Six months ago—on July 6, 2016—Diamond “Lavish” Reynolds recorded a smartphone video that challenged and changed the meaning of its medium. Her boyfriend, Philando Castile, had just been shot by a Minnesota police officer during what should have been a routine traffic stop. Reynolds employed a new feature in her Facebook app to live-stream Castile’s death and the police response to any friends who happened to be on Facebook. Over the next few days, more than 5.7 million people would watch the video—subsequently dated and captioned “Lavish Reynolds was live” by Facebook—and struggle to incorporate its truth into their lives. Reynolds’s video is but one of a great many recent videos of black men and women suffering and dying from police violence, but the Facebook Live platform invests Reynolds’s recording with additional, devastating force.

For many viewers, the rhetoric of “liveness” (if not actual synchronicity) changed their reaction to the video, albeit in ways they found difficult to articulate. In editorials, blog posts, and comment threads, viewers describe Reynolds’s video as horrifying, but it is no longer easy to explain what that term means. Something about the video’s live feed was deeply upsetting, even for viewers who watched it days later, when its events had finished unfolding. Despite a lifetime interest in horror and a career dedicated to media studies, I struggled to make sense of the terrible sensations and paralyzing grief that wracked my body as I watched Reynolds’s video.

Reynolds’s live stream upends conventional hermeneutics of media studies, but unpacking three of the key terms associated with the recording—“Facebook,” “live,” and “horror”—can help to clarify why this particular video is so devastating. Facebook traffics in the banal and encourages users to reduce life’s complexity to status updates. But true horror is unassimilable, because one cannot respond to that which one cannot understand. Reynolds’s video horrifies by radicalizing a social network and (re)exposing the age-old contradictions of live media with events that undermine many U.S. viewers’ expectations of their country. Horror can be paralyzing, but, properly understood, it can also drive a personal commitment to change.

Since its launch in 2004, Facebook has quickly become the largest and most powerful social network in the world. It is presently engaged in an expansion effort to bring the entire human population online, a charitable initiative that would, not coincidentally, make Facebook and its services even more ubiquitous than they already are. Facebook counts almost one quarter of the world’s population among its monthly active users and generates over eight billion video views per day. The social network began offering live video streaming to certain celebrities and corporate partners in August 2015 and quickly observed an enthusiastic audience response, as Facebook users were watching live feeds three times longer on average than prerecorded video.
In February 2016, CEO Mark Zuckerberg opened Facebook Live to all Facebook users with a triumphalist claim: “we built this big technology platform so we can go and support whatever the most personal and emotional and raw and visceral ways people want to communicate are as time goes on.” To facilitate the development of such “personal and emotional and raw and visceral” communication, Facebook offered a list of “tips and tricks” to help would-be live-streamers increase their audience—and by extension Facebook’s active user count. But it is hard to “tell fans what time you’re broadcasting” or “write a catchy description before going live” when tragedy strikes suddenly or when it’s dangerously unclear what exactly is happening around you.

If Facebook seems a little confused about what “liveness” means—how a recording can be planned and described in advance yet also “personal and emotional and raw and visceral”—it is not alone. Radio and television have wrestled with this contradiction for quite some time. Hence, television scholar Mimi White finds that liveness can refer to an ontology, an ideology, an alibi, or some combination of all three. For broadcast media, White finds, liveness connotes “presence, immediacy, actuality,” even when it possesses none of those qualities. Television news strongly links liveness with catastrophe and with “particular discursive strategies for recounting events—first person, present tense, direct address to the camera, and so on.” Hence liveness is not—or not just—an ontology but a way of doing media, a rhetoric. As Nick Couldry points out, live media constitutes a society among its viewers by conveying urgency, significance, and thus a shared system of values through its direct address. Liveness is a discursive tradition that seems to bring an “us” together for an event central to a shared culture, even when there is no “us” that precedes such media coverage.

In this way liveness can be scripted yet also spontaneous and powerful; events are presented according to a script that guarantees them to be worthy of community attention, whether that community is organized around radio, television, or the internet. To that end, the most popular Facebook Live material gained favor by making lighthearted or ironic use of the ideology of liveness. Facebook pays the “social news and entertainment company” Buzzfeed to produce live streams on its site, mostly silly stunts such as “Watch us explode this watermelon one rubber band at a time!” Over ten million people have tuned in to watch the gourd pop, an event that can at least be characterized as raw if not visceral, emotional, or personal. Candace Payne—also known as “Chewbacca Mom”—racked up over 160 million viewers with a live stream of her mirthful encounter with a Kohl’s Chewbacca Electronic Mask. Entitled “It’s the simple joys in life . . .” Payne’s video further belies the notion that liveness must be serious. In keeping with Facebook’s for-profit ethos, Kohl’s responded to Payne’s video with a corporate sponsorship deal, all staged for and documented through Facebook Live.

Although the ideology of liveness can be deployed ironically—as it often is, on Facebook Live—it can nevertheless be as serious as life and death. When Diamond Reynolds starts live streaming Castile’s murder, her first words—“Stay with me”—convey unequivocal urgency. She turns the phone back and forth between her face and Castile’s while describing what just happened: “We got pulled over for a busted taillight in the back. And the police just—he’s covered—they killed my boyfriend. . . . He was trying to get his license and ID out of his pocket and, um, and he let the officer know that he had a firearm and he was reaching for his wallet and the officer just shot him.”

Reynolds begins with history, creating a record for the future, but ten minutes later, as the battery on her phone dwindles, she addresses specific friends she hopes might be watching: “Phil, Sister, call me . . . I’m on Larpenteur and Phil, Sister, call me . . . I’m on Larpenteur and Fry. Whoever can come to Larpenteur and Fry, that’s where I’m at. I’m gonna need a ride home. . . . Sister, I know I just dropped you off, but I need to be picked up. I need Alizay to call my phone.” The temporal specificity of Reynolds’s personal entreaties devastates me; this woman needed help at a specific moment, one that is now past. She needed help at
the time she was recording, not at the time I am watching. She needed help from a specific community, her own—local, ready at hand, not including a media scholar in Washington, D.C. That temporal disjunction is captured in Facebook’s caption “Lavish Reynolds was live,” and it is horrifying.

Many journalists and Facebook commenters have described Reynolds’s video as horrifying or horrible, often in the context of exploring its incapacitating effect. Sherri Williams asks what it does “to black people to constantly watch these videos that are like installments in a horrible series with the recurring themes of black death, white supremacy and injustice.”

Alex Juhasz echoes this fear, writing as “one sheltered-horrified white witness to injustice against my black friends, family, and fellow citizens.” Both Williams and Juhasz find the video incomprehensible in some sense; the injustice of Castile’s death and the urgency of Reynolds’s live stream defy assimilation in the context of Facebook’s quotidian corporatism. That incomprehensibility is precisely what makes the video horrifying.

Horror is a word used too lightly and too often in U.S. media; it has been rendered nearly synonymous with startle, shock, and disgust by the seemingly endless parade of films, television shows, video games, and other media that are marketed under that genre. Horror is not the same as shock or disgust, nor as fear, terror, anxiety, or dread, so while Reynolds’s video does elicit those responses, it has a deeper effect as well. To quote the philosopher Robert C. Solomon, horror is a profound “recognition that things are not as they ought to be.” Exploring that definition can explain why Reynolds’s video is so devastating, so debilitating, for many who choose to watch it (and many, like Juhasz, who do not).

Horror is difficult to define because horrible things typically rupture one’s most fundamental assumptions about the world and leave one inarticulate, fumbling for words. Solomon observes that “in horror, one stands (or sits) aghast, frozen in place . . . Horror involves a helplessness which fear evades.” He therefore describes horror as a spectator emotion, which is not to say that it is limited to spectators or that all one does, upon being horrified, is watch horribleness unfold. Rather horror is rooted in recognition, a recognition like: that man is dying because a policeman shot him without cause. The police shoot people, black people, for no reason at all. Such recognitions tend to be deeply destabilizing; hence, Solomon observes, “it is the standard case in horror that there is nothing to do, no action to be taken, so no action can be triggered.”

Truly horrible things don’t frighten; they don’t make people yelp or clutch the arms of their chairs in
Some may claim that if horror means a profound recognition that things are not as they ought to be or not as one expects, could come to pass. Given the amount of horror media created and consumed these days, one might expect horror to be well defined in popular culture, its affective nuances well known. However, the horror genre does not engage “horror” as such. Most so-called horror movies do not horrify their spectator or even try to. They may startle her with loud noises and sudden cuts, disgust her with blood and decomposing flesh, or frighten her with dreadful monsters. A good horror movie is likely to perform all these functions, along with a dozen other generic conventions, but it is unlikely to induce horror.

Still, maybe Reynolds’s video should not be called horrifying in a culture where “horror” refers principally to a fiction genre. If the meaning of a word is its use—as the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein argues—then “horror” no longer denotes extreme epistemological upheaval but rather fear, shock, disgust, and whatever else scary movies make their viewers feel. I am sympathetic to this argument, because Reynolds’s video affected me in a way no horror movie ever has or could. Any association with the fantastic feels like a profound injustice to Castile’s memory, for horror movies have all but co-opted this crucial term in common parlance. That’s a big problem, though, because ceding horror to fiction does a profound social disservice, especially to movements like Black Lives Matter that meet horror with collective action.

Horror, Solomon asserts, is a basic emotion, “in that it has its origins in infantile helplessness and also displays characteristic hardwired facial expressions.” Horror serves an important developmental and social function; it helps people recognize critical deviations from their assumptions about the world or their cultural norms. Horror functions as an affective safety check: it lets one know that something has gone very, very wrong. Horror may induce feelings of helplessness or paralysis in the moment, but it can also encourage action. Horror can bring people together, not just gasping in a movie theater but also outside, in the streets, unified in a fight for change.

When Diamond Reynolds live-streamed the immediate aftermath of her boyfriend’s murder, she challenged viewers’ perceptions about the uses of Facebook and forced an assessment of their responsibilities as consumers of “live” media. Reynolds’s courageous recording reappropriated the social-network-as-broadcast-network, while her direct appeal for help exposed just how intrinsic distance and nonsimultaneity are to live media. Nearly six million people have watched Reynolds’s feed, most of them too late and too far away to do anything about the death unfolding onscreen. Facebook promises connection—and Facebook Live promises simultaneous connection—but Reynolds’s recording of Castile’s death illustrates how shallow those connections typically can be. It exposes the profound political and social disconnections that enable such racist violence to continue across the United States. In its implications and its form—the visceral impact of its raw camerawork, offscreen expletives, and direct address to specific viewers—Reynolds’s video horrifies, but that is not to say that it does not also galvanize.

In the weeks since July 6, 2016, dozens of Facebook Live users have appropriated the platform to broadcast political events and atrocities as they happen. The night after Castile’s
murder, Mark Kevin Bautista used Facebook Live to stream a sniper’s attack on the Dallas police during a Black Lives Matter protest. Eight days later, Turkish citizens used Facebook Live and Periscope (Twitter’s live-streaming app) to document an attempted military coup in their country and, since then, the countercoup repression that followed. No doubt the platform will have evolved further by the time you read this column, its social status changing to reflect constant updates—some political, most not.

Reynolds’s precedent has created a political utility for this social media novelty. Her video challenges viewers to reimage liveness as a participatory media practice rather than merely a spectator mode. Now it is viewers’ responsibility to extend their participation beyond online media: from computer networks to city streets, from living rooms to town halls, from recording history to changing the historical record. Horror has a role to play in stimulating social change, but only if the horrified remain committed to forging a world where things are as they ought to be. In short, they must be committed to justice. Feeling horrified is not enough; if it’s not the beginning of something else, then it’s worth nothing at all.

Notes

14. Ibid., 141.
18. For example, Facebook user Ömer Özdemir posted multiple live videos of the coup and its aftermath; see “Ömer Özdemir,” Facebook, www.facebook.com/omer.ozzdemir. However, many live videos of the Turkish coup have since been removed from users’ Facebook pages. Images and from descriptions of the videos are still available in articles about the coup. See Tim Chester, “Periscope and Facebook Live Help Document Attempted Coup in Turkey,” Mashable, July 15, 2016, http://mashable.com/2016/07/15/turkey-attempted-coup-live-stream/#HzOY888hFGqX;

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