

Beautiful Deaths and Heard Gazes

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Abstract. Viewers frequently encounter “normative” prescriptions and perceptions through photographs of how images depicting death and dying should look and, cognitively, how those images ought to be received. In such encounters, varying fundamental views or cultural myths surrounding death and dying, how it is envisioned, how it is, literally, pictured dictate a particular way of seeing and being. This article considers visual representations made of individuals who choose to enact Death With Dignity provisions to end their lives on their own terms and on their own time line. By an interrogation of a corpus of DWD images, the author investigates how such representations challenge a particular cultural logic. This reconsideration may lead to an awareness; a reasoning, creating a space in which reality is constructed beneath the viewer’s gaze. Such a reality, relies on an embodied or pragmatic aesthetic and is co-constituted by expressions of power that emanate from image and viewer. The author dubs this modality the heard gaze; a vision in which the past, present, and future are fused and subject becomes object or vessel of understanding by perceiving a visual, auditory “cue”.

Keywords: Heard Gaze, Death with Dignity, Representation, Bodies.

[es] Muertes hermosas y miradas escuchadas

Resumen. Existen distintas prescripciones y percepciones “normativas” de cómo deberían verse las imágenes de la muerte o del agonizante. Con esto, el autor hace referencia a diferentes puntos de vista fundamentales o mitos culturales que rodean la muerte y el morir, cómo se visualiza, cómo se representa, literalmente. Este artículo considera tales representaciones visuales hechas de aquellos que eligen promulgar disposiciones de Muerte con Dignidad, que ofrecen a las personas con enfermedades terminales la capacidad de terminar con sus vidas en sus propios términos y en su propia línea de tiempo. Este artículo cuestiona cómo las imágenes fijas utilizadas en la narración de Death With Dignity (DWD) informan una lógica cultural particular. Esta lógica es un razonamiento, creando un espacio en el que la realidad se construye bajo la mirada del espectador. El autor sostiene que esta realidad está co-constituida por expresiones de poder que emanan de la imagen y el espectador; es esta estética encarnada o pragmática la que da como resultado una nueva mirada que está en el centro de esta relación. Esta modalidad es la mirada escuchada; una visión en la que el pasado, el presente y el futuro se fusionan y el sujeto se convierte en objeto a través de una “señal” visual y auditiva.

Palabras clave: Mirada oída, muerte con dignidad, representación, cuerpos.

Summary. 1. Introduction. 2. A “Beautiful Death”. 3. Grounded textual analysis. 4. Brittany Maynard. 5. The Heard Gaze 6. Every picture has a voice. 7. Beauty = Autonomy. 8. Conclusions. 9. Written sources and bibliographical references.

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1. Introduction²

Photographs of the human body in illness give rise to strong emotion in viewers. On one hand, we may be drawn to visions of the body in states of “disrepair” or disease. Conversely, we may recoil at these sights because we feel our gaze is one enjoining a sort of odd voyeurism

or that we are viewing a damning evidence. One of these images is W. Eugene Smith’s “Tomoko Uemera in Her Bath” made in 1971, which reveals a young woman’s body, severely deformed by mercury poisoning as she is cradled by her mother. In that same decade, Mary Ellen Mark turned her attentions to the mental wards at the Oregon State Hospital, a psychiatric facility for women

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² An early version of this paper was presented at the 2017 Society for the Academic Study of Social Imagery conference held in Greeley Colorado. That work is included in the conference proceedings and is viewable as David Staton in “The Image of Rebirth in Literature, Media, and Society”, Society for the Academic Study of Social Imagery (University of Northern Colorado: Greeley, Col., 2017), 65-75.

deemed so mentally ill that they were institutionalized in a security ward. Her image “Laurie in the Ward 81 Bathtub”, presents the confrontational stare (you *must* engage it) of Laurie, black tendrils of her hair snaking behind, as she takes a “therapeutic” soak³. The pained expression, a spiritual and mental decay and death, is so anguished you can almost hear her pleas for help as expressed in her insistent stare. Of a more recent vintage, in 2012 photographer Andrew George approached the director of a Los Angeles, California hospital and asked permission to create portraits of terminally ill patients (with the implicit consent of those about to die). The resultant exhibition, embracing the tension of the banality and extraordinariness of the ends of lives, has toured globally for more than four years since its debut in 2016.

These are, indeed, images that engage fascination and fear, or, the eternal, polarized battles Freud⁴ described between Eros (aligned with love, creation, survival) and Thanatos (preoccupied with hatred, wars, decay, violence). In this sense, these images well reflect that internal battle; viewers’ eyes engage with the object as though a mirror, looking to and through. They do not and can not resolve the opposing actions of life and death though they provide viewers a space to enter and contemplate. Gilman asks what becomes of viewers when considering such primal and weighty concerns in considering an image: “What happens, however, when our sense of ourselves as ‘the patient,’ of ourselves as existing on the wrong side of the margin between the healthy and the diseased, becomes salient to our definition of self?”⁵ In ways, there are similarities between this viewing of self and the ways in which we may see suffering. Is it part of the human condition or some extraneous set of conditions that compel us to bear witness to such misery? Sontag, in part, answers this question in *Regarding the Pain of Others*—“we are spectators of calamities”⁶. Because it is in those *others* that we see ourselves. Reinhardt, Edwards and Duggan, in their illustrated exhibition catalogue explore this idea: photographs can mobilize political sentiment and social movements, but also create an associated form of suffering merely by the act of recreating it: “Nor are these indelible images easy to avoid. they often come to us unbidden and unanticipated, with the turn of a page, a glance at a screen—a brief look and the contours of consciousness are changed. Receptivity to such photographs is partly a matter of individual temperament and conviction but also a matter of social location, at once singular and shared, intimate and public”⁷.

Such moments captured in photographs constitute the examination central to this article’s focus. With specificity, I am engaging theory and practices of looking in considering a corpus of images which train focus on the process of death within a select group of individuals. Those people, whose images and stories were presented in a number of newspapers and magazines, ranging from those with large readership (*People* magazine with more a distribution of more than 3.4 million copies) and small (a Vermont weekly) chose to use available options in their states to willfully end their terminal illnesses. These provisions are known in the United States as Death With Dignity (DWD) acts. They are named differently in countries globally which legally permit this, but largely are referred to as physician assisted suicide. Using a considered methodological approach of textual analysis, I examine a corpus of 52 images of men and women who used such provisions to end their lives. In each case, they chose to publicly share their stories and their photographs with the readers/viewers on various media platforms. I suggest a commonality in these images exists in the concept of the “heard gaze,” the power of visual images to create an inner voice, which is heard. This article examines the ways in which photographs in DWD storytelling create a particular way of seeing and being. This logic is a reasoning, “a space in which reality is constructed beneath the viewer’s gaze”⁸ or, as Fyfe and Law describe it, “the site for the construction and depiction of social difference”⁹. I contend, this is space co-constituted by expressions of power. And it is comprised of exchanges between image and viewer, which creates an embodied or pragmatist aesthetic, which results in a new gaze that is at the core of this relationship—the heard gaze, a vision in which the past, present, and future are fused and subject becomes object through a visual, auditory cue enacted within the observer.

Upon initial viewing, these photographs may evoke feelings of discomfort; they’re not “fun” or “pleasurable” to consider. However, their power should be recognized as they may disrupt and construct knowledge. The corporeal qualities of the body (its flesh and blood) may be transformed to sign and symbol. For the person inhabiting that body, perhaps the manifestation of bearing that gaze is like feeling as “neither subject nor object but a subject who feels he is becoming an object”¹⁰. In choosing to defy such objectification, and to claim their own autonomy, a person with a terminal illness might make a conscious decision to die of his or her own terms. In avoidance of decay, to elude pain, to powerfully assert the claims on their own bodies, DWD patients may create from their final act something metaphorically called a “beautiful death.”

2. A “Beautiful Death”

A “beautiful death” is not only a willful death; it is a construction of its creator, the person choosing this

³ The images were produced in 1979’s “Ward 81” (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1979). The photographs are accompanied by text from the journalist Karen Folger Jacobs. She and Mark spent one month living on the ward while documenting its residents.

⁴ Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle: Human’s Struggle Between Eros & Thanatos - Libido & Compulsion* (New York: Norton, 1990).

⁵ Sander Gilman, *Disease and Representation: Images of illness from Madness to AIDS* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), 4.

⁶ Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), 18.

⁷ Mark Reinhardt, Holly Edwards, and Erina Duganne, *Beautiful Suffering: Photography and the Traffic in Pain* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013), 14.

⁸ Lauren Tanner, *Lost Bodies: Inhabiting the Borders of Life and Death* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), 45.

⁹ Gordon Fyfe, and John Law, eds., *Picturing Power: Visual Depiction and Social Relations* (London: Routledge, 1988), 1.

¹⁰ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1984), 14.

death, and, perhaps it also resides in the eyes of viewers. It may be a choice of the when, the where and the how of final days of one's life. It likely incorporates agency and, too, aesthetics. This gives rise to an abiding question: what constitutes a beautiful death? I can only rely on literatures suggesting what a beautiful death does *not* look like. It is not messy nor undignified¹¹. It likely does not render the experience disturbingly knowable¹². It is not witnessed by horrified observers¹³. Nor is it "ancient, bed ridden, incontinent and confused"¹⁴.

As to defining beauty, that is folly, and the definitions run from poster card pithy Stendhal "Beauty is the promise of happiness"¹⁵ to the poetic: "I feel we understand too little about the psychology of loss to understand why the creation of beauty is so fitting as a way of marking it—why we bring flowers to the graveside, or to the funeral, or why music of a certain sort defines the mood of mourners. It is as though beauty were a kind of catalyst, transforming raw grief into tranquil sadness, almost, one might say, by putting the loss into a certain philosophical perspective"¹⁶. Dewey views the philosophical and the profound embedded in beauty in this way: "Beauty is the response to that which to reflection is the consummated movement of matter integrated through its inner relations into a single qualitative whole... Demonstrations in mathematics, operations in surgery, are thus said to be beautiful—even a case of disease, too, may be so typical in its exhibition of characteristic relations as to be called beautiful. Both meanings, that of sensuous charm and of manifestation of a harmonious proportion of parts, mark the human forms in its best exemplars"¹⁷.

My view and method of looking at DWD photographs, aligns closely with Dewey and his notions of pragmatism and aesthetics contained in *Art as Experience* originally published in 1933. There are a multitude of meanings ascribed to the ideas and ideals of beauty. For me, it's of particular note Danto and Dewey both mention death and beauty. Why might that be? Pursuing this line of inquiry may prove revelatory. And it also may reveal how a beautiful death becomes evident. For those who are ill, perhaps such a death may be a choice for less suffering and anguish and more dignity and control. Here, I am not just addressing the control of the planned death, but also an expression of self regulation of the inhabited body. McNerney articulates this idea: "In an extension of the aesthetic discourse, those who successfully accessed requested death were deemed to have achieved a 'beautiful' death, as the halting of the visible processes of the bodily decay and their associat-

ed intolerable social situation discursively transformed them into representations of beauty"¹⁸.

I suggest both a literal and metaphoric aesthetic can be discerned in beautiful death subjects. A careful viewing of such images reveals the construction of such appeal in these images. Within these photographs, a nascent power may cognitively disrupts normative perceptions of how images typically portray of death or dying. This view disrupts those varying, but fundamental, views or cultural myths surrounding death and dying and how it is pictured. Though it may be culturally variable, there are abiding accounts and visions of the process of a life lived. This follows a typical narrative structure of childhood, adulthood, and life's end. Viewers, naturally, experience a form of cognitive dissonance if that process does not unfold in such prescribed manner, let's say, in the case of a young person's death or when a lively, engaged or active person is fatally struck with a bullet or an incurable disease. Those who choose a beautiful death disrupt that narrative. Goodnow asserts that "photos have a power to shock a society into challenging its cultural myths"¹⁹ and Foss holds that the visual is capable of allowing insight into non-linear, multi-dimensional, and dynamic human experience that language or written discourse can not²⁰. If it is true that contemporary culture, our day-to-day experience, is largely defined by looking at images, then we ought to be curious about interventions made by images challenge conventional narrative²¹. Images have social effects, construct meanings, develop understanding among a host of powers. Rose²² asserts the idea that images are not simple depictions but rather the site for social constructions, echoing Fyfe and Law: "To understand a visualisation is thus to enquire into its provenance and into the social work that it does"²³. Rose suggest photographs may provide a revelatory scaffolding in one of three ways: via the creator of the image, the social practices and effects that come as a result of it being seen, or audiences that see the image. Further, she views visual material as creating meaning within three sites: the site of production, the site of the image, and the site of audiencing. My analysis trains its analysis and interpretation on is the second of these, the site of the image itself. The most important aspect of the site, she notes of the image, is its compositionality. While admitting there exists debate about how to theorize an object's effects, she contends, "Such discussions of the compositional modality of the site of the image

¹¹ Robert Jones, *Liberalism's Troubled Search for Equality; Religion and Cultural Bias in the Oregon Physician-Assisted Suicide Debates* (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007).

¹² Tanner, *Lost Bodies*..., 14.

¹³ Margaret Battin, *The Least Worst Death* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 5.

¹⁴ Arthur Benjamin. Downing, *Euthanasia and the Right to Death: The Case for Voluntary Euthanasia* (New York: Humanities Press, 1970).

¹⁵ Stendhal, *Le Amour* (Sydney: Wentworth Press, 2018).

¹⁶ Arthur Danto, *The Abuse of Beauty: Aesthetics and the Concept of Art (The Paul Carus Lectures Series 21)* (Peru: Open Court Publishing Company, 2003), 111.

¹⁷ John Dewey, *Art As Experience* (New York: Penguin, 2005), 135.

¹⁸ Fran McNerney, "Death and the Body Beautiful: Aesthetics and Embodiment in Press Portrayals of Requested Death in Australia on the Edge of the 21st century", *Health Sociology Review* 16 (2007): 394.

¹⁹ Trisha Goodnow, "Using Narrative Theory to Understand the Power of News Photographs", in *Handbook of Visual Communication* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 351.

²⁰ Sonja Foss, "Theory of Visual Rhetoric", in *Handbook of Visual Communication* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 141-152.

²¹ Among other scholars, this point has been elucidated by William John Thomas Mitchell, *What do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); Gottfried Boehm, *Was is ein Bild* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 2005); Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2006).

²² Gillian Rose, *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to Researching with Visual Materials*, rev. ed. (London: SAGE, 2013).

²³ Fyfe and Law, *Picturing Power*..., 1.

can produce persuasive accounts of a *photograph's effects on its viewers* (emphasis added)²⁴. She recognizes effects that are subjective or may be affective. This particular site, where the textual analysis of the DWD corpus is focussed, raises a singular question, though its answers are multivalent: What are these images saying?

3. Grounded textual analysis

Unlike some academic methodologies, which are extraordinarily rigorous in the particularities of the ways methods are applied, McKee contends media studies and cultural studies allow for varied interpretations of text: "Rigorous methodologies can limit research to a great extent: if you only ever ask the same questions in the same way, you will continue to get very similar answers. By contrast, by asking new questions, and coming up with new ways of thinking about things, you can get different kinds of knowledge"²⁵. This is a complement to Rose's methods for approaching visual methodologies. One ought, she writes, take images seriously, though she adds that viewers should consider their individual ways of looking at them²⁶. Hartley concurs here, adding that textual analysis "involves examining the formal internal features and contextual location of a text to ascertain what readings or meanings can be obtained from it. It is not a tool to find the correct interpretation, rather it is used to understand what interpretations are possible"²⁷.

Such an approach backs out any measure of hierarchy, rather considers that there may be any number of methods and contexts for arriving at meaning through textual. In my particular instance as researcher and research instrument, I analyze photographs with an end goal of discerning how an image constructs the notion of the social including difference and how those images (singularly or as a group) may construct the gaze—what is present and what is absent that draws me in. With a critical and informed background, one can develop what Rose calls "a good eye" which might be thought of as a visual connoisseurship in which the color, content, spatial organization (or perspective), light, expressive content (mood or environment), and focalizers, or how the image works to catch our gaze, are analyzed²⁸. Goffman's noted "Ritualization of Subordination" from his *Gender Advertisements*²⁹ study, informs the way I specifically consider the photographs' internal and external narratives. Banks and Zeitlyn³⁰ define these as the content of the image and the external forces which may have shaped it: "Information about the nature of the world beyond the photograph are always involved in readings of the internal narrative." By employing these aspects of a textual analysis, I move toward a more fully

informed understanding of the dynamics of these visual representations. I am, frankly, aided in these tasks as I do have a *good eye*; aside from graduate university training in aesthetics, semiotics, and art history, I worked for many years at a high profile New York City fine arts photography gallery before launching my own photography-specific gallery, following which I was a museum director and curator for several years. I have critically examined hundreds of thousands of images with an eye toward those that best convey their intended purpose(s) and the articulation and theory by which those purposes are conveyed.

I examined a corpus of 52 photographs accompanying print stories, which held as their central topic the stories of people enacting DWD provisions within the United States of America. Stories were spotlighted in magazines and newspapers and generally had broad statewide, regional, or national circulation. Though a few of these stories reached international audiences, this corpus comes from those states in the U.S.A. where aid-in-dying provisions were legal in the spring of 2016. Those include Oregon, Washington, Montana, and Vermont. (California has made legal the End of Life Option Act, but law was not enacted until June 9, 2016 and therefore was not examined in this project. Similarly, the state of Colorado passed a DWD provision in November 2016. As of early 2021, just nine states have DWD acts. It is interesting to note, though, that a Gallup poll from 2018 showed 72% of Americans support DWD choices. This article does not take as its subject other nations in which physician-assisted suicide is legally permitted. The publications reviewed include the major newspapers from each of the states where DWD provisions are available: the *Portland Oregonian*, the *Billings Gazette*, the *Seattle Times*, and the Vermont alternative weekly *Seven Days*. I've also examined the self-titled quarterly publication produced by *Compassion and Choices*, the national DWD advocacy group and a website by another advocacy group, Death With Dignity National Center. In each case, I looked at stories that shared stories of those who exercised their legal rights to aid in dying. I did not consider articles related to the legislative process surrounding the enactment of laws, nor did I review guest editorials/opinions or other similar non-profile stories. Choosing other related materials e.g. the story of Dr. Jack Kevorkian, known as "Dr. Death"³¹, for instance, clearly could result in different findings. To reiterate, in my review of images, I am not in search of a singular meaning or concise definition, but *my* interpretation via the close readings of a formalized textual analysis, "the mindful, disciplined reading of an object with a view to deeper understanding of its meanings"³². Because of the ontological gravity of photographs, they provide a unique opportunity to give close readings to objects in

²⁴ Rose, *Visual Methodologies*..., 28.

²⁵ Alan McKee, *Textual Analysis: A Beginner's Guide* (London: SAGE 2003), 141.

²⁶ Rose, *Visual Methodologies*..., 17.

²⁷ John Hartley, *Communication, Culture and Media Studies: The Key Concepts*, rev. ed. (New York: Routledge, 2002), 227.

²⁸ Rose, *Visual Methodologies*..., 57.

²⁹ Erving Goffman, *Gender Advertisements* (London: Palgrave 1979).

³⁰ Marcus Banks and David Zeitlyn, *Visual Methods in Social Research* (Thousand Oaks: SAGE, 2015), 11.

³¹ Dr. Jack Kevorkian was an American physician who attended to the deaths of 130 patients who opted for his assisted suicide services. The euthanasia proponent was convicted of murder in 1999 and served a prison sentence until 2007. For his involvement in these deaths, the media developed the moniker, Dr. Death, to describe Kevorkian.

³² Barry Brummet, *Techniques of Close Reading* (Thousand Oaks: SAGE, 2010), 3.

the past present and in the present past. Images have the power to pull us into their orbit not just visually, but they may offer other sensory messages, some loud, some whispered.

My method for close reading is formalized by the strictures of grounded theory which, by its nature, is iterative as the process unfolds. Defined simply by Denzin and Lincoln it is a theory “grounded in data systematically gathered and analyzed”³³. I examined the corpus of images and asked the same 20 questions for each image. These queries prompted the process which involved looking, gazing, and knowing. I verbalized my impressions and recorded them as I looked for the aforementioned qualities, contents, and contexts. I followed this process by editing the transcribed recording and placed my now printed observations into categories, grouping by pattern, repetition, frequency. This type of gathering or chunking together of “like and like” objects is deployed by scholar such as Glasser, Strauss, Charmaz, and Rose, in identifying categories of meaning in a data set that are exhaustive, exclusive, and enlightening³⁴.

4. Brittany Maynard

In 2014, 29-year old Brittany Maynard was diagnosed with an incurable form of brain cancer. Because there were no DWD provisions in her state, she moved to Portland, Oregon to end her life. In that Pacific Northwest state, physician assisted aid in dying became legal in 1997. Here I note a very particular vocabulary advocated by DWD proponents. Death with dignity, aid in dying, end-of-life options, or self-determined death are the advocate’s preferred terms; they eschew words or phrases such as suicide, mercy killing, or euthanasia. This lexicon and lobbying nationally is largely the work of Denver, Colorado-based Compassion and Choices³⁵, a contemporary iteration of the former aid in dying advocacy group, the Hemlock Society³⁶.

Maynard joined the efforts of Compassion and Choices to more widely share her story. *People* magazine became the most significant publication in sharing her tale. Along with the print publications, Maynard also made several videos detailing her life and her end-of-life choices. The resulting media coverage generated renewed interest, and controversy, on the subject of aid in dying. The controversy stemmed in large part because of the young woman’s appearance. Largely, her

on camera representations defied conventional images associated with illness. In this paper, I use the definition of “representation” by Hall: “Representation is an essential part of the process by which meaning is produced and exchanged between members of a culture. It does involve the use of language, of signs and images which stand for or represent things”³⁷. So, images like those commonly viewed of people with terminal disease or bodily defect, can create a widely understood meaning generalizable to a culture. But, images like those analyzed in this paper may present a counter-narrative to consistent meanings.

Text, of course, is crucial in the telling of Maynard’s story. Such discourse employs very particular language and, those messages are often complemented by very deliberately composed and constructed photographs. Though covered by numerous media outlets, *People* magazine, by Maynard’s choice, served as the exclusive print and web outlet for telling her story and, importantly, expressly conveying why she was going to use DWD entitlements to end her life. As a result of *People*’s wide reach, all sorts of organizations worldwide began responding to Maynard’s story, from the Vatican’s top bioethicist calling her actions “reprehensible”³⁸ to those who saw her as an “ideal, but unlikely spokesman”³⁹ for the DWD movement. Words are important here and the use of the word “unlikely” is striking. Why was she not the “usual” sort? Because she was young. Because she was attractive. Because she appeared healthy. And, because of those visual factors evident in her photographs, the inference by people was this: she had so much to live for because, in almost every photograph *People* magazine published, she appeared in full blossom of life. She was a beaming newlywed woman with so much to live for. In analyzing the Maynard images, and other DWD photographs, I train theoretical frameworks on the site of the image itself to define, and discuss a pragmatist aesthetic that may serve to inform a new form of the gaze.

The site of the image –its visual rhetorics– are interrogated using a pragmatist or Deweyian, aesthetic approach. Visual rhetoric is succinctly defined by Foss: “the term used to describe the study of visual imagery within the discipline of rhetoric ... and is concerned with the use of symbols to communicate”⁴⁰. Foss asserts that three conditions must be met in defining visual rhetoric: the image must be symbolic, it must involve human intervention, and it has to be shown to someone with the purpose of communicating to that person (or persons)⁴¹. As such, the DWD narratives I viewed meet these conditions. Toward furtherance of *one* understanding (my own) this textual analysis may show how representation and meaning embedded within images constitute a disruption in the gaze. A shift in power –from the viewer to

³³ Norman Denzin and Yvonne Lincoln, eds., *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research*, rev. ed. (Thousand Oaks: SAGE, 1994), 204.

³⁴ Several visual communication scholars approach this qualitative assessment in this fashion. They include the purveyors of grounded theory: Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research* (New Brunswick: Aldine Transaction, 1964); Kathy Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide Through Qualitative Analysis* (London: SAGE, 2006); Rose, *Visual Methodologies*.

³⁵ Compassion and Choices is an American non-profit advocacy group promoting end of life options, specifically access to medical aid in dying. It has outposts in numerous cities in the United States of America.

³⁶ The Hemlock Society was an American right-to-die advocacy group from 1980-2003. Its contemporary iteration is the group Compassion and Choices.

³⁷ Stuart Hall, *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (London: SAGE, 1997).

³⁸ Associated Press published this article to its affiliated members. It appears in: Dan Kedney, “Vatican official condemns assisted suicide, calls Brittany Maynard’s act ‘reprehensible’”, *New York Daily News*, Nov. 23, 2014.

³⁹ Meghan Daum, “Brittany Maynard’s Date with Death”, *Los Angeles Times*, Oct. 8, 2014.

⁴⁰ Foss, “Theory of Visual Rhetoric...”, 141.

⁴¹ Foss, 144.

the viewed upon— activates within the image. It speaks to us.

5. The heard gaze

Here is an image of Maynard as she air kisses the camera. Such an action is pregnant with sign and symbol. This captured moment also clearly illuminates my notion of the heard gaze, which suggests a Dickensian moment wherein viewers, are been acted upon by the photograph (or other visual) and are transformed into subject acted upon by the image. The transfer of the power of the visual object allows for the viewer to see past, present, and future. Merleau-Ponty describes this as the “coloring of memory”⁴²: objects are not exclusively seen in the present but lensed, interpreted and heard through previous experience. In common parlance, when something visual (or otherwise) resonates with us, we often say “that speaks to me”. That is the capacity embedded in images of the young woman; they speak, they have voice. This image depicts the young woman seated at a cafe table, the “two-top” variety, designed for a pair, its design explicitly suggests intimacy. The image is cheerful in tone, the sun highlighting yellow tones, light ablaze, shadows receding. She seems to have absorbed some of that vibrant tone; she appears aglow. With back toward the wall, she gazes outward, directly engaging the camera’s lens and, with lips pursed and her head cocked she leans in, just slightly, toward the person behind the camera. Lifting one hand and holding it parallel to the table’s small top, with arched smile, she blows a kiss toward the viewer. Her eyes sparkle with affection and from the glare of the camera’s flash.

What is seen is a picture of a past in the present (photography writ large has always held this capacity). Knowing of Maynard’s impending illness, viewers also see the future. Barthes might call such an experience the third meaning⁴³, which exists where another language begins; it is the science of the symbol and all that an image might convey. And, too, Barthes traces words and visual texts of remembrance, of loss he encounters in his search for meaning amid grief; the absence of his mother, Henriette. We give shape and life to those memories through words, through thick description and exploration of the wound; as Barthes notes, “I see, I feel, hence I notice, I observe, and I think”⁴⁴. In this photograph of Maynard, viewers might well imagine her pursed lips could be blowing out the candles on a birthday cake, but with the knowledge of her fate, a sort of dissonance may manifest: the viewer knows she has few of those remaining. The glass of white wine at her elbow may contain a few more sips, or perhaps she abandons them. Maybe she is prepared to exit the frame, exit the restaurant and entering a different realm. Who is receiving the kiss? Does her companion—a lover, a friend, a partner to be— cherish that picture and what might they recall,

what might they hear, when they revisit the image? Is it the silence of an air kiss? The song that was playing during their meal? Might they imagine soft clink and tinkle of a graceful, wine goblet raised in celebration? Does Maynard’s smile generate a sound? Yes. That is the heard gaze. The experience of the viewer in absorbing the entirety of the photograph depicting a DWD narrative generates the heard gaze. It is a near synesthesia effect, in which the observer is “viewed” and hears an inner voice emanating from the visual exchange.

This heard gaze may be enjoined if viewers listen to other photos of Maynard: I see the yelp of a two-month old puppy wiggling and snuggling in Maynard’s embrace; in another image, I hear the distant echoes of burros braying as a foursome of backpackers stand high above a canyon, beneath their hiking boots the scrape and grit of soil make tiny sonic ripples; in this photo, I sense squeals and peels of delight as Maynard wears her graduation gown. Memories, past, present, and imagined future are heard in each instance, in each image. Heiferman deftly encapsulates this temporality: “Snapshots can remind us of what is or once was. They can overwhelm memory and even logic. Snapshots... briefly excuse us from the present and allow us to talk back to time and mortality. Snapshots fascinate us because they are incomplete; they demand our interaction. We search them for clues, trying to remember or confirm what we’ve cared about, where we’ve been and what we’ve become”⁴⁵. It is a visual version of a Proustian memory, which harkens memory from the visual, not the madeleine⁴⁶.

Those four words, “talk back to time”, by Heiferman are significant because these DWD visual narratives depicting bodies have the capacity to talk back to time, to, in effect bend it to their will; their acts defy nature’s imminent time table. Rather, these bodies assert autonomy and viewers hear that dialogue, witness those words. Dewey concretely observed the sound of images. Initially what begins as a discussion of sound from external stimuli, finds Dewey turning inward and reflecting: “Sound is the conveyor of what impends, of what is happening as an indication of what is likely to happen. It is fraught much more than vision with the sense of issues; about the impending there is always an aura of indeterminateness and uncertainty—all conditions favorable to intense emotional stir. Vision arouses emotion in the form of interest—curiosity solicits further examination, but it attracts; or it institutes a balance between withdrawal and forward exploring action. It is sounds that make us jump. Generically speaking, what is seen stores emotion indirectly... Sound agitates directly”⁴⁷.

And so, such sound is present in photos of Lovelle Svart, a former newspaper librarian who shared her DWD story with readers of the *Oregonian* newspaper. In one image of her that speaks especially loudly to me,

⁴² Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (New York: Routledge, 2005).

⁴³ Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text* (London: Hammersmith, 1977).

⁴⁴ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*..., 21.

⁴⁵ Marvin Heiferman, *Photography Changes Everything* (New York: Aperture, 2012).

⁴⁶ In Marcel Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time*, or, *Remembrance of Things Past* published in 1913, the narrator is transported to evocative memory after tasting crumbs of a madeleine in the book’s first volume, *Swann’s Way* (New York: Random House, 1992), 60.

⁴⁷ Dewey, *Art as Experience*..., 246.

she is on her death bed, a wristwatch the only decoration on her body. What springs forth from this image, what falls on my ear, is the tick, tick, tick of the watch on her left wrist. Why is she wearing a watch on the day of her death? Why would she consider or be aware of time or its passage? My own voice tells me that seconds are seeping and sweeping from her body. If I move within myself and within the photo's composition and find myself in the past, in the once was, maybe it is quiet enough in this room to hear that watch ticking, to audibly process the sound of her heart, her pulse. I hear the breaths, in, out, in, of those present. Maybe, they too are counting down Svart's moments, her breaths. On the day that she was born 62 years prior, was another person looking at a timepiece, counting the ticks until Lovelle came into being? I hear her wristwatch. It is a metronomic plea: time is passing.

This is how I experience and name heard gaze. But I have heard of it before, in Barthes' describing a photograph of his mother "caught in a history of tastes". What he recalls is "an ivory powder box (I loved the sound of its lid)"⁴⁸. And, so, my heard gaze of Svart in her death bed, her slender frame, isolated and alone and composed with insistence on her body, is the persistent whoosh of a passing of time, of millions upon millions of clicks and ticks of the second-hand steadily sweeping across the face of her watch.

If we hold true, or may come to believe, that art is the exploitation of the medium, then, such is its transformative power, that heard gaze may offer rich and deep experiences beyond the visual. What is that particular capacity within DWD photographs? It likely holds within ourselves a sort of recognition of death foretold. In this viewing, the image's subject and its viewer create a mirror in which the viewer becomes object. In this process becoming, the photograph generates the inner voice and insistently stares back. And what that heard gaze tells us, sometimes whispering, sometimes shouting, concerns our mortality.

This reflection, is suggestive of Lacan's mirror stage⁴⁹ theory. It comes to realization for me in a photo of Fred Nelligan. In this image mirrors and reflection are the focused attraction. As viewer of this image, which appeared in the *Portland Oregonian*, I am the third figure viewing the spectacle. Within the act of looking I find something troubling to me about this looking upon and it is a sense of voyeurism. The tension lies in the publication of this photo: am I a voyeur if I was "invited" to view this intimate scene? Nelligan was once an avid outdoorsman. However in this photograph—all mirrors, reverberations, echoes and angles—he is frail, his rugged frame decimated by disease. Adding more layers of looking, Nelligan is being observed by a nursing assistant as he shaves. Here, Dewey would note that the photograph invites the act of vision, which, in turn, invites experience—the viewer's experience, which I suggest includes hearing Nelligan. In this way, Nelligan is

watching himself being watched; he is on display, "look at me," he says, "I am you". When viewers look deeply in this way, they hear an echo of their own fragile humanity within the seeing.

6. Every picture has a voice

Inner speech works differently for everyone, but it works within us all. We see, we say, if even only to ourselves. Such "auditory vision", or our inner voice, happens all the time even without visual stimuli. Notably, it's different than a casual glance, which might reveal distance, color, height, etc. For instance many words connote images. For instance, the word "death", conjures all kinds of inner voice responses heard by autonomic neural auditory processing before moving to cognitive functions about how things might appear. We have a vision of what death looks like and the same might be said of the word beauty. When we hear the word, a well spring of images develops. In this way, the phrase "beautiful death" can evoke rich images.

In this way, a voice is heard, and a visual image is created, we might call this the mind's eye, before a decision is made about the image being viewed. To particularly situate the heard gaze, I've interrogated the photographs of those who chose willful death, I suggest those images emit "sounds" that resonate deeply inward. Heiferman and Kismaric explore this idea: "Every picture has a voice. Some have volume switches you can adjust, like the images that parade across your television screen day in and day out". Some scream at you with the hurricane force of multiple speakers and digital sound at the multiplex movie theater... But still photographs talk, too. They grab our attention and challenge us by saying 'Look at me. Buy me. Remember me'. *Be like me* (emphasis added) If every photograph has a job, it is to say something"⁵⁰. When viewers recognize this inner voice or inner speech, that heard gaze corresponds to the visual; the visual triggers the voice and sense-making occurs, even if that sense-making may at times, as with DWD storytelling, run counter to what viewers may previously believed as certain truths.

In this way, when a particular photograph initially appears to us a healthy body, then we learn it is not, cognitive dissonance develops. If seeing is believing, hearing is understanding that belief. So sound can be seen as Bulkin and Groh describe in their 2006 study: "Objects and events can often be detected by more than one sensory system. Interactions between sensory systems can offer numerous benefits for the accuracy and completeness of the perception"⁵¹. Mental images, the aforementioned "minds' eye", might better be called inner speech—internally verbalized, just as we visualize that circumstance or image and its attendant ideas and narratives contained within. In DWD photographs, this inner

⁴⁸ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*..., 64.

⁴⁹ Jacques Lacan addresses this in "The Mirror Stage", in *Identity: A Reader*, eds. Paul du Gay, Jessica Evans, and Peter Redman (London: SAGE, 2000), 44-50.

⁵⁰ Marvin Heiferman, and Carol Kismaric, *Talking Pictures: People Speak About the Photographs That Speak to Them* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1994), 9.

⁵¹ David Bulkin, and Jennifer Groh, "Seeing Sounds: Visual and Auditory Interactions in the Brain", *Current Opinion in Neurobiology* 16 (2006): 415.

voice, or inner speech that we hear within our minds, tells us we are looking at our own mortality e.g. “That’s me!”. Such photographs of the other, the impaired one, the sick one, the different one, the one with cancer being depicted *are us*. We hear them beckon. And this is what I see, and hear, in those images of the one who is about to die by choice. I also observe other things, from minutiae to big picture, or, in Barthes’ vision, from *studium* to *punctum*. The *studium* remains purely descriptive, an indexical account of is depicted within the photo’s borders. The *punctum*, however, leaps from the photograph; it is the thing that punctures me, that informs my heart rather than my head, that is memorable, distinctive, out of place⁵². The *punctum* manifests not only within the borders of a photograph, but with its own audible presence, suggesting words and sounds that resonate and connect meaning to emotion.

A few photographs I’ve encountered in this corpus function in this way. They spoke, I listened. And though the time spent was rather fleeting, to me, an immediate affinity was generated. For instance, in one photograph of Jane Trotter, she sits with her husband in an old, automated photo booth. This *is* an intimate photograph in several ways. Of course, the dimensions of the space, of the photo booth insist on close proximity of bodies. Because of that, a revelatory process occurs because it offers a sense of privacy that encourages people to open up or revealing an aspect of personality or behavior not normally revealed. in public. It is a controlled space in which, contradictorily, self control may be negated. The lighting is flat and evenly distributed, which is another contrived attribute of the space being occupied. And, too, the depth of field is compressed by nature of the camera’s optics and the confining dimensions it documents. There are no props or materials in the photo and overall the picture is slightly soft focussed. Yet, the lens’ gaze is insistent on its simplified subject. It’s all quite straightforward, but, nonetheless, I sense *punctum*; my eyes are immediately drawn to the badge on her jacket. If I zoom in tightly to the photograph I can make out the writing on the picture. It has Trotter’s name on it and appears as work pass or an identification badge. Further inspection reveal the name tag is for the Pacific Northwest Restaurant Convention and Exposition and it also says “Julia’s 14 Carrot, Cafe Seattle WA”. For me, it is curious and touching at once. It endures through the temporality of the photograph; it is at once being viewed now as an object of the past in the present and contains ideas of future musings. What became of Trotter or Julia’s 14 Carrot Café? One no longer exists. Erwin Byrnes lives in the hardscrabble of Montana. He is as pale as his snowy beard, though in this photograph, just behind him a bouquet of majestic purple irises soar. The scene’s loveliness is temporary; the bouquet and Byrnes will wither and perish. But they’ve both been picked for display in this photograph in which Byrnes is recounting his decision to end his life. There are other images of Byrnes with shadows crossing faces. These studies of light and shadow don’t indicate time of day so much as passage of

time. He is moving toward life’s twilight. Within these images, hugs and hands become central to the subject matter. Time is passing, hold on, squeeze it tight.

Almost all of these imagers are in profile, Svart’s are an exception; she confronts the lens directly and straightforward. There is a similarity in the composition of the postures and poses to the work of August Sander as he expressed in his notable 1929 work on “types” in the *Face of Our Time*. One of the signature expressions of his work was the idea that nature is awesome to behold and to belong to; we ought to foster it as a connection to the Earth. Editing, naturally, plays a role in which photographs are published and, by extension, those I’m able to include in my analysis. I’m aware there were countless images that were discarded by editors or editorial constraint that may have provided a fuller, more robust sense of these lives. There were likely more voices to be heard. But, in my viewing, most subjects appear happy or to be enjoying themselves. They seem keenly aware that it’s important to present your best self; our best self is how we want to be remembered. There are component pieces and photographic practices that are ordered in the composition of these images; bodies are at rest or in motion in time and space; planes vertical and horizontal are easily identified; tonal values create sentiment or emotion from bright to bleak. And these components in total activate the heard gaze, turning me into an object of reflection, a space of inquiry concerning my own death and the questions that might surround it. Accompanying text may in some regard be responsible for framing the story in a particular way, but the photographs selected are equally, if not more, effective in evoking a visceral response that is the heard gaze. Images are both effective and affective.

7. Beauty = autonomy

We may locate visual beauty in other ways within DWD storytelling aside from the physical attributes or ontological gravities of the photographs. One such way is the vested autonomy of the act itself; the self authority to make a decision on this scale. There is a singularly human quality that is undeniably attractive about an act of affirmation, of enacting deeply held belief. When growth stops or when an illness consumes one’s ability for betterment, the beauty that is autonomy enters; the person who chooses DWD is exerting agency and an aesthetic assertion to live one’s end days in a sort of allegorical beauty, devoid of decay and other detritus associated with eath. It is, after a fashion, the ultimate expression of aesthetic judgment. Dewey, who wrote eloquently of pragmatism’s link to aesthetics, might succinctly consider DWD a good end to a good life, and that, in itself, is a thing of beauty.

As I’ve noted, a large part of this metaphorical beauty is what leaps from the page to our mind’s ear. It is this inner voice or the heard gaze, which impels viewers to look and question. When one heeds that inner voice as offered in DWD visual narratives (and other thematic, visual storytelling) they may come to realize the rhythms of life include death and its depictions. Naturally, this may result in them hearing such a message that they re-position themselves via reflection, in their relationship to mortality.

⁵² Barthes, *Camera Lucida*..., 26.

And this, is the value of Dewey's exhortations on life or art as experience: "All interactions that effect stability and order in the whirling flux of change are rhythms. There is ebb and flow, systole and diastole: ordered change. The latter moves within bounds. To overpass the limits that are set is destruction and death, out of which, however, new rhythms are built up"⁵³.

My body and ears pulsed with these rhythms of the heard gaze when I took the time to listen to the voices of Maynard and others. Listening to that inner voice was much like having Nelligan or Trotter or Svart whisper in my ear. They were sharing with me the stories of their beautiful deaths. The heard gaze allows me to deeper experience the visual world amid the never-ending whirl and swirl of images that bombard us in all our moments waking and sleeping. We ought not disregard entirely the screens and images that occupy so much of our lives because they are always trying to tell us something or sell us something. In either case, they need to be viewed by the mind's ear. In DWD visual storytelling, if we heed such voices and slow down to listen, we will find there is beauty in the sharing of these stories. There is beauty in death.

8. Conclusions

As noted, the method deployed here, textual analysis, leads to only one interpretation: my own. It can not be otherwise as subjectivity governs this approach. In another time, and in another place, using another method (perhaps content analysis), more discoveries and findings may surface that might offer further insight into the body of knowledge surrounding DWD photographs and narratives. As the provisions that allow for people to choose the terms of their own deaths have long been established in countries outside the one of investigation, it would be of value to examine the ways in which pictorial representations are handled in those areas. Might there be a correspondence between such depictions? A human quality that binds them? The conditions of time that bind this particular investigation occurred pre-pandemic and it may be instructive for research moving forward to consider that variable and the idea that attitudes toward dying may have been reevaluated or recalibrated in such a way as to offer a reconsideration of what is meant by a beautiful death.

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