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MORTALITY AND DIGITAL DOCUMENTARY **JENNIFER MALKOWSKI**

**DYING IN  
FULL DETAIL**

# **DYING IN FULL DETAIL**

MORTALITY AND  
DIGITAL DOCUMENTARY

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Jennifer Malkowski

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**FOR JOY,**  
MY GRANDMOTHER,  
WHO DIED  
A GOOD DEATH

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## INTRODUCTION

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The representation of a real death is . . .  
an obscenity. . . We do not die twice.

ANDRÉ BAZIN,  
“Death Every Afternoon”

Don't take pictures o' that. Whattsa matter with you?!?

UNIDENTIFIED SPECTATOR OF JUMPERS  
FROM THE WORLD TRADE CENTER ON 9/11

The two preceding quotations are separated by many factors: almost half a century of history, mode of address, circumstance, and level of formality.<sup>1</sup> The first appears in print, written by prominent film critic and scholar André Bazin in a 1958 review, and addresses a hypothetical circumstance in a theoretical mode: if one were to film a human death as it happened, that filming would be obscene. The second is spoken by an anonymous, off-camera individual in raw footage taken during the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center. The hypothetical has become actual, the theoretical has become practical, and a man watching individuals jump to their deaths from a burning skyscraper chastises a fellow witness who, like many, chooses to record that fearsome sight. In this moment, a tension becomes starkly apparent between the expanding technological capability to record death and continued social prohibitions against

doing so. Together, these quotations hint at the strength, breadth, and longevity of concerns about the documentary capture of death—an act that has long mesmerized and repelled those who make, view, and think about documentary images, but an act that has become increasingly practical with advancements in digital technology.

*Dying in Full Detail: Mortality and Digital Documentary* will consider the consequences of that new practicality, examining documentarians' recent pursuits of death with equipment that promises to capture its "full detail." In *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* (1910), Rainer Maria Rilke composes the phrase I have appropriated for my title. In context, its meaning refers to a style of dying rather than a style of displaying death that my title references. Rilke uses the phrase to describe waning death rituals at the turn of the twentieth century: "Who cares anything today for a finely-finished death? No one. Even the rich, who could after all afford this luxury of dying in full detail, are beginning to be careless and indifferent; the wish to have a death of one's own is growing ever rarer."<sup>2</sup> Rilke and historians alike characterize the twentieth century as an era of death's denial in the West, a time when the "full detail" of life's end was little attended to and kept from the public eye—nowhere more so than in the United States. As contact with death diminished in modern life, the idea of its unsimulated, documentary appearance on film screens became highly charged. In his 1974 writing about the enduring taboo of filming actual death, Amos Vogel expresses the frustration of death's cultural banishment and the grim fascination that it creates with watching life end: "For when we witness unstaged, real death in the cinema we are frightened, caught in the sweet and deadly trap of the voyeur; mixed feelings of attraction and repulsion take hold of us as we anxiously watch the actual end of another being and search his face for hints of the mystery or proper rules of conduct."<sup>3</sup>

As the century approached its end, though, documentarians seemed poised to bring many such taboo moments to the public screen—to reveal death's detail more fully and more often than ever before. Technologically, they were enabled by accessible and affordable digital production and distribution. Culturally in the United States, they were empowered by a turn away from hidden and homogeneous hospital dying back toward an individualized "death of one's own"—and by the public's unabated curiosity to see images of violent death, nurtured in fiction film through the century's suppression of natural death.<sup>4</sup>

Written near the height of Western death-denial culture in 1958, Bazin's essay couples a bold condemnation of documentary death with a less novel condemnation of pornography: "Like death, love must be experienced and cannot be represented (it is not called the little death for nothing) without violating

its nature. This violation is called obscenity. The representation of a real death is also an obscenity, no longer a moral one, as in love, but metaphysical. We do not die twice.”<sup>5</sup> Bazin focuses on death as a “lived” experience that cannot be successfully mediated by a documentary camera, drawing an ethical line in the sand and demanding that some aura for the death moment be preserved. He also connects the sacred quality of death to its temporal singularity within each lifetime, continuing: “Before cinema there was only the profanation of corpses and the desecration of tombs. Thanks to film, nowadays we can desecrate and show at will the only one of our possessions that is temporally inalienable: death without a requiem, the eternal dead-again of the cinema!”<sup>6</sup>

For Bazin, filmic reproduction profanes death, and yet he acknowledges, “Death is one of those rare events that justifies the term . . . *cinematic specificity*.”<sup>7</sup> Although much theoretical writing associates it with photography’s stillness rather than cinema’s motion, death, after all, is the culmination of a particular process of duration and change: dying. It seems perfect, on that level, for capture by the technology that “mummifies change,” as Bazin famously wrote elsewhere about film—although I will demonstrate that video and digital video (DV) have proven more adept at that capture.<sup>8</sup> To “mummify” this most drastic and most mysterious of changes is a quest that has attracted many cameras. The curiosity, I believe, is not just about a desire to see death but also a desire to find out whether a camera could really *show us* death. Could moving image technology meaningfully represent a liminal event that is frequently written about as being unknowable and beyond representation? Would this technology’s affordances for mediating the visible world grant it access to the often invisible physiological process of a human body expiring? As Richard Dyer writes, “Western society has had a positive mania for trying to see what’s inside the human being, body and soul. The photographic media, too, so clearly at the cutting edge in capturing appearances, have also sought to see and show past them.”<sup>9</sup>

For Bazin, to re-present the sight of an actual death would be an acute “cinematic perversion,” but during the era in which he wrote, the problem was more theoretical than practical.<sup>10</sup> Despite the American public’s persistent—though not universal—desire to see such a documentary moment (manifest since the early years of cinema), catching hold of one on *celluloid* was quite difficult due to technological constraints. Many cameras were not especially mobile, they required expertise to operate, their film stock was expensive, and, for a time, they could run for only a few minutes per reel. Further, distribution options in this era were slight. In contrast to our digitally enabled Internet climate, most outlets for documentary footage—such as the theatrical news-

reel—were subject to the type of journalistic gatekeeping likely to suppress any views of documentary death that actually made it onto celluloid. Technology thus helped mediate between the “stop” of ethical condemnations and the “go” of many viewers’ desires, keeping the archive of documentary death images sparse through the mid-twentieth century. That balance began to shift in the United States during the 1960s as nascent trends in media solidified (detailed in chapter 1): the widespread adoption of home movie cameras brought the public greater access to recording technologies, and television’s continuing infiltration of American living rooms provided more possibilities for the distribution and exhibition of moving images.

These trends have expanded astoundingly in the decades since, as digital technologies have filled these roles and created still others; in a new media environment, instances of recorded death are no longer the rare lightning strikes they once were. Beginning in the 1980s, when both consumers and professional documentarians started adopting video widely, and continuing through today’s ubiquitous mobile phone cameras, recording devices became substantially more affordable, versatile, and easy to operate. As videotapes and digital storage supplanted reels of film, operators could record far more material at far less cost and with far fewer interruptions for changing reels. The democratizing effect of these technological shifts has meant, in practice, that vastly *more* cameras are blanketing public space in the digital age, more ready to capture death wherever and whenever it may occur. A further effect of advancing digital technologies is the accessibility of broader distribution for professional documentaries on DVD and paid streaming sites and for nonprofessional documentaries or raw footage on free streaming sites (YouTube, Vimeo, or any number of less well-known and less reputable alternatives).

And yet, the evolution of death’s documentary representation in the digital age has not been a simple story of its universal proliferation through improved technologies. In some cases, the affordances of different digital tools align poorly or come into conflict with social, cultural, and economic forces in a way that impedes the circulation of documentary death. In terms of temporality, for example, DV has the capacity to record hours of footage inexpensively, enabling it to track long processes of dying from disease or to record pedestrians patiently at the Golden Gate Bridge until one jumps off it (as the chapters ahead will discuss). Yet this capacity exists in tension with the conventions of Internet video, a primary avenue of digital distribution. On YouTube and similar sites, the brief, spectacle-oriented video is king. The celebration of those qualities curtails video-makers’ options for displaying death’s duration or its frequent resistance to spectacular visibility, and it reinscribes the overexposure

of violent (rather than natural) death. The failure of Google Glass—a glasses-style, wearable computer able to record video from its user’s optical point of view—to achieve widespread consumer adoption provides another instructive case. Had it become commonplace, Glass would have expanded individuals’ capacity to record death in public space beyond the gains mobile phone cameras have already achieved. And in terms of specific affordances, it would have allowed people to begin their videos more quickly in the face of sudden events, to record hands-free when they are in physical danger, and to record surreptitiously when the doing so openly might put them at risk (as it has, for example, for many recording police violence against Black citizens in the United States in the mid-2010s). But social drawbacks overshadowed Glass’s technological affordances: the surreptitious recording capability raised major privacy concerns, and consumers were not thrilled about the aesthetics of wearing lensless glasses with a bulky computer unit attached to them. Glass became a brief fad as a general consumer product—a technological innovation that would have advanced efforts to document death on video, quickly (and probably rightly) sunk by social rejection.

Still, the cheap and easy chain of digital production, distribution, and exhibition has allowed an unprecedented amount of documentary death footage to reach the public. This footage ranges from intimate chronicles of long dying processes—often shot in part by the dying people themselves or their loved ones—to low-resolution, silent shots of killings recorded by mounted surveillance cameras. It has captured suicides, fatal confrontations with police, war deaths, and sometimes even surreptitiously recorded executions. Typified by shots of jumpers plummeting from the World Trade Center, of protesters under attack during the Arab Spring, and of Black victims of fatal police violence in the United States, documentary death footage has played a prominent role in twenty-first-century visual culture, wielding significant political influence.

Coverage of the World Trade Center’s destruction illustrates the scope and rapidity of technological changes undergirding this influx of footage. As citizens tuned in to *CNN* that morning in 2001, they saw the initial use of extreme long shots from the network’s own distant, ineffectually zooming cameras evolve into greater reliance on eyewitness video shot by bystanders near the towers with personal, portable cameras. Some of the news networks acquired and aired clips that showed individuals jumping to their deaths, but—as Barbie Zelizer describes—did so amid a storm of ethical controversy, retreating to still images within hours and then to no visual records of the jumps at all.<sup>11</sup> Within a few years of the attacks, the rise of streaming video sites around 2005 would effectively bypass this ethical crisis among professionals. Since then, plentiful

9/11 jumper footage has been readily accessible to anyone with Internet access and the will to watch it, as the citizen journalists who originally shot the footage or other nonprofessionals who have acquired copies have been able to circulate it freely via YouTube and other sites. *Wall Street Journal* columnist Richard Woodward broadly articulates the fears accompanying this shift: “We better get used to living without visual boundaries—and with the curiosity and flexible morality of the viewer as the only limit on what we can see—from now on.”<sup>12</sup>

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

*Dying in Full Detail* undertakes this reassessment, analyzing deaths that are *embodied* and *enframed*: physical (not metaphorical) deaths of visible individuals, caught on camera. Through this analysis, I ask what digital image technologies reveal about death and, in turn, what death reveals about the digital. The affordances of digital image technologies aim to fulfill promises made long ago by photography and then by cinema: to make visible what has been invisible, to make public what has been private. These promises unfold at the level of both production and distribution, as the digital pledges to let us *record* more of what has gone previously unrecorded through widespread and continuous taping and to let us *watch* more of what has gone unseen through instant, global distribution that bypasses old media’s gatekeepers. Recording actual deaths presents an ideal test case for such promises. Death is one of the most private experiences of contemporary Western culture, its visibility remains elusive (its occurrence often passing too quickly and unpredictably to be seen or recorded), and distribution of its documentary capture has frequently been interrupted by media gatekeepers. Indeed, representing death has always been among the earliest projects of new image technologies—a challenge through which image-makers seek to prove the magic of their new devices. The results generally expose both the potential achievements of these devices and their inevitable disappointments.

The footage that actually emerges from digital technology’s promises to make death newly visible and public proves to be no exception to this trend.

I argue that the digital is unable to show death “in full detail,” as it remains beyond representation even amid image technologies that can record it more fully than ever. Failures to fully reveal it on the documentary screen affirm that death is enigmatic and internal, with limited external signs that the camera doggedly pursues. It refuses to appear as a transcendent, identifiable instant capable of video capture. Especially resistant to mediated visibility is the “moment of death,” a supposed point of transition from living being to corpse that has fixated image-makers and audiences, and that obscures the more frightening reality that dying is a durational process—a long one, for most Americans. In digital technology’s undeniably increased capacity to record and distribute the sight of death, though, I contend that what it actually delivers is increased opportunity to politicize individual deaths through the rhetorical power of their documentary representation. The contribution digital death documentary can make to the world is ultimately more sociopolitical than metaphysical—more wrapped up in the everyday labor of improving human lives than in the irresistible, impossible philosophical pursuit of truly understanding their endings.

Further, I hope to frame digital technology in a way that suits its actual application in the documentary form. Scholarship on digital cinema tends to focus on the highly visible realms of special effects and image manipulation in big-budget fiction film. The changes digital technology has enacted in documentary have been less spectacularly visible but arguably more impactful, vastly expanding what professionals can do with their limited budgets and extending documentary authorship to nonprofessionals. The frequent scholarly conflation of digital cinema with digital special effects has left a dearth of new media theory that speaks well to digital documentary. For example, theorizing digital cinema in one of the field’s most-cited, foundational works, Lev Manovich emphasizes that “pixels, regardless of their origin, can be easily altered, substituted for one another, and so on. Live-action footage is thus reduced to just another graphic, no different than images created manually. . . . *Digital cinema is a particular case of animation that uses live-action footage as one of its many elements.*”<sup>13</sup> Manovich affixes this provocative claim broadly to digital filmmaking, but it is deeply misleading in relation to most digital documentary work. Putting aside the ethical factors that may stop documentarians from drastically mucking about with “easily altered” pixels (other than in routine and relatively benign processes like color correction), there is still the reality that altering pixels well takes time and money, and it thus remains beyond the *budgets* of this typically underfunded filmmaking form.

Especially troubling for the study of digital documentary is existing new media theory’s fixation on the loss of indexicality. That perceived loss of the

physical connection between object and representation has branded digital images as “immaterial” or “disembodied,” but this drama of referentiality seems surprisingly irrelevant in the reception of digital documentary.<sup>14</sup> With most documentaries, viewers’ Bazinian faith in the direct correspondence between objects in the world and their representation on-screen does not seem to be shaken by digital capture—which is to say, viewers remain suspicious of digital documentary in basically the same ways they have always been suspicious of celluloid documentary. They question whether the editor has tinkered with a chronology of events or whether incidents have been staged for the camera, but I have not seen evidence in viewer response to the works I analyze that they are wary of overt *digital* manipulation on any meaningful scale.<sup>15</sup> And in much new media scholarship’s narrow association of materiality and embodiment with indexicality, these terms’ more immediate connotations are sacrificed. As I demonstrate in this book, seeing recorded death makes us *feel* embodied, regardless of platform or medium. While we are watching a still-living person plummet 245 feet off the Golden Gate Bridge and hit the water with a devastating force, for example, it hardly matters that sequences of ones and zeroes are communicating this event rather than silver halide grains on a strip of celluloid. Knowledge of such differences—for those who have it—does nothing to lessen the impact of seeing a life end, a digital sight that feels decidedly material, and painfully so. Along these lines, I support Tom Gunning’s assertion in “Moving Away from the Index” that the familiar, indexicality-based approach “may have reached the limits of its usefulness,” especially in the realm of digital media theory.<sup>16</sup> Gunning draws a distinction between classical film theory, which strives to uncover the essence of the medium, and contemporary film theory, which insists on the experience of watching as central to the medium. Theories of digital immateriality and nonindexicality rely on the former model, but *Dying in Full Detail* will support the latter approach.

#### Death Culture’s National and Historical Context

As much as video and digital technologies have enabled documentary death, the drive documentarians do or do not experience to capture death and the willingness or unwillingness of audiences to look at it are products of culture—for my study, primarily U.S. culture from the mid-nineteenth century to the present. *Dying in Full Detail* is grounded in the experience of U.S. audiences, though inclusive of some of the transnational circulation of death footage from elsewhere to which they are exposed. This national context serves the project beyond simply establishing a manageable scope; the United States pre-

sents the most extreme case of the opposing social conditions that typified the twentieth-century culture of death denial. While removing dying bodies from public space and repressing the taboo topic of death in public discourse, mid-century U.S. culture nurtured a simultaneous obsession with its fictional media representation. This national culture creates a complex and high-stakes environment for the entry of documentary death footage, as detailed later. I want to acknowledge, though, that while I sometimes refer to “U.S. death culture” ahead, there is no singular death culture in the United States. Attitudes toward death in any given period vary with race, religion, region, national or ethnic origin, and so on. To give just one example, attitudes toward death in gay male communities at the height of the AIDS crisis differed considerably from those of the American mainstream in that period.

Although most of my case studies are U.S.-based, I intend for my argument, methods, and many of my insights to be broadly applicable for scholars and viewers of global media. The tension between death’s visibility and invisibility that forms the core of my argument seems to be a near-universal theme, globally, in documentaries about death, even if its iterations can differ significantly across national contexts. To take one subtopic, documentarians all over the world making films about war and atrocity wrestle with the question of whether and how to make death visible and with alternatives to its direct display when documentary images are lost or were never made. The two most striking examples in the past decade come from Israel’s Ari Folman and Cambodia’s Rithy Panh. Folman’s *Waltz with Bashir* (2008) centers on the director’s own role, as an Israeli soldier, in the First Lebanon War’s Sabra and Shatila refugee massacre. Ending with video documentation of the massacre’s gory aftermath, *Waltz* revives the power of documentary corpse footage—long dulled by this sight’s awful ubiquity in the twentieth century—by juxtaposing its harsh, live-action details with the majority of his film’s sleek and stylized animation. In *The Missing Picture* (2013), Panh builds on his decades of experience representing the Cambodian genocide on film to tell the story of his own painful childhood surviving labor camps and losing loved ones to the Khmer Rouge. Though the phrase carries multiple meanings, “the missing picture” refers partly to actuality footage of the Khmer Rouge’s murders—the audiovisual record of their atrocities, never created or since lost, that cannot be shown in Panh’s film. In its absence, Panh relies on other kinds of archival footage, Khmer Rouge propaganda, excerpts of his own films, and—most centrally and evocatively—elaborate dioramas of hand-carved clay figurines. As Leshu Torchin writes, “Where no images of an experience exist, Panh uses something available (or imagined) and thus gestures to the gaps produced through trau-

matic experience and a compromised historiography.<sup>17</sup> While these have long been among Panh's methods as a documentarian, *The Missing Picture* becomes his most evocative exploration of the value of actuality footage of death, of the extent to which filmmakers and viewers invest in its authority, its supremacy over other kinds of representation. For, as *Dying in Full Detail* will assert more generally, the type of "missing picture" Panh lacks would never meet expectations—would never equal the tragic beauty and truth of his clay pageant.

Further, my discussion of the ways in which documentary death serves political causes—despite its overall failure to illuminate death's "full detail"—also has broad global applications, as actuality images of death are pulled into the service of politics in many, many regions. In some cases, the political causes are massive, transnational in nature, and circulate globally through journalistic and social media. This was true for the 2011 wave of interconnected revolutions in the Middle East and North Africa and the multiple instances of documentary death they produced—most prominently, images of Mohamed Bouazizi's self-immolation in Tunisia and the corpse of Khaled Saeed, beaten to death by police in Egypt. These men's deaths elevated them to martyr status and fueled the coming uprisings in their respective nations, where photographs of them—both alive and dead—frequently graced material protest signs and pro-revolution Internet activism.<sup>18</sup> In other cases, recordings of death circulate on a narrower national level where they spark smaller-scale political organizing. In Foshan, China, in 2011, security cameras recorded two-year-old Wang Yue (sometimes written about as "Little Yue Yue") being struck by two vehicles and lying fatally injured in the road while eighteen passersby neglected to help her. The footage, circulating on local television news and then online, prompted national debate about the Chinese public's moral character and was successfully mobilized to support new Good Samaritan legislation.<sup>19</sup> In Ficksburg, South Africa, in the same year, Andries Tatane was filmed being shot and beaten to death by police while protesting a lack of public services. Footage of the incident—again, broadcast locally on television news and circulated online—propelled further protests and gave Tatane a martyr's role in this activist cause.<sup>20</sup> This book's approach to reading photographs and footage of this nature and its broad consideration of ethical and aesthetic factors in recording death can be applied across national boundaries to cases like these, with the proper consideration of each case's historical and cultural context.

To return to the U.S. historical and cultural context and documentary death's place within it: Robert Kastenbaum succinctly summarizes the state of mainstream U.S. death culture around the turn of the twenty-first century, writing, "We have succeeded more than most societies in reducing the pres-

ence of the dead. In part this has been accomplished by keeping people alive longer. In part, though, we have cultivated techniques for keeping not only the dead but also the dying from general view. For most people in other times and places, death and the dead were more a part of everyday life.<sup>21</sup> Death was certainly a prominent part of everyday life upon the birth of modern image technologies in the mid-nineteenth century. Infectious disease tore through populations, especially in growing urban centers, ensuring that “nineteenth-century Americans lived and died in a cauldron of uncontrolled endemic and epidemic diseases of contagion.”<sup>22</sup> These hardships were aggravated by the widespread threat of sudden death—still fearsome in its refusal of time for the soul’s preparation—from diseases like cholera, and for a few overwhelming years from the massive casualties of the American Civil War.<sup>23</sup>

Nineteenth-century Americans coped with their ever-present mortality by building a culture, as Philippe Ariès describes, in which the process of dying was charged with fierce emotion: joy that the dying person would pass into eternity and salvation, but sharply felt and loudly expressed grief for those from whom he would be (temporarily) separated.<sup>24</sup> The soul’s fate remained a key concern in this period, but the presence of the living at the deathbed became a fiercely cherished source of support that rivaled the religious elements of a “good death.” To attend the bedside of the dying was a privilege granted to many, as death in this era was far more public and visible than it would soon become. Deathbed visitors largely expected to see life end triumphantly and emotionally—an expectation for sensational dying that persists among media viewers today—so deaths that failed to present those qualities often disappointed.<sup>25</sup> This period of American death culture—concurrent with the rise of photography in the history of image media—hardly foreshadows the denial and suppression of death that would follow in the twentieth century. Discourse on mortality was robust and highly public, because death itself was robust and highly public, and because a dominant Christian religious faith enabled Americans to conceive of death as an exalted event that would lead to a glorious reunion in heaven.

Understanding the persistent saturation of death in U.S. culture through the end of the nineteenth century illuminates the severity of the “brutal revolution” in attitudes that would follow, propelling the country (and much of the Western world) into its much-analyzed era of death denial and creating high stakes for documentary representations of life’s end.<sup>26</sup> Observing death culture in the West in 1955—around the height of this “brutal revolution”—noted anthropologist Geoffrey Gorer asserted, “The natural processes of corruption and decay have become disgusting, as disgusting as the natural processes of

birth and copulation were a century ago; preoccupation about such processes is (or was) morbid and unhealthy, to be discouraged in all and punished in the young.<sup>27</sup> Death had begun to recede from the public eye in the early part of the century as a result of two major medical developments. First, death rates declined, thanks to improvements in medical care and the control of epidemic diseases—as well as better housing, nutrition, and hygiene.<sup>28</sup> As Americans played witness to fewer deaths in this era of longer life, “the final days of dying, once calmly familiar to everyone, [became] existentially disturbing in ways they once were not.”<sup>29</sup> Second, the rise of hospitals in the early twentieth century, and their promise of lifesaving medical intervention from doctors and machines, led to death’s spatial displacement starting around 1930, from the home to the hospital.<sup>30</sup> Here, the dying were hidden from the public, first in open wards—where they underwent operations and died in full view of other patients—and then in a deeper layer of concealment as the need for income drove hospitals to offer private and semiprivate rooms.<sup>31</sup>

The style of death that was possible in a twentieth-century American hospital was radically different from the style possible in a nineteenth-century American home, necessitating changes in how people defined the good death. A new trend compromised the personal, spiritual preparation for life’s end that had been a central component of a good death since the Middle Ages: that of doctors and family members concealing a terminal diagnosis from the dying person, lest knowledge of her or his immanent demise interfere with medical treatment or hospital routines. An unconscious, speedy end proceeding as privately and invisibly as possible thus became the most valued manifestation of death—a sharp reversal from the fear of sudden death and desire for support and witnesses at the deathbed that were dominant in earlier centuries.<sup>32</sup> Friends, family, and even neighbors, who had been fixtures of deathbeds at home, were now discouraged from gathering beside them and permitted only in limited numbers at set visiting hours.<sup>33</sup>

These changes in customs are symptomatic of how the emotional and spiritual needs of the dying and their survivors became subordinated to the demands of medical care. That Americans abided by this shift in values perhaps speaks to the creeping secularization of U.S. culture and a redistribution of faith—away from God and the certainty that loved ones would reunite in heaven, and toward science and the promise that loved ones could delay their earthly parting. In hospital dying for much of the twentieth century, “spiritual rites of passage” were replaced by “metallic ones” as machines became primary and nurses were taught to do their jobs with mechanical efficiency.<sup>34</sup> Personifying this newly medicalized natural death (arguably more frightening

than violent death in the twentieth century), Ariès asserts, “The death of the patient in the hospital, covered with tubes, is becoming a popular image, more terrifying than the *transi* or skeleton of macabre rhetoric.”<sup>35</sup>

Enduring death in a hospital, covered with tubes, would likely be easier if it arrived within hours, like nineteenth-century cholera. But as the medical establishment became more successful at prolonging life, a protracted period of suffering and dying was the unfortunate side effect. Death’s duration lengthened more dramatically than at any other point in U.S. history. The leading three causes of death in the United States in 1950, for example, all typically produced a great deal of hospital time as death approached: heart disease (which kills only a portion of its victims through sudden heart attacks), malignant neoplasms (cancer), and vascular lesions.<sup>36</sup> For most Americans in this era, the “moment of death”—which this book will track as an object of persistent fixation for documentarians and their audiences—was thus a tiny fragment of a very long process of dying, compared with other historical periods. Furthermore, the “moment,” if it ever really had been identifiable, was now obscured by a swarm of drugs and medical procedures that seemed to divide dying into innumerable, often invisible pieces—perhaps making its decreasingly attainable capture on camera all the more enticing.<sup>37</sup>

Lacking the firsthand exposure to dying and the dead that their ancestors had, Americans could not help but rely on other sources of information about what death—this essential and shared human experience—looked like. Cinema has been one of those sources. As Jay Ruby surmises, “Long before most Americans ever see the actual body of a dead person, they see photographic and electronic representations of death—a few are actual, most make-believe.”<sup>38</sup> Gorer’s 1955 essay sharpens that observation by noting that the make-believe majority of such representations avoid natural death, which Gorer sees as truly taboo, and favor violent death. The deathbed documentaries analyzed in chapter 2 position themselves against this trend, striving to bring the physical and emotional realities of actual, natural dying back into the public eye. Throughout *Dying in Full Detail*, the interplay between “actual” and “make-believe” representations of death will recur, as will the porous aesthetic boundaries between these modes of filmmaking. Generally having seen little in life or documentary to challenge mainstream fiction film’s visions of death, viewers respond to “actual” death footage—when it finally does start to appear with any regularity—through the lens of these “make-believe” visions.

Ethical (and Unethical) Approaches  
to Recording and Viewing Death

*Dying in Full Detail* is about the documentary camera's pull toward death's most apparently visible forms—toward publicly displaying dying and dead bodies on-screen—and the impact its footage makes on American visual culture. This book focuses on death that is embodied and enframed, but such displays are complemented in documentary history by other important and eloquent works that approach death more obliquely. In addition to the aforementioned film *The Missing Picture*, this set of documentaries includes *Blue* (1993), in which Derek Jarman opts for a screen of flat color rather than images of bodily decay in his audiocentric chronicle of his own death. In *Grizzly Man* (2005), director Werner Herzog encounters a tape on which a young couple is heard being killed by a bear, and he rejects it on camera, telling its owner, "You must never listen to this . . . you should destroy it."<sup>39</sup> Perhaps Bazin's greatest ally in his argument against recording death is Claude Lanzmann, who pointedly made his nine-and-a-half-hour Holocaust opus *Shoah* (1985) without the shots of corpses that fill other classic Holocaust documentaries, such as *Night and Fog* (1955, Alain Resnais). Resisting documentarians' common pull toward making death directly visible, Lanzmann states unequivocally, "If I had stumbled on a real ss film . . . that showed how 3,000 Jewish men, women and children were gassed in Auschwitz's crematorium 2, not only would I not have shown it but I would have destroyed it."<sup>40</sup> Instead of relying on archival images, Lanzmann evokes past death in the present—grasping at it through the spaces and actions that connote it for living witnesses and perpetrators (a method Panh also adopts in his haunting *S21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine* [2003]). Death forms the core of all these documentaries, but the filmmakers restrain it from surfacing visually or aurally, refusing to create Bazin's "metaphysical obscenity."

On the other end of documentary death's spectrum of elision and display lies "death porn." Rather than finding creative ways to evoke death without showing it, as the previously mentioned documentaries do, death porn delights in its graphic display. Seemingly untroubled by ethical concerns, these films and videos strive for "maximum visibility" of bodily pain and destruction that parallels the "maximum visibility" of bodily pleasure Linda Williams writes about in pornography.<sup>41</sup> Gorer, in fact, theorized a similar connection in 1955, long before this content circulated on the Internet and in relation to far more innocent fare, such as horror comics. In both traditional pornography and "the pornography of death," he asserts that "the emotions which are typically con-

comitant of the acts—love or grief—are paid little or no attention, while the sensations are enhanced.<sup>42</sup>

The most well-known example of the cult death porn genre is *Faces of Death* (John Allen Schwartz), a controversial 1978 release that presents itself as a compilation documentary exploring the profound topic of death, “our own destiny” that we refuse to recognize.<sup>43</sup> An on-screen “expert” guides us: Dr. Frances B. Gröss, who has “compiled a library of the many faces of death” for our edification and narrates these clips. *Faces of Death* quickly communicates its more macabre intentions through the type of footage it uses: gory animal deaths, corpses and autopsies, blatantly staged human deaths (an electrocution, an alligator attack, a cult leader cutting open a follower’s chest and eating his innards), and very occasional actuality footage of human death. Still more unsettling than this mix is the way that footage is presented, often with jokes from Dr. Gröss or a comical soundtrack. Actuality footage of a suicidal jump from a building ledge, for example, is accompanied by a jaunty jazz score with the musical count, “and a one, two, one two three four,” timed to signal the woman’s jump.

Death porn films of this ilk are cataloged with encyclopedic detail in David Kerekes and David Slater’s *Killing for Culture: An Illustrated History of Death Film from Mondo to Snuff* (1995), but since the book’s publication, death porn’s quantity and reach have expanded dramatically with the help of digital technology. High-traffic “shock sites”—analyzed further in chapter 4—gather the Internet’s goriest images of actual death alongside footage of nonfatal wounds, spectacles of bodily disfigurement and disability, and often sexual pornography, too.

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

The works I analyze in *Dying in Full Detail* generally fall between these two extremes of cautious omission and unabashed enjoyment in their approach to

actuality footage of death. These documentarians labor in an ethical and aesthetic borderland, though one increasingly populous in the digital age, striving to represent the unrepresentable, directly and ethically. Not all succeed, as some lose their tenuous grasp on an ethical engagement with death. But all share a conviction, as do I, that images of actual death can do a kind of cultural work—can have a value to the living that justifies the fraught circumstances of their creation.

For documentary death footage to perform this cultural work, it must above all find an audience who is willing to witness it—an act of looking whose ethical complexity parallels that of the act of recording. Not very long ago—in fact, as recently as 2007 when I began researching this topic in earnest—evidence suggested a continuing eagerness among the public to see graphic images of actual death.<sup>44</sup> Questions about the ethics or value of displaying such images, when they were raised, came primarily from professionals in journalism, documentary filmmaking, and academia. These tended to focus on whether it was fair to the deceased or to that person’s survivors to distribute documentation of the death and on whether the image served a function valuable enough to account for its explicitness. These individuals questioned our *right* to look at graphic images of actual death, and usually a particular image; a refusal to look would stem from ethical objections to that image’s creation or display.

Over just a few years, though, a different kind of objection to looking at documentary death (bundled with various other potentially disturbing recorded sights) gained tremendous momentum in public discourse through the popularization of “trigger warnings”—globally in Internet communities and nationally in U.S. university campus culture. A trigger warning is a caution provided (in writing at the top of a blog post or in a professor’s remarks before a course film screening, for example) about potentially upsetting content ahead, giving the audience a chance to turn back or psychologically prepare themselves for the experience of consuming it. These warnings have a long history in feminist Internet culture, but they vastly broadened their reach in the mid-2010s to become a subject of fierce controversy.<sup>45</sup> Resistance to trigger warnings in this era stems, in some measure, from the practice’s expansion beyond the specific groups it was once imagined to protect. Many of us in the position to provide such warnings (in our college classrooms, in our writing, in our media-making) agree that a rape survivor, for example, may benefit from advanced notice about a graphic rape scene in a film that might “trigger” a volatile traumatic memory.<sup>46</sup> But applications of trigger warnings and the pool of individuals insisting on them have expanded far beyond this type of specific scenario. At their most extreme, trigger warnings may now be demanded by those who have not

personally experienced the uncomfortable things they do not wish to see represented: violence, sex, suicide, self-injury, substance abuse, eating disorders, racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, and so on.<sup>47</sup> Now the culture of the trigger warning feels, to many critics, dangerously oversensitized. No longer calibrated for those people who have actually lived through trauma, trigger warnings often function to shield those with relatively privileged lives from being upset by the traumatic experiences others have to endure.

Proponents of the trigger warning have made refusing to look at disturbing images, like the images of recorded death that this book considers, a much more common and more public practice. Further, they have dramatically shifted the terms under which that refusal is made. Such refusals previously tended to project outward from the individual making them, manifesting an interest in the rights and well-being of others; refusals stemming from trigger-warning culture turn inward, proclaiming one's own right to self-protection from perceived psychological harm. Deeply wary of this turn toward a rhetoric of self-protection, I believe that each of us must interrogate our own experiences and privileges when deciding whether to close our eyes to difficult sights. The images and footage of this nature that are described and sometimes depicted in *Dying in Full Detail* represent, as Susan Sontag writes, "a means of making 'real' (or 'more real') matters that the privileged and the merely safe might prefer to ignore."<sup>48</sup> Those of us among "the privileged and the merely safe" must weigh the necessity of our self-protection against our moral obligation to learn and think critically about the terrible things that happen to others, and—crucially—about the way these terrible things are mediated and the consequences of that mediation. Additionally, the type of sights we choose to avoid and our reasons for doing so matter. It is one thing to avoid *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* because one is upset by blood and gore; it is another to avoid *Night and Fog* because one is upset by dead bodies. And it is one thing to avoid Eric Garner's recorded death at the hands of police because one knows the history of and objects to the spectacularized suffering of Black male bodies; it is another to avoid that footage because one finds it disturbing to watch someone die on camera.

The rise of the trigger warning and its attendant culture makes clear that the desire to see a sight like recorded death is by no means universal. As much evidence as there is that this desire has been strong and persistent throughout the history of photography and film, there are many who feel dread, not curiosity, at the prospect of witnessing a recorded death. The cultural shift toward this dread response, toward a rhetoric of self-protection that trigger-warning culture suggests is likely one consequence of the shift in visual culture that

this book describes: the vast expansion of disturbing recorded events available for public view, which digital technology has enabled (though not exclusively caused). When a sight like recorded death is taboo and seldom seen, it may pique curiosity; when it is confronting viewers through video links in news articles and on social media every few weeks in a new form, its generally grim reality registers for many, and that curiosity evolves into apprehension. In my field of research, I do not have the option to avoid images of this nature and, in fact, have to actively seek them out. As a brief personal comment, I will note that the evolution from curiosity to apprehension in the face of documentary death footage is one I have undergone myself during my many years of research for this book.

If trigger-warning culture has contributed something valuable to the matter of creating and viewing potentially disturbing content, it is this: no one should take lightly their request for others to look at horrifying things, especially in media as immersive as photography and film, and especially in a form as sobering as documentary. No matter how sheltered and privileged an audience member might be, no matter how strong one's conviction is that that person *should* see the content in question—that they are morally obligated to do so—it is no small thing to ask someone to witness sights like the ones analyzed in this book. For some, that act of witnessing may pass with little impact, but for others it may leave a psychological mark. On an existential level, it may even drive home the relative powerlessness most viewers have in the face of human cruelty or the chaotic violence of life.

While their effect on audiences will vary, sights like these cannot be unseen—even in the form of small, black-and-white stills in an academic book, with their accompanying description and analysis. Thus, I want to note here that I understand the stakes of writing about the recorded deaths of others and of asking this book's readers to absorb those recordings and think about what they mean. Throughout the process of completing *Dying in Full Detail*, I have aimed to preserve for myself and for my readers the human meaning and emotional impact of these deaths while simultaneously analyzing them in a form (the academic book) that demands, in some measure, critical distance. Writing about this topic with care, compassion, and hopefully some grace has been a vital goal for me as I seek to honor my implicit ethical obligations to readers and especially to the individuals whose deaths—exposed to the public and often deeply unjust in nature—undergird my work.

## The Influences and Structure of *Dying in Full Detail*

My writing about the intersection between death and documentary is informed by much related scholarship on photography (Roland Barthes, Sontag, John Berger) and a few film-specific studies (Bazin, Vogel, Michael Renov), where writers have more rarely taken up the subject.<sup>49</sup> No author has been more important to this book than Vivian Sobchack, whose 1984 essay (and its revised 2004 version) “Inscribing Ethical Space: Ten Propositions on Death, Representation, and Documentary” provides an early and ambitious exploration of the topic. In a mere eighteen pages of the *Quarterly Review of Film Studies*, Sobchack provides a cultural context for death in documentary, ten theoretical propositions about it, and a taxonomy of six “gazes” through which the camera might look at actual death, evaluated in relation to ethics.

Sobchack’s gazes, which I will reference in multiple chapters ahead, require a brief overview.<sup>50</sup> She grants ethical approval to five of these ways of looking, starting with the “accidental gaze,” which applies to death footage captured by chance without a cameraperson’s intention to record it. The “helpless gaze” indicates that the cameraperson was restrained from intervening in the death recorded, usually by physical distance or the law (for instance, in the case of recorded executions). Whether helpless or not, the cameraperson who records death with an “endangered gaze” is doing so at the risk of her or his own life, and thus paying an appropriate price for the ethical privilege. An extreme extension of the endangered gaze, the “interventional gaze” shows the cameraperson emerging from cover and safety to record death—sometimes dying while doing so. Finally, the “humane gaze” is more of a stare, “marked by its *extended duration*” and often employed to film natural death.<sup>51</sup> Sobchack praises instances of the humane gaze in which documentarians have been invited by the dying—where the opportunity to consent is possible, unlike in most of the cases these gazes describe. Each of the preceding gazes is ethical, according to Sobchack, because death’s recording neither indicates the cameraperson’s complicity nor interferes with death’s possible prevention. In fact, Sobchack encourages viewers to look for signs of an ethical position “inscribed” within the footage itself—a zoom that indicates physical distance from the death or an obscured view that signifies the cameraperson’s endangerment and need to take cover. The “professional gaze” (attributed to professional journalists, in this essay), however, does not inscribe acceptable ethics into its content and does not receive automatic ethical approval from Sobchack. Instead, its content is “marked by ethical ambiguity, by technical and *machinelike compe-*

tence in the face of an event that seems to call for further and more humane response.”<sup>52</sup>

With this taxonomy of gazes, Sobchack (implicitly) opposes Bazin’s sweeping rejection of documentary death, contributing a welcome insistence that not all recorded deaths are recorded equally. *How* death is documented matters, and viewers can evaluate the ethics of each instance by examining the circumstances and attitude of its recording—often implied in the material itself, through cinematography. Using her essay as a vital foundation, this book affirms Sobchack’s insistence that the way death is recorded makes a difference, engaging in the type of close reading that she lacked the space, access, and perhaps desire to undertake in “Inscribing Ethical Space.”<sup>53</sup> Further, the works I analyze present opportunities to expand Sobchack’s list of gazes, as new ways of looking have emerged in the documentary form that are uniquely digital. In chapters 3 and 4, I propose three digital-era additions to that list: the expectant gaze, the automated gaze, and the ubiquitous gaze.

The chapters of *Dying in Full Detail* progress both chronologically and thematically. Chronologically, the chapters cover photography and film’s predigital efforts to record death from the 1830s through the 1970s (chapter 1), video’s influx into documentary production in the 1980s and 1990s (chapter 2), the influence of digital production tools in the first few years of the 2000s (chapter 3), and the current climate of digital distribution (chapter 4). Thematically, the book’s two halves explore two sides of the mutually informing interplay between death and the digital. The first pair of chapters asks what the digital (sometimes through absence) reveals about death: namely, that it frequently resists visibility and proceeds as an amorphous process rather than an identifiable event. The second pair of chapters reverses the question to ask what death reveals about the digital, emphasizing the latter’s unique durational powers, capacity for surveillance, and surprising sense of materiality.

Chapter 1, “Capturing the ‘Moment’: Photography, Film, and Death’s Elusive Duration,” situates digital efforts to record death within a long history of photographic and filmic attempts from the invention of the daguerreotype in 1839 through the end of the Vietnam War in 1975. The chapter unifies disparate images—Civil War and lynching photographs, early cinema’s execution films, images from Nazi concentration camps, home movie footage of President John Kennedy’s assassination, and television news coverage of the Vietnam War—through their struggle to capture the “moment of death.” I argue that such attempts form a collective and enduring fantasy for documentarians and their audiences, one that cannot be fully realized because cameras cannot make visible a definitive “moment” within an opaque, durational process of dying. The

relative paucity of success in capturing death on celluloid also highlights film's specific technological limitations in that task.

Chapter 2, "The Art of Dying, on Video: Deathbed Documentaries," continues with the opposition between the visible "moment of death" and the nebulous process of dying by examining long-term chronicles of natural dying. This documentary practice gained traction through the rise of analog video and then DV. With newly affordable and user-friendly equipment, both professionals and family members began to bring cameras to the bedsides of the dying, who collaborated in recording their own deaths. Their documentaries—including the filmic precursor *Dying* (1978, Michael Roemer), *Silverlake Life: The View from Here* (1993, Peter Friedman and Tom Joslin), and *Sick: The Life and Death of Bob Flanagan, Supermasochist* (1997, Kirby Dick)—challenge the primacy of the visible "moment of death" by systematically excluding it, despite technology's newfound readiness to capture it. They instead use video's affordances to make the long process of dying newly public, detailing the illness that precedes this "moment" and the mourning that follows it. I argue, though, that this exclusion also reveals a new discomfort with the physicality of dying, as the surprisingly routine "moment" of bodily expiration conflicts with the era's revised model of the "good death" as highly individualized.

Chapter 3, "A Negative Pleasure?: Suicide's Digital Sublimity," analyzes *The Bridge*, a 2006 documentary that exploits the durational affordances of the digital in order to record death in a new and ethically volatile way. With two stations of continually staffed DV cameras, director Eric Steel surveilled San Francisco's Golden Gate Bridge for every daylight minute of 2004, watching for the frequent suicides this structure draws. Culled from ten thousand hours of video, the startling suicide footage included in *The Bridge* made newly visible a type of highly public dying that had remained socially and politically invisible for decades. This display of recorded suicide elicited both a barrage of ethical criticisms and a surge in activist efforts to erect a suicide barrier at the Golden Gate. While the film's harshest critics condemned the mere act of recording these suicides—a common response to death documentaries—I argue that its ethics are fully entangled with its aesthetics. *The Bridge* uses Hollywood conventions to frame suicide as sublime, both terrible and magnificent, and to elevate one graceful jumper into a position as the film's star. These aesthetic choices compromise the film ethically, in light of social scientists' findings that suicides can spread when romanticized through their media representation—an effect that would counteract the project's alleged goal of suicide prevention.

Chapter 4, "Streaming Death: The Politics of Dying on YouTube," moves past professional documentaries with theatrical distribution and ten thousand

hours of footage to consider amateur videos as short as twelve seconds that circulate online. I analyze the production and distribution of videos of two violent 2009 deaths, each of which was captured by multiple mobile phone cameras and posted on YouTube. The victims were Oscar Grant, a young Black man fatally shot in Oakland by transit police, and Neda Agha-Soltan, a young Iranian woman killed in Tehran during a protest of that year's elections. Put to use by activists, these two sets of videos achieved disparate levels of success in raising awareness about their injustices and securing support for associated political causes. Analyzing the videos' aesthetics and circulation, I argue that YouTube's failure to provide context for its content—which has prompted scholarly criticisms about its usefulness for activism—can sometimes be politically liberating. However, the centrality of spectacle to success in YouTube's "attention economy" means that the deaths streaming on the site generate interest from the way they look and sound more from than the degrees of injustice they depict. Thus, for activist death footage, I find that only graphically visible death is likely to significantly increase a cause's political visibility.

Finally, my conclusion reflects on the motivations of those who make and view documentary death and on the broad cultural and political work these maligned moving images attempt. I end *Dying in Full Detail* with an acknowledgment that even the recorded reminders of human mortality I write about here are themselves mortal. While a spirit of death denial pervades the public's attitude toward digital recordings—thought immortal, never to curl and decay like celluloid film—the files that store death footage face their own deaths through, for example, neglect in the endless process of migration to new formats that is necessary to sustain them.

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

## NOTES

### Introduction

- 1 Bazin, "Death Every Afternoon."
- 2 Rilke, *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, 17. This passage came to my attention through Friedman, *Fictional Death and the Modernist Enterprise*, 57.
- 3 Vogel, "The Ultimate Secret," 263.
- 4 I will use the term "natural" death to refer to deaths we attribute to disease or age, but I make this choice between two terms that are both unsatisfying. Is there anything that feels either "natural" or "nonviolent," for example, about a death in an intensive care unit that is accompanied by forceful chest compressions, jolts from defibrillators, and the frenzied atmosphere of a "code" (when a patient's deterioration prompts CPR or intubation)?
- 5 Bazin, "Death Every Afternoon," 30.
- 6 Bazin, "Death Every Afternoon," 31.
- 7 Bazin, "Death Every Afternoon," 30.
- 8 Bazin, "The Ontology of the Photographic Image," 9.
- 9 Dyer, *White*, 104.
- 10 Bazin, "Death Every Afternoon," 31.
- 11 Zelizer, *About to Die*, 43–48.
- 12 Qtd. in Zelizer, *About to Die*, 301.
- 13 Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, 300, 302 (emphasis in original).
- 14 For influential discussions of digital immateriality (not all of which frame the digital as simply immaterial), see Mitchell, *The Reconfigured Eye*; Rosen, "Old and New"; Hansen, "Between Body and Image"; Doane, "The Indexical and the Concept of Medium Specificity"; Rodowick, *The Virtual Life of Film*.
- 15 Editing a digital documentary is, of course, a form of digital manipulation, but here I am referring to major changes to the mise-en-scène.
- 16 Gunning, "Moving Away from the Index," 30–31.
- 17 Torchin, "Mediation and Remediation," 39.
- 18 Halverson, Ruston, and Trethewey, "Mediated Martyrs of the Arab Spring."

- 19 He Huifeng, “Shenzhen Introduces Good Samaritan Law,” *South China Morning Post*, August 1, 2013, <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/article/1293475/shenzhen-introduces-good-samaritan-law>.
- 20 Andile Mngxitama, “Tatane’s Death Underlines Need for Government to Deliver,” *Sowetan*, April 19, 2011, <http://www.sowetanlive.co.za/columnists/2011/04/19/tatane-s-death-underlines-need-for-government-to-deliver>.
- 21 Kastenbaum, *On Our Way*, 44.
- 22 Lundgren and Houseman, “Banishing Death,” 226. Lundgren and Houseman clarify that while sanitary conditions in rural areas also welcomed disease, death rates outside the cities were significantly lower (225–26).
- 23 Lundgren and Houseman, “Banishing Death,” 227. A nineteenth-century young man’s diary entry about cholera expresses the terror these threats brought: “To see individuals well in the morning & buried before night, retiring apparently well & dead in the morning is something which is appalling to the boldest heart” (Rosenberg, *The Cholera Years*, 3). For more on death in the Civil War period, see chapter 1 and Faust, *This Republic of Suffering*.
- 24 Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death*. Ariès claims that this model of death spread even to the frontier in the mid-nineteenth century, as letters from that period to loved ones back East indicate (449).
- 25 Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death*, 448, 473.
- 26 Ariès, *Western Attitudes toward Death*, 92.
- 27 Gorer, “The Pornography of Death,” 195.
- 28 Lundgren and Houseman, “Banishing Death,” 229.
- 29 Post, *Inquiries in Bioethics*, 83. To nuance this history, I will note that there are twentieth-century and twenty-first-century Americans for whom the sight of death remains common: medical professionals, care workers in nursing homes, police, and military personnel, for example. The sight of death is thus not hidden from everyone but rather has been increasingly restricted to professionals whose jobs necessitate significant exposure to death.
- 30 Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death*, 570. Lundgren and Houseman show a major growth period for hospitals between 1873 (178 U.S. hospitals) and 1909 (4,359 U.S. hospitals) (“Banishing Death,” 231).
- 31 Lundgren and Houseman, “Banishing Death,” 232.
- 32 Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death*, 587; Walter, *The Revival of Death*, 59.
- 33 Lundgren and Houseman, “Banishing Death,” 237.
- 34 Post, *Inquiries in Bioethics*, 86; Lundgren and Houseman, “Banishing Death,” 236.
- 35 Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death*, 614.
- 36 Halbert L. Dunn, *Vital Statistics of the United States 1950*, vol. 1, *Analysis and Summary Tables with Supplemental Tables for Alaska, Hawaii, Puerto Rico, and Virgin Islands* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1954), 171. Heart failure—as opposed to heart attacks—often kills in a long and unpleasant process.
- 37 Ariès, *Western Attitudes toward Death*, 88–89.
- 38 Ruby, *Secure the Shadow*, 12.
- 39 For an analysis of how death functions in this important documentary (from a more theoretical than ethical perspective), see Jeong and Andrew, “Grizzly Ghost.”

- 40 Qtd. in Hansen, “Schindler’s List Is Not Shoah,” 301.
- 41 Williams, *Hard Core*.
- 42 Gorer, “The Pornography of Death,” 197.
- 43 The infamous film spawned several direct sequels and many derivatives in other multipart series such as *Facez of Death*, *Death Scenes*, *Traces of Death*, and *Banned from Television*.
- 44 This widespread eagerness survived the shocks of documentary death images from the 9/11 attacks and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq that followed them, limited as the impact of the latter images may have been. Indeed, the public’s continuing drive to see recorded death became newly evident in the first decade of the twenty-first century with data on online image and video searches (e.g., Internet users trying to watch Nick Berg’s beheading video in May 2004 made it the most common search engine query in the week it was released) (Zelizer, *About to Die*, 286).
- 45 Myriad articles and blog posts have debated the value of trigger warnings; I recommend Elizabeth Freeman, Brian Herrera, Nat Hurley, Hoday King, Dana Luciano, Dana Seitler and Patricia White, “Trigger Warnings Are Flawed,” *Inside Higher Ed*, May 29, 2014, <https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2014/05/29/essay-faculty-members-about-why-they-will-not-use-trigger-warnings>; Jack Halberstam, “You Are Triggering Me! The Neo-liberal Rhetoric of Harm, Danger and Trauma,” *Bully Bloggers*, July 5, 2014, <https://bullybloggers.wordpress.com/2014/07/05/you-are-triggering-me-the-neo-liberal-rhetoric-of-harm-danger-and-trauma/>; Karen Swallow Prior, “‘Empathetically Correct’ Is the New Politically Correct,” *Atlantic*, May 23, 2014, <http://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2014/05/empathetically-correct-is-the-new-politically-correct/371442/>.
- 46 Ensuring that a rape survivor about to watch a film for class knows that it has a graphic rape scene is a widely palatable trigger warning example scenario. But the potential efficacy of such warnings, even in this seemingly clear-cut case, is not easy to predict. Survivors of traumatic events can have highly idiosyncratic triggers—like a sound or a color they associate with the event—rather than intuitive ones like seeing a rape scene in a film. Further, the benefit of a trigger warning may depend on how the warned individual reacts to it. Current psychological research on treating PTSD asserts that controlled exposure to the traumatic memory and its associations is more effective than avoidance. While a college classroom—however thoughtfully managed—is no substitute for a trained exposure therapist’s office, research suggests that we may be harming rather than helping our students if we encourage them to avoid assigned material on the basis of a trigger warning. The best use of such warnings, then, may be to prepare students who have lived through trauma to actually encounter potentially triggering material that is curated and taught with care, not to avoid it. *Treatment of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder*, 8.
- 47 The most publicized instance of extreme trigger-warning culture on a college campus came from a quickly withdrawn document that administrators circulated to Oberlin College faculty advising them to “be aware of racism, classism, sexism, heterosexism, cissexism, ableism, and other issues of privilege and oppression” in choosing what content to teach, to make that material optional where possible, and to favor alternatives. Jenny Jarvie, “Trigger Happy,” *New Republic*, March 3, 2014,

<http://www.newrepublic.com/article/116842/trigger-warnings-have-spread-blogs-college-classes-thats-bad>.

- 48 Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, 7.
- 49 See especially Barthes, *Camera Lucida*; Sontag, *On Photography*; Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*; Berger, *About Looking*; Renou, *The Subject of Documentary* (“Filling up the Hole in the Real”).
- 50 Sobchack, “Inscribing Ethical Space,” 249–55.
- 51 Sobchack, “Inscribing Ethical Space,” 252.
- 52 Sobchack, “Inscribing Ethical Space,” 255.
- 53 Although her assessment of documentary ethics prescribes close reading as a necessary tool, Sobchack herself does little of it in “Inscribing Ethical Space.” Her intentions seem to be broad and theoretical, and her ambitious coverage of an extensive topic in eighteen pages leaves little room for detailed analysis of actual footage. Additionally, far less of that footage would have been available and accessible to a scholar writing on this topic in 1984 (or even revising such a work in 2004) than to one writing on it today.

#### Chapter 1. Capturing the “Moment”

- 1 The twentieth-century trends toward death from prolonged ailments continue in the twenty-first, where at least seven of the ten leading causes of death in the United States forecast a slow withering rather than a sudden end (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “Deaths: Leading Causes for 2012,” 17, August 31, 2015, [http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nvsr/nvsr64/nvsr64\\_10.pdf](http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nvsr/nvsr64/nvsr64_10.pdf)). These ten causes are based on the CDC’s 2012 study, the most recent year for which public data were available. The seven-out-of-ten figure also holds true within each racial category that CDC statistics include, though variance of a few percentage points exists between racial categories when measuring by total annual deaths rather than leading causes. Even the top cause, heart disease, does not always provide a sudden death from a heart attack. Heart failure often kills in a long process accompanied by painful swelling, difficulty ingesting food, and a sensation of drowning when the lungs begin to fill with fluid. Though the following additional statistics do not signify a period of “dying” in the sense of immanent terminality, the average American is debilitated for five (for males) or eight (for females) years before death (Hardwig, “Going to Meet Death,” 37).
- 2 Acknowledgments to Scott Combs, who uses Williams’s “Film Bodies” to discuss the temporality of staged death scenes in melodrama—a use that partly inspired my extended comparison between Williams’s modes and documentary death. See Combs, *Deathwatch*, 71–73.
- 3 Williams, “Film Bodies,” 713, 703.
- 4 Barbie Zelizer provides an alternative temporal framing to mine in *About to Die*, arguing for the primacy of the “about to die” moment caught on camera (one that occurs earlier than the “moment” of death I am discussing). For Zelizer, it is less the spectacle of death or the allure of its precisely timed capture that draws viewers in, but rather the way “about to die” images restore a subjunctive “as if” state where the ensuing death or destruction may still be avoided.