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Why do we stare?

Our fascination with ugly images of suffering and humiliation is an old one. But where is the Web taking us?

DANIEL BEREHULAK/GETTY IMAGES

SNEERING AT UGLINESS: **Is this painting attributed toQuentin Metsys just an early 16th-century version of peopleofwalmart.com?**

BY PHILIP KENNICOTT

The picture arrived on the front page of the New York Post, ignited a firestorm of controversy and then faded within the usual two to three news cycles. It showed a dark-haired man in a light-green jacket, standing on the New York City subway tracks as a Q train approached. “Pushed on the subway track, this man is about to die,” read the headline, making it dreadfully clear that this was an image of death in action.

Like Robert Capa’s 1936 photograph that purportedly shows a Spanish Republic militiaman struck by a bullet and collapsing on a hillside. Or Eddie Adams’s agonizing 1968 image of a Viet Cong soldier executed on the streets of Saigon. Or grainy screen grabs of Saddam Hussein on the gallows. Debates about the image twisted and turned the usual poles: Is it ethical to take and exhibit this kind of image? And why is it so compelling?

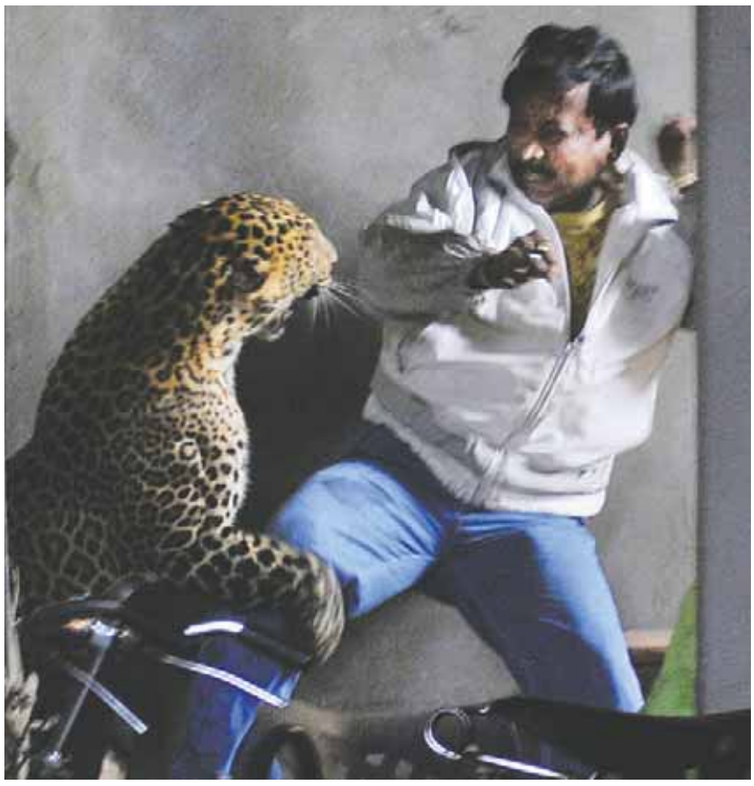
The anxiety about whether it is seemly to feast one’s eyes on the moment of another man’s death is at least as old as Saint Augustine, who recounted in the “Confessions” the futile resistance his protégé Alypius made to the attractions of gladiator contests. When Alypius was dragged, resisting and protesting, to the arena by a gaggle of worldly friends, the young man closed his eyes so as to not see the bloodshed. But the roar of the crowd broke his will, and when he opened his eyes just momentarily — like the shutter of a camera going off — he was transfixed: “He was no longer the man who had come to the arena, but simply one of the crowd which he had joined, a fit companion for the friends who had brought him,” wrote Augustine.

The fear that we may be attracted to and corrupted by images of suffering is nothing new. And photographs of imminent death are only one extreme example of a larger body of images that fall into the guilty-pleasure category of images of distress. Define pain to include emotional distress, humiliation and even mild embarrassment, and one realizes that we spend an extraordinary amount of our lives taking pleasure in photographs of the hurt of others. Add in images that demonize our enemies, or make us

feel smug, or appeal in some other way to the worse angels of our nature, and one has an enormously large, but often overlooked category of dark pleasure.

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE VIA GETTY IMAGES

SKEWERING CULTURES: Chinese beachgoers wear body suits and protective head masks, dubbed "face-kinis" by online commenters, to avoid sunburn, insect bites and jellyfish at a public beach in Shandong province. The image went viral, reflecting the online popularity of images that mock cultural differences.



MANAS PARAN/THE SUNDAY INDIAN VIA ASSOCIATED PRESS

SUFFERING: A leopard attacks a man in a residential neighborhood of Gauhati in the northern state of Assam, India. The Web fosters a form of voyeurism focused on violent pain and suffering.

An enduring, visceral fascination

Call it the Ugly Image. Like it or not, these kinds of images give people a particular kind of pleasure, a glimpse at the disordered, frightening, repellent side of life, and often the disordered, frightening and repellent side of ourselves. The history of art is full of them and still today, in the hush of museum, it's terrifying to feel the visceral tug of blood in a crucifixion painting, or hear the raucous, mocking laughter of soldiers casting lots for Christ's clothes, or survey the tangle of naked corpses on a life raft lost in the billows of the sea. A 16th-century painting in London's National Gallery, attributed to the Flemish painter Quentin Metsys, shows a woman elegantly attired, with a jeweled ornament in her headdress, rings on her fingers and ample breasts squeezed into a low cut dress. But her face is misshapen and beastly, her nose like a snout, and from her cheekbones to her shoulders, wrinkles gather like a sagging rubber mask.

Is it horrifying, or funny? Pitiful, or a 16th-century version of peopleofwalmart.com, where contemporary image seekers can look at obese shoppers, people with ridiculous tattoos, skirts so short they're indecent, and other cheap atrocities of fashion and grooming? With the fading of longstanding religious and traditional beliefs, which sanctioned gruesome images of the Crucifixion, martyrdom of saints, sadism in Hell, and all kinds of monsters and freakish prodigies of nature, one senses in contemporary moral culture an effort to find new opportunities and new forms of permission to sate the appetite for this kind of image.

Facebook and Twitter have become vast, voyeuristic bazaars of freakishness and pain, inviting us to laugh at politicians having bad hair days, or a peasant carrying too many

goats on the back of his motorbike. There's a dead Syrian rebel, killed by the thugs of Bashar al-Assad. There's the same dead Syrian, loyal to Assad, killed by rebel thugs. The captions shift, but the invitation to a fast, easy, cheap emotion is the same. A toothless man says racist things about President Obama. A pious liberal prig spouts off inanities about Romney. Rarely these images tell us something useful about the world. Mostly, they indulge the same appetites that were once sated by racist jokes in the back of the bar, or gladiator contests and circus spectacles.

TWITTER USER @THEGIRLSS

HUMBLED: Images of politicians in defeat, such as this Instagram photo of Mitt Romney pumping his own gas after the election, were widely shared.

YOUTUBE

UNFLATTERING: Conservative columnist Maggie Gallagher's appearance on MSNBC became fodder for mocking Internet videos.

Online, a torrent of ugliness

The year 2012 was rich in images of ugliness, not just photographs and video of people suffering and dying, but images that allowed us to enjoy the discomfiture of our enemies, to feel better about ourselves by enjoying the dridiculousness of other people, to confirm easy and unconsidered prejudices about the world and our brothers and sisters upon it. The subway death image was particularly powerful but not particularly rare. In the last year alone, powerful photographs of Tibetan protesters immolating themselves and running aflame through the streets, and images of a Peruvian policeman being dragged, face down and bleeding, by a crowd in Lima have made the ubiquitous best-of-the-year galleries. These last two, perhaps, provide useful information to the world, teaching us about political passions and conflicts far from our own world.

But what to make of the rest of the bumper crop of petty schadenfreude, humiliation and embarrassment from 2012? The last year was a campaign season, so caricature images and photographs of losing candidates looking physically exhausted and spiritually defeated abounded as well. War and nationalism were in the usual abundance, too, so many of the most compelling photographs of 2012 played off of tribal feelings, from images of rage in the Middle East to "aren't they strange?" photographs that mock cultural differences.

It would be easy to compile a perverse "Best of the Year in Ugly" list, just by culling the viral and memorable photographs that circulated in the news media. Strong contenders: Lance Armstrong lying alone on a sofa, beneath his seven Tour de France yellow jerseys, no longer the velo-hero of yore (Category: Humiliation, although the im-

age was tweeted by Armstrong himself); a gay activist being brutally stomped by hooligans in Ukraine (Category: Physical Harm and Cruelty); Mitt Romney pumping gas after losing the presidential election, looking slightly less than his usual groomed and upbeat self (Category: Schadenfreude, for 50.6 percent of the population); a man in India being mauled by a leopard (Category: Physical Harm and Cruelty, runner-up); Chinese women sunbathing on a beach with their faces covered in full head masks (Category: The Strangeness of Others).

But there were too many to make a meaningful list. And these kinds of lists, like Web sites that post celebrity mug shots and newspaper articles that anguish over whether to print disturbing images, are generally a way of keeping the images in circulation, allowing their pleasure to be distributed yet more widely.

The nature of that pleasure remains elusive and troubling. Look at the ancient and wrinkled woman surrounded by jewels and finery, staring into a mirror as a servant delicately places a feather in hair

In Bernardo Strozzi's "Vanitas," circa 1637, an ancient and wrinkled woman stares into a mirror. She is surrounded by jewels and finery, and a servant woman is delicately placing a feather in her mistress's thin gray hair. The painting carries a clear, simple and deeply misogynistic moral message about the ridiculous of vanity. Look at the anti-Semitic caricatures in hundreds or thousands of Renaissance paintings of the Passion of Christ, and you will find a clearly expressed worldview that reinforces Christianity's foundational blood libel. The squalor of William Hogarth's "The Rake's Progress" is as easily understood as an Aesop fable.

But the Ugly Image today is generally at odds with how we think about our moral view of the world. Would the people who clicked through the Web gallery "Celebrities who Look Older Than Their Age" indulge in this kind of cattiness in their real lives? How many parents who pass on links to the New York Post's "Fifty Fat Celebrities" gallery would suggest to their children that laughing at people because they are overweight is acceptable behavior? How many people who retweeted that photograph of Mitt Romney pumping gas would advise their children that after you win a game you should mock the loser?

Sharing the schadenfreude

The Internet has proven the perfect vector for the ugly image, enabling our funny-cruel-horror receptors with the same dexterity it showed for pornography. It neither invented the kinds of images that give us guilty pleasure nor the dissonance between that pleasure and our real moral selves. But it has made that private pleasure palpably public, and the sheer quantity of traffic in these images has made our hypocrisy almost quantifiable. And the quantity is huge.

There are so many of these images circulating in so many places — plug in the hashtag "#fail" and there's a snapshot of Levi Johnston's "memoirs" marked 30 percent off at Dollar Tree — one is tempted to say that we have become a culture that thinks in this kind of image. The speed and instantaneousness of photography captures and makes tangible the unprocessed thought, the thing for which you once would have sought private absolution in the confessional booth, or indulged with a smile then suppressed with a grimace while pondering the grand guignol of life before falling asleep. Even the idea that we "share" these images on social media brings with it a tinge of hypocrisy. Sharing a piece of pie means having less of it for yourself. Sharing a video of a meth addict hurling obscenities at the police isn't exactly an act of giving; it requires nothing of the giver and passes on nothing of value, either.

A famous Hellenistic statue, the original of which was probably carved in the second or third centuries B.C., shows an old woman sitting on the ground, disheveled, with a strap of her dress falling down perilously close to her right breast. Her eyes goggle, and she looks up at the viewer with a stupid, perhaps inebriated grin. The "Drunken Old Woman" remains a puzzle: Is she a devotee of the wine god, participating in some ancient ritual, or a grotesque moralizing figure meant to remind us of the brevity of beauty

and the passing of life? Or simply a figure of fun? The moral role this statue played in its own time is mostly lost to us.

As obscure to us, we might say, as the moral role of the ugly image in our own age. Perhaps these images are simply a pressure valve, small ways to vent ugly impulses in cyberspace rather than indulge them in life. Perhaps hypocrisy freely indulged on the Web is necessary to the definition of our real values in civic life, the dark tones in one sphere defining the light in another. Perhaps the preternatural communion with billions of people afforded by the Internet makes it all the more necessary that we affirm our own existence and value by laughing at others, forcing us all into a vast, cyber version of junior high school in which bullying and cruelty are a primal defense mechanism against being lost in the crowd.

It's the speed and ubiquity of these images that make one despair. The difference between a snapshot of a drunken old woman posted on the Web and a statue of a drunken old woman in a museum is the amount of time one spends with each. The Hellenistic statue at least has a chance to engage our empathy. The Ugly Image today is inexhaustible, fleeting and transient. It would be reckless to make claims about where this is all going, foolish to suggest that beauty is dead, or ugliness triumphant. But something is happening, some kind of cleft in the moral life that is being widened, channeled out by torrents of small images that invite us to enjoy suffering or think ill of others. If all of this is widening the canyon between our better and worse selves, on which side of this chasm will we end up standing?

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