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Memento Mori: The Birth of Post-Mortem Photography

Memento mori: el nacimiento de la fotografía post-mortem

Dra. Ilse Bussing López
Escuela de Lenguas Modernas, Universidad de Costa Rica, San José, Costa Rica
ilse.bussing@ucr.ac.cr

Abstract

In this article, I will be focusing on the origins and characteristics of this type of photography, mainly as it unfolded in Britain and the United States. Three texts that I employ in order to draft the origins and transformation of post-mortem photography in these countries, from its beginnings in 1839 to our time are: Stanley Burns's *Sleeping Beauty* (1990), Jay Ruby's *Secure the Shadow: Death and Photography in America* (1995), and Audrey Linkman's *Photography and Death* (2011). These works coincide with one idea: photographing loved ones who have passed away, as well as the general response to this practice have evolved, as have the notions and sensibilities towards death itself. This study poses two fundamental questions, when faced with a dread for this custom: 1. why is photographing our dead so frightening and appealing at the same time?; and, 2. in a society that has become desensitized to viewing images presented by the media of mangled bodies, of grotesque products of crime or war, why is the notion of photographing a deceased, loved one so offensive? After all, photographing our loved ones who have passed away, is as old as photography itself.

Keywords: Memento Mori, photography, death, post mortem

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Resumen

Este artículo se centra en los orígenes y características de este tipo de fotografía, principalmente en Gran Bretaña y Estados Unidos. Los textos empleados a la hora de trazar la evolución de la fotografía post-mortem en estos sitios, desde sus inicios en 1839 a nuestros días son: *Sleeping Beauty* (1990) de Stanley Burns, *Secure the Shadow: Death and Photography in America* (1995) de Jay Ruby y *Photography and Death* (2011) de Audrey Linkman. Estos estudios coinciden en que el fotografiar seres queridos fallecidos, así como la reacción ante dicha práctica, han evolucionado a través del tiempo, en la misma manera en que han cambiado las nociones acerca del concepto de la muerte. Esta investigación presenta dos preguntas fundamentales, especialmente al toparnos con un rechazo por esta práctica: 1. ¿Por qué el fotografiar a nuestros seres fallecidos es tan aterrador y tan atractivo a la vez? y 2. En una sociedad que se ha desensibilizado ante imágenes presentadas por los medios, de cuerpos deshechos, productos grotescos del crimen o de la guerra, ¿por qué es tan ofensiva la noción de fotografiar a un ser querido? Al fin y al cabo, la costumbre de fotografiar a los seres queridos fallecidos, es tan antigua como la misma fotografía.

Palabras clave: Memento Mori, fotografía, muerte, postmortem

"Life is commemorated through photographs. Why not death?"
(Ruby, 1995, p. 1)

When people wonder about what would motivate someone to analyze post-mortem photography, I think about what lies behind the question, about, in a sense, the place where the question is coming from. What I suspect is that it is a place of fear and often repulsion, but it is also a place of sincere yet morbid interest in the subject matter. So then, the questions that I would like to ask people in return would be: 1. why is photographing our dead so frightening and appealing at the same time?; and, 2. in a society that has become desensitized to viewing images presented by the media of mangled bodies, of grotesque products of crime or war, why is the notion of photographing a deceased, loved one so offensive? In this article, I will be focusing on the origins and characteristics of this type of photography, mainly as it unfolded in Britain and the United States. This article focuses on the initial part of a study that later considers this practice in Costa Rica, as it arose, developed, and persisted in current times.

There are three main texts that I employ in order to draft the origins and transformation of post-mortem photography in Britain and the United States, from its beginnings in 1839 to our time: Stanley Burns's *Sleeping Beauty* (1990), Jay Ruby's *Secure the*

Shadow: *Death and Photography in America* (1995), and *Photography and Death* (2011) by Audrey Linkman. All of these works coincide with one idea: photographing loved ones who have passed away, as well as the general response to this practice have evolved, as have the notions and sensibilities towards death itself.

Before discussing this evolution, it is necessary to consider this type of photography, not as a completely autonomous and isolated form, but as one that follows in the tradition of an older predecessor—posthumous paintings or portraits. There were essentially two types of paintings that were commissioned to commemorate the death of either a loved one or an important figure. In the posthumous commemorative or mortuary portrait, the person was depicted after passing away, usually in their deathbed. In the second type of painting, however, the posthumous mourning portrait, the person is depicted as if they were alive. Certain clues about the state of the sitter were present in the painting, such as the inclusion of common death symbols like the willow tree or a wilted flower (see Figures 1 and 2).

Figure 1
Rachel Weeping

Note. Wilson Peale, C. (1772-1776). [Painting]. Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, United States.

Figure 2
The Last Sleep

Note. Lambdin, G. (1859). [Painting]. Museum of Art, Raleigh, NC, United States.

If depicting the dead in painting was considered an indispensable and crucial aspect of honoring one's dead, it was only logical that this custom would continue with the advent of a new form of portraiture—photography. In 1839, Louis Jacques Mande Daguerre (1787-1851) announced the discovery of the first practical process of photographing at the Academy of Science in Paris. As soon as his discovery, the daguerreotype appeared, it was employed to capture and depict the dead: "the custom of photographing corpses, funerals, and mourners is as old as photography itself" (Ruby, 1995, p 50). According to the same author, this custom was and is "a widespread practice and can be found in all parts of the United States among most social classes and many ethnic groups" (p. 50), and I would argue, in most areas of the world, as will be later discussed. According to Burns (1990) "an estimated 30 million daguerreotypes" of deceased people were taken in America from 1841-1860 (from the section "Death in America: A Chronology"). All these authors agree that this outstanding figure was due to the ability of members of the mid-

dle classes (and at times the working classes) to afford a daguerreotype of their family members who had passed away. Following Burns (1990) "Prior to the invention of photography, most people never had a picture of themselves. Portraiture was reserved for the wealthy, and even the popular miniature painters, especially the itinerants, served the middle classes. Photography served as the great equalizer in portraiture. By the 1850s one could get a daguerreotype for twenty-five cents." In fact, one can confirm the popularity of this mode of photography by considering the abundance of advertisements in newspapers by photographers, offering their services for post-mortem pictures. Ruby (1995) notes how these advertisements abounded from 1840-1880 but then practically vanished after the 1880s, thus reflecting a shift in this practice due to various factors, such as the rise of the funeral parlor, which will be later addressed.

Authors agree with the notion that there are different styles of post-mortem photographs, and that these evolved during the eighty to one hundred years in which this practice was especially popular. Ruby, for example, mentions how from approximately 1840-1880, an effort was made to portray the deceased as if they were peacefully asleep, not dead. The author calls this style, "the last sleep." Furthermore, Linkman (2011) notes the connection between Romanticism and this style of pictures, "photographers of the nineteenth century eschewed realism in post-mortem portraits commissioned by the bereaved family. Influenced by the ideas of the Romantic movement, they opted instead to portray death as sleep" (p. 13). This same author further expands on the idea of sleep as a soothing metaphor for death: "Unlike death, however, sleep is not final. After sleep we hope to wake refreshed and revitalized. So the metaphor effectively tames and domesticates the alien and frightening aspects of death" (p. 21). The notion of sleep indeed seems to "domesticate" death; in addition, people perceive that the safe and comfortable place for sleep to occur in is the home. Therefore, the convergence between sleep and home that is captured in portraits of the deceased seems only logical. In addition to these symbolic reasons, during this time, the departed were often depicted on a sofa or a bed at home, for the simple reason that all of the arrangements for burial took place in the domestic sphere. Moreover, because ready-made coffins were not available at the time, families had to wait for them to be built while the body remained at home (see Figures 3 and 4).

Figure 3
Young Woman Seated with Rose in Her Hand

Note. Post-mortem photograph, circa 1844. From S. B. Burns, *Sleeping beauty: Memorial photography in America* (fig. 14), 1990, Twelvetree Press. Copyright 1990 by Twelvetree Press.

Figure 4
Postmortem Daguerreotype of the Same Boy Lying in Bed

Note. Post-mortem daguerreotype, circa 1848. From S. B. Burns, *Sleeping beauty: Memorial photography in America* (fig. 7), 1990, Twelvetree Press. Copyright 1990 by Twelvetree Press.

This proximity with death results in an equally intimate style of photography, in which the frame of the picture often rests on the face or upper half of the body: "the photographer concentrates on the upper half of the body and frequently photographs a close-up of the head in profile. The body is seen in various poses: lying in bed, lying in a coffin, or seated. Full-body photographs are common for children because of their small size. Full-body views of adults are extremely rare" (Burns, 1990, "Memorial Photograph Identification by Era"). Another significant aspect about the style of this era is that, possibly due to the "natural" relation with death and the dead, "There are few beautification concerns in this era" (Burns, 1990). This point becomes painstakingly clear in Figure 5, in which no attempt is made to conceal the fluids flowing out of the woman's mouth:

Figure 5
Close-up Dead Woman with Blood

Note. Post-mortem photograph, circa 1843. From S. B. Burns, *Sleeping beauty: Memorial photography in America* (fig. 16), 1990, Twelvetree Press. Copyright 1990 by Twelvetree Press.

Whether in brutally candid depictions as the one above or in more serene pictures, this initial style of portraiture conveys an intimate involvement with the dead that seems to be devoid of feelings of shame or unease on the part of those who were left behind to view these photographs.

The family's close involvement with the body of their loved one, and with death itself meant that mourning was processed in a particularly close and honest way: "In the Western World in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the sick were usually nursed at home, tended by close family,

frequently female relatives and neighbors" (Linkman, 2011, p. 16). Another author confirms this and adds how cemeteries acquired positive connotations, allowing the living to mix with the dead: "Eighty years ago, people died at home and their friends prepared their bodies for burial. In England and America, cemeteries were designed as parks where families strolled for refreshment, landscapes dotted with graves, where the living might contemplate the dead (Today instead of gazing at death, we watch violence)" (Lesy cited in Ruby, 1995, p. 12). Paying last respects to the deceased at this time was not limited to a brief visit to a funeral parlor or cemetery; rather, it involved the handling, touching, and caring for the body: "to spend time with the deceased and view, touch, kiss or talk to the physical remains. Children were regularly taken to view and kiss the lifeless body, thereby socializing them into the "proper" way to treat the dead" (Linkman, 2011, p. 18). The closeness between the body of the deceased and the bodies of his/her caretakers guaranteed a physical relationship with death, a relationship marked and defined by corporeality, and not merely a spiritual one or one that was relegated to memories of the person when he/she was alive. This intimacy resulted in an acknowledgement of the reality and normality of death for both the deceased and for those who were still living, thus somehow lessening the extraordinary status of death, and to some extent, the fear that it instilled in the living.

The proximity to death did not necessarily lessen the impact of the tragedy, especially when the "natural" order was reverted and parents had to experience the grief of losing their child, but this nearness did guarantee a way of processing the loss that included an intimate participation in the death process. One particular way to deal with death intimately was the external manifestation of grief which was highly ritualized during the nineteenth century, resulting in the wearing of mourning clothing and accessories. This custom was in great part brought to the United States from England, when Queen Victoria made it popular after the untimely death of her beloved husband, Prince Albert (1819-1861): "When Queen Victoria made the trappings of long-term widowhood fashionable, many British widows emulated her affectation of black clothes and dark accessories. It is logical to assume that the custom was borrowed from England by Americans. Some mourning rings and brooches contained photographs of the deceased along with their braided hair" (Ruby, 1995, p. 109). Even though "widows wearing mourning jewelry are known as early as the 1600s in England" (p.109), ritualized mourning and its trappings were especially popular in Victorian times (see Figures 6 and 7).

Figure 6
Victorian Hair Mourning Jewelry

Note. Victorian mourning jewelry made of human hair. Photograph retrieved from BBC (n.d.), *A history of the world.* https://www.bbc.co.uk/ahistoryoftheworld/objects/sk6JlaxBRmWLv625ew-14ww. Copyright n.d. by BBC.

Figure 7
Victorian Mourning Brooch

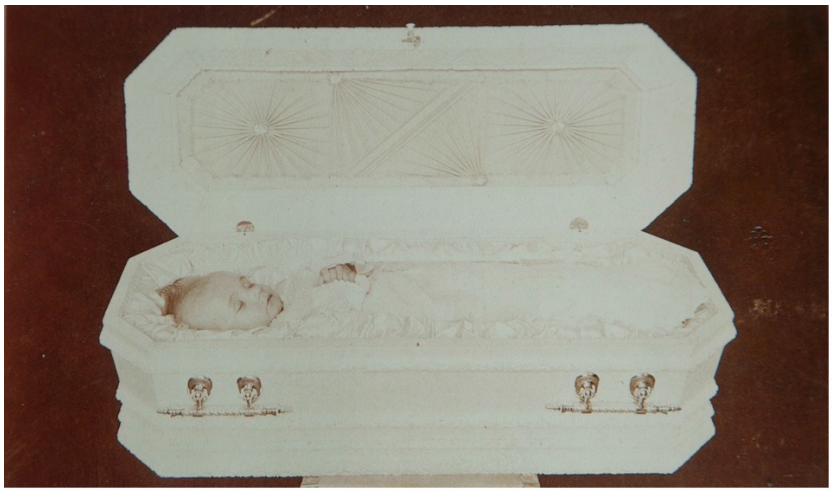
Note. Victorian mourning brooch. Photograph retrieved from The Antique Jewelry Company (n.d.), *Victorian mourning brooch.* https://www.antiquejewellerycompany.com/shop/victorian-15ct-gold-memorial-brooch/. Copyright n.d. by The Antique Jewelry Company.

From 1880-1910, Linkman (2011) and other authors detect a shift in the focus of post-mortem photographs. Close-ups of the deceased are no longer common; these images usually depict the whole body in a casket (which is why these pictures are often called "casket photographs"). This changing scenario is due largely to one factor—the emergence of the funeral parlor and the ensuing "professionalization" of the business of death. Burns (1990) presents interesting facts and figures concerning the "professionalization" of funerary practices in the United States. For instance, in 1882, the Funeral Directors National Association of the United States, the first association of its kind in that country is established. Burns notes how during the first meeting, the term "funeral director" substituted its less agreeable predecessor—"undertaker." Furthermore, Burns discusses how embalming was promoted during the end of the nineteenth century as a way of "disinfecting the corpse" (in "Death"). The embalming of Abraham Lincoln in 1865, so that his body could be displayed across the country in a 20-day-tour, had a significant effect on the popularity of this practice.[1] Another curious offshoot of the rising popularity of funeral parlors was the substitution of plain coffins for a variety of more sophisticated caskets. Prior to 1850 in the United States, coffins were "plain, functional, wooden boxes shaped to the form of the body, being tapered from shoulders to head and from shoulders to feet" (Linkman, 2011, p. 62). With the rise of the death industry, the casket substituted its humble predecessor: "At mid-century the new style caskets appeared on the market heralding changes in name, shape, appearance and purpose" (p. 62) and "By 1883 there were over 100 different casket designs on the market" (p. 63) (see Figures 8 and 9).

Figure 8
Johnny Frederick Schultz in White Jewel Box Casket

Note. Silver print, 1893, taken by Eclipsed View Company, Duluth, Minnesota. From S. B. Burns, *Sleeping beauty: Memorial photography in America* (fig. 51), 1990, Twelvetree Press. Copyright 1990 by Twelvetree Press.

Figure 9
Girl in Coffin



Note. Post-mortem ambrotype, circa 1858. From S. B. Burns, *Sleeping beauty: Memorial photography in America* (fig. 39), 1990, Twelvetree Press. Copyright 1990 by Twelvetree Press.

As Linkman (2011) notes, the switch in the term coffin to "casket" evinced a shift in the attitude regarding the corpse: "the choice of name signaled a change of function. Caskets were intended to house jewels and precious objects" (p. 62). Near the end of the nineteenth century, the body seemed to have lost its gross corporeality to give way to an idealized, often embalmed and sanitized, wax-like image of the deceased: "By 1900, side-opening, satin-lined jewel-box caskets, displaying the cosmetically beautified bodies in their restful sleep, became popular" (Burns, 1990, "Death in America: A Chronology"). This beautification and idealization undoubtedly contributed to the distancing between life and death, the living and the dead. As Linkman (2011) observes, "survivors slowly ceased to venerate the corpse, and instead concentrated on the eternal spirit" (p. 68).

Consequently, the professionalization of the business of death brought about the detachment of home and family from the body of the deceased and involved, instead, the funeral parlor and its workers, in a once-familiar affair:

> [funeral parlors] provided a controlled and sanitized space, removed from daily life, where the living could come face-to-face with death. Since the funeral director also assumed sole responsibility for washing, dressing and laying out of the body, this development represented another important milestone in the distancing of the living from their direct involvement with the dead. (p. 68)

The photographs from this time reflect this growing indifference towards the dead and their body, often depicting the deceased in the parlor of

the funerary home, although some images from the time still take place in a private home's parlor. Even in the latter case, the focus is no longer on the face of the deceased; rather, the whole backdrop surrounding the body is now included: the parlor, the flowers surrounding the casket, an occasional live bystander, etc. One could argue that because of the commercialization of caskets and other funerary paraphernalia such as flower arrangements, these pictures incorporate these props as an attempt to advertise these items, as an extension of the commercial spirit of the times. However, one could also argue that, at a deeper level, the wider frame and greater distance between the deceased and the photographer (and those viewing the photographs) is due in large measure to the greater detachment between the deceased and his/her loved ones, who are no longer in charge of all the funerary arrangements. The rise in importance of the funeral parlor results in the consequential fall of the home as a place of mourning, as a site where life mixed, almost effortlessly, with death. Moreover, the funeral director, and no longer the family, became the protagonist in the process involving death; it is the funeral director and not the mother, the father, the siblings, or the children of the deceased, who are now in control of the rites of death and mourning (see Figure 10).

Figure 10
13-Year-Old N.W. Thompson in Casket with Flower Wreaths Barrows

Note. Cabinet card, 1889, by Barrows, Fort Wayne, Indiana. From S. B. Burns, *Sleeping beauty: Memorial photography in America* (fig. 64), 1990, Twelvetree Press. Copyright 1990 by Twelvetree Press.

After 1910, but especially after 1930, death photography fell drastically in popularity. When these pictures were taken, the attention shifted from the deceased person to an "acknowledgement of the mourners and the social event of a funeral and viewing" (Ruby, 1995, p. 77). Furthermore, Ruby also notes how more recent photographs present the "shift away from a representation of the body of the deceased to images of mourners, funerals and cemeteries is reflected in the private images families produce when one of their members dies" (p. 29). It is clear that the progression from intimate, close-up portraits of the dead, to whole-body casket pictures, to the eventual substitution of the body of the dead for the body of those who are still living, reflects a mourning anxiety towards focusing on the dead or the condition of death. When death photography was popular, from 1840-1880, photographers advertised amply for this type of work in newspapers, which evinces both the popularity of this custom, and the receptive attitude of the general public at the time. In 1890, when Kodak's hand-held camera came out, family members began taking the pictures. Today, these pictures are usually taken by family members, not so much because they are an intimate affair, but because the practice is now considered morbid or taboo, "like the erotica produced in middle-class homes by married couples, that many privately practice but seldom circulate" (p. 1). This same author argues that "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" (Stitt cited. in Ruby, 1995, p. 2). Ruby (1995) also notes how twentieth-century Americans do not seem to mind remembering their loved ones as long as they appear alive in the pictures: "In contrast to postmortem and funeral photography, few twentieth-century Americans seem offended by the idea of remembering someone who has died with a photograph of them taken while they were alive" (p. 110).

On the other hand, academics who study this subject note how people who have shared post-mortem family pictures are often uncomfortable to do so: "there is a general reluctance to show the images or acknowledge the practice outside of the family for fear of being considered morbid. All of the families I interviewed for this study became very anxious when I broached the subject" (p.83). Without a doubt, post-mortem photography emerged as soon as photography itself appeared, reflecting the attitude at the time that viewed death, not as a distant event, but rather as a commonplace occurrence: "given that photography was invented at a time when Western society enjoyed an intimate relationship with death, it was perhaps inevitable that death ended up playing a significant role in shaping the contents of the Victorian family album" (Linkman, 2011, p. 8). However, in the decades to follow, in the twentieth century, the rise of the funeral parlor and a gradual distancing between the dead and the living resulted in the decline of this type of photography and its relegation to hidden family albums. The anxiety that is expressed by those interviewed is further evidence that this practice is no longer considered popular or acceptable in the contemporary Western world, a fact that is forcefully confirmed by further study linked to this one, centering on the Costa Rican context.

Having explained the decline of post-mortem photography, it is still necessary to clarify that there do seem to be indications that firstly, as mentioned previously, death photography is not entirely dead, and secondly, it might be undergoing yet another shift in the general public's acceptance of it, at least under certain circumstances. For instance, Ruby (1995) mentions that with the AIDS epidemic in the eighties, public manifestation of mourning, including taking pictures of patients who were ill with the disease, became socially acceptable. Moreover, he mentions how the Neonatal Hospice of Children's Hospital of Denver instituted the practice of taking pictures of newborns who passed away in order to offer them to the parents and assist them in their grieving process. While conducting this research, I came across the website for a Colorado based, nonprofit organization called "Now I Lay Me Down to Sleep," which specializes in infant bereavement photography (Now I Lay Me Down to Sleep, n.d.). One of the founders, Cheryl Haggard, decided to form the group after one of her children died just six days after being born. The group connects photographers who take these pictures free of charge in order to assist grieving parents. The artistic and somber black-and-white portraits that appear on the website challenge the current view that this is an unhealthy or macabre practice. In the pictures, infants who are tenderly cradled by their parents appear to be asleep, thus echoing the nineteenth-century "last sleep," post-mortem compositions (see Figure 11). The existence of this organization and the continued practice of this phenomenon suggest that death photography is far from dead and that it could be experiencing a resurgence of sorts.

Figure 11

Cofounder of "Now I Lay Me Down to Sleep," Cheryl Haggard, holding her son, Maddux.

Note. [Photograph]. Retrieved from https://www.nowilaymedowntosleep.org/. This photograph was the inspiration for the *Now I Lay Me Down to Sleep* organization. Sandy Puc is the photographer and co-founder, alongside Cheryl Haggard, of the *Now I Lay Me Down to Sleep* organization.

Mourning and Photography

The role of photography in mourning can only begin to be understood if we consider the powerful symbolic nature of the photographic object. Ruby (1995) states that its material essence acts as a surrogate for loss, and that it "serves as a substitute and a reminder of the loss for the individual mourner and for society. It would seem that photographs afford those in the business of adjusting to the loss of someone they cared for a chance to both remember and accept that which is final" (p. 7). Ruby also discusses the important role of mourning clothes and accessories in the grieving process, since they served as "a reminder to the mourners of their loss and [how] this kept the work of grief in their consciousness" (p. 110). In other words, we can argue that these objects, accessories and pictures alike, whether worn or displayed, were employed as respectful remembrances of the death of a loved one. In addition to their symbolic wealth as substitutes of loss, post-mortem photographs also owe their potency to a very basic element–tangibility: "an object that reminds the mourners of the cause of their sadness may serve to make the work of grief more tangible. Photographs of the deceased provide significant assistance in getting survivors to accept the finality of the loss and begin the essential reintegration of the mourner into society" (p. 174).

The material aspect of these photographs evinces the more abstract link between memory, photography and grief. The fact that one can hold and view a concrete image of a loved one triggers memories of that person, regardless of whether they are dead or alive. Because of this triggering of memory, this tangible souvenir aids in therapeutic settings in which loss must be addressed: "given the apparently obvious connection between photography and memory on the one hand, and memory and grief on the other, photographs of a dead loved one would seem a natural therapeutic tool when a patient is having difficulty dealing with his or her grief" (p. 9). Furthermore, and despite the cultural and historical censorship that might prevail today, it seems that this function of post-mortem photography persists: "Because images of those we love who had died form a significant part of the grieving process, we make and use photographic representations of the dead whether our society 'approves' or not. We need to gain a better understanding of our private need to remember through photography" (p. 25).

When it comes to recalling a loved one who has passed away, there are fundamental differences between remembering them as alive or dead: "remembering a life that is over is an impulse that is fundamentally different from remembering a death" (p. 110). Ruby offers engaging notions that link memorial photography to the preservation of life, while post-mortem photography dwells on the lack left behind: "pictures of death are inescapable reminders of the loss, while memorial images of a life that is no more help us to symbolically keep the dead alive" (p. 174). Remembering the dead while alive, then, seems to arise from an inability to let go, from an impulse that we might even describe as a desire to somehow mummify the dead, but in their live state. Remembering the dead as dead, however, inevitably

exposes their finality and the raw loss that results from it. It seems that the difference between these two types of photography and process of remembrance stem from a contradiction that mourners have to deal with: "to keep the memory of the deceased alive and at the same time, accept the reality of death and loss" (p. 174).

In its beginnings, post-mortem photography emerged as organically as photography itself. There were several practical reasons for photographing the dead during the nineteenth century, fundamentally, the desire to retain a memory of a loved one. Often times, a post-mortem photograph was the first and only picture that was taken of the person, especially when the deceased was an infant. In fact, the high rates of mortality during this time partly explain the large quantity of post-mortem photographs [2]. Another reason for commissioning these pictures was based on long distances and separation; these photographs were usually sent to relatives and friends who were too far away to be able to attend the funeral: "distance and separation combined with deeply held feelings of love, duty and obligations could have provided powerful motives for the commissioning of post-mortem photographs" (Linkman, 2011, p. 17).

During Victorian times, this type of photography gave the middle classes and part of the working classes access to a medium that conserved the memory of a loved one, a privilege that was previously only available to the upper classes through the commissioning of painted portraits. The twentieth century witnessed the increasing rejection of post-mortem images. Nevertheless, as mentioned earlier, the need to preserve the memory of the dead often weighs heavier than current taboos that accompany it. Ruby (1995) indicates that twentieth-century American society experienced a struggle that most Western societies seem to be undergoing presently, a struggle between a "denial of death" and "a deeply felt private need to use pictures of those we love to grieve their loss" (p. 1).

The greatest irony behind the rejection of post-mortem photographs as valid remembrances of a loved one is the passive acceptance, on the other hand, of mediatized violence; critics like Ruby have pointed out how "dismemberment, death by torture, suicide, mass murders, to name only a few, are acceptable viewing events" (p. 12). Furthermore, he adds a grim conclusion about the current management and acknowledgement of death: "It may be that death is real to us only when it looks like media-created fantasies" (p. 12). Due to the widespread practice of post-mortem photography in the past, as well as the ongoing need of people to retain an image of a loved one who has departed, it is time to consider the validity of such a custom, as well as its valuable therapeutic function. As Ruby notes, remembering is a necessary antechamber to forgetting: "photographs that memorialize a life or commemorate a death provide us with a means to remember so we can forget. There is a commonsense link between grieving and photographic images" (p. 174).

Notes

1. Initially, embalming was more common in the North than in the South [United States], more prevalent in urban than rural areas and confined to the middle and upper classes due to the high costs involved" (Linkman, 2011, p. 66).[»]
2. According to Linkman (2011), ¼ of reported deaths in England and Wales were of infants who were less than 1 year old. She also remarks how in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, working-class people in England had to bury their stillborns in pauper graves, but could at least afford to take a picture of their child: "a post-mortem portrait might have served as a substitute for the grave" (p. 19).[»]

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