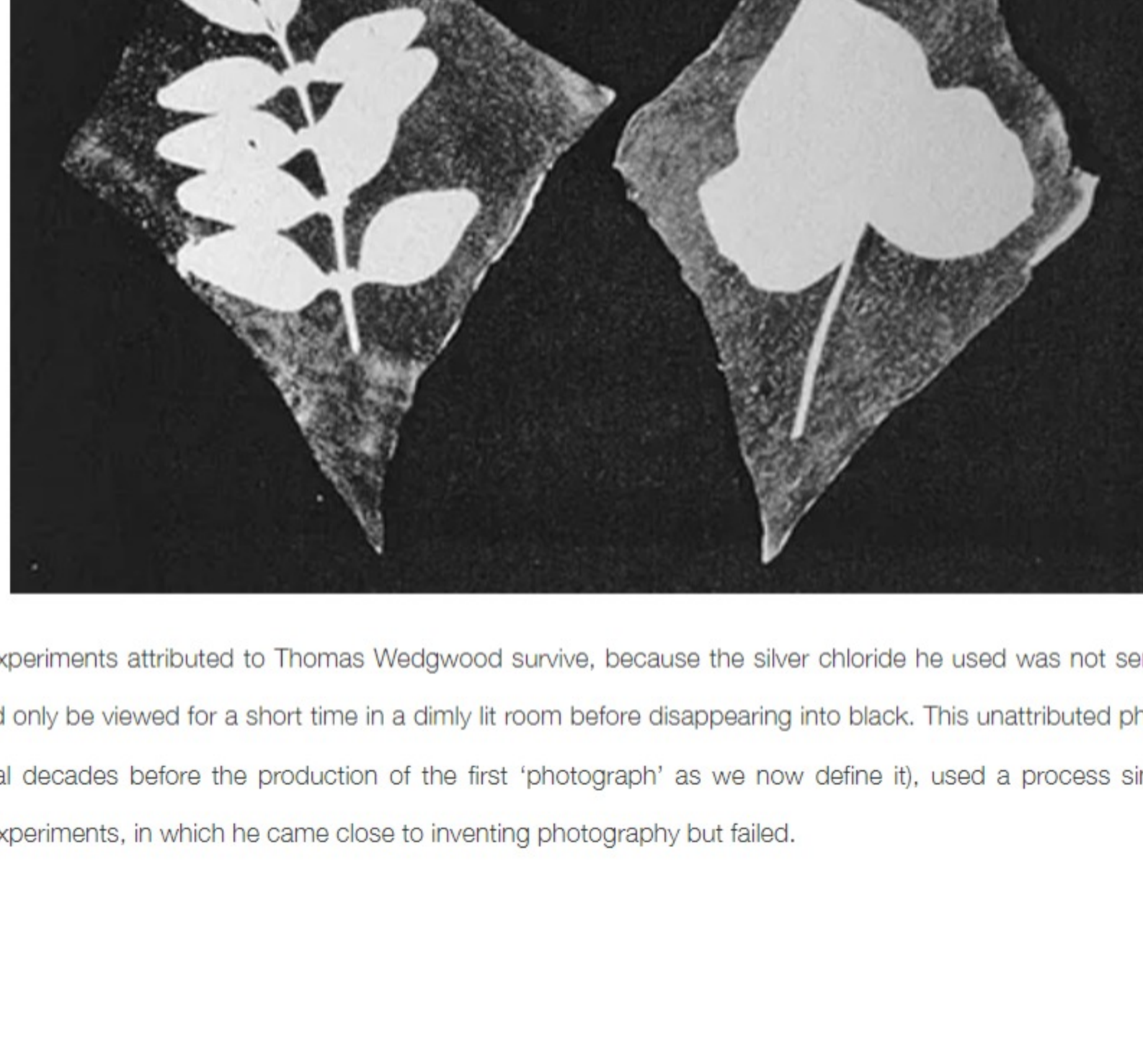


PHOTOFILE | ESSAY

JENNIFER GOOD

UNFIXING VIOLENCE

Photography and Oblivion



No photographic experiments attributed to Thomas Wedgwood survive, because the silver chloride he used was not sensitive enough to 'fix' them, so they could only be viewed for a short time in a dimly lit room before disappearing into black. This unattributed photogram made in the early 1800s (several decades before the production of the first 'photograph' as we now define it), used a process similar to one used by Wedgwood in his experiments, in which he came close to inventing photography but failed.

The early 'proto-photographers', as Geoffrey Batchen calls them in his history of photography titled *Burning with Desire*, worked over decades to make photographic chemicals stable enough to fix their images, struggling against pictures that gradually passed away by over-exposure to the light. Some of these, such as Thomas Wedgwood, played an important role in photography's pre-history but were destined never to succeed in their experiments.

Wedgwood's images 'hovered briefly between life and death before succumbing to their own will to develop. Perversely, the very light needed to make and see them proved fatal to their continued visibility.'^[1]

What is the relationship between these first photographs, which 'passed away' because they could not yet be fixed into visibility, and the kinds of disappearance that characterise contemporary violence in the global media landscape?

Lynsey Addario, the celebrated war photographer, was drawn into debates about the ethics of picturing death in the media in March 2022, when her image of a family killed in a Kyiv street in the early days of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine was published in the *New York Times* and shown around the world. Two years later, I sat on a stage with Addario at London's Frontline Club as she spoke frankly about her positioning as 'war photographer' and the strange burden of bearing witness to death. We talked about how social media has begun to disrupt the historically monocular, stilled and indelible imagery of war, as well as re-opening old debates about power and violence. But, asked what the biggest challenge was in photographing an invasion that was about to enter its third successive year, she replied unequivocally that it was holding peoples' attention: to continually find ways of renewing visibility, *fixing* the conflict in the eyes and minds of the world rather than allowing it to slip away. So many deaths, seen but subsequently deemed invisible by evolving global news cycles.

The idea of a unitary self, born in the post-Enlightenment era in which Wedgwood and others were working, was the driver of the 'proto-photographers' deep desire to fix and to steady both the world and the self in an image that certified their own existence. Photography still serves every day to defend against this very human fear of non-existence, of slipping away, or simply of not being seen. In Ukraine, as well as in Gaza and in the other, even less visible conflicts that continue worldwide (currently said to number approximately 110), the stakes are different. 'It is a vast oblivion,' writes Teju Cole in his latest novel, 'but also a relief that we are not inundated with the faces and presences of the innumerable dead.'^[2]

Ukrainian photographers bear this burden of oblivion very heavily, supported by archival projects such as The Ukrainian War Archive – a platform that gathers, archives and preserves the work of Ukrainian photographers documenting the war into unknowable posterity. The apparatus of the hard drive is a weapon of resistance not only against invisibility, but against colonial oblivion too, in which whole histories and identities might otherwise be subsumed.

The *New Yorker* reported in March 2022 that the war in Ukraine 'has become content, flowing across every platform at once.' In our social media feeds, not just images but information of all kinds interacts, 'flows'^[3], in a new and liquid kind of vision that can unfix a fixed image, even if the image is a still one.^[4] Points of view can be changed or even let go of altogether, caught up in a continuous stream of presence and contingency.

Of all the social media functions that destabilize the conventions of news journalism, maybe the most striking is the disappearing 'Story': existing in different forms on different platforms (having originated on Snapchat), the Story is distinctive because it is made to appear for only twenty-four hours.^[5] The antithesis of a record of events for posterity, or of a 'first draft of history', it's deliberately ephemeral. Instagram Stories are part of the ecosystem of social media ephemera,^[6] said by media scholars to 'subvert the old model by disposing of the fragments that pass through them by rule instead of exception.'^[7] Their temporal qualities are curious in relation to those of photography itself: not only are they designed to disappear, but also to be consumed within a matter of seconds before being passed by.

It's common practice among professional photographers, including Addario, to use the main Instagram feed (or 'tiles') for the work that one wants to be known for and remembered by, and Stories for more fleeting stuff: quick reactions, hot takes, behind-the-scenes views, humour and the mundane. Stories often take the form of informal video clips, or of photographs overlaid with graphic captions and other, quick-fire visual material. It's where you're most likely to see content about professional photographers' 'real lives'. It was in Addario's Stories where we saw her own, live, response to the reaction that her Kyiv photograph was generating in the wider media – to the ethical criticism, the doubts about whether or not she had done the right thing; whether the picture should have been taken or published at all – her own shock and her own questions. (One of the recurring ethical criticisms of 'too-graphic' photographs of death in the news media centres the danger that a family member will see and recognize someone in the picture. The *NYT* and *The Washington Post* reported that this exact thing happened in the case of Addario's picture: the family's father and husband first learning of their deaths when he saw the image with his own eyes.)

When I go online, now, to research this, there is lots of material in which Addario tells the story of that famous photograph, acknowledging the brutality of the killings, the frightening experience of being there, and the ethical complexity of the scenario. But no regret. No prevarication or doubt. There is no trace, now, on her Instagram, of the Stories in which she had expressed in real time the cycle of feelings she went through; they have been lost to the ether.

I'm not here to argue one way or the other about the morality of the picture Addario took, except to say that her account of her actions in that moment is as convincing as any I can imagine. Nor am I interested in catching her out in an expression of regret. I simply remember being struck, when I tapped on her Stories on that day in early Spring of 2022, by the image flow that enabled me to be part of a 'thought process' – of what might be regret, but, moment by moment, might change into other feelings and other human reactions – forgoing the usual inscrutability and authority of the war correspondent. Her response moved, flowed, expressing in a strikingly vulnerable and genuine way (which I cannot quote here, of course, because it is gone...) a process not fixed, but unfolding in time.

Nathan Jurgenson, Snapchat executive turned chronicler of social media photography, in his 2019 book *The Social Photo*, says of this new reality of image flows, that 'Even when sitting still on a screen, social images shared as communication as much as for documentary or aesthetic reasons are alive in their implicit flow. They are animated by how they relate alongside one another and in how they circulate socially, from screen to screen.'^[8] The aliveness, even of still photography, in this context, is in their relation to one another, from screen to screen and image to image. For Jurgenson, the implicit expiration of images that are made to disappear likens them most closely to a speech act, drawing them away from the frames of reference of photographic history and towards other historical lineages instead. 'More like speaking than recording', they are a mode in which we must adjust our analytical expectations, 'to see movement as shareable, to speak and listen with and through it.'^[9] Others see in these new social media conventions a 'temporal time-bound logic, one of the main characteristics of oral cultures'^[10] – which adds an interesting dimension to their naming as *stories*.

That notion of 'aliveness' takes on new meaning, too, when the images in question are images of death. It all points, perhaps, to a new visual language for the photographic representation of war, confounding the simple binaries of still/moving or visible/invisible. To these we must add silence/speech, aliveness/expiration, even the 'stories' we tell about the past versus the ones we experience haptically in the ongoing present tense.

Addario's photograph, which can be read in the context of established photographic theory as a kind of *death-squared* – a dead image of a dead body – is no less heart-rending for being given over to the aliveness of communal call and response, shared outrage, layers of language around and typed, hopelessness and re-contextualization, as it is flowed through, around and within. The hopeless injustice of a family stopped in their tracks, slain while fleeing mortar fire as their hometown became a warzone, is not made less tragic, less brutal or any easier to look at by its movement through those social media flows. But for viewers, whether within or outside of the warzone, it might change what it means to look at it. What Roland Barthes called photography's 'undialectical' nature; the hopelessness of its fixity and suspension, might be broken, not in order to redeem it in any way, but to make space for a mourning – a forward momentum – in place of endless melancholia.

Putin's invasion of Ukraine is nothing if not a warning about the dangers of fixity. Fixity of point of view, a blindness to any but one single, uncompromising perspective on the world and one's place in it, is where photography, in microcosm, offers a wider insight into the drive towards war itself. No movement, no ambivalence, no vulnerability, only the final binary of us/them, exists in this worldview, which makes possible the waging of war on an innocent population and their democratic sovereignty.

In Gaza, for a while, it was power blackouts that rendered the suffering of Palestinian people, and their democratic sovereignty, periodically invisible. Local journalists persisted for a long time in generating continual high-quality coverage and visual reportage that held global onlookers accountable for what we were seeing. Today, fewer and fewer of these reporters survive, and the latest in the unrelenting cycle of existential threats to both life and visibility is famine. The images appear, hold our attention for a time, then pass away, unfixed. The politics of visibility – who is seen, by whom and how – has been understood within the global economy of media and memory for a long time as a vital matter of social justice. But there is a politics of temporality, too: how long an image stays in the mind, on the screen or in the headlines. Whether a 'story' is relegated to the past or allowed to be expressed in a future tense. We are confronted, as a life-and-death issue, with the fraught and contradictory power of photographic memory as it resists the pull of oblivion, but often fails.

[1] G. Batchen, *Burning with Desire: The Conception of Photography*, MIT Press, 1999, p.120.
[2] T. Cole, *Tremors*, Faber, 2023, p.52.
[3] J. Vázquez-Herrero, S. Direito-Rebollal, & X. López-García, 2019, 'Ephemeral Journalism: News Distribution Through Instagram Stories', *Social Media + Society*, 5(4).
[4] J. Prosser in *Picturing Atrocity: Photography in Crisis*, eds. Geoffrey Batchen et. al, Reaktion, 2012, p.13.
[5] N. Jurgenson, *The Social Photo*, Verso, 2019, p.113.
[6] J.B. Bayer, N.B. Ellison, S.Y. Schoenebeck & E.B. Falk, 2016, 'Sharing the Small Moments: Ephemeral Social Interaction on Snapchat,' *Information, Communication & Society*, 19:7, 956-977.
[7] N. Pedrini, 2014, 'On ephemerality: Perspectives on communication across the analog-digital divide', *Parsons Journal for Information Mapping*, 6(2), p.5.
[8] Jurgenson, p.114.
[9] Jurgenson pp.113 & 114.
[10] Vázquez-Herrero et. al., 2019.

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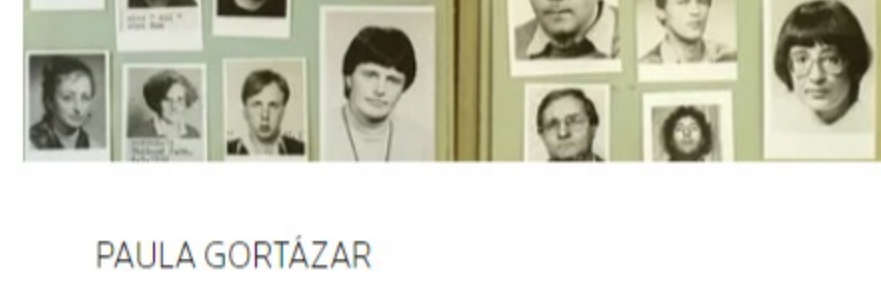
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