (and continue to be essential) in convincing a skeptical or ignorant public that the Germans had committed genocide on a massive scale. Most legendary in the annals of death images that have "made a difference" in the world, though, are the photo and film footage of General Nguyễn Ngọc Loan executing handcuffed prisoner Nguyễn Văn Lém in 1968 Saigon. The paragon of the "moment of death" image fantasy described in Chapter One, Eddie Adams' photo of this event, *Saigon Execution*, has a popular reputation as a major turning point in the Vietnam War – shifting public opinion into opposition to American involvement there. Despite credible assertions from historians that media coverage of the war *followed* rather than precipitated this change in public opinion, the legend that Adams' picture significantly contributed to the war's end persists.<sup>3</sup> Clint Eastwood's *Flags of Our Fathers* (2008), a film whose very premise argues for the importance of images in war, includes this monologue in its opening moments: "The right picture can win or lose a war. Look at Vietnam: the picture of that South Vietnamese officer blowin' that fellow's brains out of the side of his head – [*motions gunshot*] 'Blammo!' – that was it. The war was lost. We just hung around trying to pretend it wasn't." As this scene exemplifies, popular history seems to have rendered a verdict on *Saigon Execution*: this image of actual death "made a difference."

It is in its use by activists that documentary death most obviously satisfies the challenging questions that haunt its very existence: *why* should we make and look at images of actual death? What right have we to do so? This chapter will examine the activist use of documentary death in conjunction with digital media, considering shifts in the production and distribution of such material, as well as characteristics of politically effective documentary death that remain constant (and, indeed, become more apparent) in the digital age. On the production side, cell phone cameras represent a massive technological shift not so much in kind but in scale: these

easy-to-operate digital recording devices travel around in the pockets and purses of *billions*, vastly increasing the likelihood that a death in public space will happen in a camera's vicinity.

In terms of distribution changes, we get an unexpected contrast to digital distribution in the digital documentary about digital photography, *The Devil Came on Horseback*. As mentioned above, Steidle lugs around huge binders filled with prints of his photographs when he goes to speaking engagements, inviting the audience to come flip through them after the presentation if they require more evidence of what he's said (Figure 4.1).<sup>4</sup> While the bulk of these binders helps visualize the extent of the violence in Darfur, they also register as a curious anachronism in this twenty-first-century story. They sit there, heavy and sedentary on the table, awaiting one viewer at a time to walk over and look at them. This image of the literally *bound* photographs signifies their physically bound limitations amid the fluidity of the digital age. Videos shot on cell phone cameras are not at all bound in this manner, but rather are *viral* videos, bestowed with all the rapid and unfettered movement that word implies. Or, if one prefers, they are "spreadable media" – a term Henry Jenkins uses to counter the term viral's connotations of autonomous proliferation in an unchanged form.<sup>5</sup>

If activist videos of death are "spreadable," then YouTube, the Internet's most popular worldwide destination for streaming video, is the primary place where they are being spread. The site, launched in 2005, has become a hub for participatory culture and the notion of interactivity so central to new media theory and Web 2.0. As a venue for activist video, and especially for activist video of death, that notion of participation is especially charged. Writing on the Holocaust and twentieth-century media, Barbie Zelizer makes an assertion that is important to reexamine in the twenty-first: "It may be that the act of making people see is beginning to take the place of making people do, and that witnessing – even if it involves a narrowed representation of atrocity and little real response – is becoming the *acte imaginaire* of the twentieth century."<sup>6</sup> Studying activist videos of death on YouTube reveals the extent to which "witnessing" in that space can facilitate "doing," but also the very real limitations of the actions that emerge in that scenario. Despite its wide accessibility that welcomes non-professional media producers and provides new ways to "consume," too, YouTube is hardly a digital utopia – even as a space for just witnessing. Context can be a problem on YouTube in multiple ways. The site presents raw video without the context that might be necessary to understand what is being depicted, and it creates the awkward and insensitive context of seeing somber activist videos posted alongside skateboard stunts and clips of animals being tickled.

Activists who wish to use YouTube to spread death videos face a challenge in the site's "Community Guidelines," which prohibit many forms of graphic content. One guideline reads, "Graphic or gratuitous violence is not allowed. If your video shows someone being physically hurt, attacked, or humiliated, don't post it," and is followed by another that continues, "YouTube is not a shock site. Don't post gross-out videos of accidents, dead bodies or similar things *intended to shock or disgust*" [my emphasis].<sup>7</sup> But as the language of the latter rule hints, YouTube sets out to judge each graphic clip by more specific criteria rather than excluding all such content (a judgment that takes place when users flag a video as potentially inappropriate and YouTube employees then watch the video and decide whether to remove it or place an age restriction on it).<sup>8</sup> The expanded guidelines elaborate on these criteria:

The world is a dangerous place. Sometimes people do get hurt and it's inevitable that these events may be documented on YouTube. However, it's not okay to post violent or gory content that's primarily intended to be shocking, sensational

or disrespectful. If a video is particularly graphic or disturbing, it should be balanced with additional context and information. For instance, including a clip from a slaughter house in a video on factory farming may be appropriate. However, stringing together unrelated and gruesome clips of animals being slaughtered in a video may be considered gratuitous if its purpose is to shock rather than illustrate.<sup>9</sup>

Here, YouTube adopts the spirit of Supreme Court Justice William Brennan's 1957 definition of obscenity: that which is "utterly without redeeming social importance."<sup>10</sup> The site avoids harboring "death porn" by requiring some intention (however their employees see fit to determine it, I suppose) for the material beyond shock, sensationalism, or disrespect, and by banning "unrelated and gruesome clips" that are merely "[strung] together." More interesting are the statements and implications about the role of context on the site. YouTube suggests that graphic material "should be balanced with additional context and information," seeming to recognize the tendency of its format (favoring short, user-uploaded videos) to omit adequate context. YouTube's expanded guideline on sex and nudity reinforces this call for context and highlights another dimension of their philosophy about censorship:

Most nudity is not allowed . . . There are exceptions for some educational, documentary, scientific, and artistic content, but only if that is the sole purpose of the video and it is not gratuitously graphic. For example, a documentary on breast cancer would be appropriate, but posting clips out of context from the documentary might not be.<sup>11</sup>

The discouragement of "clips out of context" shows the site that has made its reputation through non-professional raw video actually favoring professional, fully edited documentary. As activist video of death on YouTube illustrate, the malleability of these guidelines and their dependence on human judgment allows the site to distribute death videos in many circumstances – when the site's administrators deem them educational, or, indeed, when they have the potential to "make a difference" in a cause deemed worthy.

Relatively early in YouTube's history (four years after its 2005 founding) and in the era of cell phone videos, two sets of death videos that were fully integrated into activist causes circulated heavily on the site, never removed by administrators despite activists' fears that they would be. These sets of videos depict the killings of Oscar Grant in Oakland, California and Neda Agha-Soltan in Tehran – both in 2009. Their comparison reveals the importance of analyzing the content of individual clips in death documentary rather than lumping all such recordings together in an ethical judgment. As little as we generally think about aesthetics in raw video shot by non-professionals on cell phones, I want to highlight their importance in both videos to argue that an audiovisual resemblance to the vision of death presented by mainstream, commercial cinema is most likely to generate audience sympathy and media attention. Further, I argue that the tendency of most streaming video to strip away an event's context greatly impacts the ways viewers understand the depicted deaths – but not always in a decidedly *negative* sense, as some have claimed.

## “The Whole World is Watching” . . . on YouTube: Activist Videos of Death

The videos of Oscar Grant III show the death of this 22-year-old African American father at the hands of transit police in Oakland, California. In the first few hours of 2009, Grant was returning by train from New Year’s Eve celebrations when BART (Bay Area Rapid Transit) police stopped his train at Oakland’s Fruitvale station. Responding to reports of a fight that allegedly included Grant, four officers detained him and his friends on the platform as a train full of passengers watched the scene – and in some cases recorded it. After officers Johannes Mehserle and Tony Pirone pushed Grant facedown on the ground and attempted to handcuff him, Mehserle drew his gun and shot Grant fatally in the back – later claiming that he thought Grant might be reaching for a weapon and had mistaken his own gun for his Taser in his effort to subdue Grant. In fact, no one in Grant’s party was armed.

Footage from six cameras that captured parts of this event has been made public (Figure 4.2); some of the videos aired on the local news and on YouTube within days of the shooting, and others emerged during Mehserle’s criminal trial.<sup>12</sup> One mounted security camera at the Fruitvale station that was directed at the tracks and outer edge of the platform recorded only the train’s arrival and departure, its passengers watching the arrest, and some peripheral movements from officers. In a figurative passing of the torch from one surveillance technology to another, handheld digital cameras and cell phone cameras vastly outperformed mounted security cameras in documenting Grant’s death, reinforcing a sense of the latter as yesterday’s model of the Panopticon. Five of these portable cameras recorded the arrest from different angles, and three of those had Grant in frame when Mehserle fired his fatal shot.<sup>13</sup> The quantity and density of cameras watching the police on that night registers in Margarita Carazo’s footage, in which Tommy Cross, Jr.’s digital camera, also recording, hovers around the corner of the frame, displaying a miniaturized duplicate on its LCD screen of the scene we are watching (Figure 4.3). None of these witnesses, however, were able to get very close to the arrest and the three that did enframe the shooting could present only an obscured view – Pirone, pushing Grant’s head down on the platform and kneeling on his neck, blocks the line of sight.

Neda Agha-Soltan’s death occurred several months later on the other side of the globe. In Iran, many had taken to the streets in massive protests against the re-election of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, widely considered to be fraudulent. Among them on June 20<sup>th</sup> was Agha-Soltan, a 26-year-old woman who had been peacefully protesting in Tehran, accompanied by her music instructor, Hamid Panahi. As the two left the crowd and attempted to return to their car, Agha-Soltan was struck in the chest by a rifle bullet and died moments later. Witnesses on the scene reported that she was shot by a member of the government-allied *Basij* militia, apprehended and identified by the crowd, but never prosecuted.<sup>14</sup> As in Grant’s case, several bystanders with cell phone cameras shot footage of this public killing.

The first Agha-Soltan video posted to YouTube and the most widely viewed shows the anonymous camera operator approaching her as she is laid on the ground by Panahi and another bystander, Dr. Arash Hejazi, who press their hands to her chest in an attempt to stop her bleeding. As the cameraperson circles past them to get a clear shot of Agha-Soltan’s face, she appears to look directly at the camera just before blood begins to pour from her mouth and then nose (Figure 4.4). More people gather and begin to scream as she continues to bleed and as attempts to save her become more frantic, at which point the 40-second video cuts out.<sup>15</sup> Another begins with an anonymous operator’s thumb blocking the lens – a reminder that these are images captured by non-professionals in a chaotic situation. The operator approaches Agha-

Soltan and the puddle of blood she is lying on, then passes over Panahi's shoulder to enframe her face, already covered with blood that is pooling in one of her eyes, the other open and staring blankly (Figure 4.5).<sup>16</sup>

This startling close-up was widely reproduced as a still image by the Green Movement and their international allies for use at protests and in online efforts to gather support for their cause. Posing a great risk to those who shot them and those depicted in them, the videos were sent out of Iran by their anonymous authors, at which point friends put them online and sent them to major news outlets. The first video described here, for example, was sent by its author to a friend, who then sent it to an Iranian expatriate friend in the Netherlands, who then posted to Facebook and YouTube and sent it to the BBC and *The Guardian*.<sup>17</sup> YouTube's administrators refrained from taking them down, noting that they allow graphic violence when they deem it to have "documentary value."<sup>18</sup> As the videos made waves in YouTube's "attention economy," major U.S. news networks also aired them, despite these networks' inability to verify their content.<sup>19</sup> All of this took only hours, with these witness videos of Agha-Soltan's death streaming online and televised on the news on the very day that she died. They even spread within Iran, where the government had been trying – with moderate success – to cut off public access to social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. Iranians saw the videos on non-state television channels accessed via satellite dishes or on their cell phones as people passed them around via Bluetooth connections.<sup>20</sup>

My intention in discussing Grant and Agha-Soltan's deaths together is not to equate them, but rather to show *differences* in their circumstances, how they were recorded, and how those videos circulated, as well as the impact of those differences on activist responses to each death. When videos of both deaths were quickly uploaded to YouTube and other streaming video sites, they entered an environment of death's limitless repetition in time and multiplication in space. Users could watch the finality of death register in each video, then and return instantly to that video's beginning, reviving the dead and watching them die all over again. This mode of viewing is the sort André Bazin so passionately decried in "Death Every Afternoon": the casual repetition of a temporally sacred moment that should remain unrepeatable.<sup>21</sup> At the time of his writing in 1958, such an act would have required the physical rolling back of a celluloid reel, but on YouTube the act is made easy – even encouraged – by the "Replay" button that prominently appears whenever a video ends. And because Grant and Agha-Soltan's deaths were each recorded on several cameras – the footage from which is posted and reposted in many forms by many users – Bazin's sacred moment multiplies not just in time but in space, as well. That expansion is visualized whenever one finishes watching one of the Agha-Soltan videos, for example, and is then inundated with suggested videos YouTube thinks may be of further interest. If "Replay" does not appeal, one can instead select from the many little thumbnail images of her bleeding face to see other angles or other postings of the same video (Figure 4.6).

The YouTube viewing experience described above seems to invite a certain callousness, and yet the act of watching these streaming videos – likely more than once and from more than one angle – spurred political action among many viewers. With both Grant and Agha-Soltan, digital technology enabled the recording and circulation of deaths that fueled political causes. "Citizen journalists" were on hand to document brutal killings that the press did not capture – or could not, because of Iran's bans on non-state media. Digital distribution plays a key role with the Grant and Agha-Soltan videos, as well. Abraham Zapruder sold his 8mm film of President Kennedy's death to Time, Inc., where it was locked away in their vaults for twelve years before it was shown on American television (illegally).<sup>22</sup> By contrast, footage of Grant and Agha-

Soltan streamed online within hours or days of their deaths. These videos have been much less constrained by the power of governments or news corporations. Both cases pose dangers to the governments they reflect so poorly on – signifying racial discrimination and police brutality in the United States, and politically repressive violence in Iran – and yet no government could shut away a digital video clip in 2009 in the way they could an 8mm film in the 1960s. Such clips can be uploaded to YouTube in minutes, often directly from the phone that recorded them, where they can be played, replayed, and downloaded freely – a system that provides the public with unprecedented access to raw footage. Even in Iran, where the government tried mightily to deprive protesters of the digital communication channels that so aided their cause, such channels proved impossible to fully block.<sup>23</sup> They provide, as journalist Youssef Ibrahim puts it, “a new wrinkle for autocratic regimes experienced at quiet repression.”<sup>24</sup> Or more colorfully, activist Ethan Zuckerman contends that, “any platform sufficiently powerful to enable the distribution of cute cat pictures can also be deployed to bring down a government under the right circumstances.”<sup>25</sup> Although they did not bring down the government in 2009 Iran and although they can also serve as surveillance tools for governments themselves, YouTube and social networking sites played a significant role in support of 2011 uprisings like Egypt’s, prompting then-President Mubarak to cut off that country’s Internet in the first days of the protests.<sup>26</sup>

Amateur footage of newsworthy events, even of death, is a phenomenon with roots deeper than the digital era, exemplified by Zapruder’s 8mm film of the Kennedy assassination. His footage of Kennedy – along with other 1960s death footage, such as Nguyễn Văn Lém’s summary execution in Saigon – has a sheen of “I can’t believe they caught that on camera.” Today, however, the recording of public deaths feels almost inevitable. While Kennedy’s celebrity status justified Zapruder’s decision to carry his 8mm camera to work that day and roll pricey film as the president’s motorcade went by, there were plenty of people on the Oakland BART train equipped, trained, and willing to record officers detaining Grant, an anonymous stranger. And Iranian protesters had cell phone cameras that they drew quickly as they flocked to Agha-Soltan’s side. Intentionality is a key difference between Zapruder’s film and the videos shot by bystanders in the Grant and Agha-Soltan cases. The individuals recording Grant did so with the intention of documenting whatever injustice and violence would emerge from the confrontation between passengers and police; those recording Agha-Soltan seem similarly motivated to gather evidence of a deadly injustice, given the great personal risks they took to create and circulate the footage. The Zapruder film, in contrast, provides a textbook example of Vivian Sobchack’s “accidental gaze.” His recording of actual death is unexpected and inadvertent, intruding into a casual home movie of the president’s visit to Dallas and exempting him from the ethical problems of the “professional gaze.” Sobchack reserves the professional gaze for professionals: journalists who pursue death footage intentionally and at the expense of intervention. This gaze is “marked by ethical ambiguity, by technical and *machinelike competence* in the face of an event which seems to call for further and human response.”<sup>27</sup>

As professional journalists and “citizen journalists” are, to some extent, converging in their documentary activities, it may be tempting to apply the professional gaze label and its attendant burdens to non-professionals, like those who recorded Grant and Agha-Soltan’s deaths. But such an application would ignore not only economic factors (citizen journalists are, for the most part, not tracking down good news stories to make their livings), but also social and technological ones. Unlike the intrepid reporters Sobchack quotes in her section on the professional gaze, the creators of YouTube death videos have usually had a singular experience: the right-time, right-place opportunity to record *one* death by chance rather than a career



investment in pursuing dramatic images for the news. The expanding presence of digital recording devices in public space has forged countless opportunities of this nature, and it has helped shape new social norms about the use of those devices. Namely, if one is in the immediate presence of a notable event, one is expected to record it and post the video online.<sup>28</sup> Though Sobchack's categories of the "endangered gaze" or the "humane stare" might apply to the Grant and Agha-Soltan videos, I believe that a new term is needed to account for the shift in recording practices that digital technology has caused since Sobchack published "Inscribing Ethical Space" in 1984.<sup>29</sup> Paired with the expectant gaze category I suggested in Chapter Three to describe *The Bridge*, I propose an additional category: the ubiquitous gaze. This category connotes the sense in which death's recording has become common – often accomplished by multiple cameras in a single case – and the increasing extent to which we presume that a camera will be present and recording when public death occurs. No longer conceived as solely an isolated and individual ethical judgment about whether to record death, this category addresses the social norms that have begun to solidify in the course of rapid technological advancement.

Helped into existence and brought before the public eye via digital technology, the Grant and Agha-Soltan videos propelled some into political action and generally drew tremendous attention to these deaths. For the Agha-Soltan videos, this was attention on a global scale, but the Grant videos traveled significantly less beyond U.S. borders. This disparity is evidenced by the statistics YouTube publicly provides on some videos' circulation. Comparing two of the most popular Grant and Agha-Soltan videos (each with over a million views), Grant's receives the vast majority of its views within the U.S., also making small inroads in Canada, Australia, and Northern Europe (Figure 4.7). The Agha-Soltan video garners equal attention in the U.S. and Iran, but also accumulates more significant view counts in Canada, Australia, and Northern Europe than Grant's and has noticeable visibility in countries such as Brazil, India, South Africa, and Algeria (Figure 4.8).<sup>30</sup> In fact, though the Grant case was discussed nationally in African-American and activist communities, its mainstream media coverage remained mostly regional.<sup>31</sup> Agha-Soltan's death, by comparison, received in-depth coverage by media outlets worldwide.

While unjust treatment of African-Americans by law enforcement is perceived as a commonplace among Oakland residents, the existence of clear video evidence that a white transit cop fatally shot a black passenger lying prone on the ground galvanized locals and brought masses of protesters into the streets on more than one occasion. Indeed, the protests began not in the immediate wake of the shooting itself, but rather following the broadcast of the Grant videos on local news and on streaming video sites like YouTube.<sup>32</sup> While a small number in Oakland participated in looting and property destruction, most protested peacefully, calling for justice, brandishing photographs of Grant, and sometimes lying down in the street in bodily mimicry of the nonthreatening position Grant was in when he was shot (Figure 4.9). The racial dynamics of Grant's death, the fact that it was recorded, and the palpable outrage it inspired in a major urban area brought comparisons to the Rodney King case (though King survived his beating by police). The magnitude of response from the media and the public is, however, not comparable in these two cases, as King's became a major national news story and prompted massive riots in L.A. on a scale well beyond the protests inspired by Grant's shooting.<sup>33</sup> Grant's supporters closely followed the trial of his killer, Johannes Mehserle, over the ensuing two years and were generally outraged at the leniency of his conviction and sentencing: two years in prison for involuntary manslaughter.<sup>34</sup> Though Grant's supporters wanted a different outcome, the fact that an officer was convicted of any criminal charge in an on-duty shooting was nearly unprecedented – a result of the political pressure and authoritative evidence the videos helped provide.<sup>35</sup>

In the Agha-Soltan shooting, the Internet broadcast of the her death videos made Neda, as she is always called by supporters, an instant rallying point for the Green Movement within Iran and elicited an explosion of sympathetic messages and gestures from its international allies. Her name – which also means “voice” in Farsi, as many commentators noted – was yelled on Tehran streets during protests and also from residences into the night. She became a fixture of protest signs (Figure 4.10) and a centerpiece of shrines and memorials both in Iran and across the globe, as well as a literal “icon” on Twitter. There, supportive users adopted thumbnail photos of her bleeding face as their avatars (along with those who tinted their avatars green in solidarity with the Green Movement). Bloggers and posters on YouTube comment boards frequently expressed how deeply they were shocked and saddened by the videos, adding pleas to spread them and promises that they would “never forget.” One YouTube user seemed to convey the consensus reaction from the West in the simple statement, “This is the most terrible thing I have seen in all my sheltered and quiet life.”<sup>36</sup> Significantly, the comments on the Agha-Soltan videos contrast with those that Grant’s generate, which tend more toward legal and moral debate than a sharing of grief. Even as the Green Movement sputtered under tremendous pressure from Ahmedinejad’s government in the months that followed, Agha-Soltan still commanded attention. Iranians risked personal safety to mourn publicly for her, PBS and HBO aired documentaries about her, and she was named “Person of the Year” by *The Times* in London.<sup>37</sup> An American band made a song and music video about her to benefit Amnesty International (Figure 4.11), and a factory in Iran was shut down for mass-producing Neda statuettes.<sup>38</sup>

#### How Death Goes Viral: The Role of Aesthetics in YouTube’s “Attention Economy”

So how did the Agha-Soltan videos from Iran generate such broad interest among the Western public while the Grant videos remained more nationally, and even regionally, bound? Part of the former’s ability to “go viral” stems from their integration within the larger news story of Iran’s election protests and the political factors intertwined with its coverage. In the U.S., where relations with Iran are generally hostile, there was a palpable eagerness among many media outlets and citizens to support the Green Movement and some framed the movement’s purposes in tandem with U.S. efforts to spread “freedom” and “democracy” in the Middle East. I also suspect that the videos achieved so much exposure because Americans may feel that they can “bear witness” to Agha-Soltan’s brutal death with relatively few feelings of culpability – unlike videos of suffering and death from Iraq or Afghanistan (or, for that matter, the Vietnam execution footage). Furthermore, the usual impetus to “do something” that accompanies activist videos – sometimes putting off viewers who would rather “do nothing” without guilt – may have felt slightly mitigated for those American viewers of the Agha-Soltan videos who were keeping up with news about the protests. Too much American intervention in Iran, it was feared, would only strengthen the government’s claims that the unrest was a Western plot and not the true reflection of the people’s wishes.<sup>39</sup> Alongside these political dimensions of the videos’ popularity, I argue that audiovisual elements played an equally crucial role. Specifically, the ubiquity and versatility of digital video allowed for a representation of her death that mirrors conventions from the West’s mainstream, commercial cinema.

Eric Steel grafted such conventions onto death footage in *The Bridge* largely in the post-production process – a calculated artistic choice that many saw as inappropriate. Here, the conventions appear in the raw footage itself, seeping in during a chaotic recording situation that

did not facilitate much aesthetic intentionality. Striking among those conventions are the multiple camera angles, which audiences of Hollywood death scenes have long been treated to, but which have become practical for documentary only in the digital age when more cameras are likely to be on scene.<sup>40</sup> The difference between these angles in fiction film and in the Agha-Soltan videos is that the latter remain in the form of raw shots that we watch sequentially rather than simultaneously – as if we had full access to three cameras’ coverage of a single scene in a fiction film, seeing shots that would later be condensed and intercut.<sup>41</sup>

Shaky, handheld cinematography is the most ironic entry in the list of conventions that align the Agha-Soltan videos with mainstream fiction. Such cinematography was less a stylistic choice than a practical necessity for documentarians in the direct cinema and *cinéma vérité* periods when it became a visual trademark of the documentary form. It was a visual style largely prompted by a technological shift, as maneuverable 16mm cameras and synchronized sound equipment allowed for a more spontaneous documentation of events as they happened, without tripods and careful set-ups – a scenario now widely extended to non-professionals with cell phone cameras, like those who recorded Agha-Soltan’s death.<sup>42</sup> But since its documentary heyday in the ‘60s, intentionally shaky handheld camerawork has overrun fiction film and television – especially in the twenty-first century. Directors often use it to overlay a gritty, documentary roughness onto fiction to make it feel more real, more authentic. This stylistic adoption is so widespread in fiction that it weakens the link with documentary that this technique is meant to evoke. Where once watching a handheld shot in a fiction film called up associations with documentary, now I would argue that the shakiness of the Agha-Soltan footage calls up associations with fiction film. The unsteady frame that approaches her is very similar to “camera subjectivity” horror films such as *The Blair Witch Project* (1999, Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sánchez) or *Cloverfield* (2008, Matt Reeves), and is only a tad more extreme in its jolts than recent war films. Two separate scenes in *Flags of Our Fathers*, for example, have a shaky, handheld camera and on-screen soldiers approaching a wounded comrade from approximately the same angle as the Agha-Soltan footage. Amidst bleeding and suffering, these lives slip away in front of the camera, like hers, despite attempts at medical intervention from desperate witnesses to the deaths.

The videos also provide “maximum visibility” of the streams of blood that pour from Agha-Soltan’s mouth and nose – blood flow so dramatic that it would be a challenge for an effects make-up artist to simulate convincingly.<sup>43</sup> Synced to the pace of her escalating bleeding is a crescendo of shouts and wails from the gathering crowd, which audibly register the tragedy, providing the type of immersive soundtrack death scenes require in order to be evocative. If we extend our comparison to casting, Agha-Soltan is a victim ideally suited to command sympathy from an international audience. Like Hollywood’s best murder victims – whether in a war film, political thriller, or slasher movie – she exudes the innocence associated with being young and a woman. Her feminine beauty allows for her objectification, too, in the risqué blend of sex and death that Hollywood trades in – a viewing mode evidenced by a number of subtly sexual and overtly lewd comments on YouTube.<sup>44</sup> Agha-Soltan’s identity as an Iranian also plays a major role since image distributors and consumers in the West have long proven that they are comfortable watching the bodily destruction of the racial other.<sup>45</sup> In particular, the scenario of Americans watching an Iranian woman die at the hands of her own government resonates with the U.S. media’s dominant discourse about the Islamic Republic in Iran: that women are the primary victims of its oppressions (and the broader, accompanying implication that Bush-era wars in the Middle East were invested in “liberating” Islamic women).<sup>46</sup> Multiple angles,

dramatic blood flow, immersive audio, and the subject's appearance – these audiovisual details make it easier to understand why the Agha-Soltan videos received such disproportionately massive attention from the international community amidst all the footage coming out of Iran that summer. Even other graphic videos of fatal violence failed to generate anywhere near the amount of exposure for the Green Movement that her death did.<sup>47</sup>

That Agha-Soltan's death looks like a gritty Hollywood war movie is especially important in connecting with American audiences – the dominant users of YouTube – not because these viewers are necessarily callous and entertainment-oriented, but because Hollywood has been Americans' primary guide to what death looks like for much of the past century.<sup>48</sup> As discussed in the Introduction, while previous generations had plenty of first-hand exposure at deathbeds, the twentieth century brought both lower death rates and a rapid medicalization of the dying process that replaced its visibility in the home with sequestering in the hospital.<sup>49</sup> There it was kept mainly out of sight, soothing a society that no longer welcomed familiarity with the physical transition from life to death. Fictional, filmic representations partially assumed the role of exposing people to that process, but with an unsurprising preference for spectacle, favoring the most dynamic and dramatized types of death. The same appetite for spectacle also dominates YouTube, despite the site's high proportion of actuality footage. In YouTube's attention economy, the brief, spectacle-oriented video is king, curtailing documentarians' options for displaying death's duration, its frequent resistance to spectacular visibility, or its context. Sam Gregory, program director for the activist video organization WITNESS, notes the difficulties human rights videos face in attracting attention on YouTube because "much human rights material is not immediately powerful performance, and may not be most effectively or honestly presented in that mode."<sup>50</sup> Agha-Soltan's recorded death has achieved "viral" status globally because it *is* "immediately powerful performance." It embodies the temporally condensed spectacle of YouTube, plus documentary's poignant stamp of authenticity – the alluring promise that one is seeing the taboo sight of "real" death unfolding before the camera.

Comparatively, the videos of Oscar Grant have the look of courtroom evidence, not of a dramatic death scene (indeed, they were filmed as such by passengers who knew the evidentiary value of their footage). Though a few more people recorded Grant's death than Agha-Soltan's, the multiple angles offer somewhat less to choose from: several offer very similar vantage points, and none secure the close-ups that make the Agha-Soltan videos so striking. Those who recorded Grant's death lacked the proximity and mobility of those who recorded Agha-Soltan's, because the BART officers had confined them to the train cars. In the bystander videos, Grant himself becomes a small and obscured collection of pixels, reminiscent of (but even less visible than) Kennedy, who died in miniature and awash in 8mm film grain in Zapruder's recording of his assassination. Bay Area news programs highlighted the challenge of seeing Grant's fatal shooting within the videos by adding a familiar annotation when airing them: a bright circle around Grant and Mehserle that points to the obscured action in the frame.<sup>51</sup> Grant is a victim whose body does not register externally the internal damage it sustains when Mehserle's bullet pierces his lungs – his dose of police brutality fails affectively to evince its actual *brutality* in the videos. With this aspect of the Grant videos, we can recall the challenge described in Chapter One that documentary death shares with genres and movements as varied as melodrama, pornography, and German expressionism: the necessity of externalizing internal states for the camera. Robert Capa strove for and eloquently secured the external visibility of death-by-gunshot in staging *The Falling Soldier* in 1936. The Grant videos achieve in actuality footage

neither what Capa did in faux actuality footage, nor what the Agha-Soltan videos would months later.

This limitation of proximity and mobility aligns the Grant footage more with the distant and fixed positions of surveillance cameras than with the omniscience and omnipotence of the camera in mainstream fiction film. Agha-Soltan's bystanders knew exactly where the action was and what the viewers would want to see, like those Hollywood cinematographers. The bystanders recording Grant, however, sometimes lack that awareness because the Oakland shooting played out in a more chaotic way than the one in Tehran. Karina Vargas, for example, disobeys police orders and exits the train to better record the arrest. But just as she gets close to Grant and Mehserle, she suddenly pans her camera left to catch a young man being tackled right next to her. As she does, Mehserle shoots Grant off-screen and Vargas misses the scene's most important feature. Considering the challenges of this recording situation (including, we should keep in mind, the higher-than-average likelihood that some of those recording the arrest were intoxicated, since this was just hours after midnight on New Year's Day), YouTube viewers are wildly unsympathetic to Vargas' mistake and her camerawork, writing harsh and often misogynist comments on her video. Pirate48153, for instance, writes: "Bitch next time learn how to 2 fukin record b4 u go postin shit up on youtube u stupid hoe."<sup>52</sup> Lest we think Pirate is an outlier, 46 YouTube users gave Pirate's comment a thumbs up – making it statistically the most approved-of comment of all 3,357 posted on that particular video.<sup>53</sup> As this intense outrage implies, details in the Grant videos like Vargas' ill-timed pan disrupt the fantasy of ocular power that mainstream fiction and the Agha-Soltan videos provide, reading as frustrating moments when the contingencies of documentary interfere with the desire for "maximum visibility."

The audio track is the element that does push the Grant videos' impact beyond that of automated surveillance footage. In concert with the handheld camerawork, which grounds the footage in human subjectivity, the increasingly clamorous passengers give a sense of immersion that partly compensates for the lack of visual detail. Almost never localized to visible individuals, the comments from onlookers blend together as a coherent, collective will of the 2:00 AM crowd. As the videos begin, we hear snippets of conversation unrelated to the still-tame encounter between passengers and police – reminders of the event's apparent banality when it began. An off-screen passenger in the Vargas video, apparently talking on his phone, says, "Hey, we're in Fruitvale right now. *Fruitvale*, with a fruit! Where you guys at?" Daniel Liu takes an early break from holding his camera aloft to record the scene and sits down next to a female companion, whose body he absently tapes, as she says, "Thank you, baby." As the tension of the arrest escalates and the BART police push Grant to the ground, though, the crowd's attention becomes audibly fixated. Their comments grow louder, more frequent, and more impassioned, including: "That's fucked up" "Protect and serve, protect and serve," "Fuck the police!" "Get their badge numbers," and, perceptively, "Put it on YouTube."

Although these comments suggest a viewing position allied with Grant rather than the officers, they also reinforce the subtle framing of this footage as most notable for the questions of legality and ethics it raises, not for its tragic loss of life. This dynamic is understandable considering that most of the Grant footage precedes his shooting, unlike the Agha-Soltan footage, and that witnesses reported that even after the shooting many passengers assumed Grant had been tased or otherwise failed to realize he had been fatally hit by an actual bullet. The protesters surrounding Agha-Soltan when she is felled by a bullet also add a cacophony of voices to her videos' images, but in a more overtly emotional way: they tell her not to be scared, plead for her to stay with them, and some simply scream. For the majority of Western viewers who do

not speak Farsi, the audible emotion of the soundtrack is likely to feel even more prominent in the absence of linguistic comprehension.

### “I Never Thought the World Could Be So Small”: Identifying with the Dying

In the details discussed in the previous section, a sense begins to emerge of how greatly audiovisual elements shape the emotional reactions and political actions that individual deaths generate in an era when they are recorded and displayed more and more frequently. What’s at stake in that shaping process is the extent to which lives are “grievable,” as Judith Butler describes. In *Precarious Life*, Butler writes about the way that certain types of death have been ignored or suppressed in public discourse, such as the deaths of gay men during the AIDS crisis, or the victims of American bombings in Iraq and Afghanistan. While she draws the borders of grievability based on identity and causes of death, it is apparent in the Grant and Agha-Soltan videos that aesthetics can contribute powerfully to Butler’s uneasy truth that some lives are “so easily humanized” and others are not.<sup>54</sup>

While shot distance and audio play key roles in the relative humanization of the dying Grant and Agha-Soltan, I assert that the primary distinction here is the inclusion of Agha-Soltan’s face, in close-up. Intimate facial close-ups are a rarity in documentary death, but a fixture of death in fiction film – a tool for forging sympathy and identification between audience and character. Facial close-ups like Agha-Soltan’s seem also to promise the clearest window on the mystical “moment of death,” which Hollywood obsessively displays. The archetypal shot is a close-up of the dying character as her or his expression slackens and eyes close or slip into a blank stare. My discussion of Douglas Sirk’s *Imitation of Life* (1959) in Chapter Two describes just this type of shot: wealthy actress Lora sits at the bedside of her African American housekeeper, Annie, and listens as the dying woman utters her last words, “I’m just tired, Miss Lora – awfully tired . . .” Annie’s head and eyelids droop in close-up as her speech trails off. YouTube viewers may perceive a similar process unfolding in the first Agha-Soltan video, as her eyes seem to meet the camera’s stare and then roll back in a loss of consciousness, soon obscured as blood runs over them. As evidenced by their user comments, the visibility of this dying process gives the Agha-Soltan videos an emotional charge beyond the power of documentary’s more common images of corpses. When the cameras roll on the dying rather than the dead, identification is more likely. When we look at the “too late” images of corpses, Sobchack maintains that, “Our sympathy for the subject who once was is undermined by our alienation from the object that is.”<sup>55</sup>

Beyond mere close-ups, the Agha-Soltan videos even offer the illusion of eye contact. In his wonderfully meandering meditation on photography, *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes takes a moment to lament his boredom and apathy when looking at images from a newsworthy catastrophe:

Trying to make myself write some sort of commentary on the latest ‘emergency’ reportage, I tear up my notes as soon as I write them. What – nothing to say about death, suicide, wounds, accidents? No, nothing to say about these photographs in which I see surgeons’ gowns, bodies lying on the ground, broken glass, etc. Oh, if only there were a look, a subject’s look, if only someone in the photograph were looking at me! For the Photograph has this power . . . of looking me *straight*

*in the eye* (here, moreover, is another difference: in film, no one ever looks at me: it is forbidden—by the Fiction).<sup>56</sup>

Though Barthes denies its power to fiction film, a look “straight in the eye” is within the repertoire of documentary, and Agha-Soltan’s death provides an instance most striking. Many posters to YouTube’s video comment boards wrote about this detail and the haunting experience of Agha-Soltan’s look as she dies.<sup>57</sup>

Between Oscar Grant and the cameras that recorded his death, there is no eye contact, nor even many clear shots of his face. The Grant videos portray a victim who is decidedly not “faced,” who often becomes an anonymous representative of a demographic group (“young black men”) – hence the extreme ubiquity of Grant’s face in the protests, used by supporters to individuate and humanize him. Renderings of his face – uniformly based on one smiling photograph of Grant that local newspapers ran frequently in the case’s aftermath – appeared as posters, at public memorials, on protest signs, on t-shirts, as masks worn by demonstrators, and even as large-scale murals (Figures 4.12).<sup>58</sup>

In California, there was a localized outpouring of grief for Grant, but if public response to the Grant and Agha-Soltan videos generally frames the latter’s death as more widely, globally “grievable,” it is also because a broad swath of viewers are able to *identify* with Agha-Soltan as they watch her breathe her last breaths. The political actions that arose from both Grant and Agha-Soltan’s deaths bear this out in their deployment of “I am Neda” and “I am Oscar Grant” declarations. “I am \_\_\_\_\_” is a somewhat common template for activists whose political actions revolve around an individual.<sup>59</sup> It is also a template that deserves closer examination for its bold (and seemingly uncritical, in many cases) declaration of not just support for that individual but direct identification with her or him.

Grant supporters in Oakland shouted this slogan at marches, spray-painted it around the city, and inscribed it on protest signs. The individuals declaring this shared identity were largely, but not exclusively, those who indeed shared with Grant the identity attributes that were seen as crucial to his death: being a person of color, male, young. San Francisco filmmaker Kevin Epps, for example, explained at a protest, “I’m angry because [Grant] could have been me . . . We’re guilty until proven innocent.”<sup>60</sup> In the “I am Oscar Grant” declarations, we see the uniting power of a shared vulnerability to violence that Judith Butler posits as crucial in our post-9/11 world. Butler writes, “From where might a principle emerge by which we vow to protect others from the kinds of violence we have suffered, if not from an apprehension of a common human vulnerability? I do not mean to deny that vulnerability is differentiated, that it is allocated differently across the globe.”<sup>61</sup>

The parallel “I am Neda” declarations seem to follow Butler’s principle, too, but ultimately elide her clarification that vulnerability is “allocated differently across the globe.” Unlike most of those who symbolically assumed Oscar Grant’s identity in the Bay Area, remaining situated in a specific cultural and political context, annunciations of “I am Neda” again achieved global reach. In addition to its appearance in international protests, the phrase was also used to generate personal photos and messages in solidarity with Agha-Soltan. Amnesty International launched one such campaign called “Neda Speaks,” for which 749 users sent in photos.<sup>62</sup> The site’s explanation of the campaign grounds its use of the phrase in the local and culturally specific, explaining “People in Iran yell ‘I am Neda’ into the street after lights out as a sign of defiance since the government has made it illegal to mourn for her. We want you to join us in support of this fundamental stand for human rights by uploading a photo of yourself

holding a sign that says ‘I am Neda.’”<sup>63</sup> What is not explained is *why* that powerful phrase should be exported out of its local and specific context – why the declaration of identification “I am Neda” is the best way to make “this fundamental stand for human rights.” Nevertheless, 749 people of diverse ages, genders, ethnicities, and nationalities have posted pictures of themselves with “I am Neda” scrawled on pieces of paper they hold or on visible body parts or clothing (Figure 4.13).

While African-American Bay Area resident Kevin Epps can say “I Am Oscar Grant” because “[Grant] could have been me,” there is little credibility in the idea that many of the “I Am Neda” declarers would feel like “Neda could have been me.” These supporters are able to identify with the woman dying so dramatically in intimate close-up and looking them “straight in the eye,” but their sharing of human vulnerability lacks nuance. Their good intentions are dampened by the missing acknowledgment that vulnerability is “allocated differently across the globe” – that a white teenage boy from Connecticut, for example, will very likely avoid being shot by his government or dying by any violent means. One example that is both moving and fraught comes from another, smaller-scale “I am Neda” photo project started by a tumblr user who “wanted to make a point that Neda became the face of the uprising because we could all see ourselves in her.”<sup>64</sup> Responding to that user’s call for photos of people wearing homemade “I am Neda” apparel, a U.S. soldier serving in Iraq posted a photo of himself in full military gear, holding open his unbuttoned camouflage shirt to reveal those words, inscribed in marker on his t-shirt. However earnestly and emotionally this soldier describes his feelings about the Agha-Soltan death in his accompanying text, there remains a certain incongruity between the words he has written on his shirt and his visibly signified participation in the U.S. war in neighboring Iraq – a lingering gap between the capacity to sympathize and the right to claim a shared identity.<sup>65</sup> Perhaps the members of The Airborne Toxic Event – the band that recorded the “Neda” song and music video for this Amnesty International “Neda Speaks” campaign – best express the power *and* naiveté embodied in “I am Neda.” Collapsing space in a familiar cliché and eschewing the spirit of Butler’s assertion that “vulnerability is differentiated . . . allocated differently across the globe,” the song’s repeating chorus ends with the deliberately pronounced words, “I never thought the world could be so small.”

### The Promise and Peril of Context

The qualities of the Agha-Soltan videos that enable this broad, even strained, “I Am Neda” identification – their universalizing communication of suffering and death, encapsulated in short, dramatic, and aesthetically familiar clips – are the same qualities that exclude cultural specificity. While useful for drawing attention to an activist cause, such videos reduce complex events to spectacle and strip away cultural and political context – a characteristic of YouTube that worries scholars and activists. Sam Gregory points out that, “most human rights situations are embedded in contexts of structural complexity, long histories of repression and reaction and many actors with different agendas.”<sup>66</sup> This problem is especially prevalent in raw footage distributed online, where it can be re- or de-contextualized when taken from its original site and embedded elsewhere, and where it is often accompanied by uninformed and even misleading user comments. As described earlier in the chapter, a lack of context troubles YouTube’s administrators, as well, forming one of the criteria under which they may remove graphic videos from the site. Even as the Agha-Soltan videos reveal conditions in Iran during the protests, they



also cover over aspects of Iranian culture and history enmeshed with this murder. Most importantly, the raw footage itself cannot explain the context of martyrdom's resonance for Islam and for Iran.

Distinct from looser applications in the West, martyrdom in Islam is a much more codified concept and the title can even be officially bestowed or denied by legal and religious authorities.<sup>67</sup> At the core, an Islamic martyr, or *shaheed*, is one whose death creates a powerful testimony to his or her faith.<sup>68</sup> Martyrdom has been a truly formative concept for Iran, specifically, because its population is predominantly Shi'ite – a sect of Islam for which the martyr Hussein is a key figure – and because the 1980s Iran-Iraq War forged countless martyrs who were revered by Khomeini and the government.<sup>69</sup> The concept and history of Islamic martyrdom in Iran provided a frame through which many there discussed or interpreted Agha-Soltan's death – a set of common cultural reference points familiar to even the secular elements of the Green Movement, whose conception of her martyrdom would not be a religious one. While Agha-Soltan was embraced as a martyr for the protesters, Iran's government was attempting to make her a martyr for *the Islamic Republic*, offering her parents the pension entitled to an official martyr if they would go along with the story that she was killed by protesters. They would not; as her mother explained, “Neda died for her country, not so I could get a monthly income from the Martyrs Foundation. If these officials say Neda was a martyr, why do they keep wiping off the word ‘martyr,’ which people write in red on her gravestone?”<sup>70</sup> Understanding the danger that Agha-Soltan's martyrdom could (and did) fuel the Green Movement, the government launched a long and multifaceted campaign to either co-opt or defuse its power, within which the offer to her parents was only one prong.<sup>71</sup>

In a further testament to the Agha-Soltan videos' global appeal, they can fit into a simple “innocent victim” story in the West, with familiar emphasis on spectacle, and on another level can accommodate the complex narrative conventions of martyrdom specific to Islam. Her family and supporters evoked the tropes of Islamic martyrdom in describing her death: pure intentions, fearlessness, a premonition of her death, and a holy corpse that remains beautiful.<sup>72</sup> In her look at the camera, some even saw a final exhortation – an Islamic martyr's effort to impart truth to the living with her or his final words.<sup>73</sup>

These qualities were generally ignored in the Western media's coverage of Agha-Soltan, and in some cases the values associated with Islamic martyrdom were inadvertently disregarded. One such value that seems crucial to the function of martyrdom's *recording* is that graphic representations of martyrs' deaths cannot be lumped in with the so-called “gratuitous” violence in Western media that inspires so much hand wringing. Numerous comments online attacked the Agha-Soltan videos as insensitive and violent, but as historian David Cook notes in his book on Islamic martyrdom, “In the end martyrdom is *about* blood and suffering.”<sup>74</sup> Blood, suffering, and death are essential components of martyrdom and its representation – components that give the act such emotional and persuasive power. The Green Movement and its worldwide supporters understood that immediately in Agha-Soltan's case, making images of her bloodied face a ubiquitous feature of their protests (Figure 4.10). Yet these components were suppressed in initial airings of the Agha-Soltan videos on major news networks in the U.S. Rachel Maddow on MSNBC played only a small portion of the video, cutting it just before Agha-Soltan began to bleed from her mouth and nose, and accompanied even this snippet with profuse warnings and justifications. Maddow reassure us that they are showing it “not to be gratuitously graphic, but . . .” and after the clip explains that “the video continues beyond that point showing, ultimately, a great deal of blood.”<sup>75</sup> CNN and Fox News both blurred out her whole face (Figures 4.14) – a

common practice in American TV journalism intended to show respect for the victim and family. These channels reverse the annotation KTVU put on the Oscar Grant videos, adding a circle that denies access to one portion of the frame rather than a circle that calls attention to one. In doing so, they erase Agha-Soltan's identity, her bleeding and suffering, her charged look at the camera, and the emotional power of the video in general. To suppress Agha-Soltan's identity and the violence of her death in this manner is to neutralize a martyr's most powerful means of bearing witness, converting non-believers, bolstering the faithful, and honoring the dead.

In these examples of how news networks integrated the Agha-Soltan videos, an uncomfortable insight becomes apparent: that calls for simply *more* context and attacks on YouTube's lack of context fail to recognize the abuses contextualization can inflict upon footage. Here, the bare encounter with raw footage in the supposedly non-contextualized space of YouTube can provide a clearer and more illuminating engagement with recorded death. I would argue that Oscar Grant's footage presents another instance of the dual promises and perils of context. Part of the reason that the Grant shooting quickly inspired such passionate protest in Oakland was that the widely-accessible videos of his death seemed to be plainly legible, with no further context required: an African-American man lying face down with his hands behind his back and posing no threat to anyone is shot at close range by a white officer. As police procedure consultant Mark Harrison elegantly put it, "If they were kids from Orinda [a wealthy suburb] being rowdy on the way home from a Raiders game, I don't think it would have gone down the same way."<sup>76</sup> In the videos was visible evidence of extreme white-on-black police brutality, the sort that many Oakland residents have felt besieged by for decades.

As the saga of Mehserle's criminal case got underway, however, his supporters and the press heaped on additional context, details that – these sources implied – were needed to interpret the videos correctly. For example, Mehserle's squeaky clean record as a BART officer was compared to Oscar Grant's list of five prior arrests.<sup>77</sup> Detailed diagrams were provided to illustrate how BART officers' Taser holsters attach to their belts, the process used for changing the holster's configuration, the position of the holster on Mehserle's belt, and how that position could have confused him about whether he was pulling his gun or his Taser.<sup>78</sup> A video expert, Michael Schott, hired by Mehserle's defense lawyer testified during his trial that one can see Mehserle struggle to unholster his gun in the footage and that this action suggests that he thought he was handling his Taser.<sup>79</sup> In this case, the context provided by Mehserle's supporters and by news media obscures as it claims to clarify, asking the viewer to doubt what initially seemed clear in the raw videos. Instead of spreading lies and conspiracy theories the way that Iran's government did for the Agha-Soltan videos, Mehserle's supporters cast doubt on the Grant videos by spreading minutia, information that should not be (but is) seen as relevant, and interpretations from "experts" whose biases may not be obvious to the public or the jury.<sup>80</sup>

Here we might recall a parallel process of dubious contextualization that occurred in the Rodney King case, the incident of police brutality against African Americans with which Grant's case is so often associated. Footage of King's beating shot with a home video camcorder by bystander George Holliday became key evidence in the trial of LAPD officers. Unable to ignore this seemingly damning video, the defense instead presented this record of the beating in a way that "distorted and dehistoricized" it, as Elizabeth Alexander argues in "'Can you be BLACK and Look at This?': Reading the Rodney King Video(s)."<sup>81</sup> She describes the way the Holliday video was used in court:

The defense in the Simi Valley trial employed familiar language of black bestiality to construct Rodney King as a threat to the officers. The lawyers also slowed down the famous videotape so that it no longer existed in 'real time' but rather in a slow dance of stylized movement that could as easily be read as self-defense or as a threat. The slowed-down tape recorded neither the sound of falling blows nor the screams from King and the witnesses.<sup>82</sup>

Such a presentation of the Holliday video seems to work toward a number of effects advantageous for the officers: anesthetizing jurors to the shock of the beating by playing the footage many times, evacuating some of its horror by eliminating the audio in slow motion and freeze frames, and creating time within the short video for lawyers to expansively narrate it. In doing so, they added their own favored context, providing arguments for why each blow or kick King suffered on-screen was justified by the situation.<sup>83</sup>

The same techniques were used in Mehserle's trial, where the videos of Grant's death were shown many times on the courtroom's flat panel TV monitors. There, they sometimes provided visible evidence for the prosecution to counter inaccurate witness testimonies, but were also subjected to a series of slow motion and freeze frame replays narrated by experts testifying for the defense, as coverage of the trial in the *San Francisco Chronicle* describes:

Running images in slow motion, [Michael] Schott said Grant's right hand had been forced against his back by a second officer, Anthony Pirone, a few seconds before the shooting. Grant's left hand was nearby, though according to Schott it was moving "up in the air" at the time of the shot. As Schott toggled back and forth between images, Grant was shown being shot over and over again. His mother, Wanda Johnson, watched for a while but then dropped her head against the back of her seat and closed her eyes, crying.<sup>84</sup>

Here in the continuous back-and-forth replay of the gunshot are echoes of Bazin's 1958 objection to the documentary capture of death and his sense that the mechanical repetition of a singular "moment of death" would be a desecration (though the moment of fatal wounding rather than the "moment of death" is the one repeated in this courtroom).<sup>85</sup> The repetition prompts a strong emotional reaction from Grant's mother – one person in the courtroom, at least, who does not seem to be at risk of becoming inured to this sight, regardless of how many times it is replayed.

For many, the Grant case itself felt like a replay – an anxious return to the brutal violence of the King beating and, some feared, the different sort of violence that followed the officers' Simi Valley trial. But the differences are also striking: the Grant videos show police brutality that ends in *death* rather than hospitalization and show it from many angles, yet there is no doubt that they made less impact on the American public in 2009 than the King video did in 1991.<sup>86</sup> Like the disparity in attention between the Grant and Agha-Soltan videos, the reasons for the greater exposure of the King case than the Grant case are complex, but two suggest themselves most strongly to me. First, aesthetics seem important, once again: though Holliday was the only witness who taped King's beating and was physically further away than those who recorded Grant's death, he was able to provide a clearer depiction of an attack that itself was more clearly visible than Mehserle's attack on Grant. The officers in Holliday's video stand back from King, whose body is distinct and well-illuminated lying on the pavement, and move in only when they

deliver their blows in an attack that lasts longer and appears more dramatic than the gunshot Mehserle inflicted on Grant. Unlike its visible appearance in the Grant videos, police brutality *looks* truly brutal on Holliday's tape – even though the attack on Grant was fatal. Second, the recorded violence against King is horrifically protracted, exceeding the blink-and-you-miss-it gunshot in the Grant videos. This difference in duration should be qualified, though, by acknowledgment that Grant suffers a blow from Officer Pirone earlier in the footage and that the rough treatment he receives does seem to play out for a long period of time as we await the gunshot we know is coming. Third, the shock of the King beating in 1991 was accompanied by another shock: that someone had actually recorded the event on video. In 2009, the “I can't believe they caught that on camera” feeling had been diluted by the ubiquity of digital recording devices. We now *can* believe it when notable happenings in public space are recorded (by six cameras, no less) – perhaps we even expect it.

The context used to position the Grant videos in court and in the media unduly focused on Grant's criminal record, while a more telling way to contextualize the videos would have been to pair them with the larger record of U.S. law enforcement's treatment of citizens like Grant. Their story needs to include appalling statistics about the disproportionate violence police direct against African American men, or the stories of some of those men who also suffered or died at the hands of police.<sup>87</sup> Acknowledging this larger context, Grant family attorney John Burris remarked in 2011, “I've been involved in ten cases since Oscar Grant. The only difference was that his was caught on camera.”<sup>88</sup> These are acts of contextualization that happened far too little in Mehserle's trial or in mainstream coverage of the Grant shooting. Indeed, the racial dimensions of this shooting seem to have been discussed little in the Los Angeles court where a jury without any African-American members determined the former officer's verdict.

Of course, warnings from activists and academics about a lack of context on YouTube must also contend with the form of context YouTube videos *do*, in every case, provide: the comments of viewers. In the case of the Grant videos, I would argue that YouTube comments offered a context far more important to understanding Grant's death than the details of Mehserle's Taser holster. The comments contain elaborate, brutal, and persistent articulation of racism against African-Americans, a context too raw and ugly to be fully printed in the paper or aired on the local news. Overtly racist comments filled with derogatory terms and offensive opinions appeared often, from many different users, on many different postings of the Grant videos. Their presence and quantity provide an important reminder that YouTube and social media sites are havens for hatred at the same time that they are tools for progressive activism, qualifying the idea of the Internet as a democratizing, utopic force. Performing that qualification in an essay on fans of Disney's *Song of the South*, Jason Sperb helpfully notes, “The Internet may be the most efficient textual universe for any scholar wishing to prove that racism is alive and well today, and much more rampant than many will admit.”<sup>89</sup> Though not the site's intention, YouTube creates a public forum where racists can gather and connect. Videos that depict graphic violence against people of color may become nodal points for that gathering, solidifying shared attitudes in a manner similar to the way lynching photographs reinforced a previous generation's “imagined community” of racist whites among whom they circulated.<sup>90</sup> Although the racist YouTube comments on the Grant videos were usually decried by many other viewers, they expose a cultural context for his shooting that does not match the claims about post-racial America elicited by Barack Obama's inauguration in that very same month, January 2009.

### Conclusion: “To Rescue Some Type of Meaning”

When Brian Steidle returned from Darfur to the U.S. with his binders full of corpse photographs in *The Devil Came on Horseback*, he naively hoped those photographs would make an immediate, concrete, and large-scale impact, leading to U.S. military intervention in Darfur. Earlier in the film, he had longed for an act of transformation: for the camera through which he watched trucks of Janjaweed killers to become a weapon’s scope, for what he saw as passive observation to become active intervention. A related act of transformation underlies his fantasy about the photographs, as the dead bodies he preserves in page after page of documentation promise to summon troops who will rise up in their stead and save those who can still be saved. In the face of tragedy as vast and brutal as Darfur’s, Steidle can hardly be blamed for desiring a swift and heroic response from his national audience. Though it does not come, Steidle’s disappointment likely ignores the smaller-scale responses his efforts must have generated: a few hundred or a few thousand minds changed about the situation in Darfur, some significant donations to aid groups and human rights organizations, more citizens drawn to rallies and protests on the issues, and maybe even a politician or two inspired to advocate for Darfur.

In the activist use of documentary death, we hope to see clear victories – just as Steidle does – but are inevitably left, instead, with partial successes that require too many qualifiers. Agha-Soltan’s recorded martyrdom empowered Green Movement protesters in Iran and shed light on their plight for global audiences, but it did not lead to a new election or a government overthrow. More broadly, assertions of social media’s power to facilitate revolutionary movements – which the Agha-Soltan videos signify – must be paired with acknowledgments that repressive governments can appropriate these tools and use them *against* progressive activists.<sup>91</sup> Successes feel even more scant in relation to the Grant videos: Mehserle was convicted, but on a lighter charge and with a much shorter sentence than Grant’s supporters hoped for. Further, the narrow media focus on Mehserle’s individual culpability and his trial drew attention away from the structural inequities of law enforcement in the U.S. and the flawed policies and attitudes in the BART police force that precipitated this tragedy. In fact, rather than take a hard look at their own tendencies toward racial profiling or their use of force guidelines, several Bay Area law enforcement agencies considered other policy changes in the wake of Grant’s shooting that indicated they had learned a disappointing lesson from the case: get control of the documentary images. Some police forces in the region made plans to equip their officers with over-the-ear cameras to record point-of-view shots of what the officers see.<sup>92</sup> Though such a system could be used to make officers accountable in their use of force, that is not the tone being used in framing this new system. San Jose’s Sgt. Ronnie Lopez, for example, explains: “We live in a YouTube society where people have the ability to record us. We firmly believe officers do the right things for the right reasons, and this is a way to show *our side*” [my emphasis].

In addition to qualifying the successes of the Grant and Agha-Soltan videos, I must also note that for the great majority of individuals shown dying on YouTube, no organized political response will emerge to “do something” about their deaths. No users will even promise to “never forget.” Faced with these mitigating factors in the efficacy of documentary death, one understands the strangely nostalgic appeal of Adams’ *Saigon Execution* photograph and the legend that accompanies it: here is a documented death that *stopped a war*. But it is possible to think so today partly because the dust of history has settled, covering over those nagging qualifiers that we can see more clearly in deaths from 2009.

In a moment of broad reflection, historian David Cook writes, “Ultimately, martyrdom is an attempt to rescue some type of meaning and dignity from death.” A similar attempt is made by those who produced and circulated the Neda Agha-Soltan and Oscar Grant videos, and by most documentary representations of death – whether of martyrs or not. The act of watching a real person’s life end cries out for justification, some reassurance that the death has not merely provided a momentary diversion – just another YouTube offering viewed in between music videos and cute kittens. We want these images to *communicate* something clear and vital, but they often remain difficult to absorb, perched precariously at the edge of representation.

## Conclusion: The Nearest Cameras Can Go

“ . . . The nearest friends can go  
With anyone to death, comes so far short  
They may as well not try to go at all.”

– Robert Frost, “Home Burial”<sup>1</sup>

Frost’s words bookend those of a fellow poet, Rilke, that began this project with the notion of “dying in full detail” – a phrase whose alluring possibilities I have applied to digital documentary, describing a view of death it seems to offer. I am likewise transposing the assertion in “Home Burial” to the context of representation, as well, broadening its “friends” to consider the documentary camera and the audiences that camera serves. Paired, these quotations form two ends of a spectrum of answers to the question this project has ultimately considered: not about the extent to which it is right to record actual death, but about the extent to which it is useful. The access cameras in the digital age might grant to “dying in full detail” offers to help us understand a shared human experience that is urgent and complex; but the persistent discourse on death as unknowable threatens that even digital cameras undertaking its representation will “[come] so far short / They may as well not try to go at all.”

What I have endeavored to demonstrate in this project is that the promise of seeing death’s “full detail” can never be fulfilled by any image technology. “Friends” cannot absorb deaths they witness, and cameras have little chance to communicate the totality of this experience. As machines that thrive on the visible and the audible, the best they can hope to do is inscribe the external signs of death onto celluloid or translate them into the binary code that underlies digital video. Those signs, however, can convey a great deal – enough that we cannot say that cameras approaching death “[come] so far short / They may as well not try to go at all.” Although death remains a process that, as Bazin says, “must be experienced and cannot be represented” – its “full detail” always out of reach – that does not make the grasping efforts of documentarians futile.<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, the preceding chapters have shown undeniably partial and fragmentary images of documentary death doing cultural *work* in various forms, some more ethically comfortable than others. They have engaged the public’s curiosity about the elusive “moment” of violent death, and they have destabilized the notion of death as a moment through chronicles of dying as a process. They have exposed the ugliness and brutality of death in war, and they have framed death as an emotionally or aesthetically inspiring experience. They have helped the dying find meaning in their last months of life, and they have recorded, without consent, fatal attacks or anguished decisions to commit suicide. They have mobilized activists when their dying subjects have the right characteristics and are recorded with the right aesthetics, and they have gone largely unnoticed when failing to meet these conditions. To access this cultural work that documentary death performs, we have had to look closely at the images themselves – to analyze the content of death’s recording rather than condemning or praising the mere fact of it.

Although the works examined in this project do not exist *because* of digital technology, most would not exist without it. The affordability, versatility, and durational capacities of digital production and distribution has had a tremendous impact on what is possible in the documentary

realm – an impact that is starkly revealed when death is the documentarian’s subject. And death’s study by digital cameras has, in turn, brought the complexities of its duration to light: its status as a complicated and variable process, both physically and psychologically, in which the transcendent “moment of death” we might imagine becomes a tiny fragment that resists identification.

Digital technology takes us nearer to death than film technology ever could, but perhaps in the end the idea of proximity is less important to understanding these images’ appeal than the idea of control. From the early days of the daguerreotype, image makers and consumers seemed to understand psychological allure of *capturing* death – of freezing its visible traces in a material picture, one that could stop the relentless progression of time and that the living could hold in their hands. If photography can thus arrest death, the moving image can manipulate its temporality – especially on digital video, when viewers may have nothing to hold, but their hands can instead tinker with time’s flow. With a push to the buttons of a remote control or a click of the mouse on a virtual control panel, the living can tailor death’s progression to their whims – repeating, fragmenting, reversing, slowing, or freezing it. As Frost implies, there is a point in the dying process past which the dying cannot bring along the living – a hard truth that makes this power of the moving image all the more poignant. Through the moving image, we can traverse the mortal boundary between alive and dead as many times as we wish, with the simplicity of pushing a button and the ease of hopping to and fro across a small stream. Thus, we gain a modicum of control – however slight – over our inevitable fate that offers so little of it.

A few lines further in “Home Burial,” Frost continues, “Friends make pretence of following to the grave, / But before one is in it, their minds are turned / And making the best of their way back to life / And living people, and things they understand.” Having virtually followed so many to the grave in the course of this project, I feel compelled to close by saying, simply, that the deaths I have seen end on camera have had a profound effect on me – on an emotional level as much as an intellectual one. Like the experience of death, this one is difficult to express. Instead of trying, I will come to the end of this work on endings and make the best of my way back to life, and living people, and things I understand.



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## References

### Introduction

<sup>1</sup> André Bazin, "Death Every Afternoon," in *Rites of Realism: Essays on Corporeal Cinema*, ed. Ivone Margulies, trans. Mark A. Cohen (Durham: Duke University Press, 1958/2003), 30.

<sup>2</sup> From footage shown in the documentary *In Memoriam: New York City 9/11/01* (2002, Brad Grey).

<sup>3</sup> Rainer Maria Rilke, *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, trans. M.D. Herter Norton (New York: Norton, 1910/1964), 17. This passage came to my attention through Alan Warren Friedman's *Fictional Death and the Modernist Enterprise* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 57.

<sup>4</sup> In this project, I will use the term "natural" death to refer to deaths we attribute to disease or age, but I make this choice between two terms that are both unsatisfying. Is there anything that feels either "natural" or "non-violent," for example, about a death in an intensive care unit that is accompanied by forceful chest compressions, jolts from defibrillators, and the frenzied atmosphere of a "code" (when a patient deteriorates to the point of needing CPR or intubation)?

<sup>5</sup> Bazin, "Death Every Afternoon," 30.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>8</sup> André Bazin, "The Ontology of the Photographic Image," in *What Is Cinema? Vol. I*, trans. Hugh Gray, 1st ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1945/2005), 9.

<sup>9</sup> Bazin, "Death Every Afternoon," 31.

<sup>10</sup> Editing a digital documentary is, of course, a form of digital manipulation, but here I am referring to major changes to the *mise-en-scène*.

<sup>11</sup> For discussion of digital immateriality, see William J. Mitchell, *The Reconfigured Eye: Visual Truth in the Post-Photographic Era* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992); Philip Rosen, "Old and New: Image, Indexicality, and Historicity in the Digital Utopia," in *Change Mummified: Cinema, Historicity, Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 301-349; Mark B.N. Hansen, "Between Body and Image: On the 'Newness' of New Media Art," in *New Philosophy for New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), 20-46; D.N. Rodowick, *The Virtual Life of Film* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

<sup>12</sup> Robert Kastenbaum, *On Our Way: The Final Passage Through Life and Death* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 44.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 68-69.

<sup>14</sup> Anonymous, "Ars bene moriendi," in *Medieval Popular Religion, 1000-1500: A Reader*, ed. John Raymond Shinnars, trans. John Raymond Shinnars (Peterborough, Ont., Canada: Broadview Press, 1430/1997), 525.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Interestingly, the time spent withering away could even seem interminably long in the fifteenth century. One of the temptations is Impatience, and the *Ars moriendi* cautions the dying man that "through impatience and grumbling your soul is lost, just as it is delivered through patience." The tract's author has sympathy, though, for the suffering endured by those dying from causes like "a fever, an abscess, or some other serious, painful, and prolonged malady" [530].

<sup>17</sup> Philippe Ariès, *Western Attitudes Toward Death: From the Middle Ages to the Present*, trans. Patricia M. Ranum (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), 28-33.

<sup>18</sup> Kastenbaum, 89.

<sup>19</sup> Anonymous, "Ars bene moriendi," 525.

<sup>20</sup> David E. Stannard, "Death and the Puritan Child," in *Death in America*, ed. David E. Stannard (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1975), 25. Stannard gives us a quantitative sense of the grim probabilities by citing Philip J. Greven, Jr.'s finding that one out of every four children in Andover, MA would die before the age of 10 in the period of 1640-1759 [16].

<sup>21</sup> Burden Lundgren and Clare Houseman, "Banishing Death: The Disappearance of the Appreciation of Mortality," *Omega: Journal of Death and Dying* 61, no. 3 (2010): 226. Lundgren and Houseman clarify that while sanitary conditions in rural areas also welcomed disease, death rates outside the cities were significantly lower [*Ibid.*].

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 225.

- <sup>23</sup> Ibid., 227. For more on death in the Civil War period, see Chapter One and Drew Gilpin Faust, *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War* (New York: Vintage Books, 2008).
- <sup>24</sup> Charles E. Rosenberg, *The Cholera Years: The United States in 1832, 1849, and 1866* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962/1987), 3.
- <sup>25</sup> Lundgren and Houseman, 228.
- <sup>26</sup> Philippe Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death*, trans. Helen Weaver (New York: Knopf, 1981). Ariès claims that this model of death spread even to the frontier in the mid-nineteenth century, as letters from that period to loved ones back East indicate [449].
- <sup>27</sup> Ibid., 448, 473.
- <sup>28</sup> Ibid., 508. For more on the cemeteries of the nineteenth century, see Ariès' chapter in *The Hour of Our Death* (475-556); Stanley French, "The Cemetery as Cultural Institution: The Establishment of Mount Auburn and the 'Rural Cemetery' Movement," in *Death in America*, ed. David E. Stannard, 69-91 (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1975); and Mark S. Schantz, "The Court of Death," in *Awaiting the Heavenly Country: The Civil War and America's Culture of Death*, 163-206 (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008).
- <sup>29</sup> Geoffrey Batchen, *Forget Me Not: Photography & Remembrance* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Architectural Press, 2004), 65, 73-75.
- <sup>30</sup> Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death*, 513-516.
- <sup>31</sup> Ariès, *Western Attitudes Toward Death*, 92.
- <sup>32</sup> Geoffrey Gorer, "The Pornography of Death," in *Death, Grief, and Mourning* (New York: Arno Press, 1955/1977), 195.
- <sup>33</sup> Ibid., 197.
- <sup>34</sup> Lundgren and Houseman, 229. The authors elaborate on this point by noting how dramatically surgical procedures improved from 1850 to 1900, shifting from a desperate measure completed without anesthesia and with high mortality rates to a "relatively safe and pain-free" practice [230].
- <sup>35</sup> Stephen G. Post, *Inquiries in Bioethics* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1993), 83.
- <sup>36</sup> Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death*, 570. Lundgren and Houseman show a major growth period for hospitals between 1873 (178 U.S. hospitals) and 1909 (4,359 U.S. hospitals) [231].
- <sup>37</sup> Lundgren and Houseman, 232.
- <sup>38</sup> Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death*, 587; Tony Walter, *The Revival of Death* (London: Routledge, 1994), 59.
- <sup>39</sup> Lundgren and Houseman, 237.
- <sup>40</sup> Post, *Inquiries in Bioethics*, 86; Lundgren and Houseman, 236.
- <sup>41</sup> Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death*, 614.
- <sup>42</sup> Heart failure – as opposed to heart attacks – often kills in a long and unpleasant process accompanied by painful swelling, trouble eating, and a feeling of drowning when the lungs begin to fill with fluid.
- <sup>43</sup> Michael C. Kearl, *Endings: A Sociology of Death and Dying* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 29.
- <sup>44</sup> Ariès, *Western Attitudes Toward Death*, 88-89.
- <sup>45</sup> Jay Ruby, *Secure the Shadow: Death and Photography in America* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), 12.
- <sup>46</sup> For an analysis of how death functions in this important documentary (from a more theoretical than ethical perspective), see Seung-Hoon Jeong and Dudley Andrew, "Grizzly Ghost: Herzog, Bazin, and the Cinematic Animal," *Screen* 49, no. 1 (Spring 2008), 1-12.
- <sup>47</sup> Qtd. in Miriam Hansen, "Schindler's List is not Shoah: The Second Commandment, Popular Modernism, and Public Memory," *Critical Inquiry* 22, no. 2 (Winter 1996), 301.
- <sup>48</sup> Linda Williams, *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the "Frenzy of the Visible"* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989/1999).
- <sup>49</sup> See especially Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981); Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Picador, 1977); Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Picador, 2003); John Berger, *About Looking* (London: Bloomsbury, 1980/2009); Amos Vogel, "The Ultimate Secret: Death," in *Film as a Subversive Art* (New York: Random House, 1974), 263-282; Michael Renov, "Filling Up the Hole in the Real: Death and Mourning in Contemporary Documentary Film and Video," in *The Subject of Documentary* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 120-129.
- <sup>50</sup> Vivian Sobchack, "Inscribing Ethical Space: Ten Propositions on Death, Representation, and Documentary," in *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 249-255.
- <sup>51</sup> Ibid., 252.

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 255.

## Chapter One

### Capturing the “Moment”: Photography, Film, and Death’s Elusive Duration

<sup>1</sup> André Bazin, “Death Every Afternoon,” in *Rites of Realism: Essays on Corporeal Cinema*, ed. Ivone Margulies, trans. Mark A. Cohen (Durham: Duke University Press, 1958/2003), 30.

<sup>2</sup> We might think of the *Final Destination* film franchise, for example, as a more sensational and less compassionate cousin of *Six Feet Under* in its staging of moments of death – all supernatural and elaborately grisly.

<sup>3</sup> See Introduction and Chapter Two.

<sup>4</sup> For a discussion of these issues in new media theory and a list of sources, see Introduction.

<sup>5</sup> For more on these debates about defining death, see Chapter Two.

<sup>6</sup> The twentieth century trends toward death from prolonged ailments continue in the twenty-first, where at least eight of the ten leading causes of death in the U.S. forecast a slow withering rather than a sudden end [“Leading Causes of Death,” *Center for Disease Control and Prevention*, last modified December 31, 2009, <http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/fastats/lcod.htm>]. Even the top cause, heart disease, does not always provide a sudden death from a heart attack. Heart failure – also included in the heart disease statistic – often kills in a long and unpleasant process accompanied by painful swelling, trouble eating, and a feeling of drowning when the lungs begin to fill with fluid. These ten causes are based on the CDC’s 2007 study, the most recent year for which final data was available from the CDC at the time of writing. Though the following statistics do not signify a period of “dying” in the sense of immanent terminality, the average American is debilitated for five (for males) or eight (for females) years before death [John Hardwig, “Going to Meet Death: The Art of Dying in the Early Part of the Twenty-First Century,” *Hastings Center Report* 39, no. 4 (July 2009): 37.]

<sup>7</sup> Acknowledgements to Scott Combs, whose dissertation on death in American fiction film uses Williams’ “Film Bodies” to discuss the temporality of staged death scenes in melodrama – a use that partly inspired my extended comparison between Williams’ modes and documentary death. See Scott Combs, “Final Touches: Registering Death in American Cinema” (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2006), 58-64.

<sup>8</sup> Linda Williams, “Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess,” in *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed., eds. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 713.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 703.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 713.

<sup>11</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 92-95.

<sup>12</sup> Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Picador, 1977), 70.

<sup>13</sup> André Bazin, “The Ontology of the Photographic Image,” in *What Is Cinema? Vol. 1*, trans. Hugh Gray, 1st ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1945/2004), 15.

<sup>14</sup> Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Picador, 2003), 24.

<sup>15</sup> Jay Ruby, *Secure the Shadow: Death and Photography in America* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1999), 27, 61.

<sup>16</sup> Barthes, 14.

<sup>17</sup> Geoffrey Batchen, *Forget Me Not: Photography & Remembrance* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Architectural Press, 2004), 17.

<sup>18</sup> Ruby, 52.

<sup>19</sup> Philippe Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death*, trans. Helen Weaver (New York: Knopf, 1981), 415.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 469.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 442, 411.

<sup>22</sup> Ruby, 159.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 174.

<sup>24</sup> Bazin, “Ontology.” That the “piece” this new indexical medium offered had a physical connection with the individual’s body aligned well with mourning practices of the period, which often prized locks of hair for their similar connection. Geoffrey Batchen discusses the use of hair alongside photography in mourning practices, but argues that the indexicality of the photograph was insufficient and that the hair was used as a supplement to provide full physical link with the dead [73-75].

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<sup>25</sup> Drew Gilpin Faust, *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War* (New York: Vintage Books, 2008), 61.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>27</sup> E.F. Bleiler, "Introduction," in *Gardner's Photographic Sketchbook of the Civil War*, by Alexander Gardner (Dover Publications, 1959).

<sup>28</sup> Jane Carmichael, *First World War Photographers* (London: Routledge, 1989), 3-4; Raymond Fielding, *The American Newsreel, 1911-1967* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1972), 72; David Mould, *American Newsfilm 1914-1919: The Underexposed War* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1983), 100-131, 133-137.

<sup>29</sup> Qtd. in Mould, 220.

<sup>30</sup> Franny Nudelman, *John Brown's Body: Slavery, Violence, and the Culture of War* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 116-119; Bleiler.

<sup>31</sup> George H. Roeder, *The Censored War: American Visual Experience During World War Two* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 25.

<sup>32</sup> Nudelman, 122; Mark S. Schantz, *Awaiting the Heavenly Country: The Civil War and America's Culture of Death* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008), 186.

<sup>33</sup> Nudelman, 122.

<sup>34</sup> An alternate frame of "Last Sleep" shows that Gardner tried more than one arrangement for the soldiers' belongings. Then he transported this body to the cave-like setting of "Home" and photographed it all over again, despite implications in the accompanying texts that he stumbled upon these scenes as they were. Pondering how these deceptions would have been received, Nudelman argues that 1860s audiences would not have expected untainted realism from their photographs, since the camera served as both a window on reality and a tool of magic and illusion [123]. That this soldier was really dead, and was really killed in battle at Gettysburg – whether it happened in the stone enclosure or in a nearby field – may have been truth enough.

<sup>35</sup> Staging and manipulation also had precedents in the short history of war photography at that time. In the Crimean War, Britain's "official" war photographer Roger Fenton had been barred by his government from documenting the dead, wounded, or ill; but in 1855 he did famously manipulate and photograph a barren landscape littered with cannonballs, once with cannonballs in the road and once with them moved off to the sides [Sontag, *Pain*, 49]. Three years later after the siege of Lucknow in India, Felice Beato became the first person to photograph war corpses. To do so, though, he rearranged the bones of the slain for the camera and posed some local men behind them [*Ibid.*, 54].

<sup>36</sup> Alexander Gardner, *Gardner's Photographic Sketchbook of the Civil War* (Dover Publications, 1866/1959), plate 41. Significantly, the descriptions that appear in this book (that Gardner published himself on a small scale) may not have accompanied them in the other forms through which the public viewed Civil War photographs: as *cartes de visite* and stereoviews, and in public exhibitions at urban galleries such as Matthew Brady's [Nudelman 105-106].

<sup>37</sup> Gardner, plate 37.

<sup>38</sup> Nudelman, 121.

<sup>39</sup> Faust, 10-11.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>42</sup> The country's need of comfort is clear, but little evidence survives about whether Civil War battlefield photographs actually succeeded in comforting anyone – despite their many efforts. Nudelman remains skeptical on this point, arguing that Gardner's photos may *not* have elicited the desired response, but instead may have deeply disturbed viewers through the absence of loving hands caring for these bodies, through the obvious distance between the living and the dead that the photos make visible.

<sup>43</sup> Leigh Raiford, "The Consumption of Lynching Images," in *Only Skin Deep: Changing Visions of the American Self*, eds. Coco Fusco and Brian Wallis (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2003), 268. Though victims of other races – including whites – were also lynched during this time period, most of those cases occurred in the frontier West where the practice claimed to stand in for legal executions in the absence of a fully developed judicial system. These executions have a very different tone than the lynchings of blacks in the South, which often snatched victims away from jail cells and purposefully denied them existing legal proceedings. [Dora Apel, "On Looking," in *Imagery of Lynching: Black Men, White Women, and the Mob* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 23].

<sup>44</sup> Jacqueline Denise Goldsby, *A Spectacular Secret: Lynching in American Life and Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 216.

<sup>45</sup> Leon F. Litwack, "Hellhounds," in *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America*, ed. James Allen (Santa Fe, NM: Twin Palms, 2000), 9, 20.

<sup>46</sup> Raiford, 267. Though lynching photographs were sometimes appropriated to decry racism and its violence, for the most part their original production and distribution was fully complicit in and supportive of that violence. One notable exception is a collection of cabinet cards depicting the lynching of William Biggerstaff in Helena, Montana in 1896. J.P. Ball, the photographer, was an activist who tried to prevent Biggerstaff's "legal" execution; when unable to do so, he tried to convey the man's dignity and innocence with his lynching photos [Goldsby, 246].

<sup>47</sup> Apel, 30; Goldsby, 273.

<sup>48</sup> Raiford, 269. The support of these technologies helped lynchings increase in size, length, complexity, and brutality over time, in order to satisfy the crowd's desire for grander and grander spectacles. Litwack tells a story that disturbingly demonstrates the trend toward anesthetization to the sight of death. A young boy who had attended a live lynching quickly yearned for a newer and more graphic experience, telling his mother, "I have seen a man hanged. Now I wish I could see one burned" [Litwack, 14].

<sup>49</sup> Raiford, 270; Apel, 44.

<sup>50</sup> The challenge of ephemerality was familiar to cinema of the same period, an industry that in the 1910s also began manufacturing photographic images of stars and movie scenes in postcards and fan magazines to supplement the intangible motion pictures themselves. Photographs were not the only available souvenir of lynchings, but not everyone could obtain pieces of cloth, hair, teeth, bone or even flesh torn from the corpse [Litwack, 9; Raiford, 270].

<sup>51</sup> Raiford, 270.

<sup>52</sup> Apel, 30.

<sup>53</sup> Goldsby, 221.

<sup>54</sup> Reproduced in the *Only Skin Deep* anthology alongside Raiford's essay, 273.

<sup>55</sup> If it was the white women whose purity lynch mobs were so eager to "protect," it seems that purity would be already sullied by seeing Jesse Washington's burnt and contorted frame, missing limbs, and curled, fingerless fists.

<sup>56</sup> Hilton Als, "GWTW," in *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America*, ed. James Allen (Santa Fe, NM: Twin Palms, 2000), 40.

<sup>57</sup> A photograph of Frank Embree (lynched on July 22, 1899 in Fayette, Missouri) standing handcuffed, naked, and visibly bleeding is a startling anomaly amongst these corpse images [*Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America*, ed. James Allen (Santa Fe, NM: Twin Palms, 2000), plate 43]. His seemingly defiant look directly at the camera disrupts the utter powerlessness that dominates the postmortem lynching photos – thus illustrating one of the likely motivations for the conventional postmortem timing of these photos.

<sup>58</sup> Vivian Sobchack, "Inscribing Ethical Space: Ten Propositions on Death, Representation, and Documentary," in *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 237.

<sup>59</sup> Goldsby, 231-232.

<sup>60</sup> Toby Haggith, "Filming the Liberation of Bergen-Belsen," in *Holocaust and the Moving Image: Representations in Film and Television Since 1933*, eds. Toby Haggith and Joanna Newman (London: Wallflower, 2005), 39; Barbie Zelizer, *Remembering to Forget: Holocaust Memory through the Camera's Eye* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 88.

<sup>61</sup> Qtd. in Robert H. Abzug, *Inside the Vicious Heart: Americans and the Liberation of Nazi Concentration Camps* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 30. *Vogue* photographer Lee Miller, on the scene at Dachau, noted that "by midday, only the press and medics were allowed in the buildings, as so many really tough [soldiers] had become sick it was interfering with duties" [Qtd. in Zelizer, *Remembering to Forget*, 89]. Reportedly, even the famously tough-as-nails General Patton "retired behind a barracks and became physically ill" when he toured Ohrdruf [Abzug, 27].

<sup>62</sup> Qtd. in Zelizer, *Remembering to Forget*, 86.

<sup>63</sup> Abzug, 69-73, 82, 91, 129; Zelizer, *Remembering to Forget*, 105, 110; Kay Gladstone, "Separate Intentions: The Allied Screening of Concentration Camp Documentaries in Defeated Germany in 1945-46: *Death Mills* and *Memory of the Camps*," in *Holocaust and the Moving Image: Representations in Film and Television Since 1933*, eds. Toby Haggith and Joanna Newman (London: Wallflower, 2005).

<sup>64</sup> Roeder, 127.

<sup>65</sup> Zelizer, *Remembering to Forget*, 39, 31.

<sup>66</sup> Yet there is also reason, in this case, to be less suspicious than usual of political motivations in the display of atrocities. They helped justify any harsh treatment of defeated Germany and cemented the Allies as "the good guys," but the U.S. also had reason to rebuild the German reputation, as it needed cooperation in the rapidly

developing Cold War [Roeder, 127]. So perhaps the simple motive of informing the public, so often invoked and so rarely accurate, was slightly purer here than it had been in many previous wars.

<sup>67</sup> Zelizer, *Remembering to Forget*, 33, 90.

<sup>68</sup> During that time, there was a marked increase in belief, but both polls revealed that citizens vastly underestimated the scale of the killings, with most casualty guesses hovering at or below one million, despite regular reports of three to eight million in the press [Abzug 10, 139]. Two similar polls in Britain showed an increase in believers from 37% in November, 1944 to 81% in April, 1945 [Zelizer, *Remembering to Forget*, 138].

<sup>69</sup> James Agee, "Untitled review of the 1945 US Signal Corps documentary on the liberation of the camps," in *America Views the Holocaust, 1933-1945: A Brief Documentary History*, ed. Robert H. Abzug (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1999), 203.

<sup>70</sup> Zelizer, *Remembering to Forget*, 118.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 199-200.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 174. Zelizer offers an example: an iconic photo of bunks full of male survivors in Buchenwald was used to illustrate a 1979 story about POWs from that camp reuniting. Problematically, none of the men in the story were pictured in the photo, and as non-Jewish POWs, they experienced different (and better) conditions in the camp than those visible Jewish survivors [*Remembering to Forget*, 185].

<sup>73</sup> I do not fault, however, people like Claude Lanzmann who express doubts about the benefit of such images. Rejecting corpse footage from the camps in making *Shoah*, Lanzmann declared: "If I had stumbled on a real SS film . . . that showed how 3,000 Jewish men, women and children were gassed in Auschwitz's crematorium 2, not only would I not have shown it but I would have destroyed it" [Qtd. in Miriam Hansen, "*Schindler's List* is not *Shoah*: The Second Commandment, Popular Modernism, and Public Memory," *Critical Inquiry* 22, no. 2 (Winter 1996), 301]. Certainly, the overuse of corpse footage as "illustrative wallpaper" (as archivist Toby Haggith dubs it) for documentary projects on the Holocaust does nothing to soothe fears that "moment of death" footage would be used incautiously [Haggith, 33].

<sup>74</sup> Laurence Rees, "*The Nazis: A Warning From History*," in *Holocaust and the Moving Image: Representations in Film and Television Since 1933*, eds. Toby Haggith and Joanna Newman (London: Wallflower, 2005), 147.

<sup>75</sup> Sontag describes this encounter as her first with such graphic documentary images: "Nothing I have ever seen – in photographs or in real life – ever cut me as sharply, deeply, instantaneously." Sontag, *On Photography*, 20.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Laura Mulvey, *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image* (London: Reaktion Books, 2006), 22.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>80</sup> Combs, 13.

<sup>81</sup> Sobchack, 288.

<sup>82</sup> Titles from this era that demonstrate the popularity of the execution spectacle include: *The Execution of Mary Queen of Scots* (1895, Thomas Edison), *Shooting the Captured Insurgents* (1898, William Heise), *Beheading the Chinese Prisoner* (1900, Siegmund Lubin), *Execution of Czolgosz with Panorama of Auburn State Prison* (1901, Edwin S. Porter/Edison), *The Terrible Turkish Executioner* (1903, Georges Méliès), *Execution of a Spy* (1902, Mutoscope/Biograph), *Electrocuting an Elephant* (1903, Edison), *Execution by Hanging* (1905, Mutoscope/Biograph), *Reading the Death Sentence* (1905, Mutoscope/Biograph). [Combs, 6-50; Mary Ann Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, the Archive* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 145].

<sup>83</sup> Doane, 159. *The Terrible Turkish Executioner* has even more elaborate splices and stop motion work as the title character beheads four men and is then sliced in half by their reassembled corpses. As this description indicates, though, it is a film more engaged with fantasy than a realistic presentation of death.

<sup>84</sup> Combs, 19.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 23-24.

<sup>86</sup> Doane, 160.

<sup>87</sup> Accounts of Czolgosz's actual execution also note that multiple jolts of electric current were administered to ensure death [A. Wesley Johns, *The Man Who Shot McKinley* (South Brunswick, NJ: A.S. Barnes, 1970), 248].

<sup>88</sup> Combs, 36.

<sup>89</sup> Doane, 145; Goldsby, 225.

<sup>90</sup> Indeed actual animal deaths, such as Topsy's, have been filmed and displayed in both documentary and fiction films far more frequently than actual human deaths – perhaps serving as a substitute spectacle for viewers curious

about sights of the latter. Sobchack reports that noticing this ethical discrepancy, while watching a rabbit killed on screen in *The Rules of the Game* (1939, Jean Renoir), prompted her initial interest in writing about documentary death [293]. We can watch actual animal deaths in films as geographically, temporally, and topically varied as *The Lion Hunt* (1907, Viggo Larsen, Denmark), *Blood of the Beasts* (1949, Georges Franju, France), *Pink Flamingos* (1972, John Waters, USA), and *Cannibal Holocaust* (1980, Ruggero Deodato, Italy), to name a few. While regulations now constrain American filmmakers from killing animals for their movies, these do not pertain to the documentary recording of animal deaths – including their steady slaughter in the meat industry.

<sup>91</sup> Combs, 40.

<sup>92</sup> Doane, 160.

<sup>93</sup> Kristen Whissel, *Picturing American Modernity: Traffic, Technology, and the Silent Cinema* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 19, 63, 115.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 90-91.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 82, 96.

<sup>97</sup> A few examples of paintings and prints to feature this pose in Civil War battles are: *Death of Col. Edward D. Baker* (1861, Currier and Ives), *Fighting at Virginia* (1862, Currier and Ives), *Battle of Spottsylvania* [sic] (1887, Thure de Thulstrup), *Battle of Shiloh* (1888, Thure de Thulstrup).

<sup>98</sup> As Caroline Brothers acknowledges in her study of Spanish Civil War photography, “moment of death” shots (“unquestionably the most powerful and controversial images of any war”) were so difficult to capture in the 1930s that “anything that came close was fêted as a journalistic feat” [Caroline Brothers, *War and Photography: A Cultural History* (London: Routledge, 1997), 178].

<sup>99</sup> Indeed, Capa himself announced his capture of the “moment of death” through the image’s original title: *Loyalist Militiaman at the Moment of Death, Cerro Muriano, September 5, 1936*.

<sup>100</sup> Brothers, 183.

<sup>101</sup> Larry Rohter, “New Doubts Raised Over Famous War Photo,” *New York Times*, August 18, 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/08/18/arts/design/18capa.html>; Alex Kershaw, *Blood and Champagne: The Life and Times of Robert Capa* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2003), 39-42. The original negative in sequence with Capa’s other shots that day, which might settle the debate definitively, has never surfaced. For a well-illustrated example of Susperregui’s geographical evidence, see “Faking Soldier: The photographic evidence that Capa’s camera DOES lie... and that his iconic ‘Falling Soldier’ was staged,” *The Daily Mail*, July 21, 2009, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/worldnews/article-1201116/How-Capas-camera-does-lie-The-photographic-proof-iconic-Falling-Soldier-image-staged.html>.

<sup>102</sup> Kershaw, 38.

<sup>103</sup> Mould, 154.

<sup>104</sup> The most famous WWI example of death footage whose staging was not announced is undoubtedly the British propaganda film *Battle of the Somme* (1916), which brought actual footage from the front to eager audiences, but mixed in staged material. One such staged shot shows soldiers charging “over the top” of a trench and one crumples right back down, presumably killed on camera. As Anton Kaes points out, the British were not alone in their filmic fabrications: the American Life Photo Film Company, for example, was faking “documented” German atrocities with uniformed actors in New Jersey from the war’s beginning in 1914 [Anton Kaes, *Shell Shock Cinema: Weimar Culture and the Wounds of War* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2009), 29-31].

<sup>105</sup> Carmichael, 52; Stephen Bottomore, “The Biograph in Battle,” *Film and the First World War*, eds. Karel Dibbets and Bert Hogenkamp (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1995), 32; Fielding, 67-69.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 68.

<sup>107</sup> See Kershaw for a summary of and quotations from these various interviews [39-42].

<sup>108</sup> Sontag, *Regarding*, 55.

<sup>109</sup> Qtd. in Kershaw, 46.

<sup>110</sup> In my view, the fact that some journalists still use the neutral rhetoric of “we may never know” regarding this photograph’s authenticity, despite evidence that favors its staging so heavily, is evidence of how much we *want* to believe that we might be seeing an actual “moment” of war death.

<sup>111</sup> Barbie Zelizer, *Covering the Body: The Kennedy Assassination, the Media, and the Shaping of Collective Memory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 18.

<sup>112</sup> Many video games that center on fighting with long-range weapons will incentivize headshots by giving players who complete them extra experience points or virtual trophies to display on their public gaming profiles.

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<sup>113</sup> The transfer of the Zapruder film I am working from is on *Image of an Assassination: A New Look at the Zapruder Film* (1963; Oak Forest, IL: MPI Teleproductions, 1999), DVD. Clear reproductions of each numbered frame can be found at: <http://www.assassinationresearch.com/zfilm/>.

<sup>114</sup> Films from Orville Nix and Mary Muchmore that were shot on the other side of the road from Zapruder offer different evidence because of their angle, but only obscured and distant views of Kennedy himself and the headshot that killed him.

<sup>115</sup> The view of Kennedy is obscured for approximately 15 frames by a road sign. On the amateur quality, Stella Bruzzi writes that “Zapruder” became shorthand among film production students for a piece of film whose content was important but whose technical quality was very low [Stella Bruzzi, “The Event: Archive and Imagination,” in *New Challenges for Documentary*, eds. Alan Rosenthal and John Corner (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 200/2005), 421].

<sup>116</sup> Woe to the earnest historian who sets out to study the Zapruder film as evidence in his murder, and especially in relation to the Warren Commission’s clearly botched investigation. While this task is of the great interest and importance, conspiracy theorist of the more crackpot variety (including director Oliver Stone) have created something of a minefield for scholars. My analysis of the film is supplemented partly by a well-researched and mostly restrained study by David Wrone: David R. Wrone, *The Zapruder Film: Reframing JFK’s Assassination* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2003).

<sup>117</sup> This saga highlights what a different process of evidence collecting and reviewing digital technology provides, compared to film. Zapruder and his business partner had to spend nine hours that day visiting seven different offices and plants to get the film developed and copied – a delay during which neither Zapruder nor officials even knew how much of the killing he’d recorded. It took days to get copies to all the government investigators who needed them and they often had to make special arrangements for projectors that could slow down or freeze the film without damaging it. Plus, the copies investigators received had a necessarily degraded image quality compared to the original, and they did not contain the visual information between the original film strip’s sprocket holes [Wrone, 19-31]. Though the superpowers of digital video are perhaps exaggerated, it remains true that such evidence today can be seen, copied, and transmitted to distant locations within minutes, and that well-made copies will appear practically identical in quality to original files.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, 272-273. Zapruder understood his film’s monetary value on the day he shot it and negotiated for a good price with Time Inc., but he could hardly have anticipated the vast sums that would eventually be paid for that short strip of celluloid. Time Inc. had returned ownership of the film and its copyright to the Zapruder family in 1975 and in 1999 the U.S. government purchased the original film from the Zapruder heirs for \$16 million [*Ibid.* 272].

<sup>119</sup> The only official copy that researchers had the right to examine required a trip to the National Archives in Washington, D.C. [*Ibid.*, 52].

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>121</sup> The accompanying narration of the sequence also leaves out any mention of the headshot. “Split-Second Sequence as the Bullets Struck,” *Life*, November 29, 1963, 24-27.

<sup>122</sup> “Assassination: The Trail to a Verdict,” *Life*, October 2, 1964, 40-50B; “A Matter of Reasonable Doubt,” *Life*, November 25, 1966, 38-48B.

<sup>123</sup> Warren Commission, *Report of the President’s Commission on the Assassination of President John F. Kennedy* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1964), 108. David Wrone describes the underground industry of Zapruder bootlegs, which were publicly shown (sometimes advertised, with an admission fee or with an accompanying lecture) at college campuses and other locations. The illicit screenings were never prosecuted by Time Inc., the film’s copyright holder [59-61].

<sup>124</sup> Bruzzi, 427.

<sup>125</sup> An enhanced bootleg copy of the film aired on the March 6, 1975 episode when Richard Groden, the man who had labored to improve the copy’s quality, was a guest. On the program’s audio track, the studio audience’s shocked reaction to the headshot is pronounced. The segment appears on the *Image of an Assassination* DVD, or can be viewed at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4DwKK4rkeEM>.

<sup>126</sup> The Warren Commission itself encouraged this fixation on the headshot by using in its case against Oswald a sequence of stills in which frames 314 and 315 were reversed, allegedly due to a printing error. The reversal made it appear that Kennedy’s head snapped forward rather than backward with the impact of the shot, a motion that would reinforce the Commission’s argument that Oswald delivered that shot from behind Kennedy in the book depository [Wrone, 165].



<sup>127</sup> The full quotation from Bazin, about the perversity of replaying an actual death over and over on film, reads, “Before cinema there was only the profanation of corpses and the desecration of tombs. Thanks to film, nowadays we can desecrate and show at will the only one of our possessions that is temporally inalienable: death without a requiem, the eternal dead-again of the cinema!” [31]

<sup>128</sup> The Justice Department had strongly requested that Oswald be moved secretly during the previous night. But the police rescheduled his transfer to Sunday afternoon in order to accommodate broadcasters, who were especially eager to cover every scrap of post-assassination news to compensate for their failure to cover the assassination itself. That rescheduling and the throngs of reporters and camera equipment that made Oswald’s assailant hard to spot have drawn criticism to the press, who may have inadvertently facilitated Oswald’s murder [Zelizer, *Covering the Body*, 58-60].

<sup>129</sup> CBS and ABC were showing Kennedy’s coffin being moved from the White House to the Capitol when Oswald was shot [Erik Barnouw, *Tube of Plenty: The Evolution of American Television* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 334]. Instant replay was thus used to replay death documentary footage before it was used for its intended purpose of sports coverage – debuting weeks later in the 1963 Army-Navy football game [Kathryn Jay, *More than Just a Game: Sports in American Life Since 1945* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 103].

<sup>130</sup> Barnouw, 334.

<sup>131</sup> David Kerekes and David Slater, *Killing for Culture: An Illustrated History of Death Film from Mondo to Snuff* (London: Creation Books, 1995), 204. Pennsylvania politician Budd Dwyer is sometimes included among famous live television deaths, but his recorded suicide during a 1987 press conference did not air live.

<sup>132</sup> Qtd. in Peter Braestrup, *Big Story: How the American Press and Television Reported and Interpreted the Crisis of Tet 1968 in Vietnam and Washington* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), 35.

<sup>133</sup> North Vietnam’s communist army in South Vietnam, the National Liberation Front (NLF), was referred to by the American troops and media as the Vietcong.

<sup>134</sup> The levels of trust placed in the young medium were demonstrated by a series of surveys from the Roper Organization for the Television Information Office. After several years of war coverage in 1972, for example, survey respondents reported television as their main source of news over newspapers, and also said they would trust television accounts over newspaper accounts in a case of conflicting information by a margin of 48% to 21% [Daniel C. Hallin, *The Uncensored War: The Media and Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 106].

<sup>135</sup> Hallin, 129; Braestrup, 36.

<sup>136</sup> Charles J. Pach, Jr., “And That’s the Way It Was: The Vietnam War on the Network Nightly News,” in *The Sixties: From Memory to History*, ed. David Farber (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 92; Braestrup, 34.

<sup>137</sup> Reflecting on TV’s damaging impact on his war effort in April 1968, President Johnson told the National Association of Broadcasters, that “historians must only guess at the effect that television would have had . . . during the Korean war, . . . when our forces were pushed back there to Pusan” or during the German counterattack at the Battle of the Bulge [Qtd. in Pach, 91].

<sup>138</sup> Because none of these presidents ever officially declared war on North Vietnam, they created serious tensions with Congress and the American people. Implementing official censorship in an unofficial war would have connoted deception and secrecy during a time when too much was already in the air, and may have even *legally* required a declaration of war [William M. Hammond, *Reporting Vietnam: Media and Military at War* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998), 18]. It also would have taken tremendous additional spending and organization in South Vietnam: control over all communications leaving the area, a huge new multilingual staff, and expanded Teletype and radio circuits. Plus, the American government could hardly censor the work of the many foreign reporters who had flocked to the action there [Ibid., 43]. Effective censorship would have required participation from the unstable South Vietnamese government. Whether due to an ethical investment in the free press or fear of a media outcry if that freedom was suspended, the U.S. was not willing to open the floodgates to South Vietnamese censorship, assuming that it would be greatly excessive [Ibid., 41].

<sup>139</sup> Ibid., 53, 43.

<sup>140</sup> Pach, 95.

<sup>141</sup> Qtd. in Amy Rust, “‘Passionate Detachment’: Technologies of Vision and Violence in American Cinema, 1967-1974 (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2010), 49. See Rust also for excellent analysis of the relationship between graphic news footage from Vietnam and newly explicit violence in American cinema of the period.

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<sup>142</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>143</sup> Pach, 95.

<sup>144</sup> An ABC camera crew was also at the scene, but its operator only filmed before and after the execution, not during. ABC's report on the story claimed the South Vietnamese cameraman was "afraid of General Loan" and refrained from filming for that reason [Braestrup, 351].

<sup>145</sup> George A. Bailey and Lawrence W. Lichty, "Rough Justice on a Saigon Street: A Gatekeeper Study of NBC's Tet Execution Film," *Journalism Quarterly* (Summer 1972), 223; Pach, 109.

<sup>146</sup> Bailey and Lichty list the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *Chicago Tribune*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and the *New York Daily News* as among the newspapers that ran Adams' photo on February 2, 1968 [225].

<sup>147</sup> Ibid., 226.

<sup>148</sup> The others are Nick Ut's photo of a little girl named Kim Phúc running naked and badly burned by napalm, and the photo of massacred Vietnamese bodies piled on a path in My Lai [Marita Sturken, *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 90].

<sup>149</sup> Zelizer, *Remembering to Forget*, 215; Andrew Hoskins, *Televising War: From Vietnam to Iraq* (London: Continuum, 2004), 19-20.

<sup>150</sup> Indeed, more people likely saw the photograph than the film footage in the '60s, since the photo was widely reprinted and Suu's film was only aired a few times in the years after its debut on *The Huntley-Brinkley Report*: once on *The Frank McGee Report* in March, 1968 and again in NBC's 1969 *From Here to the '70s* special [Bailey and Lichty, 227]. The distinction is less sharp now, when we can possess either a print of the photo or a copy of the footage (on a number of DVDs that feature it or as a video clip downloaded from the Internet).

<sup>151</sup> Sturken, 90.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid., 93.

<sup>153</sup> Faust, 19.

<sup>154</sup> Pach, 108.

<sup>155</sup> Believing Loan's assertion about Lém's crime, Eddie Adams regretted the damage his photograph did to Loan's reputation and its use as "perfect propaganda for North Vietnam" [Eddie Adams, "The Tet Photo," in *To Bear Any Burden: The Vietnam War and Its Aftermath in the Words of Americans and Southeast Asians*, ed. Al Santoli (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 185].

<sup>156</sup> Sturken, 93.

<sup>157</sup> I am referencing Supreme Court Justice William Brennan's well-known 1957 definition of obscenity: that which is "utterly without redeeming social importance" [*United States v. Roth* S. Ct. (1957)]. For a brief discussion of "death porn," see Introduction.

<sup>158</sup> Sontag, *On Photography*, 21.

## Chapter Two

### The Art of Dying, on Camera: Natural Death Documentaries

<sup>1</sup> T.S. Eliot, "Little Gidding," in *Four Quartets* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1943), 58.

<sup>2</sup> In this project, I will use the term "natural" death to refer to deaths we attribute to disease or age, but I make this choice between two terms that are both unsatisfying. Is there anything that feels either "natural" or "non-violent," for example, about a death in an intensive care unit that is accompanied by forceful chest compressions, jolts from defibrillators, and the frenzied atmosphere of a "code" (when a patient deteriorates to the point of needing CPR or intubation)?

<sup>3</sup> Sigmund Freud, "Timely Reflections on War and Death," in *On Murder, Mourning, and Melancholia*, ed. Adam Phillips, trans. Shaun Whiteside (London: Penguin Books, 1915/2005), 185.

<sup>4</sup> See Introduction for further discussion. The most-cited work on twentieth century death-denial comes from Philippe Ariès, first in *Western Attitudes Toward Death: From the Middle Ages to the Present*, trans. Patricia Ranum (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974) and then in a more detailed follow-up, *The Hour of Our Death*, trans. Helen Weaver (New York: Knopf, 1981/1991). More recently, Burden Lundgren and Clare Houseman have provided a succinct and well-researched overview of these issues in "Banishing Death: The Disappearance of the Appreciation of Mortality," *Omega: Journal of Death and Dying* 61, no. 3 (2010), 223-249.

<sup>5</sup> See Chapter One for further discussion of postmortem mourning photographs.

<sup>6</sup> Shortly after Roemer's documentary, a brief revival of postmortem mourning photography also arrived in the form of James Van Der Zee's 1978 *The Harlem Book of the Dead*.

<sup>7</sup> Fiction films of the post-classical Hollywood era have made some progress in rectifying these misrepresentations, but many of the most remembered and beloved deathbed scenes still participate in them. *Love Story* (1970, Arthur Hiller), for example, presents an emotional deathbed scene between young lovers in which the dying cancer patient, Jennifer, appears beautiful, healthy, and strong on the last day of her life. Amos Vogel writes of *Love Story* as exemplifying "the insufferable sentimentality and the manageable, antiseptic way in which people die in commercial films" [*Film as a Subversive Art* (New York: Random House, 1974), 263], and Robert Kastenbaum describes the cathartic function the novel *Love Story* served for a group of oncology nurses he knew. "All had read *Love Story*," he writes, "and all had wept because 'it was so beautiful.'" The one nonnurse in the group asked: "But was any of it true to life? Have you ever seen a person actually die like this?" No, they hadn't. And that was just the point" [*On Our Way: The Final Passage through Life and Death* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 122].

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 121.

<sup>9</sup> Vivian Sobchack, "Inscribing Ethical Space: Ten Propositions on Death, Representation, and Documentary," in *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2004), 236-237.

<sup>10</sup> Scott Combs, "Final Touches: Registering Death in American Cinema" (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2006). Combs theorizes the "registrant" in his Introduction and discusses EKG and EEG registrants in Chapter Five. He also provides illuminating examples of how aesthetically unsatisfying natural death has seemed to filmmakers, discussing D.W. Griffith's frequent augmentation of deathbed scenes in his Biograph shorts. Through editing, Griffith would intercut the death scene with a more action-oriented elsewhere: a person racing to save the die-er or to bid them farewell, often arriving "too late," in melodrama's typical fashion. As Combs notes, "Griffith saw the failure of rescue as more cinematic than body failure" [59].

<sup>11</sup> For an eloquent discussion of this duality, see Laura Mulvey, *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image* (London: Reaktion Books, 2006), 11-15.

<sup>12</sup> We do, actually, have cameras that can penetrate the body and show us its inner workings, but (as will become apparent in the next section) death as we now understand it cannot be localized to one visible internal event – like the heart ceasing to beat.

<sup>13</sup> The previous chapter revealed the sense in which the spectacular "moment" of death offered by *Electrocuting an Elephant* or Vo Suu's footage of Nguyễn Văn Lém's execution were actually processes, not events – however brief those processes might be. But the death of a typical cancer patient in recent decades contains duration on a far greater scale.

<sup>14</sup> Though it may have been used elsewhere earlier, the phrase "a death of one's own" appears in Rainer Maria Rilke, *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, trans. M.D. Herter Norton (New York: Norton, 1910/1964), 17.

<sup>15</sup> Part of the reason for *Imitation's* anachronistic deathbed scene might be that the film is based on Fannie Hurst's popular 1933 novel of the same name, which was published at a time when this kind of dying was a less distant memory. This death scene in the novel, however, is not as strongly framed as a "good death" and differs significantly from the film's. Delilah (renamed Annie for the 1959 film) collapses on the floor in the middle of the night from the pain of an illness (tumors, it seems like) that she has been hiding for months. She is propped up on a palette on the living room floor and attended to by a neighborhood doctor, spending most of her final hours unconscious [Fannie Hurst, *Imitation of Life*, ed. Daniel Itzkovitz (Durham: Duke University Press, 1933/2004), 265-267].

<sup>16</sup> Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death*, 560.

<sup>17</sup> Peter G. Filene, *In the Arms of Others: A Cultural History of the Right-To-Die in America* (Darby, PA: Diane Publishing Co., 2003), 63.

<sup>18</sup> Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying* (New York: Scribner, 1969/2003), 41-42.

<sup>19</sup> Margaret M. Lock, *Twice Dead: Organ Transplants and the Reinvention of Death* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 7, 59-64.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 1, 78.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>22</sup> "What and When Is Death?" *Journal of the American Medical Association* 204 (1968): 220.

<sup>23</sup> Lock, 66.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 71. Lock shows the reduction of anxiety that accompanied this medical consensus by citing a study that showed medical textbooks in the first half of the twentieth century ceasing to instruct doctors in how to diagnose death [72].

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 74, 89.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 79, 73-74. Lock makes an extended anthropological comparison between the U.S. and Japan to demonstrate that well-educated citizens in other medically-advanced countries are far less willing to accept the medical assurance that “brain dead” organ donors are truly dead.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>29</sup> Qtd. in Tony Walter, *The Revival of Death* (London: Routledge, 1994), 1. Ariès, who proclaimed the twentieth-century U.S. as a haven of death-denial in the 1973 lectures that became the book *Western Attitudes Toward Death*, himself admits in 1981’s *The Hour of Our Death* that denial is not necessarily the key word of U.S. death culture anymore. All the recent attention, though, had not been wholly liberatory in Ariès’ view [xiii, 593].

<sup>30</sup> Walter, 39-40.

<sup>31</sup> Larry Churchill, “The Human Experience of Dying: The Moral Primacy of Stories Over Stages,” *Soundings* 62 (Spring 1979): 33.

<sup>32</sup> Kastenbaum, 113-115. Kastenbaum lists Jessica Mitford’s *The American Way of Death* (1963) and Ruth Harmer’s *The High Cost of Dying* (1963) as the most influential of these exposés.

<sup>33</sup> Stephen R. Connor, “Development of Hospice and Palliative Care in the United States,” *Omega: Journal of Death and Dying* 56, no. 1 (2007-2008): 90.

<sup>34</sup> Kastenbaum, 111.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 110. This rhetoric gets a little unwieldy a few pages later, as Kastenbaum slips into an extended metaphor of deaths as varieties of plantlife: “One person’s good death is not necessarily the same as another’s. Perhaps we might think of a skillful gardener who understands the conditions that favor optimal growth. These principles are applied with diligence and sensitivity. When the time comes, there is blossoming everywhere – but the garden is graced with flowers of many varying colors, shapes, and fragrances” [112].

<sup>36</sup> Tony Walter remains skeptical of the extent to which hospice provides a wide range of options for dying: “Despite all the rhetoric of choice, we find hospices promoting clear notions of the good death” [3].

<sup>37</sup> “Growth in U.S. Hospice Programs 1974-2009,” *National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization*, last modified December 13, 2010, <http://www.nhpco.org/i4a/pages/index.cfm?pageid=5994>; Connor, 92. Another important factor in hospice growth since 1982 has been the Hospice Medicare Benefit [Ibid., 91].

<sup>38</sup> The twentieth century trends toward death from prolonged ailments continue in the twenty-first, where at least eight of the ten leading causes of death in the U.S. forecast a slow withering rather than a sudden end [“Leading Causes of Death,” *Center for Disease Control and Prevention*, last modified December 31, 2009, <http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/fastats/lcod.htm>]. These ten causes are based on the CDC’s 2007 study, the most recent year for which final data was available from the CDC at the time of writing. Though the following statistics do not signify a period of “dying” in the sense of immanent terminality, the average American is debilitated for five (for males) or eight (for females) years before death [John Hardwig, “Going to Meet Death: The Art of Dying in the Early Part of the Twenty-First Century,” *Hastings Center Report* 39, no. 4 (July 2009): 37.]

<sup>39</sup> Filene, 158.

<sup>40</sup> Kastenbaum, 132.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 98; Walter, 2; Carlo Leget, “Retrieving the Ars Moriendi Tradition,” *Medicine, Health Care and Philosophy* 10 (2007): 314; Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York: Free Press Paperbacks, 1973/1997).

<sup>42</sup> Timothy Leary, *Design for Dying* (San Francisco: HarperEdge, 1997), 4. Mary Roach’s popular study of the uses of human cadavers, *Stiff*, extends this principle beyond death, encouraging readers to do something interesting and unique as a corpse: “Get involved with science. Be an art exhibit. Become part of a tree. Some options for you to think about. Death. It doesn’t have to be boring” [Mary Roach, *Stiff: The Curious Lives of Human Cadavers* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2003), 10-11].

<sup>43</sup> In addition to Churchill, others calling for “stories over stages” include: William Joseph Gavin, *Cuttin’ the Body Loose* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995), 194; Marilyn Webb, *The Good Death: The New American Search to Reshape the End of Life* (New York: Bantam Books, 1997), xviii; and Ira Byock, *Dying Well: The Prospect for Growth at the End of Life* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1997), 36.

<sup>44</sup> Actually, Sally’s is not the first segment in the film’s original cut, the one that aired on PBS in 1976. The version of *Dying* in distribution at the time of my research – a VHS edition produced by Filmmakers Library – begins with Sally, proceeds to Bill and Harriet, and ends with Rev. Bryant. The televised version, as described by reviewers and

scholars writing on the film in the '70s and '80s, begins with a young widow's interview about her husband's death and another interview with Yale's Prof. Maynard Mack about the production of the film.

<sup>45</sup> Michael Roemer visited a documentary film course taught by George C. Stoney that I took at NYU in the spring of 2003 to present and talk about *Dying* (a visit that marked my first exposure to this film and sparked my initial interest in the topic of death in documentary). In his remarks, he claimed that Harriet was well aware that she would likely be perceived as "a bitch," in her words, and encouraged Roemer to use the footage anyway. After *Dying* aired on PBS, she was invited to do a number of speaking engagements and spent some time doing those talks on bereavement and anger.

<sup>46</sup> See Bill Nichols, "The Voice of Documentary," in *New Challenges for Documentary*, ed. Alan Rosenthal, 17-33. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983/2005. This trend is wonderfully illustrated in Albert and David Maysles' beloved *Grey Gardens* (1975) in the year before *Dying*, in which the old "fly on the wall" pros allow eccentric subjects to bring them into arguments and to perform overtly for the camera rather than keeping up the charade of its invisibility. More radically still, others were exposing the pretensions and deceptions of the direct cinema style through parody and imitation, in mockumentaries such as the powerful *No Lies* (1973, Mitchell Block) and prescient *David Holzman's Diary* (1967, Jim McBride).

<sup>47</sup> Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death*, 592; Stefan Fleischer, "Dying to Be on Television," *Film Quarterly* 31, no. 4 (Summer 1978): 30.

<sup>48</sup> "WGBH Alumni: Susan Kubany," *WGBH Alumni*, May 22, 2007, <http://wgbhalumni.org/profiles/k/kubany-susan/>

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>50</sup> Kübler-Ross, 8.

<sup>51</sup> Juanita Wood, *Expressive Death: The Current Deathwork Paradigm* (Ph.D. diss., University of California at Davis, 1977); quoted in Walter, 32.

<sup>52</sup> Robert Kastenbaum recognizes that sometimes in this culture "the good death is the one that achieves" [123].

<sup>53</sup> Michael Roemer (question and answer session, New York University, New York, NY, Spring 2003).

<sup>54</sup> Combs, 243.

<sup>55</sup> Michael Roemer, "Filmmaker's Report on 'Death and Dying' Film," in *Death, the Press, and the Public*, ed. David Dempsey (New York: Arno Press, 1982), 122-123.

<sup>56</sup> Robert Kastenbaum notes that, "Past constructions of the good death neglected the sustaining human relationship," but that loved ones have gained prominence in the *nova ars moriendi*. No longer viewed by society as an earthly distraction from salvation (as they were in the middle ages) or as people not to burden with emotions or let interfere with medical routines (as they were in much of the twentieth century), friends and family are once again a key ingredient of the good death – as they were in the nineteenth century, too. Their support tops the lists of what is important to dying patients, according to recent studies [124-125].

<sup>57</sup> Anne Hunsaker Hawkins, "Constructing Death: Three Pathographies About Dying," *Omega: Journal of Death and Dying* 22, no. 4 (1990): 303-304.

<sup>58</sup> Kastenbaum, 72.

<sup>59</sup> "Show Business: Death Watch," *Time*, May 3, 1976, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,914147,00.html>.

<sup>60</sup> Fleischer, 31.

<sup>61</sup> This section title references Laura Mulvey's *Death 24x a Second* (London: Reaktion Books, 2006). "30x a second" reflects the change in frame rates between film and video, though frame rates across all types of video production are not uniform.

<sup>62</sup> Ross McElwee, "Sherman's March: Director's Statement," *Ross McElwee: Homemade Movies Inc.*, 2006, <http://rossmcelwee.com/shermansmarch.html>

<sup>63</sup> Michael C. Kearl, *Endings: A Sociology of Death and Dying* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 387.

<sup>64</sup> Fleischer, 30, 32.

<sup>65</sup> Roemer, "Filmmaker's Report on 'Death and Dying' Film," 123.

<sup>66</sup> *Near Death*, in typical Wiseman fashion, is actually about the Intensive Care Unit as an institution more than it is about people dying. Wiseman's camera follows the caregivers rather than the patients. As one of the most generously funded documentarians working today, Wiseman – despite his notorious shooting ratios – was able to keep shooting on celluloid well into the twenty-first century.

<sup>67</sup> Amy Souza, "Cinema Sympathy," *New England Film*, March 2003, <http://www.newenglandfilm.com/news/archives/03march/davis.htm>

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<sup>68</sup> David Kerekes and David Slater, *Killing for Culture: An Illustrated History of Death Film from Mondo to Snuff* (London: Creation Books, 1995), 261.

<sup>69</sup> "Show Business: Death Watch."

<sup>70</sup> Gavin, 142.

<sup>71</sup> Part of the aesthetic contrast between *Dying* and *The End* results from production logistics rather than types of equipment. *Dying* selected its subjects closer to the diagnosis stage of their dying process and filmed them when they are still mobile and feeling well enough to spend time outdoors. *The End* found its subjects through a hospice organization, and therefore began documenting their deaths at a later point in the process, when most were already significantly debilitated and unable to leave home.

<sup>72</sup> This likely age of death is based on a prognosis for someone born when Bob was, in the '60s. Perhaps frustrated himself at the invisibility of his illness, Bob constructs a "visible man" statue (clear, plastic miniatures used to show the normative work of internal organs) that he adapts to reveal the way his own particular body works. In *Sick*, he mixes together concoctions to represent mucus, feces, and semen and rigs the statue to dribble these out of their respective orifices.

<sup>73</sup> Jason Janis, "Kirby Dick Director of *Sick* Interview," *DVD Talk*, accessed April 13, 2011, [http://www.dvdtalk.com/interviews/kirby\\_dick\\_dire.html](http://www.dvdtalk.com/interviews/kirby_dick_dire.html)

<sup>74</sup> Bob's reaction certainly subverts the idea that the dying gain access to new wisdom as they approach death, an idea nineteenth century Americans particularly invested in.

<sup>75</sup> Roemer, "Filmmaker's Report on 'Death and Dying' Film," 123.

<sup>76</sup> Walter, 22.

<sup>77</sup> For comprehensive overviews of autobiographical documentary's formation and influences, see Michael Renov, "New Subjectivities: Documentary and Self-Representation in the Post-verité Age," in *The Subject of Documentary* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 171-181; and Jim Lane, "The Convergence of Autobiography and Documentary: Historical Connections," in *The Autobiographical Documentary in America* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2002), 11-32.

<sup>78</sup> Sobchack writes about the dying person in these rare scenarios (she mentions only *Dying* and *Silverlake Life*) as reviving a style of death ritual described by Ariès in which the dying is the organizer and the guardian of that ritual's protocols [253].

<sup>79</sup> Geoffrey Batchen, *Forget Me Not: Photography & Remembrance* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Architectural Press, 2004), 78.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

<sup>81</sup> Because *Silverlake Life* is a planned, full-length feature that is shot and carefully edited over a long period of time, I would not equate it with actual home video footage, as Bill Nichols does in *Blurred Boundaries*: "the film defies all conventions of the home movie even though it is one" [Bill Nichols, *Blurred Boundaries: Questions of Meaning in Contemporary Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 10].

<sup>82</sup> Michael Renov, *The Subject of Documentary* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 186.

<sup>83</sup> This mirror for the dying also connects back to the death rituals of previous centuries, echoing the medieval phase of self-reflection, in which the dying man would consider the way he had lived his life and his sins.

<sup>84</sup> Sobchack, 237. The full quotation about corpses from Sobchack, also used in Chapter Four of this project, reads, "Our sympathy for the subject who once was is undermined by our alienation from the object that is."

<sup>85</sup> The shaking of Mark's camera as it registers death indirectly recalls a related moment of violent death, documented. An oft-mentioned scene from *The Battle of Chile* also signifies death at the level of cinematography, as the cameraman himself is shot during a battle and the still-recording camera falls to the ground as his subjectivity is lost.

<sup>86</sup> Sobchack, 243.

<sup>87</sup> André Bazin, "The Ontology of the Photographic Image," in *What Is Cinema? Vol. 1*, trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1945), 15.

<sup>88</sup> This quotation, used by Jay Ruby for the title of his book on nineteenth-century mourning photography, comes from one of the oldest photography advertising slogans: "Secure the Shadow, Ere the Substance Fade, / Let Nature Imitate what Nature Made" [Jay Ruby, *Secure the Shadow: Death and Photography in America* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), 1].

<sup>89</sup> This detachment from types of death we are unlikely to die relates to the modern fragmentation of death into a large number of fatal and identifiable diseases [Walter, 12].

<sup>90</sup> Robert Kastenbaum and Claude Normand, "Deathbed Scenes as Imagined by the Young and Experienced by the Old," *Death Studies* 14, no. 3 (1990): 201; J.W. Evans, A.S. Walters, and M.L. Hatch-Woodruff, "Deathbed Scene Narratives: A Construct and Linguistic Analysis," *Death Studies* 23, no. 8 (December 1999): 715-733; Adrian Tomer, "Death-Related Attitudes: Conceptual Distinctions," in *Death Attitudes and the Older Adult: Theories, Concepts, and Applications*, ed. Adrian Tomer (Philadelphia, PA: Brunner-Routledge, 2000), 88; Jonathan F. Bassett, Polly A. McCann, and Kelly L. Cate, "Personification of Personal and Typical Death as Related to Death Attitudes," *Omega: Journal of Death and Dying* 57, no. 2 (2008): 163-172.

<sup>91</sup> Elisabeth Bronfen, *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1992), x.

<sup>92</sup> Sobchack, 253.

<sup>93</sup> There are interesting moments in *Grace* that reveal this tension, as nurses try to persuade patients to take more pain medications and patients sometimes resist because of fears that they will no longer feel like themselves.

## Chapter Three

### "A Negative Pleasure": The Sublimity of Suicide in *The Bridge*

<sup>1</sup> Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, trans. Justin O'Brien (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1942), 5.

<sup>2</sup> Mostly when Ruttman seems to catch serendipitous moments from multiple angles. Shooting with more than one camera in the same location could have allowed him to get these shots in a strict documentary mode, but, as far as I'm aware, historical research has not uncovered these production details.

<sup>3</sup> Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Picador, 1977), 177.

<sup>4</sup> Philip Matier and Andrew Ross, "Film Captures Suicides on Golden Gate Bridge," *The San Francisco Chronicle*, January 19, 2005, <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2005/01/19/MNGENASPH31.DTL>.

<sup>5</sup> Eric Steel, "Letter to the Editor," *The New York Times*, November 12, 2006, <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9403EEDA1E3FF931A25752C1A9609C8B63&scp=3&sq=%22eric%20steel%22%20snuff&st=cse>.

<sup>6</sup> Stephen Holden, Review of *The Bridge*, *The New York Times*, 27 October, 2006, <http://movies.nytimes.com/2006/10/27/movies/27brid.html?ref=movies>; Andrew Pulver, Review of *The Bridge*, *The Guardian*, February 16, 2007, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/2007/feb/16/documentary>.

<sup>7</sup> For more on this aspect of new media theory and a list of sources, see Introduction.

<sup>8</sup> Eric Steel, "The Bridge Press Kit: Director's Statement," *The Bridge: Official Website*, <http://www.thebridge-themovie.com>.

<sup>9</sup> Matier and Ross.

<sup>10</sup> Howard Feinstein, "Get Your Suicide Here, Folks," *The Guardian*, June 23, 2006, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/2006/jun/23/3>.

<sup>11</sup> Cheryl Eddy, "Steel Will," *The San Francisco Bay Guardian*, October 24, 2006, [http://www.sfbg.com/entry.php?entry\\_id=1942&catid=110](http://www.sfbg.com/entry.php?entry_id=1942&catid=110).

<sup>12</sup> For a description of Sobchack's six gazes, see Introduction.

<sup>13</sup> Vivian C. Sobchack, "Inscribing Ethical Space: Ten Propositions on Death, Representation, and Documentary," in *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 249.

<sup>14</sup> Camus, 4.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>16</sup> George Simpson, "Editor's Introduction," in Emile Durkheim, *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*, ed. George Simpson, trans. John A. Spaulding and George Simpson (New York: Free Press, 1897), 18-19.

<sup>17</sup> Georges Minois, *History of Suicide: Voluntary Death in Western Culture*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 43; Ron M. Brown, *The Art of Suicide* (London: Reaktion Books, 2001), 22.

<sup>18</sup> Minois, 218.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 9; Durkheim, 327-329.

<sup>20</sup> Minois, 117.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 186.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 210.

<sup>23</sup> Howard I. Kushner, *Self-Destruction in the Promised Land: A Psychocultural Biology of American Suicide* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1989), 22, 28.

- <sup>24</sup> Minois, 191, 281, 297; Kushner, 30.
- <sup>25</sup> Brown, 109; Kushner 37; Minois 297.
- <sup>26</sup> Minois, 321.
- <sup>27</sup> Ronald W. Maris, Alan L. Berman, and Morton M. Silverman, eds., *Comprehensive Textbook of Suicidology* (New York: Guilford Press, 2000), 269. This research was sparked by Edwin Schneidman's chance discovery of a large file of suicide notes in the L.A. County Coroner's Office in 1949, which Schneidman reflected on decades later in the most bizarre, and bizarrely earnest, quotation I've read about the study of suicide: "The golden road to the kingdom of understanding suicide was paved with suicide notes" [Qtd. in Maris, Berman, and Silverman, 269].
- <sup>28</sup> Kushner, 81, 62.
- <sup>29</sup> Minois, 321.
- <sup>30</sup> Plato, *The Dialogues of Plato, Vol. II*, trans. Benjamin Jowett (New York: MacMillan and Co., 1892), 265-266; Cornelius Tacitus, *The Annals of Imperial Rome*, ed. and trans. Michael Grant (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1971), 390.
- <sup>31</sup> Robert Garland, *The Greek Way of Death* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), 99.
- <sup>32</sup> Alan Warren Friedman, *Fictional Death and the Modernist Enterprise* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 52.
- <sup>33</sup> Qtd. in Durkheim, 330.
- <sup>34</sup> Ibid., 327-328.
- <sup>35</sup> Warding off evil spirits was another use for some of these customs, especially stakes through the heart and heavy stones laid atop a corpse's burial spot at a crossroads. These practices evolved from folklore that linked suicides with malevolent spirits who could linger to terrorize, or at least irritate, the living [Minois, 320-321].
- <sup>36</sup> Minois, 183, 187. In contrast, France actively suppressed press coverage of suicide [Minois, 291].
- <sup>37</sup> Brown, 157-163, 187.
- <sup>38</sup> These seem to be inspired by George Cruikshank's 1848 engraving *The Drunkard's Children*, Plate VIII.
- <sup>39</sup> At least one of these suicides is verifiable through more reputable sources: *The Sydney Mail* of Dec. 14, 1872 confirms that Alice Blanche Oswald did indeed jump to her death from London's Waterloo Bridge.
- <sup>40</sup> Qtd. in Kushner, 44-45.
- <sup>41</sup> Joost A. M. Meerloo, *Suicide and Mass Suicide* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1962), 136.
- <sup>42</sup> Ibid., 8.
- <sup>43</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, ed. James Strachey, trans. James Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1920), 59; Robert E. Litman, "Sigmund Freud on Suicide," in *Essays in Self-Destruction*, ed. Edwin S. Schneidman (New York: Science House, 1967), 331, 336.
- <sup>44</sup> Danuta Wasserman and Camilla Wasserman, eds., *Oxford Textbook of Suicidology and Suicide Prevention: A Global Perspective* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 520-521.
- <sup>45</sup> Endorsed by the CDC, the American Association of Suicidology, and other organizations.
- <sup>46</sup> American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, *Reporting on Suicide: Recommendations for the Media*, accessed November 19, 2009, [http://www.afsp.org/index.cfm?page\\_id=0523D365-A314-431E-A925C03E13E762B1](http://www.afsp.org/index.cfm?page_id=0523D365-A314-431E-A925C03E13E762B1).
- <sup>47</sup> Maris, Berman, and Silverman, *Comprehensive Textbook of Suicidology*, 254.
- <sup>48</sup> Qtd. in Friedman, 58.
- <sup>49</sup> While denouncing Judas as a reviled suicide, the Church took pains to set martyrs (especially Jesus) apart as choosing death in a more praiseworthy fashion [Brown, 50].
- <sup>50</sup> Along with the young British poet Thomas Chatterton [Brown, 123].
- <sup>51</sup> David P. Phillips, "The Influence of Suggestion on Suicide: Substantive and Theoretical Implications of the Werther Effect," *American Sociological Review* 39, no. 3 (June 1974): 340-354.
- <sup>52</sup> Most scholars treat this claim as unsubstantiated, though Minois lists a number of specific cases in which the corpses of suicides were found with copies of *Werther* on their persons [267]. We do have evidence that fear of *Werther* imitation was great enough to get the book banned in Leipzig, Copenhagen, and Italy [Phillips, 340]. Leipzig even made wearing the popular "Werther costume" a fine-able offense [Martin Swales, *Goethe: The Sorrows of Young Werther* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 97].
- <sup>53</sup> Qtd. in Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, ed. Nicholas Walker, trans. James Creed Meredith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1790/2007), 107.
- <sup>54</sup> Ibid., 76.
- <sup>55</sup> Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *The Sorrows of Young Werther and Novella*, trans. Elizabeth Mayer and Louise Bogan (New York: Random House, 1774/1971), 140-141.



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- <sup>56</sup> Swales, 84.
- <sup>57</sup> Goethe, 166-167.
- <sup>58</sup> Bruce Duncan, *Goethe's Werther and the Critics* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2005), 1.
- <sup>59</sup> Swales, 58, 99.
- <sup>60</sup> Duncan, 23.
- <sup>61</sup> Durkheim, 133, 141.
- <sup>62</sup> Representations of classical era suicides are an instructive exception to this trend of how portrayals of suicide are received – whether those works were made during the period or much later. For example, Lucretia remained a popular subject for painters throughout the Middle Ages and Early Modern period, as Ron Brown notes, and her (bare-breasted) beauty and nobility in the suicidal act are often emphasized. Perhaps the cultural distance between contemporary audiences and their long-dead Greek and Roman ancestors sufficiently disarmed these portrayals.
- <sup>63</sup> Andrew O'Hehir, "Beyond the Multiplex: Tribeca," *Salon.com*, May 1, 2006, <http://www.salon.com/ent/movies/review/2006/10/26/btm/index.html>; Josh Rosenblatt, Review of *The Bridge*, *The Austin Chronicle*, January 26, 2007, <http://www.austinchronicle.com/gyrobase/Calendar/Film?Film=oid%3A430985>.
- <sup>64</sup> Richard Brody, Review of *The Bridge*, *The New Yorker*, November 6, 2006, [http://www.newyorker.com/arts/reviews/film/the\\_bridge\\_steel](http://www.newyorker.com/arts/reviews/film/the_bridge_steel).
- <sup>65</sup> Kant, 78-90.
- <sup>66</sup> David E. Nye, *American Technological Sublime* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994), xvii.
- <sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, xx.
- <sup>68</sup> Leslie Fulbright, "34 Suicides in '08 at Golden Gate Bridge," *The San Francisco Chronicle*, January 14, 2009, <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2009/01/14/BALM15A1TG.DTL>.
- <sup>69</sup> Tad Friend, "Jumpers," *The New Yorker*, October 13, 2003, [http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2003/10/13/031013fa\\_fact](http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2003/10/13/031013fa_fact).
- <sup>70</sup> Sontag, *On Photography*, 20.
- <sup>71</sup> Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Picador, 2003), 108.
- <sup>72</sup> Oddly, Steel cites the 9/11 jumpers as an inspiration for *The Bridge*: "I could actually see that from where I sit now. Obviously, that's one of those things that you just can't erase from your mind . . . Someone jumping off the bridge was making a choice to escape an emotional inferno, perhaps not equivalent, but somehow related perhaps to what I had seen on 9/11" [Marc Savlov, "The Gate Escape: Eric Steel on *The Bridge*," *The Austin Chronicle*, January 26, 2007, <http://www.austinchronicle.com/gyrobase/Issue/story?oid=oid%3A439265>]. Steel's response to the horrifying sight that he "can't erase from [his] mind" is to seek out, record, and exhibit *more* jumpers, following the thin metaphorical connection of the "inferno." One could surmise that Steel is returning obsessively to an experience of trauma. But it is questionable whether the product – perhaps too direct in its return – is therapeutic for a post-9/11 American audience. As one unsettled reviewer wrote, "after 9/11, viewers can be forgiven for never wanting to see another soul take a fatal plummet" [Nathan Rabin, Review of *The Bridge*, *The Onion*, October 26, 2006, <http://www.avclub.com/articles/the-bridge,3733/>].
- <sup>73</sup> Qtd. in Nye, 14.
- <sup>74</sup> Ruthe Stein, "Golden Gate Bridge Suicide Film Draws Crowd at Festival," *The San Francisco Chronicle*, May 1, 2006, <http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2006/05/01/BAG4AIIIF6P1.DTL>.
- <sup>75</sup> A few of these shots are in color, but saturation levels are so low that they appear almost black and white.
- <sup>76</sup> perkapit, "A Necessary Evil," *Internet Movie Database: The Bridge Comments*, February 10, 2008, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0799954/usercomments?start=30>.
- <sup>77</sup> A choice later explained by a plot twist: this jump was a ruse to con Scottie rather than an earnest suicide attempt.
- <sup>78</sup> A striking example also appears in documentary history, minus the digital effects, with Werner Herzog's *The Great Ecstasy of the Sculptor Steiner* (1975). Herzog displays his subject, a champion "ski flyer," sailing through the air in extreme slow motion – even discussing the special cameras he uses to achieve that effect within the film itself. The threat of a fatal landing also pervades the piece, which pays a great deal of attention to the dangers of the sport and uses slow motion again to show a number of frightening falls.
- <sup>79</sup> Carolyn Zinko, "An Inside Look at Who Jumps," *The San Francisco Chronicle*, July 31, 2007, <http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2007/07/31/BAJJR9U672.DTL>.
- <sup>80</sup> As described in Chapter One, though, Capa probably *didn't* catch an actual death on camera, but rather staged a simulation of one.
- <sup>81</sup> Jay Slater, "Off 'The Bridge,'" *Film Threat*, December 12, 2007, <http://www.filmthreat.com/index.php?section=interviews&Id=1132>.

<sup>82</sup> I am referencing Supreme Court Justice William Brennan's well-known 1957 definition of obscenity: that which is "utterly without redeeming social importance" [*United States v. Roth* S. Ct. (1957)].

<sup>83</sup> The study cited is: Richard Seiden, "Where Are They Now? A Follow-up Study of Suicide Attempters from the Golden Gate Bridge," *Suicide and Life Threatening Behavior* 8, no. 4 (Winter 1978). Seiden tracked 515 individuals who were prevented from killing themselves at the Golden Gate Bridge between 1937 and 1971 and discovered that only 5% had later killed themselves (at least, in the period between their attempts at the bridge and his data collection). Asked about her structure for this activist section of the film, Olson comments, "I wanted to attack it without being gruesome or exploitive, which a lot of the material about the topic is. So I did a lot of dry historical research about the bridge" [J. Esther, "Suicide at Sundance," *Curve* 15:3 (May 2005)]. Beyond just designing its content as activist, Olson put her film to work proactively: she adapted its script into an op-ed for *The San Francisco Chronicle*, collaborated with the Psychiatric Foundation of Northern California in their pro-barrier efforts, and sent DVDs of *The Joy of Life* to the Bridge District's board of directors.

<sup>84</sup> Olson herself acknowledges that *The Bridge* "brought an enormous amount of attention to this seemingly intractable issue. It was an absolute tipping point I think. The fact that he was making the film became like this PR nightmare for the Bridge District" [Email message to author, November 17, 2009]. The lobbying push that *The Bridge* helped fuel is ongoing, but indications at the time of writing are that a net of steel cables will be approved and built by the District if its \$40-50 million price tag can be covered by government grants and private fundraising.

<sup>85</sup> Sontag, *Regarding*, 114-117.

<sup>86</sup> My examination covered the 856 entries posted to the official site's message board through June 15, 2010.

<sup>87</sup> Including the Tribeca Film Festival, the San Francisco International Film Festival, and the London Film Festival.

<sup>88</sup> DJJOEINC, "Compelling, depressing and depressing," *Internet Movie Database: The Bridge Comments*, June 7, 2007, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0799954/usercomments?start=30>.

<sup>89</sup> Message boards are at *The Bridge*'s official site and IMDb.com. For memorial sites, see <http://www.findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi?page=gr&GRid=26753163> and <http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=37568059894>.

<sup>90</sup> Qtd. in Swales, 97.

<sup>91</sup> See Chapter Four for further discussion of this axiom.

<sup>92</sup> Richard Lally, "Interview: Eric Steel," *IONCinema*, October 30, 2006, [http://www.ioncinema.com/news/id/1593/interview\\_eric\\_steel](http://www.ioncinema.com/news/id/1593/interview_eric_steel); Jordan E. Rosenfeld, "The Bridge, *Pacific Sun*, October 20, 2006, [http://www.pacificsun.com/story\\_archives/bridge.html](http://www.pacificsun.com/story_archives/bridge.html).

<sup>93</sup> Though I would not take them as proof of *The Bridge*'s imitative influence on suicide, jumper statistics at the Golden Gate do show a sharp rise that correlates with the film's circulation. 24 died in 2004, 23 in 2005, then 34 in 2006 when *The Bridge* hit theaters, and 35 in 2007 when it played on television and was released on DVD. *The Bridge* is of course only one potential factor for the increase among many, but has been cited as a very likely contributor by both Bridge District officials and local suicide prevention advocates. Analyzing the week-by-week numbers, Bridge District spokeswoman Mary Currie asserted, "The first spike in activity that we saw came on the heels of Eric Steel's film premiering in San Francisco" [Marisa Lagos, "Fatal Jumps from Bridge Rise Sharply," *The San Francisco Chronicle*, January 18, 2007, <http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2007/01/18/MNGMMNKN61.DTL>; Carolyn Zinko, "35 Jumped to Their Deaths from Golden Gate Bridge Last Year," *The San Francisco Chronicle*, January 11, 2008, <http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2008/01/11/BAG9UDDFN.DTL>].

<sup>94</sup> André Bazin, "Death Every Afternoon," in *Rites of Realism: Essays on Corporeal Cinema*, ed. Ivone Margulies, trans. Mark A. Cohen (Durham: Duke University Press, 1958/2003), 31.

<sup>95</sup> "Rise Above This (The Bridge Version)," YouTube video, 4:15, posted by "theVirus7," July 25, 2008, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O4-amEszd10>.

## Chapter Four

### Streaming Death: The Dynamics of Dying on YouTube

<sup>1</sup> Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Picador, 2003), 13.

<sup>2</sup> Qtd. in Kristen Whissel, *Picturing American Modernity: Traffic, Technology, and the Silent Cinema* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 63, 115.

<sup>3</sup> Daniel C. Hallin, *The Uncensored War: The Media and Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 110; Andrew Hoskins, *Televising War: From Vietnam to Iraq* (London: Continuum, 2004), 13.

<sup>4</sup> We do see brief shots of Steidle going through digital image files on his laptop and showing them in a digital slide show at one of his speaking engagements. But *Devil* keeps its focus on more material forms of photographic display: the binders of pictures (which the directors show twice) and the black and white reproductions of Steidle's photos in the print edition of the *New York Times*.

<sup>5</sup> Henry Jenkins, "If It Doesn't Spread, It's Dead (Part One): Media Viruses and Memes," *Confessions of an Aca/Fan: The Official Weblog of Henry Jenkins*, February 11, 2009, [http://www.henryjenkins.org/2009/02/if\\_it\\_doesnt\\_spread\\_its\\_dead\\_p.html](http://www.henryjenkins.org/2009/02/if_it_doesnt_spread_its_dead_p.html).

<sup>6</sup> Barbie Zelizer, *Remembering to Forget: Holocaust Memory Through the Camera's Eye* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 212.

<sup>7</sup> "Community Guidelines," *YouTube*, accessed March 19, 2011, [http://www.youtube.com/t/community\\_guidelines](http://www.youtube.com/t/community_guidelines)

<sup>8</sup> For an interesting article on the people who do this work for sites like YouTube – described by one interviewee as "combat veterans, completely desensitized to all kinds of imagery" – see Brad Stone, "Policing the Web's Lurid Precincts," *The New York Times*, July 18, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/07/19/technology/19screen.html>

<sup>9</sup> "Community Guidelines."

<sup>10</sup> *United States v. Roth* S. Ct. (1957).

<sup>11</sup> "Community Guidelines."

<sup>12</sup> For a synchronization of footage from all six cameras, see: "Captured by 6 different cameras BART police shoot and kill unarmed Oscar Grant," YouTube video, 9:39, posted by "streetgangs," July 4, 2010, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rSN5WF9qD3g>

<sup>13</sup> The following passengers operated the five cameras: Daniel Liu; Margarita Carazo; Tommy Cross, Jr.; Jamil Dewar; and Karina Vargas. All testified at Mehserle's criminal trial in 2010.

<sup>14</sup> "Iran Doctor Tells of Neda's Death," *BBC News*, June 25, 2009, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/8119713.stm>

<sup>15</sup> "Iran, Tehran: wounded girl dying in front of camera, Her name was Neda," YouTube video, 0:40, posted by "FEELTHELIGHT," June 20, 2009, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bbdEf0QRsLM>

<sup>16</sup> "Shot By Basij [WARNING GRUESOME]," YouTube video, 0:15, posted by "b0wl0fud0n," June 20, 2009, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fmi-LePl894>

<sup>17</sup> Gert Van Langendonck, "Iconic Iran video was posted in the Netherlands," *NRC Handelsblad*, June 23, 2009, [http://vorige.nrc.nl/international/article2280315.ece/Iconic\\_Iran\\_video\\_was\\_posted\\_in\\_the\\_Netherlands](http://vorige.nrc.nl/international/article2280315.ece/Iconic_Iran_video_was_posted_in_the_Netherlands); Brian Stelter and Brad Stone, "Web Pries Lid of Iranian Censorship," *The New York Times*, June 22, 2009, [http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/23/world/middleeast/23censor.html?ref=neda\\_gha\\_soltan](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/23/world/middleeast/23censor.html?ref=neda_gha_soltan)

<sup>18</sup> Lindsay Hodges Anderson, "YouTube's Political Director Discusses Value of Social Media Websites in Iran Crisis," Harvard Kennedy School Website, June 26, 2009, <http://www.hks.harvard.edu/news-events/news/alumni/youtube-iran>

<sup>19</sup> Those networks slashed coverage of Agha-Soltan's story and Iran's protests five days after her death when another death, a celebrity death, drastically commandeered media attention in the U.S.: Michael Jackson's. Strangely, Jackson's death crowded into Oscar Grant's spotlight very slightly, too, as described by journalist Demian Bulwa in his coverage of Mehserle's L.A. trial: "I was greeted outside the downtown courthouse by a large and loud protest. I was surprised by its size until I realized it was actually two protests: one in support of Oscar Grant, the man Mehserle killed, and one in support of Michael Jackson, whose former doctor is facing involuntary manslaughter charges and was having a court hearing" ["Mehserle Sentence – In the Judge's Words," *The San Francisco Chronicle*, November 17, 2010, <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/blogs/crime/category?cat=3412>].

<sup>20</sup> Nazila Fathi, "In a Death Seen Around the World, a Symbol of Iranian Protests," *The New York Times*, June 22, 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/23/world/middleeast/23neda.html>; Robert Mackey, "The Lede: June 22: Updates on Iran's Disputed Election," *The New York Times*, June 22, 2009, <http://thelede.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/06/22/latest-updates-on-irans-disputed-election-3/?scp=1&sq=hamed,%20neda&st=cse>

<sup>21</sup> André Bazin, "Death Every Afternoon," in *Rites of Realism: Essays on Corporeal Cinema*, ed. Ivone Margulies, trans. Mark A. Cohen (Durham: Duke University Press, 1958), 27-31. For more on this essay, see the Introduction.

<sup>22</sup> David R. Wrone, *The Zapruder Film: Reframing JFK's Assassination* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2003), 70. For more details, see Chapter One.

<sup>23</sup> Stetler and Stone.

<sup>24</sup> Philip Seib, "New Media and Prospects for Democratization," in *New Media and the New Middle East*, ed. Philip Seib (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 4.

<sup>25</sup> A theory of Zuckerman's summarized by Henry Jenkins. Henry Jenkins, "What Happened Before YouTube," in *YouTube: Online Video and Participatory Culture*, by Jean Burgess and Joshua Green (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2009), 114.

<sup>26</sup> "Internet service restored in Egypt," *Al Jazeera English*, February 2, 2011, <http://english.aljazeera.net/news/middleeast/2011/02/201122113055781707.html>

<sup>27</sup> Vivian Sobchack, "Inscribing Ethical Space: Ten Propositions on Death, Representation, and Documentary," in *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 255.

<sup>28</sup> One of the most famous examples of this twenty-first century trend is the video of University of Florida student Andrew Meyer's dramatic arrest during a 2007 campus Q&A session with Senator John Kerry. Viewed over five million times on YouTube (as of March 2011), the original spawned many remix and response videos as well as the popular catch phrase "Don't Tase Me Bro!" "University of Florida student Tasered at Kerry forum," YouTube video, 2:23, posted by "GainesvilleSun," September 17, 2007, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6bVa6jn4rpE>

<sup>29</sup> For an explanation of Sobchack's six gazes, see the Introduction.

<sup>30</sup> These statistics accompany the following videos: "POLICE SHOOTING AT BART STATION – OSCAR GRANT," YouTube video, 3:28, from an episode of *KTVU Morning News* televised by KTVU on January 5, 2009, posted by "TheDirtyNews," January 5, 2009, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bmJukcFzEX4>; "Neda Agha Soltan, killed 20.06.2009, Presidential Election Protest, Tehran, IRAN," YouTube video, 2:23, posted by "AliJahanii," June 22, 2009. The statistics for these videos are consistent with available YouTube statistics for other Grant and Agha-Soltan videos, as well.

<sup>31</sup> *The New York Times*, for example, did not initially report on the Grant shooting at all until more than a week later when large protests occurred in Oakland. At that point, the case became worthy of a story from the U.S. paper of record, but one that (over)emphasized the property destruction perpetrated by a small number of the protesters. Its first sentences dramatically read, "Protesters angry over a deadly shooting of a young unarmed black man on New Year's Day stampeded through city streets on Wednesday night, burning cars and smashing storefronts and leading to pleas from city officials on Thursday for patience and calm" [Jesse McKinley, "In California, Protests After Man Dies at Hands of Transit Police," *The New York Times*, January 9, 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/09/us/09oakland.html>].

<sup>32</sup> Grant was shot in the early morning hours of January 1, KTVU aired the first footage from the event on January 4, and the first major protest occurred on January 7.

<sup>33</sup> The L.A. riots resulted in 11,000 arrests, 2,000 injuries, and 58 deaths [Ronald N. Jacobs, "Civil Society and Crisis: Culture, Discourse, and the Rodney King Beating," *The American Journal of Sociology* 101, no. 5 (Mar. 1996): 1268].

<sup>34</sup> With credit for time served, Mehserle would be eligible for release in as little as seven months [Demian Bulwa, "Johannes Mehserle Sentenced to 2-year Minimum Term," *The San Francisco Chronicle*, November 6, 2010, <http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2010/11/06/MN061G7HVS.DTL>].

<sup>35</sup> Statistics on criminal charges brought against officers demonstrate how unusual Mehserle's case was. A study done by *The San Francisco Chronicle* in the wake of Mehserle's initial murder charge showed that over the past 15 years throughout the U.S., only six officers had been accused of murder in on-duty killings – a miniscule number considering that police officers kill an average of 350 people per year. Most of these six officers were acquitted. As the Grant family's attorney John Burris asserted about Grant's case in comparison to most on-duty shootings, "You can't understate the importance of the videotape. In the other cases, you don't have enough evidence to offset the testimony of the police officers" [Demian Bulwa, "Ex-BART Cop Accused of Murder in Rare Group," *The San Francisco Chronicle*, February 15, 2009, <http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2009/02/15/MN2615QD01.DTL>].

<sup>36</sup> Comment from Sepirothkai ["Iran, Tehran: wounded girl"].

<sup>37</sup> PBS aired *A Death in Tehran* as part of its *Frontline* series in November 2009; HBO's *For Neda* aired in June 2010. HBO actually streamed *For Neda* online and aired it on Voice of America before the U.S. television premiere as part of its efforts to get the film seen widely within Iran [David Bauder, "HBO Battles to Show 'For Neda' Documentary in Iran," *The Associated Press*, June 15, 2010, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/06/16/hbo-battles-to-show-for-n\\_n\\_614001.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/06/16/hbo-battles-to-show-for-n_n_614001.html)].

<sup>38</sup> William Yong, "Iran Halts Production of 'Neda' Figures," *The New York Times*, June 9, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/10/world/middleeast/10neda.html>; "Neda," Music Video, 4:38, The Airborne Toxic Event official site, June 8, 2010, <http://www.theairbornetoxicevent.com/news/1430.html>

<sup>39</sup> President Obama himself worried that American support for the protesters, especially his own, could have such an effect as pundits debated whether he should speak out more strongly on Iran's election results and their aftermath ["Should Obama Speak Out on Iran?" *The New York Times*, June 17, 2009, <http://roomfordebate.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/06/17/should-obama-speak-out-on-iran/>].

<sup>40</sup> The 1968 coverage of Nguyễn Văn Lém's execution in Saigon (discussed in Chapter One) provides a notable pre-digital precursor to the phenomenon of multiple angles in documentary death. It was captured on film by NBC cameraman Vo Suu and as a photograph by Eddie Adams. For more on Hollywood's presentation of death from multiple angles, see Amy Rust, "'Passionate Detachment': Technologies of Vision and Violence in American Cinema, 1967-1974" (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2010), 22-42.

<sup>41</sup> The sequential rather than simultaneous viewing of Agha-Soltan's process of dying in three shots is most reminiscent of temporal structures from certain early cinema selections. One thinks of Porter's *Life of an American Fireman*, in which the viewer sees a fireman rescue occupants of a burning building first from an interior view and then from an exterior view. The action plays through fully from each angle, so that the exterior repeats what has already been seen from inside, allowing audiences to absorb this exciting spectacle more fully. See Charles Musser, *Before the Nickelodeon: Edwin S. Porter and the Edison Manufacturing Company* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 230-234.

<sup>42</sup> Erik Barnouw, *Documentary: A History of the Non-Fiction Film* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974/1993), 235.

<sup>43</sup> "Maximum visibility" is a phrase Linda Williams uses to describe techniques in pornography in Linda Williams, *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the "Frenzy of the Visible"* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989/1999). In fact, the extreme "realism" of Agha-Soltan's bleeding in these videos has been a primary safeguard against politically motivated accusations that her death was staged. Claims that the woman in the video was an actress and that she had a concealed tube in her hand to spill blood onto her face, or that one of the men in the video spilled it onto her face while the cameras' views were blocked, have convinced few on the YouTube comment boards [see comments on "Iran, Tehran: wounded girl"]. There does not appear to be any moment when a sleight of hand might have taken place or when the blood appears digitized in the videos themselves. Viewers seem to understand that simulating such a scene – especially with simultaneous coverage from several cameras – would demand very expensive and elaborate practical and digital effects.

<sup>44</sup> When the Agha-Soltan videos were released in 2009, YouTube had implemented a new comment policy that allowed users to vote down offensive posts. With enough negative votes, the post would be hidden and would become irretrievable, leaving only a note from the administrators to indicate that it had once existed (the site has since revised this system to allow viewers to easily retrieve hidden posts if desired). On the day the videos went up, I was scanning through the comments every few hours and caught this succinct one before it was voted down and, mercifully, disappeared forever: "I came buckets." Another that can still be seen on the comment boards comes from DrBukcake and asks, "Is this what they call 'snuff' movie? Sexy girl wih legs open and then death. is it ok for me maturbate at this video?" [see comments on "Iran, Tehran: wounded girl"]

<sup>45</sup> That dynamic is especially present in U.S. coverage of the Vietnam War (discussed in Chapter One), for example, and is explored more fully in John Taylor, "Foreign Bodies," *Body Horror: Photojournalism, Catastrophe, and War* (New York: NYU Press, 1998), 129-156.

<sup>46</sup> I am grateful to my colleague Nazanin Shahrokni for this insight.

<sup>47</sup> One example shows a male protester dying from a shot to the neck. As of March, 2011, it has only 703 views and 7 comments ["protester shot in neck in Iran GRAPHIC MATERIAL DISCRETION IS ADVISED PLEASE DO NOT REMOVE," YouTube video, 0:43, posted by "CensorshipIsBad," June 17, 2009, [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eGsMfOo3q\\_8](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eGsMfOo3q_8)]. In comparison, the most-viewed Agha-Soltan video (among the many posted) has 1,081,881 views and 4,479 comments.

<sup>48</sup> In terms of sheer numbers, U.S. audiences accounted for 30% of YouTube's viewership in 2009, the year of Agha-Soltan and Grant's deaths – a plurality if not a majority [Anderson]. In their book on YouTube, Jean Burgess and Joshua Green describe YouTube as a site that is, "U.S.-dominated demographically to an extent; but whose common culture – at least as represented by our sample – feels culturally U.S.-dominated out of all proportion" [Jean Burgess and Joshua Green, *YouTube: Online Video and Participatory Culture* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2009), 82].

<sup>49</sup> Philippe Ariès, *Western Attitudes Toward Death: From the Middle Ages to the Present* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), 87.

- <sup>50</sup> Henry Jenkins, "From Rodney King to Burma: An Interview with Witness's Sam Gregory (Part Two)," *Confessions of an Aca-Fan: The Official Weblog of Henry Jenkins*, April 2, 2008, [http://www.henryjenkins.org/2008/04/from\\_rodney\\_king\\_to\\_burma\\_an\\_i\\_1.html](http://www.henryjenkins.org/2008/04/from_rodney_king_to_burma_an_i_1.html)
- <sup>51</sup> A segment from KTVU news that uses this effect is available at "Bart Police shooting in Oakland KTVU report," YouTube video, 4:17, from an episode of *KTVU News Weekend* televised by KTVU on January 4, 2009, posted by "monkeyassj," January 5, 2009, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IKy-WSZMklc>
- <sup>52</sup> Comment on "Cop shoots & Kill unarmed Man(Oscar Grant)," YouTube video, 3:59, posted by "bofoleone," January 6, 2009, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jFNDK8PQGNw>
- <sup>53</sup> As of March 14, 2011.
- <sup>54</sup> Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004), 37.
- <sup>55</sup> Sobchack, 237.
- <sup>56</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 111.
- <sup>57</sup> For examples, see comments from soulstealer1995, portisalpha, and dgfmooore, on "Iran, Tehran: wounded girl"
- <sup>58</sup> The posters of Grant's face also became a symbol of solidarity with the protesters that local business owners would post on their storefronts, partly in the hope that the small number of protesters bent on property destruction and looting would spare their businesses.
- <sup>59</sup> At the time of writing in March 2011, the phrase is currently being used in support of Wikileaks' founder Julian Assange, with "I Am Julian Assange" t-shirts available for purchase from several Internet sites.
- <sup>60</sup> Lesley Fulbright and Steve Rubenstein, "BART Protesters in SF: 'We Are Oscar Grant!'" *The San Francisco Chronicle*, January 13, 2009, [http://articles.sfgate.com/2009-01-13/bay-area/17198450\\_1\\_police-vans-protesters-powell-street-bart](http://articles.sfgate.com/2009-01-13/bay-area/17198450_1_police-vans-protesters-powell-street-bart)
- <sup>61</sup> Butler, 30-31.
- <sup>62</sup> Photo count as of March 16, 2011; photos collected at <http://nedaspeaks.org/gallery>
- <sup>63</sup> Description from the official site, "Neda Speaks: Learn," *Neda Speaks*, <http://nedaspeaks.org/learn>
- <sup>64</sup> "I Am Neda," *tumblr*, July 17, 2009, <http://iamneda.tumblr.com/>
- <sup>65</sup> The soldier writes: "i know i don't represent much of the people i serve with, and that saddens me. it's hard for me to relate to many of these people. but even in the military there are those of us that see what is happening in the world, and we are also appalled. i'm only one country away from iran, and there's still so little i can do. for what it's worth, i hope this helps, somehow" [<http://iamneda.tumblr.com/>].
- <sup>66</sup> Henry Jenkins, "From Rodney King to Burma: An Interview with Witness's Sam Gregory (Part One)," *Confessions of an Aca-Fan: The Official Weblog of Henry Jenkins*, March 31, 2008 [http://www.henryjenkins.org/2008/03/from\\_rodney\\_king\\_to\\_burma\\_an\\_i.html](http://www.henryjenkins.org/2008/03/from_rodney_king_to_burma_an_i.html)
- <sup>67</sup> David Cook, *Martyrdom in Islam* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 154-155; Joyce M. Davis, *Martyrs: Innocence, Vengeance, and Despair in the Middle East* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 9.
- <sup>68</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>69</sup> Roxanne Varzi, *Warring Souls: Youth, Media, and Martyrdom in Post-Revolution Iran* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 47; Cook, 4; Davis, 46.
- <sup>70</sup> Qtd. in "A Death in Tehran," *Frontline*, directed by Brent E. Huffman and Katerina Monemvassitis, aired November 17, 2009.
- <sup>71</sup> They also spread all manner of counter-narratives to explain what viewers saw in the videos: that Neda was alive and living in Greece, that the CIA had killed her, and that a BBC correspondent arranged her death to get a story. Iran's state media even made and aired their own documentary that put forth an the explanation that Neda was an actress who faked her death for the cameras but was later killed by her co-conspirators ["Iranian TV Suggests Neda Video a Fake," *The Huffington Post*, January 8, 2010, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/01/08/iranian-tv-claims-neda-vi\\_n\\_415416.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/01/08/iranian-tv-claims-neda-vi_n_415416.html)]. Journalist Scott Peterson commented on the Iranian government's many counter-narratives by saying, "Part of the strategy like that, certainly for the Islamic Republic, would be to just cast so much doubt, to really just cloud the issue so much, ... [that] all of it would be meant to somehow undermine the power of the story of Neda's death" ["Interview: Scott Peterson," *Frontline*, September 9, 2009, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/tehranbureau/deathintehran/interviews/peterson.html>].
- <sup>72</sup> These tropes are described by: David Cook, "Patterns of Prognostication, Narrative, and Expiation," in *Martyrdom in Islam* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 116-134.
- <sup>73</sup> HBO's documentary *For Neda* provides examples of the way family and supporters frame Agha-Soltan as a martyr. The film seems generally geared toward a broad Western audience, emphasizing Neda's love of Western fashions, downplaying her religious faith, and asserting strongly that she only believed in freedom and was "not

political” (as if the concept of freedom is separate from politics, and as if dying in protest of a fraudulent election could somehow make sense as an apolitical act). But underneath this overt Western orientation, the Iranians interviewed for the documentary distinctly interpret her death through the codes of Islamic martyrdom. First, Neda’s parents affirm that she knew the risks of protesting but was determined and courageous, fulfilling the requirement that a martyr of Islam should have pure and clear intentions and not fear death. Then her mother says “she was beautiful even after death . . . like an angel,” a statement that evokes the holiness of a martyr’s body, said to resist normal decay and odor. Elsewhere in the film, photographer Reza Deghati talks about Neda’s look at the camera as a direct communication with the audience, calling for them to witness her death and its meaning. This framing attempts to wrench from Neda’s sudden death a final exhortation. Neda’s mother also claims that Neda encountered an older woman at a previous protest who told her that she should try to hide her beauty because the *basij* men would shoot and kill her for it – an anecdote that fills the traditional role of a premonition or omen of the martyrdom to come. Thus, though the word “martyr” is scarcely mentioned in HBO’s *For Neda*, let alone its cultural context explained, the interviewees weave together a forceful, subtextual martyrology more accessible to Muslim viewers [*For Neda*, directed by Anthony Thomas, aired June 14, 2010].

<sup>74</sup> Cook, 4.

<sup>75</sup> “Iranian Protests, Neda, Moussavi and more - Rachel Maddow,” YouTube video, 9:34, from an episode of *The Rachel Maddow Show* televised by MSNBC on June 22, 2009, posted by “CheneyWatch1,” June 28, 2009, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JrfwhYTHCcI>

<sup>76</sup> Leslie Fulbright, “Many See Race as Central to BART Killing,” *The San Francisco Chronicle*, January 11, 2009, <http://articles.sfgate.com/2009-01-11/news/17195723>

<sup>77</sup> Demian Bulwa, “Oscar Grant’s Character, Shooter Both on Trial,” *The San Francisco Chronicle*, May 30, 2010, <http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2010/05/30/MNVS1DJMHF.DTL>

<sup>78</sup> This article ran with a suggestive headline: Demian Bulwa, “Position of Mehserle’s Taser Holster May Be Key,” *The San Francisco Chronicle*, February 14, 2010, <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2010/02/14/MN8D1BNR8U.DTL>

<sup>79</sup> Demian Bulwa, “Mehserle Video: Clear as Mud,” *The San Francisco Chronicle*, June 25, 2010, [http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/blogs/crime/detail?entry\\_id=66576](http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/blogs/crime/detail?entry_id=66576)

<sup>80</sup> Schott, for example, is a former police officer who has testified in or assisted with many police officers’ defenses and was paid upwards of \$60,000 by Mehserle’s defense for his work on this case [Ibid.]. Mehserle’s defense also hired retired Los Angeles police captain Greg Meyer to testify about the use of force in the Grant shooting. Meyer frequently provides such testimonies for the defense of officers on trial, was paid \$44,000 for his services, and was forced to admit on the witness stand that “he had studied the Rodney King case and had concluded that the officers who beat King in 1991 did not use excessive force” [Demian Bulwa, “Mehserle Justified in Using Taser, Expert Says,” *The San Francisco Chronicle*, June 29, 2010, <http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2010/06/29/BARU1E6A8Q.DTL>].

<sup>81</sup> Elizabeth Alexander, “Can You be BLACK and Look at This?: Reading the Rodney King Video(s),” in *The Black Public Sphere: A Public Culture Book*, ed. Black Public Sphere Collective (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 84.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 96.

<sup>83</sup> Frank P. Tomasulo, “I’ll See It When I Believe It’: Rodney King and the Prison-House of Video,” in *The Persistence of History: Cinema, Television, and the Modern Event*, ed. Vivian Sobchack (London: Routledge, 1996), 75-76. See also Linda Williams, “Trials of Black and White: *California v. Powell* and *The People v. Orenthal James Simpson*,” in *Playing the Race Card: Melodramas of Black and White from Uncle Tom to O.J. Simpson* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 252-295.

<sup>84</sup> Bulwa, “Mehserle Video: Clear as Mud.”

<sup>85</sup> Bazin, 30-31.

<sup>86</sup> I felt that disparity in impact myself when presenting material from this chapter to academic audiences in the Midwest and on the East Coast. While a fair percentage had not heard about Grant’s death, all could reach back to their knowledge of the Rodney King beating as a way to approach the topic and many of the questions I fielded after presenting compared the two.

<sup>87</sup> To give just one example, even statistics released by the U.S. government indicate this relationship: “Young black men are killed by police in ‘justified shootings’ at a disproportionate rate, based on Department of Justice statistics. In 1998, there were 48 young black men killed in what were described as ‘justifiable homicides,’ of young white

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males nearly the same numbers - 53. Yet, young black males made up only 1 percent of the total U.S. population and young white males made up 8 percent" [Fulbright, "Many See Race as Central to BART Killing"].

<sup>88</sup> Reginald James, "Vigil Held for Oscar Grant Two Years After His Death," *Oakland Local*, January 3, 2011, <http://oaklandlocal.com/article/vigil-held-oscar-grant-two-years-after-death>

<sup>89</sup> Jason Sperb, "Reassuring Convergence: Online Fandom, Race, and Disney's Notorious *Song of the South*," *Cinema Journal* 49, no. 4 (2010): 28.

<sup>90</sup> Leigh Raiford, "The Consumption of Lynching Images," in *Only Skin Deep: Changing Visions of the American Self*, ed. Coco Fusco and Brian Wallis (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2003), 267. For discussion of lynching photographs, see Chapter One.

<sup>91</sup> Scott Shane, "Spotlight Again Falls on Web Tools and Change," *The New York Times*, January 29, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/30/weekinreview/30shane.html?hp>

<sup>92</sup> Point-of-view shots that, I fear, will be too readily seen as exact replicas of human perception – which they are not. Demian Bulwa, "Many Police Use Cameras to Record Interactions," *The San Francisco Chronicle*, July 27, 2010, <http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2010/07/27/MNGI1EID8S.DTL>

<sup>1</sup> Robert Frost, "Home Burial," in *Poems by Robert Frost: A Boy's Will and North of Boston* (New York: Penguin, 1914/2001), 89.

<sup>2</sup> André Bazin, "Death Every Afternoon," in *Rites of Realism: Essays on Corporeal Cinema*, ed. Ivone Margulies, trans. Mark A. Cohen (Durham: Duke University Press, 1958/2003), 30.



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## Appendix of Images

### Chapter One



Figure 1.1: Benjamin Srisai dies  
(*Six Feet Under*, “The Secret,” 2002, HBO)



Figure 1.2: Unidentified child, ca. 1850s, Boston



Figure 1.3: Mother with deceased child



Figure 1.4: Mobile darkroom from the Civil War era



Figure 1.5: *A Sharpshooter's Last Sleep*  
(1863, Alexander Gardner)





Figure 1.6: *The Home of a Rebel Sharpshooter*  
(1863, Alexander Gardner)



Figure 1.7: *Field Where General Reynolds Fell*  
(1863, Timothy O'Sullivan)



Figure 1.8: Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith lynching;  
August 7, 1930; Marion, IN



Figure 1.9: Jesse Washington lynching;  
May 16, 1916; Robinson, TX





Figure 1.10: Corpses at Dachau, 1945



Figure 1.11: Corpses at Buchenwald, 1945



Figure 1.12: Officials check Czolgosz's pulse and heartbeat  
(*Execution of Czolgosz with Panorama of Auburn State Prison*, 1901, Edwin S. Porter and Thomas Edison)



Figure 1.13: Topsy's fatal electric shock  
(*Electrocuting an Elephant*, 1903, Thomas Edison)



Figure 1.14: U.S. color-bearer at the "moment of death"  
(*Advance of Kansas Volunteers at Caloocan*, 1899, Thomas Edison)





Figure 1.15: Amidst the action, a soldier on the left edge dies in a dramatic pose  
(*Battle of Spottsylvania* [sic], 1887, Thure de Thulstrup)



Figure 1.16: The death pose appears prominently with the lead soldier on foot  
(*Charge of the Rough Riders at San Juan Hill*, 1909, Frederick Remington)





Figure 1.17: *The Falling Soldier* (1936, Robert Capa)

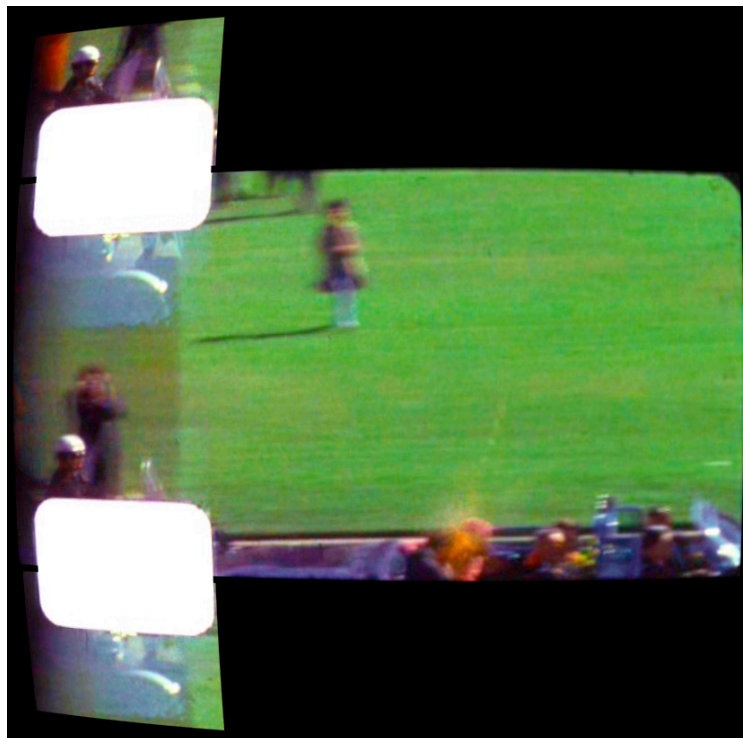


Figure 1.18: Frame 313 of the Zapruder footage  
(1963, Abraham Zapruder)



Figure 1.19: Frame 313 of the Zapruder footage as it appeared in the *Warren Report* (*Report of the President's Commission on the Assassination of President John F. Kennedy*, 1963, Warren Commission)



Figure 1.20: *Saigon Execution* (1968, Eddie Adams)



Figure 1.21: Frame of Vo Suu's footage for NBC  
(from *Hearts and Minds*, 1974, Peter Davis, Criterion Collection)



## Chapter Two



Figure 2.1: Annie on her deathbed  
(*Imitation of Life*, 1959, Douglas Sirk, Universal)



Figure 2.2: Photo of Sarah Jane in the death scene  
(*Imitation of Life*, 1959, Douglas Sirk, Universal)



Figure 2.3: Video image of Ray (*Lightning Over Water*, 1980,  
Wim Wenders and Nicholas Ray, Anchor Bay)



Figure 2.4: Film image of Ray (*Lightning Over Water*, 1980, Wim Wenders and Nicholas Ray, Anchor Bay)



Figure 2.5: Bob dying in the hospital with Sherri (*Sick*, 1997, Kirby Dick, Lionsgate)



Figure 2.6: Detail from the piece *Wall of Pain*  
(*Sick*, 1997, Kirby Dick, Lionsgate)



Figure 2.7: Low angle shot of Bob's penis dripping blood  
(*Sick*, 1997, Kirby Dick, Lionsgate)





Figure 2.8: Mark's KS lesions  
(*Silverlake Life*, 1993, Tom Joslin and Peter Friedman, New Video Group)



Figure 2.9: Mark shows the camera a KS lesion on Tom's eyelid  
(*Silverlake Life*, 1993, Tom Joslin and Peter Friedman, New Video Group)



Figure 2.10: Tom and Mark record themselves and watch the footage in real-time on a monitor  
(*Silverlake Life*, 1993, Tom Joslin and Peter Friedman, New Video Group)



Figure 2.11: Mark records Tom's body just after death  
(*Silverlake Life*, 1993, Tom Joslin and Peter Friedman, New Video Group)



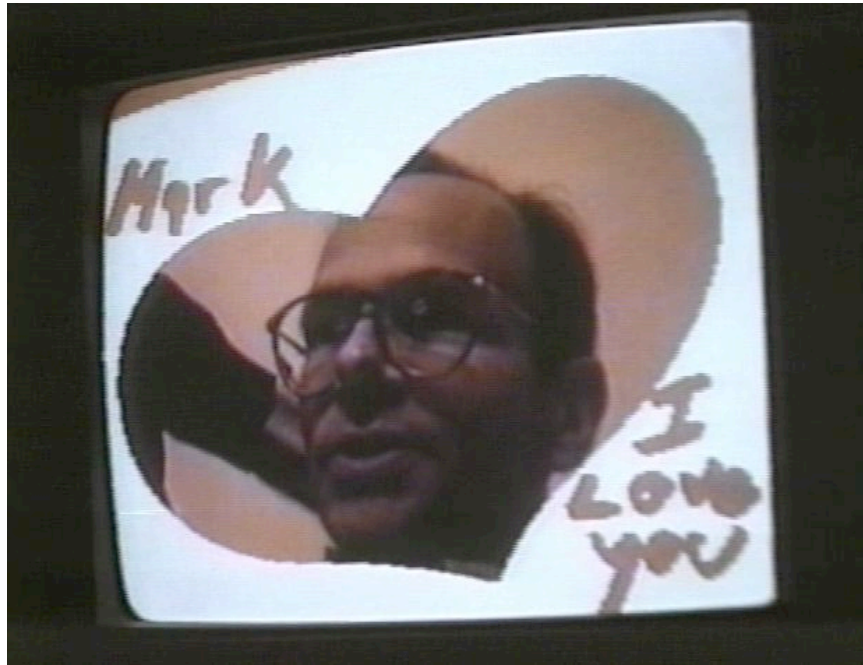


Figure 2.12: Footage Tom shot for Mark plays on a monitor while Mark naps (*Silverlake Life*, 1993, Tom Joslin and Peter Friedman, New Video Group)



Figure 2.13: Eda dies as the camera records (*Dying at Grace*, 2003, Allan King, Criterion Collection)

### Chapter Three



Figure 3.1: A woman leans over the rail  
(*Berlin: Symphony of a Great City*, 1927, Walther Ruttmann, Image Entertainment)



Figure 3.2: A splash signifies her jump  
(*Berlin: Symphony of a Great City*, 1927, Walther Ruttmann, Image Entertainment)



Figure 3.3: Eric Steel staffs *The Bridge*'s south recording station



Figure 3.4: The Golden Gate Bridge shrouded in fog, in *The Bridge*'s opening shot  
(*The Bridge*, 2006, Eric Steel, Koch Lorber)



Figure 3.5: A man prepares to jump in the opening sequence  
(*The Bridge*, 2006, Eric Steel, Koch Lorber)





Figure 3.6: The jumper's descent  
(*The Bridge*, 2006, Eric Steel, Koch Lorber)



Figure 3.7: A frame from the kitesurfing montage  
(*The Bridge*, 2006, Eric Steel, Koch Lorber)



Figure 3.8: *The Death of Socrates* (1787, Jacques-Louis David)

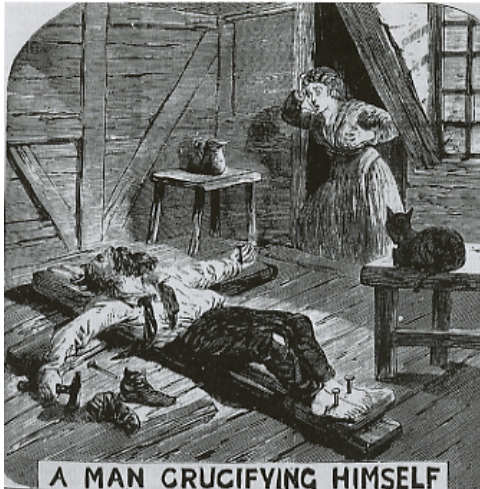


Figure 3.9: Suicide in the *Illustrated Police News*



Figure 3.10: Suicide in the *Illustrated Police News*



Figure 3.11: Suicide in the *Illustrated Police News*





Figure 3.12: *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* (ca. 1560s, Pieter Bruegel)



Figure 3.13: Wide shot of bridge with jumper  
(*The Bridge*, 2006, Eric Steel, Koch Lorber)



Figure 3.14: The jumper as a dark speck  
(*Suicide Box*, 1996, Natalie Jeremijenko)



Figure 3.15: Gene stands on the railing  
(*The Bridge*, 2006, Eric Steel, Koch Lorber)



Figure 3.16: Gene's fall (*The Bridge*, 2006, Eric Steel, Koch Lorber)



Figure 3.17: Madeline jumps at Fort Point  
(*Vertigo*, 1958, Alfred Hitchcock, Universal)



Figure 3.18: Jen Yu jumps from an ornate mountain-top bridge  
(*Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, 2000, Ang Lee, Sony)



Figure 3.19: Her slow descent into the fog  
(*Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, 2000, Ang Lee, Sony)



## Chapter Four



Figure 4.1: Binder of photos  
(*The Devil Came on Horseback*, 2007, Annie Sundberg and Ricki Stern, Docurama)



Figure 4.2: Six synchronized angles of the Grant shooting



Figure 4.3: Frame from Margarita Carazo's footage



Figure 4.4: Agha-Soltan looks toward the camera in the first posted video



Figure 4.5: Frame from second posted Agha-Soltan video

Iran, Tehran: wounded girl dying in front of camera, Her name was Neda

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Views: 1740

10:50

Featured video

Neda Salehi murdered by Basiji

3:40

Neda, Iranian girl (Neda Agha Soltan)

0:16

Iran Tehran wounded girl dying in front of

0:16

What is the face of fascism?

0:51

0:40 / 0:40

240p

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991,141

Suggestions

'For Neda'

by CBS  
1,740 views

10:50

Featured Video

Neda Salehi murdered by Basiji Sniper in Tehran...

by flight4peace  
81,733 views

3:40

Neda, Iranian girl (Neda Agha Soltan) is dying ...

by mp3nick  
199,881 views

0:16

Iran Tehran wounded girl dying in front of came...

by DjKaveh007  
77,947 views

0:16

What is the face of fascism?

by DatsumJB  
14,119 views

0:51

Figure 4.6: YouTube interface at one Agha-Soltan video's completion

167

This video is most popular in:

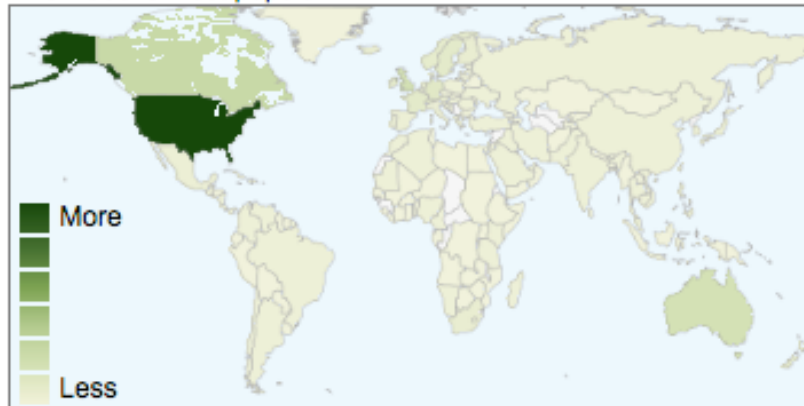


Figure 4.7: Geographical popularity of Grant video with the most hits  
(video details cited in endnotes)

This video is most popular in:

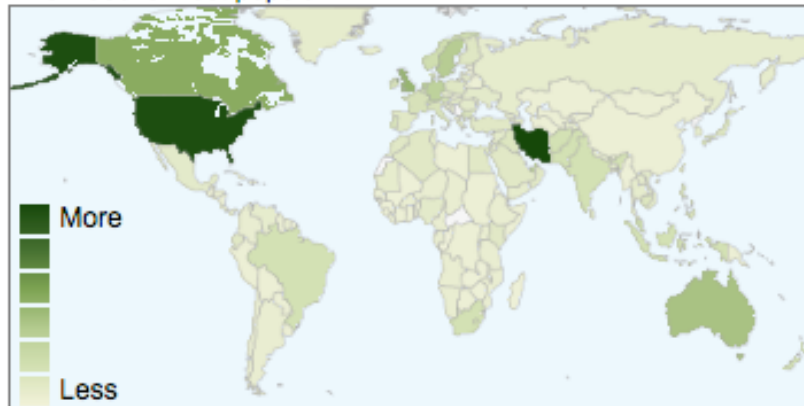


Figure 4.8: Geographical popularity of Agha-Soltan video with the most hits  
(video details cited in endnotes)



Figure 4.9: Protestors in Oakland simulating Grant's body position when he was shot





Figure 4.10: A protestor holds up a laminated frame of Agha-Soltan's bloodied face from the second posted video



Figure 4.11: A frame from the animated music video "Neda" (2010, The Airborne Toxic Event)



Figure 4.12: Oakland mural of Oscar Grant (Associated Press)

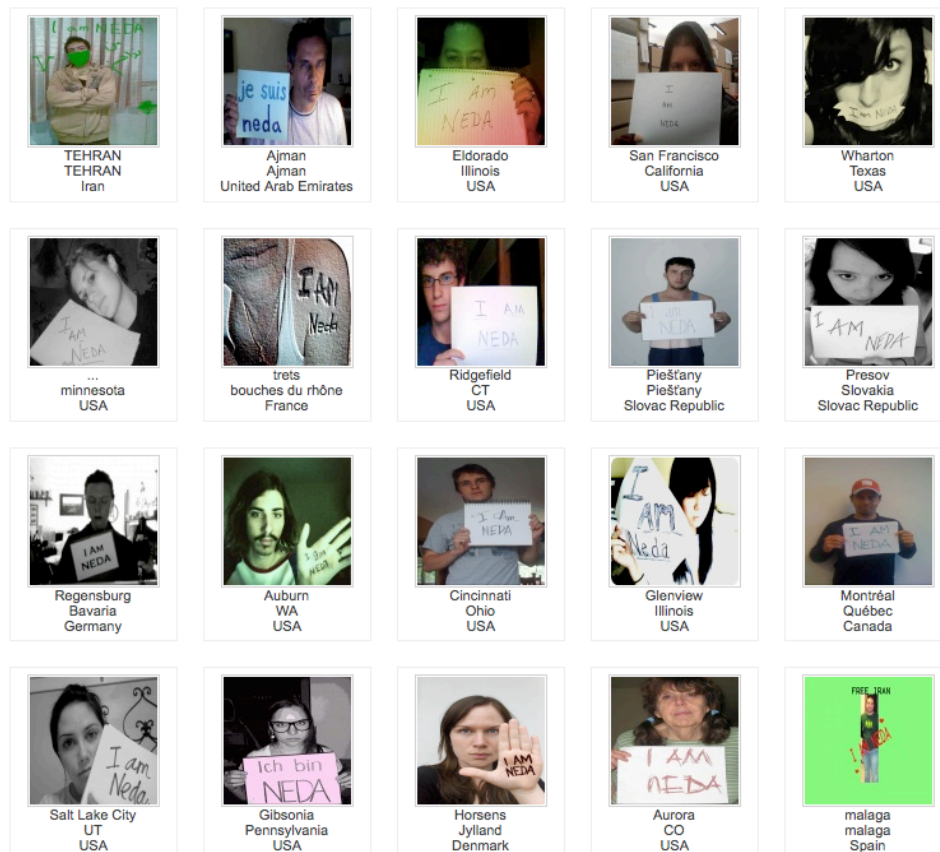


Figure 4.13: Sample of contributors to Amnesty International's "Neda Speaks" campaign



Figure 4.14: Screen shot from Fox News coverage of Agha-Soltan's death