

Corporeal Images

1.

Thinking about the relationship between image and death is in a sense thinking about the origin of images. It should be remembered that some of humanity's oldest images are representations and evocations of the dead body. From the earliest reconstructions of skulls to the various types of funeral effigies and masks, death has played a fundamental role in man's aspirations to invent and exhibit (his own) images. Death is not only a motive for the production of images, but also takes us back to the origins of art itself, as an expression of the human desire to overcome the vertigo of time and the ephemerality of things.

What should one think when faced with a dead body? This is a metaphysical question but also a crucial question about the objective and subjective relationships that we manage to perceive and generate between images and the reality they aim to represent. As Hans Belting suggests, 'an image finds its true meaning in the fact that what it represents is absent and therefore can be present only as image. It manifests something that is not *in* the image but can only *appear* in the image.....'.¹ The dead person will always be absent, a fatal and intolerable absence that the living attempt to alleviate with an image.

The contradictions between presence and absence, which continue to animate much of our consideration of images, become particularly acute and complex when they concern the image of the dead body. As an inanimate figure, the dead body is the – suspended, silent, inflexible – image of a living body, and thus all images (whether sculpted, drawn or photographed) of a corpse are inevitably representations of a previous image. The mystery that surrounds death fuels the mystery of the image. In the image, the dead *return*, to breathe life into our relationship with death. Absent body and present image, the paradox between being and appearing, images of the dead body show that 'a picture lays claim to its specific aura at the intersection of life and death'.²

The prevalence of images that, ontologically speaking, are based on a relationship of *physical connection* with the corpse is another important fact in the history of this relationship between image and death. Both the Jericho skulls (7000-6000 BC) and the death masks that came later were created through direct modelling from the body of the corpse. In other words, their origin was *in that* body. This quality of *contact* with a *unique* dead body conferred upon certain images an aura and a weight of reality that are fundamental to understanding the perspective and scope of the symbolic actions that we developed with images, particularly when their intended use is to ease disappearance or forgetting. Furthermore, it was this same substantiality of the image that prompted one of the stories on the origin of painting told by Pliny the Elder in his *Naturalis Historia*: a young woman, with the help of a light source, projects and draws the profile of her lover's shadow on the wall, just before he sets off for war.

¹ Hans Belting, *An Anthropology of Images: Picture, Medium, Body*, Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 2014, p. 182

² *ibid.*, p.232

The invention of photography in the first half of the nineteenth century triggered a new phase in the experience and perception of the image and of death. The new cultural, scientific, and symbolic conditions of modernity shaped a new discursive and metaphysical context. The use of a technical device that, in a sense, reduces man's action to the essential, makes a long-desired transmutation possible: the definitive replacement of the hand by a technical device. The photographic image automates the act of representing the body. In addition to its *indexical*³ status, the photograph revealed an unusual potential for figuration and verisimilitude.

As André Bazin emphatically states in his seminal text on the ontology of the photographic image, 'death is but the victory of time. To preserve the bodily appearance artificially is to snatch it from the flow of time, to stow it neatly away, so to speak, in the hold of life.'⁴ Whether as live evidence, a moment frozen in time, or deathly vision of the world, the photographic image is prefigured as an image of the past, a situation, instant or event that will never again be repeated. The truth is that since the appearance of photography, the technologies of the visible have always fed – or fed from – this modern utopia of dominating time, of overcoming finitude, as a means of anticipating a sublime ambition: the secularisation of eternity, which would finally make possible a real control over death. Indeed, it was in the name of this control that photography was invented and then employed.

Thus photography would make it possible to capture a body with a truth that is an immanence of the technique. The ancient desire to invent a process capable of suspending time, making it possible to preserve and materialise the appearance of the body in a visual impression, was fully realised with the emergence of photography. The field was immediately open for the different forms of post-mortem photography that began to spread and take hold in European and American culture. Indeed, in the early days of photography, the funerary portrait, which quickly replaced the ancient tradition of death masks, was an important source of income for many photographers, particularly in Catholic countries, where the popularisation of representations of the deceased was most evident. There was often a softness to these images, in homage to the legacy of earlier painted mourning portraits. This not only reflects the role of the photographic image as a substitute object for real mourning, but also demonstrates how these commercial photographic practices sought to anchor such images within a particular artistic tradition.

Throughout modernity, photography was a privileged medium for reinforcing death and the dead body as visual themes, subjects for observation or even contemplation, as something that could be judged and appreciated aesthetically. In addition, the theme of extreme violence, of war, of tragic events and catastrophes, became recurrent and obsessive themes in the history of photography. However, the photographic approach to these themes has raised a disconcerting paradox: the images contribute to intensifying a traumatic awareness of death, but at the same time it is well known that photographic 'reduction' has a pacifying effect, allowing for a

³ See Charles S. Peirce, *Peirce on Signs: Writings on Semiotic*, The University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 1991

⁴ André Bazin, 'The Ontology of the Photographic Image', in *What is Cinema?*, Vol. 1, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1967, p. 10

distanced and cold discernment that inevitably alleviates the extent of the trauma. The image protects us from tragic reality. Furthermore, as Thierre de Duve states, 'trauma is much less bound up with the "subject" or even with the "effect of the real" of photography than with characteristics inherent to its space-time, fractured by the intrusion of the real itself, in the Lacanian sense of the term.'⁵

It should be recalled at this point that Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida*, perhaps the most famous and revisited reflection on photography, was initially prompted by the writer's mourning following the death of his mother. Throughout the book, Barthes explores various types of connections between photography and death, as two correlated and inseparable themes. In addition to photography's ontological singularity, which has the ability to reorganise our perception of time and experience of the past, Roland Barthes discovers a symptom of another historical shift, the fact that photography signals the emergence of a new paradigm of perception and representation of death, unmediated by religion or ritual: 'for my part I should prefer that instead of constantly relocating the advent of photography in its social and economic context, we should inquire as to the anthropological place of death and the new image. For death must be somewhere in a society; if it is no longer (or less intensely) in religion it must be elsewhere; perhaps in this image which produces death while trying to preserve life. Contemporary with the withdrawal of rites, Photography may respond to the intrusion, in our modern society, of an asymbolic death, outside of religion, outside of ritual, a kind of abrupt dive into literal death. Life / Death; the paradigm is reduced to a single click, the one separating the initial pose from the final print.'⁶

2.

Siloquies and Soliloquies on Death, Life and Other Interludes began to take shape during the course of research carried out at the National Institute of Legal Medicine and Forensic Sciences (INMLCF), in Lisbon and Coimbra. Over three years, Edgar Martins took more than a thousand photographs and scanned more than three thousand negatives from the INMLCF's vast and extraordinary collection. A significant number of these images show forensic evidence, particularly weapons and objects used in crimes and suicides, as well as crime scenes, death masks, projectiles, suicide letters and activities inherent in the work of the pathologist. However, alongside these photographs, Edgar Martins also began to retrieve images from his own archive and produce new photographs on other subjects, intended as a visual, narrative and conceptual counterpoint. The project sits precisely within this counterpoint between images, imaginations and imagery relating to death and the dead body, as an interstitial realm, an interlude, between art and non-art, between past and present, between reality and fiction.

In this way, by productively linking documental and factual records (attached to real cases and meeting the scientific and operational requirements of the INMLCF) with images that seek to explore their speculative and fictional potential, *Siloquies and Soliloquies on Death, Life*

⁵ Thierry De Duve, 'Pose et instantané, ou Le Paradoxe photographique', in AA.VV, *The Caesura image. LisboaPhoto 2005*, Câmara Municipal de Lisboa, Lisbon, 2005, p. 36 (N. of T. direct translation of the original French quote)

⁶ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, Penguin, London, 1993, p. 86

and Other Interludes proposes to scrutinise the tensions and contradictions inherent in the representation and imagination of death, in particular violent death, and, correlatively, the decisive but deeply paradoxical role that photography – with its epistemological, aesthetic and ethical implications – has played in its perception and intelligibility.

All these questions acquire even greater importance at a time in which new (digital, virtual) images tend to strip bodies of their corporeality. We are increasingly confronted with vague and abstract bodies, bodies that don't exist, and that never existed. The new image technologies, which include processes associated with so-called post-photography, are notable for their great skill in creating artificial and imperishable bodies, immortal bodies that defy the previous separation between death and life.

Edgar Martins' decision to work at the National Institute of Legal Medicine and Forensic Sciences also stems from his interest in highlighting the historic and symbolic role of one of the places that, in the context of modernity, institutionalised – through scientific practice and judicial discourse – the documentation, analysis and scrutiny of death and the dead body. Effectively, both the INMLCF's mission, and its collection – particularly its photographic collection – should be analysed in the context of a set of decisive transitions that took place during the nineteenth century, a period that witnessed a marked development of those sciences whose subject of study is knowledge of man. In the fields of physiognomy and the social sciences (sociology, anthropology, ethnology, etc.) and in the medical sciences (anatomy, psychiatry, etc.), the human body was subjected to a vast array of observational activities. It was also a historical period that saw the emergence and codification of social statistics, whose central conceptual category was based on the notion of the 'average man' proposed by Adolphe Quetelet⁷ in the 1830s. The rise of this branch of demography was decisive in establishing a scientific paradigm that overvalued the principles of probability as a way of determining social laws based on the regularity of data. Transposed to the biosocial sciences, the body became the target of anthropometric investigations and, validated by the legitimate field of scientific reason, prompted the founding of a moralised anatomy.

The incursion of an artist into a place so marked by scientific, legal and also ideological assumptions naturally raises epistemological and semantic questions. What distinguishes a documentary image of a corpse or a crime scene from an image that depicts the staging of a mental image of a corpse or crime scene? What effect do these differences have in the viewer's imagination? How do the retrospective and prospective horizons appear in the face of these different types of image?

It could also simply be suggested that the artist enters the territory of the forensic pathologist, in order to scrutinise the expert's archives and ways of conceiving the image, while also bringing his own photographs, creating a heuristic and paradoxical way of experiencing images. We know that every photographic image always carries with it the mark of a disturbing interruption that constricts all sustained logic of continuity. This is the fate (or implausibility) of the photograph, an image that tends towards aphasia yet at

⁷ Adolphe Quetelet, a Belgian astronomer and social researcher, although less cited than August Comte, was one of the pioneering figures of modern sociology, particularly in establishing the quantitative paradigm in social sciences.

the same time does not hinder the formation of (mental, fictional) movements that prevent the image from ever closing or stopping again. In this way, despite the tendency to see it as evidence, the photographic image, in its inevitable precariousness, refers to a temporality that can never be restricted to the evidential relationship with the picture-making moment, in that photographic time is prone, as we well know, to multiple, discontinuous and immeasurable dimensions, like the different sides of a crystal, to use the analogy proposed by Gilles Deleuze. This is what makes it necessary to reveal its phenomenology as much as possible; in other words to expand all that makes it an event in the face of the real, in the face of its image. In the midst of this constellation of (appropriated, constructed, 'scientific' and 'artistic') photographs we are drawn back into observing the photographic image with sensitivity, because we realise that it is made of everything: it has a permutational and rhizomatic nature, an amalgam of elements from the perceptible to the imperceptible, impure and ambivalent elements mixed with revealing things, visual forms intertwined with thinking in action.

Just as relevant for this type of relationship with the image is the role that the artist confers on the texts that he found in the INMLCF archives, as well as in the press and in specialised books on the subject. These texts should not be understood as captions for the works, nor as elements that diverge from or counter the images. In fact, they both suggest different – yet complementary and potentially overlapping – ways of describing truth, as well as fiction and narration. In this sense, text and image connect with each other in a dual movement: on one hand, the text prompts the imagination, a thought that is projected visually; on the other hand, the images prompt the text since, as fragments of an (open and unpredictable) narrative, the image calls for textuality and historical evaluation. As such, these discursive and conceptual inflections point towards a reformulation of the very idea of truth in photography, and the next question that arises is whether, and to what extent, all the staging, all the fiction, is naturally factitious and instigated by a *real backdrop*? Wouldn't the most appropriate way to emphasise the reality of appearance be to create work about the appearance of reality?

We see the image of a man at the water's edge on a beach. It is night-time. His body is bleached out by the light of the photographer's flash. The total darkness that fills the top half of the image gives it an enigmatic and frightening quality, a feeling not unrelated to the effect of contamination by the other images in the series, or by the text that Edgar Martins chose to put with the photograph: a man decided to commit suicide, as part of a philosophical investigation. Image and text create an unusual, ambiguous and traumatic situation. The spectator is challenged – forced – to mix two heterogeneous processes, to see and to read coextensively. Déjà vu, memories, involuntary recollections, unplanned and elusive images, or simply a strange sense of reality – these are all mental phenomena that lead us to cross the boundaries of the conscious. It should be remembered that Sigmund Freud understood the uncanny as a sensation that occurs at the moment in which the distinction between imagination and reality suddenly disappears. On this point, Laura Mulvey adds 'if a photograph marks a meeting point between a material, physical moment and a twinge of uncertainty in rationality, two factors come particularly into play. First of all there is the intellectual uncertainty associated with death and the uncanny contained in the human imagination's

engagement with the photograph. Secondly, there is the intellectual impossibility of reducing the photograph to language and a grammatical system of meaning, the presence of an intractable reality in the index.⁸

Finally, it is important to underline that all these questions relating to the image and to death cannot of course be separated from perception and awareness of the body. Photographic images are the products of an environment, with its ontological characteristics and cultural connotations. But we know that the experience of each photographic image is equally the product of our own selves, of our body as a living environment of images. Images are corporeal manifestations, they evoke and conjure visions (imagination, memories, perceptions, dreams) that are continually different, old and new. In other words, images are merely conditional and circumstantial responses. This sense of the corporeality of images is the very starting point for Edgar Martins' invitation to us to observe the *arc of the photographic*, formed between its paradoxical epistemology and its plasticity, in which visible and visual, similarity and dissimilarity, mind and body, figuration and abstraction, fixity and movement, recollection and imagination, are connected and inseparable notions, part of the living pulse that links us to images.

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2016

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⁸ Laura Mulvey, *Death 24x a Second. Stillness and the Moving Image*, Reaktion Books, London, 2006, p. 63