

OPINION



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Morbid voyeurism

RECENTLY I observed a group of elderly men at a café looking at the photo of a woman's face shorn off by a shotgun. They passed the phone around and gawped at the image. They seemed blind to the fact that before her life was taken from her, that woman was someone loved by her children and relatives, a human being worthy of respect even in death.

One of the worse violations of a person's dignity is probably that of gaping at their mangled corpse after they have been killed in a horrific accident or grisly murder. The act of covering a blood splattered corpse soon after death is meant to prevent our eyes from examining the remains of what once was an intact and valuable individual. It preserves the honour that every human life is entitled to, even when lost.

The ubiquity of smartphones has given casual bystanders the ability to capture the immediate moments after someone's tragic end. In many cases, there is ample time to do so before the emergency services and law enforcement are on the scene. This puts the bystander in the position of having to decide whether to perpetuate their intrusive stares by snapping a photo or else shield the corpse from the morbid voyeurism of their peers.

When bystanders choose to take a photo of what is probably the victim's most vulnerable moment, they are making a conscious decision to souvenir an event that – while out of

the ordinary – does not really concern them nor deserve to be documented by them. They are trampling over the victim's dignity by giving themselves the means to gawk at the gruesome scene whenever they wish to do so.

Social networking sites and messaging apps have helped nurture many people's penchant for sharing photos that record their daily experiences – whether ordinary or not. Those bystanders who use their phone to create a memento of what they witnessed at a tragic

event, soon after have to decide whether to share the photo of the victim's body or not.

While a fascination with death and its physical manifestations has long existed within different human cultures and is even celebrated in art and cinema, this does not excuse anyone armed with a smartphone from respecting the dignity of those who lose their lives in tragic circumstances.

Observing those men studying the snapshot taken soon after a horrific femicide reminded me of those other instances when I had heard of photos of dead bodies making the rounds, a woman blown up by a bomb and a biker crushed by a truck. It made me think of the people I love and of how I would feel if their death were to be documented and shared on strangers' phones just because of someone's decision to give in to voyeuristic tendencies rather than exercise empathy and show respect toward others.

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18-year-old Italian student was handed a four-year suspended sentence and fined €15,000 after getting caught etching his initials on one of the main doorways of Ggantija temples



thority Board – would far outweigh any number of (admittedly appalling) 'disfigurements', inflicted upon those same stones by the occasional random 'juvenile delinquent', here and there.

According to Cambridge archaeologist Dr Simon Stoddard – who has worked extensively on Malta's megalithic temples, over the past 30 years – "not only would the proposed development be roughly the same height above sea level as Ggantija; but the deep nutritious soil deposits around the front of the development will be utterly destroyed."

This, he added, "would most likely result in the loss of invaluable archaeological information"; with other objectors – including NGOs like 'Flimkien Ghal-Ambjent Ahjar'; and photographers like Daniel Cilia – also arguing that future approval of this 'monstrosity' may even come at the cost of Ggantija's own status as a 'UNESCO World Heritage site', no less...

And yet, not only have the Maltese authorities so far failed to even lift a single, solitary finger, to prevent this 'sacrilege' from taking place... but, by failing to throw that application clean out of the window (as it so clearly should have, when it was originally received), the Planning Authority is clearly imparting the message that...

... no, actually. In this case, at least, there is no real 'contradiction' between our popular perceptions, and the 'reality on the ground'. So if we all still somehow feel – in spite of all the apparent 'evidence' to the contrary – that the local authorities are NOT, in fact, 'doing enough to protect our cultural heritage from vandalism'...

... it's only because it's perfectly true, at the end of the day. They're not. All the local authorities are REALLY doing, by coming down so heavily on that (I won't go as far as to say 'poor'; but I will certainly say 'unfortunate') 'little Italian brat', is... well, the only thing they've ever done, when faced with 'threats to Malta's cultural heritage.'

They're being 'strong with the weak, and weak with the strong'. As bloody usual...

of Architects had issued a stark warning to the effect that: "Malta risks losing its historical and artistic patrimony to large-scale construction projects"...

... and among those 'large-scale projects', which pose a direct 'danger' to Malta's priceless cultural heritage: there happens to be at least one application to build a "three-storey, 22-apartment block" – complete with "20 garages at basement level" – less than 200 metres away from the same Ggantija Temples, themselves...

... in other words: slap-bang in the middle of the UNESCO buffer-zone, of the self-same 'priceless national heritage monument', that the Maltese authorities were so very quick to 'protect', last week: when it was threatened by the immature actions of a single, solitary, Italian teenager (who, let's face it, must also have been a particularly 'dim-witted' specimen, at that...)

Meanwhile, it bears repeating that the damage that this proposed development would certainly cause to Ggantija Temples, if the permit is actually granted – a decision which, incidentally, has yet to be taken by the Planning Au-