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Ours is a world where death floats in the realm of the hyper-visible, a world where our phone cameras extend, by way of mediation, the encounter with death from the body itself to the eyes of those who take cover behind their screens. However, as Guy Debord tells us, mediation does not amount to a mere act of representation; images are rather products of established social relations, ones whose accumulation materialise in the form of a spectacle.¹ These relations which serve as the spectacle's bedrock, necessitate an apparatus that promises their reproduction and propagation. Here, the technology of the phone camera serves as the medium that marks the prelude to a prolonged process in which death, as a social relation, gets reproduced, dwelled upon, manipulated, and along the way diluted.

In this article, I examine the ecology of phone footage that captured the deadly blast that took Lebanon's Beirut by storm – and left it in debris – on August 4, 2020. I will touch on the making, circulation, and appropriation of these images, which, as I explain, have come to saturate online spaces. My observation is not so much concerned with the way these images depict utter devastation and destruction. Instead, my focus is directed towards the image of death as a continuation of the spectacle, as an ultimate product of capital. Stretching beyond the event itself, I look at how the technology of the phone camera – in its accessibility, immediacy, and efficacy – has facilitated the commodification of the death image, upon which quasi-forms of solidarity have been perpetuated.

The Death Image as Capital

Capitalism imbues our everyday lives and shapes the most trivial aspects of our personal and public matters. Its tenacity manifests in what Mark Fisher referred to as “capitalist realism: the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to imagine a coherent alternative to it.”²

Just as envisaging the demise of capitalism is still unfathomable to many, it should not come as a surprise that neoliberal policies have been unhesitatingly imposed in response to crises which capitalism itself has engendered, following what Naomi Klein refers to as the “shock doctrine”.³ Catastrophes, a more severe form of crises, be they “natural” or man-made, can be used to instigate public panic and thereby serve as an opportunity to impose or reinstate dominance. By responding to – or rather inciting – catastrophes, neoliberalism feeds off public disorientation to establish itself more rigorously.

In one of Beirut’s port warehouses, a tremendous amount of ammonium nitrate was left burning for several minutes before shattering a city and its residents. Naturally, many who resided or happened to be in the surrounding area, have reached to their phones to record the incident. Little did those behind their phone cameras know that it was not just another fire waiting to be extinguished but that they were bearing witness to a manufactured catastrophe, and that for some, their footage would outlive them. The images which circulated on social media in the minutes before and leading up to the explosion evince socio-economic structures whose roots can be traced back to the years of the French mandate over Lebanon.⁴

Despite Lebanon’s conspicuous sectarian divides, limiting its political reality to the former is certainly reductive. As Fawwaz Traboulsi notes, religious sects are emblematic of “the way pre-

capitalist formations are recycled to play new roles in a peripheral capitalist economy”.⁵ Over the past three decades, Lebanon’s assimilation into the neoliberal order coincided with the end of the civil war in the early 1990s which gave way to investment opportunities in finance and reconstruction. As such, established structures have been reproduced, maintained, and manifested through monetary and economic policies, which, in their turn, have facilitated the perpetual plundering of resources by the ruling elite and have given rise to private ownerships, nepotism, and clientelism.

However, rather than scattering the ashes of prevalent social relations, the spectacle’s detonation – both figuratively and concretely – only served to reinstate them. The prevailing order is most patent when we recognize the resurrection of the spectacle in the afterlife of the death image. The information and technological revolutions have ushered capitalism’s semiotic turn, where labour is produced through non-physical objects, taking “the mind, language, and creativity as its primary tools for the production of value”.^{6,7} Some have argued that, unlike under mercantilist and industrial conditions of labour, capital in cyberspace is immaterial, its products cognitive, and divisions of labour less and less identifiable in the infosphere.^{8,9} However, as Silvia Federici notes regarding the restructuring of work relations vis à vis affective labour, these hierarchies in the “global workforce” are far from obsolete.¹⁰ The idea of horizontal cooperation is not effortlessly subsumed into the equation of immaterial labour, which is falsely believed to expunge disparities inherent to traditional capitalism. Similarly, the reach and practicality attributed to the technology of the phone camera have facilitated the conception of the death image according to the logic of immaterial labour, which then blurred the lines between production and reproduction and enabled its spread and metamorphosis into a commodity.

In the days, weeks, and months following the Beirut explosion, footage of the latter became of utmost value. Once the initial global shock to the event had waned, many sought to make profit from its aftermath. State and non-state actors, international donors, and individuals have all prolonged the span of the death image and capitalised on the misery it has spawned. In a way, the general recognition of the phone camera as a user-friendly tool that exists at everyone's disposal has contributed to the flattening of the image's materiality (i.e., its conditions of production and propagation).

In the online sphere, many attempted to extract profit from the death image. The latter could be customised to cater to various markets and attend to different needs. Art practitioners would gather remnants of burnt and discarded fabric, shattered glass, and rubble to create "memorable pieces" of which a share of profit would go to "those affected by the blast".^{11, 12} Numerous Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), whose premise for intervention was guided by self-proclaimed expertise, emerged to bypass the state for its mishandling of the situation. These organisations extended their presence on social media platforms where calls for action were made, mostly appealing to the guilt-ridden expatriates who would compensate by responding to and sharing as many GoFundMe campaigns as deemed adequate. All these attempts, be they individual or collective, local or international, led by state or non-state actors, stretched the death image's online presence in an attempt to respond to the so-called humanitarian crisis. Thus, they sought to attract fiscal support in the form of cash and in-kind assistance. Following market logic, these operations were fraught with competition, mismanagement of funds, unequal distribution, continuous delays, and redundant assessments.¹³



Figure 1: Screenshot from Lebanese designer Zuhair Murad’s official Instagram account featuring celebrities posing in the “Rise from the Ashes” t-shirt as part of his “Relief Collection”)

As such, it is precisely this false immateriality ascribed to the technology of the phone camera that guided the assimilation of the death image into a commodity. The death image was thriving while its subjects have died, gone missing, or left critically injured. Of course, the “moral fist-shaking”, as Holly Lewis calls it – and which many tried to invoke by shaming the state for its incompetency, proposing conditional assistance directed by reforms, bypassing state apparatuses to provide aid – is not really a valid point of contention here.¹⁴ Lewis reminds us of how impersonal social relations are under capitalism and how ethical appeals to the latter are deemed untenable. As such, it is within – and not despite – catastrophes that capital will find ways to unapologetically

leech on the bodies of the dead and their image. Here, the phone camera serves as the medium through which the inherent hierarchy of capital relations was extended to the digital realm. This only attests to – rather than denies – the malleability of capital and its ability to change forms and to expand in the infosphere, just as it would offline.

Poor Image, Poor Subject

Phone footage from the blast has inundated online spaces, most notably WhatsApp, Facebook, and Instagram. These images were reconstructed, reshared, and replayed countless. Throughout the process, their quality was compromised, their sound distorted, and their source lost. Hito Steyerl describes an image of unbridled circulation, of low resolution, of mixed formats, as a “poor image”, one which testifies to the “violent dislocation, transferals, and displacement of images – their acceleration and circulation within the vicious cycle of audiovisual capitalism”.¹⁵ She points to the reconfiguration of value by which the image has come to be redefined per the semiotic turn of capitalism, hence giving more consideration to factors of speed, spread, and accessibility. These features – guaranteed by the technology of the phone camera – work against the fetish of high-resolution images yet are co-opted by the rushing stream of information capitalism where these images make up the main source of surplus value. As such, operating within the logic of semio-capitalism, the poor image never really escapes commodification. Although the potential for disruption is undoubtedly present in the concept of pirating and appropriating images, the latter are subject to accumulation in the competing markets of the ever-privatised digital realm.

An iPhone belonging to Hungarian therapist Agoston Nemeth is mounted on a handrail as it records in 4K the rising flames and the eventual moment of detonation from his apartment’s terrace overlooking the Beirut port. The ensuing video is a terrifying slow-motion rendition of the blast in which death unfolds frame by frame and has been widely shared on various social media

and news platforms. The broad circulation of this video bore no mention of its producer, and it is only by checking multiple sources that I stumbled upon an interview with Nemeth in which he recounts his experience.¹⁶ This speaks volumes about the informal conducts and accessible routes through which the footage engendered by the phone camera travels, whereby the image witnessed could come to overshadow the witness herself.

The simple interface on which the technology of the phone camera rests has allowed the poor image of the explosion to take on many forms, ranging from jump cuts of a huge cloud of smoke from various angles to random recordings with close-ups and wide shots of people covered with blood and dust. All these images were put together and pulled apart, uploaded, downloaded, edited, ripped, compressed, remixed, and circulated countless times. Because these videos were being shared extensively, most sources were misattributed or lost along the way. They became the property of anyone and everyone to do with as they please with no repercussions. As such, although death might have been pixelized, it was offered an afterlife, one which derives from attaching a camera to a smartphone.

As the example of the 4K footage demonstrates, the poor image is not a mere aesthetic that essentially entails a low-resolution or grainy image. Rather, the poor image further depicts a subject that has always-already been on the periphery of the visible. This absence from the realm of the seen attributes a lack of visibility to the subject under scrutiny to whom I will refer here as the “poor subject”. When catastrophe hit, the poor subject found itself overwhelmed with unprecedented visibility that only led to its fixation on and dwelling in the politics of representativity. Its poorness became a target point of selling, manifesting in humanised representations of its own suffering. This disruption of an entrenched dearth of visibility relates to what Irmgard Emmelhainz refers to as the “mediatization of mediation”.¹⁷ This idea is rooted in

bringing to the fore matters of public concern to be discussed in the realm of mass media, alluding to its emancipatory potential. However, as Emmelhainz explains, this risks engendering depoliticised zones in which “speech and action are reduced to sheer appearance”.¹⁸ Such depictions were propagated through a certain prerogative adopted by the Lebanese government as well as corporate and individual actors alike that explicitly validates the victimisation of the “struggling subject”. Being anything but empowering, these portrayals only served to strip the poor subject off its agency – if any – and to limit its presence to the symbolic realm.

The Simulacrum of Digital Commons

The circulating images of the explosion were imbued with a sense of faux solidarity that adopted the notorious “we are all in this together” sentiment, as shown in online captions and comments. Leaving no room for disputing the pseudo-commons, this discourse erases the material basis upon which death was materialised and mediated. It presumes that those behind their phone cameras and those who encountered the death image by way of its mediation, either reliving the horrific moment or coming across it for the very first time, were all victims of the same event.

Nevertheless, this approach gives way to the dichotomous ‘victim vs. perpetrator’ rhetoric and dilutes the complex relations upon which the death image was conceived and mediated. By not accounting for the multiple layers through which the catastrophe has unfolded, this dichotomy foregrounds a monolithic understanding of the blast and treats hegemony as one-dimensional. It justifies xenophobic tropes by corroborating the flag-waving rhetoric endorsed by the Lebanese state itself, who in turn co-opted such appeals for solidarity. It also reduces entrenched structural anomalies by tying them to specific political parties and figures which, although not unfounded, risks obfuscating neoliberalism’s ability to morph into various forms where representational politics serves as a mere façade.

As such, it is dangerous to claim that this catastrophe hit all of those who experienced it equally, for this view is oblivious of the conditions that have shaped their experience before, during, and after the explosion, be that gender, race, or class related. The magnitude of the blast was all but the same for foreign workers on decks and in warehouses, migrant women and their children in the slums adjacent to the Port, and working-class families in the parallel gentrified neighbourhoods. Along these lines, a crisis does not simply unfold equitably among those who experience it. Of course, this is due to systemic disparities that have been historically founded, maintained, and only exacerbated in times of catastrophe.

This idea of the commons has made structural discrepancies seem extraneous in the larger scheme of things. It has rendered long-standing inequalities appear as though they are matters of personal plights that do not concern the public realm. This reverberates with Hannah Arendt's words on how "only what is considered to be relevant, worthy of being seen or heard, can be tolerated, so that the irrelevant becomes automatically a private matter".¹⁹ Along these lines, the death image would become the table that Arendt refers to in her understanding of the public realm; the table which, in case of its disappearance, those gathered around it "would be entirely unrelated to each other by anything tangible".²⁰ In this context, the phone camera has enabled this conversion of death into something tangible, something worthy of being collectively processed. Through its simple technical configuration and potential for ample outreach, the phone camera enabled the mediation of the blast as an all-encompassing event which then tamped down the conditions upon which death – both palpably and symbolically – was conceived.

However, was it death in and of itself that really brought about this experience of the "commons"? Or was it its "mediatization," as Emmelhainz would put it, and later its commodification, that generated a sense of commonality expressed in the collective reproduction

of the death image and its poor subject? We must then ask, at what cost has the poor image, and accordingly its poor subject, become so perceptible? To which a simple answer would be the subject's right to opacity.²¹ For the poor subject to be seen and heard, it must become transparent, to lay bare its vulnerability, for only in the latter can it become valuable. This hierarchy in looking, in making visible, is rooted in "grasping" the other, and this very act of grasping presupposes a kind of relation built on rendering the subject purely fathomable, wholly discernible, leaving no room for inconspicuousness.²²

Thus, the phone camera has provided the poor subject with contemporary relevance, one which has deprived it of its own right to opacity. As Jacques Rancière reminds us, notions of availability, accessibility, and circulation do not by any means eradicate hierarchies inherent to the act of looking and its dissemination through technology.²³ There are processes that an image undergoes in order to reach us, ones that we can and should locate materially, for mediation is not a one-dimensional process of an uninterrupted path from production to circulation. Our own conditions as producers and/or perceivers inevitably shape the way we see, understand, and respond to an image, conditions that we must account for to understand the nuances of what we presume to be the commons.

Here, it becomes helpful to go back to Silvia Federici's problematisation of the commons under capitalism. Rather than celebrating the ways in which the "informatization of production" has allowed the engendering of a common space in which notions of inclusion and exclusion have been undermined, she invites us to question the material basis of what has come to be perceived as the digital commons.²⁴ As such, unpacking the infrastructure of online spaces is crucial to understanding the ways in which the digital commons are formed and organised. In the context of this paper, this experience of commonality – notwithstanding its nuances – was primarily

introduced and perpetuated by way of the phone camera technology. Thus, dissecting the material conditions upon which this medium has been made available helps define the foundation and flow of online spaces, their accessibility and appropriation, as well as their thresholds and parameters. By so doing, the digital conception of the commons is seen as an extension of, rather than an alternative to, the various forms of commons that are to be located materially as “a quality of relations, a principle of cooperation and a responsibility”.²⁵

This is when solidarity ceases to be merely performative; when our experiences are not reducible to being deciphered by everyone, everywhere, all the time. When our idea of the commons contests rather than complies with the logic of capital, here, the commodification of compassion and the engrossment in sensible politics.²⁶ When, instead of diluting differences, we use them to comprehend the premise upon which we relate to one another. More specifically, to come to terms with the fact that often we are unable to understand “the pain of others”, especially not when the only way we have encountered it is through commodified mediations.²⁷ As such, in order to move beyond discursive notions of solidarity and towards creating concrete bonds of togetherness, it remains fundamental to invest in commons that are conscious of the limits, hierarchies, and nuances of visibility, commons that fundamentally allow the existence as well as the prevalence of zones of opacity that thwart “the imperial reign of a light that only shines on things anymore in order to disintegrate them”.²⁸

Notes

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5. Ibid, viii.
6. Silvia Federici, "Precarious Labor: A Feminist Viewpoint." *In the Middle of a Whirlwind*: <https://inthemiddleofthewhirlwind.wordpress.com/precariou-labor-a-feminist-viewpoint/>
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15. Hito Steyerl, "In Defense of the Poor Image". *e-flux Journal #10* (2009), 1.
16. See Newsflare, "Unseen footage shows moment of Beirut explosion in 4K slow motion". Dailymotion: <https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x7vidhw>
17. Irmgard Emmelhainz, "Militant Cinema: from Third Worldism to Neoliberal Sensible Politics". *La Furia Umana*: <http://www.lafuriaumana.it/index.php/66-archive/lfu-33/728-irmgard-emmelhainz-militant-cinema-from-third-worldism-to-neoliberal-sensible-politics>.
18. Irmgard Emmelhainz, "Can we Share a World Beyond Representation?" *e-flux Journal #106* (2020), 7.
19. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 51.
20. Ibid, 53.
21. Edouard Glissant, "For Opacity", *Poetics of Relation* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1990), 189.
22. Ibid, 191.
23. See Jacques Rancière, "Courtisane 2017: How Does It Mean? – Jacques Rancière And Dissent!", *Desistfilm*: <https://desistfilm.com/courtisane-2017-how-does-it-mean-jacques-ranciere-and-dissent/>
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