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The Trauma of Digital Death

The images are all-too-familiar: stabbings, strangulations, bludgeonings, poisonings, and other forms of murder; mutilations, amputations, asphyxiations, beheadings, and other varieties of torture; cuttings, jumpings, hangings, overdoses, and other methods of suicide; car crashes, falls, drownings, chokings, and other tragic accidents; heart attacks, cancer, AIDS, Ebola, and other diseases both mundane and exotic; and the gun violence and shootings ... the many, many shootings. In an increasingly violent world, we believe that we know the face of death, for we believe that we've seen it — the eyes slowly closing, the last gasps for breath, the bodies pierced and torn apart, the insides made suddenly, sickeningly visible. No matter that the images are fiction, the bodies props, the wounds makeup, the blood a thick red dye, the torn flesh a digital effect. No matter, for death is all around us (a false proximity, sure, but always nearby nonetheless). Yes, in the digital age, we believe that we know death, despite the fact that so few of us have actually *witnessed it*.

In Effigie, In Absentia

The first strike is, quite literally, a stunning blow: it knocks the would-be rapist on his back while the onlookers — whose rowdy cries and crude gestures precipitated the violence — suddenly grow quiet, only serving to reinforce the nauseating repetition of the wailing soundtrack. The camera, too, seems momentarily stunned; it struggles to find a subject, hovering between the assailant, the fire extinguisher, and his victim, whose slack jaw already bears the trace of concussive trauma. As the extinguisher swings down for second blow, and then a third, and a fourth, and a fifth, we too become stunned, nauseated, disorientated; helplessly bearing witness as the face, its square jaw and sharp nose so distinct only moments ago, becomes deformed — the flesh above the mouth torn away, the teeth cracked and knocked out, the jawbone crushed and compacted to the side. And yet, from

somewhere within the victim, there is movement, there remains a hint of *life*. His tongue protrudes as he gags and grasps for breath, the muscles in his face twitch visibly as flesh is ruptured, his hand, out of focus and distorted, juts up in front of the lens as if to push us, to beg us to look away. But the film won't let us, the shot refuses to cut, and instead the camera echoes our disorientation by spinning upside down and then back again, pulling up as the extinguisher rises and smashing down as it makes contact. There is *weight* behind every impact, both the weapon and the camera feel excessively heavy, and each strike grows exceedingly visceral. By now the face is gone, the forehead cracked open, flaps of tissue and bits of bone and blood and brain violently spatter about. As a last rush of air escapes the victim's throat, all signs of struggle finally, mercifully disappear, and what is left is no longer the face of man but rather the face of death.

At least we think it is, maybe. Well, to be honest, upon watching this early scene from Gaspar Noé's 2002 film *Irréversible* — in which one of the protagonists enacts misguided revenge for another equally violent and reprehensible transgression — we're not quite sure what we saw, though we hope to never see it again just as much as we want to watch it again immediately. It's only fiction, we assure ourselves, yet it *looks* so real and *feels* so real that we can't stop replaying it in our minds. We've seen death depicted before — many, many times in many, many ways — but there's something different about this image, something haunting, something shocking, something we can't quite put into words. In fact, the only thing we can say for certain about this scene is that it's *traumatic*: on the one hand we have the visible, physiological trauma that plays out within the frame — that unrelenting depiction of flesh pushed so far beyond its limits as to not simply fail but rather utterly fall apart at the seams, to disintegrate before our very eyes — while on the other we have the invisible, psychological trauma suffered on the part of the audience, not simply a feeling of disturbance but rather an overwhelming shock to the senses. When we look a bit closer (as uncomfortable as that might be), we find this sensation to be the result of a carefully orchestrated series of excitations and stimulations, a calculated image of death — a *simulation of death* — so intensely visceral and so disturbingly verisimilar that its veracity becomes almost impossible to gauge, leaving us convinced that we've seen the very thing that we know we've not. Utterly overcome in this moment of witnessing, it's only later that we can ask ourselves if this is what death really looks like — a question which implies an ignorance every bit as painful as the image that inspired it — and because the answer never comes, we cannot seem to stop asking.

So, let's try asking different questions. In fact, let's change the whole conversation, for whenever the subject of violence in moving images comes up, the narrative seems always already determined: contemporary society, having been exposed to increasingly violent imagery over the last century, has become increasingly numb to not only those images but also violence as

a whole. Indeed, though few would deny the fact that images of death have grown ever more gruesome (for lack of a better word) in the digital age, fewer still see such images as anything more than indications of a culture desensitized to violence and gore. Putting aside such notions, I seek a more nuanced account of our desire to *see and feel death* in popular media, first by observing that in the digital age we no longer aim to simply *represent* the end of life but also *simulate* death, and second by arguing that such simulations are, thanks in part to their increased viscosity and hapticity, symptoms of a desperate struggle to reassert the intensely painful pleasure — the *jouissance* — that was once found in the act of *witnessing death*, lost over the course of the twentieth century when that common experience was rapidly replaced by the production of images capable of displaying only the pain of *trauma*.

When Lacan first approached the issue of trauma in his 1964 seminar on “Tuché and Automaton,” he was quick to remind us of Freud’s observation that “nothing can be apprehended *in effigie, in absentia*” — that encounters with the sign and the symbol are not equal to encounters with the real.¹ Yet a confusion between representation and reality lies at the very heart of our relationship to death in contemporary culture: we find ourselves profoundly curious about and perversely titillated by death because its reality has been repressed and replaced by endless effigies, erected in the absence of an experience that has long been declared offensive and abject. Put more simply, we’re drawn to images of death because we no longer have direct, unmediated encounters with the actual processes of dying. It’s no wonder then, that so many of us fail to “apprehend” mortality — to understand, even at a rudimentary level, its complex physiological processes, to grasp its vast and far-reaching effects on our lives and our culture, or even to catch-it-in-the-act — because, for us, death has never been more than an image, just as it’s always been absent from our lives. This is not to say that the *loss* that accompanies death (especially the passing of loved ones and friends) does not have a direct and profound impact on our lives, but rather that the actual *event* of dying — the moment that one’s Being transitions into nothingness — is veiled, hidden, and repressed. And so to understand how this veiling of death has impacted our understanding of mortality, we must look back to a time when death was not absent but rather intensely *present*, a time before the image of death rendered the reality of death obscene.

What follows in this chapter, then, can perhaps best be described as a *longue durée* of death in three parts, each unpacking a different attitude toward mortality during a given century from the nineteenth to the twenty-first, each drawing upon different branches of theory and philosophy (from psychoanalysis to poststructuralism to new media theory), yet each also connected by a central theme: the trauma of witnessing death and the impact of that experience (or the absence of that experience) on our relationship to the very act of dying, whether as concept or as event. To that

end, the first section will illustrate *what we've lost*: the thick experience of death once found in the act of witnessing, which provided opportunities (however traumatic they may have been) to glimpse the full processes of dying. The second section will explore *how we've lost it*: the emergence of new technologies during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries — chief among them the rise of hospital and the advent of the moving image — that allowed us to repress the thought of mortality and conceal the act of dying while simultaneously, and rather perversely, fetishizing the notion of traumatic death. The third section will cover *how we struggle to get it back*: the aesthetic and narrative strategies in contemporary moving images — namely, the push toward simulation, but also the increase of viscosity — through which we attempt to reassert both the painful trauma and the pleasurable *jouissance* of witnessing death. Along the way, we'll continue to wrestle with the issue of trauma and its connection to the image of death in contemporary culture, leading to a brief coda that will return us to the very spot from which we began: the physical and psychological trauma contained within a particularly visceral simulation of death.

The *Jouissance* of Death (Witnessing)

Let's begin as I suggested we should, by asking new questions about representations of violence and changing the conversation about death in moving images. In doing so, we must remember to consider trauma in both its forms: the physical violence that so often defines contemporary images of death and the psychological shocks that continue to resonate even after the screen has gone dark. Why, for example, are so many contemporary depictions of death fixated upon anatomical and biological details that were all but absent from moving images prior to the digital turn — not the tearing of flesh or the spilling of blood but the making visible of bones, muscles, organs, fluids, and other viscera under the skin? If we find these increasingly visceral depictions of death to be so uncomfortable to watch, why are we also so clearly attracted to them, both as audiences and as artists? Likewise, if the act of viewing verisimilar depictions of death is so painful, why are we subsequently compelled to repeat the experience (even if only in our minds)?

Perhaps it might be easiest to start with that last question, whose answer is both “shocking” and yet hardly surprising, for Freud's elaboration of traumatic neurosis — the foundation of numerous philosophical approaches to trauma throughout the twentieth century — hinged upon a similar question: Why does the unconscious mind repeat or replay traumatic experiences? In his influential essay *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud proposed that conscious experience is punctuated by the undesirable accumulation and subsequent cathexis of various energies or tensions. As such, one of

the primary purposes of the structures of consciousness is to act as shield against “excessive amounts of stimulation” that might disproportionately add to such tensions, in particular through the pre-conscious reception and dismissal of vast amounts of stimuli that are deemed inconsequential or unnecessary for the conscious interpretation of experience.² According to this schema, one’s typical experiences and memories are constituted only by those stimuli that pass through this pre-conscious screening process and enter into conscious thought or consideration. Trauma, on the other hand, is the result of stimuli whose “amplitude” is so intense as to overwhelm our defenses — forcefully bypassing the pre-conscious, flooding the conscious, and spilling over excess excitations into the unconscious in the form of psychic wounds. This is why Freud argued that “*protection* against stimuli is an almost more important function for the living organism than *reception* of stimuli,” for the individual is always under threat of becoming overwhelmed, always “threatened by the enormous energies at work in the external world.”³ This notion was borrowed several years later by Walter Benjamin, who wrote that “the threat from these energies is one of *shocks*. The more readily consciousness registers these shocks, the less likely are they to have a traumatic effect.”⁴ When we’re shocked by the images of *Irréversible*, it is not simply because we find their content disturbing, but also because the film overwhelms us with stimuli of such intensity that it cannot be easily or readily processed, leaving behind traumatic wounds in the form of questions that we cannot seem to answer and curiosities that we cannot seem to satiate.⁵

Considering that traumatic events greatly increase our tensions, we might assume that, in an attempt to somehow manage these tensions, traumatic wounds would be repressed or pushed aside within the unconscious. Yet Freud was surprised to find that this was frequently not the case. Instead, his initial encounters with trauma — first the analysand’s transference of affect unto the analyst, which he read as an unconscious attempt to reproduce the circumstances a troubling relationship within the boundaries of analysis, and second the uncontrollable recollection of distressing events, such as the intense flashbacks experienced by veterans of combat or the debilitating nightmares suffered by victims of abuse — all shared in common an act of *repetition*, in which the circumstances of the traumatic event are not repressed but rather pushed to the fore and reproduced or re-experienced.⁶ And so Freud arrived at that crucial question: If recollections of trauma build upon painful tensions, why does the unconscious mind repeat or replay traumatic experiences?

The answer was to be found in the now-famous example of the child’s “fort-da” game, in which a well-behaved child of one and a half years old (who “above all never cried when his mother left him for a few hours”) was observed repeatedly throwing a wooden spool tied to a string over the edge of his cot, such that it was out of view and therefore effectively absent, and

then taking great delight in pulling it back — fort-da, fort-da, gone and back, gone and back.⁷ The game, according to Freud, was an unconscious re-staging of a traumatic scene for the boy — that of the mother's uncontrollable absence, which instilled in the boy an anxiety regarding loss — and “he compensated for this, as it were, by himself staging the disappearance and return of the objects within his reach.”⁸ What is important here is not that the boy gained mastery over the toy's “existence” (an act which did not in any way negate his lack of agency in regard to his mother's presence and absence), but rather that he was able to stitch the notion of loss into his understanding of everyday experience, as rudimentary as it might yet have been, by creating a *symbol* that represented or, more astutely, stood in for the root cause of his pain and anxiety. As upsetting it may have been, the boy was no longer *overwhelmed* by his mother's absence because he had created a symbol which made the very concept of absence (and thus the experience of loss) far more easily negotiable and understandable.⁹ Likewise, in cases of transference, flashbacks, and nightmares, Freud surmised that the unconscious continually reasserts traumatic experiences in order to provide opportunities to symbolize and negotiate the trauma, to give context and meaning to that which initially overwhelmed the primary (meaning-making and tension-reducing) processes of the conscious mind.

“The problem,” as Žižek would later tell us, “is *how* to symbolize the trauma, how to integrate it into our universe of meaning and cancel its disorienting impact.”¹⁰ Or, perhaps, the problem is actually *when* to symbolize the trauma, as we find in Žižek's descriptions of disaster films that, in trying to *anticipate* mass trauma, failed to prepare us in any way for the horrors of 9/11.¹¹ But let's not get ahead of ourselves. If we assume that the answer to Freud's inquiry is the same as the answer to our own — why are we compelled to replay the shockingly visceral images of death found in contemporary moving images? — we might conclude that we “re-stage” the images in order to consciously negotiate or reflect upon that which had originally overwhelmed us and prevented conscious interpretation. Certainly there is truth here — we run through the distressing images of *Irréversible* again and again in our minds in order to “make sense” of something so violent that it initially stunned and nauseated us — and yet something about this analysis feels incomplete, there's something that we're clearly missing.

It's only when we look a bit closer at the cause of our trauma, at the very thing which we are attempting to symbolize and digest through contemplation and recollection, that it suddenly hits us: the traumatic image that we witnessed was itself already a symbol, a representation, and a substitute for another, greater trauma which many of us have never even experienced, namely, *the act of witnessing the actual death of another human being*, once an exceptionally common experience, yet now regarded as utterly abject. Moreover, if the image that felt so traumatizing — *the image that was designed to traumatize us* — was itself merely a stand-in for

an encounter that we imagine to be intensely unpleasant even as we seem to unconsciously long to experience it, then we find that before we can fully address the role or function of trauma in contemporary images of death, we need first to explore how death was experienced *before* the moving image inundated us with its symbols, how we understood and related to death when its reality (and not just its image) was readily available to all.

In the opening of his seminal text *Discipline and Punish*, for example, Michel Foucault brutally yet eloquently describes a visceral scene of death, in which a man is tortured in front of a crowd with burning pinchers, covered in boiling oil and sulfur, has his limbs stretched by horses and hacked off by knives and saws, and is finally burned alive.¹² Although the details are every bit as gruesome and as painful as those of *Irréversible*, if not more so, Foucault's scene is no work of fiction; it's an account of the execution of Robert-François Damiens, the Frenchman charged with regicide after a botched attempt to assassinate King Louis XV in 1757. For Foucault, Damiens's execution — the last time the French government sanctioned the use of several brutal methods of torture, most specifically drawing and quartering — marked the start of a significant transition in which "the entire economy of punishment was redistributed" and subsequently hidden from the public within the invisible, panoptic systems of control favored by the modern prison complex and the neoliberal surveillance state.¹³ Yet what strikes me about the event, and what warrants mention of it here, is not only the ensuing repression of the spectacle of death but also the very *public* from which it was hidden: the crowds and spectators who came to *see and feel death* and who thus desired to bring themselves *into contact with death* in a manner almost entirely unavailable in contemporary Western culture.

As was the case with the majority of executions from the medieval period through the late nineteenth century, the execution of Damiens was a public event, one in which the working class and the aristocracy alike witnessed firsthand the destruction of the human body and the difficult processes of dying. Among the crowd that day was the infamous womanizer Giacomo Casanova, who described the event as "an offence to our common humanity" — drawing and quartering having already been out of fashion, so to speak, for at least a century — yet also noted that his companions "did not budge an inch" as they watched.¹⁴ Despite the severe brutality suffered upon Damiens's body or the disgust that such violence likely aroused, the fascination implied by Casanova was nonetheless a common characteristic of all who attended, regardless of gender, class, or occupation. "Nothing was noticed more in the vast concourse that saw it done," Dickens wrote of the event in *A Tale of Two Cities*, "than the crowd of ladies of quality and fashion, who were full of eager attention to the last ... until nightfall, when he had lost two legs and an arm, and still breathed!"¹⁵ "Was it because their hearts were hardened?" Casanova asked.¹⁶ Or were they, even unconsciously,

FIGURE 1.1 *The torture and execution of Damiens, March 2, 1757.*

drawn to the execution not to see the punishment of an infamous criminal, but instead simply drawn to *witness death*?

Today it strikes us as cruel, uncivilized, and unhealthy to desire to witness the death of another human being, but “for a very long period” — many centuries, as Philippe Ariès tells us — “death was a public spectacle from which no one would have thought of hiding and which was even sought after at times.”¹⁷ In this regard, the public execution is perhaps too easy an example; we recognize its graphic details because execution scenes have become a common trope in many historical dramas, where they adhere closely to the notions of traumatic death privileged by the moving image (we feign astonishment at the fictional spectators who cheer on the executioners, yet delight ourselves in the violence). When we extend our gaze further back in history, we find that we are similarly well-versed in the “bloodlust” that spurred ancient gladiatorial combat — where the traumatic destruction of the human body was (and remains, in fictional representations) the central attraction — and with the practice of human sacrifice, prevalent not only in our narratives of ancient tribal cultures but also in many of our most celebrated religious texts.¹⁸ Despite being a bit on-the-nose, these examples nonetheless hint at a desire that has always accompanied the conscious recognition of mortality — to stand in the presence of death — that was also on display more recently, though less transparently, in nineteenth-century examples like public surgeries and autopsies or in the desire to observe

combat, such as the picnic-basket-toting spectators who went to watch the opening battle of the American Civil War in July of 1861.¹⁹

Significantly more prominent in our past, though far less represented today, was the experience of natural death, the anticipated passing which occurred in the home, in bed, and in the presence of *witnesses*. Far and away the most common manner of dying for centuries, the “deathbed” held an especially prominent role in the literature, theater, and art of the mid-to-late nineteenth century — immediately prior to the advent of the moving image and its fetishization of traumatic death — when it became “a key set piece” for many Victorian and Edwardian artists.²⁰ According to Geoffrey Gorer, the reason for this was simple: “it was one of the relatively few experiences that an author could be fairly sure would have been shared by the vast majority of his readers,” a universal familiarity afforded by its status as an overtly *public* ceremony.²¹ Indeed, before the hospital became the primary and private domain of death, the dying person’s bedchamber was always “a public place to be entered freely” and an intimate space where they were always “at the center of a group of people” — not just family, but also friends, neighbors, acquaintances, and even curious strangers.²² Children, too, were exposed to death, and it was considered so integral a part of the experience of adolescence that until the turn of the twentieth century “no portrayal of a deathbed scene failed to include children.”²³ Though the experience of death has never been *comfortable*, to witness the passing of others was once at the very least *common*, a standard rite of passage for the young and an anticipated sacrament for the old.

The former ubiquitousness of the deathbed ritual betrays the fact that it was once considered a necessary and even essential event, but for what purpose and to what end? On the surface, we can attribute this omnipresence to the fact that several important social functions were made possible by the deathbed.²⁴ First and foremost, it facilitated the farewells desired by both the dying and their kin, allowing for the necessary gratitudes, praises, apologies, and forgivenesses that accompany a social life, as well as the opportunity for reflection and prayer.²⁵ At the same time, it was often the preferred moment to announce the “redistribution of social roles and property rights,” which, according to Elisabeth Bronfen, helped to “close the gap in social relations produced by death” and ensure the continuation of significant social and familial structures.²⁶ Finally, on a less practical and more existential level, to be surrounded in one’s last moment was also thought to be the final assurance of a meaningful and successful life, for before the image of trauma turned the sudden possibility of death into a terrifying specter, the primary fear regarding one’s mortality was the fear of dying alone. So to die “at home in the bosom of one’s family” was often considered to be the very definition of “the good death,” which was more than a privilege, it was an aspiration, the goal of well-lived life, the final opportunity to resolve lingering tensions and ensure the continued subsistence of family and community.²⁷ Yet today,

in an age when the act of witnessing death is anything but quotidian, we can begin to look beyond these obvious benefits and recognize that the deathbed ritual was far more than a simple custom. It was, rather, for hundreds if not thousands of years, an indispensable ritual that eased the pain of knowing death just as much as it eased the passing of the aged, the sick, and the injured, for it provided an opportunity to *viscerally and haptically experience* an event that is, consciously or not, the central concern of every human life.²⁸

The experience of witnessing death would have been, we can imagine, rather intense under such intimate circumstances. Various sensations would have emerged: a visible blotchiness of the skin as it mottled, the sound of heavy and irregular breathing — the infamous death rattle — as the lungs began to fill with fluid, a coolness of the skin as circulation began to slow, a mustiness in the air as the body sweat and lost bladder and bowel control, strange tremors which shook the bed as muscles convulsed and spasmed. *It was in this close proximity that death was not only seen and heard but touched, smelled, and tasted.* Yet any lasting impression — the shock of witnessing, as it were — would have originated not from one phenomenon alone but rather from their constant and continuous co-mingling, for to witness the passing of another was always far more than a simple series of sensations, it was a vivid act of perception that expanded and perhaps even enabled one's knowledge of death. Whether in the home or in the square, whether it be natural or traumatic, the importance of witnessing death was that very thickness of experience: death, that ultimate unknown, that fleeting moment which separates our lived reality from the abstractness of non-existence, could at the very least be *perceived* even if it could not be caught, captured, or studied.

We might say, in fact, that the importance of witnessing was the strange and difficult comfort that accompanied such perception, clearly felt in one of Ariés's most potent examples of the deathbed scene. Present for her husband Albert's death from pulmonary consumption in June of 1836 (alongside his priest, parents, siblings, and friends), Alexandrine de La Ferronay observed the slow agony brought about by both his disease and his treatment — including violent fevers, agonizing coughs, and "extensive bloodlettings." Rather than pain or heartache, however, she found herself taken aback in the moment of his passing: "His eyes, already fixed, were turned to me ... and I, his wife!, felt something I would have never imagined: I felt that death was happiness."²⁹ Certainly Alexandrine was relieved to see her husband's suffering abated, but the happiness that she felt was something far more powerful — it was an altogether new understanding of death, a recognition that to die is not necessarily the culmination of our fears, but also often the answer to our prayers. The event itself was shocking (as the experience of witnessing always was) but this trauma was different, not only of intense pain or confusion but also of intense pleasure — it was an experience of *jouissance*.

Although the concept was first developed in his seminar on “The Ethics of Psychoanalysis,” let’s sneak up on Lacan’s understanding of *jouissance* by briefly turning to Roland Barthes, whose work on *The Pleasure of the Text* outlined a clear distinction between *plaisir* and *jouissance* or, as translator Richard Miller puts it, pleasure/contentment vs. bliss/rapture.³⁰ As Miller’s dichotomy suggests, *plaisir* is quotidian, the enjoyment of the comfortable experience, whereas *jouissance* is excessive, a disturbing and overwhelming ecstasy, and although Barthes’s analysis was grounded in literature and other forms of the text, it’s clear in his writing that *plaisir* is born in the security of contemplation, whereas *jouissance* comes from the vulnerability of embodied perception, such that “you cannot speak ‘on’ [*jouissance*], you can only speak ‘in’ it.”³¹ We find *jouissance*, then, in “that moment when my body pursues its own ideas — for my body does not have the same ideas I do.”³²

This is not so different from the understanding we find in Lacan, who saw *jouissance* as an experience that exceeds the comfortable boundaries of pleasure and thus pushes *beyond the pleasure principle*, to the point where it becomes painful and distressing. That Lacan’s reading of *jouissance* is strongly linked to the sexual drives — Alan Sheridan reminds us that its French root “*jouir* is slang for ‘to come’” — should not deter us from finding *jouissance* in the experience of witnessing death, for the pleasurable trauma of sex is a bodily ecstasy, and in the presence of death one’s ecstasy comes not from the contemplation of finitude so much as it comes from the full bodily perception of the physical and biological processes of death, the minute details of the breakdown of the body which are concretely accessible to the senses and yet so difficult to capture using mere words or representations.³³ Indeed, we’ll come to find that *jouissance* is almost entirely unavailable in representations, and so as we turn our attention to twentieth century images of death, let’s add one more crucial question to our list: how does our awareness and comprehension of mortality change when the traumatic pleasure of witnessing is replaced by the painful image of trauma?

The Pornography of Death (Representing)

Over the course of last century, death has become both aggressively clinical and violently unruly, a private and abject event subject to stringent rules and restrictions even as we imagine it to be uncontrollably chaotic and destructive. Of course death has always been a contradictory, paradoxical figure — ever hovering just out of reach and just beyond understanding — but today, in the age of medical science, in the age of contamination and sterilization, *in the age of the hospital*, the domain of death has become a private space, a quarantined space, visited only by the dying person and

their practitioners, those scant few deemed worthy of death's presence because they have devoted their lives not simply to comprehending and confronting it, but more importantly to *containing* it, so that the masses need not be burdened with the details — “an interdiction of death in order to preserve happiness.”³⁴ For the rest of us, then, death is a distant thing, a shameful failure of the body, a (supposed) struggle that (apparently) happens behind closed doors, between walls of white curtain, and under oppressive fluorescent lighting ... though it's hard to be certain of the details because we are so often denied access in the final moments. And so we rely upon the fictions that surround us on television screens and in movie theaters, transforming death into something altogether different, a sudden and malevolent event that exists only in the dominion of sickness, accidents, malice, and cruelty.

This was, as we have seen, not always the case. Prior to the twentieth century, death was present, it was public, and it was explicitly visible; not some thief in the night who came to steal you away without warning but instead a constant companion whose existence was *experienced* (rather than inferred or suspected) through the common, social ritual of witnessing of the death of others. In this light, there was no shame to death — rather than a “failure” of the body, death was the body letting go of bonds that were never meant to be permanent — and so it played out in the home, a public event anticipated and attended by a community. This was the death that Ariès refers to as “the tame death,” the death that gave “advanced warning of its arrival” and consequently “could not be sudden” because it was always present, always expected, always familiar.³⁵ “When we call this familiar death the tame death,” Ariès explains, “we do not mean that it was once wild and that it was later domesticated. On the contrary, we mean that it has become wild today when it used to be tame.”³⁶ Only since the start of twentieth century have we come to assume that death is wild, because only then did death become *hidden, repressed, and denied* — hidden by technologies that aim to defeat or replace it, repressed by a culture that fetishizes its bitterness while forgetting its sweetness, denied by the individual who “at heart ... doesn't feel that *he* will die” but instead “only feels sorry for the man next to him.”³⁷ Today, we fail to recognize the possibility of the tame death because *we fail to recognize death at all*, we have removed its actual presence from daily life to such an extent that we have forgotten what death is and remember only what we imagine it to be.

This repression has not gone entirely unobserved. The first to note its onset was the aforementioned anthropologist Geoffrey Gorer, whose slight but influential 1955 essay “The Pornography of Death” argued that death had become the central taboo of the twentieth century, much as sexuality had been in the nineteenth. “There seems to have been an unremarked shift in prudery,” he observed, “whereas copulation has become more and more ‘mentionable,’ particularly in the Anglo-Saxon societies, death has

become more and more ‘unmentionable’ as a natural process” — a radical overturning of social attitudes toward propriety and a conspicuous reversal of thinking in regard to the body.³⁸ Particularly striking is his reference to the “natural process” of death, which brings to mind two implications: first that death is, like sex, a fundamental aspect of the natural world whose consequences must eventually be thought through regardless of their “seemliness” (as Gorer would put it), and second that only natural death has become repressed in contemporary culture, whereas traumatic death has become increasingly symbolized to the point of fetishization.

In a culture where the reality of death has all but disappeared, it is of the utmost importance to recognize that biological trauma is and has long been *the* defining characteristic of the image of death. In fact, traumatic death is so fundamental to the tradition of the moving image that it would be nearly impossible to count the number of popular films, television shows, and digital games which revel in the spectacle of the body’s destruction (whether in the form of action heroes who avoid danger while indiscriminately doling out death, horror starlets who watch as friends are poached and gored one by one, or dramatic leads who struggle with the illness or injury of friends and lovers), resulting in an immeasurable database of fictional bodies battered and torn apart by gunfire, car accidents, explosions, and other equivalent forms of violence which have only increased in viscosity in the digital age. Yet this move toward the fetishization of trauma was so radically different from prior, long-standing attitudes toward death that Ariès describes it as no less than “a brutal revolution in traditional ideas and feelings.”³⁹ Looking back to the Middle Ages, Ariès reminds us that traumatic death was deemed, for hundreds of years, as the abject event par excellence — an attitude born from a religious viewpoint that thought of sudden death as a direct punishment from God — and the narratives of those who were unfortunate enough to die by random trauma were subject to repression and denial. “In this world that was so familiar with death, a sudden death was a vile and ugly death; it was frightening; it seemed a strange and monstrous thing that nobody dared talk about,” and even the victims of violent crime were subjected to such repression, “inescapably dishonored by the vileness of [their] death.”⁴⁰ The heroes of literature, songs, and folk tales, on the other hand, were always fully cognizant of their immanent death, whether through an awareness of natural signs from the body such as pain, bleeding, and fever, or from more supernatural inclinations like visions, dreams, and premonitions — though this distinction is, Ariès warns, “probably an anachronism; in those days the boundary between the natural and the supernatural was indefinite.”⁴¹ Regardless, the death worthy of remembrance was one which the dying person approached calmly and with dignity, a death marked by acceptance rather than struggle, by *recognition rather than denial*.

Consider, then, the complete reversal of this attitude in contemporary culture, where to fight against death is considered not only brave but

honorable and praiseworthy, where the natural death warrants little more than a small notice in local obituaries while the sudden or traumatic death is widely reported, discussed, and memorialized. Bearing in mind that traumatic injuries, whether accidental or intentional, account for less than 10 percent of the deaths in the contemporary United States, this constant bombardment of stories and images of trauma (murders, freak occurrences, automobile accidents, natural disasters, etc.) serve not to make death more present in our lives but rather to veil the realities of death, to deny that it is ever natural to begin with and instead turn it into something that can be prevented with better treatment and more vigilance (what Ariés refers to as “the return of warning”).⁴² For more than a century, then, natural death has been all but absent from the cultural imaginary, whereas traumatic death has become a central fear and a key form of titillation.

Titillation is, in fact, a vital aspect of Gorer’s reading of the repression of death, which he brings into play when he argues that representations of traumatic death quickly transitioned from being merely obscene (as in a failure to observe social codes which results in “shock, social embarrassment, and laughter”) to being pornographic (the “description of tabooed activities” which gratifies personal fantasies and produces a “pleasurable guilt or a guilty pleasure”).⁴³ While we typically associate pornography with graphic depictions of sexuality, “there seem to be,” Gorer argued, “a number of parallels between the fantasies which titillate our curiosity about the mystery of sex, and those which titillate our curiosity about the mystery of death.”⁴⁴ In particular, both tend to ignore “the emotions which are typically concomitant with the acts ... while the *sensations* [of the event] are enhanced as much as a customary poverty of language permits.”⁴⁵ For Gorer, this meant that the psychological aspects of sex and death — such as love, grief, angst, and anxiety — are denied in their pornographic depictions, whereas the physical sensations are fetishized and fixated upon, they become the central characteristics of the representation. To Gorer’s observation we can add our own: in fetishizing the sensations of physical trauma, what was lost was at the turn of the twentieth century was the perceptual thickness that came with witnessing the natural processes of death, and by extension the pleasurable trauma that was once an essential component of the contemplation of mortality (the implications of which we’ll return to shortly).

Gorer’s investigations into the repression of death were followed in the 1960s by Herman Feifel’s collection on *The Meaning of Death* (featuring essays by Carl Jung and Herbert Marcuse, among others), which laid the groundwork for the field of thanatological study by arguing that death plays an essential role in human psychology and that its repression shuts down several avenues for understanding basic human behavior, and by Jessica Mitford’s exposé on *The American Way of Death*, which shed light upon the sudden commercialization and industrialization of death that had

been made possible by the refusal to discuss or acknowledge the “secret” practices of the funerary profession.⁴⁶ Then, of course, there was Elizabeth Kubler-Ross’s *On Death and Dying*, which (aside from its introduction of the now-famous “five stages of grief”) argued for the return of an increased awareness of the implications of death for both society and the individual.⁴⁷ Yet the most thorough analyses of the repression of death would appear in the 1970s, particularly in the psychoanalytic and anthropological work of Ernest Becker and Philippe Ariès.

In *The Denial of Death*, Becker drew on Freud, Kierkegaard (who he saw as a precursor to psychoanalysis and a religious counterpoint to Freud), and Otto Rank to diagnose mass culture as little more than a series of “immortality projects” — specific acts or actions through which the individual could strive for a symbolic immortality long after the decay of the body — designed to assuage the need to contemplate the inevitability and finitude of mortality. In other words, the ultimate goal of many human endeavors — whether they be grand in scale, like becoming a war hero or having a building named after you, or humble, like taking a photograph or keeping a diary — has long been to leave behind self-causing (*causa sui*) objects or impressions which can continue to organize or define the meaning of our lives even after our deaths, effectively denying one of death’s most terrifying capacities: erasure.⁴⁸ History is of course filled with such death monuments, but the common individual’s capacity for preserving fragments of their life increased significantly in the transition from the nineteenth to the twentieth century, and only continues to expand in the twenty-first. Equally intriguing for this project is Becker’s argument, early in the text, that a repressive society constructs two images of those who contemplate death: the “healthy-minded” person who maintains that the “fear of death is not a natural thing for man,” and the “morbidly-minded” person for whom death is not only natural and ever-present, but also “the basic fear that influences all others.”⁴⁹ In fact, since the turn of the twentieth century, the acute awareness of death has often been categorized (erroneously or not) as a neurosis, a notion that Becker returned to throughout his text to paint well-established neuroses like depression and schizophrenia as possessing more and more extreme perspectives on death and futility.

Yet while Becker was relatively successful in highlighting the repressive aspects of the twentieth century’s immortality projects, he nonetheless failed to contextualize them in relation to earlier preoccupations with mortality.⁵⁰ To fill in the historical gaps, one could turn to Ariès (as I so often have) and his rather grand pronouncement that “the historian of death must not be afraid to embrace the centuries until they run into a millennium,” which he backed up with research that traced Western culture’s attitudes toward death over the course of several hundreds years.⁵¹ Along the way, Ariès was able to demonstrate that our relationship with death “may appear almost static over long periods of time ... and yet, at certain moments, changes

occur, usually slow and unnoticed changes, but sometimes, as today, more rapid and perceptible ones.”⁵² In his classic thanatological tome *The Hour of Our Death*, for example, Ariès sketches out an epistemology of death in which a series of subtle shifts and variations on specific themes — the role of the church in shaping our conception of death, the image of the corpse and other elements of the *macabre*, the last rights and judgments of the dying — are punctuated by moments of rupture, the most severe being the aforementioned “brutal revolution” of the early twentieth century, when, as I argue, we swung from the abject view of trauma to its fetishization. In fact, if there is anything we can take away from the scholarship produced by Gorer, Becker, Ariès and others, it’s that the sudden concealment of the realities of death just over a century ago was in every way an unprecedented event, a reversal of attitude so violent and so sudden as to not simply change our understanding of death but to entirely reshape our relationship to it.

How did this shift come to pass? How did we transition so rapidly from the notion that witnessing death was an essential aspect of the human experience to the belief that death should be utterly concealed from respectable society? The most obvious and most often cited answer, as I made more or less explicit above, is that the embrace of modern medical science at the turn of the twentieth century ensured that the hospital became not only death’s *primary* domain, but also its *private* domain as well. Indeed, the move from a visible death to an invisible specter of death was largely instigated by a shift in medical thinking, which declared witnesses to the dying to be not a comfort and a necessity but rather a danger and a risk — carriers of germs, microbes, and bacteria that would only increase both the pace and the pain of death, which could in turn be abated only by the expertise of the hospital staff. This much was obvious to Becker and Ariès, the former dying of cancer when he wrote *The Denial of Death*, the latter calling the state of death in the twentieth century a “technical phenomenon” which occurs not as a result of internal, natural causes but rather from the “cessation of care ... determined in a more or less avowed way by a decision of the doctor and the hospital team.”⁵³ Foucault, too, was aware of the immense influence of the hospital. In *The Birth of the Clinic*, he wrote of the adoption of new medical practices in the nineteenth century as an epistemological rupture in which the regimes of the visible became divorced from the regimes of knowledge, such that sickness and illness could no longer be “seen” by the untrained eye but were instead visible only to those with a mastery of medical science.⁵⁴ As the sole possessors of this “medical gaze,” the authority of doctors and clinicians was certainly increased, yet at great cost, for it also implied that the average person was incapable of comprehending the natural processes of the body through perception alone. Witnessing death, once a requisite experience which inaugurated one’s subjective yet essential knowledge of mortality, was quickly territorialized by doctors who veiled its reality and claimed dominion over its very existence (in the process transforming

hospitals into what Foucault called “temples of death,” far removed from “the familiar surroundings of [the] home and family”).⁵⁵

Yet this is clearly not the whole story, for we’ve seen that the trauma of witnessing played an essential role in our contemplation of mortality — so essential that it couldn’t be denied or repressed without, at the very least, some sort of substitute sensation. Enter the moving image, whose representations of death *facilitated* the disappearance of our actual encounters by providing that alternate experience, which is not to say that they negated our fascination with the processes of dying, but rather that they gave us just enough of a glimpse to satisfy our curiosity. The problem, of course, is that that glimpse was pure fantasy — images of eyes closing and bodies going limp with little correlation to the actual processes, appearance, or experience of death — and thus a substantially poor substitution. Worse yet, over time we seem to have lost sight of (or perhaps even *chosen to ignore*) the very fact that these images are a substitution.

Before we can examine those images in detail, however, it’s important to note that the roots of the relationship between death and the moving image began many years before Edison and the Lumières first began to experiment with strips of celluloid, for death was one of the primary fascinations of the photographic technologies which preceded the motion picture. “Ever since cameras were invented in 1839,” Susan Sontag tells us, “photography has kept company with death,” perhaps because it had “the advantage of uniting two contradictory features. [Its] credentials of objectivity were inbuilt. Yet [it] always had, necessarily, a point of view.”⁵⁶ The photograph, though *less perceptually thick*, could at least do something that the often-overwhelming experience of witnessing could not: it could draw one’s focus to a particular sensation — the paleness of the skin, the stiffness of the postmortem expression, the eerie lifelessness of the eyes of the corpse — and then allow one to fixate upon or contemplate that sensation in perpetuity. It should be no surprise, then, that something which had been so notoriously difficult to pin down would become a steady fixture of popular photographs during the nineteenth century, nor that the medium only truly took root in the public consciousness after the onset of the American Civil War, when pictures of corpse-strewn battlefields were highlighted in newspapers and journals across the country and around the world.⁵⁷

Yet a photograph need not contain a dead body in order to signify death. For example, when Barthes set out to uncover why we are drawn to certain photographs — why one image strikes us as profound, sad, terrifying, or exhilarating when a whole world of other images do little more than give us pause — he came upon the notions of the *studium* and the *punctum*, the former being the collective content of an image which inspires only a “docile interest,” the latter that rare detail within an image which strikes us in an “unexpected flash” and thus shocks us, disturbs us, pricks us.⁵⁸ In his analysis of the *punctum*, Barthes came to realize that it need not be a

physical detail but could be (and often is) something less tangible and less material. “This new *punctum*, which is no longer of form but of intensity, is Time, the lacerating emphasis of the *noème* (*that-has-been*).”⁵⁹ Within every photograph there is a co-mingled sense of time, a past moment that meets with the present and a suggestion — no, an argument — that time moves ever forward, that *what-has-been* is life and *what-will-be* is death. “Whether or not the subject is already dead” — whether or not there even *is* a living subject, Barthes came to recognize — “every photograph is this catastrophe.”⁶⁰ Why a catastrophe? Because the implication of death within the photograph is not reserved only for its subject, but instead “each photograph already contains this imperious sign of *my* future death.”⁶¹

Regardless of whether or not we view death as a catastrophe, Barthes showed us that the power of the image (still or moving) is not found in the thing or event that it depicts, but rather in those intense details which prick and shock us. Seeing as it is both *subjective* and *shocking*, the punctum of representations is somewhat akin to the trauma of witnessing — but does this mean that representations can also arouse the *jouissance* that once made standing in the presence of death so important and so essential? To find out, let’s look a bit closer at a rather obvious characteristic of twentieth-century depictions of death, one which not only distinguished them from their photographic counterparts of the nineteenth but also had a profound affect on the nature of our understanding of death in contemporary culture — namely, that they were, on the whole, overwhelmingly *fictional*.

The initial reasons for this are apparent, as the technological limitations of early motion pictures — the expense and rarity of celluloid film stock, the amount of light needed to achieve a properly exposed image, the short lengths of film which could be loaded into the camera — prohibited improvisational shooting and made it extremely difficult to capture live events without first staging the scenario (sure, the Lumières wanted to reflect back to us the “*actualités*” of the world, but their images were every bit as carefully composed and micro-managed as those made by Edison and Dickson in their Black Maria studio). Yet by mid-century, when new technological advancements, such as smaller, lighter cameras and faster, cheaper film stocks, made the capturing of live events less challenging, the reality of death had already receded into the realm of the unspoken and unseen — what was once so natural a subject for the still photograph remained far more elusive for the moving image.

Perhaps, then, it’s all the more surprising that the fictional representations of death in moving images seemed to possess the same “credentials of objectivity” that defined the still photograph — credentials which they maintained on the back of misidentifications and misunderstandings. To clarify, let’s turn once again to the “easy example” of public executions, and in particular to the rather infamous death of Mary Stuart, one-time queen of Scotland, whose beheading both shocked and delighted many

early film viewers in 1895 thanks to the Edison Manufacturing Company's short recreation of the event. With direction credited to Alfred Clark and cinematography by William Heise — who also shot *The Kiss*, another scandalous early short film — *The Execution of Mary, Queen of Scots* is known as much for its violence as it is for being one of the earliest examples of filmic editing and special effects. The film itself is rather simple: several spectators (wearing anachronistic costuming) stand against a white background at the rear of the frame, watching as the character of Mary kneels, in an austere black dress, before an executioner in an equally stark robe and mask. Mary places her head upon a block as the executioner raises an axe above his, which, with nary a moment of hesitation, is brought down upon her neck. Her head, cleanly and bloodlessly severed from her body, rolls onto the floor, where it is snatched up by the executioner, the film abruptly ending just as he begins to raise it into the air for display. More complex than the film itself was the public's reaction to it, which, depending on the source, is reported to have been a mixture of nervous laughter, disbelief, and revulsion — a variety of responses owing largely to the question of whether or not those early spectators, unschooled in the visual duplicity of filmmaking, believed that an actual woman gave her life for the film.

FIGURE 1.2 *The “fatal” blow in The Execution of Mary, Queen of Scots.*

Yet duplicity it was, for not only was the character of Mary played by a male actor in drag, but frame by frame analysis clearly reveals the moment when the actors froze in place, the camera turned off to allow for “Mary” to be replaced by a dummy, then restarted just in time for the “fatal” blow to be struck — perhaps our earliest example of a substitution splice.⁶² For those peeping into a Kinetoscope in 1895, however, the ability to pause the film for study would have been just as foreign a notion as “editing” itself, and thus they “may not have noticed, for example, the slight mismatch of the raised scepter one moment with no raised scepter the next,” which, according to Scott Combs, is “the one ‘glitch’ that tells on the film.”⁶³ As a result, he argues, “spectators may have believed that [Mary’s] decapitation looked as real as any other subject,” which is to say that it looked as real as the photographs of death which had preceded it, whose truth-value (at least as far as the public was concerned) had been clearly established.⁶⁴ As the ancestor of that technology, the moving image *inherited* the credibility of the photograph, even if it had most certainly not earned it.

Despite the fact that it *looked* real, however, the perceptual thickness of Edison’s film would have surely paled in comparison to the actual event upon which it was based. Having been convicted of plotting to usurp the throne of England from her cousin Queen Elizabeth, Mary Stuart was brought by her executioners before a large body of witnesses (mostly local nobles and dignitaries, but also a small group of her servants whose attendance she personally requested) on February 8, 1587. There, she was rather embarrassingly disrobed in front of the crowd, kneeling before the block not in the plain black dress of Edison’s film, but rather a satin bodice. Despite joking that she had “never had such grooms before to make her unready,” Mary’s nervousness and fear must have been felt by the crowd, especially in her hurried prayers as she awaited the executioner’s stroke.⁶⁵ Yet what came brought no end to the ordeal, for the headsman’s first swing missed her neck and struck the back of her head — “one account,” according to John Guy, “says Mary made a ‘very small noise,’ but another says she cried out in agony.”⁶⁶ A second swing nearly finished the job, if not for the small strips of flesh and sinew that needed to be crudely cut apart with the axe’s blade. Next, when the executioner lifted Mary’s severed head for presentation, “an audible gasp went up from the hall because Mary’s lips were still moving” — a postmortem spasm that many in the crowd interpreted as a continued prayer. Worse yet, the hair which the executioner grasped turned out to be a wig, Mary’s secret revealing itself to the world only when it detached from her scalp, her grey and balding head falling unto the floor and awkwardly rolling away. And, as if this scene were not horrific or harrowing enough for the crowd, Mary’s small dog, which had apparently hidden itself under her petticoat, ran toward her body and, after several failed attempts to corner or contain it, “lay down in the widening pool of blood between her severed head and shoulders.”⁶⁷

However we might imagine our own reaction to such an event, this much is certain: “No one who witnessed Mary’s last day could ever have forgotten it.”⁶⁸ Not the sound of the axe striking bone nor that of Mary’s painfully muttered cry, not the slowness of time as the executioner recognized his error and pulled back for a second blow, not the sight of her face tumbling across the floor nor the smell of her thickly spilled blood, not the sting of the winter air in the hall nor the chill that rippled through the crowd as a nobleman shouted “so perish all the Queen’s enemies!”⁶⁹ On the flip side, we have the simplicity of Edison’s representation — the promptness with which Mary relents to her killer, the cleanliness of his stroke, the lack of emotion or reaction from the rather small crowd — which, under any form of reflection, lends the film an air of inauthenticity. Sure, it’s shocking when we first see it, but it’s also strangely anticlimactic, especially considering the fact that we are given very little time to truly anticipate the event. In fact, when we watch the film over again (as if, say, on a loop, the way it would’ve actually been exhibited in nickelodeons of the era) it’s hard not to notice other telltale signs of the film’s deception. Combs undersells the “glitchiness” of the splice, for example, as not only does the position of a guard’s spear jump a bit, but so too does the executioner’s backswing — moving from precisely vertical to an angled downward strike — and nearly every member of the crowd, most of whom are shuffled some degree to their left or right. Even Mary’s body shifts strangely, her face pressed flatter against the block and her dress much fuller as if her hips were suddenly propped further up and back (either that or she gains about 50 pounds in a fraction of a second). Equally telling is the reaction of the executioner after completing his task, who appears to look up directly at the camera, perhaps in excitement at the success of his swing, or perhaps to check with someone off frame to ensure that everything went according to plan. Realizing that the cameras are still rolling, he quickly remembers his second task and scoops up the fake head — the final “proof” of death demanded by the film.

Whether grinning or grimacing, however, it’s safe to assume that the most common response to *The Execution of Mary* was shock, just as it would have been the most common reaction to the actual death of Mary Stuart. Yet it’s also clear that these two shocks had almost nothing in common, the former one of simple surprise at what amounts to little more than a visual hoax (which ultimately leaves very little in the way of lasting impression), the latter a shock of intensity, an overwhelming perceptual thickness that assaulted the senses and burrowed its way into the unconscious. As the twentieth century came and went, however, it brought with it only the shock of the hoax — gunmen tossing dummies off a train (or pretending to fire directly at the audience) in Porter’s *The Great Train Robbery*, noisy yet bloodless drive-bys in Hawk’s original *Scarface* (whose potency came more from pointing to real-life events than it did from any sort of verisimilitude), inexplicable explosions of blood and bodies

ridiculously flung through the air in Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch*. To these oft-cited examples we could undoubtedly add countless other images that feel somehow equally provoking and unfulfilling, but we've little need to walk step-by-step through this familiar, escalating trajectory of violence.⁷⁰ Instead, what we should and will do is look to the consequences of this trajectory, to the false consciousness that results from these endless and infertile hallucinations.

"False consciousness" is exactly what Guy Debord saw in the mediated culture of the mid-twentieth century, a "society of the spectacle" in which "everything that was directly lived has receded into a representation."⁷¹ Crucially, this "spectacle" is one that expressly denies direct perception in favor of the contemplation of discrete sensations:

Since the spectacle's job is to use various specialized mediations in order to *show* us a world that can no longer be grasped, it naturally elevates the sense of sight to the special pre-eminence once occupied by touch: the most abstract and easily deceived sense is the most readily adaptable to the generalised abstraction of present-day society.⁷²

Our recognition of the world, then, comes not from our *being-present* with it, but rather from quick glances to the other side of the room, from staring not through a window but at a screen. For Debord, what was at stake was not simply the notion that reality is masked by these sensationalized deceptions, but more importantly that it had come to be defined by them — "reality emerges within the spectacle, and the spectacle is real."⁷³

This failure to distinguish the image from the actual is equally accounted for in the poststructuralism of Jean Baudrillard, whose development of the four "successive phases of the image" was a direct commentary on the lost connection to reality at the heart of the postmodern condition. In fact, when I stated a moment ago that there was little need to lay out the history of death in moving images, I did so not only because its trajectory has always been explicitly visible, but also because even a cursory reading of Baudrillard's essay on "The Precession of the Simulacra" provides an exceptional periodization of the image of death (even if death itself was not explicit in the study). In its first phase, for example, Baudrillard argued that the image appears as a "reflection of a profound reality," and in regard to death, this was the era of the still photograph, when pictures of corpses and battlefields were meant to safeguard the memory of those who were lost — not a replacement for the experience of witnessing so much as an extension of it.⁷⁴ Baudrillard names this phase "the sacramental order," when the image was "a *good* appearance" because its intentions were pure (or, perhaps, its intentions were to maintain the purity of the thing or event depicted). In the second phase, however, the image "masks and denatures a profound reality," it was "an evil appearance."⁷⁵ Counted amongst this

“order of maleficence” would be early motion pictures like *The Execution of Mary*, whose depictions of death *perverted its reality* not simply because they were a hoax, but because that hoax forced its audience to question and doubt their own ability to recognize death. This led to the third stage, when the image “masks the *absence* of a profound reality,” when its very purpose was to disguise that which it deemed inconsequential or abject.⁷⁶ This was the era of Gorer’s pornography, those mid-century depictions of violence that were designed to titillate only in service of satisfying our curiosity, such that the veiled realities of death would not be missed. In this, the “order of sorcery,” the image merely “plays at appearance,” whether it held any allegiance to reality was of little consequence, for its very existence concealed that of its long-forgotten referent.

By the fourth stage, however, there was no more uncertainty: the image held “no relation to any reality whatever: it [was] its own pure simulacrum.”⁷⁷ Implicit in this statement is Baudrillard’s unique definition of the simulacrum — not merely a representation but a signifier without a signified, an imitation that has assumed the throne of reality (in a coup that is by no means bloodless) and thus declared itself *truth* — and also an indication of what Baudrillard termed “the precession of simulacra,” that moment when representations begin to *precede* their referents, when the image defines the real rather than the other way around. Baudrillard’s well-known example is borrowed from Jorge Luis Borges, a fable in which a map becomes so large and so exquisitely detailed that it blankets the empire it was made to represent, and in time “it is the real, and not the map, whose vestiges persist here and there in the deserts ... *the desert of the real itself*.”⁷⁸ Like Borges’s map, the images of death that grew from the roots of films like *The Execution of Mary* are no longer even recognized as representations, but are instead believed to *be death itself* (while the vestiges of actual death persist only for those who are lost or who have chosen to go exploring).⁷⁹

Indeed, by the postmodern era, few could say that they had actually witnessed or experienced the death of another, despite the fact we had become encumbered by images upon images upon images of death and dying, pure simulacra with no relation to real bodies ceasing to function, a collectively invented conception of the final event of life. We’ve already seen that what we lost during the twentieth century was the trauma and *jouissance* of witnessing that once inaugurated our knowledge of mortality, but now we can also see *how we lost it*: the influence of the hospital and the inescapability of the moving image, which together hid from us a truth that we once thought so essential. Yet our profound lack of understanding only fuels a desire for a new experience of mortality, even if such desire is unconscious and we’re not quite sure how to satisfy it. Perhaps there was a clue in Baudrillard’s name for the fourth phase of the image: *the “order of simulations.”*

The Sublimity of Death (Simulating)

In the two decades since the digital turn, the image of death has changed — on the one hand doubling down on the physical trauma that has long been its defining characteristic, while on the other attempting to recapture the (perversely pleasurable) psychological trauma that once accompanied the actual event of death. In fact, if we can say anything about our contemporary relationship to death, it's that we are constantly and continuously searching for a way to bring the image of death into alignment with the actuality of death, to reinstate the knowledge and the *jouissance* once associated with the act of witnessing. In *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, for example, Žižek followed Baudrillard in mapping out a persistently shifting relationship between our desire to comprehend the richness of lived reality and our desire to reproduce or represent that reality, what he called (borrowing from Alain Badiou) our “passion for the Real” and our “passion for semblance,” respectively. What began in the modern period as a push to replicate the phenomenological experiences of reality through the new technologies of the image — photographs, cinema, television — morphed over time into a postmodern obsession with representing the abject or traumatic aspects of life and death through relatively harmless (if also inherently dishonest) spectacles. Seeing as those spectacles were little more than signposts pointing to our lack of immediate, first-hand experiences with the very things that we are most ashamed or afraid of, over time our obsession with representations has unintentionally and conversely fostered “a violent return to the passion for the Real,” a desire to peel off “the deceptive layers of reality” in order to directly encounter the world “in its extreme violence.”⁸⁰

As we have already seen, events that were once a common aspect of lived experience, such as the witnessing of the death of others, have receded so far into the image — into the world of semblance — that their reality has become both abject and yet simultaneously (and passionately) desired. Žižek referred to this mediated state of being constantly represented yet experientially absent as a new form of “virtual reality,” an encounter that is “deprived of its subject, of the hard resistant kernel of the Real.”⁸¹ “It is not that reality entered our image,” he continued, but instead that “the image entered and shattered our reality.”⁸² Take, for example, the central object of his text, the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, an event that appeared on the surface as the radical inverse of public desire, yet which Žižek found to be the ultimate fulfillment of the American fantasy, a televised spectacle which provided the “uncanny satisfaction” of a disaster movie:

For the great majority of the public, the WTC explosions were events on the TV screen, and when we watched the oft-repeated shot of frightened people running towards the camera ahead of the giant cloud of dust from the collapsing tower, was the framing of the shot not reminiscent of

spectacular shots in catastrophic movies, a special effect which outdid all others, since — as Jeremy Bentham knew — reality is the best appearance of itself.⁸³

Žižek reminds us that, despite the frequent positioning of 9/11 as a shocking, unexpected event — “how the unimaginable Impossible happened” — we can clearly see that it was frequently and graphically predicted or anticipated within moving images, not only through the constant warnings of possible terrorist attacks from the news media but also through the myriad Hollywood blockbusters that situated mass-scale chaos and destruction as part and parcel of the pleasures of spectacle.⁸⁴ “The unthinkable which happened *was the object of fantasy*, so that, in a way, America got what it fantasized about, and that was the biggest surprise.”⁸⁵

Our fantasy, of course, is not to be terrorized or attacked. It is, rather, *to bear witness* — to stand in the presence of that which gives us anxiety *so as to better know or understand it* — and our renewed passion for the Real has cultivated several new avenues through which we attempt to re-encounter the trauma of witnessing. Not the least of these is the reappearance of the actual experience of witnessing, for at the same moment that the digital is transforming the images that once facilitated the hospital’s veiling of death, so too is medical science’s approach to the event itself changing by way of an increased interest in (and the increased availability of) palliative care and hospice. The goals of hospice are clearly designed to benefit the sick and the dying — to lessen the symptoms of their illnesses, to cease treatments which decrease quality of life while providing only marginal increases to life expectancy, and to improve end of life experiences by promoting the presence and participation of loved ones. Under the surface, however, we also find *a return of the deathbed event*, an encouragement to not only perceive the extensive processes of death, but also contemplate and form our own unique attitudes toward it (even if doing so is positioned only as a way to help ease the suffering of the dying). The twentieth century’s repression has by no means worn off, but at the very least conversations regarding natural death are being renewed, and for the first time in over a century the curtain surrounding death is being lifted.

Then again, the technological advancements of the digital age might be forcing the issue. For instance, the constantly improving quality and accessibility of digital cameras has made them an omnipresent aspect of contemporary culture, while at the same moment the barriers for dispersing and distributing video have all but disappeared. Consequently, we’ve witnessed a sudden proliferation of images of *actual death*, particularly in the form of execution videos and eyewitness footage of accidents and acts of violence — once kept from the public by the gatekeepers of media, now available to anyone interested enough to seek them out online. With hospice, witnesses to death are rarely if ever encouraged to promote their

experience as personally beneficial (let alone pleasurable), yet in a strange way that is often how we frame this footage of real-world violence. News programs, for example, may pause graphic footage moments before the event occurs, but they also consistently report that the uncensored images are easily found online, rendering their very existence as a challenge, a test of will in the face of horror. What is on display, and in fact the display itself, is still widely regarded as taboo, but for those few with the “strength” to stomach the images, they are assumed to reveal some “truth” about reality (bitter though that truth may be). For the many who choose not to look, however, their presence serves only to amplify the curiosity — the passion for the Real — that drives contemporary representations (the first person at a party to admit that they watched an execution video becomes the instant center of attention).⁸⁶

Despite our renewed passion for the Real, however, hospice is not yet the preferred practice of death in the medical community, and images of actual death continue to circulate primarily on the periphery of culture. As such, our desire to re-encounter the trauma of witnessing remains, as Žižek showed us, firmly grounded in *fantasy*, and our modern attempts at witnessing have resulted not in a richer or more complete understanding of mortality, but rather a demand for greater *intensity* in the fictional images that continue to define death — images which have, in turn, attempted to match *the shock of the real* with an increase in both *viscerality* and *verisimilitude*.

As we’ve seen, our knowledge of death was long born from our traumatic encounters with the dying, and in trying to replicate that trauma the moving image has, from *The Execution of Mary* forward, long had an obsession with shock. In many ways, *viscerality is shock* — that moment when you become overwhelmed to the point of being physically affected by an experience — and as Jennifer M. Barker explains, by visceral “we often mean our ‘gut reaction,’ a general feeling that begins deep inside but makes its way to the surface.”⁸⁷ Put another way, the visceral reaction is that initial or primary feeling which seems to come from the stomach (rather than the mind) because it *precedes thought or contemplation*. This holds true even when we use the word to describe an experience itself (rather than our response to that experience), for the *visceral moment* is one that is so sudden or unexpected that it denies us the opportunity to process our perceptions.

Viscerality has, therefore, a temporal component, and the visceral image of death is that which startles because it occurs *rapidly*. In her study of documentary images of actual death, Vivian Sobchack observed that “the most effective cinematic representation of death in our present culture is inscribed on the lived body in action that is *abrupt*,” which “denies formal reason and connotes the ‘irrationality,’ ‘arbitrariness,’ and ‘unfairness’ of death.”⁸⁸ The same certainly holds true in fiction, and since the digital turn, representations of death have attempted to replicate the traumatic experience of witnessing by greatly increasing the suddenness or abruptness

of their violence. Consider the moment toward the end of Catherine Breillat's coming-of-age fable *Fat Girl*, when two sisters, pulled over in their car at a rest stop, sleepily discuss the loss of the older girl's virginity. Suddenly, in a matter of mere seconds, a man smashes through the windshield and hacks at the older sister's head with an axe, the audience — given no opportunity to process this abrupt turn of events — feeling the blow as if they were the victim. Or perhaps Nicolas Winding Refn's *Drive*, which shifts into slow motion to tell us that its hero has realized that he's about to be attacked, yet before he can act (or before the audience has any chance to prepare themselves for what they might see or feel) a shotgun blast explodes not just a window, but literally the entire head of his companion. Or John Hillcoat's *The Proposition*, where a shocking injury to the lead character is matched seconds later by an even more gruesome and unexpected gunshot wound to the head of one of his attackers, both instances lacking the customary shot of someone aiming a weapon which we typically expect to forecast such moments of violence.

A favorite example of mine comes not from the art-house, but rather from the first film of Peter Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, the epitome of digital-age blockbuster filmmaking. In its climactic fight, the ranger Aragorn faces off against an enormous brute of an orc, and as the battle builds in intensity, we reach a moment where generic expectation dictates that our hero will be physically overwhelmed before miraculously and triumphantly rising to victory. Instead, it is *us* who are overwhelmed, caught off guard when Aragorn takes one unexpectedly masterful swing that lops off the orc's head, and with barely a moment of hesitation (or, more importantly, barely a moment for us to recognize that the fight is over) he runs off to help a friend. Imagine that this film were made a mere decade or two earlier, when Aragorn would have undoubtedly pinned his opponent, exchanged words about something important like the fate of humankind, and then struck the fatal blow exactly when we expected and desired it. Instead, in its suddenness we find a death that is far more visceral and even brutal, because it defies anticipation and denies contemplation.

Certainly the "shock of the hoax" is intense in all of these examples because of the swiftness of their violence, but at the same time the viscosity of the *physical trauma* on display has increased as well, with fleshy bodies ripped apart and exposed like never before. In fact, Barker reminds us that the visceral is not only a "gut reaction," but also *the guts themselves*, the *viscera* that hides beneath the skin and which we "hardly notice ... under normal circumstances."⁸⁹ In the digital age, however, those insides are being frequently and graphically revealed, as new representations of death often emphasize and fixate upon the interiors of the body that went more or less un-depicted in the moving image for over a century. Aside from the gunshot wounds and sliced-off limbs that disclose blood, bone, and muscle, most striking is the aesthetic technique of replaying or, more accurately,

FIGURE 1.3 A bullet (and the camera) passes through the viscera of a human body in *Three Kings*.

re-examining traumatic deaths from *inside* the body, first developed on cinema screens in David O. Russell's *Three Kings*, popularized on television with Jerry Bruckheimer's *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation*, and adapted into gaming with the latest incarnations of Ed Boon's iconic *Mortal Kombat* series. No matter the medium, we find in each case a camera that peers or even traverses *into and through* the interior of the body, following the ricocheting path of bullets or the rippling effect of blunt force trauma as every tear of the flesh, every break of the bones, and every puncture of the organs is scrutinized by its lens. And, as we follow the camera's trajectory, we also notice a desire for greater *verisimilitude*, for whether or not these images accurately reflect the true reality of trauma, they nonetheless aim to expose the biological processes that occur during death, the breakdown and failure of the intricately complicated systems of the organic body.

Whether through an abrupt eruption of violence or the exposure of the unseen interior of the body, *increased viscosity* is a significant component of contemporary representations of death, yet one that is at best an extension of prior strategies for inspiring the psychological trauma of witnessing, and at worst satisfied with (or perhaps only capable of) portraying the pain of physical trauma. In this regard, digital representations possess only small advantages over their forebears of the twentieth century, which could occasionally shock the senses but rarely provide anything approaching the thickness of witnessing or the intense pleasure of *jouissance*. To truly capture the trauma of death, the digital image must first become something *radically different and new*, and to find out what that is, let's return not only to the question of the essence of trauma, but also to another previously posed inquiry: What happens when the trauma of witnessing death is replaced

by the image of trauma? If Lacan has anything to say about the matter, the effects are rather profound.

On the one hand, Lacan's observations in "Tuché and Automaton" are very much an extension of Freud's view of trauma as an overwhelming tension resolved only through the process of symbolization (his employment of the Aristotelian concept of the automaton, for example, is a clear reference to the spontaneous and automatic return or repetition of trauma). On the other, Lacan's structuralist approach to the processes of consciousness brings to light nuances that are essential for understanding how the eruption of representations impacted our relationship to death in contemporary culture, especially when viewed through the lens of his well-known declaration that "the unconscious is structured like a language" and his elaboration of the three registers of the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real.⁹⁰ Together, these strands of thought present the landscape of human experience as fundamentally grounded in language and representation, and position trauma as those experiences which lie *beyond language* and *beyond representation*, so much so that Lacan gave a new name to trauma: the tuché, *the encounter with the Real*, that which cannot be contained within the realm of the sign and the symbol.

Like Freud, Lacan saw the procedures of the conscious mind as a screening process, but under his schema the screen is language itself, and the complexities of everyday existence are categorized, conceptualized, and contained within the boundaries of discrete signifiers. As such, he argued that our complex yet illusory interpretations of everyday life (i.e., the Imaginary) are separated from the overwhelming experience of actual existence (i.e., the Real) by the order of language and representation (i.e., the Symbolic, which also includes the practice of traditions, rituals, and law, and which Lacan pointedly referred to as the "insistence of the signs"). When we step outside, for example, rarely are we overwhelmed by the intricate geometric shapes, innumerable swaths of color, or flowing, undulating movements that appear before us, nor are we shocked by wafting scents, tickling breezes, or distant songs. Instead, we immediately and effortlessly digest the scene by situating each sensation within the confines of a word: a porch, a table, a grill, grass underfoot, leaves overhead, birds chirping, and wind blowing. If the scene were suddenly interrupted by a strange crack and a brilliant light, a sharp and inexplicable stinging sensation, dizziness, and the smell of some foreign thing burning and smoking, then we might begin to enter the realm of trauma, for in our refusal to recognize unpleasant possibilities, we so often fail to create terms which easily categorize and contain such intense experiences (ask Freud's soldiers or abuse victims to explain the circumstances of their trauma in detail, and you would invariably hear them say something along the lines of "I can't quite put it into words").

Lacan was not the only one to note the connection between the limits of language and the forms of trauma that so often frame death. Gorer, for

example, told us not only that “the sensations [of images of death] are enhanced as much as a customary poverty of language permits,” but also that “most languages are relatively poor in words or constructions to express intense pleasure or intense pain.”⁹¹ With the very first line of *The Birth of the Clinic*, Foucault made explicit that his book was “about space, about language, and about death,” for the hospital’s self-declared jurisdiction over the latter was a shift on two fronts: a shift in setting, whereby its domain moved from the public to the private, and a shift in *representation*, in that the contemplation of the processes of death could occur only within the boundaries of the language of medicine (leaving the masses, as I argue, with naught but the fictions of the moving image).⁹² In structuralism, Merleau-Ponty found an uneasy ally to his phenomenology, and when he argued that the body “signifies” in much the same manner as words and utterances — “language as/of corporeality,” as Kristen Brown Golden puts it — we can see how physical trauma begets psychological trauma, for the loss of a limb or the paralysis of the face disavows the bodily significations that connote subjectivity.⁹³ Most aligned with Lacan, however, are Barthes and Sobchack, the former arguing, in his analysis of photographs of traumatic events such as “fires, ship-wrecks, catastrophes, [and] violent deaths,” that “trauma is just what suspends language and blocks signification,” such that “the shock photo is by structure non-signifying,” it has “no value” and produces “no knowledge.”⁹⁴ Sobchack, in turn, maintained that “the representation of the event of death is an indexical sign of that which is always in excess of representation and beyond the limits of coding and culture: Death confounds all codes.”⁹⁵

Of course, that doesn’t prevent us from trying. Returning to Lacan, we find an expansion of Freud’s notion that the repetition and subsequent symbolization of trauma is an attempt to resolve lingering tensions, for if trauma is that which is beyond language, then to represent trauma is to wrench it away from the realm of the Real and forcefully insert into the Symbolic (after which it can be easily and readily stitched into the comfortable fabric of the Imaginary). Yet to symbolize is also to negate the trauma of the encounter with the Real by turning it into an effigy, so what now do we make of Lacan’s reminder that “nothing can be apprehended *in effigie, in absentia*”? Earlier, I paraphrased this statement as a warning that encounters with the sign and the symbol are not equal to encounters with the real, and now we can see not only that the Symbolic can never fully contain (and therefore is always less than) the Real, but also, and more importantly, that we can never truly know a thing or event if we meet it only at the level of representation, if we refuse to first submit to its trauma.⁹⁶ In a culture where the encounter with the Real of death remains largely absent, representations will never be able to provide the knowledge that we seek, and so we turn to a new form of the image that, like trauma itself, pushes *beyond* representation: we look to *simulations*.

For Baudrillard, the “order of simulations” was the last phase of the image, that moment when the representation becomes utterly divorced from the reality it once meant to signify, emerging on the other side a simulacrum. The *simulation*, meanwhile, is nothing less than the revolution itself, the process through which one reality is destroyed and another is born. We’ve already discussed one implication of this process — that the resulting simulacra come to precede reality rather than the other way around — but we’ve yet to grasp an equally important consequence, that the simulation is thus *affective* in ways that the representation can never be, as we see in this quote from *Simulacra and Simulation*:

Simulating is not pretending: “Whoever fakes an illness can simply stay in bed and make everyone believe he is ill. Whoever simulates an illness produces in himself some of the symptoms” (Littre). Therefore, pretending, or dissimulating, leaves the principle of reality intact: the difference is always clear, it is simply masked, whereas simulation threatens the difference between the “true” and the “false,” the “real” and the “imaginary.”⁹⁷

It’s interesting that Baudrillard positions simulations as a threat, for as we begin to simulate, we must also stop pretending, and when we stop pretending, we begin to *experience*. Rather than being frightened by that possibility, however, in the digital age we have embraced it: we seek in the simulation of death the very experience of trauma that has for so long been absent from our reality — that overwhelmingly intense stimulation that stirs within us both pain and pleasure, that leaves its wounds while also imparting wisdom and knowledge.⁹⁸

It’s clear that in the three decades since Baudrillard published *Simulacra and Simulation*, digital technologies have profoundly complicated the simulation by shifting both its boundaries and its capabilities, which Gonzalo Frasca makes explicit when he writes that “the potential of simulation has been somehow limited because of a technological problem: it is extremely difficult to model complex systems through cogwheels. Naturally, the invention of the computer changed this situation.”⁹⁹ Building on Frasca, Ian Bogost gives us an altogether different definition of the simulation, that of a simplified rule-based system that informs the user’s subjective understanding of a larger, more complex system.¹⁰⁰ It’s obvious that there’s a striking disconnect between this description, in which simulations are said to point to the complexities of reality, and Baudrillard’s, in which we find not just the absence but the destruction of that reality. Perhaps, though, this disconnect can be accounted for by rethinking not the use-value or affect of the images produced by the simulation, but instead *the production itself* — how the very process of generating a simulated image changes its relationship to the reality it depicts.

In fact, what interests me most about Bogost's discussion of simulations is that he traces them down to the level of the *cellular automaton* — “a simple program (an automaton) isolated into small units (cells). These units interact with one another, exposing what scientists — computer scientists especially — have hoped to exploit as a viable model for artificial life.”¹⁰¹ In digital simulations, the automata are essentially the determinant conditionals — “if x then z ,” “if x and y then z ,” “if x or y then z ,” “not x then z ” — that act as the most basic commands of a digital program, while the cells are the zeros and ones, the bits and bytes of data passing through this logical system. These simple programs are not at all unlike the automatons of Aristotle and Lacan, in that their reactions to stimuli are spontaneous, automatic, and repetitive, they “perform a single, simple, isolatable task” that results in a basic unit of new information, passed on to the next automaton which, in turn, performs its own task. What makes the employment of these computational units significant, and what I argue ultimately separates a simulation from a representation, is some degree of *autonomy* — once a set of rules have been established, once the tasks of each automaton have been isolated and defined, then the subsequent images they produce are shaped by the system rather than the creator of the system. In other words, *a simulation is a representation that has more or less determined its own construction (or at the very least elements of its construction) according to a system of rules.*¹⁰²

Frasca points to this when he refers to simulations as “machines that generate signs,” and likewise Lev Manovich names “automation” one of the principles of new media, which can happen at “low-levels” in programs like Photoshop or Maya, where complex image manipulation can result from the simple inputs of the user, or at the “high-levels” of sophisticated simulations like the “project of Artificial Intelligence” (the very idea of which produces within us numerous existential anxieties, which we'll return to in Chapter 4).¹⁰³ Without doubt, even the most basic depictions of death in contemporary media often require some degree of low-level manipulation — from simple color grading to achieve the carmine hue we associate with freshly surfaced blood to the extensive use of computer-generated images to create believably damaged and devastated virtual bodies — while many more rely on high-level simulations that mimic specific components of biological life — particularly the autonomous movements and reactions that often define “alive-ness” — in order to show those components breaking down or failing at the moment of death. Regardless of the simplicity or complexity of the simulation, the autonomy of contemporary images of death replicates details of the actual processes of dying that were rarely, if ever, present in the subjective representations of the last century.

Before we discuss the specifics of those autonomously generated details, let's make a few observations. First, the fact that we so often look to the simulation as a model or method for *creating life* implies that simulations

are also uniquely qualified to *create death*. Second, although the automatons that drive the simulation are simple, and although the simulation is a simplified model of a more complex system, this does not imply that the simulation as a whole is simple (nor the images it produces). Third, autonomy is particularly crucial in simulations of death because it both mimics the reactive nature of the living organism and echoes one of the most important characteristics of the natural world which undergirds the very structures of life: that nature is fundamentally orderly and consistent, and that the laws of nature are spontaneously and impartially enacted. And fourth, although we may be tempted to think of the simulation as subjective — insofar as its rules are chosen by its creators — the outcome of the simulation is an objective and complex representation that often strikes us as “more-than-real” or *hyperreal*, perhaps especially in the case of death (whose reality is always already beyond the grasp of conscious understanding).

Let’s both work our way through these observations and make our way back to the autonomous “details” of the simulation by first noting that the images, signs, and information generated by a useful or interesting digital simulation are, by nature, unpredictable. This is not to say that we cannot make reasonable guesses as to the basic forms the simulation will produce, but rather that we want the details of those forms to be more exhaustive, specific, and consistent than those a human being could reasonably create (which also infers that we want the simulation to affect us in a manner similar to the complex systems upon which they are modeled). For example, an animator’s interpretation of a tree blowing in the breeze may strike us as beautiful — the way they depict the unseen “hand” of nature pressing against a mass of leaves, the subtle gradations of green and yellow dancing and swaying as one — yet a reasonably complex digital simulation of a tree gives us something very different, not an unbroken mass swarming in one direction but rather an overwhelming variety of branches and leaves that bend and quiver this way and that, each one tugging and pulling against the others with an influence wholly dependent on its size, shape, weight, and placement, each movement allowing for sharp points of light to break through which reflect and refract off every semi-glossy surface, fostering an impression of constant motion at the outermost edges of the tree which stands in striking juxtaposition to the stability of its trunk.¹⁰⁴ Whether or not such a simulation can ever provide us with the perceptual thickness found in an encounter with an actual tree, we can see that it nonetheless forges a bond with physical reality that extends far beyond the limits of the representation’s subjective image of the world, a bond that is grounded in an experience of *overwhelming awe* that, as Immanuel Kant told us, not only confuses the boundaries between the Real and the representation, but *fuses* them as well.

To understand this bond, let’s consider the fact that the human mind can scarcely even begin to process the seemingly infinite materials and forces which together constitute the matter and energy of the universe, and so to

truly grasp the complexities of something as quotidian as a tree blowing in the breeze, one would need to take into account not simply the mass of the tree and the velocity of the wind or the volume of the leaves and the stiffness of the branches. Instead, one must also consider the structural physiology of the organism (not just roots, trunk, and crown, but interior tissues like the xylem, phloem, and cork, as well as the billions of living cells that structure those tissues, the trillions upon trillions of atoms that structure those cells, etc.), the events that gave rise to the wind (the rotation of the Earth and the subsequent Coriolis effect, shifts in atmospheric pressure, centripetal acceleration and frictional deceleration, etc.), the numerous substances that make up the ground upon which the tree takes root (the depth and density of the soil, the insects and microorganisms which contribute to that soil, the rain that seeps through the ground which feeds and strengthens the tree, the bedrock which provides foundational stability, etc.), the myriad other forces — gravitational, electromagnetic, strong nuclear, weak nuclear, frictional, tensional, elastic, etc. — at play in, between, and amongst them, and so on and so on.

Meanwhile, to fully grasp a reasonably complex digital simulation of a tree blowing in the breeze, that same human mind would need to account not only for the mass of the tree and the velocity of the wind or the volume of the leaves and the stiffness of the branches, but also the complex equations and algorithms that define mass, velocity, volume, and stiffness, the number of polygons or voxels used to delineate the shape and dimensions of the tree, the number of ways in which those units must reshape or deform when rendered from various perspectives, the particle physics and fluid dynamics used to determine the interactions between the force of the “air,” the matter of the “wood,” and the rays of the “light,” and so on and so on. Without doubt, the simulation is vastly simplified in relation to the complexities of the natural phenomenon, and yet to the layperson *they are both equally overwhelming*, so far beyond the capacities of contemplation as to be essentially and fundamentally *sublime*.

In his *Critique of Judgment*, Kant distinguished the experience of the sublime from that of the merely beautiful, the latter “a question of the form of the object, and this consists in limitation,” whereas the former is “a representation of limitless-ness, yet with a super-added thought of its totality,” an object or event so “absolutely great” in its “magnitude” that it transcends “every standard of the senses.”¹⁰⁵ In other words, that which we encounter as sublime is of such enormity and/or complexity that we shudder before it, for although we are capable of *apprehending it*, we are incapable of *comprehending it* without mentally breaking it apart into constituent pieces (which only fuels our fascination with the thing *as a whole*). Although the awe of the sublime is always constant, not every encounter with the sublime is the same, and Kant described for us two forms: the *dynamical* and the *mathematical*. In the former, we find “nature

considered in an aesthetic judgment as might that has no dominion over us,” meaning that the dynamically sublime object’s physical magnitude or structural complexity is so immense and so powerful as to make us fearful (of our ignorance or impotence, perhaps) without being afraid of the object itself (and in fact our “sublimation” to it brings us some degree of happiness, for “the agreeableness arising from the cessation of an uneasiness is a *state of joy*”).¹⁰⁶ The dynamical sublime is “aesthetic” because our sense of the scale or intricacy of the object is never more than an estimation — a “mere intuition (by the eye)” — and while the same holds true for the mathematical sublime, its estimation is of a different sort, not of the overpowering size of one object but the overwhelming mass of many.

The mathematical sublime is a recognition of something so *numerous* as to approach the infinite, which is not to say that we believe the mass to be never-ending, but rather that its quantity is so great that (as with the very concept of the infinite) we lack the capacity to fully contemplate it. As the name suggests, the consideration of *numbers* is an essential component of the mathematical sublime, and yet Kant tells us that “the sublime does not lie so much in the greatness of the number, as in the fact that in our onward advance” — in our attempts to study and understand ever more of the universe that bounds us — “we always arrive at proportionately greater units.”¹⁰⁷ To put this another way, the mathematical sublime lies in the gap between a known quantity (say, the amount of leaves on a tree and the number of trees in a forest) and its unknowable quality (the impossibility of a coherent and concurrent consideration of every leaf in a forest). This leads us back to our trees, where we find the sublimity of the actual organism to be *dynamic*, for although we can begin to understand many of the components that contribute to its overall structure, the complexity of the entire entity overwhelms our capacity of thought (as does, in the case of a redwood or a sequoia, its enormity), whereas the sublimity of the simulation is almost entirely *mathematic* — it’s an encounter with numbers so intricate and so complicated that they essentially possess no meaning for us outside of the computer’s final renderings. In this latter case the “gap” is backwards, what we apprehend is the quality of simulation (the highly detailed and immensely precise images that it generates) which we cannot but compare to its incomprehensible quantity (a digital code so complex as to produce a seemingly infinite degree of variations). This is not to say that every encounter with a tree, nor every simulation, is sublime — far from it, for we’ve developed many words and representations which allow us to situate such experiences within the comfortable boundaries of the Imaginary — yet at the same time the capacity is nonetheless always present, such that any given encounter *could* (under the right circumstances) lead to the sensation of awe.¹⁰⁸

If we shift this discussion back to images of death, it’s not terribly difficult to see how the outbreak of simulations radically alters our representation-driven relationship to the concept of mortality, as the mathematical sublime

hiding beneath the surface of the simulation echoes the experience of the dynamical sublime once found in the event of witnessing (but lost in the majority of perceptually “thin” representations). Again, the simulation will never provide the exact experience of trauma that accompanies the event of witnessing, yet it can provide something *akin* to it, a sensation of sublimity that effectively grants the simulation of death an affect not at all unlike the trauma of witnessing. In fact, the sublime trauma of the simulation — the “uncanny satisfaction” of contemporary images of trauma that Žižek also referred to as *jouissance* — is found not only in the contemplation of the equations that drive the simulation, but also in the physical and biological “details” of the images it generates, details which lie beyond the capacities of the representation and act as a sort of *virtual encounter with the Real*.

We’ve already seen these biological details in the increased viscosity of modern representations of trauma, whose depictions of the insides of the body only grow in specificity with the employment of simulations. Equally emphasized in the simulation, however, are the physical details, by which I refer to not only the matter that constructs our bodies and our universe but also the forces which bind them together. In other words, modern images of death often rely on *precisely simulated physics* in order to frame death as a consequence of the laws of lived reality, and it’s through the sublime recognition of those physical laws that we experience the painful pleasure once found only in the presence of actual death.

This is perhaps most immediately visible in digital games, whose desire for ever-greater verisimilitude rivals that of the cinematic images we’ve already discussed, so much so that constant improvements to visual fidelity (i.e., “graphics”) stands as a cornerstone of the games industry. Yet as David H. Eberly tells us, “visual realism is only half the battle ... *physical* realism is the other half,” and without doubt many modern games *feel real* because they *feel right* — they generate objects which believably interact with one another, have a tangible sense of weight and force, yet also often bend, contort, squash, and break in ways which feel equally familiar.¹⁰⁹ In fact, familiarity is key to the simulation of physics, and Eberly elaborates that “physics itself can be understood in an intuitive manner — after all it is an attempt to quantify the world around us. Implementing a physical simulation on a computer, though, requires more than intuition. It requires mathematical maturity as well as the ability to synthesize a large system from a collection of sophisticated, smaller components.”¹¹⁰ Aside from an affinity with Bogost’s definition of the simulation, if we read this quote upside down (from the perspective of the average gameplayer rather than the average game programmer) we find that in our lack of “mathematical maturity” we experience simulated physics as nothing more than *a mere intuition of the eye*, an intuition which tells us that both the gameworld and reality operate according to the same set of rules — rules that are autonomously enacted and sublimely complex — which in turn cements a

connection between the two. In their automation of complex forces such as gravity, momentum, inertia, friction, velocity, drag, buoyancy, spring, torque, etc. (not to mention rigid and soft-body collision detection and particle physics), engines like *Havok*, the *Bullet Physics Library*, and *PhysX* ensure that contemporary games possess that strange feeling of both randomness and precision that pervades our encounters with our actual physical world — which is in fact nothing less than the overwhelming sensation of the sublime, for the number and variety of scenarios made possible by the simulation (as well as the complexity of the simulation itself) is far too great to comprehend.¹¹¹

Physics have been a prominent component of digital games throughout the history of the medium. Release the d-pad as Mario is running, for example, and he doesn't freeze in place but rather slides further a bit, his *momentum* carrying him ever forward. Tap the "A" button and he hops, hold it down, he jumps. If you run forward and *then* jump, his speed carries him higher and farther than ever before (perhaps even far enough to clear the flagpole). In contemporary games, however, physics often have a direct and immediate affect on the depiction of death, as we see in Rockstar North's *Grand Theft Auto IV* (GTA IV), whose utilization of NaturalMotion's *Euphoria* animation system populated its spectacularly rendered caricature of New York City with "thinking" automatons whose "lives" are entirely dependent upon their constant awareness of the simulated physics of their world. Instead of floating along the ground in a constantly repeating series of key-framed animations, for example, NPCs (non-player characters) literally put a foot forward and then *lean* into the fall in order to take each step (thus relying on "gravity" to carry them forward), or raise a hand to brace themselves when they lose their balance, or turn and duck to avoid incoming objects, their sense of "panic" directly related to the speed or size of the object. In other words, every movement in GTA IV is unique and different, fostering a tangible sensation of *life* not found in pre-canned animations, an equally tangible sensation of *death* when those movements are stilled, and an image of a world where dying is the result not of the push of a button but rather a sublimely complicated series of mathematical calculations.

Tap a pedestrian with your car at low speed, for example, and they might become scared and hurriedly limp away, they might cry out and fall over in pain, or they might pound on your car while unleashing a few choice words. Increase the speed a bit before you hit them and they react accordingly, sometimes attempting to jump out of the way (getting spun through the air if you hit their legs as they do so), sometimes getting caught off guard (their back crumpled against the hood as their feet fly over their head), sometimes simply bracing for impact (curling tight as they slam into and over the windshield). Depending on the speed, the angle of impact, the reaction of the pedestrian — Did they put their hands up in time to lessen the impact of their head? Were they able to slide across the hood or were they pulled under

FIGURE 1.4 *Pedestrians struck by a car in Grand Theft Auto IV.*

the tires? — and even occasionally the weather and its effect on the friction of the ground, you may find at the scene of the accident a person scraping the dust from their knees as they turn to run away, a body wreathing in pain on the ground (awaiting the ambulance that will eventually come to provide CPR), or a corpse sprawled out in gruesome fashion, its limbs twisted and forever limp. Put the pedal to the floor, and death comes much quicker — the NPC moving to react before going limp as they bounce off the hood of the car, or swinging their hands and legs wildly as they fly through the air, only to “ragdoll” as they smash into a light-post.

In fact, “ragdoll physics” have become somewhat synonymous with modern action games, where developers compete to see how accurately (or perhaps how disturbingly) a body crumples after a bullet wound to the head, how it bounces after a fall from a great height, or how awkwardly it flops and contorts as it rolls down the side of mountain. If it’s “the visible cessation of [the] body’s intentional and responsive behavior that stands as the symbol of death” in contemporary culture, as Sobchack tells us, then in regard to fiction the ragdoll of digital games is its ultimate appearance.¹¹² Even the worst ragdoll effects are fascinating to watch, yet those on the level of GTA IV are relentlessly sublime — we both marvel and shutter at not just the complexity and variety of deaths generated by the game, but also the precision, specificity, and consistency of those images, the sudden and resolutely visible transition of bodies from fully responsive to utterly passive, the way they bounce or float or slide around, their fate entirely at the mercy of *physics*.

Earlier, I argued that the “shock of the hoax” found in representations of death had almost nothing in common with the trauma of witnessing. We can see now that it wasn’t a lack of “realism” that led to that disconnect so much as it was a lack of physical and biological precision, specificity, and consistency — the images struck us as false because *the physics felt wrong and the viscera was conspicuously absent*. Whether it be bodies that appeared weightless as they were tossed and thrown through the air, blood that squirted at odd angles and with far too great a force, corpses that lacked a proper sense of slackness (portrayed by actors whose muscles could not help but to resist the pull of gravity), or explosions that left skin and bones strangely intact, representations of death have always felt somehow less-than-real or unreal because the *minutia* of death was missing, those details which were once an integral part of the perceptual thickness of witnessing. In our struggle to re-encounter that experience, we’ve turned to the next best thing: simulations which have been radically infused by the digital, their capacity for autonomously generating the specificities of death shepherding a sense of overwhelming sublimity that (at the very least) echoes the thickness of experience we lost long ago. In fact, if the representation of death is *unreal*, then the digital simulation of death is, as Baudrillard would put it, *hyperreal*, so much like the Real as to be both immensely uncomfortable and intensely satisfying, and it’s that peculiar combination of pain and pleasure that we long for most of all.¹¹³ To find out why, let’s return to that shockingly intense simulation of death which first made us question whether we saw what we thought we saw and whether we know what we think we know.

Time Destroys Everything

After a short, narratively unrelated prologue, *Irréversible* begins *in medias res* as its two male protagonists, Marcus and Pierre, journey into the bowels of a grimy, underground S&M club known rather appropriately as *The Rectum*. As Thomas Bangalter’s soundtrack repeats a Doppler-like moan ad nauseam, the camera dips, twirls, lurches, and spins on its axis, never allowing us to gain a spatial foothold and only momentarily giving us glimpses of the perversions surrounding Marcus and Pierre at every turn. Although the shot appears continuous, like the upcoming murder sequence it’s actually the result of many 16 mm and 35 mm takes digitally stitched together (with simulated grain added to create a visual continuity). It also frequently utilizes a digital reframing process in order to create what Ricardo de los Rios and Robert Davis refer to as a “viscerally disturbing virtual space ... one in which the very idea of a spatially cogent continuum is irrelevant.”¹¹⁴ Unable to orient ourselves, we can only rely on the guidance

FIGURE 1.5 *Pierre smashes his victim's face with a fire extinguisher.*

of Marcus, who appears desperate and enraged, physically attacking several strangers while demanding that they take him to a man referred to only as “la Tenia” (later in the narrative, which is told chronologically in reverse, we’ll witness Marcus’s girlfriend Alex being violently raped by la Tenia, but for now his motive of revenge remains unspoken). As we tumble blindly downward, the film assaults us on all fronts, so that by the time Marcus and Pierre reach a basement full of men watching a pornographic film, we are confused, on edge, and exhausted — fearful of (yet entirely unprepared for) the violence about to erupt. When Marcus misidentifies a large, brutish man as la Tenia — who is, in fact, standing immediately to that man’s right — the man fights back, pushing Marcus to the ground and graphically breaking his arm before attempting to rape him. At this point, the previously more subdued Pierre lunges from off-screen with a fire extinguisher, setting in motion a continuous sequence of attacks that lasts for slightly over a minute and which unrelentingly simulates the breakdown of the flesh and the reality of traumatic death using a variety of digital techniques that special effects supervisor Rudolphe Chabrier likens to a “digital Swiss-Army knife.”¹¹⁵

During production, two versions of the attack were shot, one with the actor playing Pierre “holding a fire extinguisher cut in half, which allowed him to ‘hit’ the other actor without actually touching him,” and another where the actor held a real extinguisher and afflicted “real blows to a latex dummy,” its face “filled with blood” and its body “motionless.” Upon realizing that the latex face was “too lifeless,” however, the special effects team “worked with the actor’s face as much as possible, adding the effects of the blows and reshaping his head” using procedures like “computer-generated pictures, matte painting [and] graphic design, traditional editing techniques, morphing, compositing,” and various other simulators which were used to render things like vibration, motion-blur, and particle physics

(particularly the spattering of blood and the tearing of flesh).¹¹⁶ The final result of this multilayered simulation may be a traumatic depiction of death, but in the moment-to-moment it aims to create a tangible and believable approximation of *life*, the digital blending of “the actor’s face, the latex, and the 3D face” producing an image in which skin not only squishes and ripples according to blunt force, but is also supported by muscles which twitch and spasm as if the victim’s “brain” were attempting to process the physical trauma.¹¹⁷ Likewise, his hand — its tremors and quakes revealing pain and anguish the face can no longer express — is entirely computer-generated, added in post to further confuse the boundaries between what is real and what is simulated.

Intensifying this confusion is the scene’s clearly discernible physics — the believable weight and force of the extinguisher, the disturbingly accurate manner in which skin is stretched and shredded with every blow, the equally upsetting sight of blood spattering and flesh flapping. Only small portions of these effects were practical, the rest the result of complex collision simulations, such as the digitally extended extinguisher “interacting” with the digitally modeled face, which contorts and deforms according to intricate calculations of mass, friction, and transferrable energy. In fact, although new patterns of blood and bruising were added to the face’s texture-map with every impact, those textures would have seemed utterly flat and static if not for the continual warping of the computer-generated face — the way in which it not only ripples but also flattens with every blow, how the simulated bone under the digital flesh cracks and buckles again and again.

Considering the care that went into this horrific image of death, it would be hard to argue against the claim that Gaspar Noé intended to not simply

FIGURE 1.6 *Pierre’s extinguisher was digitally extended so that it could virtually (and viscerally) interact with the computer-generated face.*

disturb his audience but more importantly to *shock* and *overwhelm* them. By unraveling the film in reverse, for example, he positions the murder which diegetically concludes its story as the first event that we experience, robbing it of any context and foregrounding only its repellent viscosity. Likewise, his prolonged build-up to that violence — the ten-minute overture of *The Rectum*, through which the film's camera tumbles mercilessly ever-downward — not only denies us a spatial foothold but also constantly intensifies our sense of confusion and even panic. Elsewhere, as in the infamous rape scene, the camera takes the opposite approach, its stillness (married with the film's long-takes) producing a sickening inability to look away. And then, of course, there's the soundtrack, which, in addition to its repetitive music, infamously pulses with a frequency of 28 Hz, an almost inaudible rumbling that can supposedly cause nausea and vertigo and which was frequently cited by critics as the primary reason so many walked out during the film's premiere at the Cannes film festival (and not, somehow, the intensely brutal violence on display).¹¹⁸ Without doubt, it's clear that the aim of *Irréversible* is nothing less than trauma.

When we return to the opening scene of death, we clearly bear witness to something far more than “a strange and beautiful effect,” as Chabrier describes his work, for the visceral impact of the simulation extends well beyond that of the merely beautiful.¹¹⁹ It is, rather, in its overwhelming complexity, *intensely and utterly sublime*. As such, the trauma of *Irréversible* has little in common with the “shock of the hoax,” for it provides us with every bit as much pleasure and satisfaction as it does pain and confusion. This is perhaps why Eugénie Brinkman argues that the film echoes “the explosive excess, the painful ecstasy, the *always beyond* quality” that Leo Bersani found in Freud's readings of sexual pain and pleasure, qualities that point not only to the trauma of the film, but also to its *jouissance* — that overwhelmingly painful pleasure once found in the experience of witnessing the death of others.¹²⁰ The *jouissance* of Pierre's relentless attack comes not from the act itself but rather from the strange sensation of *discovery and knowledge* that it provides (that feeling of “oh! so this is what death looks like!”). Indeed, a perverse impression of some dark and repressed reality pervades the image, such that it's not good taste or propriety but rather “existential deadness that *Irréversible* assails,” as Mikita Brottman and David Sterritt write, “using the most radical resources Noé can muster to distress, disorient, and alarm an audience accustomed to movies as a narcotizing pleasure, not a galvanizing journey into its own most desperately hidden truths.”¹²¹ There is pleasure in the image, to be sure, but not one that lulls us into complacency; the pleasure of *Irréversible* is difficult, disturbing, and engrossing, revealing, repellent, and traumatic.

Not every viewer will find *jouissance* in the challenging violence of *Irréversible*, and in fact many will simply feel discomfort and distress. Likewise, not every simulation of death aims to renew our existential

FIGURE 1.7 *The aftermath of the simulation, its hyperreality evident in both its viscera and the jaw that shutters until the final instance of life.*

attitude toward the event of death, nor mixes pain and pleasure to defy our repressive dispositions. Yet on the whole, images of death in the digital age are slowly shifting away from representations that fetishize the traumatic while somehow only seeing what is comfortable and complacent. Simulations, on the other hand, are not held captive to our basic human desires, our incomplete and inaccurate understandings, or our denial of the abject. As such, the autonomous, simulated elements of contemporary digital images have fundamentally changed the way we think about death in the digital age, resulting in a perverse return to the physical and biological referent — perverse because the referent is not masked, nor is it absent, nor is it bypassed, but instead exists only as a system of rules, a virtuality that we have already labeled the hyperreal. Simulations allow *jouissance* to once again enter into the discourse of death, and discomfort, it seems, is small price to pay in order to reinstate the experience of witnessing that provided, for hundreds if not thousands of years, a way of publicly sharing the burden of mortality.