Preserving the Dead: Postmortem Photographs and Funeral Practices in 19th-Century America

Anthony Enns

Direitos de Autor | Copyright:

Preserving the Dead: Postmortem Photographs and Funeral Practices in

19th-Century America

Anthony Enns ⓘD

Como Citar | How to cite:

Editor | Publisher:

Direitos de Autor | Copyright:

Preserving the Dead: Postmortem Photographs and Funeral Practices in 19th-Century America

Preservando os Mortos: Fotografias Post Mortem e Práticas Funerárias na América do Séc. XIX

ANTHONY ENNS

Dalhousie University in Halifax, Nova Scotia

anthony.enns@dal.ca

—

Abstract

The rise of the modern funeral industry in 19th-century America introduced new forms of visual display that were designed to eliminate signs of bodily decay, and these practices were remarkably similar to those of postmortem photographers, who similarly sought to give bodies a lifelike appearance prior to burial. Postmortem photography can thus be understood as a transitional stage toward the modern disappearance of death, yet this practice has not entirely gone away, as postmortem photographs are still used to preserve the dead by creating the illusion of presence rather than confirming the reality of absence. Through a closer examination of the parallels between postmortem photographs and funeral practices, this article will explore the ways in which photography continues to mediate the experience of death and mourning.

—

Keywords   Photography | death | mourning | embalming | funerals

—
Resumo

A ascensão da moderna indústria funerária na América do séc. XIX introduziu novas formas de exibição dos corpos que visavam eliminar sinais de decomposição. Estas práticas eram notoriamente semelhantes às da fotografia *post mortem*, na qual os corpos eram transformados cosmeticamente e, depois, dispostos perante a câmara de forma a obterem uma aparência de vida. A fotografia *post mortem* pode, assim, ser entendida como um estágio intermédio no caminho para a moderna desaparição da morte. Porém, esta prática não foi completamente abandonada, dado que as fotografias *post mortem* ainda são realizadas para preservar os mortos, criando a ilusão da presença ao invés de confirmar a realidade da ausência. Este artigo explora os modos como a fotografia medeia a experiência da morte explorando um paralelismo entre práticas funerárias e fotografias *post mortem*.

—
Palavras–chave

Embalsamamento | fotografia | funeral | luto | morte

In the early 19th-century it was a common practice among upper-class Americans to commission a mourning portrait after the death of a loved one. Following the invention of the daguerreotype, middle-class people were also able to commission portraits of their lost loved ones for the first time — a practice that became known as "postmortem photography." This practice was popular in all parts of the country, and the number of photographs produced tended to increase during periods of conflict and crisis. During the 1840s, for example, a cholera epidemic swept through the country and the number of postmortem photographs produced was reportedly more than three times the number of wedding photographs. It was particularly common for people to commission postmortem photographs of children, as roughly 40% of children died before the age of five, and these images were often the first and only portraits ever taken of the sitters (Darrah 1981, 39).

Postmortem photographs adopted many of the conventions of mourning portraits. Unlike paintings, however, photographs were often understood as direct transcriptions of the real. For example, American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce (1998, 5-6) famously described photographs as indexical rather than iconic signifiers because they register the traces of a real physical connection:

Photographs [...] are in certain respects exactly like the objects they represent. But this resemblance is due to the photographs having been produced under such circumstances that they were physically forced to correspond point by point to nature. In that aspect, then, they belong to the second class of signs, those by physical connection.

This definition has been foundational for the field of photography studies, as American photographer Allan Sekula (1983, 218) described photographs as "physical traces of their objects," and American art critic Rosalind Krauss (1984, 112) similarly described them as "a kind of deposit of the real itself." This idea has also encouraged critics to conceive of photographic images as reminders of human mortality, as they are physical traces of the past that evoke an awareness of the inexorable passage of time. For example, American critic Susan Sontag (1977, 14) claimed that "all photographs are *memento mori*" and that "to take a photograph is to participate in another person's [...] mortality." French critic Roland Barthes (1981, 9) similarly argued that "every photograph" represents "the return of the dead," and French critic Christian Metz (1985, 84) even described photography as a form of "thanatography" because it "maintains the memory of the dead as *being dead.*" This tradition also informs the more recent work of American critic Robert Pogue Harrison (2003, 148), who argues that "the photograph retains essential links to its ancestral origins in the death mask [...] because it allows a person's likeness to survive his or her demise," and British critic Jay Prosser (2005, 1-2), who similarly claims that "photography [...] is a memento mori" because it provides "evidence of the fact of death itself."

Postmortem photographs provide perhaps the most obvious illustration of this connection between photography and death, as these images not only represented the dead but were also conceived as physical traces of their material presence. For example, postmortem photographs were often included in mourning lockets, pins, rings, and other sorts of memorial paraphernalia. The Scovil Manufacturing Company of Waterbury, Connecticut and the Mausoleum Daguerreotype Case Company of New York also produced velvet-lined cases that were specifically designed to house "sepulchral daguerreotypes" (Rinhart and Rinhart 1967, 80-81). Like caskets, in other words, these cases were designed to contain the remains of the dead, and it was customary for them to include other physical traces, such as a lock of hair, a piece of ribbon, a letter, a funeral notice, or a coffin plate, which further reinforced the notion of postmortem photographs as *memento mori*. Critics thus tend to argue that postmortem photographs forced viewers to confront and contemplate the reality of death itself. For example, American anthropologist Jay Ruby (1995, 174) argues that "pictures of death are inescapable reminders of the loss," and American historian Scott Eberle (2005, 541) similarly argues that postmortem photographs reflect "a forthright and dignified acceptance of individual mortality." Melania Borgo, Marta Licata, and Silvia Iorio (2016, 104) also argue that these images serve "to challenge immortality" by exposing the transient nature of life and the harsh reality of death.

The idea that photographs represent indexical traces of the real remains somewhat problematic, however, as they are always constructed in particular ways in order to convey particular meanings. Mary Ann Doane (2007, 136) points out, for example, that Peirce provided two contradictory definitions of the index:

> The index as trace implies a material connection between sign and object as well as an insistent temporality—the reproducibility of a past moment. The trace does not evaporate in the moment of its production, but remains as the witness of an anteriority. Hence, this understanding of the index necessarily aligns it with historicity, the "that has been" of Barthes's photographic image. The second definition of the index, on the other hand, often seems to harbor a resistance to the first. The index as deixis—the pointing finger, the "this" of language—does exhaust itself in the moment of its implementation and is ineluctably linked to presence. There is always a gap between sign and object, and touch here is only figurative.

While a photographic portrait clearly points to the person it depicts, in other words, this referential function does not necessarily involve the direct impression of the sitter's physical presence. On the contrary, there is always a gap between the photographic sign and the object it signifies, as every photograph is also a coded image whose meaning is shaped by the technical properties of the medium, the manipulations of the photographer, and the social context in which it is produced, circulated, and consumed. The constructed nature of such images becomes particularly evident when technical accidents, fraudulent practices, or social rituals imbue them with meanings that are entirely unrelated to any real pre-photographic event.

The idea of postmortem photographs as *memento mori* is problematic for the same reason, as postmortem photographers often sought to represent the dead in a natural, lifelike manner by removing any visible signs of death or decay. Instead of providing material evidence of a loved one's absence, these images were thus designed to convey the illusion of continued presence by concealing rather than revealing the reality of death. American sociologists Paul David Nygard and Catherine H. Reilly (2003, 567) point out, for example, that these images served "as a reminder [...] that the deceased remained a presence in the world of the living." British historian Audrey Linkman (2006, 335) similarly emphasizes that postmortem photography "was not designed to encourage the living to contemplate their own mortality and the transience of human existence" but rather acted "as a palliative [...] by invoking a gentler, more familiar state of being." British historian Nicola Brown (2009, 9) also notes that these images helped viewers "to feel that [the dead] were not lost to them, for they were, in a significant way, still there among the living." When interpreted in this way, postmortem photographs would seem to support Australian art historian Geoffrey Batchen's (2010, 126) assertion that "we primarily take photographs in order to deny the possibility of death, to stop time in its tracks and us with it."

The desire to create the illusion of continued presence also informed the newly emerging practice of embalming, which sought not only to preserve the body of the deceased but also to enhance its external appearance. The practice of embalming thus shared the same fundamental goal as photography—namely, the preservation of the dead—which inspired André Bazin's (1960, 8) famous description of photography as an artistic practice that "embalms time": "Those grey or sepia shadows, phantomlike and almost undecipherable, are no longer traditional family portraits but rather the disturbing presence of lives halted at a set moment in their duration [...] for photography [...] embalms time, rescuing it simply from its proper corruption." Photography is similar to embalming, in other words, because they both transform bodies into material objects that can be preserved over time. Postmortem photography would appear to provide a vivid illustration of this parallel, yet it is important to note that this practice actually predated the rise of the modern funeral industry and that funeral directors borrowed many of their techniques for preparing and presenting the dead from postmortem photographers. Instead of describing photography as a continuation of embalming, it would thus be more accurate to describe embalming as an extension or continuation of postmortem photography by other means, as it was similarly designed to transform the dead into an artificially constructed and aesthetically arranged visual representation that served to "soften" the reality of death by creating the illusion of continued presence.

The following article will shed new light on this historical juncture by examining the fundamental similarities between postmortem photographs and funeral practices. While mourning had previously been a non-commercial activity, the photography and funeral industries were commercial enterprises that sought to capitalize on people's grief by offering a wide range of commercial services for the bereaved. While beautification had not been an essential component of earlier mourning rituals, these industries introduced two new occupations—namely, professional photographers and funeral directors—that were focused on comforting survivors by "softening" the reality of death through the skillful preparation and presentation of the deceased. While viewings of the dead had previously taken place in chapels or private homes, these industries also introduced new sites of mourning by moving the dead to institutional facilities—namely, photography studios and funeral homes—that simultaneously functioned as both commercial laboratories (for the developing of photographs and the embalming of bodies) and theatrical staging areas. These industries also introduced new containers for the dead—namely, velvet-lined photograph cases and cloth-lined caskets—that were both modeled on jewelry boxes, which further emphasized the notion of the dead as material objects of value that could be preserved and cherished. These parallels help to explain why the practice of postmortem photography gradually shifted in the late 19th century from the artificial reconstruction of lifelike images to the more straightforward recording of funeral displays. While historians often argue that this shift represented an attempt to avoid or deny the reality of death, I will argue that it merely signaled the

replacement of postmortem photographs with funeral displays and the replacement of professional photographers with funeral directors, who were ultimately more successful at preserving the dead as fixed images. The following article will thus show how postmortem photography influenced—and was gradually incorporated into—modern funeral practices and how it can be understood as a transitional stage in the process of what historians describe as the "dying of death" in 19th-century America.

As mentioned earlier, the practice of postmortem photography was based on posthumous mourning portraits, which typically depicted the dead as if they were still alive. While artists occasionally included symbols of death in these paintings, such as willow trees, wilted flowers, or clocks to signify the passing of time, many of them did not contain any signs that would indicate whether or not the subject was deceased. When photographers began to produce postmortem portraits, they were also asked to capture images that depicted the dead as if they were still alive—especially when no living portrait had been taken. Sometimes subjects were seated upright on a chair or a couch, and sometimes subjects were photographed lying down but made to appear as if they were standing up. For example, American photographer Charlie E. Orr (1873, 200-201) provided the following instructions for taking postmortem images: "Place the body on a lounge or sofa, have the friends dress the head and shoulders as near as in life as possible, [...] raise it to a sitting position, and bolster firmly, using for a background a drab shawl or some material suited to the position, circumstance, etc." Orr (1873, 201) also emphasized the importance of eliminating signs of death by opening the eyes of the corpse: "[T]his you can effect handily by using the handle of a teaspoon; put the lower lids down, they will stay; but the upper lids must be pushed far enough up, so that they will stay open to about the natural width, turn the eyeball around to its proper place, and you have the face nearly as natural as life." The following description of a photograph of a dead boy taken by George N. Barnard (Anonymous 1855, 224) similarly emphasized the photographer's ability to convey the illusion of life:

> It has not the slightest expression of suffering, and nothing of that ghastliness and rigity [sic] of outline and feature, which usually render likenesses taken in sickness or after death so painfully revolting as to make them decidedly undesirable. On the other hand it has all the freshness and vivacity of a picture from a living original—the sweet composure—the serene and happy look of childhood. Even the eyes, incredible as it may seem, are not expressionless, but so natural that no one would imagine it could be a post mortem execution.

American photographer Nathan Burgess (1855, 80) also emphasized "the necessity of procuring those more than life-like remembrances of our friends, ere it is too late—ere the hand of death has snatched away those we prize so dearly on earth," and American photographer John L. Gihon (1871, 350) similarly claimed that a postmortem photograph was a source of "solace" because it was "devoid of the ghastly suggestions of the grim destroyer."

In most cases, subjects were made to look as if they were sleeping, which was also a common pose in mourning portraits. As American anthropologist Kenneth Ames (1981, 654) points out, the idea of death as sleep dominated the latter half of the century: "In the ideology of the late nineteenth century, death did not really occur. People did not die. They went to sleep. They rested from their labors." For example, American photographer James Van Der Zee (1978, 23) recounted several occasions when he was asked to make dead bodies look as if they were sleeping, including one sitting in which he was asked to pose a corpse in a chair with a newspaper in his hand: "[H]is family wanted the paper put in his hand to make it appear he had been reading and had just dozed off." This practice was particularly popular in the case of children. In 1846, for example, the Southworth and Hawes photography studio ran the following advertisement in the Boston business directory: "We take great pains to have Miniatures of Deceased Persons agreeable and satisfactory, and they are often so natural as to seem [...] in a deep sleep" (qtd. in Rinhart and Rinhart 1981, 299). Burgess (1855, 80) also explained that this technique was explicitly designed to convey the impression that the subject was still alive, as "the playful smile of innocence" often appears on the face of "the sleeping infant." It was thus difficult for viewers to discern whether the photographed subject was dead or asleep, which was precisely the point.

Postmortem photographs had to be produced quickly, as the dead were usually buried on the same day that they died. Ruby (1995, 52) notes, for example, that advertisements for 19th-century photography studios often stated that they were "prepared to take pictures of a deceased person on one hour's notice." The wet collodion process also required a dark room to sensitize and process the plates, so photographers typically used a room within the home, such as a small closet or cellar. In some cases, the dead were also brought to photography studios. For example, the advertisement for Southworth and Hawes offered to take photographs at the home of the deceased or at their private studios, and Gihon (1871, 351) described several occasions when funeral processions arrived at his studio and he was asked to photograph the deceased before they continued to the burial site. In order to produce life-like poses, photographers also had to remove fluids from the body before dressing and positioning it. In a speech presented to the National Photographic Association, for example, American photographer Albert S. Southworth (1873, 279) described the procedure for removing fluid from the mouth of a corpse so that none will be "ejected" during the sitting: "[C]arefully turn them over just as though they were under the operation of an emetic. You can do this in less than one single minute, and every single thing will pass out, and you can wipe the mouth and wash off the face, and handle them just as well as though they were well persons." He also described how to make the joints pliable so that the body can be posed in "a natural and easy position [...] just as they would look in life if standing up before you." Photographers also sought to conceal any evidence of physical deterioration, such as the darkening of the lips or the yellowing of the skin, which often looked black on photographic plates. Some accomplished this goal

by applying a red tint to the skin in order to restore the appearance of life. In 1865, for example, American photographer Frederick Gutekunst (qtd. in Borgo et al. 2016, 108) photographed a girl who had been dead for several days in order to show that it was possible to conceal the process of putrefaction. Others accomplished this goal by applying cosmetic treatments to the photograph itself. For example, Gihon (1871, 351) encouraged photographers to "place [the head] so that an artist can afterwards by painting in the eyes, convey the appearance of a possible or natural position," and Orr claimed that "proper retouching will remove the blank expression and stare of the eye," which will render "the face nearly as natural as life" (Orr 1873, 201). The treatment of bodies and images was thus driven by the same goal, which was to produce a natural lifelike appearance that would conceal the reality of death.

The removal of fluids and the application of cosmetic treatments clearly links the practice of postmortem photography to the history of embalming. While various embalming techniques were developed in ancient civilizations, modern embalming techniques were first introduced during the American Civil War, when American physician Thomas Holmes developed the first safe embalming fluid. In 1861 Holmes famously tested his technique on the body of Union Colonel Elmer Ellsworth, who was the first officer to die in the line of duty. Ellsworth was also a friend of President Abraham Lincoln, who was so impressed by the appearance of Ellsworth's body that he commissioned Holmes to embalm the bodies of Union soldiers so that they could be transported home for burial (Hickman 2002, 102). By preserving bodies over time, embalming also allowed them to be viewed for longer periods. In 1865, for example, American physicians Charles Brown and Harry Cattell embalmed Lincoln's body for a series of twelve funerals in twelve different cities. Twenty-five million people reportedly viewed his body as it travelled from Washington, DC to Springfield, Illinois, where it was finally buried, and most of the press coverage focused on this astonishing new method of preserving the dead. For example, a Chicago journalist (Anonymous 1865, 4) who viewed Lincoln eighteen days after his assassination claimed that his body showed no signs of decay and that his "countenance exhibited an extremely natural and life-like appearance, more as if calmly slumbering, than in the cold embrace of death." Journalist Charles Page (1899, 364) similarly claimed that "[t]he face of the dead president bears a very natural expression, one familiar to all who saw him often," as it conveyed "the hint of a smile, and the look of benediction." These descriptions clearly echoed those of postmortem photographs, which were similarly designed to produce a lifelike appearance.

The lifelike appearance of Lincoln's "countenance" encouraged Americans across the country to adopt this new technique, as American anthropologists Richard Huntington and Peter Metcalf (1991, 213) explain: "A nation still mourning its war dead tried to capture in their funerals something of the peace written upon Lincoln's face. In this way public attitudes were made ready to accept the new techniques of embalming then being perfected." American historian Gary Laderman (1996, 163) similarly argues

that Lincoln's funerals "served as a site where the nation could be figuratively restored and redeemed primarily because the procedure of embalming demonstrated that even in the grips of death the president's body, like the social body, could overcome the material, physical violence enacted upon it." The preservation of Lincoln's body thus had a deeper metaphorical significance, as it symbolized the preservation of the nation itself, and it helped to make the practice of embalming socially acceptable precisely because it made this metaphorical meaning possible. It also served as a form of mass advertising for the newly emerging funeral industry by demonstrating the efficacy of embalming and spreading word of its benefits across the country.

Laderman (1996, 154) also notes that public acceptance of this practice led to the rise of specialists "who could, in effect, domesticate the corpse for the public imagination and assume managerial responsibilities for its disposal." Between 1856 and 1869, for example, eleven major patents were granted for improvements in embalming. Commercially produced embalming fluid finally became available in 1878, and in 1880 American physician Joseph Henry Clark began teaching embalming workshops throughout the country (Dodge 1900, 4). In 1882 Clark also established the first professional school of embalming in Cincinnati, Ohio, which later became the Cincinnati College of Embalming, and he was thus known as "the father of American embalming schools." The National Funeral Directors' Association was also established that same year, and it sought to replace the profession of "undertaker" with the new profession of "funeral director," which referred to someone who not only constructed coffins but also oversaw the entire embalming, viewing, and burial process. Linkman (2011, 68) also notes that funeral directors referred to "their facilities' 'homes' or 'parlours' in a deliberate attempt to suggest that the remains would receive the same reverent, careful treatment on their premises as they would receive from relatives in the family home." By this time there were more than 5,000 funeral homes across the country, and this sudden increase was a direct result of an increase in the number of life insurance policies, which allowed funeral directors to develop ever more lavish and expensive forms of funeral display. By the turn of the 20th century, therefore, the viewing of the dead had shifted almost entirely from the home to the funeral home and the responsibilities associated with the dead had shifted almost entirely from photographers to funeral directors, who handled all aspects of the preparation and presentation of the body.

Like photographers, funeral directors also sought to develop new ways to enhance the illusion of continued presence. For example, an early advertisement for embalming services in a Washington, DC business directory claimed that "Bodies Embalmed by Us [...] retain their natural color and appearance [...] so as to admit of contemplation of the person Embalmed, with the countenance of one asleep (qtd. in Habenstein and Lamers 1996, 217). American physician Carl Lewis Barnes (1896, 183), president of the Chicago College of Embalming, similarly promoted this practice by emphasizing that it "prevents the corruption of the grave, so that the body will remain entire, and as it

were asleep in its bed." American funeral director William Peter Hohenschuh (1900, 88), president of the National Funeral Directors' Association, also published a guidebook that included the following advice: "One idea should always be kept in mind and that is, to lay out the body so that there will be as little suggestion of death as possible." Margaret Schwartz (2015, 17-18) thus concludes that the goal of the funeral director was essentially the same as that of the postmortem photographer, as "both mediations preserve the appearance of the flesh as such," and the goal of preserving the dead was "not merely literal (stopping decomposition) but also symbolic, in the sense that the corpse signifies peaceful sleep." Like postmortem photography, in other words, modern funeral practices were designed to transform the body into a fixed image whose preparation and presentation served to conceal rather than reveal the reality of death.

Funeral directors also employed many of the same techniques to achieve this goal, as they were primarily responsible for evacuating the interior of the body and preserving its exterior appearance. They also assumed the task of washing, dressing, and positioning the body for viewing, and they used cosmetic enhancements to conceal any signs of illness or decay. They then placed these cosmetically enhanced bodies in newly designed "caskets," which were designed to resemble women's jewelry boxes, as Thomas Schlereth (1991, 291) explains: "The coffin, previously a plain wooden, roughly human-shaped box was redefined as a 'casket,' a term whose original meaning described a container for precious objects." Funeral directors also staged the body in professional studios—known as "slumber rooms"—that were explicitly designed to resemble bedrooms. American funeral director Joseph Nelson Greene (1905, 33) emphasized the importance of these visual displays by noting that "the placement of the casket in the room, gracefully canopied by an attractive curtain, and banked against flowers artistically arranged, forms a picture so beautiful as to relieve the scene of death of some of its awfulness." These similarities clearly show that there was a direct connection between photographic and funeral practices in the late 19th century, as photographers and funeral directors both assumed responsibility for preparing and presenting the dead by transforming bodies into material objects of value that consumers could observe and preserve over time. The modern funeral industry thus represented not the end of postmortem photography but rather its continuation by other means, as funeral directors assumed the duties that had previously been performed by photographers and funeral homes assumed the functions that had previously been performed by photography studios. John Troyer (2007, 25) also points out that embalming had a "competitive advantage" over postmortem photography, as "the dead body could indefinitely exist as a well-preserved three-dimensional object with the possibility of being moved from location to location by external forces." Funeral directors thus not only created the illusion of continued presence by replacing the disturbing sight of a dead body with the comforting image of a lifelike body, like postmortem photographers, but also transformed the body itself into a fixed image that could enter into circulation like other industrially

produced commodities. What changed, in other words, was how the dead were seen, as it became possible to view a corpse over an extended period of time without the mediation of the photographic apparatus.

Funeral practices also transformed photographic practices, as postmortem photographers began to photograph funeral displays instead of creating their own displays. In some cases photographers were even commissioned directly by funeral directors, as this was yet another service they provided for the bereaved, as Batchen (2010, 109-110) explains:

> In the last two decades of the nineteenth century [...] it was common for a certain kind of cabinet card to be produced as a memorial for people who had recently died. A professional photographer would be hired as part of the funeral ceremonies to shoot a collodion glass negative of a still life [...] comprised of the various flower arrangements displayed at the funeral itself. The resulting photograph would then be reproduced many times in the form of an albumen print pasted onto a cabinet card and sent to all those who had been at the funeral, or even to those who had sent flowers but not been otherwise present.

The new practice of funeral photography was thus somewhat different from that of postmortem photography, as the photographer relied entirely on the funeral director to prepare and present the body for viewing. In addition, funeral photographs did not require retouching, as the body was already cosmetically enhanced. Instead of demonstrating the skill of the photographer, funeral photographs were thus designed to demonstrate the skill of the funeral director (as well as the wealth of the family that could afford such lavish displays). The introduction of snapshot photography at the turn of the 20th century also made it possible for individual mourners to take their own funeral photographs—a practice that has continued ever since and that can be seen most recently in the popular phenomenon of "funeral selfies" or "caskies" (Meese et al. 2015; Gibbs et al. 2015).

The modern funeral industry has also been condemned as a symptom of what Australian critic Joseph Jacobs (1899, 264) described as the "dying of death" in the late 19th century, as it distanced the living from any direct involvement with the dead: "The most distinctive note of the modern spirit is the practical disappearance of the thought of death." The anthologies *Death in America* (Stannard 1975) and *Passing: The Vision of Death in America* (Jackson 1977) similarly traced how attitudes toward death changed in the late 19th century, as the care of the dying shifted from families to trained professionals, and critics like Swiss-American psychologist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross (1969) described how this trend resulted in a widespread denial of death. French historian Philippe Aries (1974, 557-558) also drew a direct connection between the denial of death and the practice of embalming, which served "to play down the death of the person and to create the illusion of a living being," which was closely "intertwined [...] with commercial concerns," and Laderman (1996,175) similarly concluded that embalming

made the denial of death "a fundamental dimension of life and death in American culture." Critics have thus repeatedly condemned the modern funeral industry as a commercial enterprise that contributed to, and profited from, a pathological avoidance of death in contemporary American society.

While postmortem photography was gradually supplanted by new funeral practices in the late 19th century, there was a resurgence of interest in this practice in the late 20th century. Unlike critics of the modern funeral industry, however, contemporary critics more often celebrate the return of postmortem photography by arguing that it exposes the reality of death and encourages its acceptance. For example, American grief counselors Pat Schwiebert and Paul Kirk (1981, 17) explicitly promote the practice of postmortem photography—particularly in the case of stillborn babies, which are typically seen by parents only through sonogram images—and they even recommend that it become a routine hospital procedure. While they acknowledge that many parents are reluctant to photograph their dead babies, they insist that "a picture can provide tangible evidence that this was your child—that he or she was indeed a part of your life and equal to your other children in the love you gave, if only while inside you." In the early 1980s the Children's Hospital in Denver, Colorado and the Sparrow Hospital in Lansing, Michigan also began to provide grieving parents with postmortem photographs of their stillborn babies (see Ruby 1995, 180), and the Centering Corporation—a non-profit organization in Omaha, Nebraska that conducts workshops on death for perinatal caregivers—urged all hospitals to produce such images, as they helped parents to "confirm the reality of their baby's life and death" (Johnson et al. 1985, 12). A non-profit organization in La Crosse, Wisconsin called Resolve Through Sharing also advised hospitals to produce these images—even when parents refuse—because they often "decide later that they do want them," and "[t]he opportunity to take pictures will never come again" (Limbo and Wheeler 1986, 96). A non-profit organization in Denver, Colorado called Now I Lay Me Down to Sleep was also created with the sole purpose of producing postmortem photographs of stillborn babies, and this organization currently employs approximately 1,500 photographers working in 40 different countries around the world (www.nowilaymedowntosleep.org). And just as Ruby, Burns, and Eberle describe early postmortem photographs as *memento mori* because they force viewers to confront the reality of death, so too do sociologists and social workers argue that these contemporary photographs help grieving parents to accept the reality of a child's death (Riches and Dawson 1998, 121-140; Blood and Cacciatore 2014, 224-233). Proponents thus argue that this practice represents a rejection of the "dying of death" by confronting viewers with a reality that the modern funeral industry encourages them to deny or avoid.

While contemporary critics often describe the effects of postmortem photography as directly opposed to those of the modern funeral industry, it is important to note that modern funeral practices originally sought to extend or continue the practice of "softening" death by creating the illusion of continued presence. From this perspective,

postmortem photographs can be better understood as initiating a general program of denial and avoidance that later became the foundation of the modern funeral industry. It seems particularly significant, for example, that the organizations mentioned above all stress the importance of taking photographs after the bodies of the deceased have embalmed as well as the importance of positioning these bodies in a lifelike manner in order to create the impression that they are alive and asleep. Instead of forcing parents to confront the reality of their loss, therefore, these photographs thus employ the same techniques developed by postmortem photographers in the 19th century, which were explicitly designed to conceal rather than reveal the reality of death. While the celebration of these contemporary photographs clearly reflects a certain degree of nostalgia for an optical medium that is associated with an earlier time when Americans were seen as more spiritually connected to the natural cycles of life (the prevalence of black-and-white photography seems particularly significant in this regard), this nostalgia clearly reflects a misunderstanding of the function that these images originally served as well as the importance role that they played in the development of the modern funeral industry, which are now seen as defiantly resisting. Indeed, the contemporary practice of postmortem photography is still motivated by a desire to transform the body into a fixed image that is designed to "soften" the reality of death, and by celebrating this practice critics often ignore the fact that the bodies they represent are always already detached from that reality. Such an understanding of the cultural significance of postmortem photography shows that this practice was eventually abandoned not because the subject of death became taboo, as critics often claim, but rather because the techniques developed by postmortem photographers were gradually adopted and further developed by funeral directors, who continued to generate enormous profits by satisfying the same social needs and desires. If these images are now perceived as enabling a more intimate relationship with the dead or a healthier acceptance of mortality, then this may simply be due to the fact that the reality of death has now been pushed even further away from the realm of everyday experience.

—

Bibliography

Ames, Kenneth L. 1981. "Ideologies in Stone: Meanings in Victorian Gravestones". *Journal of Popular Culture* 14, no. 4 (Spring): 641-656. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0022-3840.1981.00641.x.

Anonymous. 1855. "Life from the Dead". *The Photographic and Fine Art Journal* 8, no. 7 (July): 224.

Anonymous. 1865. "The Funeral." *Chicago Daily Tribune*, May 2, 4.

Aries, Philippe. 1974. "The Reversal of Death: Changes in Attitudes Toward Death in Western Societies". *American Quarterly* 26, no. 5 (December): 536-560. https://doi.org/10.2307/2711889.

Barnes, Carl L. 1896. *The Art and Science of Embalming: Descriptive and Operative*. Chicago: Trade Periodical Company.

Barthes, Roland. 1981. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. Translated by Richard Howard. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux.

Batchen, Geoffrey. 2010. *Suspending Time: Life—Photography—Death*. Shizuoka: Nohara.

Bazin, André. 1960. "The Ontology of the Photographic Image". Translated by Hugh Gray. *Film Quarterly* 13, no. 4 (Summer): 4-9. https://doi.org/10.2307/1210183.

Blood, Cybele, and Joanne Cacciatore. 2014. "Parental Grief and Memento Mori Photography: Narrative, Meaning, Culture, and Context". *Death Studies* 38, no. 4 (April): 224-233. https://doi.org/10.1080/07481187.2013.788584.

Borgo, Melania, Marta Licata, and Silvia Iorio. 2016. "Post-mortem Photography: The Edge Where Life Meets Death". *Human and Social Studies* 5, no. 2 (July): 103-115. https://doi.org/10.1515/hssr -2016-00016.

Brown, Nicola. 2009. "Empty Hands and Precious Pictures: Post-mortem Portrait Photographs of Children". *Australasian Journal of Victorian Studies* 14, no. 2: 8-24. https://openjournals.library.sydney.edu.au/index.php/AJVS/article/view/9415/9314.

Burgess, Nathan G. 1855. "Taking Portraits After Death". *The Photographic and Fine-Art Journal* 8, no. 3 (March): 80.

Darrah, William C. 1981. *Cartes de Visite in Nineteenth Century Photography*. Gettysburg, PA: W. C. Darrah.

Doane, Mary Ann. 2007. "The Indexical and the Concept of Medium Specificity". *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 18, no. 1 (March): 128-152. https://doi.org/10.1215/10407391-2006-025.

Dodge, A. Johnson. 1900. *The Practical Embalmer: A Common-Sense Treatise on the Art and Science of Embalming*. Boston: A. J. Dodge.

Eberle, Scott G. 2005. "Memory and Mourning: An Exhibit History". *Death Studies* 29, no. 6 (July-August): 535-557. https://doi.org/10.1080/07481180590962686.

Gibbs, Martin, James Meese, Michael Arnold, Bjorn Nansen, and Marcus Carter. 2015. "#Funeral and Instagram: Death, Social Media, and Platform Vernacular". *Information, Communication and Society* 18, no. 3 (March): 255-268. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2014.987152.

Gihon, John L. 1871. "Curious Photographic Experiences". *The Philadelphia Photographer* 8, no. 95 (November): 349-352.

Greene, Joseph Nelson. 1905. *The Funeral: Its Conduct and Proprieties*. Cincinnati: Jennings and Graham

Habenstein, Robert W., and William M. Lamers. 1996. *The History of American Funeral Directing*. Milwaukee, MN: National Funeral Directors Association.

Harrison, Robert Pogue. 2003. *The Dominion of the Dead*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Hickman, Tom. 2002. *Death: A User's Guide*. London: Ebury Press.

Hohenschuh, William P. 1900. *The Modern Funeral: Its Management*. Chicago: Trade Periodical Company.

Huntington, Richard, and Peter Metcalf. 1991. *Celebrations of Death: The Anthropology of Mortuary Ritual*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Jackson, Charles O., ed. 1977. *Passing: The Vision of Death in America*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.

Jacobs, Joseph. 1899. "The Dying of Death". *Fortnightly Review* 72: 264-269.

Johnson, Joy, S. Marvin Johnson, James H. Cunningham, and Irwin J. Weinfeld. 1985. *A Most Important Picture*. Omaha: Centering Corporation.

Krauss, Rosalind. 1984. *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Kübler-Ross, Elisabeth. 1969. *On Death and Dying*: What the Dying Have to Teach Doctors, Nurses, Clergy and Their Own Families. New York: Macmillan.

Laderman, Gary. 1996. *The Sacred Remains: American Attitudes Toward Death, 1799-1883*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Limbo, Rana K., and Sara Rich Wheeler. 1986. *When a Baby Dies: A Handbook for Healing and Helping*. La Crosse, WI: Resolve Through Sharing.

Linkman, Audrey. 2006. "Taken from Life: Post-Mortem Portraiture in Britain 1860-1910". *History of Photography* 30, no. 4 (Winter): 309-347. https://doi.org/10.1080/03087298.2006.10443484.

---. 2011. *Photography and Death*. London: Reaktion Books.

Meese, James, Martin Gibbs, Marcus Carter, Michael Arnold, Bjorn Nansen, and Tamara Kohn. 2015. "Selfies at Funerals: Mourning and Presencing on Social Media Platforms". *International Journal of Communication* 9, no. 1: 1818-1831. https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/3154/1402.

Metz, Christian. 1985. "Photography and Fetish". *October* 34 (Autumn): 81-90. https://doi.org/10.2307/778490.

Nygard, Paul David, and Catherine H. Reilly. 2003. "The American Family and the Processing of Death Prior to the 20th Century". In *Handbook of Death and Dying, Volume 2: The Response to Death*, edited by Clifton D. Bryant, 567-574. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.

Orr, Charlie E. 1873. "Post-mortem Photography". *The Philadelphia Photographer* 10, no. 115 (July): 200-201.

Page, Charles A. 1899. *Letters of a War Correspondent*. Boston: L. C. Page.

Peirce, Charles Sanders. 1998. "What Is a Sign?" In *The Essential Peirce: Selected Philosophical Writings, Volume 2 (1893-1913)*, edited by the Peirce Edition Project, 4-10. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

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

Riches, Gordon, and Pamela Dawson. 1998. "Lost Children, Living Memories: The Role of Photographs in Processes of Grief and Adjustment among Bereaved Parent". *Death Studies* 22, no. 2 (March/April): 121-140. https://doi.org/10.1080/074811898201632.

Rinhart, Floyd, and Marion Rinhart. 1967. *American Daguerreian Art*. New York: Clarkson N. Potter.

---. 1981. *The American Daguerreotype*. Athens: University of Georgia Press.

Ruby, Jay. 1995. *Secure the Shadow: Death and Photography in America*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Schlereth, Thomas J. 1991. *Victorian America: Transformations in Everyday Life, 1876-1915*. New York: HarperCollins.

Schwartz, Margaret. 2015. *Dead Matter: The Meaning of Iconic Corpses*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Schwiebert, Pat, and Paul Kirk. 1981. *When Hello Means Goodbye: A Guide for Parents Whose Child Dies Before Birth, at Birth or Shortly After Birth*. Portland, OR: Perinatal Loss.

Sekula, Allan. 1983. "Photography Between Labour and Capital". In *Mining Photographs and Other Pictures 1948-1968: A Selection from the Negative Archives of Shedden Studio, Glace Bay, Cape Breton*, edited by Benjamin H. D. Buchloh and Robert Wilkie, 193-268. Halifax: Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design and the University College of Cape Breton Press.

Sontag, Susan. 1977. *On Photography*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux.

Southworth, Albert S. 1873. "An Address to the National Photographic Association". *The Philadelphia Photographer* 10, no. 117 (September): 277-280.

Stannard, David E., ed. 1975. *Death in America*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Troyer, John. 2007. "Embalmed Vision". *Mortality* 12, no. 1 (February): 22-47. https://doi.org/10.1080/13576270601088525.

Van Der Zee, James, Owen Dodson, and Camille Billops. 1978. *The Harlem Book of the Dead*. Dobbs Ferry, NY: Morgan and Morgan.

—
Biographical note
Anthony Enns is an Associate Professor
in English and Media Studies at Dalhousie
University in Halifax, Nova Scotia.
His work on the history of photography has
appeared in the anthologies *Picturing America:
Trauma, Realism, Politics, and Identity in
American Visual Culture* (2006), *Vibratory
Modernism* (2013), and *Photography and Other
Media in the Nineteenth Century* (2018). His essay
"Mesmerism, Photography, and Hawthorne"
also appeared in *Revista de Comunicação
e Linguagens* in 2008.

—
ORCID iD
0000-0002-1819-6836
—
Institutional address
Department of English, Dalhousie University,
6135 University Ave. Room 1186, Halifax, Nova
Scotia, Canada B3H 4R2.