

# Katherine Pettit

## metamorphic death: post-mortem & spirit photography in narrative cinema

As Geoffrey Batchen writes, photography has been associated with death since its inception. In stopping time, each individual photograph embodies the interweave of life and death. All photographs bear the work of death due to the temporal-material quality of freezing, mummifying or corpsifying the captured body. This temporal-material stasis is particularly manifest in the early beginnings of photographic technological development. Due to slow exposure times, the subject had to remain completely still for many seconds and even minutes to prevent the image from being blurred. The strain of motionlessness caused the subject's face to look sombre and morose. However, a solution became available for removing the physical strain from the subject. Special prosthetic devices were developed to constrain the subject. A neck and back brace was secured to the subject to ensure stillness and guarantee a detailed and clear image. Garrett Stewart observes that it was as if the body had to become a sarcophagus before it became a photographic effigy (44). This device transformed the live body into the stasis of an embalmed effigy. In order to appear lifelike, the technology of photography demanded that the subject act as if deceased (Batchen 208).

Portrait photographers took this corpse-like association with photography a step further and developed a lucrative trade in producing post-mortem photographs. Grieving parents could console themselves with a photograph of their departed child. The irony of photography becomes apparent again, as an image of the dead, *as dead*, somehow worked to sustain the living (Batchen 208). Jay Ruby writes extensively on the cultural phenomenon of post-mortem photography that began in the mid-nineteenth century and is still practiced today.

Ruby writes that death was a topic of polite conversation in the nineteenth century (7). The grieving process was considered normal, as is demonstrated by widowhood and its visual manifestation of wearing black in public, which was a lifelong social expectation for many women. Additionally, cemeteries were used as recreational sites. But this open and accepting attitude towards death became a forbidden topic for the American middle-class at the beginning of the twentieth century. The public display of mourning and distress over the death of a family member was considered to be pathological. However, this repressed view of death is changing, due to the proliferation of grief counselling and death education in public schools. Grief counsellors often use photography as a tool for facilitating the healing process, as Judith Stillion reveals:

This often helps clients to re-live the circumstances of a particular period and can result in re-gaining or attaining objectivity concerning their actions and decisions of that period. When clients re-live the period with the help of photographs, they frequently can let go of feelings of guilt and regret over actions taken or not taken during that particular time (quoted in Ruby 8).

Freud wrote that the mourning period is a process in which the subject learns that his or her loved one is now gone forever. In order to survive and heal, the person must direct his or her attention towards someone or something else. Substitutive objects, such as belongings of the deceased, or an image of the deceased, can help ease the grieving process (quoted in de Duve 123). Due to its indexical nature, a photographic image may be more useful than a drawing or a painting. Moreover, the indexicality of the photograph causes a mourning process to occur with every image. More specifically, as Barthes suggests with the "that-has-been," the viewer is always aware that the subject or the object of the image once existed in a certain time and place, but it does not exist in the same way at the time of viewing the photograph. The temporal death of photography brings awareness to both the mortality of the content of the photograph, and a sense of mortality to the viewer of the image. Whether a post-mortem photograph or not, the viewer is always engaged in a process of mourning. As Susan Sontag writes: "All photographs are memento mori. To take a photograph is to participate in another person's mortality, vulnerability, mutability" (15). In short, the mourning process of the photograph facilitates the healing process of grieving (de Duve 123). Perhaps photographic temporal death encourages healing by provoking contemplation on the impermanence of life and aids with the acceptance of the loss of death.

Photographs of death have a social purpose. Due to photography's connection to memory, and memory's connection to grief, a photograph of a dead loved one (either alive or posthumous) works as a therapeutic tool for the grieving process. The important social use of the photograph in the nineteenth century exemplifies Sontag's writings on the photograph as *memento mori*. The image of a loved one or a friend could be preserved and treasured as a memorial keepsake. The photograph offered the promise of a materialist realization of eternity. So, not only did photography aid in the grieving process, but it gave mourners tangibility for remembering the deceased.

The popularity of post-mortem photography is explained by an increase in death rates in the mid-nineteenth century. This was a time of social, demographic, and cultural upheaval in America. The population of the country tripled between 1790 and 1830



and would triple again by 1860. As cities grew, communities left the city for more space. Death rates due to tuberculosis were extremely high in areas that were crowded or over-populated. Tuberculosis became identified with the evils of urban life, while the rural lifestyle became a refuge from the disease and pollution of the city. A polarity between public and private life developed, with increasing importance being placed on the family unit. A new Victorian ideology arose that sentimentalized the family and its rituals, from birth to death (Stannard 84-87). The manifestation and utilization of post-mortem photography demonstrates the emerging importance of the nuclear family in the Victorian era.

Most photographs taken of the dead were of children, reflecting their high mortality rate. Tuberculosis had the largest impact on women and the young. Babies and children under age five were the highest risk-group for not surviving. There was the Victorian belief that the dead child was blessed with eternal youth and innocence, and the archival capabilities of photography facilitated that belief (Stannard 73-74). Thus, photographic stylistics were developed to deny the truth of death.

There are three styles of post-mortem family photography that are evident from 1840 to 1880. The first two styles attempt to portray the deceased as not dead, and the third style portrays the deceased with mourners. The first style can be labeled as “the last sleep”. The association of death with sleep can be traced back to classical Greece. The mythical sons of the night were Hypnos, god of sleep, and his twin, Thanatos, god of death. Thus, in the ideology of the late nineteenth century, people did not die; they embarked on the journey of eternal rest (Ruby 72). Blurring the boundary between death and sleep is an attempt to efface the reality of mortality.

The second style of post-mortem photography can be labeled as “alive, but dead”, portraying an attempt to conceal the notion of death or sleep. The body was not lying horizontally, but placed in an upright position, often in a chair. The eyes were open or painted on as if open, in an attempt to create the illusion that the subject was alive. The subject may have been photographed as lying horizontally, and then the photograph would have been turned and mounted on a ninety-degree angle so that the body appeared upright (Ruby 72). The grieving Victorian family reveal a profound fascination and desire for immortality by creating fictional photographs that portray the deceased as alive.

The aesthetic qualities of the first two styles of post-mortem photography usually concentrated on the facial features of the deceased, but a minority of photographs showed the entire body. The body rested on domestic furniture, such as a sofa draped with a sheet or coverlet. The setting was usually in the living room or the parlor of a private home. Sometimes, a dead child would be displayed as if asleep in a buggy. There are practical explanations for the popularity of close-up images of the deceased seated on a sofa in the parlor. Funeral parlors were nonexistent, and coffins were not readily available. Thus, “the last sleep” and “alive, but dead” poses demonstrate how technology and ideology coalesce. A body photographed in a coffin would have disrupted the illusion that the subject was alive (Ruby 72).

The third style of post-mortem photography depicts the deceased in the company of mourning family members. Photographs functioned to memorialize and idealize the social institution of the middle-class family. Often, no photographs would have been taken before a family member, such as a young child, died. Parents were depicted mourning their dead child--an attempt to create a final family image. When the subject was a child, it was held in the arms or the lap of the parent(s), as if the child were asleep. When looking at these images, it is often difficult to determine whether the child is asleep or dead. The display of grief on the face of the parents does not indicate the status of the child, as all photographs of this era portray sombre looking people due to the slow technology of exposure times. As was discussed earlier, people were placed in restraints to ensure a clear, unblurred image. The result was an image of a person without facial emotion with a rigid, expressionless posture (Ruby 88-90). This third style is an elaboration of the “last sleep” stylistic, but the inclusion of mourning parents also suggests the significant role of the family in the Victorian era.

Thus, the multiple associations of photography with death can first be seen in the earliest photographs where the slow technology demanded that the subject be as still as

a corpse. Then, real corpses were actually photographed, which served a social purpose in aiding the healing process of mourning. Photographers started with photographing live people who looked like they were dead, and ended by photographing the truly dead. The next step was to photograph the dead in the state of the afterlife, otherwise known as ghosts. Photographing the dead was the preliminary step that led to photographing ghosts. Additionally, cultural attitudes that surrounded photographic technology contributed to the transition from post-mortem to spirit photography.

There is one central characteristic of photography that brings associations of black magic, the occult and supernatural power: the double. While photography carried positivist associations of truth, the medium was also experienced as an uncanny phenomenon. The mechanical reproduction capabilities of photography were interpreted as an ability to create a parallel world of phantasmatic doubles. The new mythology welcomed the dissolving effects of modernity into the core of metaphysics. Tom Gunning provocatively suggests that the uncanny ability of photography to produce a double of the subject allowed it to embody associations of the supernatural (43). Therefore, I will examine the lineage of multi-cultural thinking on the double, as outlined by Sigmund Freud and Otto Rank.

Gunning recounts Freud's writing from *The Uncanny* (1919), stating that a fascination with repetition led Freud to go beyond the pleasure principle to a confrontation with the death drive and the conflict between Eros and Thanatos (43-44). Otto Rank also writes on the theme of the double, which was inspired by German uncanny cinema, in particular *The Student of Prague* (1912), where the trickery of double exposure was employed. Both Freud and Rank demonstrate that the double has a long lineage, from archaic beliefs to the romantic *Doppelgänger*. Photography worked as a new technology to furnish already existing beliefs regarding the uncanny.

Rank's classic essays in *The Double* (1971) provide a detailed account on the multicultural forms of the double and the beliefs that are associated with it. Rank posits that humankind's need for self-perpetuation or self-immortalization, which is partly achieved with the photographic image, led to the development of civilization and spiritual values. Rank outlines the diverse beliefs in the need to protect one's shadow, which is a form of a double. Another form of the double is in the reflection, reproduced in glass or in water. Many tribal peoples believed that the soul is embodied in the image. This was then carried over to permanent reproductive technologies, such as photography. Historically, there has been a prolific dread of one's own portrait or photograph found across many cultures, such as the First Nations, and tribes in Central Africa, as well as in Asia, East India, and Europe. It was thought that the individual's soul was manifest in the image of the subject, and it was feared that the foreign possessor of this figurative representation could lead the subject to harmful or deadly consequences (Rank 52-65). The beliefs of mysticism that surround photographic technology transcend culture and time periods.

When the daguerreotype was invented in 1839, this fear of the uncanny double was expressed by an uncertain public reception to the new technology. A decade after Daguerre's successful experiments, Balzac's writings indicate a deathly fear of the reproductive qualities of

photography. A photographer of the time, Nadar, wrote: "The lowliest to the most high [...] trembled before the daguerreotype [...]. More than a few of our most brilliant intellects shrank back as if from a disease" (Nadar 9). He continues by noting the response of his friend, Balzac, who expressed uneasiness about the photographic process. Nadar summarizes Balzac's "Theory of the Specters":

According to Balzac's theory, all physical bodies are made up entirely of layers of ghostlike images, an infinite number of leaflike skins laid one on top of the other. Since Balzac believed man was incapable of making something material from an apparition, from something impalpable - that is, creating something from nothing - he concluded that every time someone had his photograph taken, one of the spectral layers was removed from the body and transferred to the photograph. Repeated exposures entailed the unavoidable loss of subsequent ghostly layers, that is, the very essence of life. (9)

Rosalind Krauss writes in the relatively contemporary essay, "Tracing Nadar", that Balzac's theory expressed the dual identity of photography. The quality of the double was equally shared in the positivist's absolutism of matter and the metaphysician's existential link to the original source. Balzac wrote: "The external life is a kind of organized system which represents a man as exactly as the colors by which the snail reproduces itself on its shell" (quoted in Krauss 35). The connections to biology of this model were meant to carry the authority of Science, while the notion of man as a series of exfoliating, self-depicting images is the model of the snail in a poetic and whimsical form. The dual identity of photography as a coalescence of the binary discourses of art and science is revealed in Nadar's mystical theorizing of the medium.

Also around the time of Balzac's writing, there was a new cultural development in the United States - the metaphysical system of Spiritualism. The Spiritualist movement related its worldview to the modern changes in technology and science, such as electricity, telegraphy and new advances in chemistry and biology. Photography's quality of the double is what attracted the Spiritualists to the medium. Of particular interest was the trick photography of the double exposure, a kind of double within the double. Again, it was the ironic quality of photography's indexicality and simultaneous uncanniness that attracted Balzac to write about the medium and also the Spiritualists to it. Photographic likeness and the transparency of ghosts demonstrated the uncanny quality of photography, or, in other words, its capture of a spectre-like double (Gunning 47).

Photography substantiated Spiritualism. All claims of spirit photography as evidence of an afterlife rest on the indexical claim that ghosts, invisible to the human eye, are picked up by the more sensitive capacity of photography. Spirit photographers denied they knew how their photographs of ghosts were created. It was pointed out by skeptics of spirit photography that the ghosts that appeared in such photographs were often the exact duplications of existing photographs. While this observation indicates the method of photographing photographs to create the spirit image, the Spiritualists claimed that this did not rule out supernatural influences. Spirit photographs were thought to be produced by spiritual forces that used images of the dead as a way of communicating to the living (Gunning 64).



While Spirit photography often worked to substantiate the supernatural claims of the Spiritualist movement, these images also served a social purpose very similar to that of the post-mortem photographs. Spirit photographs were produced for the mourners to ease their healing process. Photographs of the dead were given to photographers to superimpose over the photographs of the mourners. These photographs were not used to claim evidence of an afterlife, but to create a consoling image. The only indexical claim of these photographs is that the image of the family lives on, even after the subjects have died. Furthermore, viewing these images today as cultural products, gives the contemporary observer a tangible understanding of the ideologies of immortality that were operating in the mid-nineteenth century.

The aesthetic tendencies of post-mortem, spirit photography and technological uncanniness are demonstrated in three films: Alejandro Amenábar's *The Others* (2001), Peter Newbrooks' *The Asphyx* (1973), and Hideo Nakata's *Ring* (1998). *The Others* utilizes two of the three styles of post-mortem photography -- "the eternal sleep" and "alive, but dead." *The Asphyx* expresses the Victorian Spiritualism that empowered the camera with supernatural capabilities. *Ring* presents a contemporary view of Victorian Spiritualism, using the haunting power of the technologies of video, the telephone and the camera.

In *The Others*, Grace lives in a mansion with her two children and three servants. Her husband is missing in action in World War Two. Grace's son and daughter are chronically allergic to light, and cannot leave the house. They must reside in complete darkness, and therefore all the windows are covered with thick drapery. In one scene, Grace is sorting through clutter in the attic when she finds a box of photographs. She comes across a photo album, where all the subjects of the images are either sitting upright in a chair or wooden bench, or lying down in bed. They are all wearing black and their eyes are closed. Grace asks her servant, Mrs. Mills, why everyone in the photographs is sleeping. Mrs. Mills tells her that what she is looking at is a "Book of the Dead"; later in the film, Grace finds a post-mortem photograph in her room, showing all three of her servants sitting on a couch, wearing black and displaying closed eyes. Grace realizes that her servants are ghosts. At the same time, the children find the servants' three graves in the garden and also realize that the domestics are ghosts. Later, the ghostly servants warn Grace that "the others" have her children. Grace enters a room where the children are hiding to discover a séance in progress and is told that she and her children are ghosts, too. In fact, when Grace's husband did not return from the war, she smothered her children with pillows and shot herself.

The use of post-mortem photography is key to the plot structure, as it is the discovery of the post-mortem photographs of the servants that leads Grace to realize that she and her children are also ghosts. Grace would not have realized that the servants were dead in the final post-mortem photograph if she had not discovered the black photo album earlier in the story, when Mrs. Mills explained to her that the subjects in the photographs were not asleep. There are nine photographs displayed in the "Book of the Dead." The images range from medium shots to long shots and from the elderly to infants. The corpses are either lying in bed to portray the first stylistic of post-mortem photography, "the eternal sleep", or the subjects are placed



upright in wicker chairs or wooden benches, portraying the second stylistic of "alive, but dead." The subjects are meant to look as if they are alive and posing for a photographic portrait. *The Others* does not depict post-mortem photographs of the deceased with mourners, the third stylistic of post-mortem photography. Some of the images depict more than one subject in the image, though. For example, in one photograph, there are two children seated on a wooden bench, holding hands. There is also an image of three young men lying together in one bed. The film is not only accurately referencing two of the three stylistics of post-mortem photography, but it is also demonstrating the frequency to which people died due to the tuberculosis epidemic during the middle and late nineteenth century. All three servants, Mrs. Mills, Mr. Tuttle and Lydia are shown to have died at the same time, as the three of them are shown seated together. The photograph is dated December 1891, which was, in fact, during the tuberculosis epidemic.

It is interesting to note that not only are the photographs depicted with historical accuracy, but the dialogue between Grace and Mrs. Mills also acknowledges the cultural attitudes of the time. While Grace is looking through the black book with Mrs. Mills, she finds the image of the two children together. Grace distraughtly expresses that she finds such a practice to be macabre, and does not understand how "these people could be so superstitious." Mrs. Mills had earlier explained that: "In the last century, I believe they took photographs of the dead in the hopes that their souls would go on living through the portraits." This recalls Otto Rank's discussion on the double and the fact that some tribal people believed that the image possessed the soul.

Achieving immortality through mechanical reproduction is further expanded on in *The Asphyx*. *The Asphyx* sketches the ideologies of immortality and Victorian Spiritualism in photographic experiments and their impact at the end of the nineteenth century. Sir Victor Hugo is a scientist who photographs people at the moment they die. In photographing the sufferers, he is repeatedly able to capture a certain smear on the picture near the head of the dying. In one scene, he projects slide images of individuals who are at the point of death, to a society of amateurs. He points out that in every image there is a black smear near the head of the nearly deceased. In order to determine the direction in which the smear is travelling, he develops an apparatus, whereby he can record moving objects. He must try to discover if the black smear represents the soul leaving the body, or if it is a death spirit

coming to take the soul away. Thus, he invents the motion picture camera.

In this film, the Victorian craze for spirit photography has been upgraded to produce the image of ghosts in the making, or death in process. What Sir Hugo discovers in action is that the puzzling smudge he has been studying is an ectoplasmic phantom, captured as it arrives on the scene of death. This is the Greek spirit of death, the Asphyx (derived from the term asphyxiation). It is the technology of the camera, which is more sensitive than the human eye that can capture the asphyx in action. *The Asphyx* accurately expresses the Victorian Spiritualist indexicality claim of the precision of the technology of the camera: the detail and instantaneous quality of mechanical reproduction is more faithful in reproducing reality than any human agency, so therefore the content depicted in the image must be truthful, and it is the weakness of the human sensory system that cannot perceive what the camera records. Furthermore, the camera is endowed with mystical strength, as its indexical ability allows the user of the technology to capture the death spirit for eternity, and thus achieve immortality. Without the sensitivity of the camera, the Asphyx could never be detected and therefore, never be caught.

Finally, the contemporary Japanese film, *Ring*, expresses a reversal of the Victorian beliefs regarding the immortality that is linked to the image as expressed in *The Others* and *The Asphyx*. *Ring* proposes the notion of impending doom that Barthes put forth in Camera Lucida, whereby viewing an image of the past, in the present, complicates the viewer's sense of mortality. Or, as Sontag writes, the photograph draws attention to the relentless melt of time, announcing an inescapable dismal fate for the viewer (15). In *Ring*, the power of the technology of the camera visually manifests this impending death of the subject by distorting the representation.

*Ring* links the technological apparatus to the supernatural. The story rests on the urban myth that a teenage girl, Tomoko, watched a video, and then received a phone call that she would die in a week. A television reporter, Reiko, investigates the story. She finds a picture of the teenage girl and her friends. She is provoked to investigate the story further when she sees the nightmarish image of the blurred and distorted faces of the four teenagers. Reiko travels to the place where the teenage girl saw the tape, watches the video and also receives the phone call. Her ex-husband takes a Polaroid picture of her, and as the picture develops, Reiko's face is revealed to be contorted and out of proportion. The Polaroid confirms her fate; she will die in one week, as did Tomoko, so she must solve the mystery to ensure her own survival.

The photograph is essential in pushing the plot forward, as it is used to confirm a dismal future, which motivates Reiko to solve the story. By contrast, in *The Others* and *The Asphyx*, the use of photography and the camera are manifestations of the Victorian beliefs of immortality and Spiritualism, linking mystic power to technology. But in *Ring*, the camera does not play an active role in changing a mortal's fate; the photograph's indexicality reveals a doom that is already present. The dualism of positivism and the capability of rendering a double lends the technology of the camera the power to reveal impending death that mere mortals cannot perceive. The light-sensitive, detailed image is rendered via the camera, which has the capacity to duplicate a reality that is

unseen by the average person. The evidence of the image allows Reiko to take matters into her own hands, and change her fate herself.

In conclusion, all three films accurately portray the shifting methods in representing death in photography in the nineteenth century. From posthumous photography to Spirit photography, there is a strong drive towards attempting immortality. Posthumous photography served as *memento mori* for the mourning, allowing the deceased to live on in the present in the form of an image. Spirit photography portrays the dualism that embodies the photograph. It is considered truthful due to its indexicality, yet the ghostly trace or double can also reveal information in reality that is not perceived by the human eye. The Spiritualists were striving to provide evidence that life does exist after death. The power of the technology of the camera brings immortality through preservation of the image, and thus the soul, as is demonstrated in *The Others*. The camera reveals the unperceivable ghost of death, which can then be captured to achieve immortality, as in *The Asphyx*. The camera reveals a distorted image that implies impending doom, and thus gives the subject a view of a dismal fate, but this fate can be changed via human agency, as in *Ring*. All three films suggest and replicate the Victorian ideology that the supernatural power of the technology of the camera can bring immortality in one form or another. ☺

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