Watching the Photograph

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Abstract

This essay proposes critical information literacy (CIL) to counter disinformation. The methodology endeavors to complement the dominant paradigm of fact-checking in media literacy efforts while arguing for a broader understanding of information production and circulation within historical and political contexts. The main method in CIL is watching the photograph, defined by Ariella Azoulay as the "repeated observation of a photograph", through which the study traces and analyzes the virality of Raffy Lerma's 2016 photograph Pieta—a powerful image depicting the atrocities of the Philippine drug war. Building on archival and documentary principles, the interdisciplinary study reveals how the sustained visibility of Pieta was driven by activist engagement rather than algorithmic amplification alone, underscoring the necessity of proactive, critical engagement with networked digital media to challenge authoritarian disinformation and uphold historical truth. Ultimately, watching the photograph is framed as a method of care, resistance, and political intervention.

Keywords: critical information literacy, documentary, disinformation

Background

This essay was first written in 2019 as a component of my creative thesis project titled *Anatomy of Compassion* (AOC). Submitted as a Digital Media and Cultural Studies course graduate requirement at the Goldsmiths University of London, the project was an art-based research in the form of a documentary installation that investigated the politicization of an indifferent viral image. It analyzed a well-known photograph of the Philippine drug war—the *Pieta*. On July 23, 2016, photojournalist Raffy Lerma took the photo of a grief-stricken woman, Jennelyn Olayres, cradling the body of her dead lover. The man, Michael Siaron, was a pedicab driver. He was killed due to his alleged involvement in illegal drugs. A placard near his lifeless body read "I am a drug pusher." These placards were ubiquitous markers left by perpetrators in the crime scenes of the extra-judicial killings of the "war on drugs" in the Philippines. Siaron was one of more than the 6,000 killed during the first six months of Rodrigo Duterte's administration whose presidential campaign hinged on eliminating illegal drug trade in the Philippines (Regencia, 2016). The photo was first published online on July 24, 2016 by Inquirer.net. It went viral and has since then been dubbed as Pieta, the photograph that called the attention of the global press to the Philippine "war on drugs" impunity (Hegina, 2016; Phippen, 2106). Consequently, the photographer Raffy Lerma stepped up to the role of representing the Nightcrawlers, an informal group of photojournalists, journalists and filmmakers documenting the slaughter (Democracy Now! 2017)

The topic was informed by the author's involvement as a human rights advocate and artist with RESBAK (Respond and Break the Silence Over the Killings). RESBAK is a group of artists, media practitioners and cultural workers who banded to decry the killings in 2016. In 2025, more than ten years hence, Duterte was finally issued a warrant of arrest and is currently on trial by the International Criminal Court for committing crimes against humanity. Nevertheless, the disinformation that put him in power was likewise instrumentalized by the Marcoses for their political comeback with the 2022 presidential win of Ferdinand "Bongbong" Romualdez Marcos Jr. Indeed, the parallel rise of fake news and autocratic governments is a global malady and the Philippines was "patient zero" (Deinla et al., 2021). Filipina journalist Maria Ressa's pioneering reports about the insidious role of social media

driven disinformation in the outcome of the 2016 and 2019 Philippine elections (Ressa 2016a, Ressa, 2016b, Hofileña, 2016) have earned her the 2021 Nobel Peace Prize. In her Nobel Lecture, she highlighted the need for "information ecosystems that live and die by facts", referring to the rationalist framework of fact-checking or authentication that has become a "journalistic subfield associated with the press' traditional watchdog function" (Labiste, 2022). Fact-checking has since then become the frontline in the campaign against disinformation. Developments in 2023 and 2024 saw the Philippine government under Marcos Jr. launching nationwide media/information literacy programs to counter fake news, deploying the same journalistic method of fact authentication. However, in 2025, Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg announced that social media company Meta Platforms will discontinue its US fact-checking program, causing an uproar worldwide amongst journalists. I resume and conclude this essay to contribute to the media/information literacy campaigns that combat disinformation in an increasingly menacing networked digital era.

Methodology

Correspondingly, this essay also serves as a constructive criticism of the current information literacy paradigm. Is fact-checking enough to counter fake news? Traditional information literacy programs focus on fact-checking but often ignore the deeper structural forces shaping media production and dissemination. The awareness of information production and dissemination as a situated sociocultural process is an emergent locus in library studies called the *critical literacy* (McNicol, 2016) or *critical information literacy* (CIL) (Downey, 2016). It is essential to critically examine both the information literacy campaign and its institutional purveyors, as these knowledge institutions not only fund and drive such initiatives but also define the standards for validating information. The abovementioned provide an overview of the profile of the most influential of these knowledge institutions (Nobel, Facebook/Meta, government) as largely Western orthodox and/or regulatory in nature.

An analysis of Jonathan Ong and Jason Cabañes' (2019) research on networked disinformation in the Philippines provides us an example of the nuanced ways in which information production is controlled, either through validation or the deliberate absence of it. The results of their research on the 2016 Philippine elections outcome shifted liability from low-level wage-earning trolls to a spectrum of middle-class complicity—ranging from the executives of ad and PR industries that crafted the Duterte presidential campaign, to the progressive leaders of the Philippine Left who have allegedly failed to counter the Marcoses' myth due to "their failure to listen" to a public disgruntled by the undelivered promises of post-EDSA liberal democracy (Ong, 2022).

Ong and Cabañes' analyses overlook the role of Philippine colonial history in shaping the conditions for fake news production, particularly how U.S. anti-communist propaganda embedded at the grassroots level laid the groundwork for modern disinformation. The anti-communist infrastructure and tactics introduced during the Cold War were later weaponized by the Marcoses and Dutertes to consolidate political power through swaying critical votes from the masses conditioned by the state to fear insurgency (Arumpac, forthcoming). Thus, the new middle-class oligarchs are not merely political clients of advertising and PR firms—they are highly-skilled technocrats who actively shape media narratives and influence public communication. Failing to acknowledge their role in the disinformation ecosystem in the country absolves not only the Dutertes and Marcoses but also reinforces the broader colonial and imperialist narrative that underpins these power structures. CIL surfaces these well-known but unvendible sociopolitical narratives suppressed by powerful neoliberal modern knowledge institutions to interrogate how information production and dissemination has and continues to shape societies.

Combatting disinformation is a stronghold of journalists and technocrats. I am interested to know how other sectors can also substantially contribute to the campaign. Taking

after critical information studies that is "cross-disciplinary and offers concrete structures as points for analysis that are relevant to all disciplines of study" (Downey, 2016), CIL is utilized in the essay as an overarching interdisciplinary methodology that harnesses and merges key ideas from documentary filmmaking, library and archival studies, and digital media studies. To complement fact-checking/authentication, it seeks to analyze the authenticity of a viral photograph. Borrowing from the principles of documentary and archives that problematize the concept of truth and provenance, *authenticity* is defined in this study as the narrativization of an image in relation to an archive that authenticates it.

The next two sections provide key literature about image, photography and digital labor, followed by an analysis of the virality of the *Pieta*—and Lerma's trajectory as the photographer of such a politicized photograph. The discussions entwine foundational concepts from respective disciplines to establish the authenticity of the viral photograph. The last section describes the documentary installation process, aiming to visualize one of the inventive ways CIL can be deployed in analyzing the many forms of information in various platforms.

The Role of Images in the Philippine Drug War

The study focused on a sole image due to deficient accessible data on the Philippine drug war. The lack of reliable data itself was the main premise of the research. In 2019, various groups have already started working on databases on the Philippine drug war. Official sources included data from the Philippine National Police (PNP), the Philippine Drug Enforcement Agency (PDEA), and the Dangerous Drugs Board (DDB). Independent researches were made by media organizations, the academe, and civil society organizations. Between the two sets of data, most of the independent data sets were kept undercover for various reasons, such as to protect the victim-families. Consequently, state official sources became the main source of information for the public. However, the PNP identified only 6,600 drug-related killings from July 1, 2016 to May 31, 2019 (Tupas, 2019). The total number of casualties was funnelled into numerous categories of the nature of death to keep the death toll low (Quintos, 2019; Kishi et al. 2018). The wide discrepancy between and among sources, ranging from 6,600 to 27,000 as of April 2019, established the unreliability of the state's official count of victims (Coronel, 2019).

The countless but unaccounted-for casualties of the drug war is an aggregate that is as undefined as historian Vicente Rafael's (2020) account of the "phantasms of revenge" (p. 927). In his analysis of the Philippine drug war images, Rafael concluded that the photographs' agency pale in comparison to the dreams of the kin of victims to kill the killers. Accordingly, dreams provoke more than the images of dead bodies that have only elicited indifference. These dreams echo Duterte's violence and in consequence, paradoxically provides fertile ground for authoritarian populism. Both the uncountable victims and Rafael's conjuring of these violent visions function as specters that cast an uneasy presence over Philippine society. They evoke the Kantian sublime, embodying the overwhelming and incomprehensible while simultaneously emerging from the human capacity for rational imagination and its limits. Within the study of aesthetics, the sublime's emotional spectrum—ranging from pleasure to terror—primes individuals to identify what is universal, pure, and moral. Kant's notion of the sublime is rooted in disinterestedness, a perspective that sustains the "object's unified form in a state of indeterminacy—a suspension that is purposive without having a purpose" (Dalton, 2015).

Walter Benjamin took on the task of redefining purpose in aesthetics in his essay, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,* published in 1935. In the same year as his original publication, Leni Riefenstahl premiered *Triumph of the Will*—a state-commissioned documentary glorifying Nazism and Hitler, widely praised for its technical

mastery. Benjamin's essay astutely anticipated how the liberatory potential of cinema could just as easily be co-opted and weaponized by those in power. During this time, Benjamin was also drafting *Paris, Capital of the 19th Century*, later published in 1938 as *The Arcades Project*. This expansive study meticulously cataloged Parisian historical artifacts, tracing the emergence of urban commodity capitalism. While researching the archive of property relations, Benjamin, as an exiled German-Jewish intellectual, was also witnessing how fascist Italy, Nazi Germany, and the Soviet Union strategically deployed the arts in their bids for global dominance. Just a few years before the outbreak of World War II in 1939, Benjamin warned that fascist regimes' aestheticization of politics would ultimately culminate in the most extreme capitalist enterprise—war. Set against a backdrop of political upheaval, his conclusion on the instrumentalization of art by fascism was both urgent and clear:

"Communism replies by politicizing art." (Benjamin, 2008, p. 42)

Benjamin recognized the need to reclaim art, restoring its political agency by aligning its purposivity with class struggle. Mark Poster's sobering response to Benjamin's laconic thesis statement was that the great expectations for cinema to foster socialist revolution never materialized (2019). Nonetheless, Benjamin's hope for the politicization of art merits a rereading through *Jetztzeit*, a notion of time he expounded in the essay *Theses on the Philosophy of History* published in 1969. Hannah Arendt annotated Benjamin's *Jetztzeit* as an idea that pertains to *nunc stans*, a Christian philosophy of the atemporal and eternal present time (p.261). But in the context of his materialist analysis of the history, Benjamin's *Jetztzeit* necessitated a redefinition outside of its theological underpinnings (Kathib "Messianic"). Following his "figure of thought" or the method of inscribing philosophical thoughts in tangible imagery, Benjamin outlined the task of the historian as not one of recounting history as commoditized progress and productivity but one of critical curation of events to determine a monad. The monad refers to a wholistic perspective of history that is dialectical and seething with "a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past" (Benjamin, 2008, p.263).

As a rejoinder to Rafael, this essay latches on to Benjamin's ideation of a monad as the mandate of the historian to comprehend that what they conceive as a whole is one that materializes. It foregrounds recognizing and resisting the sublime hegemon that reproduce—in various nuances, forms and imaginations prone to either valorizing or laying prostrate before capitalist and authoritarian phantoms—the prevailing aesthetics of fascism.

Watching the Photograph: A Posthuman Method

At the frontline of the campaign against the Philippine drug war, the Nightcrawlers became the key source of access for local and international media outfits. As the kill list increased, so did the visibility of the mediators who likewise gained recognition for their documentations. The robust circulation of the drug war images in liberal media was the initial premise of Rafael's essay. He asked: "What might account for the limits of photographic intervention in the drug war, on the one hand, and the continued popularity of Duterte, on the other?" (Rafael, 2020, p. 919). The mode of inquiry rested on an ideal inverse proportionality between the visibility of the photographs/photographers and the popularity of Duterte and his drug war. The false equivalence indirectly placed on images—produced by photojournalists and media workers obliged by profession to document and circulate representations of current events—the impossible burden of countering authoritarian populism. Rafael cited Ariella Azoulay's (2008) concept of *civil contract of photography* to conjure an ambivalent imagined community of spectators desensitized by images of impunity, thereby reifying the failure of the photographic critique of power. However, Azoulay's thesis on indifference was itself the

strength of a photograph. The idea of the *civil contract of photography* purged the photograph of a singular interpretation. It was this openness that re-ontologized photography as a site of political agency that can accommodate social negotiations among all the stakeholders of the image. Azoulay explicitly located this covenant outside of ruling powers. Rafael's critique, on the other hand, read the drug war photographs within the framework of consumerism and authoritarianism. The pedantic referencing and overturning of the emancipative underpinnings of Azoulay's discourse already received backlash from the Nightcrawlers during an earlier presentation in the *Photographing Duterte's Drug War* panel as part of the *Watching the Philippines, Reporting Duterte* conference at Columbia University in 2017 (Rafael, 2017).

The tension between interpretation and the autonomy of art is a longstanding issue. In her 1964 essay *Against Interpretation*, Susan Sontag criticized how interpretation mirrors commodity culture, where excess analysis dulls sensory engagement with art. Similarly, Hito Steyerl (2012), in her thesis on the poor image—low-resolution, piracy-driven visuals that proliferate in the digital sphere—argued that speculative valuation displaces art, ushering in the "conceptual turn of capitalism" (p. 42). This shift, she contended, gave rise to information capitalism, where the poor image circulates within structures of exploitation and devaluation. Both Sontag and Steyerl highlight how interpretation has been instrumentalized in reducing art and images to their exchange value—or lack thereof.

To rehabilitate the image, Azoulay denied the photograph of the sole authorial. Freed from ownership or the singular source of meaning, the ambivalent photograph is open to "repeated observation" that fosters deeper, collective insights beyond the fetishization of the visible (2008, p. 391). Likewise, Steyerl finds agency in the **"**velocity**"** of the poor image: its constant circulation degrades resolution, evading ownership's control, while its popularity forges alternative circuits of meaning beyond dominant forces (2012, p. 41). Sontag, in turn, offers a strategy for resisting the reduction of art to a manageable, commodified object—"by making works of art whose surface is so unified and clean, whose momentum is so rapid, whose address is so direct that the work can be…just what it is" (1966, p. 11).

The failure of interpretation is a key factor in determining the framework of this study as critical posthumanist, a theoretical lens defined by Rosi Braidotti as the critique of the humanities characterised by masculine Western reason and human exceptionalism (2019). Employing CIL as methodology and critical posthumanism as theoretical framework, this essay unequivocally supports the call for justice for the victims of the Philippine drug war. It prioritizes praxis over dissociated humanities scholarship, redirecting focus to the urgency of the issue. By re-evaluating *Pieta*, the study seeks to establish the significance of a photograph that has played a pivotal role in the campaign against the drug war. Its approach to assessing the image draws from the polemics on interpretation, which offer analogous frameworks. Sontag's "momentum", Azoulay's "repeated observation", and Steyerl's "velocity" represent different articulations of the photographic image's agency through movement. Through the act of "watching the photograph" (2008, p. 25)—paying attention to its circulation, reproducibility, and persistence through time and (cyber)space—this study moves beyond interpretation, which is often laden with subjectivities of the interpreter. Instead, as a critical posthumanist project, it examines the technological migration of the image, treating its aesthetic form as a database of virality and metadata that constructs its narrative as a "moving image."

Reconstituting Authenticity: The Role of the Documentary and the Archives

Following the movement of *Pieta* illustrates what Christian Fuchs (2013) called a "playful digital work" in that it reified the digital labor that went into sustaining the visibility of a viral digital photograph. It followed the process of building an archive by tracking down the iterations of the digital photograph online and gathering its technical metadata. Watching

the viral digital photograph then became both an archival and documentary practice. These two institutional practices that problematize indexicality inform the conceptual reconstitution of authenticity in this study.

Film critic and theorist Bill Nichols (1991) stated that in cinematic documentary practice, the authentic record is the material documentation of the event that contains the moving image. With the raw material itself comprising the authentic, issues on authenticity in the documentary discipline mainly focus on the veracity of the recorded representation with regard to the realism it claims to portray. At best, what documentary filmmaking guarantees is the evidentiary nature of its discipline, a limitation it shares with the archival discipline.

Archival theorist Luciana Duranti asserted that authenticity "only warrants that the record does not result from any manipulation, substitution, or falsification occurring after the completion of its procedure of creation, and that it is therefore what it purports to be (2002, p. 3)." The authentic record/archive, as evidence of an activity, is valued not for its veracity but for its reliability. The reliability of a record is secured with a form, or a record with date and signature; and a procedure of creation, or "the body of rules according to which acts of portions of them are recorded (2002, p. 6)." Crucially, authenticity is unverifiable and only an assumption.

Deducing from this standard archival definition of authenticity set by the ISO 15489, a document that established the standards of records management, Jens Kastenhofer pointed out the loopholes in the core concepts of archival studies. In her study on forgeries in archives, she questioned the concept of reliability based on objectivity "that is impossible for a human being to attain (2015, p. 168)." Hence, the authenticity of a record that is premised on its reliability "can never be more than an informed opinion" (2015, p. 176). The abundance of forgeries in the history of archives invites a rethinking of such phenomenon not as anomalies but instead "a source of documentary practice in itself." their authenticity marked "to the extent to which the document is assumed to be authentic. (2015, p. 176)." Kastenhofer proposed that the authenticity of the anomalous record can be recuperated by the archive itself that lends authenticity by acknowledging its disruptive presence.

Kastenhofer's reorientation of authenticity as a reiterative process is a helpful way of finetuning the method of watching the photograph through CIL. As a general rule, the library and archival disciplines put prime on the authenticity of the original digital object through its provenance. The concept of the provenance of an object is tied to its intrinsic value that has long been used by archivists to describe historical materials that should be retained in their original form rather than as copies. The purpose of such verification is to ensure the quality of the institutional memory. However, this rule simply does not hold for the networked digital era where copies abound (Moreno et al., 2014). In this light, Kastenhofer's reorientation of authenticity—that does not come from the original object but instead is determined by the archive that authenticates the copy—enables a more expansive analysis that factors in the different contexts and conditions with which the digital photograph was produced, published and reproduced. Meditating on its authenticity became the viral photograph's own agency in telling its story. Crucially, this narrativization provides lead to the institution that bestows its authenticity on the ambivalent viral digital photograph.

Mapping the Virality of Compassion: Pieta as a Case Study

In a digital photograph, the technical metadata establishes its administrative (creation date, location, format), descriptive (visual content information) and copyright information[5]. (*Figure 1*). *Pieta*, with filename RRL_2432.JPG, was from an array of digital photographs taken by Lerma in the Siarion crime scene on July 23, 2016.

ExifTool Version Number : 11.20

File Name : RRL_2432.JPG
Directory : .
File Size : 9.7 MB
File Modification Date/Time : 2019:04:28 10:57:06+01:00
File Access Date/Time : 2019:05:20 22:39:16+01:00
File Inode Change Date/Time : 2019:05:20 22:39:14+01:00
File Permissions : rwxr-xr-x
File Type : JPEG
File Type Extension : jpg
MIME Type : image/jpeg
Exif Byte Order : Little-endian (Intel, II)
Make : Canon
Camera Model Name : Canon EOS-1D X
Orientation : Horizontal (normal)
X Resolution : 72
Y Resolution : 72
Resolution Unit : inches
Modify Date : 2016:07:23 01:29:36
Y Cb Cr Positioning : Co-sited
Exposure Time : 1/320
F Number : 3.2
Exposure Program : Shutter speed priority AE
ISO : 25600
Sensitivity Type : Recommended Exposure Index
Recommended Exposure Index : 25600
Exif Version : 0230
Date/Time Original : 2016:07:23 01:29:36
Create Date : 2016:07:23 01:29:36

Figure 1. Portion of the technical metadata of the original Pieta photo retrieved through Exiftool

At the time of taking the photo, Lerma was a staff photographer of Inquirer hence, technically, *Pieta* is owned by Inquirer. The Siaron crime scene is one of the many similar crime scenes in 2016 with dead bodies and placards denouncing the dead as illegal drug users. The similitude of all these photographs was not a coincidence. The scenes were staged in order to intensify the message that these deaths wanted to convey. Rodrigo Duterte's presidential campaign promised the eradication of the illegal drug trade and he was fulfilling his pledge by sanctioning the police to conduct the drug war campaign. The ownership and creative direction of the *Pieta* was not that of the photographer. Instead, Lerma and his colleagues who reported to duty were instrumentalized in the transmission of the state message warning the unproductive sectors of society.

The virality of *Pieta* refers to two parts—the initial and the organic. In their research on virals, Karine Nahon and Jeff Hemsley (2013) identified virality as the sum of social aspects of sharing the information, its speed, and reach in terms of number of spectators and distance that the information travelled. The virality of *Pieta* was established during its initial widespread circulation within the extensive media network of Inquirer, a newspaper of record with a reach of 54 million people. A highly provocative newsworthy image, it viscerally engaged the public to the horrors of the ongoing impunity of the drug war. However, what this study was interested in was the *organic* virality of the *Pieta*, pertaining to the relational fabric that sustained its visibility after it firmly established its movement online. After the

preliminary momentum, a viral settles to a steady expansion before the onset of its decay or slow disappearance. In the intermediate state before its decay, the viral has shed its shock effect opening it to a multitude of reflective and reactive interpretations.

In a viral digital photograph, technical metadata takes the form of information about the webpages that uploaded and/or shared the image—including the URL, IP address, last date modified, among others. Using the Google Image search engine primarily, augmented by Google, Facebook, and Twitter search engines, the researcher manually identified websites and social media platforms that shared the *Pieta* photo. These website URLs were then run through an algorithm that scraped the photo URL of the uploaded *Pieta* and yielded the metadata of the uploaded *Pieta*, particularly the "Date Modified" information, which indicates when the photo was uploaded online (*Figure 3*). The photo URLs were then rearranged chronologically. The research gathered a sampling of 132 postings—or the extent in archival terms—of *Pieta* in various websites from its first its upload in July 23, 2016 to May 29, 2019. The sampling is not in any way comprehensive but indicative. A chronological arrangement of the trajectory of the viral image in webspace through time revealed the forces that maintained the visibility of *Pieta* for more or less three years.

```
--2019-05-29 09:56:42-- https://pbs.twimg.com/media/Cqk0pvlUMAABMQj.jpg
Resolving pbs.twimg.com (pbs.twimg.com)... 93.184.220.70,
2606:2800:134:1a0d:1429:742:782:b6
Connecting to pbs.twimg.com (pbs.twimg.com)|93.184.220.70|:443... connected.
HTTP request sent, awaiting response...
HTTP/1.1 200 OK
Accept-Ranges: bytes
access-control-allow-origin: *
access-control-expose-headers: Content-Length
cache-control: max-age=604800, must-revalidate
Content-Type: image/jpeg
Date: Wed, 29 May 2019 08:50:52 GMT
Last-Modified: Tue, 23 Aug 2016 21:45:46 GMT
Server: ECS (lcy/1D1E)
strict-transport-security: max-age=631138519
surrogate-key: media media/bucket/3 media/768203103195639808
X-Cache: HIT
x-connection-hash: 959f781cef86abd3156a4d741b34bc3b
x-content-type-options: nosniff
x-response-time: 272
Content-Length: 154340
Length: 154340 (151K) [image/jpeg]
150K 100% 1378G=0.02s
2019-05-29 09:56:42 (7.11 MB/s) -
Modification date of file = (2016, 8, 23, 21, 45, 46, 0, 1, 0)
```

Figure 3. Metadata of a copy of Pieta uploaded in Twitter scraped through Beautiful Soup script

In 2016, the initial postings of the *Pieta* were made in official local and international news outfit websites and their social media platforms. This was followed by reiterations in religious and personal blogs and websites and on Facebook. During the first year of its visibility, the *Pieta* was mostly reposted along with messages of moral outrage over the killings relating to the religious undertones of the *Pieta*. Some pro-administration supporters

and citizens living in and outside the country also posted it to commend Duterte's swift action on perceived criminal activities. The plurality of the meanings attached to the *Pieta* mirrored the multiplicities within the wide coverage of the liberal news media circuit.

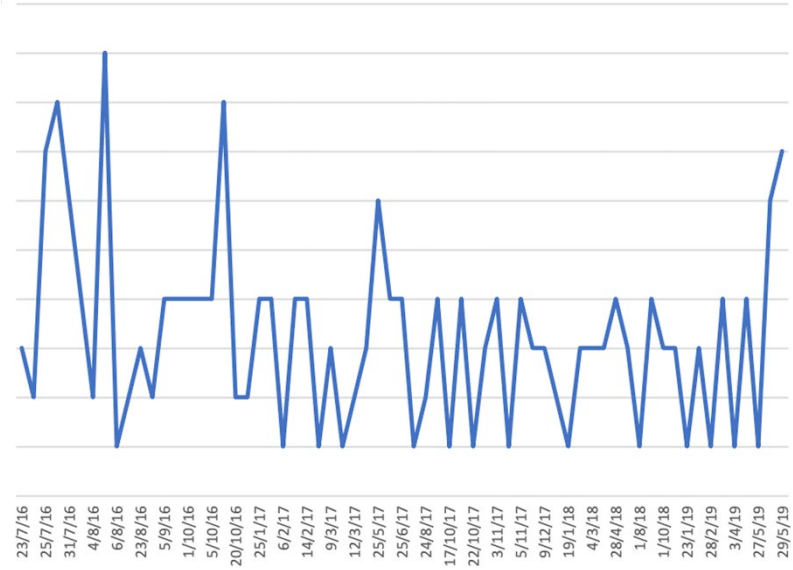

Figure 4. Graph of Pieta virality from 2016 to 2019.

In the virality graph of the *Pieta* (*Figure 4*), its visibility went down from its initial release in 2016 and rose dramatically in 2017. Around this time, the images of carefully curated bloody tableaus of the "war on drugs" slowly came to an end, in part due to the pushback by sectors of civil society. Most of the postings of the *Pieta* in 2017 were made in Twitter by individuals. In the researcher's interview with Lerma in 2019, he recounted:

> We were covering the stories in the hopes of stopping this violent Drug War. But it wasn't. Actually, it became more like a fuel for the president. He did not stop. Then it came to a point that called for (state) accountability.

The second rise of the *Pieta*'s visibility, after its initial circulation, saw an organic collective digital labour authenticating the viral photograph by identifying Lerma as the photographer. In 2017, Lerma resigned from his post as a newspaper photojournalist to become a freelance photojournalist. He then actively participated in the campaign against the Philippine drug war and invitations to his talks and interviews were posted by participants and organizers in Twitter along with the *Pieta*, to identify his authority. As stated, Lerma does not own the *Pieta*. What he imbued to the viral photograph was the reliability of his testimony as witness/photographer and advocate. The effectivity of the campaign efforts against the drug war was such that it was promptly countered by the digital labour of state-sponsored disinformation machinery in the same year. In Facebook, postings of the *Pieta* were made to channel accountability to drug syndicates and not the police. A pro-administration website of the The Manila Times, headed by Duterte supporter Dante Arevalo Ang, posted the *Pieta* to argue on the veracity of its virality.

The visibility of the *Pieta* slightly slumped in 2018 and climbed again in 2019. Its postings in 2018 showed more international news outfits reporting about the Philippine "war on drugs" story, a development brought on by the International Criminal Court launching a preliminary examination into the human rights violations of Duterte's drug crackdown (International Criminal Court). Noticeably, the individual Twitter posts went down as the Nightcrawlers, along with human rights advocacy groups, focused on gathering material

evidences to meet the stringent requirements of the ICC—including authenticated photographs, crime scene artifacts, and video interviews. In 2019, the withdrawal of the Philippines from the ICC relaunched the visibility of the *Pieta* in social media and local and international news websites as Lerma and fellow advocates as well as local advocacy groups engaged in talks to support the ICC investigation of the Duterte administration's impunity (Supreme Court of the Philippines, 2021).

Fundamentally, it was the collective proactivity that sustained the movement of the *Pieta*. Its organic virality rhythm followed the actions of the advocates and the sympathetic public. The *Pieta* initially circulated as content produced for and by the mainstream media but, upon the author's decision to join the ranks calling for state accountability, the persistence of its visibility was in due course powered by aligning with a larger campaign that sees the drug war as a class war—a war against the poor (Wells, 2017; Pangilinan et al. 2020). The specific space inhabited by the targeted group is a historically constructed vulnerability. The Filipino urban poor are mostly rural migrants seeking better pastures or urban dwellers dislocated by resettlement programs and urbanization (Constantino-David and Ofelia Regala-Angcangco, 1975). They converged in the slums where the killings are most dense, whose very heterogeneity was exploited by the Duterte administration that appealed to the mistrust of fellow Filipinos through its campaign against illegal drugs—a trade that flourished in the slums as a function of maximizing the capacity of the body to endure day and night shifts in multiple jobs to make ends meet.

This study concludes that the authenticity of *Pieta* as a viral digital photograph is rooted in the country's long history of class struggle. Drawing on the works of Heather MacNeil, Bonnie Mak, and Luciana Duranti, Kastenhofer elaborated on the complexities of archival authenticity:

> The authenticity of a record is not just presumed because of the records it is archived with, but because of the alleged trustworthiness of the archive as a whole. The archive is considered trustworthy by users, and this trust extends to the authenticity of its entire holdings. Therefore, records in the archive are held to be authentic because the archive as an institution lends them authenticity (2015, p. 167).

The question of trustworthiness, in the case of the *Pieta*, is fielded at the revolutionary perspective of history as an archive. Such politicization--anchored in what Benjamin called "the wholistic perspective of history that is dialectical" (2008, p. 263)--cannot be quantified nor verified in neoliberal standards-based assessment instruments that recognize only short-term outcomes. Ultimately, the contribution of the critical information literacy, through the disciplines of documentary and archives, are cognitive tools to necessarily complicate fact-checking campaigns against disinformation, as the menace mutates further in the coming years to serve the interests of the few who have access to technology, capital, and political power. The true danger of disinformation lies not in the fake news it generates but in the historical contexts it seeks to erase.

Vitality Beyond the Virtual: A Call to Action

Focus is a core competency in the information era. The capacity to see movements as through CIL in the technological landscape is a critical technical skill that requires an understanding of *what needs to be watched,* as well as a creative skill, as it entails strategizing how to relay the story. This skill is the *practice of care*. Technology philosopher Yuk Hui posited an alternative possibility of a technological culture beyond the current extractive informational capitalism by rethinking archival as a practice of care. An awareness that control can be had in the virtual world starts with a deliberate understanding that we can be archivists of our data and not just users whose digital labour is harnessed. In Hui's "Archivist Manifesto"

(2013), he proposed for individuals, as archivists, to regain the knowledge and skills of organising data and digital objects, and in turn, recoup the control appropriated by alienating Internet service providers. Hui's idea of care, that emphasized the "links between objects and archives," relates to a notion of care that Azoulay saw as crucial in understanding the dynamics of the covenant among the image and its spectators (2013, p. 7). Watching the photograph is a transformative act of "caring for its sense" (Azoulay, 2008, p. 25).

Watching the viral digital photograph, on the other hand, creates a database from this practice of care. And this practice of care transcends platforms. It is important to note that the virality information gathered for the research did not end with its reiterations online. Appropriation of the viral usually turns it into a meme (Shifman, 2013). The viral status of the *Pieta* did not translate it into one. As a politicized viral image, the gravity it carried moved directly from the virtual straight to the physical space after its decay. Its appropriation happened offline and in place of meme was the politicized image stabilized as protest art. In 2020, at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, a Philippine political art collective, Panday Sining Makati, appropriated the *Pieta* by painting it as a graffiti on a street wall, calling attention to the extrajudicial killings that only intensified under Duterte's militarized response to a health crisis. In 2023, sculptor Julie Lluch Dalena "tattooed" painted images of the *Pieta* on her sculptures of body parts to remind the spectators of the unceasing impunity despite and because of unrelenting crises brought by the pandemic and a newly instated regime under the son of the deposed dictator Ferdinand Marcos Sr.

In 2019, along with the first draft of this essay was produced a multimedia installation about the *Pieta* as a graduate requirement in UK. An interactive work, it asked the public to weave the canvasses printed with the incomplete image of *Pieta* by putting physical lines to parts among the canvasses. The documentary installation endeavoured to be illustrative of the study that followed the narrative of an image through CIL. Mostly an exercise in data visualization, the project visualized CIL through the three-dimensional recreation of the *Pieta*. The 12 photos provided by Lerma, along with other Siaron crime scene photos found online, were fed to Regard3D software, an open source structure-from-motion or photogrammetry program that can create 3D models through mapping a series of photographs taken from different viewpoints.For the 3D recreation of the Siaron crime scene, the photo set underwent through six steps in the 3D software. First, (1) it employed homography or the mapping between image pairs within the set. For this particular software, homography was done through the A-KAZE algorithm that identified image keypoints. Second, another algorithm, the LIOP (Local Intensity Order Pattern), located each keypoint with a descriptor.These two algorithms established the similarities between images, literally visualized as lines that connect the keypoints between image pairs (*Figure 5*).

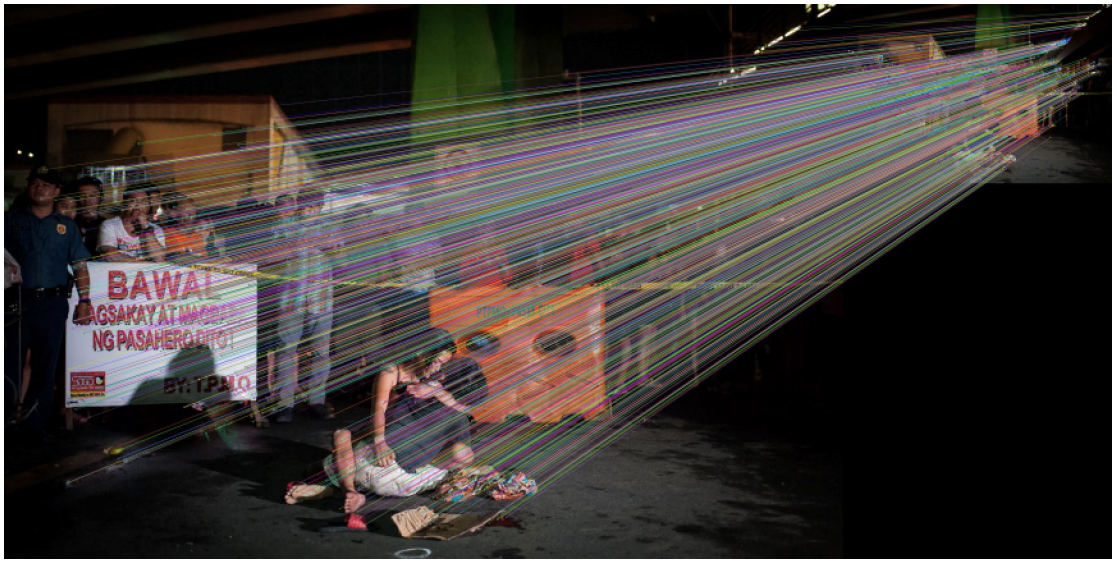

Figure 5. Homography between Pieta and image pair.

The third step was the (3) tracking of connections among image pairs. From the correlations of all image pairs, the application then moved on to the fourth step which was the (4) triangulation of the positions of the matched objects in space. From this positioning of all matches, the (5) point cloud was generated showing a semblance of the three-dimensional recreation of the photograph (*Figure 6*). The last step or the (6) "surface generation" was not done for the project.

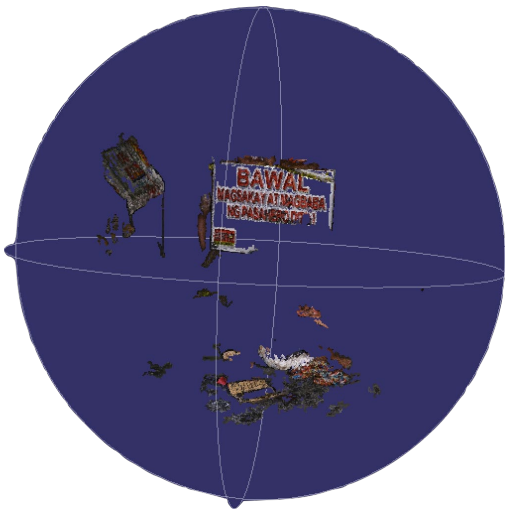

Figure 6. 3D reconstruction of Pieta at point cloud stage.

The limitations of the given *Pieta* photo set include: (1) low-light conditions and (2) sparse photo quantity. Given its inadequacies, the A-KAZE algorithm was only mainly able to identify geometrical lines, points and angles such as the letters in signages, placard, and the stripes of the cloth at the foot of the weeping woman. The 3D-mapped crime scene was then returned to the 2D planar form. The *Pieta* photo and its image pair, identified and matched by the software, were manipulated in Photoshop to remove all the elements that the Regard3D

software was not able to map. This image pair was printed in separate canvases of varying sizes (*Figure 7*).



Figure 7. Partially-mapped 3D reconstruction of Pieta and image pair in planar form

The final documentary installation contained: the partially-mapped image pair of the 3D reconstruction of *Pieta*, each printed on a canvas; and a video of scrolling virality metadata and 3D reconstruction metadata.

By showing the reconstruction of the movement of a viral digital photograph through its technical metadata parallel to its 3D reconstruction technical metadata, the documentary installation invited speculative inquiry into how iterations of the *Pieta* online can also yield tangible volume. How can the social engagement of a politicized viral be reconstructed as a volumized monad of care? Each iteration of the viral photo contains incremental variations of a variable e.g. GPS location, IP address, timestamp, et al. Following the logic of photogrammetry 3D reconstruction paradigm—where similarities can be mapped and connected, volume from the movement of a viral image can also be triangulated and constructed. The documentary installation invited the audience to see a technological form of the CIL that embodies the affective labor of digital laborers. Specifically, it invited the audience to physically and communally perform homography between the *Pieta* image pair canvasses. Through the meticulous act of weaving to connect keypoints between the *Pieta* image pair where the organic human shapes were rendered null by the software, the practice of care in archival was performed and embodied as a social gesture.

Proactive collective digital labor and activist engagement hold great transformative potential. Neither a result of social media algorithms nor media framings, watching the *Pieta* in this study yielded a counter-narrative that was marshalled through a deliberate curation of actions. Indeed, in an era dominated by disinformation, artificial intelligence, invisible digital labor and visual pollution, *watching the photograph* is an archival intervention that becomes an act of care and resistance.

As a methodology, CIL overcomes the limitations of traditional research paradigms in analyzing images in an era of visual saturation, hyper-connectivity, and AI-driven manipulation. Rather than focusing solely on interpretation or exchange value, it examines the movement of images—their circulation, transformation, and the narratives they generate. This emphasis on activity of the image across platforms highlights its narrativity that is crucial for critically interrogating the socio-political structures that shape the production, dissemination, and manipulation of information. Likewise, CIL contributes to the fact-checking paradigm for combatting disinformation by foregrounding the role of power, technology, and historical struggle in shaping digital narratives. As such, CIL is an open invitation for experts from various disciplines to participate in expanding its lexicon to adequately capture, define and understand various multimodal networked digital systems phenomena.

As authoritarian regimes and corporate-controlled digital platforms continue to shape information landscapes, the imperative is clear: neutrality is no longer an option. The archive that authenticates *Pieta* is not a static repository but an evolving battleground of historical and political struggles. To sustain the vitality of the protracted fight for truth and justice, we must not only consume information critically but actively curate, preserve, and mobilize knowledge. Watching the photograph is not just an act of seeing—it is a commitment to interrogating power and resisting the architectures of digital and social control.

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