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The Significance of Disturbing Images

Introduction

Every now and then, cameras record a moving image so rare and interesting humanity immediately deems it culturally significant, as if almost by instinct realizing just how important the image can be. The Moon landings, the first presidential debates, and rare footage of animals such as the giant squid all exemplify the different kinds of significance people can attach to footage. Historical, cultural, and scientific are just some of the labels that can be given to the images. Generally, these images elicit positive reactions and emotions. These feelings attach themselves to positive accomplishments throughout the past century and a half of recorded human history.

However, many images or events captured on video depict extremely negative situations. This does not render them any *less* culturally significant. Gruesome accidents, murders, disasters, confrontations, and overtly sexual images get less recognition of their social and historical significance, and often times are not even saved. Disturbing images of a violent, sexual, or simply unorthodox sort seldom get seen on television and are more difficult than regular images to find on the internet. The fact that these videos are viewed less often than their positive counterparts makes them rarer, both in views and probably in the amount of footage that exists. There exists more footage of rockets and space shuttles being launched into the atmosphere than there does of people getting shot in the head, or even at the moment of a completely natural death. These may not be easy to watch, but turning the camera on

these atypical, often extremely intimate moments so infrequently lends an even greater level of significance to them.

Through the wonder that is the internet, a person can find video of just about anything he or she may be looking for, though it may take a little extra work. Once simply a niche for academics and computer nerds, the World Wide Web has evolved and expanded to a truly global network, with instant access to a plethora of information, ranging from the vital and classified to the mundane, the innocuous to the controversial. One of the major reasons it has managed to grow to this level of expanse is because in the United States, the FCC chooses to leave it open and uncensored. This uncensored access presents both a blessing and curse, inasmuch as though the access to anything exists, some of the information a person may come across (or actively seek) may be disturbing or unnerving. However, just because a video may be disturbing does not mean it should not be viewed or, worse yet, destroyed. Many of these videos prove valuable because they actually exhibit high cultural significance.

Before moving forward, a note on the terms "disturbing" and "valuable." According to Merriam-Webster, "disturbing" can be used as an adjective when something causes "worry, anxiety, agitation, or uncomfortable feelings." "Valuable" has three definitions, all of which may apply in one way or another to the aforementioned videos: "worth a lot of money," "very useful or helpful," "important and limited in amount." The last definition proves to be the most apt for this discussion, as the nature of the videos captured is often such that it is the only time a specific event has been captured, and it is the only time said specific event can ever be captured. These will be the definitions applied during this discussion.

Videos

The following ten videos are examples of disturbing but culturally valuable videos that should be preserved for future generations to have access. Videos of a similar ilk should also be preserved and saved in an appropriate matter. They all feature non-fictional violent deaths, not any reenactments or fictionalizations. Though this does not mean other types of non-fictional disturbing videos, including but not limited to content that is sexual or simply ideological in nature, should not be preserved as well.

1 - *The Hindenburg Crash*

Recorded: 5/6/1937

The LZ 129 Hindenburg, a German zeppelin and world's largest airship, caught fire and crashed while attempting to dock in Lakehurst, New Jersey. 35 people perished in the accident. To this day, the official cause of the fire has never been determined.

As it was a major accomplishment that the ship had crossed the Atlantic, there were multiple camera crews there to cover the story. Surprisingly enough, none of them were able to catch the start of the fire. The newsreel footage from Castle and Pathe shows the airship floating majestically over New York City, then suddenly it cuts back to the hydrogen filled balloon engulfed in flames, floating to the ground. Ultimately, the charred metal skeleton sits amidst more smoke and flames whilst rescuers attempt to put out the flames. Since the video does not depict any individuals suffering close up, it's really only graphic if a person reflects on the fact that 36 people die while watching that footage. It airs fairly regularly with no regard for the audience's concerns, and its copyright falls in the public domain. Also, Herb Morrison's

announcement of the incident with the famous line "Oh, the humanity" was recorded as part of WLS's (a Chicago radio station) live coverage of the event. It is often dubbed over the video from a different source.

2 - The Zapruder Film

Recorded: 11/22/1963

Arguably the most scrutinized piece of film ever recorded, the Zapruder Film is 26.6 seconds of footage depicting the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. It features the motorcade Kennedy was riding in turning the corner right before the first shot was fired. As the car rides along, the president grabs his throat after the first shot before slumping over after the final head shot. The car then speeds away from the scene with a Secret Service Agent on the back attempting to shield the President and his wife from future fire. While not the only footage of the assassination, it is the most complete and gives the clearest view of the head wound suffered by the president.

The history of the film is extensively documented, and has even been the subject of numerous studies and documentaries. The uniqueness and significance of the footage is unquestionable, as it is the first and only time the assassination of an American president has been captured on film. Abraham Zapruder, a Russian immigrant and clothes manufacturer, recorded the footage on his personal 8mm camera. Three copies of the film were initially produced immediately after it was developed, two of which were handed over to the Secret Service.¹ The footage was subsequently used in the FBI's and the Warren Commission's

¹ Wrone

investigation of the assassination. Zapruder sold the original to *Life Magazine* for \$150,000.

Life published several frames of the film in black and white in its November 29, 1963.²

However, at Zapruder's insistence it excluded frame 313, which shows the moment of the bullet exiting the President's head.³

The film was first aired on network television in 1975 on the show *Good Night, America*. The precedent of not airing frame 313 was not followed, though it has been for most airings on either network or cable television since then. The initial airing caused controversy between Life and the Zapruder family over royalties, leading to a law suit in order to settle the discrepancy.⁴ The heirs regained possession of the original footage before ultimately donating it to the U.S. Government's National Archives and Records Administration while still retaining the copyright for themselves.

The John F. Kennedy Records Collection Act of 1992 was passed with the intent of preserving all records related to the assassination for historical purposes. The Zapruder Film was automatically declared an "assassination record," thereby becoming property of the U.S. government. The film was appraised at \$16 million in 1999, and the Zapruder family was compensated accordingly due to the seizure of the film under eminent domain, though they again retained the copyright. Ultimately, they donated said copyright to The Sixth Floor Museum in Dallas.⁵

This is a case where the significance of a record is immediately recognized and actions are taken accordingly. Due to the nature of the subject material, it makes complete sense that

² Ibid

³ Lapinski

⁴ Wrone

⁵ Ibid

this footage exist in the National Archive, and that the public have access to view it, regardless of the disturbing nature of the content. Unfortunately, it shows the graphic last moments in the life of a popular figure, and if a person sits down and reflects upon what he or she is watching, frame 313 can be especially disturbing. The spray of blood as a man's head explodes all over his wife would be difficult for anyone to watch, particularly a close friend or family member. Perhaps unfairly to the President's daughter, Caroline (the only surviving member of his immediate family) this film and coverage of the day's events has aired countless times through the years. However the record must be preserved and accessed whenever desired. The debate over protecting the family from future access is the subject of a later film.

3 - Jack Ruby Shoots Lee Harvey Oswald

Recorded: 11/24/1963

Two days after he assassinated President John F. Kennedy, Lee Harvey Oswald was killed himself in front of live television cameras by Jack Ruby, a local nightclub owner. Oswald was being held in the Dallas Police Headquarters before getting transferred to the county jail that morning. Footage of this event exists from multiple angles as there were multiple news sources there to cover the event. The main WFAA footage shows a large amount of reporters and police officers gathered along the basement halls of police headquarters. Two police officers lead the way as an armored car is set to arrive to pick up Oswald. Two other officers flank him, escorting him towards the vehicle. Just as the vehicle arrives, Jack Ruby jumps out and shoots Oswald once in the chest. The officers immediately subdue Ruby, wresting the gun away from him. News cameras continued to roll covering the rest of the day's events, including Ruby

getting taken into custody and an unconscious Oswald being carried away to the hospital on a stretcher. He would die later that day.

The cultural and historical significance is incredibly high, as the murder of Oswald had direct repercussions on the possible resolution of the JFK case. With the primary suspect dead, rumors and conspiracy theories swirled around at an even greater rate, doomed to be left unanswered.

4 - Public Suicide of R. Budd Dwyer

Recorded: 1/22/1987

R. Budd Dwyer, then Treasurer of Pennsylvania, called a press conference on January 22, 1987, amidst allegations he had received bribes while in office, during which he proceeded to shoot himself in the head. He was due to be sentenced for accepting the bribery the next day. The footage from multiple television sources depicts the entirety of the press conference where Dwyer reads a prepared statement declaring his innocence. He then hands three envelopes to his aids, one containing a suicide note to his wife, one containing organ donor information, and one containing a letter to Governor Bob Casey.⁶ He proceeds to pull out a .357 Magnum Smith and Wesson from a fourth envelope. He warns people to stand back before putting the revolver in his mouth and pulling the trigger. The video is very graphic from then on, as the bullet exits the back of his head and Dwyer immediately collapses to the ground. Blood rushes from his nose and mouth, and the camera zooms in on his collapsed body focusing on the face, with parts of the exit wound visible on the top of the head.

⁶ Parson and Smith

This is yet another occasion where an American government official has his head explode on camera. The uniqueness and cultural value of the event took on even more significance in the aftermath of the shooting, as news outlets tried to determine what the best course of action would be to broadcast the footage. WPXI in Pittsburgh, WHTM in Harrisburg, and WPVI in Philadelphia aired the press conference in its entirety, drawing ire and complaints from some viewers.⁷ WPVI aired it without giving a warning to its viewers about the graphic nature of the content. Other outlets would pause the footage right before the shooting and allow the audio to run, while others would simply stop the footage before he puts the gun in his mouth.⁸ The debate about the footage revolved around how much and when to show what. No one consistent reason was given; answers ranged from news directors deeming it to be too graphic to journalists thinking that showing the footage did not enhance the story at all. WPVI justified running it in its entirety by saying Dwyer was "an important public figure." WPXI's footage is the one most readily available online.

5 - World Trade Center/Pentagon Attacks

Recorded - 9/11/2011

Four hijacked planes were used by al-Qaeda agents in a coordinated attack to crash into the World Trade Center in New York City and the Pentagon in Washington DC, leading to the collapse of the towers. 2 hit the individual towers, 1 hit the Pentagon; the fourth crashed in a field in rural Pennsylvania. After news of the first plane hit the first tower, the second plane crashed on live television. Amateur video from countless cameras throughout the area is

⁷ Matviko

⁸ Ibid

prevalent online and was throughout the TV coverage over the next few days. The Internet Archive has over 3000 hours of footage just from television coverage. The significance of the footage stems from the nature of the attacks, both symbolic and tangible (3000 dead), plus the subsequent political repercussions felt the world over, even 12 years later.

6 - Death of Steve Irwin

Recorded: 9/4/2006

Steve Irwin, the world renowned and much beloved environmentalist and wildlife expert known as the Crocodile Hunter for his television nature show, died while recording footage in the Great Barrier Reef for a nature documentary entitled *Ocean's Deadliest* when he had his chest pierced by a stingray.⁹ The footage reportedly showed Irwin swimming above a stingray before the animal reacted defensively and stabbed him in the chest, piercing his heart. Irwin is then seen pulling the barb out of his chest. It is believed to be the only ever recording of a death occurring by stingray attack. The uniqueness and value of the footage should have been obvious. Unfortunately, the film was destroyed at the family's behest.

The film was initially viewed by John Stainton, the manager and close friend of the Crocodile Hunter. He claimed the film was "shocking" and "a very hard thing to watch, because you are actually witnessing somebody die, and it's terrible." The footage was then handed over to police for an investigation. Stainton claimed he never wanted to see the footage again, and thought it should be destroyed. Irwin's widow, Terri Irwin, never saw the film and claims it was

⁹ Vause

destroyed once the police closed their investigation in accordance with "standard protocols."¹⁰ Though it was difficult to find evidence confirming the protocols, it was equally difficult procuring evidence to disprove this. Based on that, and Terri's desires to protect their children from ever seeing the footage of their father's gruesome demise, the only conclusion that can be drawn is the assumption the record has been destroyed.

Experts agree that making the film public would be solely for grotesque reasons. Sam G. Freedman, who teaches media ethics at Columbia University, says there is no "compelling public interest" in the release of the video.¹¹ The only possible argument that could be would be "accident prevention" according to Martin Kaplan, a media analyst at USC. However, not making public and preserving it are two different matters.¹² While releasing it to the public would be lurid and borderline sadistic, the fact that it is the only stingray death ever captured on video should indicate that it deserves to be preserved based solely on the level of uniqueness. One could argue there is scientific value to studying the footage, regardless of whether or not it involves a public figure, and while not releasing it does protect the family from potential future exposure, it seems to go against what Irwin believed in.

Ironically, Irwin himself recognized the significance of capturing rare images on camera. Aside from the fact that he hosted a nature show for a living, in an interview four years prior to his death he commented on the dangerous nature of his work. In a 2002 interview with Associated Press Radio, Irwin said, "If I'm going to die, at least I want it filmed If we blew a

¹⁰ AP

¹¹ Noveck

¹² Ibid

million dollars worth of cameras, at least we could have gone to MGM and gone, 'Hey, look at this tape.'"

7- The Execution of Saddam Hussein

Recorded: 12/30/2006

Saddam Hussein, former President of Iraq, was executed by hanging after being convicted of Crimes Against Humanity. The Iraqi government initially released an edited version of the execution recorded by al-Iraqiya, a government television station, cutting the footage they showed the world just after the executioners have put a noose around his neck. Amateur video later surfaced taken on a cell phone camera. It is taken from the crowd at the event, and it depicts Hussein at the top of the gallows getting the noose roped around his neck. The crowd can be heard shouting things at him. Finally, the door is released and he drops down. The footage goes black for a while (but retains the audio) as the recorder moves closer to see what is going on. The footage then shows Hussein hanging by the neck.

Three arrests were ultimately made of guards who attended the execution, though the results of their trials or convictions are unclear.¹³ The hanging of Hussein is significant because it confirms the death of a former world leader and direct adversary of the U.S. government.

8 - The Shooting of Oscar Grant

Recorded: 1/1/2009

¹³ Engel

On the way home after celebrating New Year's Eve in San Francisco, Oscar Grant III was detained by police at the Fruitvale Station in Oakland after reports came in of a fight on the Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) train he was riding. He was shot in the back while being held face down on the floor by Officer Johannes Mehserle. He was pronounced dead the next morning. Multiple witnesses at the scene captured the incident on digital video cameras or their cell phone cameras. There were also surveillance cameras at the station, though it did not manage to capture any significant footage of the actual shooting. Most of the witnesses who released their footage to media outlets and prosecutors wished to remain anonymous, though Karina Vargas did allow for her name to be released and eventually testified at the trial. Mehserle was ultimately convicted of involuntary manslaughter and served 2 years in prison.

While less graphic than the previous two mentioned videos in the sense that there is less gore and they were recorded on poor quality hand held devices, it still shows a defenseless man being shot in the back at point blank range. Local television outlets KTVU and KRON aired different angles of the footage they had access to, and the videos can easily be found online at multiple outlets. The multiple angles of the shooting proved to be extremely significant and influential in the subsequent trial, as well as in stirring up social activism, protests, and demonstrations. As all of the videos were made in a digital format, it unclear where the original footage lies. KTVU and KRON both maintain copies of the footage they received, but it is unknown what the recorders of the footage did with theirs.

9 - *The Killing of Osama Bin Laden*

Recorded: 5/2/2011

After a nearly ten year manhunt, al-Quada leader and architect of the September 11 Attacks Osama bin Laden was killed in Pakistan as a result of a covert CIA/Navy SEAL operation. The operation was seen in real time in the White House Situation Room by the White House National Security Team. An iconic picture showing President Barack Obama among others watching something on a screen was taken during the raid. There are conflicting reports as to the content of the footage, but it either featured live video from a drone circling the compound or video from the SEAL team as it executed its mission within the compound.¹⁴ It is most likely the former. The US Government has refused to release any visual information of the operation, including video from any drones, helicopters, or soldiers, or still photos taken by soldiers, particularly of bin Laden's corpse.

This is a case of a piece of already culturally valuable footage increasing in value due to limitations of access to it. Numerous requests from multiple news outlets and independent third parties for access to the footage under the Freedom of Information Act have been denied. Since the operation was planned and executed with the guidance and planning of the CIA, all files and records fall under the CIA Operational Files Exemption, which is not subject to the Freedom of Information Act. Therefore, the records do not legally have to be released.

10 - Surveillance Footage

Recorded: Various dates

Surveillance footage depicting a death or possible murder is normally taken into police custody as evidence. Three examples of this are the still unsolved murder of Brandon

¹⁴ Winter

Woodard, unsolved death of Kendrick Johnson, and the Aaron Alexis footage from his Washington Navy Yard Rampage.

Brandon Woodard was shot from behind in broad daylight on 12/10/2012 in Midtown Manhattan. Footage of the entire killing exists from surveillance video, including images of the murderer and license plate number of the getaway car. Despite this, the police have been unable to make any arrests.¹⁵ Any airing or displaying of the event in the media pauses the video or shows a still from just before the incident.

Kendrick Johnson died under mysterious circumstances on January 10, 2013 in Valdosta, Georgia. His body was found days later in a rolled up matt in his high school gym. Security cameras taking still images at repeated intervals were initially not released because they were part of the investigation, then because they featured other minors in the footage and that would violate their privacy. When the footage finally was released, an independent investigator claimed it had been doctored, with large chunks of footage missing. It was also not the original footage.¹⁶

On 9/16/2013, Aaron Alexis killed 12 people and injured 3 others before being killed himself at the Washington Navy Yard in Washington D.C. After entering the complex early in the morning with the pieces of a disassembled shotgun, he put the weapon together in the 4th floor bathroom, then proceeded on his shooting spree. Since the event took place at the Naval Sea Systems Command Headquarters, security cameras all over the location captured the event. The FBI released select footage from the shooting showing Alexis stalking through the hallways with the gun in hand, but did not release any footage of the shots fired or violence.

¹⁵ Goodman

¹⁶ Blackwell

The reason they released any footage at all was to dispel rumors of a second gunman.¹⁷

Though releasing edited footage doesn't necessarily confirm absence of anything.

These specific cases all display the significance and value of surveillance footage with regards to a death, as it can help answer specific questions and solve crimes if its integrity remains intact. Unfortunately, even something as simple as maintaining the original becomes difficult with materials created digitally, as is the case with surveillance video. The sheer volume of material (often perpetually recording, 24/7) makes memory space a concern.

Conclusion

Admittedly, this project proved more complex and daunting than anticipated. Any one of the ten pieces chosen could have been the focus of even deeper, more intense and thorough research. That being said, even deciding what ten pieces of footage to use proved difficult. Limiting to moving images eliminated things such as JFK autopsy pictures or Emmitt Till's body pictures, among other perfectly timed instances. The definition used for both disturbing and valuable could encompass many other things, such as pornographic material, medical material, or even offensive rants. Initially, pornographic material was going to be considered, but that would have blurred the definition of "disturbing" even more. Limiting it to documented deaths captured on video narrowed the focus and kept some form of consistency between the images, still left in questions deaths captured in documentaries (*How To Die In Oregon*) or mondo films (*Faces of Death*). Ultimately, attacking it from angle of media portrayal meant focusing on footage where the events would be reported by a news outlet. This still left countless other

¹⁷ Starr and Brown

events that could have been explored (Challenger and Columbia shuttle disasters, Sandy Hook Elementary shooting footage, Taliban decapitations, etc.) The ones finally selected were the ones that I felt were the most influential worldwide, as well as interesting to me.

The prevalent display of the footage from 9/11 and the Hindenburg disaster show that as long as the atrocities happening to individuals cannot be viewed clearly, it is not deemed too disturbing for public consumption. Though personally, I generally feel if a death gets recorded it is significant, as it is the last moments of a person's life. However, if a recorded death comes under rare circumstances (Steve Irwin) or could be of service to an investigation (surveillance footage, Oscar Grant), it should be deemed culturally valuable and preserved. Unfortunate and traumatizing though it may be to relatives and friends of the victim, it still holds significance.

By whom and where it should be preserved is another matter, as issues of copyright and privacy do arise to complicate matters. As long as the FCC maintains an open internet, access should not be too difficult for most footage via YouTube, The Internet Archive, and other independent sites, though those raise concerns about the authenticity of the record. The fake Osama Bin Laden pictures and Steve Irwin videos are just two examples. Ease of availability online could also potentially decrease the value of certain videos, as the uniqueness, lack of visibility, and exposure are what raise the value in certain cases.

Ultimately, the only way to totally assure proper preservation and protection of footage appears to be if the government deems it culturally significant or a matter of national security, as happened with the Zapruder Film, Oswald murder, and the Osama bin Laden raid.

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