

SLAVENKA DRAKULIC

Close-up of death

In the name of memory, and that it shall never happen again, TV cameras invite their audience to participate in their necrophiliac obsession with death and atrocity

They say that a little girl, AM, was killed while eating a Ramadan-pie. It seems that it happened like this: it was morning at the end of February, bright and chilly. You ask yourself how that woman, her mother, made the pie in Sarajevo, 10 months after the beginning of the war? What flour did she use, what oil, what did she fill it with? She must have baked it the night before — but then again, how? There is no electricity, or there is, but only sometimes. Or did she do it on an open fire? But there is no wood: all the trees in the city have been cut long ago... In any case, still half-asleep, the two-and-a-half-year-old girl had been sitting at the table, eating breakfast. At that moment, she heard the sound of shelling. Maybe she was frightened by it, so she ran to her mother — but maybe not. The sound of shelling is normal around here. No, she couldn't have heard that sound, they say that those who get hit have no time to hear anything, they have no time to get frightened at all. A shell went through the roof of their house and landed in the kitchen. The girl fell to the floor. It all happened with lightning speed and she was dead before her parents or her grandfather had time to understand what was happening. By the time her father took her in his hands and looked for help, it was all over.

Then — then a TV camera arrives on the scene. Judging by certain details this happened perhaps only one or two hours after the shelling. We see the small kitchen already without the little girl, the floor is covered with brick and plaster debris, scattered shoes, her little boots. The TV camera zooms in on the roof, on the hole left by a shell, as sky and cold descend into the kitchen

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through it. The father is sitting with his arms on the table, crying. The camera shoots a close-up of his blue eyes and his tears — in fact it looks as if he is crying on camera — so that we, the television spectators, can be sure that his tears are real, that he really cried, the little one's father. He has on a white pullover made of a rough peasant's wool. You do not usually sit in your kitchen dressed warmly like that, but what do we know about the kind of cold that he is suffering from at this



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moment? From his eyes, the camera moves to that pullover so that we can see a red stain on it, left where he held his girl when he picked her up from the floor — when it was already too late. The blood is not dry yet, the stain is bright red, it looks fresh. I know that raw, handspun wool that his pullover was made with. I can feel it under my fingers. It takes forever to dry, soaked blood stays wet a long time... Looking

at this blood is nauseating. Still the camera returns to it several times. This is unnecessary, but you have no defence from those kinds of pictures — and there is no one to tell how useless it is.

Now we are in the hospital, this is the first time we see the mother, too. The reporter's voice explains that she has been wounded in her stomach. Then he (or was it she?) says something absolutely too much, too much in the moment of despair of the woman whose child has just died. The voice says that the young woman probably will not be able to have any more children. She lies on a kind of stretcher, covering her face with her hands. She sobs, her voice comes out as if broken in pieces. The father comes in, in his white pullover with the red stain, and embraces her. It is clear that they meet there for the first time after the little one's death, in a hospital room. On camera — for the first time. The mother lets out something, in some other setting you could probably call it a cry, a howl. But now it is only a sound of emptiness; with that sound the woman tells her husband she has just lost everything. This is the end, this has to be the end. The camera can't go any further than the inhuman suffering of the mother who has lost her child. Neither we, the television spectators, nor the people that we do not see who are standing behind camera — a reporter, a cameraman, a soundman — can stand all this any longer. This has to stop, I repeat to myself while the camera rolls on. I don't believe my eyes, but that's how it is: now we are looking at a white sheet with red spots. We have already forbidden this, we recognise that same sign. Red on white, that's the sign of her death. My God, how very bright her blood is, I think, while my whole being cries: enough, enough, enough. I don't want the camera to enter under that cover hiding her small body. But someone's hand surpasses my thoughts and lifts the white sheet. Her face, we see her face. Her small



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deformed face, no longer human, framed by untidy tufts of her black hair. Her half-closed eyes. We see a close-up of death. Then cut. The funeral. People talking, an off-screen voice, the father, the grandfather, a little coffin in the shallow, frozen ground. The report is finished. It has lasted a total of three minutes...

A moment later, we become aware that the TV broadcast that we have just seen is the tragedy of one family filmed only a couple of hours after they have lost their child, and that *the whole tragedy has happened on camera*. The only thing we have not witnessed is the moment of death of the two-and-a-half-year-old AM. (A take from outside, when the shell hits the roof. Then, from inside, a scene where the girl falls from her chair, in slow motion, as if she's flying. A piece of pie drops from her

hand and rolls on the ground. That's it! The reporter is pleased.) Well, why not? By now, we too, the public, are mature enough to stand it, all in the name of documentation, which we obviously believe in. That is the only thing we have not seen on our TV screens so far.

**'Something
has crept into us,
the signs
of our own dying'**

We have already seen beheaded corpses being eaten by pigs and dogs. Eyes gouged out, scattered bodily parts that do not belong to anyone, anything. Skeletons and half-rotten skulls, children without legs, babies killed by sniper

fire. A 12-year-old rape victim talking about it on camera.

Day after day. Death in Bosnia has been more and more well-documented. In 10 months, Sarajevo has been hit by 800,000 shells. In the city, 80,000 kids are imprisoned — that makes it the biggest children's prison in the world. Five thousand of them were killed or simply died. The rest await hunger and long death, slow death. Fifty years ago this is how Jews suffered. Now it's the Muslims' turn. Do you remember Auschwitz? Really, does anyone remember Anne Frank? Oh yes, we do remember it all and, because of that memory, we have the idea that everything has to be carefully documented, so that shameful history can never be repeated. And yet, here they are. Generations have learned about concentration camps at school, about factories of death; generations whose parents swear that it could never happen again — at least not in Europe — precisely because of the living memory of the recent past. *They* are fighting this war. What, then, has all that documentation changed? And what is being changed now, by the conscious, precise bookkeeping of death that is happening in our lives, in our living rooms, while we watch transmissions of the dying in Sarajevo? The little girl's death is only one horror out of many, each of which prepares us for something even worse.

The biggest change has happened within ourselves, the audience, spectators, public. We have started to believe in our role in this casting: that it is possible to play the public. As if the war is theatre. Slowly, and without our noticing it, something has crept into us, a kind of hardness, an inability to see the truth — the signs of our own dying, the close-up of the girl's dead face was one scene too much. Because it was senseless. The feeling that for the first time it is possible to watch war from so near in its most macabre details, makes sense only if, because of that, something can change for the better. But nothing changes. Therefore, this kind of documentation is turning into a perversion, into a pornography of dying. ■