

## 2.12

# Snap-Shot: After Bullet Hit Gaynor

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When, on Monday, 15 August 1910, the *Seattle Star* topped its front page with William Warnecke's photograph of "the scene on board the Kaiser Wilhelm der Grosse a moment after [New York City Mayor William] Gaynor had been shot," the information contained in that photograph was no longer news—the paper had printed the United Press service's same-day wire account the previous Tuesday and had closely covered the story ever since (Fig. 2.12).<sup>1</sup>

But if the shooting itself was no longer breaking news, the "remarkable picture taken by a newspaper photographer who happened to be aboard [the Hoboken-docked ship]" still was. For as quick as Warnecke and his camera had been, and for as efficient as the technologies of halftone and wire-news already were, until the institution of wire-photo services beginning in 1935, the wide geographic distribution of news photographs was still a relatively slow business.<sup>2</sup> The news and its images necessarily traveled on different schedules. Published in the *New York World*—its offices just across the Hudson River from the shooting—just hours after the incident and on the Pacific Coast six days later, Warnecke's speedy and on-the-spot "Snap-Shot After Bullet Hit Gaynor" would suffer a substantially longer delay before entering into its fuller cultural currency as an emblem of newspaper photography's essential program of subtracting any temporal gap between an event and its mediated public knowability.

At its second annual exhibition at Rockefeller Center in December 1936, the New York Press Photographers Association (NYPPA) awarded top prize in the "spot news" category to Warnecke's then twenty-six years old news photograph. The picture prevailed over some 440 other photographs included in the exhibition (among them hundreds more contemporary, of which several were comparably well-timed). In making such a selection in what was its well-publicized contest's second year, the NYPPA could be said to have been assigning the criteria of value in "spot news" photography's still nascent field on the basis of a picture that substantially preceded it.<sup>3</sup> But then such was Warnecke's fortune that long-past August morning to have been pointing his 4x5 ICA camera in the direction of New York City's mayor at the very moment that the mayor himself became alert to the bad news that he had been shot. Value in "spot" news photography is and always has been measured in the first place by the degree to which it is punctual. As a category of daily newspaper production, "spot news is the specifically *unforeseen-event-as-news*," journalism scholar Gaye Tuchman explains, and it is news only insofar as it is delivered promptly: "spot news events are unscheduled; they appear suddenly and must be



Figure 2.12 Seattle Star, 15 August 1910, page 1. Courtesy of Library of Congress and Office of Washington Secretary of State.

processed quickly.”<sup>4</sup> Essential in its very immediacy to the modern concept of the newspaper whose burden is as temporal as it is thematic, the good spot news photograph then is the timeliest of all pictures and the hardest kind to capture. It strives toward near-total simultaneity, collapsing any perceived temporal, spatial, or interpretive boundary between the unpredicted event and its circulated description.<sup>5</sup>

In its topical and urgent captured subject matter, as much as in its internal meditation on the quick but not instant time of news, and its accretion of telling details concerning the newsmaking culture of its day, Warnecke’s picture functions almost perfectly as an allegory of the spot news photograph. Incident and its only-just-delayed understanding radiate as if in waves from the center of the picture. The curve of Gaynor’s lapel seems almost to trace the arc of his hand’s path from his bloodied neck to the point before him where he himself could inspect it and so become his own shooting’s witness; the blood on his palm providing visual confirmation of the confusing event that he himself had only just experienced but could not yet fully understand. Two men, having heard the gun’s report, have been propelled to his aid. One braces the collapsing mayor while engaging Warnecke visually, perhaps in search of external confirmation of the truth of the circumstance he suddenly inhabits, perhaps in condemnation of the photographer’s seemingly passive role in providing that same confirmation. The other man rushes forward along the ship’s floorboards as if through the portal behind him, his own intervention delayed by his distance from the event. Beyond that portal we find in silhouette the forms of four men who stand behind a wall and so at a substantial experiential remove from the episode that would be the news here. Soon they are likely to become actors in this story, but they, like this picture’s subsequent public, will depend on the mediation of those nearer to the scene for any full understanding of what has occurred.

The picture is further distinguished as a member of its class by the distinctly journalistic conditions of its subject, production, and distribution. Gaynor, who was shot (gravely but not mortally) by a disgruntled constituent, had just the year before prevailed over New York *Journal* publisher William Randolph Hearst in the contest for his seat. The assassin, one J.J. Gallagher, was made alert to the opportunity—just as Warnecke’s editor had been—by the pre-publicized fact of the Mayor’s planned departure for Europe that morning. For his part, Warnecke, one of only five photographic staffers on Joseph Pulitzer’s New York *World* (Hearst’s great yellow-journalistic adversary), had arrived late to the scene but on time for his picture on account of his humdrum newsman’s obligation to photograph, earlier that morning, a horse set to be retired by the New York City Fire Department in favor of its new motorized fire truck.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, what celebration this picture enjoyed in 1910 was not unconnected to that moment’s shifting technological negotiation with the problem of speedy conveyance: much of its value to its initial public lay in its almost unprecedented same-day speed to local press at a time when telegraphy allowed big stories to be reported almost instantly while no adequate mechanism was in place (too few photographers, too little infrastructure) to ensure such stories their appropriate photographic counterparts.<sup>7</sup>

For all this, the NYPPA jury left no record of its collective reasoning in electing Warnecke’s old news picture the best in its category. But the Museum of Modern Art’s then librarian and future first curator of photography Beaumont Newhall, whose West 53rd Street office was just four blocks from the exhibition, was receptive to the result of that jury’s appraisal, and in his own landmark spring 1937 exhibition surveying the photographic arts, he offered some limited accounting of the picture’s distinction. Exhibiting the photograph as the very ideal of press photography, Newhall gave the once merely and variously captioned picture a proper title, “The Shooting of Mayor Gaynor,” and, in that exhibition’s influential and frequently reprinted catalog, he flagged the picture’s distinctly temporal achievement, articulating its special bearing on our evaluation of press photography’s singularity:

Sensing the exact instant to release the shutter is the most important factor in the making of any photograph. With press photographers, this sense becomes so acute as to seem instinctive . . . A fraction of a second's delay, and the remarkable picture of the shooting of Mayor Gaynor would have lost its terrific force; it seems as if William Warnecke must have released the shutter at the same moment that the assassin fired the gun.<sup>8</sup>

Newhall's enthusiasm for the picture and his assessment of it, whose rhetoric and title situate Warnecke's exposure within the almost impossibly quick temporal span of the gun's discharge, gained real traction within a museum whose early commitment to photography was marked less by a concern for press photographic value as such than by an obsession with the camera's distinctive temporal competence as a machine.<sup>9</sup> In 1943, Newhall's spouse, and then acting curator, Nancy Newhall, exhibited Warnecke's picture in her exhibition "Action Photography," where it hung alongside such precise exemplars of the camera's wider entanglement with instantaneousness as Harold Edgerton's 1939 *Firing a Mauser Automatic (Exposure 1/1,000,000 second)*.<sup>10</sup> But such invited comparison with Edgerton's extraordinary achievement points to the fundamental inappropriateness of Newhall's evaluative criteria, for indeed nothing could be more apparent in Warnecke's picture, once measured against Newhall's hyperbole (and Edgerton's more perfect suitability to it), as the fact that Warnecke had exactly *not* made his exposure "at the same moment that the assassin fired the gun," but only a moment later.

Beaumont Newhall's and the Museum of Modern Art's investment in photography's technological capability to isolate a precisely chosen instant led him to see in Warnecke's photograph a kind of instantaneousness that was simply not there. Newhall's concept of medium isolated the deftly wielded camera and its unique claim to the instantaneousness of the quick and timely exposure. This led him to miss what most matters in Warnecke's photograph as a *press photograph*, capturing, as it does, not the instant of Gaynor's shooting but instead the moment of that event's coming into being as a matter of concern—as news.

Newhall's blinkered description of the picture is not entirely misplaced, however, and some bridging of the ideals of medium specificity and instantaneousness will productively set Warnecke's picture into its proper context. Where in Newhall's and the Museum of Modern Art's reckoning with press-photographic possibility, instantaneousness had one meaning, in the world of journalism and of the NYPPA it had another valence altogether.

The instantaneousness of the photograph as the prompt expression of well-managed machines had long been held by journalists to be the medium's chief virtue. But the photographic medium to which journalism's instantaneousness was conceived to adhere was not so much that trapped within a press photographer's camera (such as Newhall would have it), but rather that of the camera and its captured image as they functioned within photographic journalism's full operational structure. Within this wider complex the camera was privileged only insofar as it operated in consort with an evolving set of technologies and professional protocols, ensuring both the timely picture's initial production and the speediest translation of that image into the widest possible newsprint circulation. Such an understanding of press photographic instantaneousness was already being articulated at the dawn of the enterprise. In an essay promoting photography's advantage over handmade engravings for newspaper publishers in the still medium-transitional year 1906, Stephen Horgan, an early innovator in the development of halftone process who was responsible for the first mechanical reproduction of a photograph in a daily newspaper in 1880, drew little distinction between the camera-in-the-field and its photomechanical engraving process:

The public demand[s] sensational news pictures with as few minutes elapsing between the occurrences and the sale of the papers containing the pictures. This necessary haste . . . prevents artistic illustrations . . . The most important consideration [is that] the printed product must be cheap in price. It is with knowledge of these latter requirements that the modern illustrated daily newspaper must be judged.<sup>11</sup>

Racing past the typewriter and sketchbook in their hobbled dash to the deadline, the camera offered reporters the fastest way to record the news. And it was the halftone screen—a secondary photographic application translating the press photographer’s primary, tonally gradient images into the discontinuous grids of dots suitable for the cylinder relief printing compatible with newspapers’ high-speed rotary presses—that offered the fastest way to print and circulate that record, as the news. For Horgan, the photographic technologies of the camera and the halftone aligned as one photographic apparatus serving mechanical objectivity and procedural efficiency (and so economy) in equal measure.<sup>12</sup>

Three years earlier the photographer and critic C.H. Claudy had already insisted upon the photographer’s new operational burden in the face of the increasingly ubiquitous convergence of news-camera and halftone screen, as the latter technology came to be embraced by ever more newspaper publishers in the decades following its perfection in the 1880s:

The papers *must* have photographs of events or places as soon as possible after the orders are given the photographer. No matter what . . . difficulties . . . you must secure your negative, make your print and deliver it to the editor in time for him to have a plate made which will be finished before the hour of going to press. This one item of speed is frequently worth more than all the rest of a make-up of a picture put together.<sup>13</sup>

For Claudy the timeliest exposure by even the fastest camera is of value to the press photographic enterprise only insofar as its image is promptly inserted into the network of human and mechanical practices which cohere in the institutional conduct of newspaper production. So far so good on the local stage, but in the absence of the wire-photo services and their virtually simultaneous far-flung transmission of copy *and* its attending picture, “spot” newspaper illustration, even where a good and timely picture existed, was still very much a hybrid affair including both halftones and artists’ illustrations (wanting for a photograph, the *Seattle Star* illustrated its first report of Gaynor’s shooting with a handy but unrelated wood-engraving).

A nascent discourse when Warnecke took his well-timed picture, then, press photographic instantaneousness was, by the late 1930s when Newhall encountered Warnecke’s picture, an idea whose time had come, now fully institutionalized into emerging textbook pedagogy. Introducing their popular manual, *Pictorial Journalism*, Laura Vitray, John Mills Jr., and Roscoe Ellard isolated “instantaneousness”—understood precisely as the successful and prompt alignment of event, cameraman, camera, press, and public—as photography’s signal contribution to modern communication and “modern thought” more generally, and argued its central importance to the newspaper’s survival in the competitive face of the newsreel and the radio:

The development of modern photographic and engraving processes might not have been so rapid and so amazing if what they had to offer had not so well answered the demand of the modern mind for a quality best described as “instantaneousness.” As . . . the boundaries of communication have been pushed farther and farther out . . . [m]odern thought . . . insists on arriving . . . at knowledge by

the shortest route. That is the surest reason why picture reporting, the “instantaneous” route to realization of the world’s events, has succeeded column after column of mere words out of the daily paper.<sup>14</sup>

Here, photographic instantaneousness refers not to Newhall’s privileged photographic capacity to freeze an instant but to the press photographic enterprise’s hard won and ever improving ability to reduce the delay between an event and its newspaper public. The value of this subtractive competency was well-recognized by 1910 but only realized as a professional norm by the late 1930s with the convergence of technological and cultural conditions reaching far beyond the introduction of lightweight cameras, compact flash equipment, and the intrepid photographers who increasingly used them. Vitray and her co-authors reckon press photography to include, in addition to these, a mature production complex consisting of high-speed presses, halftone reproduction, and wire photography services; the wholesale escalation by thoughtful newspaper editors and production staff of photography from a novel means of illustrating a story to a legitimate technology for reporting one; and the attendant proliferation of cameras and technicians working on the production end, all ready to distribute the timely picture when it came.

What had been an aspirational ideal in William Warnecke’s 1910 was, by Newhall’s and the NYPPA’s 1936–7, an operational certainty, one even bearing a name, “spot news photography,” whose more spectacular achievements might garner a prize. Warnecke’s picture’s quick four city-block hop from Rockefeller Center and the New York Press Photographers’ values, to the Museum of Modern Art and Newhall’s values, suggests how well it functioned in the interstice of these two discursive fields as they were being independently elaborated, belatedly, in the 1930s.

## Notes

- 1 “Snap-shot after Bullet Hit Gaynor,” *Seattle Star*, 15 August 1910: 1; “Mayor Gaynor of New York Shot Down by Assassin is between Life and Death,” *Seattle Star*, 9 August 1910: 1.
- 2 See Zeynep Devrim Gürsel, “A Short History of Wire Service Photography,” this volume. On the procedures of early twentieth-century newspaper photography, see Ulrich Keller, “Early Photojournalism,” in David Crowley and Paul Heyer, eds., *Communication in History: Technology, Culture, Society* (New York: Pearson, 2002): 170–8.
- 3 “1910 Photo of Attack on Gaynor Wins Prize at News Men’s Show,” *New York Times*, 5 December 1936, 21. Google’s Ngram application does not yield a result for the phrase “spot news photo” before 1934.
- 4 Gaye Tuchman, “Making News by Doing Work: Routinizing the Unexpected,” *American Journal of Sociology* 79.1 (July 1973): 120. Italics in original.
- 5 On the centrality of timeliness to any definition of the news, see Bernard Roshco, “Newsmaking,” in Howard Tumber, ed., *News: A Reader* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999): 34.
- 6 John Faber, *Great News Photos and the Stories Behind Them* (New York: Dover, 1978): 24.
- 7 The picture was published as an “Extra” in the *World* on the evening of 10 August. For one contemporary account of this picture’s temporal achievement (which neglects to mention the name of the photographer), see “Unusual Snapshots Taken at Thrilling Moments,” *New York Times*, 14 August 1910: 7.
- 8 Beaumont Newhall, *Photography: A Short Critical History* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1938): 79.
- 9 On Newhall’s technological commitments, see Sophie Hackett, “Beaumont Newhall and a Machine: Exhibiting Photography at the Museum of Modern Art,” *Études Photographiques* 23 (May 2009): 177–91. His successor Edward Steichen would include the picture in his 1949 “Exact Instant,” an exhibition of press photography whose very title appears to have been drawn from Newhall’s treatment of the Gaynor picture.

- 10 See "Checklist B," "Action Photography," Exh. 240, 1943, Museum of Modern Art, New York.
- 11 Stephen H. Horgan, "The Evolution of Daily Newspaper Illustrating," *Graphic Arts and Crafts Yearbook* 1906: 223.
- 12 On the history of the halftone, see Jacob Kainen, "The Development of the Halftone Screen," *Annual Report of the Smithsonian Institution 1951* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian, 1952): 409–25.
- 13 C.H. Claudy, "Press Photography," *The Photo-Miniature* 5.51 (June 1903): 107. Emphasis in original.
- 14 Laura Vitray, John Mills, Jr., and Roscoe Ellard, *Pictorial Journalism* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1939): 4.