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**Special issue**  
**Visual motifs**

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## Iconography of the corpse in the public sphere. Presence and absence of the dead body in times of pandemic

**Abstract**

In this article, we examine the visual motif of the corpse and its presence in the public sphere in times of pandemic from an iconographic, political and anthropological perspective. Through the analysis of the representation of the dead body in images presented by modern media, we reflect on how the formal and iconographic schemes of presentation of death were transformed following the irruption of the Covid-19 pandemic in March 2020. The pandemic scheme, which is unusual from a political and anthropological perspective, assumes a particular approach to the problem of the representation of the dead body (anonymous body, carrier of a virus), encrypted in a dialectic between systematic omission and censorship and displacement of the representation of death towards the cumulative symmetry of empty pits or coffins that prefigure the corpse to come. Pandemic iconography, often based on science fiction imagery, outlines the dehumanized restlessness of a dystopian future. Under these exceptional conditions, some corpses, which are *a priori* anonymous, stand out, showing, even in the suspended space of Covid-19, the permanence of structural schemes of violence that must be denounced and fought in the present. With that in mind, we also examine the corpses claimed by Black Lives Matter and their distinctive representations, which are very different from those of the victims of the epidemic. Finally, through these references and based on the media treatment of Diego Armando Maradona's body, we consider the significance of the return of the iconic corpse to the center of the public sphere, which imposes a regime of extreme visibility and goes beyond the representative limits of pandemic exceptionality.

**Keywords****Corpse, visual motif, Covid-19, Black Lives Matter, iconography, death, visual culture.**

## 1. Introduction

The representation of death is a central theme in Western iconographic tradition. The visual motif of the corpse, along with the problems and challenges it raises, emerges as vital in delimiting the need for the iconographic study of photographic and television images, as well as their production of meaning in the public sphere.

This is confirmed by Jordi Balló and Ivan Pintor when they position Marat's corpse as the gateway and driver for research on iconographies in the public sphere (Pintor & Balló, 2019). *The Death of Marat* (1793), by Jacques Louis David, depicts the dead body in a moment immediately after death. We could almost say that it practically does so at the time of production of the corpse. This transition stage between life and death is marked by a visual rhetoric that includes the lividity of the body, the reclining position, the fall of the hand, the wound and the prominent red blood, among other motifs. It is not, in this case, a religious or mythological theme but rather a historical theme or, more precisely, a real-time image, painted in line with events. However, the image, in its themes –betrayal, the death of the emblematic figure, passion– and in its corporeal representation, does refer to the iconography of Christianity. Interestingly, this pictorial image, made with the urgency of a contemporaneous portrait of events, makes a series of decisions on how to show the corpse in order to establish a certain political vision of the emblematic figure. The political framework appears mediated by an entire iconographic, historical and religious tradition that conditions our emotional response and determines the ways in which power is expressed. We see, then, how iconography and politics are tied together through the motif of the corpse. In fact, a good part of the references in Balló and Pintor's editorial are built on the motif of the corpse, for example, on the centrality of the visual motif of the *Pietà*.

How is the real corpse presented in newspaper photographs and on television news? Are there codes or representation strategies that determine this presentation? What interests and ideological or power mechanisms are these strategies in response to? These questions appear reframed, and enhanced, by the current context. The Covid-19 pandemic, with over 1.6 million deaths around the world (over 47,000 in Spain), confronts us, in a dramatic way, with the omnipresence of death and its ways of appearing in the media. The corpses of Covid-19 have occupied a good part of the space of the "usual" corpses of immigrants, refugees, and victims of war or attacks; and we find it imperative to address these "new" corpses specifically at this time. We also cannot ignore the parallel irruption in the public sphere, or rather reappearance, of the issue of racial violence, especially in the United States, associated, as we know, with the production of other specific corpses: bodies of African-American individuals brutalized to death by police in various American cities.

In view of this context, a series of questions emerges that shall organize our research. First, what types of corpses and what visual motifs and forms of representation associated with these typologies have dominated the contemporary public sphere? What kind of transformations and displacements in the representation of corpses does the emergence of Covid-19 cause? Finally, how do "other" corpses re-register or reappear in this context?

The route that we propose is structured in three sections. In the first, we review the general questions that have dominated the representation of the corpse in the public sphere in our contemporaneity. In the second, we address the sudden expiration of that contemporaneity caused by the emergence of the dead from Covid-19, and the visual representation issues that appear associated with these "new" corpses. Finally, in the framework of exception caused by the pandemic, we see the re-emergence of traditional corpses, associated with a story, such as those of victims of racial oppression in the United States and following the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis in May 2020.

## **2. Images of death in the contemporary public sphere**

The representation of death is a historiographic area of study with a long tradition and with important contributions from historians such as Phillippe Ariés (2005, 2011) and Michel Guiomar (1967). We focus here on the visual motif of the corpse, which takes us into a particular sphere, as it brings into play the materiality of dead flesh and how to treat it on a visual level: “Emptied of traditional forms of agency, the corpse is nevertheless not without its own powers of moving, and even organizing, the world” (Edwards, 2018, p. 5).

It is important to note an initial paradox. On the one hand, we find ourselves in a society of overexposed violence and, therefore, superabundant in terms of images of death in the media and in fiction, as Gilles Lipovetsky and Jean Serroy point out (2009). On the other hand, the corpse as such, in its material presence, decomposed and swollen, points to the category of the abject –that which should not be seen or shown publicly– as defined by Julia Kristeva (1980). Often, the vision of the corpse is associated with something that can disturb the senses and reasoning and that, therefore, must be hidden from view, either out of sight or veiled. Following Aristotelian tradition, the corpse must be presented in a decorous manner. No aesthetic pleasure should come from its contemplation and, if possible, it should arouse compassion. If we go as far as Kant, the contemplation of the corpse is outside the realm of aesthetics. We then see what kind of paradoxes an iconography of the corpse points to in the public sphere: on the one hand, the omnipresence of death and the corpse, especially in fiction; on the other, maintenance of the taboo of the corpse, especially if this is the corpse of someone close. The corpse is therefore offered as a particularly problematic image and as a disturbance in the realm of the public sphere.

If we look at the typology of images of corpses in the media in recent years, we will see a series of relevant questions emerge. The first of these concerns the individual or collective quality of the image of the corpse. The single corpse refers to iconographic constants and meanings different from the grouping of corpses or collective corpse. The corpse represented singularly can be emblematic<sup>1</sup> –a corpse that bears the trace of a story and marks a relevant moment in it–, or it can refer to forms of anonymity. Very different from the typologies of presentation of the emblematic corpse are the images of female victims of domestic violence, drowning victims, accident victims or victims of crimes. In this case, the image of the corpse wrapped in sheets or blankets and taken on a stretcher from the scene by healthcare workers or public officials is repeatedly used. The distance imposed by the camera and the concealment of the corpse refer to a taboo of representation–the hidden body–and to a particular type of anonymity where the victims are not singled out but rather increase the statistical figures of deaths from a certain crime, something very clear in cases of domestic violence. A particular variant of this public presentation of the individualized corpse occurs with drowning victims and, on occasion, with some refugees or immigrants washed up on the beaches of the places they intended to reach. In both cases, the representative distance of the image dominates, with the camera located far away and the corpse covered, generally surrounded by various civil servants or public service personnel standing next to it and often observing it. However, in the case of immigrants –a particular category of the “other”– iconographic work tends to come into play in a clearer way: the solitary body is frequently shown next to the water, which indicates the border that it was about to reach. They are panning shots, which in these cases avoid the presence of other human figures and point to the loneliness and helplessness of the covered or uncovered dead body. Decorum, or concealment, guides the processing of pathos in these “tragedies,” as if, in some cases, they were the result of natural elements–the presence of the sea and rugged territories–instead of immigration policies.

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<sup>1</sup>This is what Margaret Schwarz (2015) calls an “iconic corpse”.

Between the emblematic corpse and the anonymous corpse there is an intermediate category that refers, on occasion, to a long iconographic tradition. It is the image of the corpse publicly exposed as an admonition or example. In this case, the corpse is shown to the public, converted into an image of exemplary torment. These images are about wounded, punished, open, stripped and treated bodies without any show of respect or decorum. These bodies are generally displayed with their arms crossed, thrown or dragged on the ground, and full of dust. We could say that, in iconographic tradition, this dragged corpse, like that of a lynching victim in Gaza in November 2012, refers to the story of Achilles and Hector in the *Iliad*. Héctor, son of Priam and leader of the Trojans, was responsible for the death of Patroclus, Achilles' dearest friend. Achilles, converted into a paradigm of unleashed wrath, deployed his fury against the Trojans and pursued and killed Héctor. Then, as a sign of his anger, he dragged Hector's body around the walls of Troy for three days.

Another regime of images of the presence of the corpse in the media is the one that refers to the expression of lament, and to displays of mourning or suffering. This configuration, in which the corpse is not exposed as evidence of a fact but is presented as a mode of expression of family or collective pathos, responds to a tradition usually related to the suffering of the victims as a collective, community or people. The relationship of the corpse shown with the pathos of those who accompany it also refers to Christian tradition and is related again to the theme of the Passion of Christ and the figurative universes around the descent from the cross. In this thematic and iconographic universe, for example, the classic motif of the *Pietà* stands out as the iconographic motif galvanized by the expression of pain of the mother holding the corpse of her deceased son in her arms. The *Pietà*, explains Jordi Balló (2000), is the most repeated motif in cinema, as it synthesizes a collective tragedy in an individual drama. The representation of funeral mourning is a motif that allows us to see how pathetic formulas – formulas for the expression of feelings or passions according to the iconology of Aby Warburg (2005, p. 415)– migrate in history and reappear at different moments in history in predictable or unpredictable contexts. These expression formulas are fundamentally fixed on dramatic and emotional gestures that propose a connection with the viewer through the idea of shared pain.

Here, an important question emerges regarding the iconography of the corpse in its representations in the media: how humanity is at stake in the tension between the singularity of the individual and the generality of the species. It is relevant, at this point, to observe the abundance, with regard to the representation of the victims of massacre, of the images of the group of corpses lined up or accumulated. These images present the corpses, typically placed next to each other, in great numbers and reinforcing perspective lines. The corpses may appear uncovered or covered, but, in either case, they are a mass of corpses rather than individualized corpses. It is worth noting how this exhibition of aligned corpses often refers to massacres far from the West –conflicts in the Middle East– and, in a certain way, depersonalizes the occurrence of the corpse. In the more or less traditional media, the representation of the victims of massacre is very different if they are not Western, as opposed to when they belong to the Eurocentric world.

The use of corpses aligned in perspective and in several rows has been recurrent, for example, in images of the war in Syria, but also in those that show the tragedies suffered by immigrants. The vanishing point of the alignment of corpses to infinity speaks of the number of victims, but also of their undifferentiation or of the concept of a global victim, numerical even, whose face does not transcend. Two options are presented: the corpse is either shown, generally with a position and placement of hands that refers to the collective photographs of victims of massacre whose origin we can trace back to the photographs of Communards in their coffins taken in 1871 by André Adolphe Eugène Disderi (Didi-Huberman, 2012, p.99) and that we have seen frequently return in the military conflicts of the 20th century; or bodies are covered by sheets or blankets of uniform color, reinforcing the impersonal and cumulative

character of the victims. As Didi-Huberman points out, in these cases, the emergence of the collective corpse is not an indication of insurgency or affirmation but a sign of precariousness. Plurality does not modify the landscape but appears as an assemblage of bodies resulting from an operation: military in the case of Syrian and Palestinian victims, and police or restrictive in the case of immigrants. And, in the end, this assemblage is the outcome of a representational operation for the public presentation of bodies in order to impact the Western viewer.

Our familiarity with the history of art, cinema and photography allows us to place current images in an iconographic tradition and, through it, specify how the meaning of images is constructed for presentation in the media –or by the media– and the public sphere. We can see, for example, how the press uses the representation of the motif of the corpse based on parameters that have to do with the dialectics of showing or concealment, singularity or grouping, and decorum or crudeness, among others. Representative decisions, namely construction or selection of an image to represent an event, seem to respond to ideological criteria or denote specific positions of power. Any formal decision in an image refers to the event and a story, writes Didi-Huberman (2019, p. 55), and this story is also a story of forms. Images are a means for the expression of power, just as they can be a means for its challenge.

This iconographic contemporaneity is what takes to its limit and transforms the irruption of the global pandemic of Covid-19. As Ivan Pintor points out, as the pandemic reached Europe, an “aesthetic of disappearance” was imposed: “Other images, such as those of overcrowding refugees and migrants from Syria at the border between Turkey and Greece, or those of the measles epidemic in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and of dengue in Latin America, started to disappear from the news” (Pintor, 2020). From that moment, and in rapid progression, the only corpses to count would be those of the victims of the pandemic. But what form does the presentation of these corpses take in the media?

### **3. Virtual corpses**

In one of the most important studies on the treatment of corpses throughout history, Louis-Vincent Thomas observes, linking biology, aesthetics and anthropology, that “if men have invented rites to purify, hide, control or suppress the putrefaction of dead bodies, it is undoubtedly less for the dead than for themselves, in order to protect themselves from the contamination of death” (Thomas, 1980, pp. 83–84). Sarcophagi, tombs and marble sculptures have always operated as incorruptible exoskeletons to keep the decomposition of bodies out of sight (and imagination). However, plagues and their dead have always had their images. From *The Plague of Ashdod* (a painting by Nicolás Poussin that portrays a biblical plague taking as a model the real plague that ravaged Europe in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, with corpses with blue and morbid skin scattered around the streets of a city that reminds one more of Rome than the Old Testament, together with citizens who cover their noses to avoid the pestilence), to the images of the “Burns Archive” (the most important documentary collection of photographs of the sick, deformed and dead of the last two centuries, which has been a reference for historians, thinkers or artists like Picasso, among many others)<sup>2</sup>. If because of Covid-19 governments eliminated the registration of deaths to avoid a contagion more socially than biologically viral, what images do we have of this experience? Faced with such abstraction, what images of the many deaths we statistically assimilate have managed to manifest themselves?

During the so-called first wave, the images circulated by the media were of bodies wrapped in plastic, in airtight sacks and with various coverings –abandoned in the street or transported by healthcare workers on stretchers– reminiscent of the most recurrent images of any nuclear or environmental catastrophe. Many of these images could have belonged to

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<sup>2</sup> See Burns, 2019.

the Chernobyl disaster, or to the epidemic dystopias that filmmakers, such as George A. Romero (*The Crazies*, 1973), Terry Gilliam adapting Chris Marker (*12 Monkeys*, 1995), Wolfgang Petersen prefiguring a virus infecting the population through animals (*Outbreak*, 1995) or Steven Soderbergh explaining in detail the phases of a global epidemic (*Contagion*, 2011), recreated in their works. They are images that we had already seen in some way, and which we recognized from these other historical and fictional figurative universes. In all of them, there are health personnel covered in PPE (personal protective equipment) reminiscent of pseudo-spacesuits, corpses wrapped in airtight sacs and deserted cities –usually group images in which a space is disinfected, a body is moved, a pit is dug with the shovel, a coffin is inserted into a hole; there is an element of urgency in the act performed but in turn a sense of slowness.

Among this whole regime of repetitions, prohibitions and omissions, a few unheard-of images allowed us to read in opposition to the prefigured deaths that were beginning to emerge from the subsoils of 2020. We refer to two elusive images, which count more for what they prefigure or refigure than for what their materiality exposes.

The first occurred on Hart Island, off New York, and was replicated in several cities in Brazil, Mexico, Iraq or South Africa. A shot from above with a very open frame shows a very large open trench with excavator machines preparing to house an incalculable number of corpses. It is a ditch typical of civil engineering works, or of a dystopia not yet filmed. In this very particular figuration, the coming corpses of the pandemic are foreshadowed. Faced with the invisibility of the virus and its corpses, an atrocious and incalculable pit dispels this abstraction<sup>3</sup>.

The second unheard-of image came about during the month of November in Denmark. Faced with a possible mutation of the virus in mink, the Danish government decreed the extermination of the entire population of the animals –estimated at more than 15 million. We were thus witnesses to a re-emergence of the densest imagery of extermination of the 20th century: trucks carrying all these animals *en masse* destined for premature extermination; piles of corpses thrown from huge excavator shovels –a white mass in which identical heads and limbs are mixed; mink carcasses placed in a row, face up, on stacked metal racks; and new graves in which their corpses were disposed of as toxic waste. These are saturated images, in which the bodies occupy the entire frame and continue into the beyond out of frame. In addition, in many of the Danish mass graves, the corpses of the exterminated minks began to re-surface due to liquids and processes of decomposition.

In these images we witness a kind of ominous collective somatization, as if all the images hidden during the pandemic found in these echoes or gaps the needed templates to be able to emerge, as symptoms, in the public sphere. In view of these images, we cannot help but think of sci-fi film classics such as Don Siegel's *Invasion of the body snatchers* (1956) or Richard Fleischer's *Soylent Green* (1973), which speculated apocalyptic and serial exterminations of all mankind. Through images of incinerator trucks and industrial cemeteries that sucked up corpses, the powers of the future turned into factory morgues.

In his *Negative Dialectics*, Theodor Adorno insisted that Auschwitz, “made of death a thing one had never yet to fear in just this fashion. There is no chance any more for death to come into the individuals’ empirical life as somehow conformable with the course of that life” (Adorno, 2004, p. 362). It is therefore impossible and foolish to compare extermination in the Shoah to deaths due to the pandemic; however, their figurative logics can be carefully and respectfully collated. The concealment of death, and the disappearance of the bodies that attest to it, is a process whose invisibilization requires radical thought. Faced with the immeasurable dematerialization of his time, Adorno responded with his *Negative Dialectics*,

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<sup>3</sup> The case of the New York island has a special resonance: Hart has been the place where for two centuries the corpses that nobody claimed in the great metropolis were deposited. It is an island of corpses.

while the poet Celan responded with his famous verses that placed graves in the sky. As Paul Klee said rattling the mimetic tradition of Western art, “art does not reproduce the visible; rather, it makes visible” (Klee, 2013, p. 6). It is up to us to take on these image gaps –and their tradition– so that we can imagine and think about the deaths that this elusive present produces.

One of the most extreme experiences caused by the Covid-19 pandemic was the ban on funerals. During the first lockdown, the ritual of civilization of saying goodbye to dead relatives was not permitted; the corpses produced by the epidemic could not be seen or buried. Through their isolation in disease, their condition as toxic corpses now confined them to the category of data; their death was reported and they entered, depending on the cases and information policies, into statistics, but the communal ritual of burying them could not be shared. This entire contemporary experience, worthy of a rewriting of the tragedy of *Antigone*, is an indication of the pronounced negativity that the visualization of corpses displayed (and displays) in the present pandemic<sup>4</sup>.

Roland Barthes points out that every ceremony allows the feeling to be inhabited: “mourning protects like a house” (Barthes, 2004, p. 179). The grief materializes and embodies death, as we could say by glossing Barthes. Returning to this notion, the Korean-German philosopher Byung-Chul Han recalls that rituals are internalized through the body and that we assimilate them through our active presence in them: “rituals are processes of incorporation and corporeal staging. The orders and values in force in a community are experienced and consolidated through the body [...]. In this way, rituals generate an embodied knowledge and a corporeal memory, an embodied identity, a bodily understanding” (2020, p. 23). This idea of community is completely shaken through the virtualization of an experience as constitutive as the funeral of the beloved ones. Han points out in his book *The Disappearance of Rituals* that “digitization weakens the community bond, as it has a disembodied effect. Digital communication is disembodied communication” (2020, p. 24). In this sense, what the virtual funerals of the pandemic establish to an exacerbated degree is “a communication without a community” (p. 11). And perhaps the most disturbing thing is that this very high degree of abstraction is not, in fact, an inconceivable experience. Any Western citizen over forty years of age has experienced the progressive and aseptic transformation of funerals; when in childhood he attended an intimate family wake at the home of the deceased, this experience has now been completely erased from our lives for years. The corpses are managed by funeral companies that impose numerous barriers to the bond with the deceased. For years we have witnessed a growing depersonalization of contact with dead bodies, or rather we are assisted by entities that deposit the corpses increasingly far from our experience, in a similar way a bank manages our money. This process of abstraction has reached a new milestone during the pandemic, embracing its full virtualization. If the stench of the dead, their rigor mortis and their decomposition were fears from another era, these have not only disappeared from our daily experiences but also from our imagination.

“The conjunctive mode of social interaction, which was prevailing from the Neolithic Revolution, has been swiftly replaced by the connective mode that starts to prevail when the automating interfaces of the information machine pervade and innervate the linguistic sphere” (Berardi, 2014, p. 11). Berardi points out that the turn from conjunction to connection

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<sup>4</sup> In New York, one of the epicenters of the virus, cardboard boxes were implemented to speed up the incineration process of infected corpses: an industrialization of death rarely seen in the last century. Faced with the collapse of funeral homes around the world (incineration was imposed at the peak of the first wave), the business of digital burials began to develop: virtual meetings to say goodbye to the deceased, which even produced virtual tombstones with QR codes for relatives to bring their mobile phones and access a book of the departed from their homes where images of their life appear. The startups that commercialized these digital rituals offered a virtual space for the living to meet in the face of the double absence of the family member: in the wake of the Covid-19 era, the removal of the corpse was added to the death of the family member.

marks the passage from industrial capitalism to the new model that he calls “semicapitalism:” a radical anthropological mutation where “the proliferation of digital devices in the organic universe of communication and in the body itself” predominates, which results in a total alteration of the links between consciousness and reality, causing an inordinate and, above all, “desensitized” exchange of signs (Berardi, 2014, p. 19). “But in the Indust-Reality the invisible goal of abstract valorization was obtained by physical manipulation of visible things. Semicapitalism dissolves the visible process of production, and financial capitalism, at last, is the utter dissolution of the sphere of visibility and the melting of capital accumulation into the abstract kingdom of virtual exchange” (p. 130). In this way, it is not strange to witness the apogee started decades ago of the process of abstraction of the funeral rite, which digital semicapitalism seems to have consummated to an extreme degree during the pandemic.

The renowned Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben has repeatedly warned, before and during the pandemic, of the danger of a state that has turned existence into a health obligation. Agamben has led numerous and controversial debates questioning that “social distance” is not a simple sanitary measure but a principle of social organization (Agamben, 2020)<sup>5</sup>. In this principle lies the passage from biopolitics –regency and administration of a society over the bodies of its citizens that derives from the studies of Michel Foucault– to necropolitics –administration of death– that is seen as the dark political horizon of our time; “that the first example of legislation where a State programmatically assumes the care of the health of citizens has been Nazi eugenics, which Hitler dictated in 1933 to protect the German people from hereditary diseases, should make us think,” Agamben (2020, p. 102) reminds us.

Giorgio Agamben’s political and ontological denunciations of social distance (2020), the disembodiment pointed out by Byung-Chul Han (2019), and the irrepressible dematerialization that Franco Berardi identifies in semicapitalism (2014), among other contemporary critical voices, are directly correlated with the complaints that a group of Spanish photographers made during the pandemic against the prohibition –more explicit than implicit– to take photos of the dead.<sup>6</sup> This ban on images, as noted, imposes an abstraction unprecedented in history: a pandemic without images of nursing homes, or collapsed hospitals, where the countless deaths of Covid-19 occurred. 2020 will be, in this way, registered as the year of the first epidemic in history whose deaths have no images.

#### **4. Black corpses matter**

Nicholas Mirzoeff writes: “Police killings captured on cell-phone video or photographs and the protests that resulted have become the defining feature of present-day United States visual culture” (Mirzoeff, 2018). This defining fact, provisionally displaced by the images of Covid and its effects, which had and still has in the USA one of its pivotal moments, re-emerged in a dramatic way on May 25, 2020, when the Minneapolis police arrested George Floyd, a 46-year-old African-American man, apparently reported for using a counterfeit bill. One of the policemen who participated in the event, Derek Chauvin, immobilized the man face down, pressing his knee on Floyd’s neck for nine minutes. Chauvin ignored both the pleas of the detainee –“I can’t breathe”– and the protests of bystanders, and suffocated Floyd to the point of cardiac arrest. At seven minutes of knee pressure, Floyd was no longer moving nor had a pulse, but Chauvin kept his knee on the man’s neck even as emergency services arrived. In the ambulance, on the way to the hospital, the doctors verified that Floyd was unresponsive

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<sup>5</sup> *Where are we now? The epidemic as politics* is the book that collects all the interventions that the Italian philosopher made during the pandemic. To see some of the replies that other thinkers such as Jean-Luc Nancy, Byung-Chul Han or Judith Butler among others made to their positions: <https://www.alextemosur.com/nota/23685-sopa-de-wuhan-el-libro-completo-y-gratis-para-leer-sobre-el-coronavirus/>.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.elindependiente.com/politica/2020/06/13/los-muertos-invisibles-censura-en-la-pandemia/>.



and that he had no pulse. His death was declared at the Hennepin County Medical Center where he had been taken.

Multiple witnesses were able to record what happened during Floyd's arrest with their cameras and later share those videos on social networks. These images, precarious records in the urgency of the event, captured by numerous telephones and complemented by other images from security cameras, proliferated and multiplied in turn on networks, relighting the fuse of protest. What this mosaic of images records is an execution with racial overtones by a white policeman exercising his authority over a black man: the production, as was shown, of an imminent corpse, almost live.

We speak of re-emergence because the configuration of the event and the visual motifs it gives off refer to a tradition of structural violence and abuse of power exercised against blacks by instances of white power. As Mirzoeff points out, "These photographs and videos have revealed the wide-ranging operations of white supremacy acting under the guise of a law-and-order society" (Mirzoeff, 2018). The case of George Floyd, and the forms of his visibility harken back to images of the arrest of Eric Garner, in December 2014, by the New York police. Again, a group of white police officers violently subdue a black individual, throwing him to the ground, immobilizing him and, again, one of them uses a pressure hold that suffocates the individual, ignoring, also here, the plea of the detainee: "I can't breathe." The viral images taken by a passer-by with his mobile phone, in vertical format, with low definition and variable proximity, capture the unequal struggle from a wide angle in fast pace and mobile. From the initial relative calm of the routine arrest to the excessive violence of the restraint of the individual on the ground by four officers. The differences from Floyd's images concern the number of passers-by, and consequently the number of images; the images multiply and spread in a progressively more viral way. The timing also varies, from three and a half minutes for Garner's sequence to more than nine minutes for Floyd's sequence. The lengthening of time speaks of a fierceness in humiliation and in the exercise of violence, which also resonates with the attitude of the officers before the public that observe the scene and that reprimand the police's actions: an attitude of defiance and censorship. There is a double movement of trying to avoid the image and, at the same time, challenge it by recreating itself in the violence that refers to an iconography of humiliation and the public exposure of the (imminent) corpse, which returns us to the wrath of Achilles. In both cases the result is the same. The filming of the production of an imminent corpse, certified upon arrival at the hospital.

In a longer duration, the motifs of the authoritarian group exercising violence against a black victim to death in front of an audience, either powerless or complicit, refers to the tradition of lynching, a common practice in the USA since the nineteenth century until the 1960s. In current configurations, it is the law enforcement arm itself, the police, who go beyond the law and, furthermore, the culmination of the lynching through display of the corpse –usually hanged or burned– has been removed from the public scene. We can say that there has been an inversion with respect to the visual hierarchy of traditional lynching in terms of its representation in images. If at that time the event was substantiated in the image of the lynched corpse and in the figurations of current racial violence, the corpse is what is hidden and in turn what is made visible is the process of its production: the act of mortal violence. In this sense, there is also a change in the forms of the images from the statism of posed scenes (corpses next to the lynchers or passers-by displaying the trophy) and suspended bodies (the hanged) –to the contemporary urgency of recording in real time, or to the documentary urgency of recording the process in amateur images and in images without gaze typical of video surveillance devices or police body cameras.

There is a change of status regarding the iconicity and materiality of the corpse that implies a transformation in the representation strategy of black activism that differentiates the civil rights movement of the 50s and 60s from the current Black Lives Matter movement

(Mirzoeff, 2017). The protests over the brutal lynching of Emmett Till in 1955, which were the origin of the civil rights movement, stem from the public display of his corpse in an open coffin, which exposed the effects of the brutal lynching on the body. The exhibition of the broken corpse, turned into an icon of suffering, moved the protest. Now, the corpse is removed from view; its images are confiscated, which corresponds to a strategy of repression that confines to the back room what must remain hidden: the trace of structural violence that had previously been openly exposed.

The question of the iconicity of the corpse and the politics of the dead body is reflected upon by Margaret Schwartz in *Dead Matter: The meaning of iconic corpses* (2015). Schwartz approaches the photographed corpse as a particular point of intersection between the materiality of the body and its representational status. She reflects on the place of the image in relation to the experience of death and thinks about what kind of visual politics determines the fact that some bodies are more visible than others. One of the iconic corpses that she addresses is precisely that of Emmett Till, whom she places as a signifier of a politics of the marginalized body beyond the social identity of the deceased. In the most recent cases, those that gave rise to the Black Lives Matters protests, we can reflect on the tension of the anonymous individual turned into an iconic victim, but whose condition ultimately depends on the assimilation of their body as an emblem of a system of recurrent racial violence regardless of the particular circumstances or socioeconomic status of the subjects.

At this point, it is necessary to return to the status of the different types of images summoned in the process of corpse “production” in that recurrent systematization, which, as we have seen, explodes again with force in a public space restricted and delimited by the state of exception imposed by Covid-19.

In this sense, Nicolas Mirzoeff (2018) talks about three types of images and three instances of those images denouncing the survival of white supremacy and how, in the articulation of images and instances, a possible visibility would be sought for an abolitionist democracy still questioned due to police as well as judicial practices, since most of the police officers involved in these processes end up being acquitted.

On the one hand, we have the videos and photographs captured by mobile phones. These images are supplemented by corresponding closed-circuit television and surveillance images, police body cameras and dashboard cameras inside police cars. In the different cases driving Black Lives Matter, different types of images dominate. When there is an audience present, the image that comes first is always from a mobile phone, and then, second, the police or surveillance image may arrive, since images from police must receive judicial authorization to be made public. In other cases, you have to wait for the images from body or dashboard cameras, although they very often disappear on grounds of technical failures or only present partial content, such as the audio that would serve to determine a sequence of shots.

The images are made public and disseminated on social media. From there, they find their way to the mass media. What Nicholas Mirzoeff (2018) argues is that, at the intersection between the production and distribution of images and in the co-presence between physical and digital spaces, the movement for an abolitionist democracy tries to gain a visibility denied by supremacist tradition.

Mirzoeff (2018) points out how the gaze has historically been a vector of domination and to what extent the gaze of the slave to the foreman or the overseer was punished. In this case, holding the gaze or looking towards what should not be looked at is identified as a resistance tactic—in the same way as staring at the police is among modes of activist protest. Again, as Didi-Huberman argues, the fundamental question arises between the absolute absence or censorship of the denied image and the image as a means of exposing and challenging the power that is manifested in it (Didi-Huberman, 2019). In this sense, the video of George Floyd’s restraint recorded by the young Darnella Frazer with her mobile phone articulates that persistent gaze, holding the camera for nine minutes despite police orders to stop or look

away, as also happens in the case of Eric Garner. This way of registering the image of a “new lynching” process ignited the flames of a movement.

The riots caused by the protests in Minneapolis, and elsewhere in the USA, delineate a dialectical space waged as a war of images for the visible occupation of public space between abolitionists and “supremacists.” In this context, which provides a strong counterpoint to the images of the pandemic as a defining element of visual culture in the last moments of the “Trump era,” the images of corpses and cases of police violence do not end with George Floyd. Shortly thereafter, on July 12, 2020 in Atlanta, Rayshard Brooks was shot three times in the back by police officer Garrett Rolfe as a result of an altercation arising from the questioning and subsequent restraint of Brooks, who had been reported for blocking a traffic lane with his car in front of a fast-food restaurant.

The images of Brooks’s death pick up on some of the characteristic formal procedures and principles associated with Black Lives Matters that we’ve seen reappear in the case of George Floyd, but they also point to interesting variations. Again, a black body occupying a space in an *a priori* non-threatening situation –first asleep, then with a friendly attitude– is treated excessively in an attempt to handcuff him due to an excessive blood alcohol level and is violently subdued. In this case, unlike Floyd, the detainee struggles, resists the shots of the taser pistols and runs to escape the assault. At that moment, he is shot in the back: a process of production of an imminent corpse –confirmed, again, beyond the scene at the hospital– in the context of a situation of racial abuse. The black body is identified as a “suspect” and is dealt with violently in a way that could not be done with a white body.

This time, through the Brooks case, we are referred back to that of Alton Sterling, which occurred in Baton Rouge in July 2016. The scheme is similar. A report came in from a store of someone occupying a space at the store’s exit reported for what Claudia Rankine (2016) has classified as “black behavior,” in this case, selling CDs. This is followed by detainment, violent restraint, struggle to avoid tasers and point-blank shots when Sterling reaches into his pockets–hands in pockets appear as another of the threatening “black behaviors” filed in by Rankine in her repertoire of gestures racialized through supremacism.

The novelty here, however, lies in the variety of images recorded of the event. In contrast to the role of the record held live by mobile phone images in a single shot, or the combination of mobile footage taken by various passers-by in the case of Sterling, in the case of Brooks, the main record is provided by surveillance cameras (CCTV) and the bodycams of the police officers. As opposed to the persistent gaze of the Floyd case, we are in the realm of gazeless images and of co-present visualization of the view offered by live recording as a denouncement (in Alton Sterling’s situation, one of the videos was filmed by a member of the group “Stop the killings” that monitors the actions of the police to report acts of racial violence).

These recordings collect the repertoire of gestures that identify police killings as they appear in visualization apparatuses from a perspective of reappropriation and reframing. We must remember that they are surveillance images, and that far from any ideal objectivity provided by their condition of not being determined by a glance, they are always inscribed in a discourse. These images have rarely led to convictions and, as Nicholas Mirzoeff (2018) notes, they can be manipulated. For this reason, it is important to assemble them and (re)place them in a sequence that shows acts of violence and production of the corpse. They are wide shots, with unclear scenes happening at the bottom, or shots of variable distance operated by mobile cameras that depict the body location of the police. In this sense, the strategy of reinterpreting in the framework of Black Lives Matter, even in reconstruction for the chronicle of the event in *The New York Times*, is essential to return to the idea of detailed observation and montage. One must read the operational images and listen to them –again, the audio can be decisive– to pinpoint events, detaching the image from continuity, for example, in the case of Rayshard Brooks’ taser shot, and reframing or pointing out, as is the case here, the flashes that show the total lack of precision of this shot. One must also listen, since the audio allows one to

determine the number of shots fired and the time between them, as well as whether warning is voiced. It is about making the gesture of violence and the vulnerability of the victim appear, through the act appropriation and reassembly (or reuse) of the image that is proposed as resistance. This is shown or made to appear working on operational images, as proposed, from a critical perspective, in the work of the German filmmaker Harun Farocki.

It is not surprising that upon these images one of the tactics of the appearance of a possible abolitionist democracy is drawn, in the words of Mirzoeff (2018), which refers to the idea of showing absence in order to show it by redoubling it. This is what he calls “redacted spaces of non-appearance.” Police images are manipulated to erase the bodies present and thus accentuate their absence and the criticism of non-appearance: “Perhaps the visual evidence can be used tactically to show the space of nonappearance, the no one’s land where people die. The space of nonappearance is the racialized counterpart to the “non-places” of consumer society, designated “white”.

“Political bodies in the space of appearance are not eternal like the body of the king, and so they have suspended death in the die-in. This counterbody politic is dying but not dead” (Mirzoeff 2018). The centrality of the corpse as a mark of violence and as a political body resonates in the tactics of Black Lives Matters activism. Although, from this perspective, the corpse as a dead body, which is humiliated, an object of supremacist violence, a body displaced from the public scene and prefigured in the process of its production, is in opposition to the dead and fragile body, which is dying, re-staging and reincorporating the corpse produced, as well as to the process of its production in a performance that offers a fragile and resistant body that reinterprets, from the mode of presence, the political body that resists being erased from the public scene. Thus, the images of masses of bodies lying on the ground, occupying the spaces outlined by the police as the place for the corpse, are offered as one of the most powerful images of this activism. In this way, the African-American connects, through the “dying,” with the long-term imaginary that George A. Romero proposed for that other enslaved ancestor, the zombie. The zombie refuses to die and returns in a group, in solidarity, only now instead of demanding food, it looks persistently and occupies the space of its endless dying as a way of claiming the right to an equal existence in public space. “Performed death surrenders to visuality’s dominant viewpoint from above, making each person vulnerable, but creates a sense of freedom as you rest your body with others in spaces where you never normally are at rest. You experience solidarity as the collective body dying in” (Mirzoeff, 2018). Romero already saw how the documentary urgency of the report and the racial violence necessarily converged on the problematic relationship between the American community and its (un)dead. What Black Lives Matter proposes is a reinvention of that iconography for the era of social networks, where the materiality of the body and the urgency of the record are now encrypted in the public sphere, not fiction, and shown as the place of building a possible visibility for an abolitionist democracy.

## **5. Conclusion**

As pointed out in the introduction by referring to the corpse of Marat painted by Louis David, iconography and politics are intertwined in the motif of the corpse. From there, and starting from some basic questions about the form of representation of the corpse in media images, we have considered how those formal and iconographic schemes suddenly expired with the irruption, beginning March 2020, of the Covid-19 pandemic. The pandemic regime, exceptional at the political and anthropological level, entails, as we have seen, a particular approach to the problem of the representation of the dead body –an anonymous body carrying a virus– trying to project itself from a regime of omission, prohibition or censorship of the materiality of the human corpse towards displaced images that encrypt death in the cumulative symmetry of empty pits or coffins that prefigure the corpse to come –they project it into the future– and towards the accumulation and piling up of animal corpses that slide

the representative taboo towards the excess of animal matter in an iconography that makes the visual memory of the holocaust resonate through the body of the dead animal. In this way, pandemic iconography, frequently built on the imaginary of science fiction, portrays the dehumanized restlessness of a dystopian future.

Under these exceptional conditions, some corpses, *a priori* anonymous, are present, and are singled out, showing, even in the suspended space of Covid-19, the permanence of structural schemes of violence that must be denounced and fought in the present. In this sense, we have studied the corpses claimed by Black Lives Matter and the particular representative form they take, based on strategies of visibility and appearance very different from those of the victims of the epidemic.

Through these parameters, we can try to understand the significant return of the iconic corpse in the public sphere caused by the death of world soccer star Diego Armando Maradona last November. His death, which made the front page of the most important newspapers and newscasts in the world<sup>7</sup>, was an overwhelming event in Argentina: amid the restrictions of the pandemic, and in response to popular demand, the government decided to hold a wake for Maradona in the Casa Rosada, the emblematic seat of government where figures such as Juan Domingo Perón and Evita have been viewed by the people. As the Argentine essayist Beatriz Sarlo pointed out in an interview: the death of Maradona consecrates the rise to the definitive Olympus of the hero of Argentines and Neapolitans.<sup>8</sup> Thus, in the face of the prevailing vulnerability and precariousness of anonymous corpses struggling to make themselves visible, a regime of eternalization points to the uniqueness of this body. Among all the forbidden corpses of the pandemic, the lifeless body of Maradona was exposed to crowds who were allowed –in an exception to the state of exception– to attend en masse to say goodbye to their idol. Maradona’s corpse produced a fervor among his people almost greater than his living presence. Now he seemed to be offering himself to the masses and to melt into them.

Two images of Maradona’s funeral are especially revealing of these complex intersections and overlaps between politics and popular iconography. The first of them corresponds to the image of Argentine Vice President Cristina Kirchner saying goodbye to the footballer. It is a photograph of the leader in front of Maradona’s coffin, resting her hands on it, as if it were a ritual imposition or reverence before the remains of a saint.

The second image features two workers from the funeral home that was in charge of Maradona’s burial. At the time of placing the deceased in a cabinet, they took a selfie with the corpse, waving at the camera as is customary in the format of selfies that fans take with their living idols. This second image produced a very strong repudiation throughout Argentina, which led to the dismissal of the workers, as well as other possible criminal consequences: “if the photograph then turns into something horrible, it is because it certifies, so to speak, that the corpse is something living, as a corpse: it is the living image of a dead thing” (Barthes, 1990, p. 139), thought Roland Barthes with extreme acuity in *Camera Lucida*, one of the canonical works to think about the relationship between images and mourning.

Both images show the short circuit between the ritual and the profane that catalyzes the corpse of such an emblematic popular character. Maradona’s funeral ended in a literal overflow of bodies: the people who could not gain access to bid farewell to the body of their idol started a protest that surrounded the Government House and ended up being dispersed by the security forces. In the massive and overflowing funeral of Maradona, all the forbidden

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<sup>7</sup> French President Macron wrote a public letter pointing out Maradona’s sporting virtues, praising his leadership on and off the soccer field, while questioning his support for the Cuban and Venezuelan governments. In turn, Venezuelan President Maduro criticized Macron for wanting to politically appropriate Maradona’s corpse. As can be inferred, political tensions that went beyond the convulsive Argentine borders were unfolding over the footballer’s lifeless body.

<sup>8</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a7pA9XF\\_1ps](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a7pA9XF_1ps).

virtual funerals of the pandemic resound, as if two funeral and iconographic traditions, those that took place in the meeting of the bodies and the virtual ones that abolish them, collided on the edge of 2020.

Perhaps tradition is only available to famous corpses that can summon imagery that goes beyond their time; anonymous bodies seem to choose only what the contingencies of their present impose upon them. In his research on philosophical terminology, Adorno thought that “the authentic content of philosophy is the difference between Heidegger’s general and abstract phrase “when we die, the corpse remains” and what the medical student experiences in anatomy when he has to dissect a corpse” (1990, p. 121). That pendulum between the concealment of the corpse and its display, between the abstract and the concrete that defines the figure of the corpse and its tense representations, seems to move irremediably towards abstraction in our present, except in a select few famous exceptions.

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