

WHY HAVE THE DEAD COME BACK? THE INSTANCE OF PHOTOGRAPHY

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Abstract This essay examines how the critical theory of photography has, at least since Barthes and Sontag, developed a default position that is routinely suspicious of the political and aesthetic value of images of the dead, even as the archive of images of the dead continues to accumulate and to shock. Photographic theory seems to share the post-war assumptions that death has been eclipsed by modernity, sequestered away and rendered taboo. The project here is to give a sense of the array of photographic practice that exists in stark opposition to these assumptions, and indeed in the contemporary moment seems actively to stage an argument with the thesis of the ‘eclipse of death’. It considers work ranging from Sally Mann and Luc Delahaye to the recent projects of Edgar Martins.

Keywords Sontag, Barthes, critical theory, photography, death

THREE POST-MILLENNIAL SNAPSHOTS

Sally Mann’s photographic series and book, *What Remains* (2003) is a sequence that begins with a dispassionate lens focusing on the body of her beloved greyhound Eva, exhumed after fourteen months in the ground. ‘Was it ghoulish to want to know? Was it maudlin to want to keep her, at least some part of her? Was it disrespectful to watch her intimate decomposition?’¹ The sequence included an exploration of the woodland visible from her kitchen window where the police had chased, shot and killed a young man who had escaped arrest. Does a landscape hold the memory of violence or atrocity? It also included a section of Mann’s experiments with early photographic collodion techniques from the 1860s to capture ravaged glimpses of the landscape of Antietam, site of the bloodiest battlefield of the American Civil War, brooding on the landscape’s ‘underpinnings of death’.² Wet collodion was used to coat glass negative plates from 1851, but had been first used as a treatment for war wounds: form graphically followed content.

Most memorably, *What Remains* centred on her record of the ‘Body Farm’ at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville where patterns of decay in human corpses in different environments are researched using bodies that have been volunteered to science. In her memoir *Hold Still*, Mann recalls:

pausing by a body and waiting until the rustling of the leaves quieted,

1. Sally Mann, *What Remains*, New York: Bulfinch Press 2003, p6.

2. Sally Mann, *Hold Still*, New York, Little Brown 2015, p414. (Hereafter *Hold Still*)

I could hear the maggots noisily eating, a sound sometimes like the crackling of Rice Krispies in milk and other times, like raw hamburger being formed by hand into patties. The bulging skin roiled with their movements beneath it (*Hold Still*, pp425-6).

Mann relishes the abject, the stench of bodies, the bloated flies, the skin cells sloughed off onto her clothes as she wrestles with the corpses:

I had slipped on chunks of fatty adipocere and found hair stuck to the brake pedal of the Suburban as I drove home at night (p433).

Mann, already a controversial figure for capturing the life of her children too intimately for some critics ten years before in her *Immediate Family* project, when that work got caught up in paedophile panic and political posturing over public art funding, now courted controversy for her portrayals of death.

In 2005, Luc Delahaye was awarded the Deutsche Börse Photography prize for his 'History' series of monumental images, all vast eight by four metre prints. It included *Taliban*, an image of a dead soldier lying shoeless in a ditch, shot from a high angle above so that the body appears weirdly to be floating above the viewer, looking down, eyes glassily open. Delahaye was an embedded photojournalist during the Afghanistan war in 2002, providing images for *Newsweek*, but was also taking parallel images for a wholly different end. His photojournalism was on a standard 35mm camera, but *Taliban* was taken with a tripod-mounted, large format Linhof panoramic camera. Delahaye considers that slowness, precision and monumentality of this work attains an aesthetic detachment he suggests evokes a greater objective truth than the selected, captioned and often re-purposed newspaper image. He wanted to achieve a certain neutrality, 'measuring of the distance that separates me from what I see', he stated.³ Delahaye's claim inevitably provoked controversy in a war where the circulation of images of dead bodies has remained a consistently politicised matter.⁴

In 2006, Annie Leibovitz displayed at the Brooklyn Museum her last photographs of her partner Susan Sontag in the later stages of dying of leukaemia, the series concluding with *Susan Sontag at the Time of her Death, December 28 2004*. She also included photographs of the body of her father in the show, another major affective attachment for Leibovitz and who had died six weeks after Sontag. These images were published as *A Photographer's Life 1990-2005*, a project dogged by questions of taste and transgression, since Leibovitz was in part turning the camera on the dead body of one the premier theorists of photography's melancholic function, but also one who repeatedly returned to the question of the capacity of the image to shock.⁵ Sontag's son David Rieff condemned the photographs as 'carnival images of celebrity death', but did so in his agonised memoir *Swimming in a Sea of Death: A Son's Memoir*; in which he detailed his own horrified post-mortem investigation of

3. Mark Durden, 'Luc Delahaye: Global Documentary', in *Deutsche Börse Photography Prize 2005*, London, Photographers' Gallery 2005, p13.

4. See discussion in Erina Duganne, 'Photography after the Fact', *Beautiful Suffering: Photography and the Traffic in Pain*, (eds.) M. Reinhardt, H. Edwards and E. Duganne, Chicago, University of Chicago Press 2006, pp57-74. (Hereafter *Beautiful Suffering*).

5. Jamy Scott, 'From Annie Leibovitz: Life, and Death, Examined', *New York Times*, 6 Oct 2006. For commentary, see also Caitlin McKinney, 'Leibovitz and Sontag: picturing an ethics of queer domesticity', *Shift* 3, 2010, pp1-25.

his mother's ravaged body.⁶ In 2016, Katie Roiphe restaged all the details of Sontag's last months, her blind determination to defy death related to her earlier bouts with cancer, and her enduring theme in her writing of *la mort equivoque*, the fake death, the device of those presumed dead returning to life. Roiphe added her own riff to the seemingly interminable disputes over the afterlife of Susan Sontag's corpse and corpus.⁷

David Lillington notes in 'Death Ltd' that there was a resurgence in contemporary art focused on death and dying between Deborah Boardman's 'Mortal' exhibition in Chicago in 2001, the Wellcome Collection's 'Death: A Self-Portrait' (2011-12) - an exhibition of the art dealer Richard Harris's personal collection of death art - and Lillington's own 'Death and Dying' in Vienna (2014), an extensive survey of over forty artists.⁸ The dead, like the zombie horde popular culture so insistently imagines, had very determinedly come back into the image culture. This essay explores why this might be so.

THE ECLIPSE OF DEATH?

The question needs to be posed in this way because a generation ago it was widely argued that death, and the social practices attending it, had been definitively eclipsed. Geoffrey Gorer influentially argued in the 1950s that there had been a rapid collapse in the West of social rituals around death and mourning, and that there was now a 'fear of the expression of grief on the part of the English professional classes'. Within a generation, he proposed, 'social recognition of mourning has practically disappeared'.⁹ Gorer, who remembered the rituals around the mass deaths of the Great War (and his own father's death on the *Lusitania* in 1915) suggested a kind of dialectic at work: the restrictive prudery in social mores on the subject of death at once silenced and yet actively fostered a compensatory 'pornography of death' in popular culture. In his influential article in *Encounter* in 1955 called 'The Pornography of Death', Gorer suggested with patrician disdain:

While natural death became more and more smothered in prudery, violent death has played an ever-growing part in the fantasies offered to mass audiences - detective stories, thrillers, Westerns, war stories, spy stories, science fiction, and eventually horror comics.¹⁰

The moral panic about the tasteless recurrence of the dead in American comics soon saw this gleeful outlet almost entirely suppressed by the end of 1955, the Comics Code stamping out any corrupting depictions of the dead, at least for a time.¹¹

Gorer's line proved very influential on the last section of Philippe Ariès's important study, *The Hour of Our Death*, first published in France in 1977. After five hundred pages excavating the history and ritual of the 'good death', Ariès called his last section 'Invisible Death' in which he argued:

6. David Rieff, *Swimming in a Sea of Death*, London, Granta 2008,

7. Katie Roiphe, *The Violet Hour: Great Writers at the End*, New York, Dial 2016. Citation from Rieff, p47.

8. David Lillington, 'Death Ltd'. *Art Monthly*, November 2016, pp5-8.

9. Geoffrey Gorer, *Death, Grief and Mourning in Contemporary Britain*, London, Cresset 1965, pp15 and 113.

10. Geoffrey Gorer, 'The Pornography of Death', *Encounter*, 1955, pp49-52. (Reprinted as an appendix in *Death, Grief and Mourning*, p173).

11. See Jim Trombetta, ed., *The Horror! The Horror! Comic Books the Government Didn't Want you to Read!* New York, Abrams 2010.

In the course of the twentieth century an absolutely new type of dying has made an appearance in some of the most industrialised, urbanised and technologically advanced areas of the Western world.¹²

12. Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death*, trans. H. Weaver, London, Allen Lane 1981, p560. (Hereafter *The Hour of Our Death*).

Ariès amplified and systematised Gorer's thesis, suggesting a rapid set of transformations that had effectively banished death. Medicalisation replaced the priest with the doctor and the familial deathbed with the anonymous hospital ward and the 'cellular discipline' of atomised death-care pathways. In the clinical machine, the body is disarticulated into separate systems, each managed by specialists, dividing and subdividing the moment of death into a series of technical calibrations:

Technology erodes the domain of death until one has the illusion that death has been abolished. The area of the invisible death is also the area of the greatest belief in the power of technology and its ability to transform man and nature (*The Hour of Our Death*, p595).

It is a position that still hovers behind Anthony Giddens' notion of the 'sequestration of experience' in *Modernity and Self-Identity* (1991), the 'protective cocoon' of a technologically advanced, reflexive modernity that supposedly smooths violent extremes away, handing them over to experts and institutions; death as risk management.¹³ Surprisingly perhaps, Ariès also directly inflects Michel Foucault's formulation of 'biopolitics' in his Collège de France lectures. Biopolitics is 'a matter of taking control of life and the biological processes of man-as-species and of ensuring that they are not disciplined but regularised'. This results, Foucault says, unusually relying on received wisdom, in 'the famous gradual disqualification of death'.¹⁴ Asserting the self-evidence of Ariès, Foucault explains: 'Power has no control over death, but it can control mortality'. This is why power does not recognise death, but brackets it and gets on with its *vital* politics. Post-Foucauldian biopolitical theory has thus concentrated on the politics of 'life itself', as Nikolas Rose calls it, or the ceaseless management and control of a regime of biopolitical production and reproduction, as described by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri in *Empire*.¹⁵

13. Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*, Cambridge, Polity 1991. (Hereafter *Modernity*).

14. Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at Collège de France, 1975-6*, (trans) D. Macey, London, Penguin 2004, pp246-7.

15. Nikolas Rose, *The Politics of Life Itself: Biomedicine, Power, and Subjectivity in the Twenty-First Century*, Princeton, Princeton University Press 2007 and Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire*, New Haven, Harvard University Press 2000.

It is the partiality of this position that has redoubled the sense that the dead have come rushing back *in spite of* our theorisations. After biopolitics, the next generation of critical theorists has had to add a 'thanatopolitics', to use Giorgio Agamben's coinage. In *Homo Sacer*, he observes that if 'one of the essential characteristics of modern biopolitics ... is its constant need to redefine the threshold in life that distinguishes and separates what is inside from outside', then this must lead to a necessary administration of the category of the socially and biologically dead. 'It is as if every valorisation and every "politicisation" of life ... necessarily implies a new decision concerning the threshold beyond which life ceases to be politically relevant', Agamben

concludes.¹⁶ In the neo-colonial context of the murderous extraction of even bare life from labour, Achille Mbembe terms this ‘necropolitics’:

the creation of *death-worlds*, new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of the *living dead*.¹⁷

New formations of global Empire are not just biopolitical; they have also set up circulations of hugely profitable body parts and corpses, broken down into commercialised elements where transferable tissues and organs can be worth tens of thousands of dollars.¹⁸ Although the trace of the dead labour of these bodies is classically obscured by the magic of commodity fetishism, it does not simply vanish. Even Gorer acknowledged back in the 1950s that alongside an eclipse of the dead body representation spilt out in other ways. At least since the 1960s (since the mechanical repetitions of Andy Warhol’s ‘Death and Disaster’ silkscreen sequences), there has been a steady growth of a ‘pathological public sphere’ that organises conceptions of community around the spectacular display of injured, ruined or dead bodies.¹⁹

In place of Ariès, the monumental tome on death of our time is Thomas Laqueur’s *The Work of the Dead* (a strikingly thanatopolitical title), which argues that the cultural work of the dead does remain foundational to human community, and that this has long outlived the alleged ‘disenchantments’ or eclipses of the dead associated with modernity:

The dead remain active agents in this history even if we are convinced they are nothing and nowhere.²⁰

Judith Butler now places *grievability* at the core of human community.²¹ The spectacle of death is not confined to a ‘pornography’ of excessive ruination, but has become culturally ubiquitous. Photographic theory has been late to this change.

DEAD THEORY

The photograph has become intrinsically linked with the deathly due to the influence of Roland Barthes’ *Camera Lucida* (1980), a book indebted to André Bazin’s ‘The Ontology of the Photographic Image’.²² Barthes insists on the signification of chemical photography as indexical, the record of the literal trace of light bouncing off the referent: ‘This is its pathos, its melancholy’. Every photograph does not capture life, but instead builds a monument to an anticipated, future anterior death. Barthes stares in morbid certainty at the photo of his mother, a violent image, brute and undialectical, that ‘fills the sight by force’ and slashes at him with ‘lacerating emphasis’: her death will have already been encoded in the photograph.²³ A generation (and

16. Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, (trans) D. Heller-Roazen, Stanford, Stanford University Press 1998, p131 and p138.

17. Achille Mbembe, ‘Necropolitics’, *Public Culture* 15: 1 (2003), p40.

18. See Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Loïc Wacquant (eds), *Commodifying Bodies*, London, Sage 2002.

19. Mark Seltzer, ‘Wound Culture: Trauma in the Pathological Public Sphere’, *October* 80 (1997), pp3-26.

20. Thomas W. Laqueur, *The Work of the Dead: A Cultural History of Mortal Remains*, Princeton, Princeton University Press 2015, p18.

21. Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* London, Verso 2009.

22. André Bazin, ‘The Ontology of the Photographic Image’, (trans) H. Gray, *Film Quarterly* 13: 4 (1960).

23. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, (trans) R. Howard, London, Vintage 1993, pp90-91 and 93.

24. Jay Prosser, *Light in the Dark Room: Photography and Loss*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press 2005.

25. Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, London, Penguin 1977, pp15, 20.

26. See Laura Mulvey, *Death 24x A Second: Stillness and the Moving Image*, London, Reaktion 2006, p21.

27. See, for example, Marianne Hirsch, 'Surviving Images: Holocaust Photographs and the Work of Postmemory', *Yale Journal of Criticism* 14: 1 (2001), pp5-37; Michael Rothberg, *Traumatic Realism: The Demands of Holocaust Representation*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press 2000.

28. Ulrich Baer, *Spectral Evidence: The Photography of Trauma*, Cambridge, Mass, MIT Press 2002, pp69-70.

29. Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, London, Penguin 2004.

technological revolution) later, some critics still centre photography's intrinsic truth on Barthes's insistence on melancholia, traumatic absence and death.²⁴

Susan Sontag equally spoke of the photograph's essential role as a *memento mori* in the same language of scarring, piercing or wounding in *On Photography* (a book completed when doctors had given her a death sentence for her first bout of cancer). Her foundational shock encounter with photography, to which nothing can subsequently compare, was seeing images from the Dachau concentration camp in 1945, images that 'cut me', left Sontag 'irrevocably wounded'.²⁵ Everything after this initiation, she (sometimes but often inconsistently) argues, is a kind of falling away, the shock effect rippling into passivity or, even worse, indifferent *ennui*. Both Barthes and Sontag invoke an originating traumatic realism to the power of photography, and this has been installed as the dominant paradigm ever since, even through and beyond the digital transformation of the ontological condition of the photographic image. As Laura Mulvey argued in *Death 24x A Second*, 'the digital still thinks with the idea of the index' - even or perhaps because of the ontological status shifting underneath the image.²⁶

It is Sontag's modernist suspicion of the apparent transparency of the photograph, through its fatal *reality-effect*, that puts this paradigm in such continually tortured, self-cancelling positions. Trauma theory at once demands representation and insists on the erasures of that ghastly presumption. This tension has the highest stakes in discussions of Holocaust photography, and can be carefully formulated as a productive paradox, generative of ethical photographic theory and practice.²⁷ But the suspicion of photography's seductive ease can end up in extreme places, where any direct photographic representation is condemned as 'kitsch' or 'mute cliché' and only anti-representational abstraction or voids can properly convey the crisis in any possible 'explanatory referential frames and contexts for understanding'.²⁸ Ulrich Baer's demand of the (non-)image is that 'representations of trauma cannot constitute evidence', but that the approved image 'documents precisely the abolition of referential systems on which the notion of evidence depends' (p117). This peculiar iconoclasm willingly embraces its own anti-historicism to defend the rigour of its aesthetic demands.

These positions haunt the troubled contributions to the catalogue of the 2006 exhibition at the Williams College Museum of Art, *Beautiful Suffering: Photography and the Traffic in Pain*. This exhibition had a contemporary focus on photojournalism and art generated from the conflicts of the 1990s and beyond. This inevitably meant that it began to circle around the politics of images from the Iraq War. One of the curators and editors, Mark Reinhardt, offers a useful interrogation of the Sontagian line on numbing passivity, pointing out her symptomatically confusing shifts of position from book to book, and almost from paragraph to paragraph in the knotty inconclusiveness of her later work *Regarding the Pain of Others*.²⁹ To her position that photography can only aestheticise death so that it can only be met with

'passivity or contentment,' Reinhardt contends that this is 'neither obviously true nor even obviously clear', and continues:

I suspect few viewers really believe this, at least not consistently. And yet, when struggling to articulate what disturbs them about particular pictures or photographic tendencies, some critics (Sontag among them) are sometimes tempted by this position.³⁰

Even so, it is significant that Reinhardt and one of the other curators, Erina Duganne, ultimately end up with a similar modernist model of work that at once opens and yet closes the question of the representation of death. The exemplary work for this exhibition is Alfredo Jaar's practice that emerged from his *Rwanda Project*, exploring the 1994 genocide in a series of installations in the following years. Jaar's lightboxes at once illuminate and deny representation. In his 'Real Images' installation, for instance, Jaar selected his most powerful one hundred images from his journey through Rwanda, but then buried them in black linen archival storage boxes with a description of the picture in words silk screened on the top of the box. 'The boxes were then arranged within the darkened space of the gallery so as to create a "cemetery of images."' In Jaar's installation, text trumps image, just as it always does in Sontag's writing on photography because she so insistently mistrusts the reality-effect. Duganne goes on to suggest, in very familiar language, that this tactic 'rendered explicit the sheer impossibility of representing this tragedy' (*Beautiful Suffering*, p69). We have been here before.

The dead have come back so insistently in contemporary photography, I propose, precisely to target this doctrine of difficulty or refusal, this demand that images of atrocity and its aftermath self-cancel themselves. As I've argued in *The Trauma Question*, it is problematic to fix a single ahistorical aesthetic from the Holocaust image, as Sontag does, when the contexts and situations of image production have undergone such profound transformation in the post-1945 era.³¹ In the case of war, it has long been documented that the catastrophe of the Vietnam War, in particular, transformed the management and control of images in the Western media, with progressively tight restrictions by military and government authorities ever since.³² In such a situation, further escalated in the Gulf Wars, the imperative of the violent image can be ethically charged in multiple, overdetermined ways. The necessity of the violent image can redouble the shock of *needing to see* in the most naïvely 'realist' representational terms what is otherwise suppressed or massaged by media management.

But this is not just an argument about framing or the imperative to burst a managed frame. As Walter Laqueur is careful to insist, death itself has a history rather than standing sentinel outside it, and death itself has been steadily redefined by the medical revolutions of our era. This, surely, has been one of the main factors behind renewed photographic investigations:

30. M.Reinhardt, 'Picturing Violence: Aesthetics and the Anxiety of Critique', *Beautiful Suffering: Photography and the Traffic in Pain*, (eds) M. Reinhardt, H. Edwards and E. Duganne, Chicago, University of Chicago Press 2006, p21.

31. See Roger Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question*, London, Routledge 2008.

32. See Caroline Brothers, *War and Photography: A Cultural History*, London, Routledge 1997)

death is not a static object, but a mobile, highly articulated process. Let's take these two contexts, war and medicine, in order.

THE WAR ON DEAD IMAGES

The ethical pressure on the aesthetics of photography is always time-and-context-specific, never more so than the changing conditions of the very possibility of making images in war. In 1972, John Berger dismissed 'photographs of agony' as having no effect on the course of the Vietnam War, possibly diverting activism into merely sympathetic passivity (a position that clearly influenced Sontag).³³ The military evidently did not agree, thinking perhaps of the damning power of Nick Ut's image of a napalmed girl or the impact of Ron Haebler's unofficial record of the My Lai massacre that galvanised the anti-war movement. Caroline Brothers and others have carefully traced emergent strategies of containment in the taking and circulation of images in subsequent wars, the authorities continually narrowing the aperture, as in the Falklands War or the first Gulf War of 1991, where the press pack were held far back from the front line and fed nose-cone images of smart bombs in an attempt to virtualise or dematerialise the conflict.³⁴ This management was why Kenneth Jarecke's unofficial photograph of a charred, grimacing corpse caught in the fire-storm unleashed by U.S. forces on the Basra Road was such a shocking intervention. Initially rejected by American newspapers as too graphic, *Incinerated Iraqi* was reproduced around the world as a powerful counter to the tactic of derealisation of asymmetric remote warfare. The context of containment *amplified* the need for the image to transgress military control.

The second Iraq War used a different tactic. The U. S. military embedded the press with units on the ground, but with permission granted only through 'embed agreements' that put tight controls on the kinds of images taken and circulated. These agreements were significantly tightened as the American occupation turned into guerrilla and civil wars in 2005, and especially during the 'surge' in 2007, when American casualties were high. Particularly taboo were images of wounded or killed American soldiers. While conventions have emerged on how to represent images of dead Iraqis, there was an almost complete ban on the representation of the American war dead (and both have inevitably been criticised for their aestheticisation of violence).³⁵ Even the release of images of coffins was restricted. There was a long dispute over the publication of a photograph taken clandestinely by an employee of Maytag Aircraft, an image of coffins draped in flags being repatriated in a cargo hold from Iraq to America in 2004.

These restrictions meant that a succession of photographers and news units were put under pressure by the military command. Chris Hondros (a photojournalist who was later killed covering Libya in 2011) was attached to a night patrol that accidentally shot and killed the parents of six children, who

33. John Berger, 'Photographs of Agony', *About Looking*, New York, Vintage 1991, pp41-4.

34. See Caroline Brothers, *War and Photography: A Cultural History*, Routledge, London 1997 and also the contributions to the monumental *War/Photography: Images of Armed Conflict and its Aftermath*, (eds) Anne Wilkes Tucker and Will Michels, Houston, Museum of Fine Arts/Yale University Press 2012.

35. For critique of newspaper representations, see David Shields, *War is Beautiful: The New York Times Guide to the Glamour of Armed Conflict*, New York, powerHouse books 2015. See also Roger Luckhurst, 'Iraq War Body Counts: Reportage, Photography, and Fiction', *Modern Fiction Studies*, forthcoming 2017.

were in the back seat of the family car. His photograph of the five year-old Samar Hassan, covered in her parents' blood, with the boots and gun-barrel of an American soldier towering over her, was published in *Newsweek* and syndicated around the world. This was only after he had ensured that he had taken careful measures to send the images back to his agency in New York, since the military command feared 'that some kind of seminal, career-ending photo might have been taken, so they had wanted to delay our distributing the photos'.³⁶ In 2007, Zorah Miller, after weeks of being denied permission to leave base, accompanied a security patrol that was caught by a suicide bomber. He took several images of the aftermath before being ushered away. There were immediate demands to delete his memory cards, and after he had posted a number of images on his website, in spite of their strict adherence to the code to ensure that the bodies could not be identified. Miller was threatened with permanent blacklisting from covering any type of military operation 'anywhere in the world' (p174). Although the military backed away from this decision, further close policing of his activities, allegedly for his own protection, made work very difficult. Other photographers reported continual harassment and threat, particularly when photographers got anywhere near wounded soldiers. By 2008, it was estimated that although there were 150 000 U. S. troops in Iraq and several factional armies at war, the danger, expense and military restrictions on photojournalists meant that there were only ten officially accredited photojournalists left in the theatre of war.³⁷ There was rarely any explicit censorship, but restrictions effectively curtailed reporting of the war.

It is this specific context that produced responses like Thomas Hirschhorn's 'The Incommensurable Banner' (2008), an installation that presented an overwhelming array of photographs of ruined and devastated bodies from the Iraq War across a continuous eighteen metre-long banner. The images had all been rejected as too graphic to appear in the media and Hirschhorn intended to confront the politics of that exclusion. Nina Berman's portraits of severely injured veterans back home were difficult to place in newspapers and magazines, since they confronted the viewer with irresolvable aftermaths. Instead, she began to present them in exhibition spaces (London's Trolley Gallery eventually published them as *Purple Hearts: Back from Iraq* in 2004). This difficult context re-situates Luc Delahaye's decision to work, even inside the theatre of war, with a large format camera to escape the conventions of the fugitive image caught by the heroic, fearless photojournalist on the Robert Capa model. The era of global consolidation of media outlets under ideologically invested ownership made the development of other routes for display in the gallery, in artists' book, or on the web an outflanking tactic. Michael Kamber's anthology of interviews and images, *Photojournalists on War: The Untold Stories from Iraq*, a book 'about combat, the toll of war, censorship' with 'the goal ... to publish photos that had not been seen in the United States' was the work of a fellow photojournalist, but published through a university

36. Michael Kamber, 'Chris Hondros', in *Photojournalists on War: The Untold Stories from Iraq*, Austin, University of Texas Press 2013, p119. Hereafter *Photojournalists on War*.

37. Michael Kamber and Tim Arango, '4000 Deaths and a Handful of Images', *New York Times*, 26 July 2008, http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/26/world/middleeast/26censor.html?_r=0.

press (p267).

Not just why, but *where* the dead come back is vital to examine, since the violence of the image of war can often be taken as a meta-commentary on the violence needed to bring it through the enunciative proscriptions that control entry to the public sphere. The impulse is of course prompted by the evidentiary, documentary imperative. But the Sontagian moral angst about this stance of a revelation through shock derives from the understanding of the image as an indexical sign of the actual body, and there are indications that this melancholic paradigm is shifting.

In Kaja Silverman's history of photography, she proposes tracing out a trajectory based on analogy and relationality, not that the image stabs down, as it were, back into the body, but that its effects take place between the image and the viewer, which in turn 'helps us to see that each of us is a node in a vast constellation of analogies'.³⁸ That photography is *disclosive*, in excess of the indexical, allows it to re-constellate sympathies in and across time. It is not stuck in melancholic fixation, but oddly reanimates the dead, bringing them back into play. It is significant that Silverman ends her chapter 'A Kind of Republic' with a discussion of John Reekie's *A Burial Party on the Battle-Field of Cold Harbour* (1865), an image of African Americans collecting the skeletons and body parts of Union Army dead. The black figure who looks out in the foreground, rhyming the glaring white skull next to him, 'invites us to join the republic' with a gaze 'headed toward the present: toward the here and now in which a potentially infinite series of later looks will both meet it and greet it' (*Miracle of Analogy*, p113). In several deft strokes, Silverman provides resources for thinking about images of the dead that step outside Modernist narratives of shock, angst or the urge to de-face the face, to undo representation. There is the prospect for theorising the complex set of relays of sympathetic identification so often disallowed in thought on the photography of death.

38. Kaja Silverman, *The Miracle of Analogy, or The History of Photography, Part I*, Stanford, Stanford University Press 2015, p11. (Hereafter *Miracle of Analogy*).

MEDICINE AND THE REDEFINITION OF DEATH

There is another corpus of photographic work that intimately confronts the dead body in medical contexts, inside enframing by the clinical environment, whether in the ward or, post-mortem, in the morgue. The fine art of morgue photography is a whole subset of practice, which might be considered to run from Stan Brakhage's extraordinary record of the autopsy, *The Act of Seeing with One's Own Eyes* (1971), or Jeffrey Silverthorne's parallel *Morgue Work* (1972-74, and again in 1986 and 1990-1), a series that was initially driven by a political imperative to reveal the bodies of American soldiers from the Vietnam conflict. At the same time, the English translation of Foucault's *The Birth of the Clinic* in 1973 emphasised the centrality of the clinical gaze and the autopsy in particular in morcellating the body's pathologies, distributing them in a new economy of the visible and the invisible.³⁹ Silverthorne has

spoken of this compulsion and its limits in a recent retrospective:

I photograph to understand, then do it again, go back and again, but in the morgue finally giving up trying to understand. There is too much life here, an absolute overload, and now I feel that if I can understand, there is something wrong with me.⁴⁰

Twenty years later, controversy was deliberately courted in Andres Serrano's *Morgue Series* (first shown in New York in 1993), where familiar arguments over the aestheticisation of death attended his large cibachrome colour images of details of bodies from a New York city morgue, all callously titled with an abrupt cause of death (*Death by Drowning, Knifed to Death, Rat Poison Suicide*, and so on). Like Mann, Serrano had been the target of right-wing politicians for the provocations of his work on blood and bodily fluids at the height of AIDS activism. His morgue work was designed to provoke controversy.⁴¹ It is in the nature of transgression to need continual re-staging: Cathrine Ertmann's series, *About Dying* (2014) offers its more oblique images in a considerably cooler climate of contention, but using the same language of 'lifting the veil of secrecy' on a working morgue deemed outside normal social signification.⁴²

AIDS activism also drove an insistence on confronting the medical realities of dying and dead bodies in the 1980s and 1990s, when conservative governments deliberately under-funded medical research and care of an illness identified solely with a gay community considered by definition dissident from heteronormativity. In 1990, Therese Frare won the World Press Photo Award for her image of David Kirby on his death-bed in his father's arms, seen by some as a provocative echo of Christian *pietà* iconography. When the image was colourised and recycled for a Benetton advert and displayed on billboards and in glossy fashion magazines, it made unlikely allies of the Terence Higgins Trust and the *Sunday Times* in calling for a ban.⁴³ Insistence on tracking the very act of dying was foregrounded by artists from Derek Jarman to Hervé Guibert. Guibert transgressively breached aesthetic decorum, crossing between fiction and confession, image and text in the years before his death in 1991, recording every detail of his medical complications and treatments. He committed suicide to cheat the inevitable progress of the virus, an event he effectively filmed (in its carefully staged rehearsal) in his documentary *Pudeur ou L'Impudeur*.

A related area is the resurgence of post-mortem photography as a form of memorial, particularly in the area of neo-natal deaths. This was considered a morbid and gruesome practice exemplifying the Victorian cult of the dead, in the post-1945 paradigm of death's eclipse. In 1990, however, the Burns Archive of medical history photography issued the first volume of *Sleeping Beauty*, images of the posed dead from their substantial archive (which has been followed by two further volumes), and curator Audrey Linkman has traced this long history, coincident with the arrival of photography itself in

39. Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic*, (trans) A. M. Sheridan Smith, London, Tavistock 1973. (Hereafter *BoC*).

40. Jeffrey Silverthorne, 'Morgue Work' statement, *Working 1968-2013*, Berlin, Kehrer 2014, p64.

41. For commentary, see Andres Serrano, *Works 1983-93*, Philadelphia, ICA 1994.

42. Hayley McMillan, 'This is What Death Really Looks Like', *Refinery* 29, Feb 2015.

43. See Ben Cosgrove, 'The Photo that Changed the Face of AIDS', *Time Magazine*, 25 November 2014, <http://time.com/3503000/behind-the-picture-the-photo-that-changed-the-face-of-aids/>.

the 1830s, into the present. Post-mortem photographic practice has been fully re-integrated into grieving practices now recommended by neo-natal units.⁴⁴

44. See Audrey Linkman, *Photography and Death*, London, Reaktion 2011 and Stanley Burns, *Sleeping Beauty: Memorial Photography in America*, New York, Burns Archive 1990.

These kinds of practices might well be inscribed within the conventionalised idea that the hospital is the privileged locus for the 'sequestration of experience'. In Giddens' theory, when our protective cocoon of technical expertise is pierced by extremity, by death, the trauma is intensified: 'The frontiers of sequestered experience are fault lines full of tensions and poorly mastered forces,' Giddens warns. 'Where individuals are brought face to face with existential demands ... they are likely to experience both shock and reality inversion' (*Modernity*, pp168-9). In this formulation, the photograph reveals the truth of death concealed by the technical medical ensemble. The photographer Andres Serrano talks about the space of the morgue in exactly this way, as a 'private domain', a 'secret temple where few people are allowed' - 'some people feel shocked and outraged that I've presented it so directly'.⁴⁵

45. Anna Blume, 'Andres Serrano', *BOMB* 43 (Spring 1993), <http://bombmagazine.org/article/1631/andres-serrano>.

But this still figures Death as an obtrusion from an outside, an implacable other poorly bracketed off by modernity's institutions. It conceptualises death as the other to biopolitical management of life and the body. What if we brought back death itself into history, grasping that it has been in the process of medical redefinition, its thresholds reworked and limits extended, throughout the contemporary period?

This is what has been happening since 1968, the crucial year when the Ad Hoc Committee of the Harvard Medical School was assembled to address 'obsolete criteria for the definition of death' and produced a hugely influential new paradigm, which changed medical and legal discourse on death in America and around the world.⁴⁶ Up to 1968, the legal definition of death was still defined as the cessation of the heart-beat, a fixed and incontrovertible *moment* in the eyes of the law. This was newly problematic, because medical advances in artificial respirators and ensembles of machines newly called the 'intensive care unit' had greatly improved resuscitative measures through the artificial maintenance of respiration. This created a novel problem: the cardiopulmonary system could be sustained entirely separately from the complete absence of cortical activity: people who were definitely living and breathing, yet 'brain dead'. These new beings, products of the intensive care unit, were sometimes called 'beating heart cadavers' or 'neomorts'. They were potentially an important source for another medical frontier - transplant surgery - except that the earliest transplant doctors were at risk of being prosecuted for wrongful killing because organs were being taken from bodies with still beating hearts. As a solution to this difficult situation, the Ad Hoc Committee relocated death from the heart to the brain, establishing the criteria for determining 'irreversible coma'. This condition was determined as a complete absence of responsiveness to stimuli in both autonomic brain systems and the higher neocortex.⁴⁷

46. Report of the Ad Hoc Committee of the Harvard Medical School to Examine the Definition of Brain Death, 'A Definition of Irreversible Coma', *Journal of the American Medical Association*, 5 August 1968, p337.

47. This paragraph draws on Stuart Younger, 'The Definition of Death' in *Oxford Handbook of Bioethics*, (ed.) Bonnie Steinbock, Oxford, Oxford University Press 2007, pp285-303. (Hereafter *Definition of Death*). Dick Teresi, *The Undead: How Medicine is Blurring the Line Between Life and Death*, New York, Pantheon 2012.

This proved extremely influential, but problems of definition were only

addressed over a decade later when ‘whole brain death’ criteria were agreed in the 1981 American medical commission report *Defining Death*. When the patient met the criteria, brain death could be declared, respirators turned off, and a window of time was then opened for the harvesting of organs. Foucault’s observations about the autopsy can folded back into this living/dead body now disarticulated into separate systems: ‘Death is therefore multiple, and dispersed in time: it is not that absolute, privileged point at which time stops and moves back; like disease itself, it has a teeming presence that analysis may divide into time and space; gradually, here and there’ (*BoC*, p142).

In the interval opened up between brain death and biological death has become a fraught terrain full of anomalies, ethical crises, and a host of new liminal beings that hover between life and death. In 1972, the Persistent Vegetative State (PVS) was coined for states where there is a catastrophic collapse of brain function, yet some neocortical activity persists. This condition is meant to transition to PVS after twelve months of stasis, yet the boundary has proved difficult to secure and the wider culture has become obsessed with anomalies and extraordinary recoveries or reanimations of those in coma, however vanishingly rare these instances are. Most know about Locked-In Syndrome, another liminal state in which higher cortical activity is preserved amidst the complete collapse of the voluntary muscular and nervous system, through Jean-Dominique Bauby’s memoir (and later film), *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*.⁴⁸ It was the record of his life that he blinked out letter by letter from his hospital bed, his eyelid the only muscle he could move voluntarily.

Attempts to resolve the difficulties of medical definition of these states resulted, in 1997, with an entirely new category, the Minimally Conscious State, which encompassed not just coma-states, but also late-stage dementia. The population existing between two deaths has been therefore continually expanding since 1968. Susan Squier suggests that these liminal lives ‘test the boundaries of our vital taxonomies’ and become ‘powerful and dangerous representatives of a transformation we are all undergoing as we become initiates in a new biomedical personhood mingling existence and non-existence, organic and inorganic matter, life and death’.⁴⁹ Margaret Lock polemically terms this a process of making up new nosological categories for the ‘Good-as-Dead’, and wonders if these aren’t categories of social rather than biological death. ‘In late modernity,’ Lock contends, ‘the numbers of people recognised as candidates for social death have increased exponentially’.⁵⁰

I have argued elsewhere that this expansion offers contexts for modern ‘body horror’ fiction and film, a newly graphic focus on bodily disintegration. It is no coincidence that 1968, the year of shifting death from heart to head, was the year of George Romero’s redefinition of the zombie in the foundational underground classic, *Night of the Living Dead*. Since Romero, the zombie has been dispatched not like the older vampire by a stake to the

48. Jean-Dominique Bauby, *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly: A Memoir of Life in Death*, London, Vintage 1998.

49. Susan Merrill Squier, *Liminal Lives: Imagining the Human at the Frontiers of Biomedicine*, Durham, Duke University Press 2004, pp4-5.

50. Margaret Lock, ‘On Making up the Good-as-Dead’, in *Remaking Life and Death: Toward an Anthropology of the Biosciences*, S. Franklin and M. Lock (eds), Sante Fe, School of American Research Press 2001, p189.

51. See Roger Luckhurst, 'Biomedical Horror: The New Death and the New Undead' in *Technologies of the Gothic in Literature and Culture: Technogothics*. (ed.) J. Edwards, London, Routledge 2015, pp84-98.

heart but by a bullet to the head.⁵¹ It is also, I think, the frame for why the dead come back in photography that addresses the intimate condition of the body in hospitals and morgues. 'The public hardly has a monolithic view about what it means to be dead,' Stuart Younger observes. (*Definition of death*, p294). Photography is part of this conversation.

A final illustration of how this terrain has been picked up in photography is the extraordinarily rich project of photographer Edgar Martins, who has spent several years investigating the archive of Portugal's National Institute of Legal Medicine and Forensic Sciences in Lisbon. The archive, well over 150 years old, holds physical evidence, medical documents and photographic records of violent crimes and death scenes. The files contain autopsy findings, logged and often preserved the implements used in suicides and murders (ropes, cords, knives, guns), and included meticulous photographs of the scene, as well as suicide notes. The archive, overlooked, crumbling away, is also an accidental history of photography itself. Early reports include sketches or drawings, then hand-drawn details on primitive photographs, then a mournful acceleration through types of celluloid films, boxes of negatives, polaroids, rolls of undeveloped film, and ending up with mobile phones and digital cameras bagged for evidence. Martins began presenting different arrays of this work in 2016 in various exhibitions, starting in the UK with 'Flat Death' at the Open Eye Gallery in Liverpool, and also in the book, *Siloquies and Soliloquies on Death, Life and Other Interludes*.

Martins' taxonomic impulse clearly shows that he works in the wake of the New Topographical School of objective documentation, the serial cataloguing of forms celebrated by Bernd and Hilda Becher in their practice and teaching. Previous projects by Martins have focused on the non-places of modernity - airport runways, beaches at night, large industrial plants, European Space Agency laboratories - with a detached, neutral, formal precision. At the same time, the very precision of these topographies tips the real into the surreal, rendering his representations at once transparent and enigmatic.⁵²

In this much more fraught terrain, Martins has re-documented the documents of the National Institute of Legal Medical and Forensic Science in hundreds of photographs, in a way that raises questions about how to represent such a catalogue of private pain and death. He catches a strange 'archive fever' in trying to order such disorder, the re-shuffling of taxonomies in different displays foregrounding this unnerving curatorial compulsion. There are sequences of images of ropes or garrottes, against neutral backgrounds, precisely coiled by medical investigators as they work through these chaotic scenes of death. There are puzzling, bizarre objects that have lost their notes and thus any framing discourse: a top-hat with a bullet hole, somewhere else, a skull with a matching bullet hole - a marvellous death, the actual circumstances long lost in the bureaucracy.

It is the suicide notes that feel to be the core of the project. In some sequences, Martins photographs only the very edges of the sheets of paper,

52. See Edgar Martins, 'In Conversation with David Company' in *Topologies*, aperture, London 2007, pp115-22.

end on to the camera, offering delicate slivers of withheld knowledge; in others, original photographs of notes are digitally manipulated to remove the writing, whilst keeping the creases or blood-stains; in others, finally, we are gifted with the message, however banal, petty, vengeful or lovingly regretful ('someone let the cat out'), texts freighted with the knowledge that death inheres in the written mark. In *The Postcard*, Derrida argued that every letter becomes a dead letter, gets stuck in the dead letter office, no return to sender, no addressee found, because of the inherent quality of writing to detach from its author; to circulate and continue to signify, but also to err, to veer off course, long before death let alone long after it. This is the logic of *destinerrance*, where destination, destiny, and the inherent errancy of the letter converge.⁵³

Martins' digital manipulations are inevitably contentious interventions - the history I have traced when the dead come back into photography guarantees that. But the Martins project, more than any other explored here, seems to inhabit deliberately that zone between what Kaja Silverman calls the indexical and the disclosive where affective networks are less predictable, more mobile. It wants to challenge assumptions about the fixity of the always-already wounding index, instead thinking about another possible relation between photography and death. André Bazin thought that the ontology of the photograph inhered in the long practice at the foundation of art, 'the practice of embalming the dead' - 'a mummy complex'.⁵⁴ Perhaps it is more attuned to registering the present crisis in the image and the transformation of death itself, to think of the photograph as existing in that liminal space *between* life and death, a weird zone with now decidedly fuzzy edges that is packed with all kinds of new provisional beings and dynamic relations.

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53. Jacques Derrida, *The Postcard: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, (trans) A. Bass, Chicago, Chicago University Press 1987. See also Hillis J. Miller, 'Derrida's *Destinerrance*', *Modern Language Notes* 121: 4 (2006), pp893-910.

54. André Bazin, 'The Ontology of the Photographic Image', (trans) H. Gray, *Film Quarterly* 13: 4 (1960), p4.