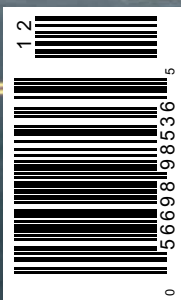


# Cabinet

A QUARTERLY OF ART AND CULTURE  
ISSUE 42 **FORGETTING**  
US \$12 CANADA \$12 UK £7



## THE ETHICS OF RUBBERNECKING

JUSTIN E. H. SMITH

The salaciousness of the eyes was already well documented in antiquity, though it was not necessarily beautiful and vital bodies that were the object of forbidden regards. In the *Republic*, Socrates relates the story of a certain Leontius, who, "coming up one day from the Piraeus, under the north wall on the outside, observed some dead bodies lying on the ground at the place of execution. He felt a desire to see them, and also a dread and abhorrence of them; for a time he struggled and covered his eyes, but at length the desire got the better of him; and forcing them open, he ran up to the dead bodies, saying, Look, ye wretches, take your fill of the fair sight."

Did Leontius have good reason to reproach his organs of vision?

Though I pretend to be treating here of the ethics of something, I must make a confession before going any further: I hate ethics. Ethicists, at least of the applied variety, ask, *Ought we?* I prefer to start out from the observation, *We do*, and from there to ask, *Why?* Ethnic cleansing, rape, genocide: these are all in our species' behavioral repertoire. If there is to be any realistic hope of eliminating them, it will come from an understanding of their true causes, and a stalwart refusal to lapse too soon into the language of ought and oughtn't.

Such understanding, I suspect, will best be attained by assuming at the outset that a human being is a certain variety of animal, which, like all animals, is an evolved product of its environment. Its perceptual mechanism has developed to pick out as salient certain features of that environment that bear directly on its short-term well-being. Faces, feces, fire: these are things that grab our attention, and so do blood and corpses. Blood is particularly noteworthy in that it is red. It makes an announcement, and one attended to by a wide variety of color-sighted animals. When it comes out of a human being, blood is somehow always a surprise. It seems *too* red. It is like nothing else that we, under normal circumstances, produce.

Blood is a paradoxical sign, in that it confirms that there is life in a body (William Harvey thought that blood itself was the source of whatever share of ensouledness is had by animals), even as its irruption into the realm of the visible indicates that the life it sustains is now threatened. It's the sign you aren't supposed to see (unless it spills out not onto smooth skin but onto fur, in which case, the thinking has often gone, it's there for the spilling).

So this is the first reason we rubberneck: like shiny things for magpies and scabs for little children, traffic accidents—just to cite the most common occasion for guilty gawking in our contemporary landscape—are irresistible, offering as they do the opportunity to catch sight of (someone else's) blood.

But there is, you might protest, something more, something that has not only to do with phenomenal salience, but also with the way such accidents illustrate our existential predicament (but for the grace of God, etc.), one that only we human beings, and not animals, are capable of contemplating. Accidents speak not just to our short-term prospects for well-being, but to the ultimate predicament to which an individual human life may be subjected. Fate, it's often called.

In a preliminary way, then, we may say that rubbernecking is our primate perceptual apparatus picking out a phenomenally salient feature of the environment, which in turn moves from the optic nerve into the neocortex, and there becomes the object of a distinctive variety of cognition, often said to occur only in humans, which sees not just the blood but the unmistakable image of its own destiny.

If it is not struck from outside, the body will explode from within; if it does not explode, it will rot. If none of these, then it will quickly become ridiculous; no one wants 130-year-olds around. In one way or another, I mean, we'll each have to make our exit, and in this respect the fatal accident is a sign not only of a possibility for our respective futures, but of an inevitability. We speak of "accidents" (in French one hears not only of car accidents, but also of *accidents cérébraux*, which is to say "strokes"), but traditionally accidents were those features of a thing that did not pertain to it essentially. Accidents were what could or could not befall a person on the path towards inevitable death.

Death is a mystery and to witness it is to be reminded that we don't exactly have everything under control. This is why, in an efficiency-driven society such as our own, we strive to keep it hidden away as much as possible. When we see it, it tends to be mediated and mediatized, delivered on digital screens that provide us, or so we suppose, a certain moral distance from the real thing. That this distance is an illusion need not detain us here; it has been forcefully argued elsewhere that to regard the pain of others—whether as a live spectacle or on some so-called reality crime show, happily provided by an entertainment industry that has volunteered for service as the ideological wing of an incipient police state—is not a morally neutral affair. The fact remains that public torture and execution,

and even the butchering of animals, do not suit our society's sensibilities. Execution and slaughter have been removed beyond city limits, behind thick walls, and if we are going to see death it will be rendered as a representation, abstractly far away and for the most part (notwithstanding occasional proposals for the live televising of certain high-profile executions) already securely shifted over into the irreversible past. We are willing to watch on screens things we believe ourselves to be too upright to watch directly. This has more to do with taste than with morality *stricto sensu*, and by the latter measure we are hardly better than the early modern revelers who took delight in the fate of a regicide. In the Anglo-American world, taste not only sends killing behind closed doors, but also euphemizes and screens death in general. In much of Eastern Europe, by contrast, the dead are put on display until their bodies begin to putrefy. Funeral goers are invited to accompany the corpse to the graveyard, to kiss its forehead, to throw dirt on the coffin: to have death rubbed in. Around here, however, funerals have been rebranded as "celebrations of lives lived."

Things were of course not always this way. In his 1757 *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, Edmund Burke speculated that any theater audience would quickly rush out of even the most compelling tragic performance in order to witness a hanging taking place outside. When it came to the sublime, Burke believed art simply could not compete with reality. Today, by contrast, for the most part we prefer to keep death at a distance: corpses of loved ones used to help drive home the finality and inevitability of death, but now we prefer closed-casket funerals. Public executions used to underline the power of the state and the futility of crime, but now the death penalty is carried out in semi-secrecy, behind thick prison walls, as if the state were a bit embarrassed by its own wrath.

There are few regions of the public sphere in which death is still permitted to issue reminders of its existence. We are not even aware, generally, of the sort of temptation described by Plato (invariably, students tell me they find Leontius "weird"). Yet there are over forty thousand traffic fatalities in the US per year, and the number of rubberneckers is surely exponentially higher. The question imposes itself: why is this the one bloody spectacle we continue to permit? It is difficult to make the case for the necessity of it all: that we simply have places to go. We have places to go because we expect to go to them, and this expectation arose in the first place because we had cars and roads available to

us. The car-and-road system that has been in place for roughly a century is surely something that no one would have accepted at the outset if the bodies of all the dead from a single year of its full use were laid out side by side.

The highway system for the most part does not give us hecatombs, like the airline system occasionally does, but only a steady stream of single deaths, deaths in pairs, and sometimes deaths of nuclear families. For the most part, the deaths it gives us are at the scale of the public executions of old. In this respect, there may be more continuity between Burke's preferred example of bloody spectacle and our own, even if the one great difference remains that the hanging is premeditated, while the accident is accidental.

I don't know, however, that I accept Burke's account of the motivation for watching executions. He takes these to be vivid examples of the sublime, but he starts out from representations of the sublime in art and not from the sublime in nature. Alpine precipices give us something ungraspable in their infinity; executions give us human death: ungraspable to the extent that we do not know what happens next, but parceled out in the neat, (all-too-)graspable body of an individual prisoner.

What if something were to go wrong with the mechanics of the gallows, obliging the crowd that had rushed out of the theater to stand around and wait? Significantly, the most emblematic depiction of an automobile accident and the consequent traffic jam in the history of cinema—the eight-minute tracking shot in Jean-Luc Godard's 1968 *Weekend*—is meant to convey a sense not of sublimity but of tedium. The motorists are so enbubbled in their own worlds, so preoccupied with their own progress to their own destinations, that the promise of seeing some blood at the end of the jam does not appease them in the least. That is perhaps the great difference between Burke's spectacles and ours: ours are, at best, the sublime payoff for a tedious wait.

---

overleaf: The tedium of a traffic jam caused by an automobile accident. Digitally modified sequence from Jean-Luc Godard's film *Weekend*, 1967.



