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 rollerblading dog walker reaches exhilarating speed down a sloped suburban street but collides with a car at the bottom; after hurtling over the cracked windshield, her body lies frozen on the pavement as the dogs bark. Each sequence ends in a slow washout 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 episodes of Alan Ball’s Six Feet Under (2001–5), a celebrated HBO drama about a family that runs a Los Angeles funeral home. Each
episode begins with a “death of the week”: a mininarrative that lasts between thirty seconds and five minutes, ends in a death, and later links up with the main narrative (usually when the deceased becomes a customer at the funeral home). While the tone and the way 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 the many opening death scenes of the series. Benjamin Srisai’s fifty-second story epitomizes this focus. It contains no dialogue, no other characters, and only one discernible 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. Six Feet Under’s impressive accumulation of scores 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 this book’s premise is that fiction film and television have long been the main resources for Americans asking the preceding question because individuals’ access to unmediated dying declined so dramatically in the twentieth century. Considering the remarkable distortions and exclusions enacted by most 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 rarely succeeded at making that sight visible, proving more capable of showing the before and after—the living person and the corpse. The images that did manage to poise themselves between these states often became icons, achieving that status precisely because they seem to make visible the alluring “moment” of death that is so elusive in the history of photography and film.

This chapter’s examination of said history reveals 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 multigenerational 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 twenty-first-century fiction is a moment filmmakers and photographers struggled mightily to document in the nineteenth century and most of the twentieth century—struggling not just because the contingencies of reality made this sight more slippery than in fiction but because of technological limitations. Cameras remained cumbersome and complicated for much of this history, and celluloid
film stock was expensive. This quest to make actual death visible through documentary media was indeed a technological one, progressing 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 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 remains 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 reputation in new media theory as technologies of embodiment and materiality, in contrast to the digital.

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 those of fiction film, 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 (through the postmortem images analyzed later in this chapter) almost wholly disappeared from the public eye for most of the twentieth. In chapter 2, 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 also helped to conceal their newly shameful counterpart of natural death, supporting its broad displacement from public life and discourse in the twentieth century.

The crucial challenge that natural death poses to the very concept of the “moment” of death is another reason to keep it firmly in mind during this journey through violent death’s documentation. The Six Feet Under scenes 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 difficult to recognize. The perception of life’s end as an instanta-
neous event—one that could be isolated and made visible in a documentary photograph or a frame of film footage—can only be upheld when death arrives via acute violence rather than withering disease. For in the latter case, how can cameras make that one moment evident? Viewing a barely moving person about to die and a motionless corpse, one does not sense much visible or audible contrast. Anxiety about this blurred line between alive and dead manifested in nineteenth-century fears of premature burial and took a new direction in the twentieth century through medical debates about defining death, spurred by the rise of organ donation. Such uncertainties about death’s timing cast doubt on the existence of a “moment” of death available for documentation by all these eager image-makers, and they 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 century and the hypermedicalized twentieth century progressed—be vastly more likely to experience long, painful processes of dying.¹

What follows will track the camera’s pursuit of these “moments” of death in documentary images that circulated in the United States from the invention of the daguerreotype in 1839 through the end of the Vietnam War in 1975. My aim will be not to cover every recording or partial recording of death from that period but to focus on the images that strongly registered in U.S. visual culture. In framing this pursuit, I borrow Linda Williams’s usage of three temporal modes in “Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess.”² Williams identifies three “body genres” that ask spectators’ bodies to mimic on-screen sensations: melodrama solicits tears from the audience, pornography solicits orgasms, and horror solicits shudders. She ties each genre to a fantasy and a temporal structure drawn from psychoanalytic theory by 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, 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, like the knowledge of sexual difference that one is never ready first to confront. Like Williams, I analyze 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.³
The ways we talk about death align readily with these temporal modes: it generally 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 can seem to make visible the exact transition point between alive and dead. I argue that achieving this scenario was a long-standing goal for documentary image-makers and a widespread desire of audiences in the predigital period, but one that usually proved to be a “fantasy of perfect temporal coincidence” (my emphasis). In documentary death’s history, the image-maker’s actions almost always occur “too late,” or death asserts its duration and refuses to become visible in the form of an alluring “moment.” 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.” Like melodrama’s coffins, corpses in documentary photography suggest the same temporal mode: 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 failure to stop a violent death, our tardiness 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 a death, they are also too late to display or witness that death. “The decisive moment,” in photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson’s terms, clearly has passed, unaccompanied by the camera shutter’s snap. Such a photograph can drive home the moral failure of preventing death and also the questionable desire it prompts for some: to see more, to see the lost object of death itself.

Of course, photography and film, in a very broad sense, have a lost object at their core: the past, which they attempt to preserve. 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. 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.” And André Bazin hints at the special relationship with his insight that the photograph “embalms time.”

People yearn to preserve the present—as, instant by instant, it becomes the past—because it feels so vibrant and alive, but the photograph turns that life into death. It freezes time and deprives it of 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 may contribute to the popularity of death photography. As Sontag puts it, “Ever since cameras were invented in 1839, photography has kept company with death.”

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. Whether captured through photography or film, corpse images tend to frustrate viewers’ attempts to identify with the victims portrayed, creating emotional distance. As Vivian Sobchack 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” and that seeing life in the act of being extinguished may feel, uncomfortably, more satisfying.

**Postmortem Mourning Photographs**

As the camera’s first sustained look at corpses, postmortem mourning photographs are also 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. These images feature recently deceased corpses, handsomely dressed and usually posed as if asleep. They rest on beds or—especially with dead infants or children—in the arms of grieving loved ones. Professionally produced in studios or through house calls, these images
emerged at the start of the camera’s history and remained common late into the nineteenth century.

Their popularity grew from a number of factors—technology prominent among them. The invention of the daguerreotype brought personal portraiture to the American middle class, no longer the product of expensive hours of posing and painting. 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 mar a sharp image with movement. They presented an opposite challenge, as photographers labored to position their stiff bodies in the convention of “the last sleep”: a reclining pose with the “lifelike” appearance of gentle slumber rather than death. 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 their body to imitate death’s stillness. These sitters underwent a rather literal version of the metaphorical experience Barthes describes as a “micro-version of death”: the photographic subject’s feeling that he is transformed into an object for the picture, just as a dying subject is transformed into the object of a corpse. Unsurprisingly, the resulting expressions on the faces of these living sitters—even in portraits disconnected from corpses and mourning—tended to be rather grim.9

Cultural attitudes toward death also bolstered the rise of postmortem photography. The strikingly different attitudes that prevail today can make it hard to imagine a time when a mother would bring her dead infant into a portrait studio, or when studios advertised postmortem services in the newspaper. But the mid-nineteenth century was, in historian Philippe Ariès’s words, the “age of beautiful death,” when death was largely seen as a Romantic passing into eternity, where loved ones reunite. Familiarity with death and corpses was widespread, as the household bedsides of the dying were heavily populated by family and community members. The death of a loved one was a tremendously painful event but was endured through the promise of reunion and through very public, emotional, and elaborate mourning practices.10 The production and exhibition of postmortem photographs became one of those public 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.

In Secure the Shadow: Death and Photography in America, Jay 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.” 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 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 was accurate, then why did studios go to such lengths to create “sleeping,” lifelike corpses?

I am more convinced that these photographs convey an 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 (for example, mourning attire and 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 photographs seem to ward off disavowal, encouraging continual acknowledgment of death—even if its image is constructed to match the “beautiful death” ideal. At the same time, the photos engage in the purest form of the new medium’s preservational function: a promise to let the living retain some piece of the dead.

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 popularity of the postmortem portrait 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 war coverage—when cameramen missed out on shots of death in battle. Hopes of phot-
tographing “moments” of death settled into the realities of photographing corpses, which were plentiful. Drew Gilpin Faust explains that the bloodiest battles killed such a massive number of soldiers that the task of burying the dead often overwhelmed survivors. As “the needs of the living increasingly trumped the dignity of the departed,” corpses were left exposed on abandoned battlefields, where Alexander Gardner and his colleagues in Mathew Brady’s employ could safely photograph them. Here corpses’ stillness once again proved useful. A minor convenience to photographers working with domestic, civilian death, it proved essential in the context of war, making corpses one of the few battlefield spectacles that early cameras could document. Roaming those battlefields, photographers were constrained by more than just the usual long exposure times: the wet-plate collodion process of the day necessitated mobile darkrooms for immediate processing, so these were hauled around in horse-drawn carriages. It took twenty stress-filled minutes from the beginning of negative preparations to the end of processing for each individual image. 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 needed to document war well seemed to be invented “too late” for each conflict of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, always lagging behind the technology for waging war and out of sync, too, with censorship of war images. Gardner, for example, could have done wonders with the equipment that photographer Ernest Brooks or cameraman Donald Thompson brought to war in 1914—lighter cameras, faster shutter speeds, some handheld capabilities, 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. Battle was by then long-range, with spread-out troops and excruciating trench warfare that favored advances under cover of night or obscured by smoke or weather. As Brigadier General Andrew Hamilton Russel remarked in a 1918 memo: “When conditions are good for fighting they are, of necessity, poor for photography, and vice versa.” In terms of censorship, too, equipment to capture battlefield death well was developed after 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 the codes of propriety from newspaper and newsreel staffs that later photographers of war death would face. They were also spared any censorship by President Abraham Lincoln’s administration, which reasoned that photos of anonymous corpses from past battles would pose no threat in enemy hands.
Comparatively, cameramen at the fronts of World War II, whose equipment gave them greater options for documenting death, were cut off from distributing such images by the U.S. government, which had learned since Lincoln’s era about the rhetorical power of war corpses. 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.

Civil War images represent some of the first encounters between cameras and violent death, revealing photographers’ attempts to integrate this spectacle into dominant traditions of beautiful (and natural) death. To that end, Gardner’s *Photographic Sketchbook of the Civil War* borrows heavily from postmortem photographers’ strategies—especially “the last sleep” aesthetic. In *A Sharpshooter’s Last Sleep*, for example, a Confederate soldier lies dead, on his back, on the ground: his head tilts gently, his body sinks into the soft grass, and familiar personal objects are arranged beside him (his cap, rifle, tin cup, and blanket). These echo the comforting toys placed with dead children in postmortem portraits. Unable to find bodies that naturally looked this peaceful, Gardner rearranged corpses, in a manner that may offend a twenty-first-century sense of documentary ethics (and general squeamishness). This practice seems to have been an open secret—not disclosed, but often apparent in a simple comparison of images. Indeed, *Sleep* features the same soldier’s corpse as the photo *Home of the Rebel Sharpshooter*, dragged from the soft grass into a rocky enclosure for a different pose.

Visual connotations of “beautiful death” in Gardner’s work are bolstered by his long and evocative descriptions that accompany each photograph. *Field Where General Reynolds Fell* (an image by Timothy O’Sullivan that Gardner reprints in *Sketchbook*) requires an especially effusive caption to redeem the beauty of corpses in an advanced state of decay, with bloating that has distended their midsections and faces. Gardner’s propagandistic description frames these (supposed) Union soldiers as noble, lifelike, and slumbering rather than dead: “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.” 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—the same corpses, photographed from the opposite side.

Also apparent in the description of *Field* are traces of photographers’ frustration with being always and inevitably “too late,” with their technological inabil-
ity to capture death itself. From the faces of the dead Gardner works backward 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.20

When read with regard to its specific historical context, this passage is quite 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 the 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 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. 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?21

Faust demonstrates the way fellow soldiers, nurses, doctors, or chaplains tried to compensate for kin’s absence at a soldier’s “moment” of death by detailing it in condolence letters, and I would argue that Gardner’s Photographic Sketchbook strives to serve a similar function for a broad audience of mourners. Unable to witness the deaths he describes, Gardner relies on a practice common during the war of studying the corpse to retrieve a sense of the 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.”22
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 photo provides. As Gardner reads faces “stereotyped by the death blow” in the Field passage quoted earlier, we see him answering the previous paragraph’s list of questions. He claims that some soldiers “had suffered severely,” but more 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,” “appealing to heaven”), and had their bodies cared for (“as if friendly hands had prepared them for burial”). Gardner’s descriptions thus attempt to soften the blow of looking at these corpses not just by adding peaceful connotations but by assuring viewers that lost “moments” of death could be indirectly grasped through the very 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 shred flesh and to the disfigurement exposed corpses suffered from decomposition and foraging animals—those photographing it had to expend tremendous effort and creativity to evoke the era’s notion of “beautiful death.” 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. That their equipment made them too late to render visible the “moment” of death, and that the postmoment corpses required ample reframing (through staging and textual rhetoric), make Civil War photos the first in a long lineage of disappointments, as documenting violent death continually frustrated indexical image-makers in pursuit of its “full detail.”

**Lynching Photographs**

A generation after Gardner beautified corpses of the war that ended slavery, a very different death documentation practice took root, opposing African American rights and avoiding conventions of “beautiful death”: photographing the lynched bodies of Black men and (some) women. These images continue the tradition of displaying death through corpses, but unlike most other examples in this chapter, their production and circulation were—in the majority of cases—wholly disconnected from grief (an extreme realization of Gorer’s “pornography of death” concept). Journalistic incentives to disseminate news of tragic violence were not the driving force, either. Even if we might criticize their profit-driven distribution, most journalistic death photos 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. Like other instances of perpetrator media in documentary history, they were made and circulated primarily to celebrate, not mourn, the murders they document. This attitude is apparent even within the pictures themselves, where enframed lynching participants display emotions that actively oppose grief: pride, excitement, and sated rage. It is important to underscore here that visual documentation of death remains—from these images’ hateful origins to their still ethically charged consumption today—a secondary feature of lynching photographs, as their primary drive was a frightening demonstration of white supremacy. Nevertheless, as the most graphic documentary images of death that significant American audiences consumed in photography’s first century, lynching photographs are essential to this chapter’s history.

The lynchings depicted in these photographs are mainly white-on-Black, occurring in the American South from about 1882 to 1930—preceding and overlapping with the era of cinema. Their extreme violence was ostensibly punishment for alleged crimes (with the rape of white women, or just its perceived threat, being the classic justification). But lynchings were more deeply motivated by the economic and social threat African Americans seemed to pose as a new social order eroded their self-effacing deference to former “masters.” 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. 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 of perpetrators and spectators proudly posing below it. The photographs’ mode of address was both celebratory, spreading evidence of lynching successes to create an “imagined community” of supportive whites, and threatening, attempting to intimidate African American communities. They circulated with little interference from the U.S. government until 1908, when the Post Office prohibited their mailing through a seldom-enforced law that had no impact on extensive underground circulation. While the postal network spread evidence of a lynching after it occurred, technologies of modernity—telephones, telegraphs, newspapers, cars, trains—worked to announce impending lynchings and transport mobs to their sites. The support of these technologies helped lynchings increase in size, length, complexity, and brutality, satisfying the crowd’s desire for ever-grander spectacles of death. One young attendee quickly yearned for a new, more graphic experience, telling his mother, “I have seen a man hanged. Now I wish I could see one burned.”

Photography was also a key technology to shape 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. 28 Second, it provided a physical trophy or souvenir for those who participated, making an otherwise ephemeral experience material—and commodifiable. 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.’ ” 29 Amateurs (after Kodak’s introduction of the personal camera in 1888) and professionals photographed lynchings and eventually could have their images commercially printed as postcards, for either sale or private distribution. That such postcards sold well enough to justify their mass production paints a grim picture of white southern morality in this period. As 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.” 30

In all three phases of the life of an image—production, distribution, reception—lynching photographs prompt upsetting historical questions. Jacqueline Goldsby affirms that at the most basic moral level, what we desperately want to know is “who took them, who looked at them, and why.” 31 Regarding Goldsby’s first question, a mixed-media art piece by Pat Ward Williams, Accused/Blowtorch/Padlock (1986), articulates the ways in which these photographs’ unimaginable production contexts trouble their current viewers. Williams’s scrawled notes encircle four views from the same photo that was published in Life magazine. The photo displays a lynched man who 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.” In the face of such agonizing documentary records of death—not just death but nauseatingly brutal and racist murders—lacunae in the historical record feel especially unsettling, unlikely as it is that the answers to such questions would provide any solace.

One puzzling detail that recurs across multiple images hints at perpetrators’ (and photographers’) disturbing sense of themselves as moral individuals. They often covered corpses’ genital areas with cloth in a strange gesture toward presenting “appropriate” displays—a gesture additionally charged by the fact that these victims had usually been lynched for alleged sex crimes. But what viewer would be so disturbed by nudity, or even castration wounds they might see,
alongside such graphic death and mutilation? The white women whose treasured purity lynch mobs were so eager to safeguard? That purity would already have been deeply sullied by looking at—either in person or in photographs—lynched corpses like Jesse Washington’s, with its burned and contorted frame, missing limbs, and curled, fingerless fists. With these genital coverings, lynching participants carefully avoid any trace of sex while creating some of the most explicit death images in documentary history—perhaps evidence of how much more taboo sex was than death in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

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?” In thinking about the reception of lynching photographs, the question of identification is particularly troubling because most are gruesome postmortems, each depicting a body whose disfigurement distances it greatly from a living person. Considering the malevolence at play in the images’ production, that distancing effect may have been desired, may have, in part, motivated the postmortem timing of these exposures. Contrasting lynching images to the gentler postmortem shots made earlier in the nineteenth century, Goldsby argues: “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.” 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 corpse hanging above the mob is intended for hostile display, with maximum visibility of wounds and other marks of humiliation.

The postmortem temporality of lynching photographs is an interesting enigma in this history, because lynching images seem best poised for “on time” synchronicity. Lynching deaths were more predictable, more geographically fixed, and safer for photographers to approach than battlefield deaths. Why, then, do these images overwhelmingly favor corpses, rather than pursuing the “moment” of death? The frenzied movement of 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 postmortem shots and the rarity of prosecution cast doubt on that
interpretation. I suspect that the radically different aims of lynching photography from most death documentary work—as noted earlier—are more the cause, subordinating the “moment” of death to other gruesome attractions, like wounds inflicted both before and after death that offer a more comprehensive record of the violence. Perhaps postmortem views also best supported the photos’ primary goal of illustrating white supremacy through a guarantee that the Black man had been fully, finally subdued—transformed from an allegedly threatening subject to the corpse’s powerless object. The variety of violent acts inflicted on the body also makes the precise occurrence of death less central and identifiable, tucked away somewhere in a series of blows, lacerations, burns, and so on.

The fact that cameras, wielded by both professionals and amateurs, turned 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 highlights an unsettling trend. Among government censors, image distributors, and the public, attitudes toward documentary death partly depend on the social and racial positioning of the deceased. The idea of publishing photos of white U.S. soldiers who had been shot could cause much hand-wringing in 1917 or 1944; would U.S. citizens be able to handle the sight? This concern becomes absurd when one acknowledges that a number of these citizens already had seen far more gruesome photos of lynched African Americans. Indeed, they may even have kept 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 an aesthetic liability. Even including photographs, few of this period’s iconic images of death or war—the ones that most characterize U.S. collective memory—are of corpses. I 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 liberated Nazi concentration camps. British and American forces began this documentary work when they entered camps on the Western Front in April 1945, later joined by the civilian press. The images they captured were comparable to lynching photographs in their visible brutality. But unlike the lynching photographs—or any others in documentary death’s previous history—they were quickly released in large quantities, in a concentrated period of time, and through many mainstream sources (newspapers, magazines, and newsreels). Again, as with lynching photographs, I emphasize that interests in the metaphysics of death or the nature of its documen-
tary mediation were not primary in these images’ creation or (in most cases) their consumption. But their indelible imagery and unprecedentedly wide circulation make them key texts in the predigital history of documentary cameras’ depictions of death.

The U.S. media was suddenly flooded with numerous, if homogeneous, views of corpses: naked bodies stacked “like cordwood” and jumbles of limbs filling mass graves, along with gaunt survivors living among the dead. Several factors prompted such an unchecked display of graphic death from a government that had been suppressing it for decades, in two world wars. First, the Allies had encountered atrocities of confounding immorality and scale that, crucially, could be easily photographed and filmed. The numerous corpses found in Buchenwald or Bergen-Belsen posed none of the typical problems of combat coverage: action that was too sudden or distant, visibility inadequate for film stock, restricted movement, threats to one's life and equipment, and prohibitions about what could be recorded. The greatest challenge image-makers reported overcoming at the camps was revulsion, aided by cameras that allowed them to “close one eye from the horror.”

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.”

A multitude of eyewitnesses struggled to explain how stunned they were by the cruelty and scale of the Nazis’ crimes—and to imagine how such atrocities could be adequately conveyed to a distant public through any form of media. After visiting Ohrdruf, the first camp where the Americans found corpses and prisoners, General Dwight Eisenhower sent word to Washington about “unspeakable conditions. . . . From my own personal observation, I can state unequivocally that all written statements up to now do not paint the full horrors.” Eyewitnesses from the military, press, and government felt an overwhelming desire to communicate that horror through documentary images, pushing U.S. officials to “let the world see,” in Eisenhower’s words. In fact, the Allies developed something of an obsession with letting the world see, and specifically with forcing the German civilians to see the crimes perpetrated by their own government. Mandatory tours of the camps and their dead for locals were common, later supplemented by mandatory screenings in the American and British occupied zones of films documenting the atrocities. Faced with the reality of the camps, many observers seemed gripped by the instinct that the public had to see the sights of death that they had, but they were also confronting the difficult truth that a mediated documentary view of these deaths would never feel sufficient.
However, observers’ drive to bring these images to the public eye would not have been sufficient without the political usefulness of documenting Nazi atrocities at that point. The U.S. government was not timid in suppressing war images that did not serve its notion of the public good. But just as the prohibition against showing dead Americans lifted when the United States needed to reinvigorate its war-weary citizens, other precedents fell away when it needed to convince the world of Nazi atrocities. Impaired by overly cautious reporting on the camps and a “hangover of skepticism” from World War I propaganda, the public was hesitant to believe written assertions that the Germans had murdered millions of Jews and other innocents in death camps. This skepticism prompted authorities to release visual evidence of the most gruesome varieties: images of decaying corpses, children’s corpses, facial close-ups of corpses, and naked corpses (nudity having previously been a sticking point in the display of atrocities).

Struggling to represent 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—shown by Gallup polls of November 1944 and May 1945. More qualitatively, records of their reception also indicate that these images from the camps made deep impressions on shocked audiences. Hence, the successes of the images as evidence—as much as one hesitates to call explicit views of murdered human beings “successful”—became quickly apparent in 1945, while their failures emerged more slowly. Captions were often missing, inadequate, or inaccurate, and images from one camp would be used to illustrate stories about another, reducing awareness of the plurality of camps and their specific identities. Similarly, information about the individuals pictured (dead or alive) was rarely provided—though news sources, admittedly, may have had little access to it. Haste and sloppiness in 1945 have had unfortunate consequences decades later, as Holocaust deniers fixate on these errors in their efforts to discredit documentation of the camps. In a more general problem that Barbie Zelizer articulates, the seeming interchangeability of the many images conveyed the feeling that the Holocaust was a singular, unified atrocity from which the press could make broad claims about the nature of human evil. It favored these large, symbolic meanings and shed specific contexts, in keeping with the images’ main political use: convincing a skeptical public that the Nazis had murdered millions in organized death camps.

Among all the images described in this chapter’s section on corpse photography, the photographs from Nazi concentration camps most 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 both were preventable and had powerful forces working to prevent them. Thus, the vast expanses of bodies in these images underscore the cost of U.S. delay in entering the war, making the American viewer complicit in this tardiness. Further, the encounter between the camera and death again happens “too late” through the Holocaust archive’s near-total absence of images showing the actual murders. Such images would have mattered—not only as evidence for courts or skeptics but in the hard lessons each of us experiences in trying to comprehend this event. 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 extermination camps like Treblinka, death came quickly to prisoners, and their killers opted not to snap its picture.

While the Holocaust sharply revived the power of corpse photography, it later 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 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. 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 purportedly drains a viewer’s reserves of compassion. The other factor in the declining impact of corpse photography emerged long before the camps were liberated: the motion picture. As its name implies, the medium sought out movement, an attraction that corpses could not provide. This liability is highlighted by the most memorable film footage from the camps, which overcame it: the nightmarish sight of the dead becoming animate, a churning mass of limbs, as bulldozers pushed piles of corpses into mass graves. These shots hint at film’s actual target in documenting death, yet to be fully realized: 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 a new capacity to register time and movement—crucial to a comprehensive representation of death. Film’s ability to render movement 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. First, Barthes’s “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 Laura Mulvey elucidates in Death 24x a Second, the apparent movement of a projected strip of film covers over the underlying stillness of the photographic frames that compose it (with film, typically twenty-four per second). If a photograph signifies death, then by its nature film also does so, “24x a second.” Rather than being a pure embodiment of life, film is thus characterized by “the co-presence of movement and stillness, continuity and discontinuity.” Bazin evoked the lurking morbidity of film’s liveliness in his pithy descriptor “change mummified”—a parallel to his notion of photography as that which “embalms time.” If “mummify[ing]” 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. Photography accompanied film into the twentieth century in this pursuit, with renewed ambition to accomplish what its technological descendent could not: to extract death itself from a stream of time and arrest its motion, freezing this “moment” and making it visible for contemplation. The thrill of being so precisely “on time” in catching death captured the imaginations of photographers and the public, as the instant fame of rare successes demonstrates. In the film-era 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 finally seemed to achieve this controversial aim.

**Early Cinema**

Early cinema’s practitioners recognized the fascination 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 discernible 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.” “Looked real” was standard, since footage of death eluded actuality filmmakers for many reasons. Executions offered spectacle and predictability, but by the development of cinema were, for the most part, no longer public events in the United States, nor was their recording permit-
Recording war deaths was a tantalizing prospect for early filmmakers and audiences, but once again was beyond the capabilities of the era's cameras. 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 also of spectacle. Natural death signifies change of the most meaningful order but not a particularly visible kind. A soldier slain in the heat of battle offers 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. 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 inscribing signs of mortification on the visibly lived body.” Though harder to predict and record, violent death offered not just the spectacle that audiences craved but, seemingly, the brevity that early reel lengths and exhibition practices required. These dictated a fixation on the “moment” of death because little more than a moment was ever put on display, with most films lasting less than sixty seconds. 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 allowing audiences to glimpse violent “moments” of death that looked real and could be fully contained in short films. In their attempts to stage death realistically, some showcased what the new medium could accomplish by manipulating, rather than just recording, time—as discussed by Combs and by Mary Ann Doane. Films like The Execution of Mary Queen of Scots (1895, Thomas Edison) or Execution by Hanging (1905, Mutoscope/Biograph) could present believable “moments” of death (by beheading or hanging, here) only by using two shots spliced together to appear continuous—one of a live person and one of a dummy. Though this illusion is playful, its logistics also reinforce the idea of death as a distinct moment. After the splice, the victim became a dummy incapable of independent movement, cinema's primary sign of life. At actual hangings, death did not always arrive so promptly and definitively: if the fall did not break the victim's neck, he could flail wildly on the rope until more gradually 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 the spectacle.” 51 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 levels of pain or barbarism they depict are not easily judged, I argue that both films undermine the technology they seem to celebrate by calling electrocution’s instantaneousness into question. Thus, they undermine the idea of death as a visible, identifiable moment through electricity’s promise and failure to deliver it.

No cameras captured President William McKinley’s shooting by Leon Czolgosz at the Pan-American Exposition of 1901, nor were any permitted to record the assassin’s death by electrocution. To alleviate that absence and add 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 execution site, taken on the day of the execution. 52 The remaining two minutes show an actor portraying Czolgosz being led out of his cell, a test of the electric chair’s current with a row of light bulbs, then the prisoner being strapped in and electrocuted. The actor playing Czolgosz does not writhe after his electrocution like William Kemmler, but to guarantee that his body will permanently still, his executioners send multiple and discontinuous jolts through him. The electrocution itself feels quite prolonged at twenty-five seconds, as its victim cycles through stiffening with the current and relaxing with its cessation thrice before the officials shut off the machine. 53 The 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? Two officials onscreen quickly labor to resolve this disquieting uncertainty, feeling Czolgosz’s pulse and listening for his heartbeat with a stethoscope. Combs uses these characters to demonstrate the film camera’s inability to overcome the invisibility of bodily death—even in cases of violent death. Adept at rendering surfaces, the camera cannot access the body’s depth, cannot expose the hidden stoppage of organs. Combs argues that it needs a “registrant” who can confirm death by proxy for the audience. 54

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. Topsy, a performing animal that had killed three men (the last of whom had tried to feed her a lit cigarette butt), was put to death at Coney Island’s
Luna Park in front of fifteen hundred spectators. 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. The film enabled cinema spectators separated from the execution by space and time to watch it along with the fifteen hundred viewers who were physically present. Slightly more than a minute in length, Elephant shows Topsy walked to her site of death, then cuts to another shot of her standing in chains. 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 thirty seconds—half of its running time—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 reveals that she continued moving for longer than the footage’s thirty-second duration, and the film’s end comes without any apparent motivation, before the body fully stills. Such details prompt questions about just how long it really took electricity to kill. 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.” Doane notes that “part of the lure of electricity is the lure of an escape from process, duration, work.” Czolgosz and Elephant expose the false promise of that escape; death by electricity is still a durational process in which the “moment” of transition remains uncertain and invisible. The public’s and cinema’s attraction to this promise of instant death is an ironic fad to begin the twentieth century, a century that would prolong the length of the dying process dramatically through death’s escalating medicalization.

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 earlier, “attempts” is the key word for many decades, as image technologies failed to keep pace with killing technologies. Considering the staggering number of violent deaths modern warfare generated in World War I and World War II, 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.

Early hopes the moving image brought for documenting war death had to
be readjusted quickly during the Spanish-American and Philippine-American wars of the late 1890s, when actuality recordings of faraway battles never arrived. Kristen Whissel describes how the conditions of war and the constraints of technology frustrated those hopes, and how filmmakers turned to reenactments to satisfy spectators’ appetites for battle footage. Evincing said appetites, she quotes a *Leslie’s Weekly* article from 1900 that anticipated potential American Biograph footage from the Philippine-American and Boer wars: “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.”

The author leaves little doubt that death—the chief ingredient of “actual, gruesome war”—is among the sights he wants to see in these “vivid, soul-stirring pictures.” 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 meet “on time” with a camera.

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 were too bulky to traverse the dense, tropical terrain of Cuba or the Philippines in battle. Even if they could have, “the conditions of modern warfare placed limits on both human and machine vision” through, for example, Cuba’s thick jungle 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).

Thus, American soldiers severely lacked the visual information needed for their military success, and any documentary cameras that managed to travel the rough campaign trails would find conditions woefully unsuitable for filming.

When the promised films of “actual, gruesome war” failed to materialize, reenactments compensated for their absence but did not reflect the conditions that had prevented their creation. For example, a trio of Edison shorts from 1899—*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 only enough gunpowder smoke for dramatic effect as U.S. soldiers 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. Though Whissel’s analysis focuses on how these reenactments frame American military might, displaying the spectacle of death is an equally central pursuit here. 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). While Filipino and Cuban deaths are fully displayed, only American death is individuated and ennobled, as when a color-bearer gets a spectacular death scene in Caloocan: filmed from behind, he stands alongside his fellow U.S. 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. The flag gives this “moment” of death an air of patriotism and gravitas, while blocking and shot distance afford it full visibility. Caloocan provides a vision of what actuality filmmakers 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 shot does so through war’s most familiar “moment” of death pose: he spreads his arms wide and falls backward. This pose responds to the central challenge of representing death in film or photography (one 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. This dynamic “moment” of death pose did not surface in war’s underwhelming actuality material until 1936, when the French magazine Vu published a Spanish Civil War photograph that would be widely reprinted and rise to iconic status. Robert Capa’s photograph The Falling Soldier shows a Loyalist militiaman on a desolate hillside collapsing backward, presumably hit by enemy fire. Perfectly realizing what Cartier-Bresson would later call “the decisive moment” in photography—now as the “moment” of death—Capa catches the soldier midfall, head thrown back and arms splayed, with his rifle just slipping from his hand.
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. Capa announced his “on time” triumph through the image’s original title (also loaded with proclamations of its documentary status): *Loyalist Militiaman at the Moment of Death, Cerro Muriano, September 5, 1936*. Here, at last, was the enduring object of desire for generations of image-makers and audiences: death itself, strikingly enframed.

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 a different soldier fallen in exactly the same spot, suggesting multiple takes. 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, but in-depth comparisons of the photographs and Spanish hillsides place the event thirty-five miles away, near Espejo. Espejo was far removed from the battles that day, making Capa’s claim that the soldier was killed by machine gun fire implausible. One remarkable aspect of this debunking is the abiding passion among scholars and the public for proving whether the image is documentary or 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.63

Whether or not the image is staged, it exhibits undeniable artistry in representing war; but the uproar about its origins shows mere artistry to be insufficient for the event purportedly captured. This photograph’s reception reveals a historical shift since the late nineteenth century, when staging in Gardner’s American Civil War images and reenactment in 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. By World War I, for example, easy-to-record troop mobilization footage was losing its appeal, and demand for hard-to-record battle actualities grew. Filmmakers staged battle scenes to compensate, as entertainment or propaganda. But when staging was detected, these films were increasingly seen as deceptive fakes rather than innocuous reenactments, to the extent that many articles decried them and taught the public to detect their tricks.64 A harsh 1914 letter in *Moving Picture World* from a representative of the Universal Film Manufacturing Company illustrates this atmosphere: “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
1.2. *The Falling Soldier* (1936, © Robert Capa/Magnum Photos).
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.”65 Perhaps, based on the tone of these articles, greater efforts were also made to pass staged scenes off as genuine. Capa himself actively courts credulity among viewers, attesting to The Falling Soldier’s authenticity in interviews about its creation.66 Plus, the image does not aesthetically announce itself as staged (as Edison’s films did through implausible camera positions). In fact, its blurred quality 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 that viewers care deeply about death’s authentic, documentary recording. 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.”67 That such an unmasking would compromise the photograph’s value so completely gives it a different value to historians. Caroline Brothers argues that in this scenario, “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.”68 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. The Falling Soldier and its history tell us that the public embraced 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 “on time.” In the 1930s, it had to be staged; it would take several more decades for documentarians to close in on the bodily spectacle Capa sought.

The 1960s

Though the 1960s may not have been the “amusement park, full of barely controlled chaos and recklessness,” of its reputation, the decade did bring a great volume of violent deaths into U.S. public life via assassinations, political protests, and war in Vietnam.69 Two that were famously filmed have been seared into collective memory: the assassination of President John Kennedy in 1963 and an impromptu prisoner execution on a Saigon street in 1968. Within the sparse history of documenting death on celluloid that I have outlined, these 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 also had converged to create a somewhat more favorable environment for death and the camera to meet “on time.” The footage that emerged in these two cases did not much resemble the straightforward, clean, and noble vision of death playacted on Capa’s Spanish hillside, but the 1960s 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. Indeed, many games that center on combat with ranged weapons incentivize headshots, rewarding players who complete them with experience points or virtual trophies to display on their public profiles.

The headshot that killed President Kennedy on November 22, 1963, was recorded by local Dallas businessman Abraham Zapruder, who brought along his Bell & Howell 8mm home movie camera when he went to watch the president’s motorcade. Despite its amateur status, Zapruder’s 486-frame film impressively keeps Kennedy on-screen almost continuously from seconds before he was first hit in the neck to seconds after the headshot that killed him. We see the president waving to the crowd as his open-top vehicle slowly rolls down the street, then his wave transforms into a grasping at his neck. Jackie Kennedy notices that something is wrong with her husband and leans in, at which point the fatal bullet strikes and a small explosion of blood and tissue erupts from his head. 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 mounts the moving car’s bumper and pushes her back in, an underpass swallows up the vehicle and the film ends. The closest view captured by anyone, Zapruder’s film still feels distant in its recording of death. The president and First Lady seem small in the frame, their forms and facial expressions melting into the celluloid’s characteristic grain. This lack of proximity is both frustrat-
ing and merciful, denying and sparing the viewer a clear look at the president’s brains splattering the car or the horror on Jackie’s face. In Combs’s terms, she would be the film’s “registrant,” reacting 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 real and relatively visible.

The images shot by Abraham Zapruder are a fixture of collective memory about this assassination, even connoting the overfamiliar, the too obsessively scrutinized because they are endlessly deployed in the “Who killed Kennedy?” debate.70 This current sense of iconic visibility obscures the images’ absence and even suppression from public view for years after the assassination, 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 a nine-hour ordeal to have the film developed, copied, and delivered to the officials gathering evidence—a saga almost unimaginable to today’s generation of mobile phone camera operators and YouTube uploaders.71 As word of the film got around, he was hounded by press representatives wanting to buy the rights; he chose Time Inc.72 From that point and for the next twelve years, Time Inc. would maintain exclusive legal rights to the film and severely limit how much of it the public could see. The company trickled out its frames through Life magazine, initially with four pages of fuzzy black-and-white reproductions in the November 29, 1963 issue. A full week after Kennedy’s death, 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. Life’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.”73 Jackson’s decision epitomizes the type of top-down gatekeeping in journalism that helped minimize the number of actuality images of death the U.S. public could access in the predigital era. That first photo spread, ironically titled “Split-Second Sequence as the Bullets Struck,” omits frame 313’s actual bullet strike, skipping from 270 to 323. Life then commenced a teasing routine of getting closer and closer to showing the headshot without doing so. Its October 2, 1964, issue printed a color enlargement of frame 309, then its November 25, 1966, issue did the same for 312, with the caption, “In the next frame, the President received his fatal headshot.”74 Outside the underground circulation of illegally made copies, access to frame 313
1.3. Frame 313 from the Zapruder film (1963, Abraham Zapruder).
seems for years to have been limited to a small, low-quality, black-and-white reproduction in the Warren Report of 1964—the published findings of the official investigating committee.⁷⁵

These details of the headshot’s suppression consider only stilled frames, but the sight’s greatest impact on the viewer requires the motion its original medium provides. 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—inability to fully contain this spectacle of death. Without the motion of his body’s recoil backward and its lifeless sinking into Jackie’s lap, Kennedy’s filmed death seems decidedly incomplete. 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, who did not attend the scattered screenings of bootleg copies that began in 1969) could not see that duration until 1975, when Zapruder’s moving image was finally screened in motion an amazing twelve years after the death he documented. At that point, it aired without Time Inc.’s permission on Geraldo Rivera’s nationally broadcast talk show, Good Night America.⁷⁶ 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 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 obsessive scrutiny for the film—gazed at over and over as a still frame and as a moving image, at regular speed and in slow motion, from Zapruder’s actual distance and blurrily enlarged. The film JFK (1992, Oliver Stone) famously reenacts an instance of this scrutiny, based on real events. 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 repulsed spectators. The horror and fascination many feel upon viewing the Kennedy headshot stem 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 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”).

In the days following the assassination, Americans lacked images of the death they were struggling to process; they could, however, see footage of a different death that perhaps cathartically channeled their curiosity and filled in for the absent images. The expansion of film technology to a wider public (through home movie cameras) had enabled the recording of Kennedy’s death, and days later nascent video technology would display his accused assassin’s murder on live television. As Lee Harvey Oswald was being transferred from city jail to county jail on November 24, Jack Ruby emerged from a mass of reporters and fatally shot Oswald in the stomach. All major networks had been covering the assassination story continuously, but only NBC was at that moment showing Oswald and caught the murder live. The other networks replayed it from videotape within seconds, using new instant-replay technology developed for televised sports. 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 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 headshot compared with other gunshot deaths. Whatever their rationale, the networks replayed Oswald’s murder throughout the day.

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. These include the 1974 suicide of Florida newscaster Christine Chubbuck during her own talk show, the 1998 suicide of Daniel V. Jones that ended his standoff with police, the 2012 suicide of Jodon F. Romero (broadcast accidentally on Fox News when operators failed to use their five-
second, live feed delay during coverage of a car chase), and the 2015 murder of journalists Alison Parker and Adam Ward during a live local news broadcast.\(^8^0\)

Although not transmitted live, television’s coverage of the Vietnam War kept the spectacle of violent death in the public eye as the 1960s progressed and into the 1970s. Beaming it into American homes in this “living room war,” television aired the type of footage camerapersons in previous wars sought but never had the means or permission to actually deliver to audiences. As reporter Leonard Zeindenberg observed, on the eve of the bloody Tet Offensive of 1968, “Certainly the everyday horrors of war have never been so easily available for viewing—crisply edited down to essentials, flashed on the home screen.”\(^8^1\) 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 wrestled to the ground and taken prisoner, GIs tossing live grenades into National Liberation Front (NLF) tunnels and then yanking out bloody corpses, 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 below with explosions, children’s limp bodies 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. Here were the authentic images of “actual, gruesome war” predicted in cinema’s infancy, so many wars ago.

Such images reached American living rooms through a confluence of technological advances and slackened censorship. Chief among the former was television itself, which replaced newsreels as the primary provider of war footage in the United States. Television had become a popular and highly trusted news source, and those with color receivers (sales of which hit their stride in the late 1960s and early 1970s) got added attractions: the jungles were green, the explosions were orange, and the blood was red. The Vietnam footage that fueled the young medium was enabled by developments in recording and transmission equipment. New “lightweight” sound cameras (forty pounds) allowed small crews to traverse difficult terrain alongside GIs. To transmit their footage back to the States, networks could pay $5,000 per five-minute segment for satellite broadcast from Tokyo or fly 16mm reels to New York for airings delayed by about two days.\(^8^2\)

Despite the sense among government officials that the “horrors of war” now on display were heightening U.S. qualms about this faraway conflict, Presidents Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon all refrained from official censorship. The challenges were too great: the absence of a declaration of war, the cost of imple-
mentation, and concern that South Vietnam would abuse censorship powers. Instead, they gave the press easy credentialing and access to briefings and combat zones, in exchange for adherence to guidelines that mostly protected military strategy—though there was government pressure at points in the war to make coverage optimistic. This rare freedom in documenting and displaying death had disappeared for wartime image-makers since the American Civil War—a freedom that became more useful in the 1960s than the 1860s, as technology allowed for the recording of more than just fields of days-old corpses.

The favorable conditions producing more recorded deaths than in previous wars, however, did not produce as many as one might expect—or as popular understanding of this war implies. While memory may retain the more gruesome images, televised footage of death in Vietnam was actually quite rare; even the category of “heavy fighting” was only shown in 3 percent of news reports. Despite better cameras and little government oversight, image-makers still had the disincentives of going out to combat areas, the dangers they faced upon arrival, the legendary invisibility of the

Despite better cameras and little government oversight, image-makers still had the disincentives of going out to 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 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. Assessing TV coverage of the war, Charles Pach Jr. contends plainly, “Those who remember graphic scenes of death and suffering simply recall a war that television did not show.”

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 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 chaotic Tet Offensive that brought the war’s violence into Saigon. Partly because Saigon was swarming with reporters—most press people having already been based there—the event was captured by multiple cameras, both on film and as a photograph. Vo Suu recorded the execution on film for NBC. His footage qualified for the expensive Tokyo satellite broadcast, making it to the nightly news on February 2, where it was seen by up to twenty million viewers. Photographer Eddie Adams snapped a picture, Saigon Execution, that would run in almost every major newspaper and win him a Pulitzer Prize.
Finding the next step in documentary death’s evolution after the Zapruder film, Suu and Adams’s images take us closer to a gruesome headshot. *Saigon Execution* does so by focusing on Lém’s facial expression, getting the viewer near enough to contemplate 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. Suu’s film footage gives the spectator a sense of being part of the crowd, mixed in among the witnesses and participants shifting around the camera as Loan casually shoos them away with his handgun to make room for the killing he is 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 propelled upward a few inches into the air before it sloshes onto the pavement. The blood fights gravity in this fountain-like form for a full three seconds after the body hits the ground, then tapers into a subdued flow. Significantly, NBC had a further seventeen seconds in which Suu zoomed in on the bleeding, but another gatekeeper—*The Huntley-Brinkley Report*’s executive producer Robert Northshield—found that “awful rough” and truncated the clip.89

Representing only a tiny fraction of documentary images from Vietnam, the shots of death survive best in our collective memory. Adams himself thought little of his photograph’s artistry, criticizing its poor lighting and composition, but fixation on its haunting “moment of death” has ensured its longevity and drowned out most aesthetic critiques.90 Its frozen, “decisive moment” stillness matters here, too. Marita Sturken includes *Saigon Execution* on her list of the war’s three most-recalled images but 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 than film footage.91 Photographed and filmed, the execution in Saigon 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 with the parallel film footage: the photo seems to freeze the moment when the bullet penetrates the man’s head and allows us to linger on his facial expression, while the film includes more surrounding footage of the prisoner walking and later the body on the ground spurring blood. 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 and dvr. Sturken adds that the film footage is “extremely difficult to watch,” implying that the photograph is less wounding. It seems to me that the more wounding medium would be the one seared into memory, but perhaps Sturken’s counterintuitive claim reveals a complex interaction between memories of the film and the photo. The latter may serve as a Freudian screen memory for the footage, allowing us to recall the victim’s unsettling grimace and forget the more traumatizing 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 I argue earlier, may make it psychologically appealing to U.S. audiences. Such a photo helps them invest in the notion of death as a moment, keeping faith that it still takes such a temporal form in an age that greatly obscures this “moment” through painful medical treatments that extend both life and the dying process. Where Americans during the Civil War feared an instant death—because they might die without spiritual preparation—Americans during the Vietnam War may have found this type more grimly alluring as it was growing more scarce. 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 an ethnic 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” of death that seemed so definitively contained in Adams’s photo. The blood’s movement thus echoes Topsy’s persistent twitching in Electrocuting an Elephant. Here, again, is the specter of duration, of dying, haunting even the headshot and its relatively convincing “moment” of death.

While Adams’s photograph and Suu’s footage give distinct, 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 its news value derived not from its political implications but rather from its striking shots of death. When the scene is reproduced, details of each man’s identity and the backstory to the execution usually are ignored. An image of a specific, high-ranking South Vietnamese officer executing a specific NLF prisoner during a specific military offensive becomes a generalized symbol of the war’s chaos and injustice. As Sturken
notes, Vietnamese kill Vietnamese, and the battle represented is of man against man. In this iconic image, cemented in U.S. memory as epitomizing the Vietnam War, one element is conveniently absent: the United States itself. The slain, wounded, and traumatized U.S. soldiers worrying the American public are nowhere pictured, nor is any sign of the American violence and imperialism that was so deeply involved in Lém's death and in all deaths the war produced.

Conclusion: Figurative Wounds

During the thirteen decades surveyed in this chapter, 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—the invisible event seemingly made visible—is never quite as revelatory as we might hope. Stilled in Adams's photo or Zapruder's (long-suppressed) frame 313, it captivates, but it feels incomplete—disconnected from the movement that makes death's fundamental change apparent. When motion is restored in Zapruder's and Suu's films, the “moment” of death a viewer thought she saw slips away—enveloped into the duration of dying. The camera’s ability to deliver death, then, is always partial, fragmentary, never in “full detail”—even in the rare cases when it manages to completely enframe that bodily transition. And yet, as I argue throughout this book, these incomplete documentary images of death often fulfill political purposes even when they fail to answer metaphysical questions about the end of life. Some in this chapter, for example, evinced the reality and magnitude of the Holocaust’s genocide, helped shift U.S. public opinion against the Vietnam War, and—distressingly—rallied both support for and opposition to brutal lynchings and the white supremacist cause they bolstered.

Documentary images of death were rare in indexical media’s era of dominance because the contingencies of where, when, and how death will happen and the minuscule 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 tools make it more practical to record and distribute—as mundane as such a statement sounds in the context of a very powerful subject. Compared with indexical media’s history, there are now many more cameras in circulation, able to cover more 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—even incidentally, as one function of a multipurpose mobile phone. These cameras also store their
images on capacious and cheap formats, giving operators the freedom to keep recording patiently until death occurs. Film and photography progressed in these directions, too, during their histories; Kodak's introduction of personal cameras in the late nineteenth century yielded more lynching photographs, and the adoption of home movie cameras in the mid-twentieth century provided the best record of the Kennedy assassination. But celluloid never mastered the preceding 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 and the shorter time period they cover.

Digital technologies would help image-makers both in overcoming logistical challenges to recording actual death and in bypassing political obstacles to displaying it. As Abraham Lincoln did not yet understand in the 1860s and as Lyndon Johnson bitterly comprehended in the 1960s, the visual record of a slain human can have tremendous political power. That power is greatest 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. The preceding history reveals that in a top-down distribution system, volatile images are routinely suppressed by government censors or news editors. Though hardly a cure-all for such 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.

In contrast to the stalled circulation of the Zapruder film, for example, chapter 4 will trace a very different path from production (via mobile phones) to distribution (on YouTube) for two sets of videos documenting public killings in the twenty-first century. And compared with Edison's reenacted substitute for footage of a high-profile execution in Czolgosz, in 2006 the Internet quickly provided videos of the decade's highest-profile execution, of Saddam Hussein, which journalism's gatekeepers at major news outlets had planned to suppress. New (or newly digitized) archives that have arisen with the innovation of streaming video have also begun to unearth the undistributed death footage of the past for broad public access. British Pathé provides a case in point from Europe, having uploaded several actuality death clips to its YouTube channel that were never edited into the company's newsreels and screened—presumably because of their disturbing content, though existing records do not confirm the reason.

Additionally, digital technology now provides greater means for the public to express a desire to see documentary death—and, thus, evidence of this long-established desire's vitality in the digital age. For instance, the hunger for documentary images of Osama bin Laden's corpse in the wake of his shooting
produced widely circulating Photoshopped fakes, and a computer virus spread through e-mailed links promising photos of the slain leader. As Zelizer notes, a similarly voracious appetite for the perpetrator video of Nick Berg’s beheading made terms such as “nick berg video” and “nick berg beheading” the top Google searches after the video’s May 11, 2004, release.

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 audiences wanted them to and how they experienced these mediated encounters. It is no coincidence that in adapting Williams’s temporal modes, my work 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 actual sex, images of actual death must satisfy a vague standard of “redeeming social importance” to avoid dismissal as “death porn.” While 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 individuals that cameras had often been too late to record in life, helping families grieve for the departed. Civil War battlefield images aided grief on a national scale for a population suffering unprecedented losses and reached back toward the undocumented “moments” of soldiers’ deaths to forecast their souls’ fates. Lynching photographs aimed to intimidate Blacks and fortify white power, but they also revealed cruelty and cowardice in white southern communities. Concentration camp images evidenced a genocide and struggled to communicate its impact to those across the globe. Zapruder’s film documented a murder of world-shaking importance and became a crucial tool in its fraught investigation. And the recording of Lém’s execution in Saigon fueled a 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 fully connect us with the dying. As Sontag perceptively wrote in 1977, “To suffer is one thing; another thing is living with the photographed images of suffering.” Related to this sentiment, there is a point at which my borrowing of Williams’s temporalities parts ways with their original use. Williams emphasizes the manner 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’s observation that we scream or 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 must be a higher threshold for claiming a shared bodily experience.

In considering that threshold, I hold in my mind the gesture of one viewer of documentary death: German filmmaker Harun Farocki. Having seen images of Vietnam’s napalm victims, he responds to this experience of spectatorship in his short film *The Inextinguishable Fire* (1969). After reading aloud a news report about the war’s violence on camera, Farocki expresses the following concerns: “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.

*The Inextinguishable Fire* is not a death documentary; it does not fall within this chapter’s scope of the U.S. circulation of recorded death in the era of indexical media. I end with it here because Farocki’s startling self-injury returns me to broader questions of ethics and understanding that must animate the study of real people dying on camera. His act 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. I can, as others have done, 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, the sense in which they wound the viewer—the sense in which they burn themselves into memory—is hopelessly figurative.