PHOTOGRAPHY AND DEATH

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PHOTOGRAPHY AND DEATH: FRAMING DEATH THROUGHOUT HISTORY

BY

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PUBLISHING

For Roy and Julie, my parents.
I know that all my strange and morbid childhood
fascinations were once a cause for concern. As we see
now however, everything in life has its purpose…

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INTRODUCTION
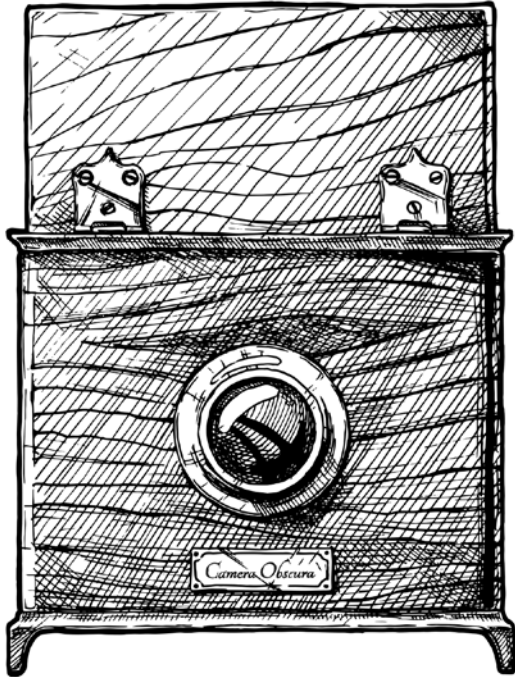
Image 1. Camera Obscura *Source*: Shutterstock.

DEATH AND POST-MORTEM PHOTOGRAPHY IN HISTORY

We were all born to die.
— Shakespeare Romeo and Juliet, Act II, Scene IV.

Death has cast its long shadow across the living since the beginning of time. Disinterested in gender, class or economic status, but most importantly, disinterested in our dreams and future plans, death is perhaps the greatest source of life's anxieties. Yet, we cannot live without it. Death gives us a framework for living life, warns us to take no future time for granted, reminds us to make the most of every moment. It is because of death that we have the ability to love so powerfully and live so vibrantly, and although it may not always be evident, it is death that teaches us the importance of connection and memory.

So, if death is responsible for creating much of the depth and richness of the human experience, why do we continue to fear it?

A primary reason, one which is intrinsically interwoven with our human fixation on death, is uncertainty. No one has ever survived dying and thus there is no scientific record of what it is like to pass on from this world (highly contested accounts of near-death experiences not withstanding). As such, what we claim to "know" about death is, not actually very much at all. The emotions, coupled with the tangible loss we experience when someone dies (the loss of their physical presence) continue to cause discomfort indiscriminate of age, cultural background or social upbringing. It is this unknowing that fills us with fear, grief and anxiety. These emotions, coupled with the tangible loss, are experienced when someone dies (the loss of their physical presence) and continue to cause a discomfort indiscriminate of age, cultural background or social upbringing. Begrudgingly, we are led to accept that death is the universal unknowable, which has forced humankind to look at other ways of engaging with the concept of

what it means to die and mourn those who have gone before us. Always these are ways which do not involve acquainting ourselves too closely or directly with death, lest it come for us too early. In response to our morbid curiosities, we have often relinquished individual beliefs or practices in favor of those which reflect the communal whole.

Over the course of recorded history, what has become evident is that the relationship which humans share with death, as a concept, a personified figure, a transitional phase or a definitive ending has varied greatly and often in accordance with societal attitudes about the purpose of death and the existence of an afterlife. The traces of these cultural discourses are evident in the artistic output of generations of artists, artisans and everyday citizens. It confronts us in scripture, music, art and literature. Death has played a vital role in our creative and artistic outputs as much as in academic discourse because, until relatively recently, death existed alongside the living in an intimate, if not always comfortable proximity. In western societies of the current era however, death has largely been removed from the public gaze. Like the infirm, elderly or dying, death has been banished from the public view, perhaps because it is so at odds with the consumerist society of which we are all a part. Ours is an era built around the impenetrable notions of youth, beauty and ownership, forever. Little attention is given to how we will die, because too much of our time is demanded in service of convincing other people (as well as ourselves), how marvelous it is to be alive. Rather than hoping for a "Good Death" we are programed to live our "best life," with no thought of what may come after. Yet, death persists.

In recent years, we are beginning to see a resurrection of sorts, with death positive movements and death studies gathering momentum in both the real and virtual landscapes. Their message is an important one, to assure us that there

is nothing more certain than the fact that we too, one day, will die. There is nothing to fear, for it is an inevitability, one which if we can accept it, we can control to some degree.

Control too plays a large role in how we respond to the idea of death. Now more than ever we believe that it is possible to control dying, either through the use of medical science, healthy eating or a range of mysticisms. Humans have a fantastic propensity for self-delusion. Subconsciously, we inherently know this, of course. Again and again we slowly return to our fixation with the specter of death, always enamored with the idea of glimpsing it from a safe distance. Such glimpses have come in many forms, but it is the photographed image which renders them most faithfully. Photographs capture a moment not as we would like it to be, but as it was. In carrying no bias of subject or object, they can render a scene with complete clarity. Unsurprisingly, the camera has been called the perfect medium for engaging with death and the "authentic" death scene.

From the moment of its invention (around 1816), the camera has been used as a tool for memorializing the departed and yet, a large amount of its relationship with death and the dead body remains unconsidered in contemporary conversations about dying. During the period of Victorian era and the Civil War, photographic images played a central role in commemoration, as well as being conduits for the way that society understood and discussed death. After the epic and devastating loss of life experienced during the Civil War and later, World War I, this tether shifted to include the spirit. While many longed to contact loved ones on the other side, it was only the camera that could offer proof of the legitimacy of such encounters. Although romantic in its intent, spirit photography was a short-lived fad and one soon replaced with images of distinctly nefarious intent. The shadow of murder and genocide, evident in the postcard snapshots of lynching victims, and later the barbarity scenes of World War

II, marked a turning point in how death was framed in images. In exposing atrocity in all its forms, photojournalism has played an important role in educating global society about the terrors of racial discord and war. The adoption of the medium for this purpose has not been without casualties of its own however, for in erasing emotion from its narrative, it has also removed emotion from its audience. We are now so used to the site of atrocity images in television and print media that their relationship to personalized and individual death has become obstructed. It is unsurprising that the implementation of these types of death photograph corresponded with a marked turn away from traditional styles of death photography, which remained absent from social view and public discourse until the 1970s. Upon its rebirth in the artistic realm, death became the medium of documentation for a range of health epidemics such as cancer and AIDS (Linkman, 2012, p. 154). Using the image to record the impact on the body of these diseases, what emerged was a photographic reflection on the lives of these individuals, who had often been stigmatized within society specifically because of their illness. Such stigma recalls Howarth's (2007, p. 211) discussion of the social death that took place during the Victorian era, in which the ill would gradually remove themselves from the public gaze as a means of maintaining dignity in the face of ill-health and impending death.

In the realm of popular entertainment, television and the internet have begun to play a more prominent role in how death and the corpse are visualized, mediated and distributed across global society (Penfold-Mounce, 2010, p. 261). Audiences engage with varying forms of death through drama series that highlight the medical profession, as much as supernatural narratives in which the dead and undead play prominent (and frequently romantic) roles. In both examples, dying, death and the body are central to these narratives.

In the case of the latter however, romantic entanglements with the undead rarely address the body as deceased. The resurrection of the soul or essence of the person in these scenarios distracts from the intimate encounters which living characters within the narrative are having with death and the dead body. This changes the way that audiences perceive death by engaging with the desires for self-preservation that are essential to human survival, whilst also pandering to a fascination with immortality. In these examples, death is not representative of finality, and thus, it becomes more palatable. The avoidance of embracing death within a more realistic framework does not always meet the needs of all viewers.

Documentaries and docudramas which focus on true crime offer a popular alternative and continue to command a large audience on network and streaming services. These examples will be discussed in more detail later, with attention focused on the use of the photographic image within the narrative and how the juxtaposition of still and moving pictures changes viewer interpretations of death and the death scene. In parallel to television, the ease of access with which we can view images of the dead online, continues to shape modern ideas about death and dying. Photography of any kind of death or death site, particularly those which share a relationship with atrocity, present a range of perceptual frames (Lennon, 2018, p. 587). A Google search can instantaneously conjure images of death in any of its guises, some of which once seen, can never be completely erased from memory. These forms of popular media, whilst sometimes being unpalatable or fantastical in their representations, create a space in which viewers explore human mortality, challenge ideas and phobias about death or delve into the minds of murderers, all while in a safe space (Penfold-Mounce, 2016, p. 3).

What these trends prove is how photographic images have become ubiquitous in the current era, so much so that most audi-

ences fail to register how many they witness from day to day. As a result, we have become numb to photography in many regards, and in our intimacy with the media, have all too frequently neglected to register its morbid history. The purpose of this book is to begin to change this attitude, to wrestle back some of our unconscious witnessing, so that we may once again begin to challenge how we look at death in the image, what it has meant to prior audiences and what it means to us in the contemporary setting.

Of interest to this collection is not only purely the content of the image and what it conveys, but also the impact it has on the viewer. In my discussion, there are three audiences to consider. The first is the audience for whom the image was intended. While we may not be able to establish a specific identity for an individual or group of individuals, the style and content of the photograph will indicate its historical context. The second audience is myself, writing about these images as I have seen, interpreted and understood them. The lens I adopt is both tainted by the contemporary society of which I am a part, as much as it is by my own feeling and experience. Finally, the third audience is you, the reader. In every single image discussed herein, this tripartite relationship is present in the three-way discussion which we conduct with the image. The outcome and conclusions we reach will be different, reflecting our own lived experience, knowledge of history, cultural background and relationship with death; yet the discussions themselves are essential to conduct.

The act of looking challenges us to notice *what* it is we are witnessing in an image. As will become evident, no two death images will be alike and even those from the same conflict or time period have the capability to prompt wildly different responses. Throughout each chapter, attention will be given to the historical context of the images under discussion, as well as to the people they depict (where their identity/identities

are known). The photograph is always a product of its time (Benjamin, 2016, p. 7; Lennon, 2018, p. 591) and in reviewing it outside of its historical context, the burden is on us as viewers to accept that now is not then, and that we cannot apply the societal standards of the contemporary world onto the past. For cohesion, my conversation will draw on the production purpose of the image and what it reveals about the historical period it represents and how death was discussed during that time. These ideas will then be related to the contemporary period, its attitudes about death, the agency of the body and the role of the viewer in the death narrative. In confronting death images which are opposed to contemporary beliefs, as with those which are an affront to our morals and ethics, is important to understanding the purpose of death photography. In *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger reminds us that it is sight that comes before words, seeing which allows the individual to establish their place within the world (Berger, 2009, p. 7). Therefore, every time we look at an image, we must realize that what is being portrayed did at one time exist in the world (Young, 2010, p. 86). Each of the images I discuss in this book have one thing in common: death. But it is how they communicate death that is the nucleus of our discussion.

John Berger's work on photography and the image has been influential in assisting me to formulate my approach, as has the work of Roland Barthes. Elements of Berger's philosophy on the image will be apparent throughout each chapter, with some forming the basis of my own discussions on how death images might be read and interpreted by the contemporary audience. Of note will be instances in which the image draws parallels with specific styles or eras of art composition. In contrast, Barthes (2000, p. 9) dissection of the image, specifically his tripartite analysis of operator, subject and viewer, is central to my discussion. Barthes, much like Walter Benjamin (2016, p. 39) before him, had a preoccupation with the