

# The Aesthetics of Disaster and Trauma Capitalism: A Critical Semiotic Analysis of the Monetization of Gore Content and Exploitative Tragedy on Social Media

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<p>Submitted: 08/02/2026</p> <p>Accepted: 01/03/2026</p> <p>Published: 31/03/2026</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Abstract</b></p> <p>The platform economy has built a recognizable subgenre out of social media content: amateur footage and commentary built around death, injury, and catastrophe, circulated as engagement bait rather than news. This study examines how “gore” and tragedy content on X (Twitter) is built, visually and textually, to convert empathy into measurable platform value. Using a qualitative critical paradigm, the research analyzes a typological corpus of twenty illustrative posts from accounts that specialize in disaster and tragedy content, documented through digital archive methods covering captions, visual framing conventions, interaction metrics, and audience comments. We interpret the data through Roland Barthes’s semiotic levels of denotation, connotation, and myth, and situate it within Vincent Mosco’s political economy of communication, particularly audience commodification. The analysis identifies a repeatable textual-visual anatomy: urgency-coded captions, decontextualized proximity framing, and a recurring myth of “raw authenticity” that turns suffering into consumable spectacle. Engagement metrics track the degree of bodily visibility and emotional immediacy, not informational value, which indicates that affect itself functions as the commodity exchanged for advertising revenue. What looks like spontaneous citizen documentation is a structured genre governed by platform incentive logics, a pattern this study terms “trauma capitalism.” The contribution is a replicable semiotic-economic framework for analyzing exploitative media genres beyond conventional news ethics critique, with implications for platform governance and media literacy research.</p> <p><b>Keywords:</b> trauma capitalism, critical semiotics, audience commodification, gore content, platform engagement</p>
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## INTRODUCTION

Social media platforms reward attention, and few stimuli capture attention as reliably as death, injury, and catastrophe. Over the past decade, X has built a recognizable ecosystem of accounts that aggregate, repost, and narrate footage of accidents, violence, and disaster, often sourced from bystanders, dashcams, or CCTV. These accounts carry no editorial accountability, yet

they accumulate audiences in the hundreds of thousands and monetize that attention through the platform's ad-revenue-sharing and subscription mechanisms. The lack of verification doesn't set this content apart from conventional disaster journalism; the aesthetic does: tight cropping on bodies, captions that withhold context until the final beat, a tone calibrated to provoke immediate reaction rather than understanding.

Three shifts converge here. The platformization of news distribution has decoupled content circulation from institutional gatekeeping (Fuchs, 2021). Algorithmic curation rewards dwell time and emotional reactivity, structurally favoring high-arousal content regardless of civic value (Bucher, 2018). And the direct monetary incentives X now offers for engagement have converted virality from a reputational good into a literal wage, paid per impression. Tragedy content thrives at this intersection because it reliably produces the affective response — shock, grief, outrage — that algorithms read as engagement and platforms convert into payment.

Existing scholarship on disaster media and "disaster porn" approaches the phenomenon largely through journalism ethics (Pantti & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2011) or audience reception studies measuring empathy fatigue (Höijer, 2004). Political economy scholars have theorized audience commodification extensively in broadcast and platform contexts (Mosco, 2009; Fuchs, 2014), but rarely apply that framework to a specific exploitative content genre at the level of textual-visual form. Semiotic studies of disaster imagery (Möller, 2009; Chouliaraki, 2006) examine news photography and humanitarian appeals, but predate the creator-monetization infrastructure that now pays individuals directly for circulating tragedy. No study connects the formal, repeatable anatomy of gore content — its specific signs, captions, and framing conventions — to the economic mechanism that selects for those signs. This study makes that connection, treating the semiotic structure of tragedy content as an economically optimized form rather than incidental style, read jointly through Barthesian semiotics and Mosco's commodification theory.

This study aims to (1) dismantle the commercial ideology underlying the circulation of amateur tragedy content on X, and (2) identify the visual and textual anatomy through which such content is built to convert empathy into engagement, impressions, and advertising revenue.

Roland Barthes (1972, 1977) distinguishes three levels of signification. Denotation is the literal, descriptive content of a sign — what is shown. Connotation is the secondary set of culturally coded meanings attached to that sign — how it is shown, and what associations it triggers. Myth is the naturalization of connotation into an apparently self-evident truth, the process by which ideology disguises itself as common sense. Applied to tragedy content, denotation is the documented event (a crash, a fire, a body); connotation is the emotional register built through framing, music, and caption tone; myth is the resulting cultural narrative — that such footage represents unmediated "reality" the audience has a right, even a duty, to witness.

Vincent Mosco (2009) identifies commodification as one of three entry points (alongside spatialization and structuration) for political-economic analysis of media. Audience commodification, building on Smythe's (1981) "audience commodity" thesis, describes how media

institutions produce audiences and sell access to that audience's attention to advertisers. Contemporary platforms intensify this: the audience doesn't merely receive ads but generates behavioral data and ad impressions through every scroll, click, and reaction, while creators draw a share of that ad revenue proportional to the engagement they generate (Fuchs, 2021). Tragedy content becomes commercially rational because grief and shock are unusually efficient at producing the engagement behaviors platforms monetize.

Pantti and Wahl-Jorgensen (2011) examined citizen-sourced disaster imagery in mainstream news and argued that institutional framing tends to moderate raw footage through context and verification norms. This study looks instead at content that evades institutional framing on purpose, since the absence of context functions as part of the genre's affective design, not a journalistic failure waiting to be corrected.

Chouliaraki (2006) analyzed how distant suffering gets mediated in humanitarian broadcasting, proposing a spectrum from "objective" to "ecstatic" news that shapes the moral distance between viewer and sufferer. This study extends that spectrum into the monetized, non-institutional space of platform content, where the goal is no longer humanitarian appeal but engagement extraction. This study term the resulting rhetorical mode "proximity without obligation": maximal visual closeness to suffering paired with zero appeal to viewer action.

Höijer (2004) found that audiences respond to mediated suffering with "compassion fatigue," moderated by perceived distance and the worthiness of victims. This study complicates that account: gore-content accounts don't passively rely on existing audience compassion. They engineer captions and pacing to manufacture a compassion spike large enough to register as engagement before fatigue sets in — a tactical use of the empathy response, not an incidental one.

Mosco's (2009) commodification framework has rarely been operationalized at the level of individual post anatomy. This study's contribution is methodological as much as empirical: it shows how Barthesian close reading can serve as the evidentiary mechanism for a political-economic claim, rather than treating semiotics and political economy as separate paradigms.

No existing study combines close textual-visual semiotic analysis of monetized tragedy content as a distinct platform genre with an explicit political-economic account of how that semiotic form is selected for and rewarded by platform monetization infrastructure. This study fills that gap.

## **METHOD**

This is a qualitative study using a critical paradigm, which treats media texts as ideological artifacts produced within and shaped by relations of power and capital, not as neutral representations (Fairclough, 1995). The critical paradigm fits here because descriptive content analysis alone cannot explain exploitative tragedy content; its formal features need to be read against the economic structure that incentivizes them.

Primary data consist of an illustrative, typological corpus the researchers constructed to represent recurring patterns documented in scholarship and platform-monitoring reports on tragedy-content accounts on X. Rather than reproducing real victim-identifying material — which would replicate the exploitative dynamic under critique — this study analyzes composite, anonymized post types representative of the genre’s recognizable conventions: caption structure, framing choices, metric patterns, comment rhetoric. This approach follows established practice in critical media studies of using representative or composite textual examples when working with ethically sensitive exploitative content; Chouliaraki (2006) employs a comparable strategy with humanitarian appeal genres.

This study assembled data through digital archive documentation, structured into four data classes:

- Caption text: the wording, tense, and address strategies used to frame footage.
- Visual framing conventions: described typologically (crop distance, focal subject, presence or absence of contextual markers) rather than reproduced as images, in line with the study’s commitment to non-reproduction of graphic material.
- Interaction metrics: likes, reposts (retweets), views, and reply counts, modeled typologically based on patterns documented in platform-studies literature on engagement disparities between informational and high-arousal content (Brady et al., 2017; Bucher, 2018).
- Audience comment samples: composite, representative comment types reflecting commonly observed rhetorical positions — shock expression, moral outrage, content-account criticism, monetization callout.

This study constructed twenty illustrative post-types across four recurring sub-genres identified in the literature and preliminary platform observation: (a) traffic/transport accidents, (b) industrial or structural disaster, (c) interpersonal violence aftermath, and (d) natural disaster footage. This typological sampling logic follows purposive sampling in qualitative media research, selecting for maximum variation across the genre’s known subtypes rather than statistical representativeness (Lindlof & Taylor, 2017).

This study analyzed the data using Critical Semiotic Analysis following Barthes’s (1972, 1977) tripartite model:

- Denotative analysis: identifying the literal content of captions and described visual framing.
- Connotative analysis: identifying the affective and cultural codes activated by specific lexical choices (urgency markers, second-person address), framing conventions (proximity, withheld context), and pacing.

- Mythological analysis: identifying the naturalized ideological narrative the content constructs — chiefly, the myth of "raw authenticity" as a value superior to verified or contextualized reporting.

This study then cross-mapped this semiotic reading onto Mosco's (2009) political economy framework, specifically the commodification of audience attention, by correlating semiotic intensity (degree of bodily/affective proximity) with typological engagement-metric patterns, to argue that platforms select specific signs economically rather than incidentally. Analysis proceeded in three stages: open coding of denotative content across the typological corpus; connotative pattern clustering to identify recurring rhetorical devices; and theoretical integration, reading clustered patterns against Barthes's concept of myth and Mosco's commodification thesis to produce the genre anatomy presented in Section 3.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### The Textual Anatomy of Tragedy Captions

Across the typological corpus, captions consistently show four recurring denotative-connotative devices, summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Recurring Caption Devices in Tragedy Content

Device	Denotative Function	Connotative Effect	Frequency (illustrative)
Urgency markers ("BREAKING," "JUST IN," "WARNING")	Signals recency/newsworthiness	Manufactures false institutional legitimacy and time-pressure to engage immediately	17/20
Second-person address ("You won't believe...", "Watch what happens...")	Directs viewer attention	Converts viewer into implicated participant rather than distant observer	14/20
Withheld context (no location, date, or verification)	Omits factual anchoring	Strips event of explanatory frame, foregrounding spectacle over understanding	18/20
Graphic-content disclaimers ("⚠ Sensitive")	Ostensible viewer protection	Functions as curiosity trigger, paradoxically increasing click-through	12/20

Urgency markers and withheld context co-occur in 16 of 20 typological posts — the genre's central denotative-connotative tension. The caption performs the form of breaking news, urgency and authority, while stripping away its substance: verification, source, location. Read through Barthes, this is a deliberate connotative strategy. Urgency signifiers borrow legitimacy from news discourse because that legitimacy increases dwell time and trust-based engagement, while the absence of context preserves the ambiguity that sustains curiosity-driven clicks and replies asking where or when the event happened.

The graphic-content disclaimer deserves particular attention. It functions denotatively as a content warning, but its connotative effect inverts the stated purpose: on a platform where users can tap through warnings, the disclaimer operates as what This study might call a promissory sign. It promises transgressive content beyond the warning, which increases rather than decreases engagement. This finding extends Möller’s (2009) observation that proximity to atrocity images is itself a rhetorical resource; here, the anticipation of proximity, manufactured by the disclaimer, becomes a resource in its own right.

**Visual Framing Conventions: Proximity Without Obligation**

Typological analysis of framing conventions identified a pattern distinct from disaster photojournalism’s conventions. Photojournalistic ethics codes (consistent with Pantti & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2011) generally favor wide framing that situates victims within a recognizable social and spatial context. Tragedy-content framing favors tight, decontextualized proximity instead: close crops on the moment of impact, injury, or visible distress, with minimal establishing context. Table 2 summarizes this pattern.

Table 2. Framing Convention Comparison: Photojournalism Norms vs. Tragedy-Content Genre Norms

Dimension	Photojournalism Convention	Tragedy-Content Genre Convention
Framing distance	Medium-to-wide, contextual	Tight crop on body/impact moment
Contextual markers (location, date)	Typically present in caption/cutline	Frequently absent or vague
Victim identification	Consent-based, often blurred for minors/sensitive cases	Inconsistent; often unblurred regardless of identifiability
Narrative arc	Before/during/after, causal explanation	Loop or replay of peak-intensity moment only
Editorial accountability marker	Bylines, outlet attribution	Anonymous or pseudonymous account handles

This study terms the resulting mode "proximity without obligation," extending Chouliaraki’s (2006) spectrum of mediated distance. Chouliaraki’s "ecstatic news" register uses proximity to mobilize moral or financial response: donation, advocacy. Tragedy-content proximity terminates at the moment of viewing instead. There is no donation link, no call to action, no follow-up reporting. The platform harvests visual intimacy purely for the affective reaction it produces in the instant of scrolling, after which the platform’s algorithmic logic, not any humanitarian appeal, determines what happens to that reaction: a like, a repost, a reply.

This is the central denotative-connotative finding: proximity, denotatively just a framing choice, connotes urgency and authenticity, and mythologically naturalizes itself as the audience’s "right to see" raw reality. This study examines this myth next.

## The Myth of Raw Authenticity

At the mythological level, the recurring justification observed in audience comment patterns (illustrative Table 3) is an appeal to authenticity: the claim that unedited, uncontextualized footage carries more truth than verified reporting precisely because it lacks institutional mediation.

Table 3. Composite Audience Comment Types and Underlying Mythic Appeal

Comment Type (Illustrative)	Mythic Appeal Invoked
"At least this is real, not like the filtered news"	Raw footage as superior truth-bearer
"People need to see this to wake up"	Spectacle reframed as civic duty
"Why is this account even allowed to post this"	Critique present but does not reduce engagement (reply itself counts as interaction)
"This account just farms views off dead people"	Explicit monetization callout — critical audience awareness coexisting with continued engagement

The fourth comment type matters analytically: it shows that audience awareness of monetization doesn't deter engagement, and in fact constitutes engagement, since replies, regardless of content, register as interaction signals to the platform's algorithm and feed the post's distribution and the account's ad-revenue eligibility. This confirms Mosco's (2009) point that audience commodification requires audience activity, not audience consent or approval. Critique becomes, structurally, indistinguishable from consumption.

Barthes's (1972) account of myth as the naturalization of the historical into the apparently eternal is directly legible here: audiences mythologize "raw" footage as a transparent window onto reality, which erases the fact that the footage's selection, cropping, captioning, and circulation are themselves highly mediated, commercially motivated choices. The myth conceals precisely the economic structure this study seeks to make visible.

## Mapping Semiotic Intensity to Engagement: The Commodification Mechanism

To connect the textual-visual anatomy identified above to Mosco's commodification thesis, this study cross-references the four sub-genres in the typological corpus against modeled engagement-metric patterns informed by platform-studies literature on emotional arousal and virality (Brady et al., 2017; Berger & Milkman, 2012). Figure 1, presented as Table 4 per the study's tabular-visual format, illustrates the modeled relationship between bodily/affective visibility and typological engagement intensity.

Table 4. Modeled Relationship Between Content Bodily-Visibility Level and Typological Engagement Metrics Across Sub-Genres

Sub-genre	Bodily/Affective Visibility (1=low, 5=high)	Modeled Relative Views	Modeled Relative Reposts	Modeled Relative Replies
Traffic/transport accident	4	100 (index)	85	60

Industrial/structural disaster	3	70	55	40
Interpersonal violence aftermath	5	130	110	95
Natural disaster footage	2	55	40	30

The modeled pattern is consistent with the genre anatomy described in 3.1–3.3: sub-genres with the highest bodily/affective visibility (interpersonal violence aftermath) show the highest typological engagement across all three metrics, while natural disaster footage, typically wider in framing and less focused on individual bodies, shows the lowest. This matches Brady et al.'s (2017) finding that morally and emotionally laden content diffuses further on social platforms, and extends it by linking diffusion specifically to visual proximity to the body as the operative variable, not emotional content in general.

Read through Mosco's (2009) commodification lens, this pattern is structural, not incidental: platforms' algorithmic ranking systems reward exactly the metrics, views, reposts, replies, that bodily/affective proximity maximizes, and ad-revenue-sharing programs pay creators in proportion to these same metrics. The semiotic anatomy identified in Sections 3.1–3.3 is the economically optimal form for the genre, not merely a stylistic tendency of tragedy-content accounts. Iterative exposure to platform feedback, view counts, monetization dashboards, selects for and reinforces it, functioning as a direct incentive signal to creators.

### Synthesis: Trauma Capitalism as a Genre

Integrating the semiotic and political-economic analyses, this study proposes the term trauma capitalism for the resulting genre: a mode of content production in which creators document human suffering denotatively, intensify it connotatively through proximity and urgency framing, legitimate it mythologically as "authentic" witnessing, and convert it economically into ad-revenue-eligible engagement. Prior disaster-media critique focused on journalistic ethics (Pantti & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2011) or audience reception (Höijer, 2004). Trauma capitalism names a production logic instead: audiences don't simply happen to respond to tragedy. Creators iteratively shape the genre's formal conventions, account by account, around whichever signs reliably trigger that response, because the platform pays for the response itself.

This reframes the ethical problem from one of taste or sensitivity to one of infrastructural incentive design. Content moderation debates often address individual posts, asking whether a given post is too graphic, without addressing the structural question this analysis foregrounds: a monetization system that pays per engagement will structurally select for content optimized to produce maximal affective reaction regardless of subject matter, and tragedy simply ranks among the most reliable affective triggers available. This study makes that selection mechanism visible and namable, rather than treating each instance of exploitative content as an isolated moral failure.

## CONCLUSION

This study set out to dismantle the commercial ideology behind the circulation of amateur tragedy content on X and to identify the visual-textual anatomy through which platforms convert empathy into engagement. Through critical semiotic analysis of a typological corpus, framed by Mosco's political economy of communication, the study identifies a repeatable genre anatomy: urgency-coded, context-stripped captions; tight, decontextualized proximity framing term "proximity without obligation"; and a myth of raw authenticity that naturalizes suffering as legitimately consumable spectacle. Cross-mapping this anatomy to modeled engagement patterns shows that bodily and affective visibility, not informational value, predicts typological engagement intensity, which supports the claim that these semiotic devices are economically selected for rather than incidental.

The study's central contribution is conceptual and methodological: it names this genre trauma capitalism, and demonstrates a replicable approach for combining Barthesian close reading with political-economic analysis to study exploitative digital genres as structured products of platform incentive design, rather than as isolated lapses in taste or ethics. This reframing has implications for platform governance, suggesting that monetization-eligibility criteria, not only content-moderation rules, are the right intervention point, and for media literacy research, which might usefully teach audiences to recognize the genre's formal markers (urgency language, decontextualized proximity, disclaimer-as-bait) as signs of an economic strategy rather than spontaneous citizen journalism. Future research should extend this framework through comparative analysis across platforms with differing monetization architectures, and through audience reception studies testing whether explicit genre-literacy interventions reduce engagement with trauma-capitalist content.

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