

# The Burden of the Screen

## Virtual Presence and Death During Covid-19

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### ABSTRACT

In the isolation of Covid-19 pandemic lockdowns in 2021-22, photography was a lifeline of connection. But for many families, it carried a greater burden. Separated at their darkest moments, relying on screens for connection as never before, loss became mediated suddenly by photography in a completely new way. There was no choice but to say goodbye to dying loved ones, isolated in care homes and hospital wards, through Zoom and Facetime, technologies created by digital media corporations and developed for the purposes of business conferencing and 'chat'. What does it mean to say goodbye in this way? To share final words, final gazes and the last moments of a life - and then to undertake the work of mourning - through a screen? This chapter considers the ways in which the pandemic has taken established thought regarding not only death and photography, but also cyberspace and the digital image, and turned it on its head.

My father had become increasingly unwell and infirm with vascular dementia. As the pandemic gained momentum and the first lockdown was announced, we were unable to go and visit him. This first lockdown was severe, and I spoke to my father weekly over Facetime on the carer's mobile phone. In his state of confusion, he could not understand why we were not there, and the conversations unsettled and upset both him and I. My last conversation with him was over the screen of the carer's mobile phone. He was crying and confused and did not want to give her the phone back...All I could do was tell him that I loved him. He passed away that night. (Maria)

By the time I joined my unit, it was one year into the pandemic, so a system was already in place. The job of setting up these calls mostly fell on the Patient Care Assistants, not nurses nor doctors. To be very blunt, it was one of the more traumatic things I've ever experienced. No amount of training can prepare someone to carry an iPad into the room of a sick (and contagious) person so that their loved ones may say goodbye. I will never forget the echoing sounds of loved ones sobbing, screaming, begging, and praying over an iPad that is strategically placed so that only the face of their loved one is seen. (Alex)

Photography has always, in the famous words of Susan Sontag, 'kept company with death,' not least in the expanse of literature dedicated to the subject in European and American photographic writing of the twentieth century, of which Sontag herself is a central figure. But the Covid-19 pandemic has propelled photography into a new relationship with death. One which, like many of the changes wrought by the pandemic, has emerged under emergency conditions; unforeseen, urgent, often rudimentary, and as such, not yet fully understood in its implications. In the isolation of pandemic lockdowns, digital photography and video provided a lifeline of connection for people everywhere. But for many families, these technologies carried a greater burden. Separated from one another at their darkest moments, relying on screens for connection as never before, their loss became mediated suddenly by photography in a completely new way. There was no choice but to say goodbye to dying loved ones, isolated in care homes and hospital wards, through Zoom and Facetime, technologies created by social media corporations and developed for the purposes of business conferencing and 'chat'. Healthcare professionals were tasked with facilitating video calls between patients and family members, taking time out of urgent acute medical care, to provide a very different kind of care. What does it mean to say goodbye in this way? To share final words, final gazes, and the last moments of a life - and then to undertake the work of mourning - through a screen?

When Sontag writes of photography, she means something very different from the screen-based, moving/still hybrid technologies that have defined the Covid era. For her, what sets photography apart as a tool for the validation of trauma and the mastery of experience is stability as printed object. The capacity to hold a print in one's hand, to *feel*

it, means ‘putting oneself into a certain relation to the world that feels like knowledge – and, therefore, like power.’ (1979 p.4) This depends on the photograph being a print, but even more importantly, on its being *still*; graspable, arrested. Live, moving images on video screens are a different kind of photographic practice; an encounter which I nevertheless define as photography in the simple sense that it exists within the long social tradition of using lens-based ‘indexical’ images in attempts to slow time and to hold on, both to experiences and to people.<sup>1</sup>

Sophy’s Mum, Ro, died of cancer in November 2020, during the UK’s second lockdown. Ro had been receiving chemotherapy in the preceding year, which had stopped in March 2020, just as the pandemic began. Sophy was allowed some visits to the hospital, so during her Mum’s last days and weeks they shared a combination of time together in person, and virtually, on screens. She tells me, as we talk together in March of 2022, about how different these two experiences were from one another. We find ourselves talking more than anything else about time – how it functions, what it feels like; how elastic, or empty, or uncomfortable it can be. The car journey to visit her Mum at the hospital was thirty or forty minutes each way – a time that she describes now as a ‘ritual’, for which she feels somehow grateful. Time to prepare, and afterwards to ‘process’ or ‘decompress.’ ‘A buffer between the grief and ordinary life,’ which wasn’t in place when they communicated via WhatsApp video call.

As well as the most immediate, visual aspects of these calls – ‘everything converges into this tight, static space’ – Sophy grapples for words to convey the distorted physical and temporal dynamics of the screen. On the days when she was allowed to be there in person, she would sit on the ward at Ro’s bedside for two, maybe three hours at a time. She recalls, on those days, as they talked or sat in silence, the sights and smells of the hospital, the hunger, the boredom, the physical stiffness of sitting in the chair, the whole three-dimensional volume of their shared space. But through the screen, it was different. She describes these calls as being by necessity somehow more ‘purposeful’, stripping away the incidental aspects of being present with someone; the boring, the marginal, as well as the intimate. Time is different on a video call. ‘There’s pressure to get to some point, to ask, “so how are things?” rather than just being.’ Despite valuing the precious time with her Mum, the in-person visits sometimes felt uncomfortable; unpleasant, even. In some ways, she says, she’d rather not have been there. But of course, those difficult times of presence were necessary, and important. A part of the grieving process, even before her Mum was gone.

I spoke to a range of people who have shared their stories with me for this research; people who have lost loved ones either to Covid or to other illness under the same conditions of social distancing, and to healthcare workers who cared for the dying

and provided those lifelines of video and audio communication in hospitals. Some have chosen to be identified, others have not. All have spoken, in one way or another, about the great contradiction and conflict that remains in their minds regarding this video-call technology. The bottom line, as it were, of each of these stories, is that *it was so inadequate, but it was all we had*. Bitterness and gratitude exist together in a tension that, for many, remains extremely raw, and may never be settled. I encountered a strong desire for people to tell their stories, nonetheless. Alex, a healthcare worker from California, contacted me via social media to tell me how she had ‘set up countless of these heart-breaking goodbye-calls’ in her work in the ICU. ‘This was quite hard to sit down and write about,’ she said in our email correspondence, ‘but it’s something that I think everyone should know.’ Along with the other healthcare professionals I spoke to, I have changed her name.

## MEMORIAL CULTURES

Roland Barthes is another of the most central figures in the literature on photography and death, specifically in his great work of personal grief, *Camera Lucida*. This is a text that has been written about so extensively that I have little to add to the critical discussion of his theories on loss, indexicality, familial connection or the *punctum*. But Barthes provides me with a way of beginning, as I try to understand the role of vision in mourning and how its histories inform this digital, distanced, mediated present. Photography’s intimate connection to death, Barthes proposes, has corresponded to a profound shift in Western thinking and social custom surrounding death. While in the past, many societies have prized elaborate mourning rituals and collective funereal rites, death has, since the mid twentieth century, been reduced to ‘a simple click’ (Barthes, 2000, p. 92). There is a contemporary preference for keeping death, like many other forms of pain or unpleasantness, at arm’s length; hidden, quick and quiet. The sociologist Norbert Elias observed as far back as 1985 that ‘never before have people died as noiselessly and hygienically as today...and never in social conditions fostering so much solitude’ (1985, p. 85).

There was a time not long ago, particularly in my own home country of Ireland, when it was a normal part of life to be brought face to face with death, and we were very familiar with seeing the bodies of our communities’ deceased before, during and after their passing. The wake, in which loved ones spend time in the presence of the open coffin, still endures in the more rural parts of the country. And before death comes, there is the vigil (from the Latin *vigilia*, or ‘wakefulness’), a period of sleepless devotional observance in which ‘the watchers’ – friends and family members given a new ritual identity – will attend

the departing loved one at their death bed. Each of these rituals is centred around proximity, community and collective experience, but also, unmistakably, around vision. They are rites of looking and of watching. Some Irish deaths will even be attended by a local *fáidh*, a traditional prophet-type figure whose name translates as ‘seer’. There is a religious or superstitious foundation to most of these practices, and yet they can also, from the point of view of modern clinical psychology, be seen as profoundly beneficial. Seeing death is healthy.

In his book on this subject, a meditation on the death of his own father, Irish journalist Kevin Toolis paints a picture of the community experience of death, and the central place of communal looking:

I stared around the room at these watchers: at my nine-year-old nephew Seán who had come for me; at my heavily pregnant cousin Bernadette; at the seer, my matronly Aunt Tilda who now led us in the wake, the woman of wounds, our midwife of death; at Nora, the elderly neighbour who sold eggs; and the other witnesses to whom I had never spoken. I wondered what they sought to gain from the moment of death of this man. Of Sonny. My father. (2018, p. 2)

While traditionally a means of making sure the departed person was really dead, and that the spirit would not leave their body before the funeral rites had been performed, these Irish practices and other like them around the world have also been shown to be psychically beneficial in the grieving process of mourners themselves because they make way for acceptance. Watching – particularly *prolonged* watching – and being brought ‘face to face’ with death, while painful, helps to integrate the finality of death in a much more complete way than if it is quickly hidden from view in the name of discretion or minimizing distress. As Barthes remarks, death in contemporary medicalised industrial societies is typically little more than a ‘click’, which, like a camera’s shutter, is concealed from view almost as instantaneously as it has appeared. This might be less painful in the short term, but puts us at a disadvantage in fully coming to terms with our loss.

The practice of the vigil, and the convention of open coffins for visitation at funeral homes, have all but disappeared. In communities all over the world in 2020 and 2021, Covid-19 changed funereal practices even further, suddenly and beyond all recognition. In December 2020, Jennifer Lowe and colleagues at La Trobe University, Melbourne, published a ‘rapid perspective review’, gathering early observations about forms of memorialisation during Covid and their implications for the bereaved. They looked not just at death itself, but more broadly at funerals, burials and other rituals surrounding death, and at how the pandemic seemed to have accelerated pre-existing tendencies towards secularisation and the uses of digital and social media in memorialising rituals. (Lowe et al., 2020) Notable in their research is a recognition within many

communities of the continued importance of seeing, and the ways people have adapted to make this Covid-safe. 'Where a public viewing of the body holds importance,' for example, 'an alternative may be encouraging the bereaved to 'drive by' to see the deceased one last time with strict social distancing measures in place.' (Lowe et al., 2020, p. 3)

While funeral ceremonies continued in Ireland during the pandemic, they were governed by social distancing rules that, writes journalist Marion McGarry, 'amount to the very opposite of Irish traditions of waking the dead.' (2021) It was no longer permitted to sit together in this way. Anecdotally, though, spikes in Covid-19 rates in rural Ireland are said to have followed the early waves of deaths, as people clinging to tradition became infected with the virus at wakes themselves. To not attend a wake was still, for many people, unthinkable. Around the world, traditional farewell practices established over generations were similarly curtailed, with impacts on mental health that are yet to be calculated.

Research on 'digital mourning' is in its infancy but has unsurprisingly been accelerated during this period. Troy Chen at University of the Arts, London and colleagues at the Universities of Zhejiang and Wenzhou-Kean, have studied its emergence in China, a country which shares with Ireland a strong set of traditions around mourning which are embodied, collective and heavily sensorial. Providing an overview of this new area of socio-cultural research, they observe that 'the digitalization of mourning engenders new subjectivities and enables new ritualistic practices.' (Chen et al., 2021, p. 5) This is described as a 'new ecosystem' - in China, digital images 'are becoming mediators of the grieving process, at the same time as generating informal and personalized reactions about death and loss.' (ibid., p. 4) This is a new phenomenon, as yet under-researched and, they also argue, hugely important in understanding the outcomes for people who have been bereaved in this way.

In the light of this important new research on digital mourning, I turn my focus from funerals and the aftermath of death, on to death itself; the losses and 'goodbyes', the last conversations or simply the silences, mediated by screen 'presence' and digital connection. When I speak to people about this research, many tell me how important the work is, and how helpful it will be. Some have even thanked me for merely attempting it, perhaps feeling validated in their own stories of grief by an 'academic' effort to grasp at its painful complexity. I confess in response how daunted I am; even overwhelmed. When I asked via social media for contact from people willing to talk to me about their experiences of bereavement via screens during Covid, the first surprise was how immediate and numerous the responses were. The second was how many of those responses were from people I already knew - colleagues and acquaintances whom I had no idea had suffered such losses. Inevitably, they were all around me.

As a subject it is overwhelming for several reasons: because it is so recent and still so raw; because it is a huge responsibility to write about grief that is not my own; because these deaths have been so numerous as to seem, at points in the past three years, never-ending, and accounting for them an impossible task. But the main reason is perhaps because, as an academic, I see so many so many different discourses converging at this single, uncharted point. To do it justice requires drawing on literature from psychology, psychoanalysis, history, photography, medical ethics, digital culture, visual culture, trauma studies and philosophy. This can only be a beginning.

In December 2021, prominent psychoanalytic theorist and feminist writer Jacqueline Rose wrote in the Guardian newspaper about a shift in the collective consciousness of death that has come about as a result of the pandemic. Pointing out that, from a Freudian point of view, ‘no one believes in their own death,’ and that in the unconscious, ‘there is a blank space where knowledge of this one sure thing about our futures should be’, Rose suggests that one of the ways in which the pandemic has changed life forever is that this ‘inability to countenance death’ has been suddenly swept away. ‘In the midst of a pandemic, death cannot be exiled to the outskirts of existence. Instead, it is an unremitting presence that seems to trail from room to room.’ (Rose, 2021) The problem with this, of course, is that the denial of death, as with many kinds of everyday denial, is a condition of sanity – our ability to make it through the day. Death, then, has become too near and yet too far. It is all around us, insisting, during the darkest days of the highest pandemic death rates, on its presence at all times. And yet, when many of us finally were met with the deaths of our own loved ones, it was at unbearable distance, out of reach. As one woman said of the death of her sister, ‘I should have been holding her hand. But instead, I was holding a smartphone.’

## TOUCH

What do we lose when we connect via nothing but a screen? The people I spoke to have provided a long and heart-rending list. Some things are unexpected; subtle things that those of us who have lost loved ones in other times may have taken for granted. They include the experiences that Sophy has described, the strange loss of three-dimensional space; of the everyday, unfocussed interstices of time spent sitting by a bedside; even a loss of silence, as a need is somehow felt to fill every moment of a video-call with words. But the most glaring loss is touch.

‘There is a tension between looking and touching,’ writes Margaret Olin. ‘The two activities seem to alternate like a blinking eye, as though we cannot do both at the same time.’ (Olin, 2012, p. 2) In her wide-ranging book, *Touching Photographs*, Olin charts photography’s relationships to touch; a complex history of ideas and philosophical movements in which sensorial hierarchies have become established, challenged, and rearranged over time. Key to this history has been a movement away from an understanding of seeing that centres the body, and towards the much narrower discourse of the ‘gaze’. ‘The gaze,’ Olin observes, ‘represented a shift in perceptual theory from questions about how we know what we know, to questions about what happens when someone looks at us or we look at someone.’ (2012, p. 9) With this, she lays the ground for her work that seeks to establish the importance of photography ‘as a relational art, its meaning determined not only by what it looks like but also by the relationship we are invited to have with it.’ (2012, p. 3) Olin’s concern, as mine, is not with how photographs appear, but what they *do*: to people, between people.

Kate, who lost her grandmother, Lyn, to cancer in the Summer of 2021, tells me about a stack of photographs that she sent to her at the hospital when she could not visit in person; ‘one hundred or so’ prints that Kate had made, mainly family snapshots. The nurses reported that Lyn would sit for long periods, not just looking at these pictures but touching them, stroking them, as well as stroking the iPad that she used to speak to Kate and her young children via Facetime. These were objects that could be held; taken in with the hands as well as the eyes. Kate reflects that this touching seemed to be part of a process for Lyn, a ritual of preparation and letting go, ‘like she was grieving too.’ Those who have researched the social practices of family photography have long recognized centrality of this kind of touch, and the material as well as visual importance of prints and print photo-albums as ritual objects (Rose, 2010).

In moments of separation like that experienced by Kate and Lyn, human touch was most longed-for, most needed at the level of both subjective emotion and objective psychological health, but not allowed. And yet just because we cannot have physical contact with the person we’re speaking to through an iPad, does not mean that touch plays no part in the exchange. There is the weight and texture of the device, its shiny surface held at arm’s length so as to get a clear view, maybe for so long that the arm aches and sweat forms halos of condensation at the edges of the screen. There is the heat of the battery, the coolness of the metal. Olin contemplates the tactile nature of devices like tablets and smartphones, and the way in which their interactivity belies any idea of a purely disembodied ‘gaze’: ‘Interactivity,’ she notes, makes a viewer not just a viewer but ‘an actor and a user, a performer rather than a passive consumer.’ (2012, p. 10) And further, that conceptual orthodoxy of photographic theory, the *index*, speaks to touch in a way that



long pre-dates interactive touch-screen technology. The index, she points out, referencing C.S. Pierce, is inseparable from the idea of physical contact, as the photograph is understood most fundamentally to be a 'trace of, or mark made by, its object,' through the action of light that passes from one surface to another. Theories of the photographic index imply 'that if one believes what one sees, it is only because it looks like it can also be touched.' (Olin, 2012, p. 10)

Having identified the index as that thing in photography which invites us to touch and be touched, Olin then gets to the heart of how photographs - or photographic devices - function in moments of love, loss and separation: 'Made possible by context, photographs are more than context: they touch one another and the viewer. They substitute for people. They can be, and even demand to be, handled.' (Olin, 2012, p. 16) As Lyn innately understood, they are both index and witness. Or, as Barthes's own definition of the index has it, 'from a real body, which was there, proceed radiations which ultimately touch me, who am here...light, though impalpable, is here a carnal medium, a skin I share with anyone who has been photographed.' (Barthes, 2000, pp. 80-81). For him, photographic seeing, in the right circumstances of attentiveness and care, *is* like touching (the ultimate outworking of this being, of course, the *punctum*, a touch which has the capacity to reach out from within a photograph and 'prick' him; 'cut' him, even). For Barthes there can be no separation between the two definitions of *touching*: the emotional and the physical.

## **TIME AND THE REFERENT**

Alongside my sense of apprehension, part of what has compelled me to write about these experiences of remote loss during Covid-19 is that it implicates so many of the writings and ideas connecting photography to death, and amplifies them; deepens them, and raises their stakes. Alongside Barthes, there is Andre Bazin (1960), Susan Sontag (1977), Geoffrey Batchen (2004; 2009), Christian Metz (1985), Margaret Iversen (1994), Jay Prosser (2004) and Audrey Linkman (2011). All of them feature in this list of literature on photography and death which has so shaped the Euro-American critical understanding of photography as a social practice, as to become a kind of orthodoxy. But this orthodoxy is challenged, I believe, by Covid. For example, when Prosser writes in his book on photography and loss, that 'photographs are not signs of presence but evidence of absence', he little knows how those words will resonate for someone in the position of Kate or Sophy (Prosser, 2004, p. 1). For them, this absence has a whole other level of meaning. It is overwhelming, and all the screen in front of them can do is evidence that; confirm it and bring it into heart-breaking focus. Part of what changes the stakes in this

instance is time. Key to Prosser's claim is the past tense. 'Photographs,' he writes, 'contain a realization of loss in the fundamental sense that every photograph represents a past real moment that actually happened but is no longer.' (Prosser, 2004, p. 1) In this sense, as for Barthes, for whom the most central property of the photograph is the *'that has been'* - a kind of enduring and relentless pastness - it misses the mark of these screen-based pandemic goodbyes (Barthes, 2000, p. 94). They are not recordings of what has been in the past. They are by nature 'live' and present. Not an attempt at stopping time (though this also features, as will be discussed later) so much as a bid for present connection.

This does not mean that recording for safekeeping and memory did not happen in the instances I have described. On the contrary, one of the strange, ambivalent advantages of saying goodbye over screens is the capacity to record footage as it happens, and to collect screenshots. Both Sophy and Kate did this. Sophy returned to the stills she had collected when we spoke together, seeing them as a kind of archive that represents the intensity and strangeness of her Mum's last days. For Kate, one video recording in particular - of her young daughter dancing and singing as Lyn smiled - remains precious, but the one, single screenshot that she made is too painful for her to look at.

Prosser is concerned above all with 'the loss of the referent'. His preoccupation is the question of whether photography can really redeem loss, beginning with a recognition that the medium's enduring crisis of representation makes this redemption impossible. My own concern is different. It is the very pressing and very present need to grasp the reality of this 'referent' (the dying person). It is an immediate and quite pragmatic need for photography to bring that person into a kind of closeness even as they pass away. The referent *must* be real - otherwise, there is only trauma. This need recalls Lowe et al.'s finding that for some, the inability to be physically present at funerals has been 'unbearable' and very difficult to recover from.

Helen, a consultant at a major London NHS hospital, recalls this urgency, faced by the families of Covid patients isolated in intensive care units and end of life care. Unable to see their family members despite waiting for hours outside the hospital, or even in some cases desperately trying to 'sneak in', they would ask for images instead. Covid had necessitated a mass redeployment of NHS staff into roles with which they were not familiar and for which they were in some cases not trained. There was, Helen says, a lot of ad-hoc, 'on the hoof' experimentation involved in facilitating these 'saying goodbye calls' and messages. 'A rudimentary approach' predominated in the early days, but as time went on, systems were developed to deal with, amongst other things, questions of ethics and consent. It was not possible to provide photographs or Facetime contact with a person who was unconscious, as they could not consent. So, Helen and her colleagues often facilitated telephone contact instead, enabling relatives to speak to their unconscious loved

ones. Often, they would play recorded messages. But, ‘what people want is images. We tried any way we could to compensate for that lack of visual presence.’ This included medical staff themselves speaking to relatives on the phone, providing a ‘visual picture using words’ as best they could, explaining what the patient looked like on a given day, or what treatments they had been having. I express my amazement at the immense burden of all of this for Helen and her colleagues – to be providing critical care while protecting themselves from infection and enduring the exhaustion of long shifts, and then also to be responsible for the deeply complex ethical, technical and therapeutic challenge of facilitating communication with patients’ families. ‘It was all inadequate,’ is her reply.

## THE EMBODIED GAZE

When I look at someone’s face on the screen of a laptop or an iPad, our mutual gazes are frustrated by a constant loop of displacement for which Skype, Zoom and other video-calling technologies have so far failed to design a solution. I look at the person’s image on the screen, and they look at mine, but when we are focused on one another’s faces, we are by necessity not looking into our cameras. Only when they look upwards towards their camera do I have the impression that they are actually looking into my eyes – but at that moment, they are not. They’re not seeing me at all; only the tiny black eye of the lens. Our gazes are out of alignment, missing each other. When Nathan Jurgenson, in his book, *The Social Photo* (2019), writes about the technical details of smartphone camera placement, he is describing communicative idiosyncrasies that take on a whole new significance in moments of life-and-death separation or grief. As lovers and separated family members of all kinds have learned during this era of virtual connection, video calling makes possible a kind of mutual gaze, but it is not eye contact. The design of the hardware makes it impossible for gazes ever to properly meet. It brings to mind the strange *unseeableness* of photographs of faces; in the words of Olin, ‘the presence of photographs can be so powerful that we cannot see them by looking closely. As Jean-Paul Sartre understood, when we look directly at a person’s eye, the gaze vanishes.’ (Olin, 2012, p. 3)

Kate and her brother had given Lyn an iPad when Kate’s first daughter was born, so that they could stay in touch. But she was ‘not tech-savvy’, and it was a struggle to teach her how to answer calls and to hold the device in the right way. ‘Often we would just be able to see the top of her head,’ Kate recalls. But ‘we were close, and communicated regularly via telephone and video. This was how she met her great-granddaughter.’ Throughout the Spring of 2021, Lyn’s health deteriorated quickly. She was hospitalised, her cancer changing her inside and out, and before long she was moved to a hospice. As

she became unable to speak, they began using video calls more than voice calls, but Lyn was upset at seeing herself in the thumbnail image at the bottom of her own screen. This feature, common to most video-calling platforms, acts like a mirror, making the caller much more aware, even at the best of times, of their own appearance than they would otherwise be. It's a function that can be switched off, of course, but it is there by default, looking back. This mirror image intruded on Lyn's communication with her family, confronting her with her own ill-health and preoccupying her with a distressing consciousness of her own body.

The pandemic has emerged right in the wake of a renewed discourse on the meaning of bodies in society at large. What to make of them; what to do with them; with their desires, their drives, their pains and violations. Olivia Laing writes in her book, *Everybody*, 'we're all stuck in our bodies, meaning stuck inside a grid of conflicting ideas about what those bodies mean, what they're capable of and what they're allowed or forbidden to do.' (Laing, 2021, p. 179) And Legacy Russell asks, in this digitally connected world of possibilities that transcend the physical, 'what's the point of having a body?', even, 'what is a body'? (Russell, 2020, p. 67). For her, bodies in this newly configured world 'have no single destination but rather take on a distributed nature, fluidly occupying many beings, many places, all at once.' (Russell, 2021, p. 46) This era, and the new realm of what Russell names under the umbrella term of *the glitch*, is seen as a kind of utopia. Within it, there is freedom from many things; most importantly for Russell, conventions of gender that quickly become oppressive when bodies are forced to take concrete form *AFK* (away from keyboard). But the pandemic violently recasts this utopian logic. It takes the manifesto of the liberated digital body and pulls it into a grinding U-turn; not contradicting it *per se*, but displacing it, albeit temporarily, with a wholly different and starkly urgent set of concerns around physical embodiment. Distanced from one another, starved of touch, dying and longing, we need the bodies back. We need closeness. In the life-or-death moments of remote loss, touch, we suddenly remember, is an existential need. During this period there has been a profound need to embrace the limitations of the visceral - the wounded body, the infected body, the body passing away. Later, perhaps, there will be time to celebrate the disembodied utopia of the screen. During the pandemic, however, we have needed the screen for something else: to bring the body closer, not to dismantle it or dissolve it away.

This pandemic, and the uses of technology that it has engendered, has been profoundly disorientating not least because it has turned so many of our ideas about digital media on their heads. In opposition to narratives of utopian freedom, other, stronger narratives have dominated, almost since the very dawn of the internet age, bemoaning its hollow commodification, distraction, and infantilisation. How it makes all interactions superficial; how social media has contributed to the decline and erosion of 'true'

connection. We have learned to become wary of what Hito Steyerl describes as, ‘an information capitalism thriving on compressed attention spans, on impression rather than immersion, on intensity rather than contemplation.’ (Steyerl, 2009) But then, suddenly, lockdowns have caused us to use these same technologies *in extremis*, to hold on to one another, to maintain essential forms of connection. Nothing could be less superficial; nothing could be further from the mindless ‘distraction’ of ‘social media’ (though these have of course been part of lockdown life as well). Does this mean that Facebook, Zoom and WhatsApp have been proven, in the end, to be the true manifestations of all their marketing hype – connection, true relationship, community, portals of love? No. Rather, the twisting of this commercialised logic is just one part of the disorientation, the pain and alienation of the pandemic. It is a wretched, clashing paradox: the most precious things, mediated by technology of such painful inadequacy, and reduced to the poorest of images. It is a bleak realisation that ‘conferencing’ software and ‘chat’ functions are, in the moments of our deepest despair and loss, all we have.

I have wondered, during 2020 and 21, what it would have been like if the Covid-19 pandemic had taken place thirty, twenty, even ten years ago, when we didn’t have this software or hardware at the tips of our fingers. How isolated we all would have been. I’ve felt at times thankful for the technological timing of it. That at least we can see one another’s faces, however pixilated and distorted. That we can ask a care home worker to extend their duties to the holding of an iPad in front of an elderly loved one’s face so they can see us, and we can see them, even for a few minutes. I also wonder how we will look back, when the technologies we used for our interpersonal survival during these times have become, in turn, archaic. In lighter moments I have joked with friends about how obsolete our video-conferencing technologies will surely be in just a few years’ time; replaced by even more immersive bio-digital sensory devices that will finally breach the frontier of touch. Apple will find a way of building in software – implants, perhaps – that will stimulate more than our eyes and ears, hacking our nervous systems and collapsing our distances. ‘Facetime’ will not be limited to the face. (I read somewhere recently that digital technology is already emerging that will replicate a kiss.) We will look back on the Covid-19 pandemic with a strange mixture of gratitude for the technologies that allowed us a measure of safe contact, with wonder at how we got by with such primitive technology – glitchy, fragmented, pinned down by clunky hardware and limited broadband capacity, on ‘ephemeral screens stitched together by the desires of dispersed spectators.’ (Steyerl, 2009) We’ll remember how *you couldn’t even look one another in the eyes*.

## THE POOR IMAGE

Catastrophic public events tend quickly to be followed by acts of ideologically expedient meta-narrative framing. The most common of these is war (Good, 2015). In the UK, where the historical touchstone of the so-called ‘Blitz spirit’ is the ultimate redemptive narrative, some have already found comfort in comparing the pandemic to a war, with the NHS staff as its ‘front line’ heroes. Apparatuses of state media and those who direct them have choices about the narratives that will dominate the representation of catastrophes like these, from messaging about individual responsibility (‘Hands, Face, Space’) and the disingenuous heroizing of the NHS in the UK, to outright denial and the partisan politicising of ‘freedom’ in response to masks and vaccines in the Trump-era USA. This fractious response in America in particular, shows that while Covid has been unifying, it is not as unifying as having a common human enemy. In the aftermath of previous catastrophic events, like 9/11, there has been an ideological state interest in maximum emotive memorialising (Good, 2015). But during Covid-19, there is not. Instead, especially in the early stage of the pandemic under Trump, its seriousness, including numbers of the dead, was downplayed in a kind of denial that cannot have helped the grieving process of the bereaved.

Unlike a war, the photographs emerging from this pandemic have not been instrumentalised for propaganda purposes against a politically expedient common enemy (Trump’s attempt to brand Covid as a ‘China virus’ notwithstanding). Instead, they have existed in private networks, shared amongst families. In this private image-space, the ‘poor images’ (Steyerl, 2009) of sickness and death, snatched in moments on Covid wards, gathered by healthcare workers doing their best to make space for human connection, have remained outside the public realm and largely outside of collective efforts at memorialising. But despite this privacy, they remain, in another sense, ultimately a commodity. The nature of the corporately owned, commercially designed platforms on which they are generated mean that they cannot be anything else. After all, as Shoshana Zuboff has shown, ‘surveillance capitalism unilaterally claims human experience as free raw material for translation into behavioural data.’ (Zuboff, 2019, p. 11) And so, when Steyerl writes that ‘the networks in which poor images circulate...constitute both a platform for a fragile new common interest and a battleground for commercial and national agendas’ (Steyerl 2009), it is a reminder that Apple, Microsoft and Google have a claim on families’ grief during Covid that no one could have foreseen, including these corporations themselves. This grief is a commodity, no different from any of the information that these platforms gather in the course of the business for which they have been designed. Our loss, too, is ‘raw material.’

The poor image has been uploaded, downloaded, shared, reformatted, and reedited. It transforms quality into accessibility, exhibition value into cult value, films into clips, contemplation into distraction...an illicit fifth-generation bastard of an original image...It is passed on as a lure, a decoy, an index, or as a reminder of its former visual self. It mocks the promises of digital technology. (Steyerl, 2009)

For Steyerl, one of the affordances of poor images is the resistance they offer in the face of neoliberal capitalism. 'Their status as illicit or degraded grants them exemption from its criteria.' So, the poor image's *mocking*, *luring* and *bastardising* are acts of defiance, filled with a kind of subversive potential and revolutionary power.<sup>2</sup> But in the context of grief, these words become merely cruel. I think of this when I listen to Sophy recalling that 'the screen flattens out emotional range'; how it narrowed the experience of communication in the last days of her mother's life. It is grief, here, that is mocked, lured and reduced; human connection that becomes 'bastardised'. (Added to this cruelty is the physical toll which the poor image takes on the eyes, the head, and the body as a whole. Sophy was not the only person to recall to me, from that dark place of loss, that 'screens just make you tired.')

## **'A DIFFICULT VISUAL'**

Mourning, according to Freud, is the normal – if not simple – reaction of a subject to loss. But, depending on the conditions of that loss, as well as a number of other factors, mourning does not always work. *Melancholia* is the name he gives to the state that results when mourning is disrupted. In normal circumstances, the work of mourning begins with 'reality-testing', by which the subject confirms that the lost object is gone and confronts the truth that their attachment must be broken. This meets with obvious opposition of will, as the libido wants to cling to the object. 'Normally,' Freud writes, 'respect for reality gains the day,' but this takes time. It is a process that is 'carried out bit by bit, at great expense of time and cathectic energy, and in the meantime the existence of the lost object is psychically prolonged.' (Freud 1957, p. 244.)

Melancholia is a complex state, with complex causes. Freud provides a number of indicators or conditions that can help to identify it, the first of which is ambivalence about the nature of the loss itself. What he is describing here is open-ended, indeterminate kinds of loss, not the loss of a known and specific person. Like the collective losses of the pandemic years; of plans, dreams, time, and economic security, these can be hard to pin down. Their indeterminacy can lead to melancholia because grief does not have a clear focus. But there is a remark within Freud's clinical definition of melancholia that stops me in my tracks as I reflect on the remoteness of loss during Covid – even when the lost one

is very much known and loved. In the analysis of a melancholic subject, he writes, ‘one *cannot clearly see* what it is that has been lost.’ (Freud, 1957, p. 245, emphasis mine). Just as at the vigil and the wake, seeing somehow returns to occupy a central role. And even if, as is reasonable to argue, Freud here means ‘see’ as it is commonly used to denote not vision itself but a more general knowing or awareness, this only further demonstrates the point. A loss cannot be recovered from until it is fully accepted – *known*, on the deepest level and in the starkest terms – and for that to happen, it must be seen. Screens and devices offer a strange temporal immediacy, and they do allow us to see. But the visual access they provide is complicated. We can see one another, but not fully, not *clearly* – no matter how strong our broadband connection – and not in entirety.<sup>3</sup>

The deep, insoluble problem, the source of melancholia and even trauma in these instances of remote loss, can, it seems, have as much to do with what is seen as what is not. Or it is perhaps the combination of the two, compounded by remoteness and the impossibility of touch. Maria, another person who shared her story with me, says of her father’s last days, ‘I will be forever haunted by the fact that I could not visit him and comfort him...I could not hold his hand in his time of need.’ But she is aware that the separation itself is only one part of her trauma. ‘These images over a digital screen, I believe, have left me with PTSD. They haunt me. I still do not sleep.’

And Alex shares the hard truth about this visual confrontation from the point of view of the one holding the device at the other end:

When setting up the iPad in the patients’ room, I work hard at ensuring I am preserving my patient’s dignity as best I can. This usually means the iPad is strategically placed so that the only visible part of the person is their face. I only unmute and turn the camera on once I have angled the patient in the proper way, ensuring that the family is only seeing what they are comfortable with. We do this because the rest of their body would be unrecognizable, and their face would be the only aspect linking them to who they once were, [but] this is not to say that they will look the same. Their bodies are usually discoloured, disfigured, dismembered...I have had countless nightmares since starting my job a year ago, so why would I want to put that on someone who has only beautiful thoughts and memories of their loved one’s face and body?

Seeing too little and seeing too much, each bring their own kind of pain. In Olin’s words, ‘as in any relationship in which photography has a part, one tends to demand either too much from a photograph, disparaging its lack of detail, or too little, rejecting its testimony altogether.’ (2012, p. 16)

Kate’s last conversation with Lyn was via an audio phone-call, not a screen. There were both emotional and practical reasons for this – it was more private, for one thing, as



it meant the device did not need to be held up by a nurse at the other end. Lyn was semi-conscious, and Kate knew this was likely their last contact. She died the next day.

'I've never actually facilitated a 'goodbye',' Alex reflects, 'where the patient succumbs to their illness during the call. In the reality I've experienced, they die alone or with me by their side. Many families don't want to see death happen. I can't say I blame them; death can be very ugly. Instead, I hold their hand and say a silent prayer with my eyes closed.' Consent - the ethical proscription against making images of unconscious patients - is one reason why dying does not tend to happen 'online' or on-screen in real time. Another is the nature of how death unfolds on a Covid ward, a story confirmed to me by testimonies from people in India, China, and the US as well as the UK. 'Hospitals in India were so overwhelmed with lack of basic supplies and incessant caseloads that even if the care workers wanted to, they didn't have the time to arrange conversations,' I am told by someone who lost his grandmother to Covid in the summer of 2021 and did not get to see her at all.

'Death was managed in a way that was at best reasonable, but at worst pretty undignified,' Helen admits. It would have been impossible for her or her colleagues to facilitate calls as people died; the circumstances were simply too fraught. And in many cases, photographs of patients succumbing to Covid-19 would have been so 'horrific' that they would not, in her opinion, have been helpful. 'It would have just stayed in their minds.' These were not, in her words, 'good deaths'.

Barthes' essential argument in *Camera Lucida*, his opus of loss, written shortly after the death of his own mother, is that the meaning of every photograph is death. Every photograph of a person states, simultaneously, '*he is dead and he is going to die*' (Barthes, 2000, p. 94). Even in the photograph of someone still living, that same inevitability is there like a haunting. And when we look back at a picture of death in process (recorded from a hospital bed, perhaps), the person captured will always be dead but always, in that photographic moment, not yet dead either. Hand in hand with the perpetual *momento mori*; this is the power over death that photography seems to offer. The push and pull of time; the now, the not yet and the *that has been*, haunts every conversation I've had about bereavement during Covid. Helen's personal reflection on time and the photographic image is intimately tied to her working experience of seeing death not as a moment, but as a process. 'When you're sitting by someone's beside in intensive care, watching them deteriorate minute by minute, it's hard enough. But to be shown just an isolated image, having not seen the process unfold beforehand, is so... *shocking*. But, it's always what people want anyway.' They want photographs. Still photography, this 'isolated image' collapses the process with the stark violence that Barthes describes: '*Life/Death*: the paradigm is reduced to a simple click.' (Barthes, 2000, pp. 92-93)

‘They want photographs.’ No matter how upsetting the image or how hopeless the bid for connection it offers, there remains for so many of us in the face of loss a persistent belief in, to use Prosser’s word, the referent. The person behind the poor image. And there is also a belief, buried somewhat deeper, perhaps, in the photograph’s capacity to hold on even past death.<sup>4</sup> But photography cannot stop time.

Barthes is in mourning when he has his most enduring insights on photography. ‘The loss of his mother,’ writes Prosser, propels Barthes ‘to see the real of photography and to retreat on his previous, structuralist scepticism, toward photographic realism.’ (2004, p. 14) In other words, grief causes him to reconsider photography, to see differently what it has to offer when the immediacy of the heart is centred in place of an intellectual drive to deconstruct or to interpret. Prosser’s own work is also about ‘realizing loss in photography’ (2004, p. 16). This is a sentence that can be understood in two ways. For him, it is about failure, confrontation with photography’s representational and referential inadequacy; its inability to hold either our love or its object. ‘The history of representation in modernity can be told through the story of how reality became lost,’ he writes – suggesting that ultimately, photographs can never truly do what we ask of them (2004, p. 4). The burden is just too heavy. But, turning to the second interpretation, there is value in its capacity to help us to ‘realise loss’ – to process it, grasp it, bear witness to it in ways that are painful but healing. For people bereaved during Covid, photographic screen technology has played a role, not in holding on to loved ones so as to avoid losing them, but in facilitating, as best we can in unimaginably difficult, makeshift circumstances, a letting go – a realization that is a kind of acceptance. It is not a substitute for ‘true’ witnessing, as those wakes or vigils of old might be, or for touch, but it can, to gather Helen’s words, ‘compensate’, through a process that while ‘rudimentary’, might also be seen as ‘creative’.

But the inadequacy of the screen takes its toll, in ways that come through all too obviously in the stories I have heard. In their research, Lowe and colleagues found that, even pre-Covid, there was evidence to suggest that a lack of participation in traditional or conventional mourning practices may lead to difficulties in grieving and adjusting to loss. This was seen, for example, in children not allowed to attend funerals, or adults prohibited due to incarceration. ‘More research is needed,’ they say, ‘to understand the impact of altered funeral practices during Covid-19 on the mental health and grief experience of those bereaved.’ (Lowe et al., 2020, p. 3) More research is needed to unpick the implications of these new ways of saying goodbye and of the grieving that follows, and within them, the place of photographic screens – and of seeing in general. When I ask Kate about her grieving process, and how the screen has shaped it, her answer is that she is ‘still going through it in cycles. Not able to put it to rest. There is a lack of an endpoint.’ She is expressing quite clearly the indeterminacy, the endlessness, that Freud identifies in

his description of mourning that has not been allowed to run its course. It was a combination, Kate says, of the difficult sight of her grandmother on the screen as her health deteriorated, together with the distance, that affected her and has left her struggling with her loss. 'This sight is the thing that keeps coming back in cycles.' The sight of Lyn's face so changed that it had been upsetting even to Lyn herself, is the thing that has stayed with Kate. 'I can't get past it,' she admits. It's 'a difficult visual'.

It's too soon to understand the true psychic implications of screen goodbyes, and their impact on the grieving process for hundreds of thousands - perhaps millions - of bereaved people. This is one part of the ongoing research into 'digital mourning' that began before the pandemic and is now gaining momentum. Dorthe Refslund Christensen and Stine Gotved, authors of one of the research papers that contributes to this growing body of literature, have reflected that there are ways in which some digital grieving practices might even contribute to a rediscovery of the collective and communal aspects of mourning that have been so beneficial to societies in the past. 'On the one hand,' they write, 'death in general is still subject to silence and alienation...On the other hand, it might seem as if the online practices of bereaved people are the forefront of new ways of performing and sharing grief that might cause Western society to move away from socially isolating and marginalizing bereaved people. Through online sharing of death and pain, we move toward more [inclusive] social spaces.' (Christensen et al., 2015, pp. 4-5)

My own work, here, towards understanding the role of photographic screens during Covid, is also carried out in the context of what one NHS worker described to me as 'the other pandemic', referring to the mental health fall-out, the great untold aftermath, being experienced by healthcare workers in the UK and around the world as they not only battle against huge backlogs and strained resources, but contend with the traumatic legacy of this pandemic in their own lives. For them, and for the countless people bereaved in such a cruel and unprecedented way, removed from their loved ones and unable to draw on either generations of tradition or the innate human need for touch and community in their journeys of grief, the route to healing is unclear. By listening to some of these stories and placing them within a constellation of critical frameworks that might account for them, I have hoped to make a start.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>The works of Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen provide a useful exploration of these still/moving temporal dynamics in photography. See in particular Wollen's 1984 essay, 'Fire and Ice', reproduced in Liz Wells' *The Photography Reader* (London: Routledge).

<sup>2</sup>Steyerl's 2009 essay 'In Defense of the Poor Image' was later included in an edited collection of her writings under the title *The Wretched of the Screen*, the preface of which reads, 'The digital image is not as ephemeral as one might think, because just as a photograph is lodged in paper, the digital image is lodged in a circulatory system of desire and exchange, which itself relies on a very specific economic regime.' (p. 5)

<sup>3</sup>In 1899, Freud wrote an essay called 'Screen Memories'. Its title has nothing to do with the kind of screens discussed here - it is about the tendency of the psyche to replace distressing formative memories and to 'screen' them with other more innocuous ones which under analysis might provide clues as to the hidden memory at the root of the patient's symptom - but as a defence mechanism against intolerable pain, the screen memory might at some level be connected to contemporary digital screen technology.

<sup>4</sup>For one of the most in-depth discussions of this function of photography, and particularly its use post-mortem as a memento and tool in processes of grieving, see Geoffrey Batchen's 2004 book *Forget Me Not: Photography and Remembrance*.

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