

An essay on how the camera might function as a *memento mori*.

'Get your cameras,' a neighbour called out. His voice was neutral as if he was just making a statement. But I could not take a picture of this. I knew the dead girl. I knew the people around her body. I was part of this, yet detached. A feeling of great confusion came over me. There was nothing I could do. She was dead and that was it. Often I had talked to her in the apron of tatty garden on the far side of the parliament building. There was nothing between us: she was just a friendly face always ready with a smoke and a story, a blond-haired girl in her twenties. It was not even that I was especially affected by her death in the immediacy of those moments. It was the issue of the cameras that really got to me'.

Anthony Loyd, *My War Gone by, I Miss it So*, Anchor, 2000, p.36



Armenian funeral

Introduction

Unlike the general character of death in paintings for a wide audience, photographs of the dead in the 19th century were for the intimacy of the family as both personal reminders of their mortality and by nature of the ‘preserved’ cadaver they complimented the Christian notion of life after death. Graveside photographs became increasingly popular in the 19th century from the coffin to the tombstone. At the time these images may well have been the only image of the deceased. It was also felt by some that in photographing the dead their departure would be less painful for the aggrieved especially if they were seen to be sleeping. They would have a *de facto* anaesthetising effect on pain and loss. Nowadays, photographs of the stillborn are used nowadays to council the bereaved parents. From Russia to New Zealand to Japan, large photographs of the departed are carried by mourners or laid on the coffin itself, forming a direct link between life and death - the photograph and the dead. However, the enduring effect and function of the photograph as a *memento mori* could be questioned through the highly prized and collectable nature of post-mortem daguerreotypes.

Nonetheless, one cannot be overly dismissive of the power and hold of a photograph. Beyond the photography of the dead or the ‘living’ at their funeral, there is an extended interpretation of the camera’s role in *memento mori* and while the camera itself records mechanically there is in the image the ‘resonance of death’ in the culture of viewing and keeping photographs. When looking at an old photograph of ourselves or of a loved one, one’s gaze may be arrested by one which is returned by someone who is no longer present. Even in Lacan’s famous story of the fisherman and the floating sardine tin, there is a pathos of transience similar to the effect of viewing the photograph as a *memento mori*.

In his essay *Looking at Photographs*, Victor Burgin is adamant that at the moment of recognition of the object depicted it is ‘no longer a confusing conglomerate of light and dark tones’ for ‘it now shows a ‘thing’ which we invest with a full identity’. This, he

continues, is an 'analogous imagery investiture' and essential part of the lacanian mirror stage. In essence, there is, in seeing either oneself or another in a photograph, an arresting of the self; a moment in which we realise that what is depicted has been and is no more. Christian Metz states it thusly:

[...] The snap shot, like death, is an instantaneous abduction of the object out of this world, into another kind of time – unlike cinema which replaces the object [...] in an unfolding time similar to life.

Photography and Fetish, The Photography Reader, p. 140

Although for fatalists we are continuously in a moribund state, the notion of the camera functioning as a *memento mori* (remember you must die) is somewhat different. Conscientiously most do not, in looking at a photograph of the living, think of the words *hic jacet*, or here lies. If anything, photographs are an affirmation of life, friendship etc. Yet in viewing a photograph of someone - be they dead or living - we are gazing upon a form of rigor mortis lasting on average 1/60th of a second or 'flat death' according to Roland Barthes. Again, Christian Metz remarks that 'even when the person photographed is still living, that moment when he or she was has forever vanished. Strictly speaking - the person who *has been* photographed - ...*is* dead' (p.140). Thus, despite providing 'possibilities of control that could not even have been dreamed of under the earlier system of recording information' (Sontag: *The Image World*, p. 156) the printed image also acts as a reminder of our aging and through that our steady unremitting journey towards the inevitable: death. In John A. Walker's 1980 essay *Context as a Determinant of Photographic Meaning* he makes reference to Berger and Mohr's *A Seventh Man*: 'Seen in the darkroom when making the print, or seen in this book when reading it, the image conjures up the vivid presence of an unknown boy. To his father it would define the boy's absence'; a sort of *memento mei*, or remember me. Therefore, the father must wrestle with a presence that is clearly not present and realise that in this absence another boy has emerged. What the father is viewing is 'the perennial presence of the figure of death' (J.R. Cisneros, *Imagery of the End, End of the Imagery*). The father is absent from the life of the boy who is growing up away from his gaze, though journeying in tandem with his father and all to a finality.

In *Burning with Desire* Geoffrey Batchen points to Hippolyte Bayard's humorous *Le Noyé* or *self portrait as a drowned man* as perhaps the first and most perfect example of a *memento mori*. In his still pose with eyes shut he has become a *nature morte*. On the reverse side of the direct positive print Bayard wrote 'The corpse you see here is that of M. Bayard, ... he has been at the morgue for several days, and no-one has recognised or claimed him ... for as you can observe, the face and hands of the gentleman are beginning to decay'. Even with a contemporary superficial glance, the elaborate style of

hand writing is indicative of his having passed away. However, in feigning death he has in a way evaded it and ‘enjoys an unenviable immortality, the zombie existence of the living dead’ (Batchen, MIT Press, 1999,p.171). Derrida’s comments are also considered in viewing representation as a ‘complicitous entanglement of sight and blindness, absence and presence, life and death, construction and ruin’. Thus with one sarcastic photograph, Bayard was responsible for opening a discourse that still runs to this day on the camera and its role in *memento mori*.

The feeling and appreciation of photography as an instrument of *memento mori* can lead to another fear of photography as Sontag noted in *On Photography. Image World* of Balzac and his ‘vague dread’ of ‘each Daguerreian operation...going to lay hold of, detach, and use up one on of the layers of the body’ (p158). She continues with an observation that ‘few people in this society share the primitive dread of cameras ... but some trace of magic remains: for example, in our reluctance to tear up or throw away the photograph of a loved one, especially of someone dead or far away’ (p.161). Sontag addresses the ‘imprisoning of reality’: ‘One can’t possess reality, one can possess (and be possessed by) images – as according to Proust ... - one can’t possess the present but one can possess the past’ (p163). In *Ontologie de L’image Photographique* film critic André Bazin too wrote of this in saying that ‘death is but a victory of time. To preserve the bodily appearance artificially is to snatch it from the flow of time, to stow it neatly away, ..., in the hold of life’. Of importance to both André Bazin and Roland Barthes in the photograph is the *index*; That irrefutable trace of a presence like that of a finger or footprint which we follow. Added into this for both writers is the ‘uncanny’. Bazin puts it thusly: ‘The photographic image is the object itself...it is the model’. Christian Metz added to this viewpoint in saying that the photograph was a ‘cut inside the referent, a fragment, a pan object’ (*Photography and Fetish, The Photography Reader*).

Bazin reflected on the ‘disturbing presence of the lives halted at a set moment in their duration’ as it ‘embalms time’ before it corrupts. Now the past gets anchored in the present. Indeed, many presents for that matter. Unlike the tangible ruins that surround us heavily marked by time, with a photograph we have to deal with the confusing notion of

the ‘embalmed index’. It is both absence and presence at the same time. As Barthes puts it, ‘it has been absolutely irrefutably present, and yet already deferred’. In an attempt to come to terms with this contradiction that is the photograph he uses ‘shifter technology. In *Camera Lucida* we read words like ‘this’, ‘that’, ‘now’ and ‘then’: ‘that has been’ (the *noeme*) (p. 96). Metz remarks that ‘immobility and silence’ – that which the photograph offers – are death’s ‘main symbols’.

As can be seen, there is evidently confusion in the writings of Barthes, reflecting the limits of language in coming to terms with this eternal message from the many deaths in the photograph. The result is that the photograph was now or ‘a now-in-the-past’ – ‘my present, the time of Jesus, and that of the photographer, all this under the instance of photography’ (*Camera Lucida* p.96). Thus we return to the concept of embalming time perfectly in photography. With the increased use of photography in the nineteenth century the photograph of the dead came to replace the death mask in recording that ‘last sleep’. Barthes calls photographers ‘agents in the recapture of death’ (*CAMERA LUCIDA*, p.92) and he goes on to write a few pages later in reflecting on his writings and mortality, ‘I am...a witness of the inactual and this book is its archaic trace’ (p.94).



Jean Ellroy, 1940

‘The Times, Express and Mirror gave it page-two play. It made the local news for five seconds.

The redhead rated zero. The Johnny Stompanato snuff was the real goods. Lana Turner’s daughter shanked Johnny back in April. The story was still hot news.

The Mirror ran a shot of the redhead smiling. The Times ran a picture of the kid just after the cops gave him the word. Jean Ellroy was the twelfth county murder victim of 1958’.

My Dark Places, An L.A. Crime Memoir, James Ellroy

Photographs of the dead when they lived are, besides from a reminder of the fact that they have passed away, also a kind of portal through which one can seek to connect with them. Like Roland Barthes in *Camera Lucida*, crime writer James Ellroy’s *My Dark Places* is a novel formed around the mourning for his mother, albeit forty years after her brutal murder. As Barthes ponders photographs (unseen by the reader) of his departed and beloved mother, Ellroy uses a single grotesque image of his mother - the last photograph of her by a crime scene photographer – to begin to understand her, know her and find her.

‘It was a female Caucasian. She was fair-skinned and redheaded. She was approximately 40 years of age. She was lying flat on her back – in an ivy patch a few inches from the King’s Row curb line.

Her right arm was bent upward. Her left arm was bent at the elbow and draped across her midriff. Her left hand was clenched. Her legs were outstretched’. (p.3).

Description of the accompanying photograph of his murdered mother

Even though clearly gone, her photograph is as Barthes would describe it: ‘that rather terrible thing that is there in every photograph: the return of death’ like a record repeating ad infinitum. Although Ellroy had few photographs with which to ‘find’ his mother, Barthes had considerably more and decidedly less traumatic, but in both there is clearly an advance, or ‘becoming’.

In the *nota roja* (bloody news) work of Mexican photographer Enrique Metinides we do not see or read of the people's lives prior to their more often than not violent deaths. An uncomfortable alluring aesthetic sits with these images of the dead. In the following image an elegant lady with all the signs of health and wealth lies dead with her chin propped on a concrete bollard. It is as if her jewellery and social standing failed to protect her from being the victim of a road traffic accident. She, Adela Legeratta Rivas, is now a cadaver about to be covered by a sheet (in contrast to the finality of Koen Wessings's photograph of a Nicaraguan mother mourning a dead son (Camera Lucida, p.24)). In both photographs we can say that the 'dead' are covering the 'dead' in the same way as Lewis Payne, prior to execution, 'is dead and he is going to die' (C.L, p.95). It could even be argued that the photographed 'dead' (e.g. Adela Legeratta Rivas) being twice dead are in turn driving us to examine their lives and life in general rather than solely the inevitability of death. Therefore, Metinides's photograph can be seen in straight terms as a *memento mori*, but also as a defection away from death, towards life as in the case of Ellroy's search for his mother.



Enrique Metinides, *Adela Legeratta Rivas, Struck by a Datsun*, 1979



Skull of a Japanese soldier sent as a souvenir and war trophy by U.S. troops
[1943, Life Magazine]

Army scandal in Afghanistan
German Soldiers desecrate the dead

Tough days for the Army!

Bild, Oct. 25, 2006

The above headlines make reference to a widely reported story of the surfacing of photographs of German soldiers in Afghanistan with skulls found placed on their vehicles. To the government and public this was intolerable the army commissioner Reinhold Robbe called for more “intercultural training”. As a considered response to the furore, Prof. Christina von Braun wrote an article for Germany’s Südwestrundfunk entitled *KFOR Soldiers and their Memento Mori*. These images, she pointed out, caused the border between life and death to vanish, even if the display of bones in the West has a long history such as in Palermo where the semi mummified dead are on view to all those who wish to see. It is not for fun as people seem to think in the Afghan case, but a reminder of death: a memento mori.

Von Braun points out that before German soldiers were allowed to be sent abroad war was only a game. However, with the Afghanistan mission death was no longer a theory, but a reality. The photographs with the skulls were collected and exchanged and stuck into albums, ‘or even placed in wallets where family photos were kept’. These images were not the *memento mori* of the church, rather an ‘intense confirmation of life’. In essence ‘the death of others is a type of survival guarantee –the photographic representation of the death of an other - and becomes a form of talisman’.

She quotes the semiotic theorist Philippe Dubois when he said that the photographed person is dead, ‘because they were seen’ (a part of his ‘thanography). However, through the photographs taken, the soldiers become a ‘defence document against mortality and

death'. Though we can see them in these three year old photographs, we are not drawn to there faces, but instead to the skull which acts like a *punctum* to distract the gaze of the grim reaper.

Conclusion

In much of these writings one cannot avoid the near audible lament that photography has failed to stop death despite all that it promised in an age of unparalleled technological advancement. From the earliest days the guillotine shutter produced nothing but a ‘flat death’ (CAMERA LUCIDA, p.92). This technology that promised so much is no more than illusion of eternal life, and a constant reminder of death. It is an illusion as is the photograph. We are not looking at the living. In the HBO series *Six Feet Under* episode 11 has the gay character David meet a male prostitute hired on the basis of the photograph he saw, but to his disappointment he “looks different from the picture”: he has aged at least ten years. He is, beside his photograph, a clear message of ‘becoming’ and a *memento mori*.

The helplessness we experienced prior to the industrial revolution through the ravages of disease and war is still with us, though we may be merely better at hiding it in our overly sanitized world where wars are fought far from home in “irrelevant” countries for whom death is a daily reality and from whom we expect to see the mercilessness of death. Death does not befall us in our world in the same way. It is but an imperceptible shadow or flicker, something we get to experience when reviewing photographs of mostly joyous occasions and catching a glimpse of where we are going.

'I, the photograph, the spaced out limit between life and death, I, the photograph, am death'.

Eduardo Cadava, *Words of Light: Thesis on the Photography of History*, 1992

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