Dying in Full Detail

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There is an axiom that threads through the history of documentary media, a belief that each new generation of image-makers reaffirms. To discard or doubt it, perhaps, would shake the form’s foundations too dramatically. The belief is in the ability to decrease war and violence through the documentary representation of war and violence—that if a photograph, say, can perfectly communicate “the horrors of war,” then its viewers will come to oppose war and promote peace. In the documentary The Devil Came on Horseback (2007, Annie Sundberg and Ricki Stern), an ex-marine turned military observer, Brian Steidle, carries that belief with him as he journeys to the Darfur region of Sudan in 2004. There, he documents the genocide raging in the area as the Janjaweed militia tears through villages, burning homes and killing and raping residents. Unable to capture graphic shots of fatal attacks as they happened, Steidle none-
theless trains his camera on countless corpses. With the razor-sharp visuals digital photography provides, he documents the corpses of young and old alike in painful detail, bodies felled by gunshot, beating, burning alive, and so on. Deliberating about what to do with his images, he expresses a confidence that, “if these photos were released to the public, there would be troops in here in a matter of days.”

Once the horrors of war he records have emotionally worn him down, Steidle returns to the United States, allows his photos to be published in the New York Times, does interviews with major news channels, and goes on the road to present on the crisis in Darfur. On this circuit, he brings with him several huge binders filled with the photographs—page after page of grisly corpses, evidencing the atrocities that the photos themselves endeavor to halt. But the images he spreads do not make the impact that Steidle knew they would; as he sees it, they fail to inspire tangible action on behalf of Darfur. Instead, many of their viewers appear to absorb only Sontag’s “bemused awareness . . . that terrible things happen.” The documentary thus draws to a downbeat conclusion as Steidle arrives at a similar insight: “I definitely look at the world differently now. I knew that bad things happened; I didn’t know that people would stand by and allow them to happen. I honestly thought as I wrote an email home that if the people of America could see what I’ve seen there would be troops here in one week . . . That’s not true at all. They’ve seen it now and we’ve still done nothing.” The credits roll soon after his statement and nudge the viewer toward action with a URL and the message: “There is a growing movement to end the crisis in Darfur. You can make a difference.” Considering the way The Devil Came on Horseback has documented the dissolution of Steidle’s own faith in this sentiment, the earnest words scrolling by on-screen convey an unintended irony.

Steidle tried to deliver what new technology promised at the turn of the previous century: the “soul-stirring pictures of actual, gruesome war” that so excited a Leslie’s Weekly author in 1900 and that Steidle hoped would mobilize a response to genocide in 2005. The intervening century, however, brought so many “pictures of actual, gruesome war” that new entries into that realm need to meet a higher threshold of vividness to stir the soul—to drive home more than just a fortified awareness “that terrible things happen.” While Steidle’s binders full of photos are certainly gruesome, the images are ultimately too familiar in their subjects and aesthetics to make the impact he wants. They bring the Rwandan genocide to mind most immediately, but they also share broad conventions of corpse photography, recalling the camps of the Holocaust and even the battlefields of the American Civil War. Because the period
of history spanned by camera technology is so crowded with atrocities, corpses and their documentary traces have become almost clichéd signifiers of the terrible things that happen in the world. Their effectiveness in political causes in centuries past—perpetrator photographs appropriated for antilynching pamphlets, concentration camp images that evidenced genocide by the Nazis—has lost potency in the twenty-first.

Further, as discussed in chapter 1, the corpse photograph can feel like an image made “too late”: a still representation of a still object that can only gesture toward the final moments of the person who once inhabited it—moments conspicuously absent from the photo. As Vivian Sobchack writes, in these images, “Our sympathy for the subject who once was is undermined by our alienation from the object that is.” The corpse’s missing subjectivity, its sense of suffering already past, seems to dilute the photo’s activist potential. The most legendary entries in the U.S. annals of death images that have “made a difference,” after all, are not corpse photographs. They are the photo and film footage of General Nguyễn Ngọc Loan executing handcuffed prisoner Nguyễn Văn Lém in Saigon in 1968. The paragon of the “moment of death” image fantasy described in chapter 1, Eddie Adams’s photo of this event, *Saigon Execution*, offers a long, hard stare at this sight, playing out in the contortions of Lém’s face as he is shot point-blank in the head. The publication of *Saigon Execution* has a popular reputation as a major turning point in the Vietnam War, shifting public opinion more sharply against American involvement there. Despite evidence from historians that media coverage of that war followed rather than precipitated this change in attitude, the legend persists that Adams’s picture played a large role in ending the war. Clint Eastwood’s *Flags of Our Fathers* (2008), a film whose very premise argues for the importance of images in war, includes a monologue to this effect in its opening moments: “The right picture can win or lose a war. Look at Vietnam: the picture of that South Vietnamese officer blowin’ that fellow’s brains out of the side of his head—*[motions gun-shot]* ‘Blammo!’—that was it. The war was lost. We just hung around trying to pretend it wasn’t.” As this scene exemplifies, popular history seems to have rendered a verdict on *Saigon Execution*: this documentary image of death in progress—not coming soon or already past—“made a difference.”

In their use by activists, images of actual death best satisfy the challenging questions that haunt their very existence: Why should we make and look at them? What right have we to do so? While I have endeavored to frame all my previous case studies through their political implications, this chapter examines the explicit activist use of documentary death in conjunction with digital media. To do so, I consider shifts in the production, distribution, and exhibi-
tion of such material, as well as longtime characteristics of politically effective documentary death that remain constant (and, indeed, become more apparent) in the digital age. On the production side, mobile phone cameras represent a massive technological shift not so much in kind but in scale: these easy-to-operate digital recording devices travel around in the pockets and purses of billions, vastly increasing the likelihood that a death in public space will happen in a camera’s vicinity.

Distribution and exhibition changes have been equally dramatic, both in kind and in scale, as the Internet allows these mobile phone users to circulate what they capture fairly easily and at no cost (or, rather, at the start-up cost of a phone and Internet access). In a social and technological context where more and more videos from billions of recording devices vie for the public’s attention, “it is not enough to have a camera,” as Leshu Torchin notes. “The question of how images are presented, circulated, and put to use remains.” This distribution revolution is underscored by its surprisingly minimal role in The Devil Came on Horseback, a digital documentary about digital photography. As mentioned earlier, when Steidle goes to speaking engagements, he lugs around huge binders filled with prints of his photographs, inviting the audience to flip through them after the presentation for more evidence. While the bulk of these binders helps visualize the extent of the violence in Darfur, they also register as a curious anachronism in this twenty-first-century story. They sit there, heavy and sedentary on the table, awaiting one viewer at a time to walk over and look at them. This image of the literally bound photographs signifies their physically bound limitations within the fluidity of the digital age. Videos shot on mobile phone cameras are not at all bound in this manner but rather can become viral, bestowed with all the rapid and unfettered movement that word implies. Or, if one prefers, they are “spreadable media”—a phrase Henry Jenkins uses to counter the connotations of autonomous proliferation in an unchanged form associated with the term “viral.”

If activist videos of death are “spreadable,” then YouTube, the Internet’s most popular worldwide destination for streaming video, is the primary place where people try to spread them. Launched in 2005, YouTube quickly became a hub for participatory culture and the notion of interactivity so central to new media theory and Web 2.0. In terms of activist videos, and especially activist videos of death, that notion of participation is especially charged. Writing on the Holocaust and twentieth-century media, Barbie Zelizer makes an assertion that is important to reexamine in relation to YouTube in the twenty-first: “It may be that the act of making people see is beginning to take the place of making people do, and that witnessing—even if it involves a narrowed repre-
sentation of atrocity and little real response—is becoming the *acte imaginaire* of the twentieth century.”6 Studying activist videos of death on YouTube reveals the extent to which “witnessing” in that space can facilitate “doing,” but also the very real limitations of the actions that emerge in that scenario. Jodi Dean delivers a digital-age update to Zelizer’s sentiment, noting how the Internet seems to promise that we can witness and then take action immediately through interactive commenting, reposting, petition circulating, and so on—measures some have disparagingly categorized as “slacktivism.” Along these lines, Dean writes, sites like YouTube make us surprisingly passive: “Discussion, far from displaced, has itself become a barrier against acts as action is perpetually postponed. . . . It’s easier to set up a new blog than it is to undertake the ground-level organizational work of building alternatives. It’s also difficult to think through the ways our practices and activities are producing new subjectivities, subjectivities that may well be more accustomed to quick satisfaction and bits of enjoyment than to planning, discipline, sacrifice, and delay.”7

Further, despite its wide accessibility that welcomes nonprofessional media producers and provides new ways to consume, too, YouTube is hardly a digital utopia even as a space for just witnessing. As Torchin notes, the traditional documentary format on which activists have often relied finds little traction on the site, especially because its users are so accustomed to very short works.8 YouTube tends to present raw video without the context often necessary to understand what is being depicted, and at the same time it creates another kind of context that feels awkward and insensitive: that of seeing somber activist videos posted alongside clips of skateboard stunts and pets being tickled. In her innovative video-book *Learning from YouTube*, Alexandra Juhasz puts it bluntly: “[YouTube is] a context that is not ideal for activism, analysis, or community.”9

Nevertheless, relatively early in the histories of mobile phone footage and of YouTube, two sets of mobile phone death videos that were fully integrated into activist causes circulated heavily on the site. Never removed by YouTube’s administrators, despite activists’ fears that they would be because of their violent content, these videos depict the 2009 killings of Oscar Grant in Oakland, California and Neda Agha-Soltan in Tehran.10 Although we generally do not give much thought to aesthetics in raw video shot by nonprofessionals on mobile phones, I want to highlight their importance here; both sets of videos make politically charged deaths metaphorically visible to the public, but one set’s greater success in making death optically visible (among other aesthetic features) gives it wider exposure and more activist power. Through these aesthetics, I argue that an audiovisual resemblance to the vision of death presented by mainstream, commercial cinema is most likely to generate audience sympathy
and media attention via YouTube (ironically, since the site achieved its initial popularity by offering user-generated alternatives to that mode). Further, I argue that the tendency of most streaming video to strip away an event’s context greatly shapes the way viewers understand the depicted deaths—but not always in a decidedly negative sense, as some have claimed. Grant’s and Agha-Soltan’s recorded deaths provide an illuminating challenge to scholars’ and activists’ claims that YouTube’s lack of context makes it a deficient and even dangerous venue for political content.

“Not a Shock Site”: Streaming Death on and off YouTube

As the Internet’s highest-traffic and culturally dominant video streaming site, globally, YouTube is essential to digital-age attempts to make death visible through its documentary recording. But understanding the nuances of how this kind of footage circulates online—both in general and in relation to the two case studies that are presented in this chapter—requires explorations both of YouTube’s corporate policies about graphic content and of the wider network of social media and other streaming sites in which YouTube is situated. On YouTube itself, users trying to distribute death videos face a challenge from the site’s “Community Guidelines,” which limit graphic content: “Graphic or gratuitous violence is not allowed. If your video shows someone being physically hurt, attacked, or humiliated, don’t post it. . . . YouTube is not a shock site. Don’t post gross-out videos of accidents, dead bodies or similar things intended to shock or disgust.” But as the latter rule hints, YouTube judges graphic clips by (somewhat) specific criteria rather than excluding all such content. The expanded guidelines elaborate on these criteria: “If a video is particularly graphic or disturbing, it should be balanced with additional context and information. For instance, including a clip from a slaughter house in a video on factory farming may be appropriate. However, stringing together unrelated and gruesome clips of animals being slaughtered in a video may be considered gratuitous if its purpose is to shock rather than illustrate.” Here, YouTube adopts the spirit of Supreme Court justice William Brennan’s definition of obscenity, offered during the case United States v. Roth in 1957: that which is “utterly without redeeming social importance.” The site avoids harboring “death porn” by requiring some plausible intention for the material beyond shock, sensationalism, or disrespect, and by banning “unrelated and gruesome clips . . . [strung] together.”

Statements about the role of context on the site are especially interesting here. YouTube suggests that graphic material “should be balanced with addi-
tional context and information,” seeming to recognize the tendency of its own format (favoring short, user-uploaded videos) to omit adequate context. YouTube’s expanded guideline on sex and nudity reinforces this call for context and highlights another dimension of the site’s philosophy about censorship: “Most nudity is not allowed. . . . There are exceptions for some educational, documentary, scientific, and artistic content, but only if that is the sole purpose of the video and it is not gratuitously graphic. For example, a documentary on breast cancer would be appropriate, but posting clips out of context from the documentary might not be.” The discouragement of “clips out of context” favors professional, fully edited documentary material, despite YouTube having made its reputation through nonprofessional raw video.

As activist videos of death on YouTube illustrate, the malleability of these guidelines and their dependence on human judgment allow the site to distribute death videos in many circumstances—when YouTube administrators decide they are educational or, indeed, when they could “make a difference” in a cause deemed worthy.12 This chapter will analyze two such sets of YouTube videos, but the site does remove the majority of death footage posted there. That removal process begins with the unpaid labor of YouTube users who press the “Report” button on videos they find inappropriate (for any reason); it continues with the underpaid labor of professional content moderators, who must view each flagged video and individually judge whether it should be removed (or have warnings and age restrictions added to it). Most content moderation for U.S. sites is now outsourced to low-wage workers, especially in the Philippines, increasing the extent to which the streaming video experience of U.S. audiences is globally inflected—even with domestically posted videos. Not incidentally in relation to this book’s topic, content moderation jobs have a high turnover rate, and those who perform them sometimes require psychological counseling, developing a PTSD-like condition from spending full workdays evaluating an endless stream of mediated horrors.13

Even this labor-intensive system with its high human cost, though, cannot actually adequately keep graphic content off of YouTube. Despite increasing pressure from worldwide governments to fend off propagandistic content from ISIS and other violent extremist organizations, YouTube has continued to rely on this imperfect, post-uploading system of censorship, and its officials have stated that the company could not possibly prescreen the volume of videos posted to the site (roughly three hundred hours of content per minute).14 The gap between posting and removal that this structure creates is what largely enables the continued circulation of graphic death videos online. During that gap, social media often enter the network of distribution, as YouTube video
virality depends on off-site actions (especially given YouTube’s limited realization of its internal social media affordances). YouTube users embed a video to their Facebook and Twitter feeds—where the video begins a separate process of content moderation for each of those sites—sharing it with wider circles of friends and followers, any of whom can share it further. By the time YouTube (or any similar site hosting streaming video) actually removes a video, it has often already been seen by vast audiences both on and off the site. In an instructive example, gunman and ex-journalist Vester Lee Flanagan recorded his 2015 murders of two former colleagues with his mobile phone as he committed them and then engineered the distribution of this death footage for maximum virality. In the hours after the incident, Flanagan seeded his Facebook and Twitter accounts with a steady flow of justifications for his actions. Only when his name was released as a suspect and journalists began scouring the Internet for information on him did Flanagan post the death video, giving it maximum exposure before Facebook and Twitter could react and suspend his accounts.\textsuperscript{15}

During the window in which a fated-to-be-removed death video is still accessible, it is not only shareable but downloadable (through any number of free and easily accessed programs online). Now housed on the hard drives or in the clouds of other users, these videos can be freshly uploaded—back to the same places in a whack-a-mole style saga of posting and removal, or to sites with less stringent censorship policies. Thus, despite the swift removal of Flanagan’s video by Facebook and Twitter, anyone can still watch it today on LiveLeak or TheYNC, two sites that form end points on a spectrum of respectability for “death porn” websites.\textsuperscript{16} While LiveLeak does post news stories in addition to its graphic images and videos, TheYNC typifies the more extreme mode of marketing documentary death footage to an unabashedly morbid audience—an audience seemingly disinterested in its possible “redeeming social importance” and focused solely on its grim audiovisual attractions. When YouTube asserts in its “Community Guidelines” that it is “not a shock site,” these are the shock sites from which it is distancing itself.

Death porn sites have regular users who come to browse such material, but the sites can also be the final destination for a viewer who has first tried to find a particular death video on YouTube and eventually concluded that it is not allowed there. I say “eventually” because many YouTube posters—from individuals to news organizations—capitalize on others’ desire to find these forbidden clips, titling their videos to imply access to what they never actually display. A YouTube search for “james foley beheading” provides illustrative examples. As far back as 2004 and Nick Berg’s recorded murder, terrorist execution videos
have polarized the U.S. public between the revulsion that many people feel at the idea of watching a recorded beheading and the undeniable draw these sights have for others—freshly evidenced in search engine data that reveal how often Internet users tried to access these videos. In the aforementioned example search term “james foley beheading,” one may click on small-time news channel You Spot’s video titled “ISIS Militants Behead Abducted American Journalist James Foley [Real Video]” but discover that the “real video” is a one-minute excerpt that ends before the beheading itself. Other search results use a thumbnail preview of Foley’s killer pressing a knife to his neck in the moment just before its penetration, despite the fact that the previewed video contains neither the beheading footage nor even that thumbnail frame.

Any actual footage of Foley’s 2014 beheading that appeared on YouTube has been removed, but this and other ISIS execution videos abound on death porn sites, constituting a large portion of the sites’ uploads during the group’s highly active period of executions. These perpetrator videos often appear on the sites in an edited form that retains their gore and cuts the surrounding propaganda—as was the case when, for example, ISIS burned Jordanian pilot Muath Al-Kaseasbeh alive and TheYNC posted a 1:24-minute excerpt of the group’s 22-minute video. But such posts, I would assert, still bolster one of the primary goals that motivates the very existence of these highly political snuff films: to spread fear, in the most vivid and immersive form possible. The apparently symbiotic relationship between ISIS and the death porn sites that host recordings of their murders reveals the sinister potential of a digital media environment with an unfettered circulation of images and few gatekeepers—an important caveat to my support for such an environment elsewhere in this chapter.

One death porn site, TheYNC (which is representative of others such as Goregrish, Rotten, and BestGore), hosts graphic actuality videos in categories such as “Accident,” “Gore,” “Murder,” “Suicide,” and “War & Conflict.” Lacking any “About” page where a website’s owners typically explain its purpose, TheYNC and its users nevertheless communicate the site’s worldview through the sensationalistic titles of its video posts, through the lack of contextual information with many videos, and especially through the site’s sponsors. As one scrolls through the home page’s dense grid of violent offerings, highly explicit video ads for hard-core pornography from sites like PunishTube.com—often violent in nature—autoplay in the page’s right sidebar, suggesting a profitable crossover between visitors to death porn sites and visitors to sexually pornographic sites. I emphasize these ads not to condemn the consumption of
pornography but rather to note the viewing mode for death footage that their prominent presence encourages: actual death is made visible here for titillation, with no pretense of an interest in education, activism, or even an apolitically existential curiosity about the end of life.

Of all the research I have done for Dying in Full Detail, browsing death porn sites has been the most distressing—not because this footage is the most explicit (though it is) but because of the brutally unsympathetic environment these sites foster for watching people lose their lives, because of the palpable aura of inhumanity and disrespect that hangs in the virtual air there. As much as I might like to dismiss death porn sites as outliers, little-trafficked places in some dark corner of the Internet, their troubling popularity demonstrates a fairly widespread desire among today’s Internet users for documentary death in its most graphic and unethical forms. LiveLeak is ranked 696 globally and 522 in the United States among the world’s most-visited websites, and even the far less reputable TheYNC logs view counts in the millions for its top videos.

More striking even than their popularity is these sites’ sheer volume of death footage, documenting lives ending from all manner of violent causes and from all corners of the earth: a male attacker chases a woman down in the street and stabs her to death, two men rob a gas station and gun down its attendant, an angry crowd beats a man to death inside a church, a woman on a train platform stands too close to the edge and is fatally struck, a motorcyclist plows into a car making a sudden turn on a busy road. Most of these sites’ videos are shot from a distance—overtly gruesome in their subject matter, but revealing little of the death’s violent detail. Some appear to come from CCTV cameras, others from mobile phones. Some are direct uploads; others are recordings of computer or television screens playing the footage from elsewhere. Some imply a geography, with on-screen Hindi characters from a news report or onlookers speaking Spanish; others occur at completely generic locations. In the absence of further details about these deaths from their postings, such contextual clues within the videos themselves feel significant—seldom as they lead the viewer to any concrete information. Usually many questions remain: When, where, and to whom did this death happen? What motivated a violent attack? Was the perpetrator apprehended? Is there a chance the victim actually survived and recovered? And, hauntingly, who recorded this death and for what purpose did someone distribute its recording? Most videos that end up on death porn sites never prove newsworthy enough to garner significant media exposure and, with it, answers to these questions. Instead, they gather on death porn sites in a steady stream, testifying to the unsettling banality both of violent death and now, in the digital age, of its documentary recording.
YouTube’s policy against “gratuitous” violence aims to distance it from the atmosphere of shock sites, but it also requires YouTube to make judgments about what recorded violence should be widely seen. In 2009, the site deemed two sets of death videos worthy that became integrated with activist causes. The videos of Oscar Grant III show the death of this twenty-two-year-old African American father at the hands of transit police in Oakland, California. In the first few hours of 2009, Grant was returning from New Year’s Eve celebrations when Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) police stopped his train at Oakland’s Fruitvale station. Responding to reports of a fight that allegedly included Grant, four officers detained him and his friends on the platform as a train full of passengers watched the scene—and in some cases recorded it. After officers Johannes Mehserle and Tony Pirone pushed Grant facedown on the ground and attempted to handcuff him, Mehserle drew his gun and shot Grant fatally in the back. Mehserle later claimed that he thought Grant might be reaching for a weapon and had mistaken his own gun for his Taser in his effort to subdue Grant. In fact, no one in Grant’s party was armed.

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

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

The first video of Agha-Soltan posted to YouTube and the most widely viewed shows the anonymous camera operator approaching her as Panahi and Dr. Arash Hejazi, a bystander, lay her on the ground and press their hands to her chest, trying to stop her bleeding. As the operator circles past them to get a clear shot of Agha-Soltan’s face, she appears to look directly at the camera just before blood begins to pour from her mouth and then nose. More people gather and begin to scream as she continues to bleed and as attempts to save her become more frantic, at which point the forty-second video cuts out. Another begins with an anonymous operator’s thumb blocking the lens—a reminder that these are images captured by nonprofessionals in a chaotic situation. The operator approaches Agha-Soltan and the puddle of blood she is lying in, then passes over Panahi’s shoulder to enframe her face, already covered with blood that is pooling in one of her eyes, the other open and staring blankly.22

This startling close-up was widely reproduced as a still image by the Green Movement and its international allies for use at protests and in online efforts to gather support for its cause. Understanding the risk the videos posed to those behind and in front of the cameras, their anonymous makers sent them out of Iran to friends who distributed them online and to news outlets. The first video described here, for example, was sent by its author to a friend, who then sent it to an Iranian expatriate friend in the Netherlands, who then posted to YouTube and Facebook and sent it to the BBC and the Guardian.23 YouTube’s administrators refrained from removing the videos (despite their violent content), and as they made waves in the site’s “attention economy”—where audience engagement is the sought-after commodity—major U.S. news networks also aired them. All this took only hours, with Agha-Soltan’s death streaming online and televised on the news on the very day that she died. The videos even spread within Iran, where the government tried—with moderate success—to cut off public access to social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. Iranians saw the videos on nonstate television channels accessed via satellite
4.2. Neda Agha-Soltan appears to look directly at the camera that records her.
4.3. Neda Agha-Soltan’s dying face, covered in blood.
dishes or sent them from mobile phone to mobile phone using Bluetooth connections.  

My intention in discussing Grant’s and Agha-Soltan’s deaths together is not to equate them but rather to show differences in their circumstances, how they were recorded, and how those videos circulated, as well as the impact of those differences on activist responses to each death. Nevertheless, both sets of videos were united by their shared aim to publicize deaths that would usually remain politically invisible, using their newly achievable documentary mediation (with the affordances of mobile phone cameras and streaming video distribution) to command public attention. In other words, their makers and distributors hoped that literal visibility would translate to political visibility and the greater viability of associated activist movements. Death’s expected invisibility in these two cases is not attributable simply to an atmosphere of death denial or other such broad factors but rather is quite culturally specific. Grant’s death would likely have remained politically invisible because of the U.S. public’s customary indifference to the unjust deaths of Black men at the hands of law enforcement, demonstrated time and again in the decades preceding Grant’s killing. Without its documentary capture, Agha-Soltan’s death would likely have been suppressed rather than ignored, as the Iranian government worked to prevent accurate domestic and international reporting of its violence against protesting Iranian citizens.

Digital video (dv) secured visibility, to at least some degree, for both deaths, but when the videos were quickly posted online, they became filtered through the exhibition conditions of streaming sites—especially YouTube. Here they entered an environment of death’s limitless repetition in time and multiplication in space. Users could watch the signs of death’s finality register in each video, then return instantly to that video’s beginning, reviving the dead and watching it all again. This mode of viewing is the sort André Bazin so passionately decried in “Death Every Afternoon”: the casual repetition of a temporally sacred moment that, he asserts, should remain unrepeatable. At the time of his writing in 1958, such an act would have required the physical rolling back of a celluloid reel, or if death footage were televised, a perhaps fruitless wait for it to reappear in the medium’s flow. In the ensuing decades, vhs would introduce a rewind function, but viewers would still be made to wait through the abbreviated duration of the event as it manually reversed and to approximate the right moment to press play and resume the scene’s repetition. YouTube, though, makes this act of repetition instantaneous, easier than ever, and explicitly encouraged through the “Replay” icon on each video’s control panel. And because Grant’s and Agha-Soltan’s deaths were each recorded on several cameras—with
the footage from each posted and reposted in many forms by many users—Bazin’s sacred moment multiplies not just in time but also in (virtual) space. That expansion is visualized whenever one finishes watching an Agha-Soltan selection, for example, and is then inundated with suggestions of other videos that YouTube’s algorithms determine may be of further interest, including more or identical footage of the same incident. Thus, if “Replay” does not appeal, one can instead select from the many little thumbnail images of Agha-Soltan’s bleeding face to see other angles or alternate postings of the same video.

The YouTube viewing experience I have just described seems to invite a certain callousness, and yet the act of watching these streaming videos—likely more than once and from more than one angle—helped fuel political responses and actions by or on behalf of the Green Movement. Theorists such as Dean and Juhasz, quoted earlier, express justified skepticism about these progressive powers of new media, but it is hard to deny that the Green Movement put social media—especially Twitter and YouTube—to work for large-scale political actions, as would participants in the Arab Spring revolutions two years later. Within Iran, activists used them to come together in the streets and navigate through government opposition, fully engaging in the “ground-level organization work” and the “planning, discipline, sacrifice, and delay” that Dean sees being phased out by low-investment virtual actions. Outside Iran, people did take to the streets to demonstrate in solidarity (having learned about the Green Movement online, in many cases), but they also used new media tools not just to spread awareness but to interfere actively with the Iranian government’s assault against the protesters. Western Internet users provided proxy servers to keep open lines of communication with the protesters in the face of government attempts to cut them off. And many on Twitter changed their location and time zone settings to make it seem as if they were in Tehran, thus making it harder for government agents to find and persecute actual Iranian organizers through Twitter.

That agents were looking for the protesters on Twitter exemplifies the dark side of new media’s political potential. As scholars have regularly noted since the 2009 protests in Iran, these media have been wielded by activists against governments and by governments against activists, as the powers that be adapt and learn the technologies. This reversal occurred during Iran’s protests in general and even with the Agha-Soltan case in particular. For example, one of the men providing medical attention to Agha-Soltan in the videos, Dr. Arash Hejazi, fled the country once they went online because he was clearly identifiable in them and feared reprisals. More strangely, an Iranian woman named Neda Soltani with no connection to Agha-Soltan or her death was also com-
pelled to flee. In the mad rush to supply information about the woman whose recorded death was suddenly being seen around the world, media sources mistakenly published Soltani’s Facebook profile picture as Agha-Soltan. Soltani received threats from the regime—which, in this case, had its digitally enabled surveillance done (incompetently) for it by the media. Having no way to correct an error with such global reach, Soltani left and sought asylum in Germany. Even doing Internet searches for Agha-Soltan today, one finds many images of protest signs and shrines that pair the living Soltani’s face with the dying Agha-Soltan’s—tragically mistaken before-and-after displays that speak to specific perils of the digital age.

Stories from Iran in 2009 or many countries in the Middle East and North Africa in 2011 demonstrate that we must temper excitement about the good that new media can do for activists with an awareness of the evil it can do for oppressive regimes. But it is unwise to disregard the former in light of the latter—particularly after the Green Movement and the Arab Spring and even contemporaneous actions within U.S. borders through pro-union protests in Wisconsin and the Occupy movement. Though very different in scope and stakes, these events all demonstrate that activists, not just the governments they protest, have a learning curve with new media: they are still discovering how material and virtual forms of resistance can be mutually supportive and need not be exclusive.

With Grant and Agha-Soltan, digital technology made visible, in mediated form, deaths that fueled political causes. “Citizen journalists” in both situations were on hand and technologically equipped to document brutal killings that the press did not capture—or could not in Iran because of the ban on nonstate media. Digital distribution plays a key role with the Grant and Agha-Soltan videos, as well. Long before such distribution was an option, Abraham Zapruder sold his 8mm film of President Kennedy’s death to Time, Inc., which locked it away in vaults for twelve years before it was shown on U.S. television (illegally). By contrast, footage of Grant and Agha-Soltan streamed online within hours or days of their deaths, much less constrained by the power of governments or news corporations’ gatekeepers. Both deaths pose dangers to the governments they reflect so poorly on, signifying racial discrimination and police brutality in the United States and politically repressive violence in Iran. Yet no government or corporation could shut away a DV clip in 2009 the way one could an 8mm film in the 1960s. Such clips can be uploaded to YouTube in seconds, often directly from the phones that recorded them, where they can be played, replayed, and downloaded freely—a system that provides the public with unprecedented access to raw actuality footage. Even in Iran, where the
government tried mightily to deprive protesters of the digital communication channels that so aided their cause, such channels proved impossible to fully block. They provide, as journalist Youssef Ibrahim puts it, “a new wrinkle for autocratic regimes experienced at quiet repression”—a wrinkle that played a key role in both the Green Movement in 2009 and the Arab Spring of 2011.27

Amateur footage of newsworthy events, even of death, is a phenomenon with roots deeper than the digital era, as exemplified by Zapruder’s 8mm film of the Kennedy assassination. His footage of Kennedy—along with other 1960s death images, such as Saigon Execution—has a sheen of “I can’t believe they caught that on camera.” Today, however, the recording of public deaths feels almost inevitable. While Kennedy’s celebrity status justified Zapruder’s decision to carry his 8mm camera to work that day and roll pricey film as the president’s motorcade went by, there were plenty of people on the Oakland BART train equipped, trained, and willing to record officers detaining Grant, an anonymous stranger. And Iranian protesters had mobile phone cameras that they drew quickly as they flocked to Agha-Soltan’s side.

Intentionality is a key difference between Zapruder’s film and the videos shot by bystanders in the Grant and Agha-Soltan cases. The individuals recording Grant did so for the purpose of documenting whatever injustice and violence would emerge from the confrontation between passengers and police—even at the risk of having their cameras confiscated. Those recording Agha-Soltan seem similarly motivated to gather evidence of a deadly injustice, given the personal danger they faced in creating and circulating the footage (a reason they still remain anonymous). The Zapruder film, by contrast, provides a textbook example of Vivian Sobchack’s “accidental gaze.” His recording of actual death is unexpected and inadvertent, intruding into a casual home movie of the president’s visit to Dallas and exempting Zapruder from the ethical problems of the “professional gaze.” Sobchack reserves this gaze for professional journalists who pursue death footage intentionally and at the expense of intervention. This gaze is “marked by ethical ambiguity, by technical and machinelike competence in the face of an event which seems to call for further and more humane response.”28

As professional journalists and “citizen journalists” are, to some extent, converging in their documentary activities, it may be tempting to apply the professional gaze label and its attendant burdens to nonprofessionals, like those who recorded Grant’s and Agha-Soltan’s deaths. But such an application would ignore not only economic factors (citizen journalists are, for the most part, not tracking down good news stories to make their livings) but also social and technological ones. Unlike the intrepid reporters Sobchack quotes in her sec-
tion on the professional gaze, the creators of YouTube death videos have usually had a singular experience: the right-time, right-place opportunity to record one death by chance rather than a career investment in pursuing dramatic images for the news. Though Sobchack’s categories of the “endangered gaze” or the “humane stare” might apply to the Grant and Agha-Soltan videos, I believe that a new term is needed to account for the shift in recording practices that digital technology has prompted since Sobchack published “Inscribing Ethical Space” in 1984. I propose an additional category, to be paired with the expectant gaze category I suggest in chapter 3 to describe *The Bridge*: the ubiquitous gaze.

This category connotes the sense in which death’s recording has become common, often accomplished by multiple cameras in a single case—a ubiquity evidenced earlier in my discussion of death porn websites. It also connotes the increasing extent to which the public now presumes that a camera will be present and recording when public death occurs. Sobchack’s categories were written for a media environment where every once in a while, an individual with a camera—usually a news employee or professional documentarian—would encounter a death and have to decide whether and how to record it. Acknowledging the sharp increase in camera-equipped encounters with death in the digital age, my category of the ubiquitous gaze is not conceived as an isolated and individual ethical judgment. Instead, it addresses the social norms that have begun to solidify in the course of rapid technological advancement.

In situations where violence and death are expected, such as the Green Movement’s protests, citizens now tend to be in quick-draw mode with their cameras—always ready to record. This shift is apparent in the bits of death footage that circulated during the Arab Spring, but even more so in those uprisings’ iconic metaimages: those of protesters holding their mobile phone cameras aloft and recording en masse. The salient point, these images suggested, was the now-ubiquitous act of recording itself—a new force of surveillance rising up to challenge the centrally controlled Panopticon (though its footage is still subject to exploitation by those in power). As Libyan activist Mohammed Nabbous optimistically envisioned this technologically enabled new reality in 2011, “At least if we die, many people can see it and protest from everywhere!”

The ubiquitous gaze is not just employed in environments where fatalities are expected from the outset; it is also activated in everyday life when the first signs of looming public violence appear. Once the blood is in the water, so to speak, there is now a societal expectation that anyone with a recording device—and they are *many*—will pull it out and use it. This was certainly the case on the night that Oscar Grant died, and the evidence that such a sensibility is becoming a broad social norm abounds on YouTube, where the norm suggests
that the products of this ubiquitous gaze should be distributed. The ubiquitous gaze’s compulsion to record and distribute documentary footage of death, driven by these emerging social norms and bolstered by YouTube’s lack of a rigid gatekeeping system, pushes farther to the sidelines the process of ethical judgment that is so important to Sobchack. Identifying this ethical shift within journalism’s history of picturing individuals “about to die,” Zelizer observes, “Journalists often avoid depicting what they think is most problematic, but as recent events involving citizen journalists show, nonjournalists may have no such reticence.” This diminished role of ethics may perturb us very little when the images evidence injustices, as Grant’s and Agha-Soltan’s do. But the plentiful clips of violent death uploaded to death porn sites raise sharper concerns about ethics and the ubiquitous gaze.

Helped into existence and brought before the public eye via digital technology, the Grant and Agha-Soltan videos propelled some into political action and generally drew tremendous attention to these deaths. For the Agha-Soltan videos, this was visibility on a global scale, but the Grant videos traveled significantly less beyond U.S. borders. This disparity is evidenced by the statistics YouTube publicly provides on some videos’ circulation. For two of the most popular Grant and Agha-Soltan videos, Grant’s receives the vast majority of its views within the United States, also making small inroads in Canada, Australia, and northern Europe. The Agha-Soltan video garners equal attention in the United States and Iran but also accumulates more significant view counts in Canada, Australia, and northern Europe than Grant’s and has noticeable visibility in countries such as Brazil, India, South Africa, and Algeria. In fact, though the Grant case was discussed nationally in African American and activist communities, its mainstream media coverage and the public’s general awareness of it remained mostly regional—occurring, as it did, several years before the Black Lives Matter movement focused widespread attention on deaths like Grant’s. The New York Times, for example, did not report on the Grant shooting until more than a week after his death, when large protests occurred in Oakland. Agha-Soltan’s death, by comparison, received immediate, in-depth coverage by media outlets worldwide.

While unjust treatment of African Americans by law enforcement is perceived as a commonplace among Oakland residents, the existence of clear video evidence that a white transit officer fatally shot a Black passenger lying prone on the ground galvanized locals and brought masses of protesters into the streets on more than one occasion. The videos made visible the previously invisible suffering of this community. Indeed, the protests began not in the immediate wake of the shooting itself but following the broadcast of the Grant
videos several days later on YouTube and then on local news. While a small number in Oakland participated in looting and property destruction, most protested peacefully, calling for justice, brandishing photographs of Grant, and sometimes lying down in the street in bodily mimicry of the nonthreatening position Grant was in when he was shot. Grant’s supporters closely followed the trial of his killer, Johannes Mehserle, over the ensuing two years and were generally outraged at the leniency of his conviction and sentencing: two years in prison for involuntary manslaughter, of which he ultimately served only eleven months before his June 2011 release on parole. Though Grant’s supporters wanted (and deserved) a different outcome, the fact that an officer was convicted of any criminal charge in an on-duty shooting was nearly unprecedented—a result of the political pressure and authoritative evidence the videos helped provide.33

The racial dynamics of Grant’s death in 2009, the fact that it was recorded, and the palpable outrage it inspired in a major urban area brought comparisons to the Rodney King case of 1991 (though King survived his beating by police). The magnitude of response from the media and the public is, however, not comparable between Grant’s case and King’s. King’s became a major national news story, and the acquittal of his police assailants prompted massive riots in L.A. on a scale well beyond the protests inspired by Grant’s shooting. Reactions to Grant’s death were comparatively muted. My interest here is not to propose any hierarchy of injustice or suggest that Grant’s case was more worthy of attention than King’s—or than the string of other unjust deaths of Black men at the hands of police that would follow in the coming years, discussed later in this chapter. Rather, my intention is to think through the ways in which specific intersections of racialized violence and digital media impact political discourse in the United States—in this case, to consider what type and magnitude of responses the YouTube videos of Oscar Grant’s death produced and why.

In the Agha-Soltan shooting, Internet broadcast of her death videos made Neda, as she is always called by supporters, an instant rallying point for the Green Movement within Iran and elicited an explosion of sympathetic messages and gestures from its international allies (among them, many diasporic Iranians). Her name was yelled on Tehran streets during protests and from residences into the night. She became a fixture of protest signs and a centerpiece of shrines and memorials in Iran and across the globe, as well as a literal “icon” on Twitter. There, supportive users adopted thumbnail photos of her bleeding face as their avatars. Bloggers and posters on YouTube comment boards frequently expressed how deeply the videos shocked and saddened them, adding pleas to spread them and promises to “never forget.” One YouTube user
conveyed a common reaction from the West in the simple statement, “This is the most terrible thing I have seen in all my sheltered and quiet life.” Significantly, the comments on the Agha-Soltan videos contrast with those on Grant’s, which emphasize legal and moral debate more than a sharing of grief. Even as the Green Movement sputtered under government pressure in the months that followed, Agha-Soltan still commanded attention. Iranians risked their safety to mourn her publicly, PBS and HBO aired documentaries about her, The Times in London named her “Person of the Year,” and an Iranian factory was shut down for mass-producing Neda statuettes.

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

So how did the Agha-Soltan videos from Iran generate such broad interest among the Western public while the Grant videos remained more nationally, and even regionally, bound? Part of the former set’s ability to go viral stems from its integration within the larger news story of Iran’s election protests and the political factors intertwined with its coverage. In the United States, where relations with the Iranian government are generally hostile, there was a palpable eagerness to support the Green Movement among media outlets and citizens—some of whom framed the movement’s purposes in tandem with U.S. efforts to spread “freedom” and “democracy” in the Middle East. I also suspect that the videos achieved so much exposure because many Americans believed they could bear witness to Agha-Soltan’s brutal death with few feelings of culpability—unlike images of suffering and death from Iraq or Afghanistan (or, for that matter, Saigon Execution). Furthermore, the usual impetus to “do something” that accompanies activist videos—sometimes alienating viewers who would rather do nothing without guilt—was, in some analysts’ views, mitigated in this case. These analysts feared that too much U.S. intervention in Iran would only strengthen the government’s claims that the unrest was a Western plot and not the true reflection of the Iranian people’s wishes.

Alongside these political dimensions of the videos’ popularity, I argue that audiovisual elements played an equally crucial role. Specifically, the ubiquity and versatility of DV allowed for a representation of Agha-Soltan’s death that mirrors conventions from the West’s mainstream, commercial cinema. As described in chapter 3, Eric Steel grafted such conventions onto death footage in The Bridge largely in the postproduction process—a calculated artistic choice that many saw as inappropriate. Here, the conventions appear in the raw footage itself, seeping in during a chaotic recording situation that did not facilitate
much aesthetic intentionality. Striking among them are the multiple camera angles, which audiences of Hollywood death scenes have long been treated to, but which have become newly practical for documentary in the digital age when more cameras are likely to be on the scene.36 The difference between these angles in fiction film and in the Agha-Soltan videos is that the latter remain raw shots that we watch sequentially rather than simultaneously—as if we had full access to multi-angle (and likely multi-take) coverage of a single scene in a fiction film, seeing shots that would later be condensed and intercut.

The most ironic convention that aligns the Agha-Soltan videos with mainstream fiction is shaky, handheld cinematography. Such cinematography was less a stylistic choice than a practical necessity for documentarians in the 1960s direct cinema and cinema verité period when it became a visual trademark of the documentary form. It was a style largely prompted by a technological shift, as maneuverable 16mm cameras and synchronized sound equipment allowed for a more spontaneous documentation of events as they happened, without tripods and careful setups—a scenario now extended to nonprofessionals with mobile phone cameras, like those who recorded Agha-Soltan’s death. But since its documentary heyday in the 1960s, shaky camerawork has overrun fiction film and television—especially in the twenty-first century. Directors use it intentionally to overlay a gritty, documentary roughness onto fiction for a more real, more authentic feeling. This stylistic adoption is so widespread in fiction that it weakens the link with documentary that the technique is meant to evoke. Where once watching a handheld shot in a fiction film called up associations with documentary, now, I believe, the shakiness of the Agha-Soltan footage calls up associations with fiction film. The unsteady frame that approaches her is very similar to “camera subjectivity” horror films such as The Blair Witch Project (1999, Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sánchez) or Cloverfield (2008, Matt Reeves) and is only a tad more extreme in its jolts than recent war films. Two separate scenes in Flags of Our Fathers, for example, feature a shaky, handheld camera and on-screen soldiers approaching a wounded comrade from approximately the same angle as the Agha-Soltan footage. These lives slip away in front of the camera, like hers, amid bleeding and suffering and despite medical intervention from desperate witnesses to the deaths.

The videos also provide clear close-ups of the streams of blood that pour from Agha-Soltan’s mouth and nose—blood flow so dramatic that it would be a challenge for an effects makeup artist to simulate convincingly. In fact, the extreme “realism” of Agha-Soltan’s bleeding in these videos has been a safeguard against politically motivated accusations that her death was staged. Viewers seem to understand that simulating such a scene well, with simultaneous cov-
erage from several cameras, would demand expensive and elaborate practical and digital effects. Synced to the pace of her escalating bleeding is a crescendo of shouts and wails from the gathering crowd, which audibly register the tragedy, providing the type of immersive soundtrack that makes death scenes more evocative.

Agha-Soltan’s Iranian identity also plays a major role. Image distributors and consumers in the West have long proven that they are comfortable watching the bodily destruction of the ethnic other.37 In particular, the scenario of Americans watching an Iranian woman die at the hands of her own government resonates with the U.S. media’s dominant discourse about the Islamic Republic in Iran: that women are the primary targets of its oppressions and, furthermore, are disempowered, helpless victims. This common lens through which U.S. audiences and news outlets viewed Agha-Soltan’s death ignores both her personal demonstration of political awareness and power as a protester that day and Iranian women’s long history of feminist activism.38 More broadly, as Evelyn Azeeza Alsultany has argued, a trope of the Muslim woman victimized by her culture has emerged in post-9/11 U.S. media. While this figure does generate sympathy, in contrast to the also-common figure of the Islamic terrorist, it has been deployed most often to reinforce the claim that the recent U.S. wars in the Middle East were invested in the “liberation” of Islamic women.39 Agha-Soltan’s death potentially functioned this way for some viewers, affirming U.S. interventions in Iran’s neighboring nations as—perversely—feminist acts.

Extending this comparison to casting and costuming, Agha-Soltan embodied a particular type of Iranian womanhood ideally suited to command sympathy from an international audience. Like Hollywood’s favored murder victims—exported around the globe—she exudes the innocence associated with being young and a woman. Her feminine beauty allows for her objectification, too, in the risqué blend of sex and death these films trade in—a viewing mode disturbingly evidenced by numerous lewd YouTube comments on her death videos. Beyond displaying youth and beauty, though, Agha-Soltan in these videos is visually coded as a modern, Westernized Iranian woman and was read as such by the U.S. media and by many within the global Iranian diaspora—regardless of whether this appearance aligned with her actual beliefs and values.40 As she lies on the pavement, her blue jeans and sneakers are prominently visible below her *hejab*. The *hejab* itself is a *roopoosh-roosari* combination (“as sexy a version of the Islamic covering imposed by law as is possible to wear in Iran”) that signifies resistance to the Islamic Republic—not to most Western viewers, but to Iranians in Iran or the diaspora.41 Setareh Sabety explains the cultural specificities of Agha-Soltan’s appearance as such: “Her thin figure, perfectly plucked
eyebrows, and signature Iranian nose job also suggest the kind of woman she was: one of the thousands of young, beautiful women who try to look as Western as possible, despite or in outright defiance of the imposed hejab and thirty years of Islamist indoctrination.”42 These visual details in the videos were supplemented in ensuing media coverage by a highly circulated family photograph of the beautiful Agha-Soltan wearing no hejab at all.

Multiple angles, dramatic blood flow, immersive audio, and the subject’s appearance—these audiovisual details make it easier to understand why the Agha-Soltan videos received such disproportionately massive attention from the international community amid all the footage coming out of Iran that summer. Even other graphic videos of fatal violence failed to generate anywhere near the amount of exposure for the Green Movement that her death did.43 Addressing the ways in which mainstream, corporate media aesthetics drive exposure on YouTube, Juhasz quips, “Like high school cheerleaders, the popular on YouTube do what we already like, in ways we already know.”44 Though their attention and intentions must have been focused elsewhere, the makers of the Agha-Soltan videos achieved a familiar and already-popular aesthetic form.

That Agha-Soltan’s death looks like a gritty Hollywood war movie is especially important in connecting with U.S. audiences—the dominant users of YouTube—(and, to some extent, also to global audiences acclimated to U.S. media).45 Many Americans respond to these representations of death not because they are necessarily callous and entertainment-oriented but because Hollywood has been their primary guide to what death looks like for much of the past century. As discussed in the introduction, while previous generations had ample firsthand exposure at deathbeds, the twentieth century brought both lower death rates and a rapid medicalization of the dying process that replaced its visibility in the home with sequestering in the hospital. There it was kept mainly out of sight, soothing a society that no longer welcomed familiarity with the physical transition from life to death. Fictional, filmic representations partially assumed the role of exposing people to that process, but with an unsurprising preference for spectacle, favoring the most dynamic and dramatized types of death.

The same appetite for spectacle also dominates YouTube, despite the site’s high concentration of actuality footage. YouTube’s attention economy is “based on the slogan: pithy, precise, rousing calls to action, or consumption, or action as consumption,” and here the brief, spectacle-oriented video is king.46 Its dominance curtails documentarians’ options for displaying death’s duration, its frequent resistance to spectacular visibility, or its context. Sam Gregory, program director for the activist video organization WITNESS, notes the difficulties hu-
man rights videos face in attracting attention on YouTube because “much hu-
man rights material is not immediately powerful performance, and may not be 
most effectively or honestly presented in that mode.” Agha-Soltan’s recorded 
death has achieved viral status globally because it is “immediately powerful 
performance.” It embodies the temporally condensed spectacle of YouTube, 
plus documentary’s poignant stamp of authenticity—the alluring promise that 
one is seeing the taboo sight of “real” death unfolding before the camera. 

Comparatively, the videos of Oscar Grant have the look of courtroom evi-
dence, not of a dramatic death scene—a perfectly reasonable quality that never-
theless deflates their power in YouTube’s attention economy. Though more 
people recorded Grant’s death than Agha-Soltan’s, the multiple angles offer less 
to choose from: several use very similar vantage points, and none secure the 
close-ups that make the Agha-Soltan videos so striking. Those who recorded 
Grant’s death lacked the proximity and mobility of their Iranian counterparts 
because the BART officers had confined them to the train cars. In the bystander 
videos, Grant himself becomes a small and obscured collection of pixels, rem-
iniscent of (but even less visible than) Kennedy, who died in miniature and 
awash in 8mm film grain in Zapruder’s recording of his assassination. Bay 
Area news programs underscored the difficulty of seeing Grant’s fatal shooting 
within the videos by adding a familiar annotation when airing them: a bright 
circle around Grant and Mehserle that tells us where to look for the obscured 
action in the frame.

Within this little circle, Grant suffers a lethal injury when Mehserle’s bullet 
pierces his lungs, but one that remains invisible to the camera—unlike, say, the 
nonlethal kicks and baton blows on dramatic display in the Rodney King video. 
Grant’s dose of police brutality affectively fails to project its actual brutality in 
its video documentation. With this aspect of the Grant videos, we can recall the 
challenge described in chapter 1 that death documentary shares with genres 
and movements as varied as melodrama, pornography, and German expression-
ism: the necessity of externalizing internal states for the camera. Robert Capa 
strove for and eloquently attained the external visibility of death by gunshot 
in staging The Falling Soldier in 1936. What he achieved with a faux actuality 
image, the citizens who recorded Agha-Soltan’s death managed with legitimate 
actuality footage, but those who recorded Grant’s failed to attain it. This failure 
of the visible is a particular problem because of the extraordinary expectations 
twenty-first-century viewers (and juries) have for video evidence—brought on 
by the expanding camera coverage of public space and the technological fic-
tions spread by television crime dramas. Investigators on shows like CSI and 
Law and Order often manage to obtain clear footage of a crime that cracks their
case. Even if this footage is initially distant or blurry, they just push a few buttons to sharpen the image or zoom in on a detail—operations that tend to be technologically impossible or financially impractical for actual investigations.

The limited proximity and mobility of Grant’s recorders align their footage more with the distant, fixed positions of surveillance cameras than with the omniscience and omnipotence of the camera in most fiction films. Agha-Soltan’s bystanders, like Hollywood cinematographers, knew exactly where the action was and what the viewers would want to see. The bystanders recording Grant, however, sometimes lack that awareness because the Oakland shooting played out in a more chaotic way than the one in Tehran. Karina Vargas, for example, disobeys police orders and exits the train to better record the arrest. But just as she approaches Grant and Mehserle, she suddenly pans left to catch a young man being tackled right next to her. As she does, Mehserle shoots Grant offscreen, and Vargas misses the scene’s most important feature.

Considering the challenges of this recording situation, YouTube viewers are wildly unsympathetic to Vargas. Her turbulent camerawork and inability to frame the action demonstrate what Juhasz calls the “bad video” aesthetic on YouTube, derided by users for its failure to achieve “the conventional norms of quality, particularly in relation to form (lighting, framing, costume, make-up, editing, sound, recording and mixing, performance, etc.).” A comment from Pirate48153 typifies the harsh, misogynistic feedback Vargas receives: “Bitch next time learn how to 2 fukin record b4 u go postin shit up on youtube u stupid hoe.” Lest it appear that Pirate is an outlier: forty-six more YouTube users gave this comment a thumbs-up than gave it a thumbs-down—making it quantitatively the most approved-of comment of all 3,357 posted on that video. As this intense outrage implies, details in the Grant videos like Vargas’s ill-timed pan disrupt the fantasy of ocular power that mainstream fiction and the Agha-Soltan videos provide, reading as frustrating moments when the contingencies of documentary interfere with desire for “maximum visibility.”

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

Although these words suggest a viewing position allied with Grant rather than the officers, they also reinforce the subtle framing of the footage as most notable for the questions of legality and ethics it raises, not for its tragic loss of life. This dynamic is understandable considering that most of the Grant footage precedes his shooting, while the Agha-Soltan footage follows hers; also, witnesses reported that even after the shooting many passengers assumed Grant had been tased or otherwise failed to realize he had been fatally shot with a pistol. The protesters surrounding Agha-Soltan when she is felled by a bullet also provide a cacophony of voices but in a more overtly emotional way: they tell her not to be afraid, plead for her to stay with them, or simply scream. For the majority of Western viewers who do not speak Farsi, the audible emotion of the soundtrack likely feels especially prominent in the absence of linguistic comprehension. In terms of both image and sound, the case I am making is that aesthetics drive exposure for Internet video and that this is true even for documentary, activist material. There, it seems as if political content should trump audiovisual form, but the reverse is more common—as exemplified by the wild virality of “Kony 2012,” a slickly produced, deeply problematic work that became the most-viewed activist video in YouTube’s history.

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

In the preceding details, a sense emerges of how greatly audiovisual elements shape the emotional reactions and political actions that individual deaths generate in an era when they are recorded and displayed more and more frequently. What’s at stake in that shaping process is the extent to which lives are “grievable,” as Judith Butler describes. In Precarious Life, she writes about how certain types of death have been ignored or suppressed in public discourse, such as the deaths of gay men during the AIDS crisis or the victims of U.S.
bombings in Iraq and Afghanistan. While Butler draws the borders of grievability based on identity and causes of death, the Grant and Agha-Soltan videos demonstrate that aesthetics, too, can contribute powerfully to Butler’s uneasy truth that some lives are “so easily humanized” and others not.\(^{51}\)

While shot distance and audio play key roles in the relative humanization of the dying Grant and Agha-Soltan, I assert that the primary distinction here is the inclusion of Agha-Soltan’s face, in close-up. Intimate facial close-ups are a rarity in documentary death but they are a fixture of death in fiction film—a tool for forging sympathy and identification between audience and character. Facial close-ups like Agha-Soltan’s seem also to promise the clearest window on the mystical “moment of death” that mainstream, commercial cinema obsessively displays. The archetypal shot is a close-up of the dying character as her or his expression slackens and eyes close or slip into a blank stare. I described this type of shot in my discussion of Douglas Sirk’s *Imitation of Life* (1959) in chapter 2: wealthy actress Lora sits at the bedside of her African American housekeeper, Annie, and listens as the dying woman utters her last words, “I’m just tired, Miss Lora—awfully . . . tired . . . ” Annie’s head and eyelids droop in close-up as her speech trails off. Many YouTube viewers perceive a similar process unfolding in the first Agha-Soltan video, as her eyes seem to meet the camera’s stare and then roll back in a loss of consciousness, soon obscured as blood runs over them. As evidenced by user comments, the apparent visibility of this dying process gives the Agha-Soltan videos an emotional charge beyond the power of documentary’s more common images of corpses. As Sobchack, quoted earlier, reminds us: when cameras roll on the dying rather than the dead, identification is more likely.

Beyond close-ups, the Agha-Soltan videos even offer the illusion of eye contact—a feature of documentary images prized by Roland Barthes in *Camera Lucida*. Lamenting his boredom with a recent catastrophe, he writes: “Trying to make myself write some sort of commentary on the latest ‘emergency’ reportage, I tear up my notes as soon as I write them. What—nothing to say about death, suicide, wounds, accidents? No, nothing to say about these photographs in which I see surgeons’ gowns, bodies lying on the ground, broken glass, etc. Oh, if only there were a look, a subject’s look, if only someone in the photograph were looking at me! For the Photograph has this power . . . of looking me straight in the eye.”\(^{52}\) Though Barthes then denies its power to fiction film, a look “straight in the eye” is within the repertoire of documentary, and Agha-Soltan’s death provides a striking instance. Many bloggers and posters to YouTube’s comment boards wrote about this detail and the haunting experience of Agha-Soltan’s look as she dies.\(^{53}\)
Between Oscar Grant and the cameras that record his death, there is no eye contact, nor even many clear shots of his face. The Grant videos portray a victim who is decidedly not “faced,” who often becomes a flat representative of a demographic group (“young Black men”)—hence the extreme ubiquity of Grant’s face in the protests, used by supporters to individuate and humanize him. Renderings of his face—uniformly based on one smiling photo that local newspapers ran in the case’s aftermath—appeared as posters, at public memorials, on protest signs, on T-shirts, as masks worn by demonstrators, and even as large-scale murals.

Tellingly, when Grant’s shooting was reenacted for the feature film Fruitvale Station (2013), director Ryan Coogler focused the scene’s cinematography on getting closer to Grant’s face than the cameras that witnessed his death—a visual contrast the film itself signals by opening with documentary footage of the incident in long shot. Fruitvale Station draws its audience figuratively and literally closer to Grant as he is fatally shot: the former through a detailed and sympathetic account of his last day of life, the latter through an evocative close-up of his face reacting to the precise moment that Mehserle fires. Framed sideways, as Grant’s head is pressed against the pavement, his face registers the gunshot with widening eyes and a look that cycles subtly through reactions of shock, disbelief, and pain. Maximizing the sense of heart-wrenching emotion and injustice in this close-up, Coogler capitalizes on actor Michael B. Jordan’s expressive face, which carries the accumulated associations of Jordan’s previous, typecaste roles as other disadvantaged but fundamentally good young Black men (in the television shows The Wire, Friday Night Lights, and Parenthood). This proximity of Coogler’s camera to the dying—so easily attained in fiction filmmaking and so elusive in actuality footage—affords the face’s humanizing display of suffering that Agha-Soltan’s footage showcases and Grant’s obscures.

In Oakland, there was a localized outpouring of grief for Grant in the wake of his death, but if public response to the Grant and Agha-Soltan videos generally frames the latter’s death as more widely, globally “grievable,” it is also because a broad swath of viewers felt able to identify with Agha-Soltan as they watched her breathe her last breaths. The political actions that arose from both deaths bear this out in their different deployments of “I am Neda” and “I am Oscar Grant” declarations. “I am _____” or “We are all _____” is a common template for activists whose actions center on an individual. It is also a template that deserves closer examination for its bold (and usually uncritical) declaration of not just support for that individual but direct identification with them.

Grant supporters in Oakland shouted this slogan at marches, spray-painted
4.4. Mural of Oscar Grant in Oakland, California (© Noah Berger/Associated Press).
4.5. Michael B. Jordan as Oscar Grant, at the moment he is shot (*Fruitvale Station*, 2013, Ryan Coogler, Anchor Bay).
it around the city, and inscribed it on protest signs. The individuals declaring this shared identity were largely (though not exclusively) those who indeed shared with Grant all or most of the identity attributes that were seen as crucial to his death: being a person of color, male, and young. San Francisco filmmaker Kevin Epps, for example, explained at a protest, “I’m angry because [Grant] could have been me. . . . We’re guilty until proven innocent.”54 The “I am Oscar Grant” declarations demonstrate one way in which a shared vulnerability to violence can be, as Butler claims, a unifying force—a force she posits as crucial in this post-9/11 world. She writes, “From where might a principle emerge by which we vow to protect others from the kinds of violence we have suffered, if not from an apprehension of a common human vulnerability? I do not mean to deny that vulnerability is differentiated, that it is allocated differently across the globe.”55 In its culturally specific deployment among young African American men, “I am Oscar Grant” evokes that uneven allocation of vulnerability. Compared with members of other demographic groups in the United States, these citizens are implicated somewhat less by the trend posited in chapter 2 wherein a fixation on violent death helps us avoid contemplating the natural deaths we expect for ourselves. Natural death is statistically still far more likely for African American men, but the Grant case demonstrates why violent death may justifiably loom larger in their psyches.56

The parallel “I am Neda” declarations seem to follow Butler’s principle, too, but ultimately elide her clarification that vulnerability is “allocated differently across the globe.” Unlike the mostly Bay Area–based “I am Oscar Grant” statements, which remained situated in a specific social and political context, announcements of “I am Neda” again achieved global reach. In addition to the phrase’s appearance in international protests, it was used to generate personal photos and messages online in solidarity with Agha-Soltan. Amnesty International launched one such campaign, called “Neda Speaks,” for which 2,760 users submitted photos.57 The site’s explanation of the campaign grounds its use of the phrase in the local and culturally specific, explaining, “People in Iran yell ‘I am Neda’ into the street after lights out as a sign of defiance since the government has made it illegal to mourn for her. We want you to join us in support of this fundamental stand for human rights by uploading a photo of yourself holding a sign that says ‘I am Neda.’” What is not explained is why that powerful phrase should be exported out of its local and specific context—why the declaration of identification “I am Neda” is the best way to make “this fundamental stand for human rights.” Nevertheless, thousands of people of diverse ages, genders, ethnicities, and nationalities have posted pictures of themselves with “I am Neda” scrawled on paper they hold, on visible body parts, or on
their clothing. As earnest and well-meaning as these individuals probably are, many of them seem to exemplify Jodi Dean’s disappointed digital-age principle, “React and forward, but don’t by any means think.”

While African American Bay Area resident Kevin Epps can say “I am Oscar Grant” because “[Grant] could have been me,” there is little credibility in the idea that many of the “I am Neda” declarers would feel like “Neda could have been me.” These supporters are able to identify with the woman dying so dramatically in intimate close-up and looking them “straight in the eye,” but their sharing of human vulnerability lacks nuance. Their good intentions are dampened by the missing acknowledgment that vulnerability is “allocated differently across the globe”—that a white teenage boy posting from his home in Connecticut, for example, will very likely avoid being shot by his government or dying by any violent means.

One example that is both moving and fraught comes from another, smaller-scale “I am Neda” photo project started by a Tumblr user who “wanted to make a point that Neda became the face of the uprising because we could all see ourselves in her.” Responding to that user’s call for photos of people wearing homemade “I am Neda” apparel, a U.S. soldier serving in Iraq posted a photo of himself in full military gear, holding open his unbuttoned camouflage shirt to reveal those words, inscribed in marker on his T-shirt. However earnestly and emotionally this soldier describes his feelings about Agha-Soltan’s death in his accompanying text, there remains a certain incongruity between the words he has written on his shirt and his visibly signified participation in the U.S. war in neighboring Iraq—a lingering gap between the capacity to sympathize and the right to claim a shared identity. Perhaps the American song “Neda”—recorded and made into a music video by the band the Airborne Toxic Event for Amnesty International’s “Neda Speaks” campaign—best expresses the power and naïveté embodied in “I am Neda.” Collapsing space in a familiar cliché and eschewing the spirit of Butler’s assertion that vulnerability is “allocated differently across the globe,” the song’s repeating chorus about how Agha-Soltan’s death affects the American songwriter ends with the deliberately pronounced words, “I never thought the world could be so small.”

The Promise and Peril of Context

The qualities of the Agha-Soltan videos that enable this broad, even strained, “I am Neda” identification—their universalizing communication of suffering and death, encapsulated in short, dramatic, and aesthetically familiar clips—are the same qualities that exclude cultural specificity. While useful for draw-
ing attention to an activist cause, such videos reduce complex events to spectacle and strip away cultural and political context—a characteristic of YouTube that worries scholars and activists. Sam Gregory points out that “most human rights situations are embedded in contexts of structural complexity, long histories of repression and reaction and many actors with different agendas.”

This problem is especially prevalent in raw footage distributed online, where it can be re- or decontextualized when taken from its original site and embedded elsewhere, and where it is often accompanied by uninformed and even misleading user comments. As described earlier, a lack of context troubles YouTube’s administrators, as well, forming one of the criteria under which they may remove graphic videos from the site. Even as the Agha-Soltan videos expose conditions in Iran during the protests, they also exclude aspects of Iranian culture and history enmeshed with this murder. Most important, the raw footage itself cannot explain the context of martyrdom’s resonance for Islam and for Iran.

Distinct from looser applications in the West, martyrdom in Islam is more codified, and the title can be bestowed or denied officially by legal and religious authorities. At the core, an Islamic martyr (shaheed) is one whose death creates a powerful testimony to his or her faith. Martyrdom has been a truly formative concept for Iran, specifically because its population is predominantly Shiite—a sect of Islam for which the martyr Hussein is a key figure—and because the 1980s Iran-Iraq War forged countless martyrs who were revered by the Ayatollah Khomeini and the government. Indeed, Iran remains today “a nation actively promoting the culture of martyrdom.”

The concept and history of Islamic martyrdom in Iran provided a frame through which many there and in the Iranian diaspora discussed or interpreted Agha-Soltan’s death—a set of common cultural reference points familiar to even the secular elements of the Green Movement, whose conception of her martyrdom would not be a religious one. While Agha-Soltan was being embraced as a martyr for the protesters, Iran’s government was—rather astoundingly—attempting to reverse that move by making her a martyr for the Islamic Republic. The government offered her parents the pension entitled to an official martyr if they would go along with the story that she was killed by protesters. They would not; as her mother explained, “Neda died for her country, not so I could get a monthly income from the Martyrs Foundation. If these officials say Neda was a martyr, why do they keep wiping off the word ‘martyr,’ which people write in red on her gravestone?”

Understanding the danger that Agha-Soltan’s martyrdom could (and did) fuel the Green Movement, the government launched a long and multifaceted campaign to either co-opt or defuse its power, making this offer to her
parents and also spreading all manner of counternarratives to explain what viewers saw in the videos.\textsuperscript{65}

In a further testament to the Agha-Soltan videos’ global appeal, they can accommodate both the complex narrative conventions of Islamic martyrdom in Iran \textit{and} a simpler “innocent victim” story in the West. Her Iranian family and supporters integrated the tropes of Islamic martyrdom into descriptions of her death: pure intentions, fearlessness, a premonition of her death, and a holy corpse that remains beautiful.\textsuperscript{66} In her look at the camera, some even saw a variant of a final exhortation—an Islamic martyr’s effort to impart truth to the living with her or his final words.\textsuperscript{67}

These qualities not only went unsigned on YouTube but also were generally ignored in the Western news media’s coverage of Agha-Soltan. In some cases, their coverage actively (if inadvertently) disregarded the values associated with martyrdom in Iran. One such value crucial to the function of martyrdom’s recording is that graphic representations of martyrs’ deaths cannot be lumped in with the so-called gratuitous violence in Western media that inspires so much hand-wringing. Numerous online comments attacked the Agha-Soltan videos as insensitive and violent—aligning, it must be noted, with those of some diasporic Iranian feminists—but as historian David Cook notes in \textit{Martyrdom in Islam}, “In the end martyrdom is \textit{about} blood and suffering.”\textsuperscript{68} Blood, suffering, and death are essential, not gratuitous, components of martyrdom and its representation—components that give the act such emotional and persuasive power. The Green Movement and its worldwide supporters understood that immediately, making images of Agha-Soltan’s bloodied face an ever-present feature of their protests.

Yet these components were suppressed in initial airings of the Agha-Soltan videos on major U.S. news networks. Rachel Maddow on \textit{msnbc} played only a small portion of one video, cutting it just before Agha-Soltan began to bleed from her mouth and nose, and accompanied even this snippet with profuse warnings and justifications.\textsuperscript{69} Fox News and \textit{cnn} both blurred out her whole face—a common practice in U.S. television journalism intended to show respect for the victim and family. These channels reversed the digital annotation \textit{ktvu} put on the Oscar Grant videos, adding a circle that denies access to one portion of the frame rather than a circle that calls attention to one. In doing so, they erased Agha-Soltan’s identity, her bleeding and suffering, her charged look at the camera, and the emotional power of the video in general. To suppress Agha-Soltan’s identity and the violence of her death in this manner is to neutralize a martyr’s most powerful means of bearing witness, converting nonbelievers, bolstering the faithful, and honoring the dead.
In these examples of how news networks integrated the Agha-Soltan videos, an uncomfortable insight becomes apparent: calls for simply more context and attacks on YouTube’s lack of context fail to recognize the abuses contextualization can inflict upon footage. Here, the bare encounter with raw footage in the supposedly noncontextualized space of YouTube can provide a clearer and more illuminating engagement with recorded death. I argue that the Grant footage presents another instance of the dual promises and perils of context. Part of the reason that Grant’s shooting quickly inspired such passionate protest in Oakland was that the widely accessible videos of his death seemed to be plainly legible, with no further context required: a Black man lying facedown with his hands behind his back and posing no threat to anyone is shot at close range by a white officer. As police procedure consultant Mark Harrison elegantly put it, “If they were kids from [the wealthy suburb] Orinda being rowdy on the way home from a Raiders game, I don’t think it would have gone down the same way.”

The videos provide visible evidence of extreme white-on-Black police brutality, the sort that many Oakland residents have felt besieged by for decades.

As the saga of Johannes Mehserle’s criminal case got under way, however, his supporters and the press heaped on additional context, details YouTube did not offer that—these sources implied—were necessary to interpreting the videos correctly. For example, the San Francisco Chronicle printed detailed diagrams of how BART officers’ Taser holsters attach to their belts, the process for changing the holster’s configuration, its position on Mehserle’s belt, and how that position could have confused him about whether he was pulling his gun or his Taser. A video expert, Michael Schott, hired by Mehserle’s defense lawyer testified that the footage shows Mehserle struggle to unholster his gun and that this action suggests he thought he was handling his Taser. Most disturbingly, the news media opposed Mehserle’s squeaky-clean record as a BART officer to Grant’s five prior arrests, attempting to justify Mehserle’s readiness to use force, even though he was not aware of Grant’s record during the arrest.

This move exemplifies a lamentable pattern wherein the media aggressively publicizes the past criminal records of Black victims of police brutality. As activist Shaun King wrote on the day video of Alton Sterling’s 2016 killing by police hit YouTube, “Now, you know and I know that we will soon learn what Alton Sterling’s farts smelled like in the third grade. They’ll reach as far back as they need to find a way to degrade and dehumanize him.” Arguing for the primacy of one’s encounter with the raw, uncontextualized streaming video footage of Sterling’s death, King continues, “Please don’t fall for that. What you
need to remember is how you felt when you first saw this man killed.” In the
Grant case, the aggressive inclusion in the news of contextual information that
favored Mehserle did send one message loud and clear, a message already leg-
ible in the way that Grant died: that this young, African American man with a
police record was not living a “grievable life” by U.S. cultural standards. His sup-
porters (and sometimes the media, too) circulated a different set of biographi-
cal details in an effort to counter this one, emphasizing his role as a father, his
very publicly grieving mother, and his friendship with the traumatized men
who awaited arrest with him on that train platform.

By contrast, every piece of personal information about Agha-Soltan that the
media promoted seemed to bolster her grievability in the West: her university
education, close ties with her family and fiancé, love of travel outside Iran,
ambition to be a singer, and oft-alleged love of freedom rather than politics
(as if dying in protest of a fraudulent election could somehow make sense as
an apolitical act). Seldom mentioned in this coverage were details like her di-
vorce or her Islamic religious faith. Thus, in the Grant case, the context pro-
vided by Mehserle’s supporters and by news media mostly obscures as it claims
to clarify, asking the viewer to doubt what initially seemed clear in the raw
videos. Instead of spreading lies and conspiracy theories as Iran’s government
did for the Agha-Soltan videos, Mehserle’s supporters cast doubt on the Grant
videos by spreading superfluous detail—information framed as highly relevant
that should not have overshadowed many of the more basic truths on display
in the videos.

Here we might recall a parallel process of dubious contextualization that oc-
curred in the Rodney King case, with which Grant’s case is so often associated.
Bystander George Holliday’s footage of King’s beating, shot with a home video
camcorder, became key evidence in the trial of LAPD officers. Unable to ignore
this seemingly damning video, the defense instead presented it to the court in
a way that “distorted and dehistoricized” the beating, as Elizabeth Alexander
argues: “The defense in the Simi Valley trial employed familiar language of
black bestiality to construct Rodney King as a threat to the officers. The lawyers
also slowed down the famous videotape so that it no longer existed in ‘real time’
but rather in a slow dance of stylized movement that could as easily be read as
self-defense or as a threat. The slowed-down tape recorded neither the sound
of falling blows nor the screams from King and the witnesses.” Such a presen-
tation of Holliday’s video pursued advantages for the officers: anesthetizing
jurors to the shock of the beating by playing the footage many times, dulling its
horror by eliminating the audio, and temporally expanding the short video to
create time for lawyers to elaborately narrate it. In doing so, they added their own favored context, providing arguments for why each blow or kick King suffered on-screen was justified by the situation.

The same techniques were used in Mehserle’s trial, where the videos of Grant’s death played many times on the courtroom’s TV monitors. There, they sometimes provided visible evidence for the prosecution to counter inaccurate witness testimonies, but they were also subjected to a series of slow-motion and freeze-frame replays narrated by experts testifying for the defense, as coverage of the trial in the San Francisco Chronicle describes: “Running images in slow motion, [Michael] Schott said Grant’s right hand had been forced against his back by a second officer, Anthony Pirone, a few seconds before the shooting. Grant’s left hand was nearby, though according to Schott it was moving ‘up in the air’ at the time of the shot. As Schott toggled back and forth between images, Grant was shown being shot over and over again. His mother, Wanda Johnson, watched for a while but then dropped her head against the back of her seat and closed her eyes, crying.”

Here in the continuous back-and-forth replay of the gunshot are echoes of Bazin’s 1958 objection to the documentary capture of death and his sense that the mechanical repetition of a singular “moment of death” would be a desecration (though the moment of fatal wounding rather than the “moment of death” is the one repeated in this case). The repetition prompts an emotional reaction from Grant’s mother—one person in the courtroom, at least, who does not seem at risk of becoming inured to this sight, regardless of how often it is replayed.

For many, the Grant case itself felt like a replay—an anxious return to the brutal violence of the King beating and, some feared, the different sort of violence that followed the officers’ Simi Valley trial. But the differences are also striking: the public could at any time access raw video of the Grant shooting online, without any framing from news anchors or lawyers, in a way that they could not access raw footage of the King beating; and the Grant videos show, from many angles, police brutality that ends in death rather than hospitalization. Yet there is no doubt that they made less impact on the public in 2009 than the King video did in 1991. Like the disparity in attention between the Grant and Agha-Soltan videos, reasons for the greater exposure of the King case than the Grant case are complex, but three suggest themselves strongly.

First, aesthetics are important, once again. Although Holliday was the only witness who taped King’s beating and was physically farther away than those who recorded Grant’s death, he was able to provide a clearer depiction of an attack that itself was more clearly visible than Mehserle’s attack on Grant. The officers in Holliday’s video stand back from King, who lies on the pavement
in the ample illumination of headlights, and move in only when they deliver their blows. Their attack on King is undeniably more visually dynamic than the gunshot Mehserle inflicts on Grant. Unlike its appearance in the Grant videos, police brutality looks truly brutal on Holliday’s tape—even though the attack on Grant was fatal. As Mamie Till understood in 1955 when she exposed her lynched son Emmett’s mutilated corpse for mourners and news cameras alike, making visible the spectacle of brutality or its physical aftermath—absent from the Grant videos—is often the only way to make the U.S. public pay attention to the death of a Black male. Indeed, instances of Black male suffering consumed as spectacle have been such a consistent feature of U.S. media and public life—from the beating of Uncle Tom in nineteenth-century literature to the beating of Rodney King on twentieth-century TV news—that viewers may expect and even feel entitled to that graphic display when they click on a YouTube video purporting to show a Black man die on camera.77

Second, the recorded violence against King is horrifically protracted, exceeding the blink-and-you-miss-it gunshot in the Grant videos. Both recordings show a long altercation, but they distribute spectacle differently within these durations. In the King video, the officers’ blows rain down at a consistent pace with no particular climax. The Grant videos are dominated by a long preamble of the officers struggling to get him handcuffed. These thirty seconds are fairly static and uneventful, providing only anticipation of when the gunshot will happen. The anticipation heightens the potential anticlimax of an event we can barely see in the videos, unlike the more sickeningly dynamic kicks and baton strikes against King. Here again we see the feature film version of this event, Fruitvale Station, seek to fill in for an absence in the documentary footage, as it did by adding a close-up of Grant’s face as he gets shot. To reinfuse Grant’s story with durational suffering, the film stays with his character on the platform through the aftermath of the gunshot—which the witnesses recording the actual attack were not permitted to do—showing him struggle with the wound’s physical pain as he and the officers wait for paramedics to arrive.

Third, the shock of the King beating in 1991 was accompanied by another shock: that someone had actually recorded the event on video. By 2009, the “I can’t believe they caught that on camera” feeling had been diluted by the massive spread of digital recording devices. We now can believe it when notable happenings in public space are recorded (by six cameras, no less). We even expect it, as I assert through my digital-age addition to Sobchack’s taxonomy of ways that camera operators can record death: the “ubiquitous gaze.” In the age of the ubiquitous gaze, the aesthetic quality of a death recording becomes the best measure for its activist potential, but the years since Grant’s case have
proven that an overwhelming quantity of such footage can also command attention. Grant’s recorded death, in retrospect, feels like the muted beginning of a heartbreaking trend. It was soon joined by widely circulating mobile phone footage documenting the killings of Eric Garner and Walter Scott, as well as the corpse of Michael Brown, the accumulation of which fueled much larger protests across the United States and the powerful Black Lives Matter movement.78

Though none of these incidents were recorded with the six-camera coverage that Grant’s received, each possessed qualities that helped make visible—optically and politically, and more so than Grant’s—a kind of death that usually remains invisible because of the victim’s social positioning. Eric Garner is decidedly faced, and voiced, in the 2014 video documentation of his death, filmed at close range and preceded by several minutes of Garner’s pleas for police to stop what he perceived as his constant harassment. Pressed to the ground in a choke hold, Garner gasps over and over again, “I can’t breathe”—a clearly audible refrain on the video that became a rallying cry for protesters. Footage of Walter Scott’s shooting from 2015 bears closer resemblance to the Rodney King video, as its strength is its unobstructed rendering of violent action. With only the briefest exceptions, bystander Feidin Santana keeps both Scott and Officer Michael Slager within the frame from the moment that Scott turns to run, through the series of eight shots that ring out as Slager shoots Scott in the back, to the sight of Scott’s body dropping to the ground. Michael Brown’s 2014 shooting was not recorded, but its aftermath was captured by multiple bystanders. Here the unexpected power of a corpse video over a corpse photo becomes apparent, as the shock of these videos is not violent death’s frenetic movement, but the significance of stillness as Brown’s body lay out in the road for four hours—uncovered for much of that time, exposed to the summer sun and the neighborhood’s mostly Black residents.79 The videos documenting his unmoving body reinvigorate the corpse image and give it new political power precisely through the recorded duration of its stillness—a sign of disrespect from law enforcement who neglected to move or otherwise attend to it.

Although many unarmed Black men like Garner, Scott, and Brown have been killed by police since 2009, many had already been killed in this manner at the time of Mehserle’s trial. Yet this context—the larger record of U.S. law enforcement’s unjust treatment of Black citizens—was often ignored by defense lawyers and the news media, who preferred to focus on Grant’s criminal record.80 Acknowledging this larger context, Grant family attorney John Burris said in 2011, “I’ve been involved in ten [similar] cases since Oscar Grant. The only difference was that his was caught on camera.”81 These are acts of contextualization that happened far too seldom in Mehserle’s trial or in mainstream
coverage of the Grant shooting. Indeed, the racial dimensions of this shooting seem to have been discussed little in the Los Angeles court where a jury without any Black members determined the ex-officer’s verdict.

Of course, warnings from activists and academics about a lack of context on YouTube must also contend with the form of context YouTube videos do, in every case, provide: the comments of viewers. In the case of the Grant videos, YouTube comments offered a context far more important to understanding Grant’s death than the details of Mehserle’s Taser holster. The comments contain elaborate, brutal, and persistent articulations of racism against African Americans, a context too raw and ugly to be fully printed in the paper or aired on the local news but that YouTube can display. Overtly racist comments filled with derogatory terms and offensive opinions appear often, from many users on many different postings of the Grant videos. Their presence and quantity provide an important reminder about one aspect of activism on YouTube: that high view counts measure only exposure, not political alignment. The x million viewers a video attracts do not translate to x million supporters of its apparent cause.

On a broader level, the racist comments illustrate the way in which YouTube and social media sites are havens for hatred at the same time that they are progressive tools, muddying the early image of the Internet as a democratizing, utopic force. As Jason Sperb notes, “The Internet may be the most efficient textual universe for any scholar wishing to prove that racism is alive and well today, and much more rampant than many will admit.”82 Though it is not the site’s intention, YouTube creates a public forum where racists can gather and connect. Videos that depict graphic violence against people of color become nodal points for such gathering. They solidify shared attitudes in a manner similar to the lynching photographs of a previous era, discussed in chapter 1, that circulated among racist whites in the United States. Although racist YouTube comments on the Grant videos were usually decried by many other viewers’ postings, they expose a cultural context for his shooting that does not match the claims about postracial America elicited by Barack Obama’s inauguration in the very same month that Grant was killed, January 2009.

Conclusion: “To Rescue Some Type of Meaning”

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

In the activist use of documentary death, we hope—as Steidle does—to see clear victories but are inevitably left with partial successes that require too many qualifiers. Agha-Soltan’s recorded martyrdom empowered Green Movement protesters in Iran and shed light on their plight for global audiences, but it did not lead to a new election or a government overthrow. Successes feel even more scant in relation to the Grant videos: Mehserle was convicted but on a lighter charge and with a much shorter sentence than Grant’s supporters wanted. Further, the narrow media focus on Mehserle’s individual culpability and his trial drew attention away from the flawed policies and attitudes in the BART police force that precipitated this tragedy, the structural inequities of law enforcement in the United States, and even more broadly, the persistent racist perception of all Black men in public space as violent threats. Just a few years later, the similarly anemic response from the legal system and policy makers to the death of Trayvon Martin—though its circumstances were different in many respects from Grant’s—provided another grim layer of confirmation for how little concrete change the Grant videos had precipitated.

In fact, rather than take a hard look at their own tendencies toward racial profiling or their use of force guidelines, several Bay Area law enforcement agencies considered other policy changes in the wake of Grant’s shooting that indicated they had learned a disappointing lesson from the case: get control of the documentary images. Some in the region made plans to equip their officers with over-the-ear (or chest-mounted) cameras to record point-of-view shots of what the officers see, in what has become a nationwide trend in the years since. Though such a system could help make officers accountable in their use of force, that is not the tone with which Bay Area police framed it. San Jose’s Sergeant Ronnie Lopez, for example, explains: “We live in a YouTube society
where people have the ability to record us. We firmly believe officers do the right things for the right reasons, and this is a way to show our side.”

In this aftermath, it is painfully clear that the technological wonders of new media have very limited power against systemic racism and, in fact, can be mobilized in support of racist power structures as well as against them. These technologies’ interventions can only go so far in securing justice for lives that are still not fully grievable in our country.

In addition to qualifying the successes of the Grant and Agha-Soltan videos, I must also note that for the great majority of individuals shown dying on YouTube, no organized political response will emerge to “do something” about their deaths. No users will even make the easy promise to “never forget.” These videos will fall into a limbo Juhasz calls NicheTube: “the vast sea of little-seen YouTube videos that are hard to find given YouTube’s architecture of ranking and user-generated tags.”

Faced with these mitigating factors in the efficacy of documentary death, one understands the strangely nostalgic appeal of Adams’s Saigon Execution photograph as it exists in collective memory. Here, legend has it, is a documented death that stopped a war—even if actual evidence suggests that it, less dramatically, bolstered an already-surge antiwar sentiment. But it is possible to think that it stopped a war today partly because the accumulating dust of historical distance covers over those nagging qualifiers that we see more clearly in deaths from the digital age’s very recent past.

Whenever I stumble upon one of those seldom-viewed deaths on YouTube, I recall David Cook’s powerful insight: “Ultimately, martyrdom is an attempt to rescue some type of meaning and dignity from death.” A similar attempt is made by the YouTubers who post those obscure videos, by those who did so for the more heavily circulated Neda Agha-Soltan and Oscar Grant videos, and by most documentarians representing death, whether of martyrs or not. The act of watching an actual death cries out for justification, some reassurance that it has not merely provided a momentary diversion—just another YouTube offering viewed in between music videos and cute kitten montages. We want these images to communicate something clear and vital, to effect some change in ourselves and in our world. The Grant and Agha-Soltan videos, especially the latter, did so more than most. But like all documentary records of lives ending in front of a camera, they remain difficult to absorb, perched precariously at the edge of representation.
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