“I Livestreamed my Grandfather’s Funeral”
Madison Brown

While we typically make videos at weddings, capturing the joyous movement through time and the ornamental rite that marks this futurity, we take photographs at funerals. Still, the perfect photographic subject is posed, painted, ready for their best and last close-up. This connection between death and photography is well established in media theory, from André Bazin’s characterization of photography’s ontological charge as “[embalming] time, rescuing it simply from its proper corruption,” to Roland Barthes describing the moment of photographic capture as “this death in which [the photographer’s] gesture will embalm me” (198, 14). The corporeal conservation that each thinker evokes (beyond, I think, the distinctly French sensibility for mortality) emphasizes the endurance of an ending; the simultaneous ephemerality of the body and the potential extension of its representability. But whence the mourner in these analogies? Indeed, the emphasis is rightly placed on the deceased. Images of the deceased have been made since the mid-nineteenth century to preserve their likeness for posterity. And even in more contemporary funeral photography, the camera is rarely turned on the mourners until after the service when, on the steps of the chapel, or the grass of interment, or finally resting with a well-deserved drink, mourners can once again assume the posturing of a conscientious if wearied photographic subject.

On Thursday May 21, I livestreamed my grandfather’s funeral; a kind man for whom life was often cruel and sometimes exquisitely obliging, he did not pass from the virus but amidst it. Having moved around for school since my early 20s, I’ve gotten somewhat used to missing things, and even despite the pandemic and the international travel ban, there’s no guarantee that I would have been able to attend. As such, I cautiously embraced the offer to watch the service via livestream. It’ll be fine, I thought; I’ve seen plenty of funerals on TV (and, I thought, I have had the explicit privilege of never having it be for a member of my own family). Like so
many other mediated events, we have become familiar with the formal features of televised funeral processions through the lenses of multi-camera news teams, deftly switching from one perspective to the next, images punctuated with somber commentary. But here, in the funeral home on the street my father grew up on, there is but one camera fastened to the ceiling, pointed down at the coffin in more of a surveillant spirit than one of deference. As the old saying goes, funerals are not for the deceased; they are for those left behind. And, to be sure, the liveness of the livestream privileged the living.

To see those left behind, moving in and through grief—affectively and corporeally—is weird. To hear my mother clear her throat, her sinuses full from crying, is weird. Not because I haven’t heard it before, but because I’ve never heard it on YouTube. And when the deacon thanks my grandmother for bringing my grandfather communion in his last days and loving him as her very ministry, it’s weird to hear my father say Amen. Not because I don’t agree, but because my computer speakers make dad’s voice sound tinny. I watch as they all kneel beside the open casket, and play idly with the rings on their fingers, and as my grandmother plucks a carnation from the floral arrangement to pin on his lapel, because I can’t bring myself to look at him. Jay Ruby suggests that we take photographs of the deceased “to mitigate the finality of death” (1). But when the funeral is streamed live on YouTube, the finality of death is not mitigated; it is reinforced through the temporal and figurative end of its transmission. And without the conciliatory sense of community—for those present or those livestreaming—the unfinished work of grieving extends unrelentingly. Some things, I think, we aren’t meant to see on screen.

Works Cited
