

Will Straw*

Dead Bodies in the Street

On the back page of the February 12, 2023 edition of the Mexico City tabloid *La Prensa*, under the headline “¡A Sangra Fria!” (In Cold Blood!), a photo shows the body of a corpse lying in the middle of a street. The headline reads “¡A Sangra Fria!” The caption adds that this is the body of a man “shot to death” in the Mexico City district of Tultitlán.

Of the many things we might say about this photograph, the first is that it is unremarkable. With relentless consistency, the front pages of Mexican daily tabloids have made the image of a dead person lying in the street a familiar, even expected feature of their appeal to readers. On February 18, 2023, in the same week of the publication of “¡A Sangra Fria!” the front page of the lurid tabloid *¡Pásala!* carried the image of a dead woman—reduced to a mass of clothing and blood at the side of a road—with the headline “¡Horrible!” The caption detailed the “Trágico final tiene doñita al caer al carril del MB, pues muere arrollada” (Tragic end for woman as she falls to the bus lane, then is run over and killed).

Only one of these photographs clearly involved a crime, but both are part of the extreme violence that writers from Carlos Monsiváis onward have seen as a hallmark of Mexico City’s print media. In many respects, the image of a dead body in the street has become the most common visual token of violence in the city’s tabloid press. It is also one of the most highly formulaic. Across hundreds of examples, day after day and week after week, a set of well-entrenched



conventions for making and presenting these images has become strikingly apparent.

These conventions range from a preference for day-time settings to angles that align the dead body diagonally across the space of the image. They also include the tendency to crop or frame images in ways that highlight the solitude of the dead person through the elimination of other human figures. I shall discuss each of these conventions in turn.

* Will is a professor of Urban Media Studies at McGill University; you can contact him at william.straw@mcgill.ca.

Day and night

The photos of dead bodies appearing on the covers of Mexico City's tabloid press are usually taken in the fullness of day, under sunny skies. In part, this contributes to our sense of the randomness of the deaths being documented—they seem to have occurred while the city is going about its daily business. The English-language phrase “in broad daylight” captures the sense of heightened visibility under which these acts of violence occur. Daylight adds to the sense of strangeness of a body lying unattended and seemingly unnoticed while city life, we assume, continues around it.

These photographs do not invite understandings of crime that draw connections between urban violence and the dangers or mysteries of darkness and night. As the work of Gabriela Pulino Llano clearly shows, the association of violence with night was central to understandings of criminality—in Mexico City and elsewhere—during much of the twentieth century¹. This understanding of crime as essentially nocturnal drew on age-old stereotypes and superstitions (and was of dubious statistical validity). Nevertheless, the sense of violence as a feature of night allowed observers to link crime to larger questions concerning the moral character of the modern city, with its barely visible subcultures and its ongoing, collective dynamics involving class, race, gender and sexuality.

In her book *While the City Sleeps: A History of Pistoleros, Policemen, and the Crime Beat in Buenos Aires before Perón*, the historian Lila Caimari speaks of an earlier shift, in twentieth-century Argentina, in popular cultural renderings of urban crime. While the persistence of crime was normally blamed on the cloak of darkness in the nineteenth century—which made criminal acts both possible and unsolvable—by the middle of the twentieth century rampant criminality was seen as a phenomena of the day. Crime benefited from the speed and anonymity of daytime

life in the modern city. Gangsters could speed away from daytime bank robberies in their fast new automobiles or disappear quickly into crowds. The readers of popular culture media found their interest in crime shifting, from a fascination with the mysteries of the night to excitement at the brazen intrusion of crime into daytime routines.

Photographic form

The dead body in the street has its own tragic legacy in the history of Mexican photography. It was the subject, of course, of what is perhaps the best-known photograph by Enrique Metinides (1934–2022), who did more than anyone else to take Mexican photojournalism focused on death and destruction into institutions of high art. Metinides's 1979 photograph *Primer plano de mujer rubia arrollada e impactada contra un poste, avenida Chapultepec y calle Monterrey* (Close-Up of Blonde Woman Run Over and Crushed Against a Pole at Chapultepec Ave. and Monterrey Street) shows the head and face of a dead woman lying in the street, her body crushed between two lampposts after she was struck by a car.

Unlike the 2023 photo from *La Prensa*, the Metinides image is rich in context, showing us witnesses in different stages of response to the horrible event, allowing us to observe the detailed cluster of steel and concrete in which the victim is held. And, as several critics have noted, this image seems to authorize the contemplation of a woman somehow beautiful in death, in a visual arrangement that individualizes the victim but also exploits her tragedy in an almost pornographic fashion. In this, it is very different from another Metinides photograph, *Accidente en la Carretera* (Accident on the Highway) (1982) (<https://www.moma.org/collection/works/125202>) which, in a more coldly observational manner, shows us two bodies scattered on a highway by an overturned automobile.

Neither of these Metinides photographs deals with crime in any direct sense, but in the formal ways in which they treat dead bodies they invite us to dig deeper into some of the conventions of crime photography. Why are bodies, photographed in city streets or roads, so often filmed in the same way? In what ways does a photographer's choice of frame and manner of composition embody a moral position vis-à-vis victims and the circumstances of their deaths.

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Diagonality and the dead body

In both *Primer plano de mujer rubia arrollada* and *Accidente en la Carretera*, bodies are aligned diagonally across the rectangular space of the photograph. In another of Metinides's works, the 1995 photograph *Chapultepec Park, Mexico City* (1995), which shows a woman sitting on the grass beside her murdered boyfriend, we likewise see the dead man aligned diagonally on the ground (<https://slate.com/culture/2013/03/enrique-metinides-101-tragedies-of-enrique-metinides-documents-50-years-of-crime-scenes-in-mexico-city-photos.html>).

We might understand the use of diagonals as one aspect of the artfulness for which Metinides is known, but it also characterizes the tabloid images discussed earlier. The body in “¡A Sangra Fria!” is aligned in a way that it appears as if the victim might slide down the slight incline of the street in which he lies. A diagonal composition sets his head clearly above his torso in the space of the image. This arrangement encourages our gaze to move downward, as if pulled by the gravitational force of the incline.

The mess of flesh, blood and clothing we see in the photograph titled “¡Horrible!” is shot so that a gaze rises from the lower left corner to the right side of the image. The position of the head at the lowest point contributes to our sense of a catastrophic loss of control and human sentience. As we scan the line of the body, upwards, it is only at its end that we find the most visibly human elements of what remains, the legs with shoes still on her feet.

The morality of style

A formal analysis of this kind cannot help but seem trivializing and exploitative. Images of violent death, we believe, should invite us to reflect on the dignity of victims and the responsibility of other forces in their fate. The challenge in analyzing crime photography is to speak about



Enrique Metinides (Mexico City, Mexico, 1934), “Close-up of a Blond Woman Run Over and Smashed against a Lamp Post, Chapultepec Avenue and Monterrey Street. April 29, 1979,” 50.8 x 60.7 cm (photograph, chromogenic print). Donated by the artist to the University Contemporary Art Museum in 2002.

photographic form and style in ways that address these issues rather than evading them. The question of diagonal composition poses this challenge in effective ways.

Photojournalists or their editors might argue that the diagonal arrangement of bodies in crime photographs allows bodies to be stretched out, to take up greater space than if they were shown horizontally. Even this explanation, of course, is not innocent. It presumes that the purpose of covering death in city streets is best served through a concentration on the body, and that this body is the part of a photograph most deserving of our attention. A composition that stretches the body across the center of the image, then, would best fulfill the journalistic purpose. In Blu Tirohl's evocative summary of this technique, “[d]eath is elongated so that we can savor it².”

In a collection of crime scene photographs from the 1970s, rescued from the archives of the Mexican crime magazine *Alerta* and put on a CD-ROM some years ago, we find hundreds of photographs of dead bodies linked to criminal acts. The difference between these images and those discussed here is striking. Unlike the photographs appearing in present-day tabloids, taken by reporters who have rushed to a crime scene, many of the images in the *Alerta* archive were taken within judicial institutions, like police autopsy rooms, or from crime scenes where the po-

lice had already arranged bodies for examination and transport.

What is striking about these images is how many of them are faithful to the grid-like structure of official police photography. Bodies are laid flat on surfaces and photographed in strictly vertical or horizontal poses. Faces are cropped so that their images may sit alongside others in series, in record books or collections of visual tools (like mug shots.) As with official police photographs, diagonal compositions are rare, in part because they make it difficult to determine the dimensions of human anatomy—the lengths of arms and legs, for example—or the distance between pieces of evidence.

Leonard Folgarait, a scholar of Mexican photography, has written about the tension found in photos of the dead, between the order of the grid (of straight, perpendicular lines) and the challenge posed by diagonal arrangements. Photography, he suggests, is a “technology of recording the truth within rectangles.”³ Analyzing the image of a man executed for revolutionary activity, he suggests that while the framing of the man’s body sought to capture it within a grid neatly arranged relative to its surroundings, the man’s final position—laid diagonally across the space—resisted this capturing.

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At some level, Folgarait suggests, this diagonal composition undermined the official purpose of the photograph, that of providing a full and satisfying knowledge of revolutionary activity and its consequences. Rather than being held within a rectangular frame, the figure of the executed man, stretched diagonally across the image, disrupted the order of the photograph and, in doing so, confounded its capacity to convey knowledge.

Bodies alone

We might ask whether the front-page photos of dead bodies in Mexico City tabloids convey anything beyond the brute singularity of each violent death. The fact that murder targets alternate so easily with the casualties of automobile accidents on these covers suggests that both are seen as little more than victims of violence without causes. In most of these photographs, there are no other people to be seen. There are no officials of any kind, nor any of the bystanders—sympathetic or morbidly curious—whom we find in earlier traditions of crime scene photojournalism. The absence of others in these images discourages any interpretation that would link the violence they document to failures of official governance or a withering of collective solidarity. Instead, we are given only the curious spectacle of inert human forms, stretched between the corners of an image and made to appear alone and neglected. ■■

Notes

- 1 Gabriela Pulido Llano, *El mapa “rojo” del pecado. Miedo y vida nocturna en la ciudad de México 1940-1950* (Mexico City: INAH, 2016.)
- 2 Blu Tirohl, “Forensic Photography, Film Noir, and Fellig: Scenes Excavated by the Night Prowler,” *Photography and Culture*, 5:2 (2012) p. 141.
- 3 Leonard Folgarait. *Seeing Mexico Photographed: The Work of Horne, Casa-sola, Modotti, and Álvarez Bravo* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2008), p. 14.

