Dying in Full Detail
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CONCLUSION

The Nearest Cameras Can Go

. . . The nearest friends can go
With anyone to death, comes so far short
They may as well not try to go at all.
Robert Frost,
“Home Burial,” in Poems by Robert Frost

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

What I have endeavored to demonstrate in this book is that the promise of seeing death’s “full detail” can never be fulfilled by any image technology. “Friends” cannot absorb deaths they witness, and cameras have little chance to communicate the totality of this experience. As machines that thrive on the visible and the audible, the best they can hope to do is inscribe the external signs of death onto celluloid or magnetic tape, or translate them into the binary code that underlies digital video. Those signs, however, can convey a great deal—enough that we cannot say that cameras approaching death “[come] so far short / They may as well not try to go at all.” Although death remains a process that, as Bazin says, “must be experienced and cannot be represented”—its “full detail” always out of reach—that does not make the grasping efforts of documentarians futile. As Susan Sontag herself—long a skeptic about the value of documenting human suffering and death—conceded, late in life, “Even if [such images] are only tokens, and cannot possibly encompass most of the reality to which they refer, they still perform a vital function.”

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

Just as I have argued against this knee-jerk reaction of ethically condemning documentary death footage, I have also tried to approach the makers and viewers of these images generously. From my experience researching this book, I have come to believe that the act of recording an actual death is more often characterized by empathy than callousness. And for most viewers who seek out such images, the motivation to look seems to emerge more from a frightened
curiosity than a cynical morbidity. Being curious about the nature of death is not inherently morbid. The rare truly universal human experience, dying is a process of momentous consequence in each of our lives—and one for which many people have found few models, through their lived experience or through realistic media representation. Good intentions do not exempt these makers and viewers from the damage their practices might inflict on others, but we will come to misguided conclusions about documentary death if we imagine soulless profiteers creating the bulk of this material for a leering, lascivious audience.

Although the works examined in this book do not exist because of digital technology, most would not exist without it. The affordability, versatility, and durational capacities of digital production and distribution have had a tremendous impact on what is possible in the documentary realm—an impact starkly revealed when death is the documentarian’s subject. And death’s study by digital cameras has, in turn, brought some of its complexities to light: its status as a complicated and variable process, both physically and psychologically, in which the transcendent “moment of death” we might imagine becomes a tiny fragment that resists identification.

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

Alongside control, the other lure of the digital in relation to death is its vaunted immortality, which is tied to its alleged technological immateriality. The label “immaterial” often feels like a dismissal of digital media as less im-
pactful, less real, than a medium like celluloid film. But digging deeper into these comparisons, the assertion of the digital’s immateriality is sometimes less of a rejection than an anxious hope. For materiality ensures mortality. The luminescence and rich grain of projected celluloid that cinephiles so love spring from the surface of a physical strip of film, which will slowly and inexorably decay. Its frames, at least in their original form, will eventually die, despite even the most well-funded efforts of preservation. The best approach to the “necessary mistake” of film preservation, writes archivist Paolo Cherchi Usai, is for the preservationist to behave “very much like the physician who has accepted the inevitability of death even while he continues to fight for the patient’s life. . . . The real question is, are viewers willing to accept the slow fading to nothing of what they are looking at?”

Digital video promised to sweep away that awful question, capturing eternal youth and eternal life as an unchanging virtual file rather than a buckling, crumbling reel of celluloid in a canister. Mary Ann Doane expresses this function of digital immateriality when she writes, “Digital media emerge as the apparent endpoint of an accelerating dematerialization. . . . [Their] information or representations appear to exist nowhere and the cultural dream of the digital is a dream of immateriality, without degradation or loss.” As Doane notes, though, this immortal immateriality is just a dream. Digital files, too, will degrade, disappear, or be abandoned by their guardians at some point in the exhausting, expensive, and ceaseless cycle of content migration to ever-newer formats.

Although, as I have demonstrated, digital video’s durational capacities have allowed us to record long processes of dying, digital images themselves usually die quick, violent deaths rather than enduring celluloid’s slowly decaying “natural” deaths. A digital file is deleted, it gets lost in a server crash, or the last program that can play its file format becomes obsolete in a software upgrade—all these are causes of death for digital images. Sometimes these violent deaths are partial, as a video file may still exist on a hard drive somewhere, but its circulation—its chance to impact audiences—is terminated when, for example, its YouTube uploader (or YouTube itself) removes the file. When documentary death footage disappears this way, the private sight that digital technology had once made public now becomes private again—living on for a time, perhaps, on just one individual’s computer. Nothing drives home the illusory nature of digital immortality, the loss that pervades this “lossless” culture, more than loading a bookmarked YouTube URL and seeing a black screen with the words “This video is no longer available.”

The digital recordings of death I have examined in this book, then, will
eventually die, too. As difficult as watching these recordings may have been for those who cared about the dying person depicted, they could also be comforting in their promise to immortalize that loved one, to extend their memory and power to affect the world of the living. This second death, then—the death of the video rather than in the video—renews the pain of the first. It is the death of memory, of a technological memory that may have outlived the embodied, human memory of those who knew the dying person in life.

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