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# THE HISTORY OF PHOTOGRAPHY IS A HISTORY OF SHATTERED GLASS

By Teju Cole, November 15, 2017

It has only been a few weeks, but I can already feel the events in Las Vegas slipping away from me. The horror that unfolded there is indelible: A single shooter killed at least 58 people and injured hundreds more. And yet the horror is not indelible; it is fading, as most public tragedies eventually do. (You might even have wondered, reading the above, Which events in Las Vegas?) Since Oct. 1, there has been a terrorist attack in New York City, a mass shooting in Texas and other gun violence throughout the country, as well as numerous distressing public scandals. What trace of these events remains for those of us not personally affected by them? Names, dates, photographs, videos: all retrievable, but most archived away in a cloud of faint memory.

After mass killings, American newspapers do not typically run images of corpses. The reasons have to do with respect for the dead and concern for readers' sensitivities, as well as restrictions put on photojournalists' access to crime scenes (these conventions are subtly, and unjustly, different when it comes to international stories). Instead of photographs of bloody bodies in the street, we get photographs of ambulances, medical professionals, law enforcement, people ducking for cover. A photograph we've all seen is of someone in distress being cradled in someone else's arms. Another is of the

candlelit vigils held in the aftermath of these horrors. The raw pathos inherent in such moments is now dulled; seen once too often, the situations are not as moving as they ought to be. But even with these diminishing returns, the press is obligated to run pictures. Among them, which are piercing? Which endure? The minor ones, the odd and peculiar ones, the ones that evoke some other history.

The images that have stayed with me from the Las Vegas massacre are of broken glass. Stephen Paddock sprayed bullets down on country-music concertgoers from a suite on the 32nd floor of the Mandalay Bay resort, smashing two of its windows in order to do so. For photographers arriving after the massacre, it would have made sense to look up and shoot the building (the shared vocabulary between cameras and firearms is both regrettable and illuminating), aiming in the opposite direction to the killer's nighttime shots. What these photographers would have seen was a golden building, its front part protuberant and vaguely ship-shaped. The hotel's windows are gaudy in the Vegas style, covered with a thin layer of gold. Near the top of the building are two irregular shapes, nine panels apart, one of them on the building's prow, the other on its starboard. They look like small black stains or asterisks, or perhaps even like a pair of gouged-out eyes: These are the broken windows.

The postmassacre photographs of the building are documents of fact. They do not feel like "works of art," nor are they intended to be. But they have a collective ability to draw our attention to the void behind the broken windows, not only the unilluminated void where windows were broken but also the inhumane void that possessed the murderer's soul, the mournful void that overtook the survivors and the abysmal void beneath our way of life, from which a bewildering violence erupts incessantly.

Glass is everywhere in photography. From Eugène Atget's reflective vitrines to Lee Friedlander's sly self-portraiture, photographers have long been in thrall to the visual complications glass can inject into a composition. Glass is present not only as photography's seductive subject but also as its physical material. Photographs were commonly made on wet-plate negatives (glass coated with photosensitive emulsion) in the 19th century, and then on the improved and portable dry-plate negatives, before film was manufactured at a sufficient strength in the 20th century to serve as a transportable medium for photographic emulsion. Sometimes the very glass of the negative becomes part of the photograph's story.

Andre Kertesz photographed a view over Montmartre in 1929, presumably through an open window. Kertesz left Paris and moved to New York and was not reunited with the negative until the 1960s, by which time it was cracked and badly damaged. But this damage became the story. Looking at Kertesz's 1970 print of the negative, it's easy to think that what we are seeing is a photograph of a city through a broken window, perhaps one shot through with a bullet. It is in fact a photograph of a city printed from a damaged glass-plate negative.

Broken glass, and broken windows in particular, are a notable byway in photography's history. Brett Weston made one of the most striking examples in San Francisco in 1937. Weston was not recording evidence of a crime, or even particularly making a sociological comment. He was describing an abstraction with his camera, the calligraphic presence of a jagged black hole surrounded by a gray remnant of glass. What has been broken away dominates the picture. We see an outline like a map of a fictional island. There's more dark to see here than glass, and the darkness is deep and mysterious, a mouth agape in an unending scream. About this picture, John Szarkowski, the influential curator at the Museum of Modern Art, wrote that the black shape "is not a void but a presence; the periphery of the picture is background." In the middle, in that darkness, is where Weston's self-portrait would be, if the window were intact.

Brett Weston was the son of the great photographer Edward Weston, and he shared his father's attraction to the mesmerizing abstractions that everyday objects can harbor. But the younger Weston's unique talent was to balance

finely, over a long career, the competing demands of something and nothing, not simply of shape but also of the absence of shape, and to create strongly graphic pictures out of those tensions. He returned to the subject of broken windows more than once, but even in his other pictures — like one of Mendenhall Glacier, made in 1973 and printed in high contrast, or one of peeling paint on a Portuguese wall in 1971, the paint dark and the wall beneath pale — he seemed to be pursuing the same highly contrasted, strongly gestural concerns.

The avant-garde German photographer Ilse Bing's broken window in Paris, from 1934, is crisp and cutting like Weston's — but we've taken several steps back, and we see a substantial part of a building's facade, including another window. It is now therefore a picture with context, and that context is poverty. Aaron Siskind's repeated studies of broken windows zoomed farther in, excluding most of the frames and leaving us with abstract-expressionist patterns that gave as much space to glass as to its absence. Brassaï and Gordon Matta-Clark have pictures that delight in a series of broken windows, serried ranks of angular splotches, like verse after verse of a ragged song. Paolo Pellegrin's "A Gypsy Woman on the Train," made in Kosovo in 2001, is as much about the apprehensive passenger's face as it is about the damaged window next to her; together they evoke war and displacement. But these photographs all have something in common. Every broken window is a frozen shock.

Among the broken-window photographs of the Mandalay Bay resort, there are intriguing variants. In one, a spectator can be seen at ground level, with some police tape. Others take advantage of the proximity of the Las Vegas airport to the Las Vegas Strip, and juxtapose the resort with Air Force One, which brought the president on a visit three days after the massacre. One such photo shows the plane in the airport and the golden structure in the distance behind. Another, by the Reuters photographer Mike Blake, shows Air Force One flying past the building. It manages to present the glory of airplane technology and the fragility of glass in a single image (and brings to mind a photo of the Graf Zeppelin printed from a cracked dry-plate glass negative in 1929: flight and broken glass together). Blake's photo places the scene of the crime side by side with the presidential plane: It's almost a political statement. But a statement saying what? That the president is ignoring the problem? That his presence is a consolation to a frightened nation? It is a clear picture, but it has no clear political meaning.

Many of our encounters with photographs today, those taken by us or those made by others, are through the glass of a mobile phone. The mobile phone is a kind of window, and it is always on the verge of breaking. The image world, echoing the real world, is correspondingly fragmentary. This is perhaps what makes the various photographs of the broken windows at the Mandalay Bay resort so poignant. And perhaps here, we do have a political lesson. An intact window is interesting mainly for its transparency. But when the window breaks, what intrigues us is the brittleness that was there all along.