

Afterlives and Aftermaths: Images of Death and Countenance in the Covid-19 Pandemic

Annalisa Mansukhani

In the poem “All Kinds of Fires Inside Our Head”, Wisconsin-based writer Nikki Wallschlaeger asks in profound verse, ‘If we’re all “just human”, then who is responsible?’ Speaking of the pitfalls, wrong turns and dead-ends that suffuse any search for accountability, Wallschlaeger hints at a deeper inaudibility of being present, an inattentiveness that exemplifies our seeking of solidarity to calm the throes of existence, a yearning for a method somewhere in the madness that pervades any genealogy of thought, action and interpretation. A morphology of photography today provokes the viewer into questioning what they are confronted by when they encounter a photograph. In the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic, this line of questioning has telescoped onto the image of death and its tendencies in the documentation of the crisis that has been unfolding. If imagined as an insertion of sorts, the photograph is a veneer on the reality of death, removing the viewer from its corporeal actuality. This photographic removal is both convenient and pained; its convenience is spelt out in the excess the image generates in the form of reproductions, while the grief that accompanies death remains indefatigable. The evidentiary nature of the image is at odds with its memorial instincts, both being summoned simultaneously.

Amidst the physical and social distancing enforced by the pandemic, the mediation of photographs has produced death as an abstraction. The disbalance caused by an absence of movement and touch has abolished intimacies afforded earlier, invoking a very public witnessing of death. Recollecting the intimacy of funeral parlours in nineteenth-century America, Shirley Samuels describes how the spaces of grieving allowed a state of privacy to remain even in death. However, with the Civil War, the battlefield produced and circulated images of dead soldiers for public consumption, making photography the new form of witnessing death at that time (figure 1). In 2020 and continuing down into the infinitude of the present moment, visuals of death have yet again managed to orchestrate a reorientation of the memorial inclinations of the photograph. Samuels speaks of the prohibition placed on photographing Abraham Lincoln’s body after his assassination, that brought into question the

place of a photograph in the act of mourning and the ways in which identity could be stabilized by the photograph itself. What circulated after Lincoln's funeral procession were photographic images of the mourning crowds, a tendency that expanded the space of mourning to 'enact a spectacle'. In a similar tone today, the privacy of mourning is no longer accessible in the pandemic. The endless reproducibility of the photograph of a corpse is a slight to the singularity of death, generated and preserved across personal archival endeavours and the photojournalistic lens of determination.



COPYRIGHT, 1911, PATRIOT PUB. CO.

Fig. 1. Timothy H. O'Sullivan, *Battle of Gettysburg*, July 1863. From the J. Paul Getty Museum. Courtesy Wikimedia Commons.

Photographs taken in the aftermath of an event of violence often come to denote a major proportion of its visual markers, forming a metonymic relationship to the event itself. With the 1994 Rwandan genocide, for example, there remains a conspicuous lack of photographs documenting the killing that took place. The genocide is understood to have been 'missed' by the media and its consumers, a 'missing' that permeates the nature of the documentation

produced *after*, occupying memorial and commemorative spaces of remembrance (figure 2). Examined here is the availability of visuals of violence and death, and we are urged to ask after the presence of these photographs, more questions about their subjects and what the images insinuate in the witnessing they produce. This re-emphasizes the metonymy in question: In Rwanda, photographs of loved ones lost to the genocide came to be identified *as* the deceased, and such associations become almost Barthesian in their enactment of grief and bereavement, saturating the images in such a way that they were compelled to '(re)produce' the loss within their frames in an attempt to preserve life and likeness.



Fig. 2. Sascha Grabow, *Mass grave memorial in southern Rwanda*, May 2009.

Courtesy Wikimedia Commons.

The Covid-19 pandemic and the documentation of burning pyres, breathless bodies, grief-stricken faces and distraught lives broke a dimensionality of the spectacular to summon a notion of culpability (figure 3). In the face of insurmountable loss, gathering offered solace in collective acts of mourning that ensued across the country. Witnessing defined a collectivity, and in turn was defined by it. Navigating the nuances of culpability while encountering an unending stream of photographs of death and desolation, our viewership met the

hypervisibility of the image of death as it breached new publics with each layer of its reproducibility. Abstracted from sanctity, the image of death in its prosumer-led networks of consumption brought with it an awareness of the viscous functionality of image-making. Believing that our responses to photographs need to extend beyond simply wanting to disassemble them, social and cultural theorist Susie Linfield identifies a crucial paradox within the frame of the photograph. The image of violence occurs in an extraordinary circumstance, an experience so far removed from the mundanity of ordinary life that it crosses an 'unbridgeable chasm' of recognition. Yet as we grapple with its incomprehensibility, the image of death holds within itself the capacity to inform us of our own failures to grasp at the fluidity of the human condition. One realizes the necessity of an impulse to think of the kinds of refusals we enable when we look at photographs of violence, death and suffering. How do we move forward, knowing that it is impossible to acknowledge in its entirety the suffering of another? How do we continue to assert our recognition of an ongoing exigency and its inevitability?



Fig. 3. Omar Elsharawy, Covid death in Kuala Lumpur, July 14, 2021. Courtesy Unsplash.

The photograph has long been associated with death, but the crisis of the Covid-19 pandemic has reframed the photographic as a spatiality. Fecund and unabashed, this spatiality is defined by a series of appropriations, creating the image of death within the confines of an objecthood that further allows it to be transported, redefined and re-sited. In each such re-siting, the image of death conjures a new public. Newness here is not to be misconstrued as novelty; instead it signifies a recombination. Through these complexities of redistributing the image of death, we encounter multiple dilapidations and accelerations where the subject of death is both gruesome and aesthetic, sorrowful and explicit, unavoidable and ignored. As we are drawn to the appeal of photographs and their ability to ‘freeze’ time, our desire to deny mortality and its inexorability manifests to implicate the frame of a photograph in the building of any interpretation around it. To read representations of death and suffering in images of violence is to also recognize the restrictions embedded in the frame; these restrictions can be understood as contexts of production—narrativizing the otherwise atomized nature of photographs to foreground coherence—and as mandates of compliance dictating affect, visual interpretation as well as our responsiveness to the suffering of others. Approaching the subject of death through the medium of photography also influences how we perceive differences and delineations between the human and the non-human. What we hope to invoke eventually in our present is a ‘disobedient act of seeing’, a disordering that submits the image and its frame to critical scrutiny, exposing mechanisms that determine not just our interpretations of photographs but also of reality. Though rare, this disobedience brings with it the possibility of re-reading and re-learning how to look, listen to and watch images. Accompanied by a layer of a self-reflexive anxiety, we might pursue our demand for culpability via a viewership of refusal, rejecting a scripted regimentation of reality. Understanding the expansiveness of the photographic as a spatiality, one can read the tendencies within it that capture death as an enduring abstraction, encompassing both the subtleties of implicating a perpetrator and sounding the foghorn of exacting an absolute.



Fig. 4. Unknown photographer, *Victims of the Bengal famine of 1943–44*. Courtesy Wikimedia Commons.

The universality we tend to ascribe to notions of shame, torment, torture and/or condemnation is inclined towards a destabilization, and the method that emerges out of this subversion lies in asking after the kinds of responsibility we assume in some part as we view photographs that portray immense suffering (figure 4). The experience of violence is a context of witnessing that resists integration into a linear historical assimilation or understanding, and photographs of death force us to read this resistance as tied to a politics of subjectivity. In its prioritizing of objective distancing, criticality veils the pertinence of such subjectivities, and to be able to ‘conceptually reorient’ the image of death, we would need to move towards considering the photographic as a spatiality that resists narrativization. The image of death elicits a consternation in the face of an institutional memory that seeks to divert culpability and any form of dissent; in imaging the violence of the moment, of death and the absence of consolation, the photograph instantiates a ‘standpoint’: a place, a situatedness to think about patterns of making and viewing, of the fallibilities that underlie human intention and rituals of seeing.

Maintaining our suspicions about photography's ability to successfully implement the preventative in acts of large-scale suffering, one is further instigated to dissect the slickness of image-based documentation in confronting violence, death, grief and loss. Witnessing is a testimonial stance, and our predisposition to associate immediate context to previous familiarity is constructed and needs to be challenged. The subject of death cannot be relegated to a category within the documentary as a genre or the photographic as a spatiality. It is instead a site upon which contemporary visualities of conflict and suffering can be placed and challenged, as a means of hopefully confronting the inconsequentiality of our socio-cultural vocabularies. Photography can assume a visual criticality in a time of crisis, visibilizing frames and fields that constrain and direct what can be seen, heard, read and felt, dictating what is cited as knowledge and recounted as truth.

While our eclectic encounters with fragments of a violent reality are made possible by the presence of the photograph across social media and other liaising interfaces, these encounters manufacture discontinuities rather than coherence. They offer us a glimpse of the contexts but in that flickering rendezvous, we are urged to initiate a renegotiation with the evidentiary, the memorial, and our acts of recording and looking. The act of witnessing in the Covid-19 pandemic has been mediated by photographs of a tangible yet eerily unintelligible crisis that escape the confines of regular plausibility. In the midst of it all, the image of death is disavowed, shunned by national norm and vernacular seeing, and continues to be fraught with tensions that grapple with the inarticulability of an absent memorial and the decimation of the documentary. We may ask—of ourselves or those looking, listening and watching alongside our own gazes—where does this leave us? Where do we go from here? As our ability to make sense of the world repositions itself, seeking an aftermath where there might actually be one too many or none at all, the photograph persists as an awkward, fittingly elusive and unpredictable conduit of memory.

Bibliography

- Baer, Ulrich. *Spectral Evidence: The Photography of Trauma*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2005.
- Butler, Judith. "Torture and the Ethics of Photography." *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 25, no. 6 (April 2007): 951–66.
- Campt, Tina M. *Listening to Images*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2017.
- Kracauer, Siegfried, and Thomas Y. Levin. *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1995.
- Linfield, Susie. *The Cruel Radiance: Photography and Political Violence*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010.
- Möller, Frank. *Visual Peace: Images, Spectatorship and the Images of Violence*. Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.
- Samuels, Shirley. "Death and Photography." *Nka Journal of Contemporary African Art* 20, no. 1 (2020): 122–29.
- Wallschlaeger, Nikki. "All Kinds of Fires Inside Our Heads." Poetry Foundation. Accessed on June 24, 2021. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/142210/all-kinds-of-fires-inside-our-heads>.