

Jennifer Malkowski, **Dying in Full Detail: Mortality and Digital Documentary**, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017, 264 pp., \$84.95 (hardcover), \$23.95 (paperback).

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***Dying in Full Detail: Mortality and Digital Documentary*** by Jennifer Malkowski takes documentary representation of death and dying as its subject but through it explores fundamental questions about what it is we think we're doing when we create, and consume, digital images. While this book will no doubt be, and probably already has been, avidly read by students and scholars of death and dying, it should also be considered by readers who want to reflect on what the transition from analog to digital filmmaking means for audiences' and filmmakers' relationship to the real, with death presenting an undeniable and ineffable aspect of reality that both compels us and ultimately eludes our representational grasp. In other words, *Dying in Full Detail* engages with urgent questions in media studies today, in the course of presenting important contributions to the interdisciplinary study of death and dying.



The book's chapters function as standalone investigations of the history of death in documentary film and photography, largely in the United States, in chronological order, from the earliest days of the medium up to war photography in Vietnam in chapter 1; in chapter 2, deathbed documentaries as they emerged as a practical possibility and a cultural impulse in the late 20th century; documentary evidence of suicide in the early 21st century in the third chapter, with an emphasis on Richard Drew's *The Falling Man* photograph from the World Trade Center on 9/11 (a cropped version of which serves as the book's cover) and the documentary *The Bridge* (2006); and finally, in chapter 4, a consideration of bystander footage of unjust killings by authorities—of Iranian activist Neda Agha-Soltan, who was shot at an antigovernment protest in 2009, and Oscar Grant III, murdered by an Oakland, California, police officer at Fruitvale Station in the same year. While each of these chapters tells a self-contained story about a particular kind of documentary representation of death, there is considerable benefit to considering these accounts in juxtaposition. The themes that run throughout the book include what difference digital makes, the visual aesthetics of texts that purport to show death "as it really is," representational relay between fiction and documentary, and the ethics of making, looking at, and distributing these images.

Chapter 1 provides a useful summary of the history of efforts on the part of documentary photographers and filmmakers to capture an image of death as it occurs, and the inevitable limitations due to heavy equipment and the expense of film stock that made such images unlikely, and all the more remarkable when they did occur, as with Eddie Adams' image of Nguyễn Văn Lém's execution on the streets of Saigon during the Vietnam War, and Abraham Zapruder's footage of John F. Kennedy's assassination. While this history has been examined by other scholars, in subsequent chapters Malkowski's distinctive contribution is to consider the changes that digital has wrought across hardware, software (or the medium on which images are captured), expense, and infrastructures of distribution that have changed the

possibilities for producing, disseminating, and consuming documentary images of death. In contrast to the “moment of death” being a sought-after but unlikely image to capture in the predigital, premobile era, images of public death have become all too common, even if they are mostly sequestered on so-called “death porn” sites, since the largest distribution platforms such as YouTube largely take them down, unless they are deemed to have redeeming social or political value.

One such change brought by digital—the vastly reduced expense of capturing footage—has facilitated a subgenre investigated in chapter 2, the deathbed documentary. Without succumbing to technological determinism, Malkowski traces the convergence between filmmaking becoming more accessible due to cheaper devices, the ability of filmmaking to be vastly more “patient” due to the reduced expense of filming, the declining power of traditional gatekeepers in distribution, and cultural shifts occurring late in the 20th century, in which the much-criticized Western culture of “death denial” was increasingly challenged by the desire of Americans to die at home, and in an individualized way. While earlier modes of documentary sought but often failed to capture the “moment of death,” the deathbed documentary revealed the much longer duration of dying as a process, Malkowski argues, in which the “moment” is often either not shown or, when it is shown, turns out to not be as revelatory as anticipated. This contrast speaks to a theme that recurs throughout the book—how visual recording technologies trouble the temporalities of death.

A valuable aspect of this book that makes it distinct from many fine works that inform it, such as Jay Ruby’s (1992) *Secure the Shadow* and Michele Aaron’s (2014) *Death and the Moving Image*, is its willingness to traverse what have often been fairly siloed scholarly traditions. *Dying in Full Detail* is in dialogue with scholars across the study of photography and moving pictures, fiction film and documentary, professionally-produced film and amateur footage, cinema studies and media studies, and production studies and textual analysis. Malkowski is forthright in the intellectual debt this book owes to scholars across these traditions, notably Susan Sontag, Linda Williams, Barbie Zelizer, and in particular to Vivian Sobchak, in a prescient 1984 article entitled “Inscribing Ethical Space,” in which Sobchak remarks on the dearth of representations of death, at least at the time (this would soon change) in documentary, and theorizes a set of categories for the types of cinematic gazes one sees of death, and their ethical implications. Malkowski uses these gazes as conceptual devices throughout the book, and builds on Sobchak’s observations with some important updates for the digital era. Far from presenting these gazes as abstract, ideal types, this book grounds them in the professional roles and routines, technological affordances, economic imperatives, and cultural attitudes to death that produce these gazes in specific texts.

Each chapter zeroes in on one or two primary texts for in-depth analysis, while conveying the characteristics of the broader universe of texts from which these were selected. Although these texts are all from the documentary tradition, Malkowski’s awareness of the relay between the aesthetic choices made in fiction and documentary highlight how these genres do not operate in strict isolation. One such point at which Malkowski convincingly argues for their mutual influence is in chapter 3, which offers a critical analysis of *The Bridge*, a film that documented a year of suicides from jumping off the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco. In this text, Malkowski sees the force of the past aestheticization of death by suicide and, more generally, by falling, inform not just the making of this ethically-suspect film but the choice of so many people to die by the bridge and the manner in which some of them do it. In a cultural context in which most people’s only exposure to death, be it natural or otherwise, is via media, the role of fictional media, which

so often takes death as its subject, is undeniable in shaping not just how audiences imagine death but how documentary texts are produced.

Although not an audience study per se, Malkowski reports on audience responses in online spaces and beyond. Drawing from these evidentiary threads, especially in chapter 4, which deals with cases of violent, unjust deaths captured by bystanders and shared via YouTube, the book argues that audiences seek an aesthetically arresting or satisfying depiction of death. Those representations that “stick,” or make an impact, are those that confirm, in some way, the aesthetic expectations that have been cultivated in audiences by fictional film—by providing a good view, a dramatic and decisive moment, a victim returning the viewer’s gaze, spectacle. Malkowski acknowledges this finding, without letting it overwhelm evidence that audiences can learn things from documentary images of death and dying, imagemakers can produce these images ethically, and these images can be used to bring attention and momentum to social justice activism, all under the right circumstances.

*Dying in Full Detail* approaches the impulse to document death visually with cautious empathy. While acknowledging that some engagements with death on screen seem to lack any sense of respect or compassion, Malkowski finds that most of the texts engaged with in the book are motivated by a desire to learn, understand, inform, and maybe even help. Ultimately, though, the efforts of imagemakers to show death in its full detail are doomed to fail, as are all ocular-centric fantasies. Through these efforts to inform audiences about life’s end, documentarians can’t help but reveal the limitations of their lenses. As more people have the digital tools at their disposal to produce and disseminate images of death, whether as a conscious choice or due to circumstance, Malkowski’s careful unpacking of the ethics and limitations of the various gazes that organize these images will continue to be recommended reading.

### References

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