

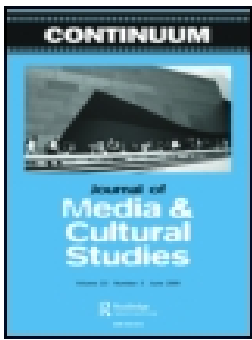
PDF hosted at the Radboud Repository of the Radboud University Nijmegen

The following full text is a publisher's version.

For additional information about this publication click this link.

<http://hdl.handle.net/2066/181211>

Please be advised that this information was generated on 2018-04-11 and may be subject to change.



Deathwatch: American film, technology, and the end of life/Beyond the checkpoint: visual practices in America's global war on terror

László Munteán

To cite this article: László Munteán (2017): Deathwatch: American film, technology, and the end of life/Beyond the checkpoint: visual practices in America's global war on terror, Continuum

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10304312.2017.1293007>



© 2017 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 01 Mar 2017.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 69



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Deathwatch: American film, technology, and the end of life, by C. Scott Combs, New York, Columbia University Press, 2014, viii + 276 pp., \$30.00 (paperback), ISBN 978-0-231-16347-7

Beyond the checkpoint: visual practices in America's global war on terror, by Rebecca A. Adelman, Amherst and Boston, University of Massachusetts Press, 2014, xi + 268 pp., \$27.95 (paperback), ISBN 978-1-62534-070-2

Film-makers, as C. Scott Combs' *Deathwatch* demonstrates, have employed a variety of techniques to capture the end of life ever since the inception of the medium. Through close readings of films spanning from the early silent era to Clint Eastwood's *Million Dollar Baby* (2004), Combs explores how technological innovations in the American film industry influenced portrayals of death. Combs' argument is predicated on the idea that the instance of cinematic death has always been contingent on registration, either from within or outside the film's diegesis. In *Beyond the Checkpoint*, Rebecca Adelman examines how citizen-state relationships have been negotiated through visual practices woven around the global War on Terror. Death, too, features in her book as a memory of the 9/11 attacks, a potential menace to be prevented, and an everyday reality for American soldiers deployed in the Middle East.

Although *Deathwatch* focuses on American films across the twentieth century, its scope exceeds the realm of cinema. The word 'technology' in the subtitle refers to the use of electricity that, as Combs asserts, plays a crucial role in ending, and representing the end of, a life. More specifically, Combs identifies the electric chair, sound and electrocardiograph (EKG) monitors as technological landmarks that left their mark on cinematic representations of death. The invention and implementation of the electric chair as a revolutionary method of execution was contemporaneous with the early silent films of the Edison Company, many of which re-enacted executions. The execution film was among the first cinematic genres to emerge, reflecting a fascination with both death and technology.

If cinema created the possibility for engaging with what Combs calls 'screen death' (16), it also developed techniques to signify the very instance of death. The question 'When has death happened?' is central to Combs' project. In *Camera Lucida* (1980), Roland Barthes addresses this question by describing the photographic medium as analogous to death. Combs recalls Barthes' work, but only to claim that 'cinematic death-as-stillness cannot be thought, or at least, it cannot be thought photographically' (5). Instead, he turns to André Bazin's 'Death Every Afternoon' (1949) and Pier Paolo Pasolini's 'Observations on the Sequence Shot' (1967) as theoretical footholds for his book. Strangely, Margaret Gibson's pertinent article, 'Death Scenes: Ethics of the Face and Cinematic Deaths' (2001), is absent. Gibson applies Levinas' work to problematize the visibility of death, particularly in close-ups upon the surface of the body. Her article would have offered a useful reference point for the notion of deathwatch, which Combs defines as 'a sustained look at movie scenes in which the image seems to foreground the anticipation for death and the search for a perceptible break in vitality' (23). Screen death, he claims, always needs an agent – 'registrants' – outside the body to indicate death to the viewers.

The first chapter explores early American execution scenes and the electric chair through such films by the Edison Company as *Mary Queen of Scots* (1895), *An Execution by Hanging* (1901), *Execution of Czolgosz* (1901), *Shooting Captured Insurgents* (1898) and *Electrocuting an Elephant* (1903). It is through these case studies that Combs demonstrates the role of the registrant that appears in the form of a coroner or an onlooker, indicating life's end. It is not always clear, however, whether the deaths in these films are real or fake. We learn, for instance, that *Shooting Captured Insurgents* is a re-enactment of the execution of Cuban prisoners by Spanish soldiers during the Spanish-American War, and that it

represents death in such realistic detail that the *mise-en-scène* comes to serve as a 'narrative extension of the besieged body' (45). Later on, Combs adds, the visual grammar of such fake deaths was emulated by filmic representations of real deaths. But these later representations of real deaths do not receive sufficient treatment in the chapter, apart from *Electrocuting an Elephant*, which documents the real death of Topsy, a circus elephant. Rather than being registered as a singular instance, death appears as a lengthy process. 'The camera,' Combs concludes, 'doesn't see dying; it will always be seeing dying' (59).

The representation of death as duration, rather than an instance, is the topic of the second chapter. Combs discusses the role of the 'narrating camera' (66) as a technology whereby death is disseminated through an extended panning shot of the landscape, or an object replacing the human as the registrant of death in early silent films. In an insightful reading of the concluding pan of D.W. Griffith's *The Country Doctor* (1909), Combs illustrates how the natural landscape, devoid of human presence, comes to operate as 'posthumous motion' (65), that is, the extension of the moment of death beyond its registration.

The third chapter considers the role of sound as an acoustic space that informs the death scene. In much the same way that physical space extends the death scene in *The Country Doctor*, off-screen sound has the potential to serve as a registrant. Combs uses Alan Crosland's *The Jazz Singer* (1927) as a case study to illustrate how the voice of an off-screen character 'encourages the camera to mark finality within diegetic space and outside the body' (113). Conversely, Rouben Mamoulian's application of diegetic sound in *Applause* (1929) severs the noise of chatter from the visual representation of death, leaving viewers 'longing for the union of body with voice' (125). Combs' analysis lays bare how diegetic sound as a technological feat replacing sound films can operate as a disruptive force, withholding narrative closure. A similar disruption of body and voice is discussed in chapter four, which focuses on the role of first person voiceover narration that, in films such as *American Beauty* (1999), reflects on life from a posthumous perspective, occupying a liminal position between life and death.

With the advance of life-support technology, the border between life and death becomes ever more porous. In the final chapter, Combs discusses the EKG and electroencephalograph (EEG) monitor as a registrant that translates the instance of death into audiovisual signs on a screen. He relates the machine to earlier registrants that indicate the end of life outside the body. Combs points out that the sound that the machine emits is akin to non-diegetic sounds, while the flatline that indicates the end of vitality corresponds to the posthumous motion in Griffith's pan of the landscape in *The Country Doctor*. The monitor is an expedience that stands in for both the dying body and the registrant. Ultimately, the flatline serves as an indexical sign of brain death. In Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), which is the main case study in the chapter, 'someone must be there to witness and record' (192). Human and technological registration of death, Combs suggests, are 'eerily connected' (193).

Throughout the five chapters, the author reverberates his thesis that cinematic death is dependent on registration. The case studies chosen for each technological step are illustrative of the changes in performing and registering cinematic death over the twentieth century. At the same time, the cleanliness of selection raises questions as to whether the survey is representative enough. Death appears in a plethora of forms in American cinema, and one may wonder whether there are contexts, technologies and types of registration that should have also been considered. For instance, in Steven Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), the diegetic non-registering of deaths overwhelms us as we are compelled to watch soldiers dying during the Normandy landing scene. Unlike in the films Combs analyses, the turmoil of war leaves no time for death to be fully registered. On some occasions the soldiers in the frame do not notice the death of their comrades, leaving the task of registration entirely to the viewers.

Also, in several of the films Combs refers to, the end of life is often deliberately represented as uncertain. One cannot be sure, for instance, whether the nameless sailor in J.C. Chandor's *All Is Lost* (2014) will be saved by the rescue helicopter, or if the dim lights he sees from underwater announce his letting go of life. Registering death can also be mistaken. A number of films feature characters believed to be dead, yet are brought back to life. Combs' imaginative close readings would have benefitted from greater attention to the reception of the films discussed in the book. What affective registers do various scenes of death trigger, and how did contemporary audiences and critics engage with them? Although

this aspect is absent from Combs' discussion, *Deathwatch* offers insights into both widely and lesser known films that will be of interest to scholars in Visual Culture, Cultural Studies and American Studies, to name only a few fields.

While Combs' book is centred on technological innovations, Adelman's *Beyond the Checkpoint* is based on 'constellations of visual practice' (9). She is interested in the ways images and visual technologies woven around the War on Terror have affected everyday life. The book foregrounds two notions that constitute its conceptual backbone – that of 'visual practice' and 'citizen-subjectivities'. For Adelman, visual practices are 'the ways in which individuals and institutions employ the visual to confront terror', and encompass 'the full range of activities that take place around certain visual objects' (9) that entail films, images, websites, memorials, among others. Citizen-subjectivities propose the citizen-subject as forged through 'practice rather than status. It is a dynamic mode of belonging to the nation-state that has affective, physical, and political coordinates, a posture that must be continually maintained and that is variable over time' (10, 11).

Post-9/11 visual culture has yielded a rich body of scholarship over the past fifteen years, with an emphasis on artistic representations of trauma and cultural practices of mourning and commemoration. David Simpson's *9/11: The Culture of Commemoration* (2006), Marita Sturken's *Tourists of History: Memory, Kitsch, and Consumerism from Oklahoma City to Ground Zero* (2007), Karen Engle's *Seeing Ghosts: 9/11 and the Visual Imagination* (2009) and, most recently, Thomas Stubblefield's *9/11 and the Visual Culture of Disaster* (2015) have been important works in this field. In *Beyond the Checkpoint*, Adelman departs from their approaches by turning attention to citizen-subjectivities that are formed through a spectrum of visual practices governed by ideological and political configurations. In the introduction she calls these configurations 'shadow rules of engagement', drawing on the term 'Rules of Engagement' (ROE), which entails soldiers' code of conduct with enemy forces. By 'shadow rules', Adelman means 'an elaborate, flexible codification composed by agents from a range of institutions, which dictates how the visual might be deployed against terror' (9). Mutable and ephemeral, these rules are nevertheless organized and instrumental to the visual culture of the War on Terror. Thus, the term denotes the militarization of everyday life, from strengthening airport security to the production and dissemination of images of the war. Combining research methods taken from Visual Culture, Trauma Studies, Political Philosophy and American Studies, Adelman demonstrates these rules as operating through five sets of visual practice, which are the structuring principles for the book: the illuminating, the dimensional, the diagnostic, the temporal and the juridical.

In the first chapter, Adelman addresses practices employed by critics of the state to challenge the censorship of photographs of torture and carnage. Illuminating practices reveal and circulate these images with the objective of mobilizing the public to undermine state power. Adelman avers that these practices are ethically flawed in the sense that practitioners of illumination turn tortured bodies into 'visual commodities' (42). Although her case studies revolve around the infamous Abu Ghraib photos and the websites *iCasualties.org* and *Iraq Body Count* (IBC), Adelman's argument also applies to journalistic efforts to identify the individual in what is known as the 'falling man' photograph, showing a person falling headfirst from one of the towers on 9/11. While the alleged goal behind identifying the falling man was to facilitate bearing witness to a well-known, yet tabooed, image, the families (one Hispanic and the other African-American) that were approached as potential relatives of the man were later defamed both within their communities and on the internet on the grounds of the image connoting suicide (Munteán 2013). The opening chapter foregrounds the fraught politics of visual practices.

The second chapter deals with dimensional practices whereby the scale of trauma is reduced so as to facilitate coping mechanisms, such as the negative space of the 9/11 Memorial at Ground Zero, which Adelman describes as an effort to transform terror 'into a subterranean negative of itself' (68). Arguably, the most intriguing aspect of this chapter concerns the so-called Flat Daddies and Mommies, life-sized photographs of deployed combatants made available for their families. Like the EKG/EEG technologies Combs describes in *Deathwatch*, these photographs are simulations of what is materially invisible. However, while the flatline on the monitor registers the end of life, Adelman views the Flats less as simulations emphasizing the absence of the photographs' referent and more as an essential

means to the daily life of families whose loved ones are made present. They, too, facilitate coping with loss. 'While families mourn, the Flats continue their work, offering mute solace to the bereaved in some households, promising a happier future in others' (90). In light of Adelman's earlier point about the ethical flaw at the core of illuminating techniques, and how researchers exploit torture images in the name of scholarly analysis while muting those depicted in them, I could not help but question whether her analysis of the Flats partakes in what she criticizes as the 'pleasure' (15) of studying the trauma of others, even if her interest is less on the nature of these families' personal pain and more on methods of trauma management.

Trauma remains central to the third chapter on diagnostic practices. Adelman examines movie ratings by the Classification and Ratings Administration (CARA) between 2004 and 2012, arguing how the ratings construe terror as a prerequisite of torture. The most insightful discussion focuses on *Virtual Iraq*, a computer simulation designed to help returning soldiers deal with their experiences in combat. What at first sight seems to be a dimensional visual practice, insofar as it aims to mitigate the effect of trauma, Adelman demonstrates how the programme, with the help of an operator, realistically recreates situations on the battlefield, allowing soldiers to bear witness to and process their traumatic experiences in a virtual terrain. Not unlike the functioning of EKG/EEG monitors in *Deathwatch*, trauma is translated into numbers and lines on the computer screen. Such a virtual, yet very real, engagement with the traumatic past contributes to the recovery of the patient. Adelman's observation on the similarity between the structure of trauma as a 'virtual' experience, unavailable for representation, and the virtuality of the computer simulation is pertinent, though the analogy requires further explication because the latter is ultimately used to recall a repressed and real experience. The virtuality of the computer screen is a proxy to help soldiers bear witness to what they otherwise cannot remember.

If trauma is an unclaimed experience in Caruth's (1996) terms, it also exerts its effects temporally, insofar as it ruptures the linear progression of time and defers understanding. In the fourth chapter, Adelman discusses visual practices designed to regain control over the contingent temporality of war and terror. Apart from her reading of *The 9/11 Report* as a temporally ordered narrative of the events, two other case studies stand out as particularly evocative. Concerning the acclaimed television series *24* (2001–2010), Adelman contends that the show's pace and depth 'make terror slow, small, and digestible. The split-screen format is essential to linearity, ensuring that the narrative remains orderly while becoming wider, branching out into multiple corners of the television screen rather than shuttling between past and present' (143). Although the series indeed organizes the plot in a linear fashion, the effect of simultaneity created by split-screen may simultaneously work against it. Whereas the clock safeguards linearity, the split-screen renders the individual scene overcharged with information, supplemented by unexpected turns in the plot and character development. Subsequently, Adelman reads the representation of the falling body in the flipbook at the end of Jonathan Safran Foer's novel *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005) as a means of reversing the man's fall and thereby gaining control over time. While the flipbook has the potential to turn the novel into an instrument of reversing time, it also lends itself to be flipped the other way around. In Stubblefield's (2015) words, 'the fall is simultaneous to a reversal of the fall; it rescues the anonymous figure at the same time that it documents his death' (82).

The last chapter of *Beyond the Checkpoint* focuses on Adam Yahiyeh Gadahn, an American who made videos on behalf of Al Qaeda and was charged with treason as a result. An unremarkable character with no evidence of fighting experience, Gadahn is at the same time a highly problematic figure in that he embodies two mutually exclusive categories. 'He sounds like us but talks like them; he is dressed like them but looks inexorably like us. Gadahn is both and therefore, in a way, neither, and his simultaneous doubleness and nothingness haunt the indictment' (179), writes Adelman. By challenging the 'us vs. them' binary, Gadahn's liminality poses a threat that the state aims to mitigate via indictment. Because this juridical practice identifies the person with his mediatized image, it becomes counterproductive. The image, Adelman demonstrates, is not only indestructible but it reproduces the terror that it represents through each citation.

Adelman's discussion of five modes of visual practice constitutes an original and useful approach to the visual culture of the War on Terror, which, in light of the United States' continued involvement in conflicts in the Middle East, remains a timely topic. The conclusion anchors these modes of visual practices to Adelman's personal experience of being screened at the airport security checkpoint, shared by millions of us travelling by air. It is at the checkpoint that individuals are transformed into citizen-subjects (illumination), rendered as two-dimensional images (dimensional), searched for illegal items (diagnostic), and made to experience time in the form of waiting (temporal). Finally, we are granted freedom once found harmless (juridical). Similarly to the 'cleanliness' of Combs' choice of films, Adelman's selection of case studies to demonstrate the operation of the five modes may feel forced and exclusive at times. The 9/11 Memorial, for instance, which is discussed as a dimensional visual practice, is also arguably temporal in the way it employs the void as a spatial expression of the temporal rupture of trauma. Also, drone strikes, which Adelman briefly addresses in the juridical context, are criticized by practitioners of illumination who see them as morally dubious weapons. The book would have benefitted from greater dialogue between chapters, especially where the five modes overlap. Nevertheless, *Beyond the Checkpoint* provides a novel perspective on the subject of terror and trauma in post-9/11 visual culture.

References

- Caruth, C. 1996. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Engle, K. 2009. *Seeing Ghosts: 9/11 and the Visual Imagination*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press.
- Gibson, M. 2001. "Death Scenes: Ethics of the Face and Cinematic Deaths." *Mortality* 6 (3): 306–320.
- Munteán, L. 2013. "Naming the Unnamable: (De)constructing 9/11's 'Falling Man.'" In *Performing Memory in Art and Popular Culture*, edited by Liedeke Plate and Anneke Smelik, 105–119. New York: Routledge.
- Simpson, D. 2006. *9/11: The Culture of Commemoration*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.
- Stubblefield, T. 2015. *9/11 and the Visual Culture of Disaster*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Sturken, M. 2007. *Tourists of History: Memory, Kitsch, and Consumerism from Oklahoma City to Ground Zero*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

László Munteán
 Radboud University, Nijmegen, Netherlands
 ✉ l.muntean@let.ru.nl

© 2017 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.
 This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10304312.2017.1293007>