

DEATH

BAP Quarterly

Volume 4 Issue 10 Winter 2009

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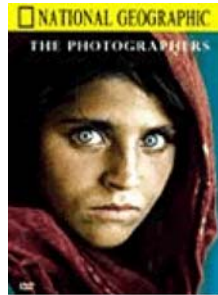
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Death in Photography

by Chong Ho (Alex) Yu, Ph.D.

Death in National Geographic



It is undisputed that National Geographic (NG) photographers have been producing numerous seminal images for about a century, and thus every issue of the magazine could be considered collectible. However, if one would like to see the best of the best, the documentary entitled "National Geographic: The Photographers" will save you from skimming through the volumetric collection of issues. In the documentary only a few photos were selected from the photo bank of past issues, and two of them impressed me tremendously. The first is a photo of a dead hiker taken in the Himalayan Mountains and the other is a picture of Angel Falls taken by a photographer who lost her life at the site.

Needless to say, climbing the Himalayan Mountains is extremely dangerous due to their extremely high elevation and low temperature. In fact, overall one of six hikers who attempted to conquer the mountain never returned; instead, the mountain conquered them. When the NG photographer took pictures along the route, he saw quite a few corpses with intact winter clothing and hiking equipment. At first, he focused on the landscape and the heroic acts of the hikers who accompanied him during the trip. Suddenly, he experienced an "ah-ha" moment and turned the lenses to a dead body. After taking the picture, he still did not expect that the unconventional piece could be published. Interestingly enough, the editor regarded the one showing the corpse as his best shot. While most of the photos taken of the Himalayan Mountains glorify the spirit of conquest, that picture shows the price of exploration, which is a much less familiar idea to the public. Frankly speaking, when I looked at the image of the dead hiker, it was unpleasant and even disturbing. One may say that this photo is sublime rather than beautiful.

On the contrary, the picture of Angel Falls is very visually appealing. Angel Falls, which is located in the Canaima National Park in Venezuela, is the world's highest waterfall (979 meters or 3,212 feet). There are many ways to capture the beauty of Angel Falls, such as a cover-shot from a distance, a close-up standing near the falls, or a bird's-eye view from a helicopter or an airplane. No matter how creative you are and how hard you try, any perspectives that you could think of might have been exhausted by other photographers. To introduce a fresh angle, a female NG photographer jumped from the top of Angel Falls wearing a "flying jacket," like the one that appeared in the movie "Tomb Raider II." From this unusual view, the visual impact is undoubtedly stunning. As the viewers are excited by the climax of her leap, the narrator of the documentary somberly explained "but that is her last jump." A technical malfunction during the jump killed her. Afterwards, I could not stop thinking about her death while viewing the photo. Does this piece of information increase, decrease, or have no impact at all on my appreciation to the picture?

Although both pictures are associated with death, one could easily see their differences. In the

former, the motif of death is deliberately inserted into the photo whereas death is accidental in the latter. Critics who are familiar with theories of aesthetics might go further to say that the element of death is intrinsic to the first photo, but that it is external to the second. In the second photo, viewers have to contemplate the philosophical meaning of death in order to fully appreciate the theme of the anti-hero while purging thoughts of the deceased photographer from their heads. Otherwise, the beauty of Angel Falls could never emerge from the photo. But, is there a sharp demarcation between the intrinsic and extrinsic elements of these photos?

Neizvestny's sculptures and his experience in the USSR



In the following I would like to reexamine what philosophers and art critics say about death. At first glance it seems to be off-topic, but indeed it is germane to the discussion. Through this discussion we will see the common thread between photography and other forms of art in the context of death. Death negates everything that we have and we do. No wonder philosopher Martin Heidegger described humankind as a “being approaching death.” In a similar vein, theologian Paul Tillich asserted that all of us experience anxiety owing to the “threat of non-being.” In addition, Nobel Prize winner Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn maintained that to understand life, one must first comprehend death.

The subject matter of death is so complex as to inspire the preceding thinkers. It is not surprising to see that many art critics consider death a very important, if not the most important, theme in art. Take English art critic John Berger as an example. In his classic entitled “Art and Revolution,” Berger compared Ernst Iosifovich Neizvestny, the prominent Russian-Jewish sculptor from the latter half of the 20th century, to August Rodin, the well-known French sculptor whose work spanned across the late 19th and early 20th centuries, due to their similarities of temperament, such as a similar preoccupation with time passing and the same desire to produce an epic work of art. Nonetheless, it seems that Rodin’s mind was preoccupied by life, as manifested in his works “Kiss” and “Age of Bronze,” while Neizvestny’s heart was filled with the concept of death. His obsession with the theme of death might be related to his life experiences. At the age of 17, Neizvestny joined the Red Army to fight the Nazis. Near the end of World War II, he was heavily wounded and almost died. After the war, Neizvestny witnessed the tyranny of the Communist regime and thus he decided to emigrate to Switzerland and America. One of his works entitled “Mask of Sorrow” is a monument dedicated to the victims of Soviet purges.

Berger contended that death for Neizvestny was a starting point for his art; for him death showed the courage of life. Berger highly praises Neizvestny’s Hermaphrodite torso by saying, “I would say it represents the family, the nation, the human race ... This is how men die in battle thinking of their children. This is how children are massacred before their hopeless parents. This is what joins men together in resistance: a resistance ... we can find in the body itself.” At first glance, the motif of death is, so to speak, intrinsic to Neizvestny’s sculptures. But, on what ground are these comments based? Could Berge make such insightful interpretations by merely staring at the sculptures? Did he read the biography of the artist?

He is familiar with the history of the USSR, isn't he? The answers are obvious. The viewer needs input external to the work in order to philosophize the meaning of death embedded into the sculpture. If so, what is the demarcation point of intrinsic and extrinsic elements of art?

Risk-taking as a part of life and art

The death of the NG photographer who took the image of Angel Falls is just the tip of the iceberg. It is rare for writers, musicians, or painters to get killed in creating art. But indeed, many photographers died of non-natural causes on their assignments. For example, Markus Groh, a diver from Vienna, Austria, was killed by a Tiger shark while taking undersea photos. In Hall County, Georgia, photographer Thomas Campbell slipped on rocks, fell down and died while trying to take an outdoor picture. Another photographer named Julio Ortega was killed by a passing car while trying to take a picture of steam rising over the New York City skyline from his perch on the Queensboro Bridge. Further, according to photographer Chuck Doswell, taking lightning photos is definitely risky. It is likely that the photographer uses a metal tripod and a metal cable release in an open location during a thunderstorm. In the Garden of God located in Colorado Springs, there is a small monument dedicated to a local photographer who was killed by lightning while taking a picture.

In the name of art for art's sake, this aspect of photography is never emphasized. Even if "National Geographic: The Photographers" mentions the tragic death of the photographer, it is not treated as part of the equation in judging the aesthetics of her work. I would not go to the extreme to request giving "extra credits" to the photos taken by late photographers who were killed in action; rather, I question whether it is fair to consider this information external to the photo.

Aesthetically, the picture of the dead hiker found in the Himalayan Mountains is quite unsightly. That is where the background information, which is external to the picture, helps me to embrace the repulsive image. More importantly, the essence of the story told by the picture is about the human cost of expedition in an exotic location, the Himalayan Mountains. But how many people could recognize the Himalayan Mountains from looking at the picture alone? Once, in a lecture, American philosopher Daniel Dennett showed four pictures of snowy mountains and asked the audience to point out the Himalayan Mountains. No one could do it. By the same token, without reading the history of the USSR and the personal history of Neizvestny, it would be hard pressed for even someone like Berger to unveil life from death in the sculptures. We need these pieces of information because they either shape the experience of the artists or set the stage for the work. But, is it true that risky experiences also influence the work of photographers? If it is treated as a part of their life, then it is also a component of their art. Who said that we must appreciate the beauty of Angel Falls and forget about its danger? The information on the risky aspect, nevertheless, enhances my aesthetical experience rather than reducing it. Again, what is the distinction between the internal and external elements of art and are they integrated?

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