

# Why We Look

Posted Aug 27, 2015 by John Biggs (@johnbiggs)

We look because it's there. We humans look towards violence in order to define it, to decide where we must run (or if we should stand and fight). We are fascinated by suffering. There is a cognitive bias towards the terrible. Many complain that there is not enough "happy" news. The problem is that there is happy news all around us, we just don't notice. A baby smiling or someone offering someone else a spot on the bus doesn't go viral because most humans experience little kindnesses and forget them. But we don't forget violence.

We look because it's always available. There is a moment, as you watch a violent video, that you feel you need to fast forward. ISIS fighters in front of ragged flags, knives out - fast forward to the death. Gunshots on a pier - fast forward to what thousands of live viewers saw. The destruction of culture, of lives, of futures, of belief in the decency of mankind - we look because in the end we want to see how far we'll fall if given the impetus. We want to see how thin the spiderweb veil of sanity really is, how deep the well truly goes until we hit rancid water. And we look to feel superior and to give the amygdala that tickle of surprise we crave. Broadcasting is not new. We learned to sing so we could make others feel strange things, we learned to orate to raise the blood of soldiers, we learned to repeat horrible stories to outrage and distract. From the Lives Of Saints with a pierced St. Sebastian to the latest LiveLeak link, we need violence to feel whole. And that's why we love these videos. We love them. We share them - "OMG" "#prayers" - we post them, the news organizations replay them over and over. They are our reward for staying out of trouble.

We look because madmen know we will look. During the latest massacres - and there have been too many to recall here - most of the killers carried small body cameras. Why? Perhaps they thought it would help explain why they did what they did, why they took aim and fired. It's propaganda created to exonerate the madness, to explain a viewpoint so hideous that violence is the only outcome. It is designed to say "My name is Ozymandias, king of kings: Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!"

We look because the efficacy of the image is waning. Most of us will never see violence. Most of us exist in a bubble of bed, car, cubicle, car, bed. Our forebearers prayed to dry gods for that opportunity, the opportunity to be safe, to move in the world without fear. The kingdom of true violence is waning, but the violence that is left is there for us to see. The formula is simple: death plus social media equals outrage. Outrage leads to fear. Fear leads to failure. But that equation, the rules that defined it, are fast failing. Now the outrage is empty. Tweets slung from person to person like something sticky on the end of a finger, Facebook conversations that degrade into babble, viral videos that lose meaning even as they spread. It's all becoming noise. And so the image must be bigger, bolder, stranger. It must be a missive from an alien world, all dead and red and horrible.

We look because we hope they will not win. They won't win. They say the arc of history bends

towards justice. I hope so. But until it hits ground we will see another shooting and another, another beheading and another, another killer in the corner of the frame before the explosion rocks the marathon or the gun goes off. In the end, however, the kingdom of violence will be spent. I'm sure of that. How long it will take I don't know and it is a fearful pain to think on the two people who died doing their jobs last night, to think on the beheading of a scholar for keeping humanity's treasures safe, to think on the little girl turning an Uzi on a father. We look because we think we must. But we don't have to. We can look away and try to solve the problems we've created. I'm not naive but I think we're all working for the same goal. Generations have struggled to get to where we are now. Why do we insist on watching this death? The kingdom of violence can fall.