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Nothing is Unwatchable for All

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5 Amy Boyle Johnston, "Ray Bradbury: Fahrenheit 451 Misinterpreted," *LA Weekly*, May 30, 2007, www.laweekly.com/news/ray-bradbury-fahrenheit-451-misinter preted-2149125; Michele Lingre, "Turning Off TV Gives Child a New View of Life," *Los Angeles Times*, January 9, 1994, http://articles.latimes.com/1994-01 -09/local/me-10102_1_sesame-street.

6 Caity Weaver, "Jordan Peele on a Real Horror Story: Being Black in America," *GQ*, February 3, 2017, www.gq.com/story/jordan-peele-get-out-interview.

7 Christina Sharpe, *Monstrous Intimacies: Making Post-Slavery Subjects* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).
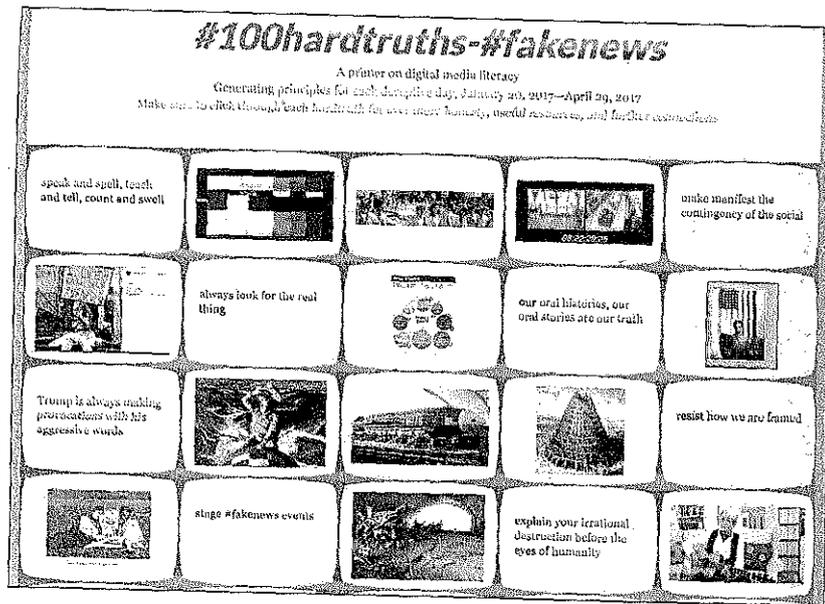
Nothing Is Unwatchable for All

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In July 2016, I published an opinion piece, "How Do I (Not) Look? Live Feed Video and Viral Black Death."[1] It was a personal and professional coming to terms with this disruptive, horrific cultural media event. There I explained why "I just can't watch" one particular video that was, at that moment, ricocheting across the screens, hearts, and minds of the world: "Diamond Reynolds' live feed video of the brutal murder of her boyfriend Philando Castile at the hands of the police with her child as witness in the backseat." I went on to name and delineate four traditions from visual culture, media studies, and critical Internet studies that could serve as "a brief primer of ways to understand how or why we might (not) look": Don't Look, Look Askance, Look at Death, and Look at Death's Platforms.

Looking now, back and through and about death's visual platforms, I see that my earlier writing served at least four critical functions:

- It provided a process for my own disorienting but strongly felt reactions to a series of highly circulating images: namely, I'm not going to watch.
- It opened a space to ruminate upon and share a long tradition of scholarly thinking (including my own) that granted this intuitive self-protective impulse a more rational or political basis.

#100hardtruths-#fakenews

A primer on digital media literacy
Generating principles for each discipline day, January 20, 2017–April 29, 2017
Make sure to click through each hardtruth for user-made, homely, useful resources, and further connections

Screen grab of the final twenty "hardtruths" from http://scalar.usc.edu/nehvectors
/100hardtruths-fakenews.

- It allowed me to offer up one—my own—unique reaction to the raucous conversation about Reynolds's video and similar images. Not why I found it unwatchable, or why I chose not to watch it, but more that every look at violence and brutality in this, our moment of persistent, total, sharable, encompassing visibility, is an ethical choice and a political act.
- It implicated me, as a white woman, as a scholar who writes on and makes video, who has celebrated outsiders' voices for decades, who had once believed in the politics of visibility. It implicated me as one player within a dynamic ecosystem of words and images emanating from our diverse bodies and formats of work, our many watchings, our clicking and forwarding, our not watching, and our associated actions. My not watching was not necessarily being irresponsible or disconnected or somehow safe and outside of this logic of seeing and violence. I had to account for myself, publicly, as a form of penance.

Over the next year, another wave of viral images, and their linked and co-constitutive words and violence, momentarily and brilliantly sucked up all the air of our shared looking space. The images and sounds of fake news (in all of its confusing multiplicity and mutability, referring, as the phrase now does, depending upon who is speaking, to media images from *The Daily Show* or Breitbart, or to what Trump calls the failing *New York Times* and CNN, or to intentional propaganda or profiteering click-bait) grew to become, in their/our moment, fully reprehensible and utterly deplorable. But with only a little hindsight (and it does seem so hard to see clearly in this new era of Trumpian image-blitzkrieg), I can see how fake news videos continue and expand the logic of images of viral black death that had so recently demanded all of our viewing attention.

Of course, such images aren't new, only newly fascinating, following on a decade of related viral video of first-person mayhem and cruelty and a millennium of racist depictions of brutality in ways that define today's new and also very horrific video zeitgeist. Both bodies of viral media are real-time; people-made; immediately trans-medial and thus corporate-influenced and controlled; utterly and definitively subjective and political; manifestations and at the same time witnesses of hatred, fear, and violence; image projects that observe and then render more real-world suffering; entirely dependent upon context and audience for meaning; and spellbinding in their capacity for saturating the senses and spirit so that dissociation, denial, and self-hatred (not watching) seem as reasonable and righteous a response as does anger, action, or analysis.

Perhaps this linking of viral live-feed images of black death and fake news is crazy. Or downright wrong. Shortsighted or insensitive. Simpli-fying? Generalizing? I do know that one body of viral video defined a highly topical media moment that was followed by the next; but I also know that I chose not to look at one, while I ended up staring much too closely at the other: a look that also, ultimately, brought me to myself. My ethical, political, personal choice to look *every day for 100 days* at fake news, and then share my responses online, is a stunning parallel to and reverse of my earlier gesture, non-choice, and act of self-punishment in the ominous endless sight of black death.

When I built the online primer of digital media literacy, *#100hardtruths-#fakenews*[2]—working steadily from January 20 to April 19, 2017, and with the help of my colleague, the technologist Craig Dietrich—my impulse was not to sustain the offenses held therein nor the conversations about or

responses to those self-same transgressions. Rather, I was moved, as a citizen, to act in alignment with and all the while against this mounting visual information travesty: as witness to, teacher about, and interlocutor with an escalating media abomination. Linked as I was to our illicit and new president, Donald Trump, his news, and our media, my project (in social media and on the stand-alone website) was at once sordid and pained, if sometimes hopeful. It was just one offering among many but still became over-full with too much. And thus, also, it became one woman's real-time testament to and hording of a hundred days' detritus left over from a digital life attending to fake news. Where once I had chosen scarcity and clarity (don't look), here I went for over-abundance and onslaught (never look away).

Fake news, I decided—and the Internet's mountain of attempts to better see it, know it, defang, debunk, and stop it—should be carefully looked at for no better reason than that it was and is. More so, in its unseemly existence it proved itself at once inordinately powerful within the fleeting attention economy of the Internet and also for its associated material manifestations of aggression. For #100hardtruths-#fakenews, all of my attention was beelined to see and show the connections that the Internet and its president were attempting to hide: how sick consolidations of falsehoods and their seemingly trifling swirls of online reaction in the form of memes, reposts, likes, and more fake news congeal into corporate, governmental, and patriarchal power that is unleashed in the form of punitive projections, escalating restrictions, and literally, inevitably, the mother of all bombs.

This I called "virality is virility," and its gross material enactments were what I was watching for. I knew and found that this kind of looking—his, ours, the media's, mine—would end with bullying, arrests, deportations, people not going to college, others not getting to use bathrooms or stay in the military, and yes, bombs: falling, landing, killing, destroying, blindly.

Needless to say, averting our gaze with disdain or otherwise censoring the visual unpleasantness that was made by and for us in the current format of the Internet-minute—fake news—would be the responses that any despot would wish for. So, yes: let's watch.

But, let's also face it: "Fakenews r us." This self-reflexive, self-fulfilling, skeptical mandate (another of my hardtruths) is central to all watching

on the Internet. While the fake news is bogus, by definition, so too must be our watching and linked writing about it. Yuck.

So why did I choose to look at and be fully dirtied by one unwatchable body of work while selecting to not and never to look at the other (even so, not staying clean)? How do my diametric positions of watching allow me to understand better my own limits as well as the boundaries and differences between two appalling bodies of viral video and the actions that each might inspire, produce, or crush?

First, there is the matter of Internet time. Last year's insults must be biggered and bettered in a logic of neoliberal growth. We tire so quickly. Our eyeballs become numb.

Then there is a matter of truth. For one short, horrific moment last year, a series of viral images of black death moved fully—not via the logic of fakery or uncertainty that I, for one, argue defines all Internet viewing (see above)—but rather on the force of their authenticity: images that were unarguably, unutterably so true that no one (white) could undermine, unsee, unknow their structuring logic of viciousness, even if not looking.

Which gets us to #BlackLivesMatter, and the power of that movement's ultra-true images, and #100hardtruths-#fakenews and the insipid helplessness of this newer moment underwritten by image deception, just one year and one president later. Which allows me to end with difference, context, shame and forgiveness.

My watching patterns, as a white middle-aged queer academic in the time of Trump (difference), are situated in what I can bear (context), what I can do (by virtue of privilege and passion . . . shame), and who I might work to join so as to get and do better (forgiveness). Nothing is unwatchable for all, so perhaps we need to do better in sharing the burden of viewing image-based brutality with and for each other.

Notes

1 Alexandra Juhasz, "How Do I (Not) Look? Live Feed Video and Viral Black Death," *JSTOR Daily*, July 20, 2016, https://daily.jstor.org/how-do-i-not-look/.
2 Alexandra Juhasz, "#100hardtruths-#fakenews" (2017), http://scalar.usc.edu/nehvectors/100hardtruths-fakenews.