

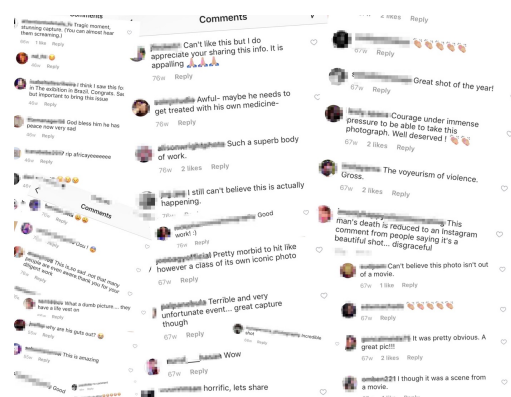
HYPERALLERGIC

ARTICLES

Against Consuming Images of the Brutalized, Dead, and Dying

Reproducing and repurposing brutal visuals carries the risk of desensitizing, and further reinforcing the terrorizing normalization of what shouldn't be mundane.

William C. Anderson June 1, 2018



Comments from photos showing brutal violence, murder, dying, and death (image by the author)

"I am interested in ways of seeing and imagining responses to the terror visited on Black life and the ways we inhabit it, are inhabited by it, and refuse it. I am interested in the ways we live in and despite that terror."

Christina Sharpe

Exposing brutality isn't inherently bad, but the casual repetition of such displays can serve purposes that aren't necessarily intended. Images can freeze someone in a moment of suffering when life is lost, but there's more to lose than our sense of comfort when we bear witness. Reproducing and repurposing brutal visuals carries the risk of desensitizing, and further reinforcing the terrorizing normalization of what shouldn't be mundane.

Think about Kevin Carter, who took an internationally famous, Pulitzer-prize winning photo of a starving Sudanese child being stalked by vulture while she tried to reach a feeding center. [A Time magazine piece recalled the moment:](https://www.nytimes.com/1985/05/27/us/27carter.html)

As he crouched to photograph her, a vulture landed in view. Careful not to disturb the bird, he positioned himself for the best possible image. He would later say he waited about 20 minutes, hoping the vulture would spread its wings. It did not, and after he took his photographs, he chased the bird away and watched as the little girl resumed her struggle. Afterward he sat under a tree, lit a cigarette, talked to God and cried.

Though the photo became famous and established a great reputation for his work, it haunted him. Many of the images he took and the things he saw disturbed him. Two months after winning the Pulitzer he took his own life. In the note he left he lamented being haunted by “killings & corpses & anger & pain ... of starving or wounded children,” as well as “trigger-happy madmen, often police ... killer executioners.” The world begs us to take notice of what’s wrong, but when we do, intention means everything.

Observation of major photojournalistic outlets like [World Press Photo](#), [AFP](#), and the [AP](#) show that brutality, especially traumatic death, has an enticing cinematic quality to it. Images of suffering, tortured, and dead people, including children, are consumed by audiences who laud the “greatness” of the images in their comments on social media. Photographers, videographers, and documentarians are made into merchants of death dolling out reels of destruction to receptive dealers who can make use of the product. Sadness, empathy, or concern for the suffering in the images aren’t guaranteed. Those who are victimized in this way are objectified by the artists for their own ends.



Britt Reints, photo of protest in Pittsburgh after NY grand jury decided not to charge police officer who killed Eric Garner with an illegal chokehold (2014) (photo by [Britt Reints via Flickr](#))

The carefree consumption of suffering and death should lead us to ask whether trauma is being conflated with quality. Even though art doesn’t have to be made for a cause, careful attention should be paid to what causes, rebellions, and empowerments certain visuals can recklessly undermine. Visuals of brutality are now repurposed like samples in music production and used to provide the backdrop for the spectacular and newly relevant. Horror can be reduced to merely a feature or a sound in the

background. We’re so used to consuming violence in art forms like popular music and cinema that it becomes hard to separate the two — entertainment and atrocity.

When unacceptable manifestations of brutality, death, and destruction do come our way, some of us may not easily recognize them because we're expecting them to look as fantastical as cinema. Some may even feel affirmed by seeing themselves or those with whom they share an identity visually "represented" while being brutalized, dying, or dead. Here we have to admit to ourselves: it's not the world doesn't know what's happening to many of us or isn't paying attention; it's that far too many people simply don't care and maintain their power through the absence of compassion. This is especially true when it comes to Black people's bodies.

In 2015 I wrote about how the [legacy of lynching photos](#) extends into the virality of images of anti-Black violence today. The movement to resist the careless commodification of Black people's suffering is not about promoting censorship; it rejects efforts to further strip Black people of our agency. It shouldn't be assumed that if we are being harmed, or are dead that our bodies, visual documentation, and recreated renderings thereof are everyone's to share and consume.

Our existence within the confines of racial capitalism and the afterlife of slavery promotes the cavalier use of these types of images, drawing a direct line back to chattel slavery. Still, for many throughout the African diaspora who aren't descended from the enslaved (including those on the African continent) we suffer all types of trouble via oppressive gazes. Be it an association with slavery or "the third world," our self-determination can quickly be disregarded. We are treated like land or water — a natural resource to be harvested and used. Black people and our bodies, dead or alive, are made into commons to which people assign their own particular uses, purposes, causes, and ambitions.

[Claudia Rankine](#) reflected on how images of a Black person's dead body can be disregarded and consumed writing, "Another option, of course, is that it becomes a spectacle for white pornography: the dead body as an object that satisfies an illicit desire." Everyone brings their own gaze and all the oppression, harm, and trouble it can contain to their respective viewing.

Many are doubly at risk, especially those who are otherized by the dominant white gaze. This violence of fascinated observation, conscious or subconscious, is true with regard to many things including class, gender, sexuality, and so on. For Black people, we're fighting a society that regularly kills us and then redistributes our harm, death, and hardship as a visual spectacle.

Christina Sharpe tells us this much in her book *In the Wake*:

When we find images of Black suffering in various publics framed in and as calls to action or calls to feel with and for ... That is, these images work to confirm the status, location, and already held opinions within dominant ideology about those exhibitions of spectacular Black bodies whose meanings then remain unchanged ... the repetition of the visual, discursive, state, and other quotidian and extraordinary cruel and unusual violences enacted on Black people does not lead to a cessation of violence, nor does it, across or within communities, lead primarily to sympathy or something like empathy. Such repetitions often work to solidify and make continuous the colonial project of violence.

In 2017 Dana Schutz's painting of Emmett Till's mutilated body titled "Open Casket" at the Whitney Biennial was met with protests for being anti-Black and exploitative. "It is not acceptable for a white person to transmute Black suffering into profit and fun, though the practice has been normalized for a long time," [Hannah Black wrote in an open letter](#). Her letter explicitly described the phenomena black people and several hyper-exploitable, otherized people are capable of being procured by. "The subject matter is not Schutz's; white free speech and white creative freedom have been founded on the constraint of others, and are not natural rights," Black explained.



Dana Schutz's "Open Casket" (2016)
(photo by Benjamin Sutton for
Hyperallergic)

Schutz went on with her business and artists of different backgrounds came to her defense along the way with a statement of their own. Among them was Kara Walker. [The statement defending Schutz's painting](#) alleged "censorship" and stated artists must "not perpetrate upon each other the same kind of intolerance and tyranny that we criticize in others." Years earlier in 2012, a piece was scheduled to be performed by the artist Clifford Owens as part of his "Anthology" series at MoMA PS1. The exhibition was supposed to include a series of performances where Owens interpreted instructions given to him by many other artists, including Walker, whose piece would have included a demand for sex and mention of a "forced sex act." Upon hearing this was Owens' intention Walker rescinded her involvement. She then left us with

some powerful words that never lost their meaning, writing, “I refuse to have this idea of mine cause anyone physical harm. Challenging and highlighting abusive power dynamics in our culture is my goal, replicating them is not. Please cease and desist.” The show went on without any such act, but the truth remained that we cannot flatten power dynamics or minimize the role of power in inflicting violence of any sort. We could get lost trying to hierarchize which brutalities are more acceptable, but that doesn’t provide an excuse for indifference.

The cinematic quality assigned to violence can mislead us to think harm and death are only supposed to look a certain way. This obsession with brutality having a certain spectacular, picturesque quality highlights people passionately believing in the need to visualize certain aspects of the traumatic to believe it to be true. If we must visualize oppression and harm to make them believable, that limits our ability to conceptualize liberation or a better world. If we have to see pain to know it hurts, how can we achieve the freedoms we can’t even imagine because we’ve never seen or experienced them?

People regularly assume that visuals of abused, dying, and dead people are theirs to take. However, the dead cannot consent unless they leave us with instructions. The entirety of a life can be reduced to an act of brutality, a killing. Someone’s beliefs, their hobbies, and aspirations are minimized by the weight of what’s shareable, consumable, and capable of being repurposed. Meanwhile, the tragedy that’s emphasized can ultimately be stripped of any compassionate meaning through casual consumption. That’s *if* who we’re witnessing being brutalized is able to be mourned. The violence inflicted on someone is not easier to empathize with when it’s seen. Those who do the oppressing see those they’re oppressing and that’s part of their gratification.



Irish Naval personnel from the LÉ Eithne (P31) rescuing migrants as part of Operation Triton (photo by the Irish Defense Forces [via Wikimedia Commons](#))

This isn’t about contest and being too sensitive about art or measuring who does and doesn’t get to offend. The dead and brutalized are also not necessarily holy relics for us to attach ourselves to that we should abstain from looking at thoughtfully. This is about rejecting willful absurdities that equalize the very unequal in the name of art and consumption. Violence does not need to be constantly repurposed,

reproduced, and consumed; it needs to be stopped. We need redistributions of

resources, not trauma. In a world destructively obsessed with consumerism, we should challenge ourselves to look past trite capitalist models of art and creation.

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