

SYNÆSTHESIA

COMMUNICATION ACROSS CULTURES

Communications Journal
ISSN 1883-5953

Aténé Mendelyté
Volume 1, Number 3
Summer 2012
pp. 84 – 90

published by



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Death (in the Eye) of the Beholder: An Encounter with Victorian Post-mortem Photography

Aténé Mendelyté
University of Amsterdam

This article deals with the earliest version of post-mortem photography concentrating on the effects of such pictures on the present-day viewer. The encounter with these artefacts begins from a phenomenological point of view as I try to describe my personal experience of coming face to face with the image. I claim that the relation between the perceiver and the photograph does not just simply change but remains constantly vacillating between the modes of life and death. The shock of this constant oscillation is explained in terms of the opening of the Lacanian Real, of the subject turning into an abject/object which enacts the perceiver's own constant (wish and) fear as well as marks the re-emergence of the aspect of our psyche from which the cultural and the symbolic protect us.

Victorian post-mortem photography | spectrality | photophobia |
Lacanian Real | pictorial desire | phenomenology

Introduction

“Death loves to be represented... The image can retain some of the obscure, repressed meanings that the written word filters out” (Ariès 1985: 11). So pronounced medievalist and historian Philippe Ariès. Is this death with a thousand faces the symptom of facing the fear of our finitude or is it the means of perpetuating it, creating a culture of fear throughout the ages? What is the psychosocial need for these images and how do they create meaning? This article will, thus, address these questions in order to see whether visual representations of death can be seen as related to the culture of fear and if so, in what sense.

One of the most curious examples of such representations is Victorian post-mortem photography. In the Victorian era, when photography was an extremely expensive pursuit, a post-mortem photograph was often the first and the last picture taken of the recently deceased. It was customary to photograph a person in natural settings creating an impression of a living subject (with the help of stands and wires). These traditions have changed as photography became a more common practice and a person would have a number of pictures taken throughout his/her life; then the deceased began to be photographed in the funeral settings and the social aspect came into focus – a post-mortem picture served as a record of the process of mourning. However, these practices should not be regarded as being strictly historical as both of these types of photographs continue to be produced¹.

Socially, the practice has gained a taboo status but thrives

¹ For example, the early tradition of portraying the dead as living was revived in photographing the still-borns. See Angela Riechers, (2008), 'Eternal Recall: Memorial Photos in the Digital Environment', at <http://www.dgp.toronto.edu/~mikem/hcieol/subs/riechers.pdf>

in the personal sphere, behind the closed doors of grief. The uneasiness in facing these images, I would suggest, should be seen as an historical and cultural phenomenon, i.e. as a culture of fear rather than a universal way of dealing with death – this will be further explained in the first section of this article. I will attempt to uncover the repressed nature of these images in Western society and subsequently pose the main question of this article: why are these photographs so difficult to behold?

The encounter with the earliest version of post-mortem photography will be my next step as I will be concentrating on the (perceptual and psychosocial) effects of such pictures on the present-day viewer. By analysing a set of objects (nineteenth century pictures that portray the dead as living) this article therefore is an aim at distinguishing the general tendency behind them to affect the contemporary (twenty-first century European) consciousness (first and foremost my own). In other words, just as the mythological Perseus once faced Medusa I will now face the post-mortem.

The encounter with such artefacts will begin from a phenomenological point of view as I will describe my personal experience in coming face to face with these objects devoid of any contextual or social information – of anything that might distract me from this embodied experience of fear. I will first try to understand these images in relation to the Barthesian reading of photographs via the concepts of *studium* and *punctum*. I will observe a peculiar metamorphosis in the perception of the picture: what was first perceptually grasped as a living subject will appear as both dead and living simultaneously – the understanding of the picture as a post-mortem will completely reconfigure my relation to it as an objective observer.

As a consequence of my observation, I will claim that the relation between the perceiver and the photograph does not just simply change but remains constantly vacillating between the modes of life and death. The perception is in some way prevented from being conclusive and the object invites viewers to either gaze more deeply or avert the gaze. In order to find possible reasons for this peculiar perception I will move out of the strictly Barthesian framework and will explain the shock of this constant oscillation in terms of the opening of the Lacanian Real, of the subject turning into an abject/object which enacts the perceiver's own constant (wish and) fear. To put it differently, the aim of the article is to show that these pictures have the ability to affect us deeply despite their remote historical and cultural context, and that behind the perceptual inconclusiveness of these images lurks the fear of facing our own finitude.

Post-mortem Photography and Research

Discussions of post-mortem photography are unusual in the academic discourse as historian of art Jay Ruby painstakingly shows in his ethnographic study of American post-mortem photography. He is one of a small number of

scholars working with this phenomenon as “[s]cholars interested in the pictorial representation of death and the social customs surrounding it find their work regarded as morbid or strange. ‘Expressions of grief have been considered embarrassing, even in bad taste, for many decades. Interest in death has been thought morbid or, at least, maudlin’” (Ruby 1999: 6).

Ruby also describes the further misfortunes that befall the researcher of this field: “A colleague’s wife is uncomfortable at the thought of coming to my home because I have all ‘those pictures of dead babies.’ My proposal to mount an exhibition on this subject was rejected by several curators as being too ‘difficult’ for the public”² (Ruby 1999: 6). However, this photophobia is not limited exclusively to academic discourse. Even recent filmic representations of post-mortem photography exemplify its taboo status in the present-day culture, which was pointed out by literary scholar Susan Bruce in her article on the narrative function of post-mortem photography in Alejandro Amenábar’s film *The Others* (2001):

In this instance, for example, Grace’s [the main character’s – A. M.] reaction [to seeing the post-mortems – A. M.] is excessive, neurotic, perhaps slightly unbalanced—but if that is the case, so too is almost everyone else’s. To most of us today it is unimaginable that we might hang a photograph of a dead relative on our living room wall, or show it to visitors in the parlor; as Stanley B. Burns remarks in the preface to his published collection of post-mortem photographs, there exists today ‘no culturally normative response’ to these images of the dead (Bruce 2005: 29).

The unwillingness to deal with these photographs is related to the complicated issues of morality and ideology as well as personal grief and trauma. However, even

² Furthermore: “Even the idea of collecting nineteenth-century examples of these images upsets some people and causes them to assume the collector has a morbid, unhealthy fascination with death. Lou McCulloch, a collector, in *Card Photographs: A Guide to Their History and Value* (1981), a book designed to promote and assist photograph collecting, states that “today many people are appalled by such photographs [i.e., postmortems – J. R.], but one must remember that the practice was based upon an accepted social custom”. While gathering information for this study, I placed advertisements in periodicals that deal with collecting and antiques. Some of the responses led me to a semi underground group of collectors who specialize in macabre and grotesque photographs-postcards of beheadings in China, piles of corpses, dead soldiers from the Spanish-American War, torture victims, and other esoteric images of the exotic other. The assumption made on the part of those answering my advertisement was that if I was interested in postmortem images, I must be interested in other “macabre” subjects” (Ruby 1999: 177).

though the taking of post-mortems is usually a private matter and is disdained publicly, as Ruby’s research shows, the practice is thriving among Americans and Europeans alike together with another photographic practice: “Two photographic practices are common and yet seldom discussed in public – corpse and funeral pictures and amateur erotica, also produced for a very limited audience” (Ruby 1999: 163). It is both peculiar and telling that these genres of photography should have a similar status. As opposed to previous historical eras, there is a marked attempt to move away from the essential matters of human existence: the casualness of procreation and death, unframed by any (grand) narrative scheme. The post-mortem and home erotica genres expose us to the undeniable presence of the body, which seeps through the neat symbolic structures of society — the symbolic and the bodily are often at odds. The inability to signify the body in a semiotic sense, to make it manageable within the limits of a codified meaning makes its manifestations problematic and yet the psychological and emotional need for these images persists.

This sociocultural paradox holds even broader-ranging implications as the natural death is replaced by the representations of the violent death in the mass media and fiction (Gorer 1965: 197). Historian of photography Michael Lesy conjectures that the tendency to accept death only as a depersonalised (communal, national, global) or sensationalist event implies that “[t]oday, instead of gazing at death, we watch violence; instead of the long look at the steady state, we switch back and forth from one violent epiphany to the other. Ordinary and inevitable death, death as an actual part of life, has become so rare that when it occurs among us it reverberates like a handclap in an empty auditorium” (Lesy 1987: 3–4). In other words, an encounter with the inevitable casualness of death is a matter of a cultural phobia: death is tolerable when it is a part of the symbolic dimension and convention (impersonal level), but it is less acceptable on a personal level. Media discourse constructs death as a violation of both the public and the private space, as something quite outside of our existence, something threatening and to be waged war against.

As I have mentioned in the introduction, the denial of personal grief and death as a part of life is an historical and cultural phenomenon. This nearly unanimous public attitude and rejection of these images is as well related to the fact that in the twentieth century America and Europe “the significance of death [...] has been disguised, suppressed and denied in a way unprecedented in the history of human culture” (Stannard 1974: 443). The cultural mind-frame used to be different just at the end of the nineteenth century which can be witnessed in the following professional advice given by a nineteenth century post-mortem photographer Josiah Southworth in a journal panel discussion in 1873:

The way I did it was just to have them dressed

and laid on the sofa. Just lay them down as if they were in a sleep. That was my first effort. It was with a little boy, a dozen years old. It took a great while to get them to let me do it, still they did let me do it. I will say on this point, because it is a very important one, that you may do just as you please so far as the handling and bending of corpses is concerned. You can bend them till the joints are pliable, and make them assume a natural and easy position. If a person has died, and the friends are afraid that there will be a liquid ejected from the mouth, you can carefully turn them over just as though they were under the operation of an emetic. You can do that in less than one single minute, and every single thing will pass out, and you can wipe the mouth and wash off the face, and handle them just as well as though they were well persons. Arrange them in this position, or bend them into this position. Then place your camera and take your pictures just as they would look in life, as if standing up before you. (Qtd. in Ruby 1999: 56)

The quote exemplifies how a-matter-of-factly the issue was dealt with and that the practice was an accepted trade, aiming for mastery, devoid of any morbidity. Ruby also quotes a number of nineteenth century letters from the receivers of such photographs further showing the acceptability of these pictures, their casualness, and their easy circulation amongst the family members of the deceased.

Whereas Ruby analyses the conditions of consumption and production of post-mortems (sociocultural processes of meaning construction), an opposing strand of research concentrates on the photographs as texts within themselves (art-historical approach), Ruby does not deny the value of the study of such photographs as artistic artefacts:

But what about the pleasure of the image? There can be no doubt that some of the[se] photographs are wonderful to look at, particularly those from the nineteenth century. Must we ignore the very real beauty of these pictures in our search for the cultural? I think not. There is no reason why historical photographs cannot fulfil and illuminate our contemporary expectations. Images are polysemic, i.e., they can have a variety of potential meanings. (Ruby 1999: 10)

I choose yet a third option in order to address the question of this pictorial repression. I wish to describe an encounter with Victorian post-mortem photography devoid of any socio-cultural or textually coded information, as a pure psychological effect. However, as we shall see, this exploration will eventually bring me back to the question of aesthetics. But before I delve into this complex and fascinating relationship a

brief elaboration of the object's history and context will help to clarify what I am *not taking into consideration*.

Post-mortem photography appeared together with the invention of photography. It is therefore tempting to connect it with Roland Barthes's ideas on the essential spectral quality of photography: pictures by their very nature at once claim to state an object's immortality and at the same time embody its death (pastness). However, post-mortems do not seem to be native to photography: art historian "[Phoebe – A. M.] Lloyd has conjectured that the [pre-photographic – J. R.] 'paintings were commissioned by bereaved families for use in mourning rituals. Sitting in front of a posthumous portrait during the mourning period and viewing it annually on the occasion of the death was a regular ceremony in the nineteenth century'" (Ruby 1999: 41).

Interestingly, as many of the extant paintings have been mistyped, their status as post-mortems has been overlooked as the subjects have been depicted as living while their death was represented in certain associated symbolic objects.³ Nevertheless, "[s]ince the bereaved wish-ed their dead to be restored to them as living presences, it is necessary to define these "life" portraits as posthumous. And because families commissioned the portraits during the mourning period, the mourning function has been included in the designation" (Lloyd 1978/1980: 71). Therefore, it is necessary to postulate that the psychological need for post-mortem representations is not tied to an invention of a particular medium, i.e. photography. Also, the connection with death is implicit in any pictorial depiction and is not specific to photography, although the latter makes it most manifest: representation as such involves a statement of the object's immortality and death at the same time – an image is a testament of time.

There is also a key difference between the painterly and the photographic post-mortems, which results in their varied perceptual effects:

Painters created the illusion of life in death. In comparison, photographers [...] offered a much more imperfect – even shoddy – illusion, that is, the pretense that the person was merely sleeping rather than dead. At best, post-mortem photographs constitute a failed attempt at *trompe l'oeil* which fooled no one. Their function was not to keep the dead alive but to enable mourners to

³ "The obscurity of the genre – Lloyd is the first art historian to recognize it – is due to the fact that the deceased children are portrayed as if alive with 'disguised' death symbols, that is, a willow tree in the background, or a wilted flower in the child's hand. Sometimes the portrait contains nothing to indicate that it is a posthumous rendering. For example, Mount's portrait of Jedediah Williamson is only known as posthumous because Mount's account books contained the following entry: 'I made a sketch of Col. Williamson's son after he was killed by a loaded wagon passing over his body'" (Ruby 1999: 40).

acknowledge their loss. (Ruby 1999: 46)

Precisely for this reason these early types of post-mortems are particularly interesting artefacts: they present a dead body as a living subject and to a perceiver both the undeniable fact of death as well as the pitiful attempt at life are equally present. In most of the pictures the awkward position of the body, unnatural stare of the eyes or the feet slightly lifted above the ground (the presence of a stand) indicate to the viewer that s/he is looking at a corpse.

The thesis of this article, i.e. the claim that these pictures expose us to a perceptual shift, does not rely on the pictures' being able to trick us: the knowledge of the situation does not impact the effect as it is not context-dependent. Of course, one contextual detail *is* essential for the effect to take hold of the beholder, i.e. the knowledge that it is a post-mortem picture in the first place. Without a closer inspection one may sometimes assume that the person in the picture is merely asleep. Nevertheless, it is the oscillation of the object between the appearance of life and the essence⁴ of death that sets the mechanism in motion and not merely the shock of knowledge itself. The picture's working within us, transforming the sense of our subjectivity is at the core of this pictorial experience.

The Logic of (Pictorial) Desire

As I look into the picture of a small boy, comfortably slumbering in a chair, covered in furs, the boy who just fell asleep in the middle of his play (the toy is still in his hand!) everything in this image is unity: it presents a vision of childhood, an abundance of life, and an idyllic world of promise. As I also realize that this is a post-mortem photograph it becomes an image of death, it turns into its opposite. But I do not stop seeing life in the picture; the two sides continue co-existing as if in a virtual superimposition of two incompatible worlds; there is some perceptual boundary that my mind just cannot cross. Then, I look at the fireman standing proudly in his uniform, I see his eyes bulging like two white abysses, and I grasp the same co-existence of two realities. I see a typical family photograph: two parents sitting elegantly in their chairs, their handsome daughter standing between them — but her feet do not touch the ground. How should I explain the psychological doubling of these images?

The above mentioned vacillation of the picture is not

⁴ In this case it may be said that this "essence" is but another appearance. Here we may witness a clash between the Platonic Idea (idealism) and the person's fleshly embodiment (materialism). Therefore, the persistence of the symbolic placement of the subject despite his/her death is related to a peculiar reversibility. The materiality of the body may be seen as essence and the subjecthood (or soul) as appearance and vice versa. Therefore, the initial oscillation that I have observed has much larger philosophical implications.

connected to the context of the photograph, its being an element in the grieving process, an expression of the relatives' wish to bring the deceased back to life in a virtual form as a liminal presence, a spectre with substance. It is a property of the picture itself, which can be heuristically related to William J. Thomas Mitchell's article "What Do Pictures 'Really' Want?" where the art historian encourages us to take into consideration the materiality of the pictures and their personhood:

It's crucial to this strategic shift that we not confuse the desire of the picture with the desires of the artist, the beholder, or even the figures in the picture. What pictures want is not the same as the message they communicate or the effect they produce; it's not even the same as what they say they want. Like people, pictures don't know what they want; they have to be helped to recollect it through a dialogue with others. (Mitchell 1996: 81)

It is significant that Mitchell does not posit the usual subject-object distinction as pictures are related to us (perceivers) through the web of interrelated desire. Mitchell's asking of pictures of what they want is not unlike Barthes's phenomenological exploration of pictures that "advene" (Barthes 1994: 19), pictures that inexplicably attract the thinker. But Barthes's notion depends on the pre-given intentionality⁵ of consciousness, whereas Mitchell's approach relies on the picture's ability to speak back. Inspired by these ideas I claim that we are not merely responding to a stimulus or facing the Other (as in Mitchell's subaltern model of the picture) but that these two desiring persons⁶ can potentially (depending on how we approach the image) create a new subject-object which only comes into being upon the conjunction of the object (picture) and the subject (the beholder). This emergent mode of being is not strictly divisible into object and subject any more: pictures are animated and (re)animating objects.

This heuristically defined personhood of post-mortems (their animation) does not seem to correlate with the Barthesian ontology of the image. Barthes uses the concept of *punctum* to speak about a detail in a picture attracting attention in its very inexplicable perceptual prominence. But it does not seem to describe the effect that post-mortems induce: their vacillation between modes of being involves a shift within the whole of the picture, whereas *punctum* pierces the unity of a picture – it is a detail that pricks. Barthes also stresses that *punctum* marks the surfacing of the fundamental duality of pictures, breaking the unity of a photograph: "The Photograph is unary when it emphatically transforms 'reality' without doubling it, without making it

⁵ The perception of something as something.

⁶ The beholder and the picture itself!

vacillate [...]: no duality, no indirection, no disturbance” (Barthes 1994: 41). In this instance it is useful to relate the notion of a unary photograph to Barthes’s concepts of the denotative and connotative meaning described in his famous *Mythologies*: *punctum* is what escapes both levels of signification and yet has an undeniable effect on consciousness.

One thing that prevents understanding post-mortem photography in Barthesian terms is the thinker’s interpretation of the picture’s referentiality: “the Photograph is never anything but an antiphon of ‘Look,’ ‘See,’ ‘Here It Is’; it points a finger at a certain *vis-a-vis*, and cannot escape this pure deictic language. This is why, insofar as it is licit to speak of a photograph, it seemed to me just as improbable to speak of the Photograph” (Barthes 1994: 5). It is not possible to go outside the concrete encounter for Barthes because this movement would eliminate his aim: it would undermine *punctum*, which is always particular. Therefore, at this point our projects part ways since post-mortems, while being particular and capable of having both *studium* (generic and social codes observable in the picture and related to the agency of the photographer) and *punctum* (co-presence, a detail that breaks with the code like the Derridean trace that unhinges the unified meaning), they all have a common, abstract way of operating, their common intentionality, their collective, as it were, wanting.

Moreover, my claim is that they all potentially can give way to the opening of the Lacanian Real as we grasp the striving of these photographs to represent both death and/as\in life. It is, therefore, not surprising that the entwinement of life and death that post-mortems exemplify induce such a strong shock and cause a social photophobia. Neither is it surprising that Bruce compared post-mortems to Susan Sontag’s description of the images of torture:

We seem to suspect that to look at such images must bespeak a morbid fascination with death, or, worse, the enjoyment of someone else’s suffering, akin to the attitudes to war photography that Sontag decries in *Regarding the Pain of Others*: the assumption that the ‘appetite for such images is [...] vulgar, or low’, bespeaking a ‘commercial ghoulishness’, a kind of ‘bad taste’.
(Bruce 2005: 30)

I contest this interpretation because while it may hold true for the pictures of torture, the pictures of the deceased portrayed as living is a different phenomenon altogether as there are no signs of torture, no lowness, no bad taste. They do not present us with the transgression of our ethical and moral codes as they bare no trace of a violent death. Natural death awaits each individual; it cannot be associated with the shock of the torture photographs, i.e. they depict not socially induced but natural bodily damage. Our culture may deny the inevitability of death but it cannot be regarded as a transgressive act in the same sense. Early Victorian post-mortem

photographs shock us for different reasons, the main of these reasons being a different form of referentiality, which will be explained in the following section.

Post-mortems as the Loci of the Real

The Lacanian Real is a name given to the pre-Symbolic register in the psychosocial development of human psyche, before the emergence of the subject in the following Imaginary and Symbolic stages. The Real may be equated to an absolute unity with matter and the non-existence of lack and desire – the unity with the mother’s body. Since the subject is only constituted in the Imaginary (via identification with an image) and Symbolic (via the entrance into language) stages, the Real remains unreachable to the subject and yet is no less constitutive of a psyche. To claim that post-mortems are in some way exemplary of the opening of the Lacanian Real and not of the Barthesian *punctum* may seem controversial since Barthes himself compared *punctum* to Jacques Lacan’s notion of *tuche*: “It is the absolute Particular, the sovereign Contingency, matte and somehow stupid, the *This*⁷ (this photograph, and not Photography), in short, what Lacan calls the *Tuche*, the Occasion, the Encounter, the Real, in its indefatigable expression” (Barthes 1994: 4). In what sense did Barthes get it wrong?

The Lacanian *tuche* or opening of the Real, although manifesting itself in the particular, is always essentially related to a single thing: breaking of the screen, i.e. of the symbolic and artistic codes that structure our relation to an object and inscribe us within it. In reality (not the Real!) we have an imaginary screen to repress an insight into the real position of the subject. In the Lacanian sense, the subject is what a signifier represents to another signifier. Therefore, the subject is always already dead as it is built on the grounds of a dead signifier that precedes us: we are born into and out of *logos*. This is precisely what the screen hides and what *tuche* helps to reawaken in front of our eyes as a momentary *flash*, a glimpse into our real position. This glimpse, however, does not mean that we reach the Real. We catch the sight of it while remaining firmly fixed within the Symbolic. Therefore, the *flash* is such a fitting word for the description of the phenomenon as it is not unlike the flash of the camera that momentarily erases all of reality from our sight.

Both *punctum* and *tuche* are connected to the Lacanian unconscious which very much like a Freudian slip presents itself through discontinuity, braking of any kind of unity, i.e. it is precisely the disruption that is symptomatic and telling to a psychoanalyst. However, *tuche* is more general and less specific than *punctum* because it is “the return of a traumatic encounter with the real, a thing that resists the symbolic, that is not a signifier at all” (Foster 1996: 138) which can manifest itself in various sometimes very similar ways as opposed to

⁷ Emphasis in the original.

the always singular *punctum*. This generality is at the very core of the post-mortem picture: it is not merely a detail that breaks the unity of the picture and wounds us. What shocks us is a transformation in the perception of the image (or a group of images), a shift in the status of the subject within the image(s) and its relation to our own mechanism of desire. Even though Barthes mentions that *punctum* has the power of expansion it still arises from a certain localized detail or quality and is particular in every single image. One cannot trace the same *punctum* in a group of images because this would undermine the very definition of it. In post-mortems the shift is non-localisable as it arises from the picture in its entirety and is common to all of these images.

One of their common and key perceptual features is that a post-mortem is not about reference in the usual sense, i.e. it is not a vector that is pointing towards something that has been. Such picture is not iconic but moves beyond its iconicity, gets free from its historical and cultural context. Furthermore, these pictures are the reflections of our own subjectivity, they reference us, if anything; they are a vector that is pointing towards us, to something that is and thus create a completely different temporality, a different sense of embodied time. By turning from subject to abject/object it re-enacts our own libidinal logic: reaching the ultimate *jouissance*, going beyond the chain of signifiers, reaching the initial unity with the maternal body which means the psychological as well as physical death of the subject – there can be no subject in the Real. The picture breaks the Cartesian hard subject which was fixed in the Imaginary and the Symbolic stages as the limit between ourselves and the picture collides.

Finally, I can explain why post-mortems produce a shock experience: they envelop us within their object of representation, they assault us in all our symbolic and semiotic safety. The picture's reversal from (referring to) the subject (the personhood rooted in the Symbolic) to abject/object (materiality of the body, the Real) affects us because it represents *us* in both stages: in separation from *das Ding*⁸ and the subsequent subject formation and in our final reunion with it, i.e. death. Therefore, the momentary flash, the transgression of the Symbolic and the opening of the Real takes place: it represents the actual subject position of being buried in a tomb of a dead signifier. Our subjecthood is exposed to be like a carefully positioned, dressed, and surrounded by the attributes of a living desiring subject (for example, toys) child in a post-mortem picture who is a corpse despite (still) belonging to the Symbolic order. The body is what breaks the narrative, it does not fit, it has to be violently appropriated to a grotesque (to our 21st century eyes at least) degree. This is a place of *até*, the place of death.

Lacan in his observations on Sophocles's *Antigone* emphasized that the whole play itself was *até*: Antigone is

⁸ The Thing, i.e. the unity with matter and unity with the maternal body.

already dead at the beginning of the play. The whole beauty of the piece (and the shock of it) consists of moving from the image of a beautiful girl that engages our erotic desires to her essence (as already dead) (De Kesel 2009: 212). Therefore, like in Lacan's understanding of the function of art, post-mortems do not show what they have to show. They show something through absence. They trap the unconscious by this visual trick, by the constant perceptual vacillation of the image. In this sense post-mortems are the perfect aesthetic images as for Lacan such is the function of Beauty – to open our sight to the Real. The picture's true gaze affects us because it is the gaze of the ultimate *jouissance* in all its horror, exposing the subject as always already dead. It is for the same reason that Slavoj Žižek encourages to love thy symptom as thyself and accept the fact that the ultimate satisfaction is impossible as the final unification with the Real marks the end of us. In other words, we realize that what the picture wants is what we want: the desire to be grounded in the Real unites us which means that the subject has to be destroyed.

Thus, behind the peculiar cultural aversion to post-mortems hides a more fundamental fear to be “extinguished.” Only Macbeth in all his perceptiveness admitted that much for himself⁹: “Out out, brief candle! / Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player / That struts and frets his hour upon the stage, / And then is heard no more. It is a tale / Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, / Signifying nothing [my emphasis].”¹⁰ Post-mortems signify the Nothing, stand for the lack itself.

Coda

I began with the Barthesian perspective in order to explore Victorian post-mortem photography as a phenomenon, as *eidōs*. But soon enough the essence of these pictures deviated from being possible examples of the *studium/punctum* relationship to something more abstract and more wounding. The observed (subject-object, life-death) vacillation of the pictures could not be further explained phenomenologically. In the Mitchellian sense I then asked these pictures of what they want. They wished to show two impossible worlds¹¹, to be alive yet dead which was rich in its psychological implications and therefore I delved into the Lacanian psychoanalysis. I started with the analysis of my own psyche and gave it as a possible explanation of a broader sociocultural tendency. However, it is important to stress that this reading serves only as a possible account that helps us grasp the significance and shock of the encounter, to prick the wound, to understand the reasons for the general photophobia and repression accompanying post-

⁹ It is not surprising that literary critic Harold Bloom proposes that Shakespeare invented psychoanalysis before Sigmund Freud!

¹⁰ William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, Act 5, scene 5, 19–28.

¹¹ Gottfried Leibniz's term for possible but incompatible worlds.

mortems.

Finally, I came to conclude that what Barthes saw as a general feature of photography, post-mortems make explicitly manifest: "Photography is a kind of primitive theatre, a kind of *Tableau Vivant*, a figuration of the motionless and made up face beneath which we see the dead" (Barthes 1994: 32). The difference is that in post-mortems we see ourselves as the dead. It is ontologically equivalent to the mode of being that Barthes perceives to emerge when he is photographed: "I am neither subject nor object but a subject who feels he is becoming an object: I then experience a micro-version of death (of parenthesis): I am becoming a spectre" (Barthes 1994: 14). The outlined relationship also stands in a direct opposition to Sontag's idea that collecting or even the taking of pictures signifies a certain ownership over reality: "To photograph is to appropriate the thing photographed" (Sontag 1977: 4). It is not we that make a claim over the thing photographed. Instead, post-mortems re-appropriate us in violating our safe positioning within the symbolic structures of representation and subjectification.

However, having said that, I must also admit that "[w]e as critics may want pictures to be stronger than they actually are in order to give ourselves a sense of power in opposing, exposing, or praising them" (Mitchell 1996: 74). Only the hollow gaze of death in these pictures refuses to perish: death loves to be represented. In one of the brothers Grimm's tales Death takes its mortal godson into a cave to show all the burning candles of human lives. The godson proudly expects to see his life as a long candle – many years away from death, after all his godfather is Death itself! Alas, he finds his life's light about to go out. The horror of the realisation is reminiscent of the effect discussed in this article. Death takes us all, not even its godson is exempt, and it loves reminding us of that, with all of its thousand faces.

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