Where Are the Photos of People Dying of Covid?

In times of crisis, stark images of sacrifice or consequence have often moved masses to act.

Filled coffins at the Gerard J. Neufeld funeral home in Flushing, Queens, on April 26.
Credit...Bryan R Smith/Reuters

By Sarah Elizabeth Lewis | New York Times on May 1, 2020

Recently, a friend, colleague and mentor, the cultural historian and critic Maurice Berger, died at 63 of complications from the coronavirus.

Every day that passes, particularly as I hear the wail of ambulance sirens going by on the West Side Highway near my window, I think of Maurice. I think of the conversations about images we might have had regarding this moment.

Much of what I know and teach about how images structure and shape issues of race and justice I learned from his scholarship and life experience. Visualization is a powerful tool — it can help us more deeply understand the severity of the situation as we work to curb the virus. But the visuals we need most in this time are difficult to come by.

I thought of Maurice when a friend living in Milan, who was among Italy's earliest diagnosed coronavirus cases, sent me this text message in March: "If people could only see what it is like in the hospitals, they would stay at home." He was admitted to the hospital earlier that month, but with his doctor's agreement quickly left, feeling that his bed could be better allocated to others experiencing far worse symptoms.

The environment was also so grim that he felt he would have a better chance, at least psychologically, if he returned home.

"It was a war zone," he wrote. When we spoke later, he told me that his lungs had been damaged and his fever was still high; he coughed with pain nearly every other sentence. He remains ill.

What are we missing by not having images that represent the full impact of the coronavirus crisis? In the United States, the frequently recurring pictures in the media are of the president, the virus itself represented as a spiky ball, health care and front line workers deemed essential and visuals conveying economic disarray (empty businesses, winding unemployment lines).

Funeral home workers at a morgue in Brussels disinfecting the body of a person who died of Covid-19.Credit...Kenzo Tribouillard/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

While there have been some professional images from inside medical zones, they remain rare. "Make note of what we can't see," the CNN commentator Brian Stelter said in March. "That's the suffering happening inside hospitals." He went on to discuss a video that was taken covertly in a hospital. What it means, he said, "is that we're not seeing this crisis with our own eyes."

Mr. Stelter also interviewed Dr. Esther Choo in Portland, Ore., who argued that unfiltered images revealing the stark conditions in hospitals are a matter of public health.

Medical privacy laws in the United States can present obstacles to this kind of viewing. Instead of images, we have daily briefings of statistics presented in pie charts and bar graphs. During news conferences, officials such as Gov. Andrew Cuomo of New York and Chancellor Angela Merkel of Germany have illustrated how social distancing can flatten the curve through clear numerical analysis.

Statistics alone, however clear, are not historically how we have communicated calamity on this scale. There is an inverse relationship between high numbers and comprehension: It is much harder to picture tragedy of the kind we are now witnessing than it is to visualize one person in pain, or an image that connects with a familiar aspect of the human condition, what psychologists have termed the "identifiable victim effect."

Treating a Covid-19 patient at a hospital in Milan.Credit...Flavio Lo Scalzo/Reuters

For at least a brief moment, daunting imagery (along with increasingly alarming data) seemed to force President Trump to backtrack on his push to relax national social distancing guidelines. "I have been watching them bring in trailer trucks, freezer trucks," he said in March. "They are freezer trucks because they can't handle the bodies, there are so many of them. This is essentially in my community in Queens — Queens, New York. I have seen things I've never seen before. I mean, I've seen them, but I've seen them on television in faraway lands."

He amended his insistence on opening the country back up by Easter, telling "Fox & Friends" that "the worst that can happen is you do it too early and all of a sudden it comes back." (Mr. Trump has wavered on this issue since then, encouraging the vocal minority of protesters who are against the lockdown while deeming it "too soon" for states like Georgia to reopen.)

Maurice and I would have considered the debates about the potential and limits of how and when images create empathy.

We would have talked about how the impact of photographs of people affected by the tainted water in Flint, Mich., aided the start of a nationwide understanding of the unconscionable injustice uncovered by Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha and illuminated by photographers such as LaToya Ruby Frazier. We would have discussed how artists like Keith Haring, Félix González-Torres, David Wojnarowicz and the collective Gran Fury made visible the AIDS crisis in a time of government inaction.

We would have talked about how reports on the Civil War death count — totaling around 750,000 by recent estimates — filled newspapers, but photographs conveyed the cost of the conflict in a way nothing else could. "Let him who wishes to know what war is look at this series of illustrations," Oliver Wendell Holmes wrote in The Atlantic after photographs of the carnage went on view in Mathew Brady's New York City gallery in 1862.

A photograph of Civil War casualties of the Battle of Cold Harbor, in Virginia (1865).
Credit...John Reekie, via The Library of Congress

Brady's photographs had "done something to bring home to us the terrible reality and earnestness of war," The New York Times said. "If he has not brought bodies and laid them in our door-yards and along the streets, he has done something very like it."

Maurice and I would have talked about the Farm Security Administration project, which sent out photographers such as Gordon Parks and Dorothea Lange to capture the depth of the country's suffering during the Depression.

There are, to be sure, many extraordinary, intrepid photographers documenting the pandemic — or are trying to, as did George Steinmetz, whose drone was seized by the New York Police Department when he used it to shoot footage of the burials of Covid-19 victims on Hart Island, the city's public cemetery. (Photography of the island is prohibited "without the express permission" of The Department of Correction, according to the city's website.)

Images that emerge as an emblem of sacrifice or consequence have often moved masses to act. Yet without these pictures, the virus is harder to combat.

A drone photographed a mass burial on Hart Island, the public cemetery in New York City, on April 9.
Credit Lucas Jackson/Reuters

A few weeks ago, my friend in Milan sent me a picture after I asked him about his prognosis. A former boxer and muay Thai fighter, he is one of the strongest people I know in terms of spirit and drive. He was smiling, but had a heaviness in his eyes, and it seemed that the virus had ransacked him. He had been battling this invisible opponent for weeks and was back at the hospital for more testing.

"My heart is OK, but I still can't breathe," he texted me. "The doctors think I might be anxious or afraid to die, but I'm not. I just wish I could fight back, but I know that's not how it works." I wept.

I check in on him each day, and most days, catch myself wondering if he will be there to text back.

Many do not have these mental images. Yet as we see cities shuttered and roads empty, I will remain focused on the absence of something else — a representative, visual archive of the staggering human toll of the crisis from which might emerge, in time, our emblematic pictures. For society to respond in ways commensurate with the importance of this pandemic, we have to see it. For us to be transformed by it, it has to penetrate our hearts as well as our minds.

Images force us to contend with the unspeakable. They help humanize clinical statistics, to make them comprehensible. They step unto the breach.

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Correction: May 4, 2020: An earlier version of this article misstated the name of an agency founded as part of the New Deal. It was the Farm Security Administration, not the Farm Securities Administration.

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