Ethereal Presences In Holography and Photography

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Abstract

This paper examines the concept of the ‘Presence of Absence’ in post-mortem photography and holography, drawing upon both historical and lesser-known images as reference. To create a photographic negative one needs the presence of light to expose the light sensitive surface, be it glass, a polished plate or plastic. A hologram may also be created when a coherent light source, for example from a Laser, travels through a light sensitive material and falls upon the subject to be recorded. A holograph however, retains the optical qualities of both phase and amplitude, the memory of light. Both mediums recall, as it were, ‘now absent moments’, and confronts us with what is ‘not there’ as much as ‘what is’. This paper examines the exploration of absence and presence in post-mortem photography and holography and it’s a richly visceral visual language. A photonic syntax can interpret death as an elegant yet horrific aesthetic, the photograph may be beautify screened and yet obscene in its content. In essence one can be a voyeur, experiencing a mere visual whisper of the true nature of the subject. Our Victorian forefathers explored post-mortem photography as an object of mourning, and at the close of the nineteenth century when Jack the Ripper had the inhabitants of White Chapel in a grip of fear, photography made its mark as a documentation of violent crime. Today, within contemporary photography, death is now presented within the confines of the ‘Art Gallery’, as a sensual, and at times, sensationalised art form. In exploring post-mortem imagery, both in holography and conventional photography, absence presents an aspect of death as startling in its unanimated form and detailed in its finite examination of mortality.

Key Words: Photography, Holography, Post-Mortem, Laser, Camera, Historical, Absence, and Presence.

Ethereal Presences

Common to all forms of photonic reproduction is its emotive presence. One can examine a photograph of a past event, or person, and be able to re-live the feelings associated with the subject. The feelings may not always be happy ones but the photograph or hologram – our light record - has its own physical presence, an ability to make what is absent present. In essence
post-mortem photographs are visual triggers evoking emotive responses in the viewer, for one may examine old photographs of a loved one, once death has occurred. The photographic record depicts the subject as alive; there is no hint to what might befall them at a later stage in life when the living may explore the image as a form of Memento Mori (Remember Death). The photograph is the physical presence/substitute for the figure; absence occurs in the realisation that the figure is no longer physically there. The tactile photograph is the trigger to remember the experience that the object recalls in the viewer. Examining absence and presence within post-mortem photography requires a better understanding of photography’s beginning in the early 1800’s. Surviving post-mortem photographs from this period are the fragile contemporary survivors of a past existence.

In capturing a photographic representation time is frozen, killed prevented from continuing. The Victorians and others believed that in taking a photograph of the dead one was securing a shadow of the deceased before the apparent substance faded. The Daguerreotypist of time was called upon many times before the minister, so that the presence of the once living could be captured and retained. Within Victorian society of the day photography became an invaluable tool in memory retention of the deceased and within the grieving process. The society of the time had a fear of being forgotten in death. The portraits taken of the cadavers were traditionally kept on view in the household, carried as keepsakes or with the advent of Carte de vista kept in mourning albums. Even though the actual person was physically absent their spirit was present through their photographic duplication. Although the cadaver may be physically present within the original space, (and upon the photosensitive plate), the essence of the once living is absent. The photograph is a simulacrum as it is merely a material copy without substance.

The early forms of photography utilised to retain the dead carry parallels with the medium of holography. Firstly examining the ambrotype in which a shadow of former life is captured upon a glass plate becoming visible only once placed upon velvet blackness. The ambrotype is a glass plate negative, which appears as a positive when a layer of back varnish is applied to either side (emulsion or blank) or it is viewed against a black surface. Ambrotype subjects can be difficult to see for the ambrotype cadaver only comes back to life when the ambrotype is moved and manipulated within the light. To view a holographic image one has to physically move the substrate it is produced upon. This is to make the image appear, or in the case of double exposures, for images to alternately appear. Like the ambrotype of the past contemporary holograms need to be viewed either in a darkened space or against a black surface.

With both forms of photonic retentions there appears a determinable absence and presence. One has to remember that our pre-occupation with the capture and depiction of death did not suddenly begin with the Victorian ideals. For prior to the invention of photography there are two documented forms of mourning portraiture. The first posthumous commemorative portraiture is more commonly referred to as the mortuary portrait, paintings created after the person had died. The aim of these portraits was to retain the dead, to immortalise them, to deny death and recapture the absence of the person depicted, not unlike the Victorian ideal of the “sleeping beauty”, the attempted presence of life after death. The second form of post-mortem painting is the posthumous mourning portrait where the deceased appears very much alive. These paintings were created to give the illusion of life, not to keep the dead alive but to allow those left behind...
to grieve. Unlike mortuary portraits where it is obvious the subject is deceased, posthumous mourning portraits are harder to distinguish as they show the deceased alive, eerie and zombie like evocative of horror.

**Holograms Of The Dead**

A German pathologist that seriously considers holography to be a potential tool in his work is Professor Günter von Hagen, famous for his ‘BODY WORLDS; The Anatomical Exhibition of Real Human Bodies’. His exhibitions, which promises that you will discover the ‘mysteries under your skin’ are anatomical exhibitions of ‘real’ human bodies, dissected and displayed in forms many think are macabre mimics of life, playing chess, running, riding horseback and the most memorable - a young pregnant woman giving birth. The juxtaposition is startling. They are all dead.

Von Hagen performed the nations first live broadcast autopsy. The program, commissioned by Channel 4, was promoted in a suitably ghoulish but fashionable way, using images taken from early woodcut illustrations of 17th century medical surgery and a trendy typeface. Many thought it un-godly and since both the public and members of the British Government oppose it, it is likely to prove difficult, if not impossible, to stage another exhibition such as ‘Body Worlds’. All this was bought to a head by a second autopsy coinciding with a late night opening of the gallery during Halloween. Posters were distributed depicting the Grim Reaper on horseback complete with his scythe, and other horror graphics to raise your hair, neutralising the Professor’s sincere attempt to demystifying his science. On meeting the Professor I am overshadowed by the height of the man. Topped by the large black Homburg hat that has become his trademark and places him somewhere between a spaghetti westerner and Dr Jekyll Mister Hyde - all dressed up and ready for business. I’m told that the hat hides a hideous scar from a car crash. He stares at the full colour holograms...the cold still gaze of the scientist in abstract thought. You can see he’s talking it all extremely seriously. If he didn’t exist, science fiction would have invented him. After a long pause he nods to me and explains in a deep awkward accent that he needs more time to think, so another meeting is scheduled two weeks hence. I have the impression that he, not his wife, is feeling a little over stretched, distracted by the bad press surrounding his curious venture.

I decide that our second meeting will need a more detailed scientific explanation so decide to bring my close friend Dr Hans Bjelkhagen, a Swedish physicist and academic dedicated to the science of full colour holography, important for this project if we are to record veins and flesh. Hans is a good deal shorter than the Professor with a robust waistline and a heavy Swedish accent. The idea of bringing Von Hagen and Bjelkhagen together to discuss holographie de la Mort appealed to my somewhat warped sense of humour. The two professors accents engage in conversation - a beautiful blend of Germanic/Swedish techno speak and I fall into a day-dream remembering the disturbing feeling many experience when looking into the eyes of a holographic portrait. The recording captures everything, everything in reach of the beautiful red-pulsed laser light. Every hair, pore, glistening tear duct, floating dust particle, time on watch dial, shine from tooth enamel but especially the iris, lens and pupil, the mechanics of the eye, and we are drawn inside.
In the latter half of the nineteenth century it was a common held belief that the retinas of a corpse fix the last image seen by that poor soul, like a photograph. Murder victims' eyes were often used as a means of trying to identify the culprit. William H Warner, a prominent British photographer of the 1860’s, documented and outlined in Bill Jay’s book ‘Cyanide & Sprits’. “In April 1863 a young woman, Emma Jackson, was murdered in St Giles, London. Warner immediately sent a letter to detective-officer James F Thomson at the Metropolitan Police office, Scotland Yard, informing him that ‘if the eyes of the murdered person be photographed within a certain time of death, upon the retina will be found depicted the last thing that appeared before them, and that in the present case the features of the murderer would probably be found thereon’ he based his assertion on the fact that he had, four years previously, taken a negative of the eye of a calf only a few hours after death and upon microscopic examination of the image found depicted the lines of the pavement on the slaughter-house floor.” We have to remember that weird and strange ideas were emerging during this period of history. Today we know this to be myth, but even a myth can propel modern technology and none more so than in holographics. Could it be that Herr Professor had come up with the idea of replacing his exhibits with holograms after watching Star Wars?

As it turned out the Professor, or his wife, chose not to use holograms after all. But although I had come close to creating the worlds first holographic Morgue, the experience showed me my own limits. Particularly later when I learnt that Bjelkhagen had already recorded a cadaver for medical purposes in Chicago. On seeing it, as compelling as the holographic image was, I would have rather looked the other way.
To Capture Our Passing

Traditionally a Memento Mori was an object carried by the owner at all times. Although they take many forms they are usually small sculptural pieces representing the human form in a state of decay. The idea of the memento mori of remembering death is an important concept in relation to actual death photographs and photography as a medium. For in utilising an object for example a photograph in such a manner death becomes an inherent presence while being physically absent. In discussing post-mortem photography alongside holography, contemporary digital holograms are from experience are closer in concept to the Memento Mori that a photograph. The digital hologram has the ability to create a three dimensional representation of the human face, as it is digitally constructed, the face can appear in the process of decaying. It has a sculptural feel to it and can be created on a small size to allow it to be carried by the owner. A contemporary remembrance of death. In contrast to Victorian mourning portraiture scene of crime memorialises the place, time of death, and the violent graphic nature of death creating trophies and an evidential documentation of the event. Photography in the nineteenth century was utilised to document scene of crimes, as seen with the work of Alphonse Bertillon and the photographic evidence of Jack the Rippers unfortunate victims in 1888.
Mary Jane Kelly is remembered only in death because of the person who took her life; Jack the Ripper. Mary Jane Kelly is presumed to be his last victim and the most vicious in execution. Her post-mortem photograph still exists today taken by the police at the time as a record of scene of crime. Due to the poor quality of the photographic image it is difficult for any viewer to examine the scene in any great detail. What is evident from this photographic record is the nature of the attack and the way in which her life was wretched from her.

This photograph is not an object of mourning but a documentation of scene of crime. Taken by the police of the time to record and document the nature of her death. Mary Jane Kelly is remembered not as an absent family member but as a victim. Her cadaver is now nothing but a vacant shell it cannot even be posed to create the imitation of sleep. There is nothing present which could lend the viewer to read this photograph as a human figure. Her cadaver is presented to the viewer slit from throat to pelvis, sections have been cut away and tossed aside as if pieces of meat. What skin is left is peeled back to allow the killer access to the internal workings of the once living body. The pathologists report of the time although succinct and unemotional is frightening in its vivid description of the carnage that occurred. It is as if a violent autopsy has already taken place, yet to be concluded and the remains are not carefully stitched but thrown to the four corners of the world.

What is disconcerting about this image is the way, in which the cadaver is unrecognisable, the cadaver has been eviscerated and the hacked at the face is beyond recognition. The poor quality of the image shields the viewer from the more inherent horror present within the scene. Death within this genre is not beautiful, nor elegant, nor reminiscent of antiquities sculptures. It is harrowing and disquieting even though this particular image depicts an event more than a century ago its impact is still felt with present viewers. Even though it is a duplication of a scene it carries within an unspoken presence of fear and horror, for one is aware that such images exist today. The documentation of such contemporaries of Jack the Ripper as Jeffrey Dahmer, Charles Ng and Fred and Rosemary West. Perhaps that is what is imbued in such images not death but the presence of the actual knowledge these acts are still very present within contemporary society. Absent from such post-mortem photographs is the life of the victim and the physical presence of the killer, for they are long gone. There minds become the carriers of the scenes of carnage they create).

Where the eyes of the victims were photographed in the hope a residual image of the murderer remained and the scenes where the deaths occurred were documented as with the famous photograph of Mary Jane Kelly’s unrecognisable corpse. Not only was death the subject of photography the language which was beginning to grow around the medium spoke of violent acts, the snapshot, taking a photograph and the voyeuristic nature of the medium. What makes this genre different from the post-mortem photographs of earlier times is how the nature of absence and presence in scene of crime photographs is dependent on the viewpoint of the creator. These photographs are not objects of mourning as with the Victorian post-mortem photographs nor are they artistic in nature they now become trophies and evidence. This genre...
of photography is examined from two similar yet distinct views, the killers and the pathologists. Specifically serial killers for whom post-mortem photography is far more intimate. The photograph is personal to a killer, they utilise them to create shrines to their victims or keep them as keepsakes, akin to the use of Victorian mourning portraits. It is noted that a number of serial killers utilize photography to some degree in the execution or preparation of their crimes. For many the allure is photography’s voyeuristic nature watching and waiting for the perfect moments, only these moments result in a loss of life. For some killers purely document their victims, others document the resultant crimes such as Jeffrey Dahmer. In my opinion the post-mortem photograph within this situation becomes a trophy, not a simulacrum as the photograph is imbued with substance, only to the killer and the family of the victim. The photograph becomes an object of veneration an actual memento mori the killer uses the photographic image to remember death, not his own but his victims. It is not a reminder to the killer of their mortality but allows through its possession a way to re-enact the crime, relive the moment when life becomes absent from the victim. In photographing the corpse, the killer evokes the earlier Victorian idea of remembrance after death, they are not mourning they are worshiping having objectified the cadaver, thus the photographic cadaver becomes a substitute for the real corpse.

Important also to this genre of photography is how the photographic image’s physical quality is dictated by the chosen film, camera type and quality of light utilised. The ultimate limitation of a photographic image is not the cameras limitation but that of the photographer. The main limitation for a serial killer is time. They must act quickly and with deftness, so the Polaroid camera and film became an obvious choice. It is an instant photograph, no need to have a film processed, which brings with it the fear of being discovered. The Polaroid is compact and easily hidden although it gives a very restrictive view of the cadaver. The format of the image is square so to fit the whole cadaver within the photographic plane the killer must move away from the subject. This is to encompass the entire figure, these cameras are not designed for detail they give a very atmospheric quality to the subject and over time the colour fades. Not unlike the process of dying, there will be a point at which there is only a mere shadow left of the original subject. The minute details are lost the resultant image when out of focus gives a very ethereal surreal account of the cadaver. These images are about emotion not necessarily the finer points of the scene. In the physical absences there is evoked a physical response within the killer. They were present for the event so can fill in the blanks making an inaccurate photograph readable.

The second view is that of the pathologist. It is their job to identify the cause and time of death. In determining these two things the pathologist will thoroughly document the cadaver to decipher the sequence of events that led to death. The pathologist will document the cadaver, recording the wound/s, the apparent path taken by the killer to ensure death. When the cadaver is presented for autopsy, its photographic documentation is detailed and specific, and to a point accurate. The photographs attained show the minutiae of the damage created by the killer and evidence of death. This series of photographs will allow the pathologist the opportunity to place himself within the space where death occurred, thus being able to ascertain certain things about the cadaver and the killer. These post-mortem photographs are viewed without emotion they are merely evidential to the process of death. This genre of photography is an important contemporary tool within the criminal justice system. These photographs are merely a documentation of death a record of a life that existed once. In contrast to the serial killer where
the photograph becomes a keepsake and a personal item of remembrance the evidence books presented to the jury and the court become public property. There is no anonymity for the cadaver, these photographs are not placed above the parlour mantle they remove all life from the photograph, they become the visual presence of evil, absent is the regard for human life. In contrast the pathologist is looking for an exact replica of the cadaver, they wish to see every minute detail, nothing is to be missed. This detail is important for it helps to recreate an event that has already taken place. The obvious choice to document the cadaver is a high-end digital/film camera with quality film stock the medical photographer will use filters and various other technical items to ensure accuracy. The photographs will be a near exact copy of the cadaver in ever sense, the medical photographer has the time to accomplish this. These photographs in my opinion can be viewed similarly to Victorian mourning portraits as simulacrum. The photographs are accurate copies of an object without any substance to them. They are not objects of mourning, or trophies they are just documentational evidence to an event. In terms of absence presence the cadaver is very much present within the process of documentation, absent is an emotional qualities. The photographic work is carried out with a detached objectivism allowing an outside viewer some insight into the violent nature of death. For both the killer and the medical photographer it is their choice of how the subject is recorded, how the image is composed, and what information is retained. For both sides there will be the physical presences within the photographic image that evoke the absence of life. In addition further selection can occur within the darkroom, when an image is additionally adjusted and tweaked. Each viewer in essence is never given a full physical representation of the event from which to derive a complete interpretation of the photograph as they were not physically there to witness the event or did they take part in it.

Absence occurs on several levels within this scenario, there are two physical absences the removal of the killer from the event and the eventual removal of the cadaver. There are two removals of life from the event, firstly the physical act of the killer and the use of photography, that by merely taking the photograph death is evoked and life taken. Death is present when the violent act takes place there is also a perception of death in the presence of the cadaver. Death is present when the killer finally strikes, but becomes absent when the cadaver is removed from that space. The visible presence of death in the series of post-mortem photographs is in viewing the actual corpse, and through the photographs that document the scene of crime. In viewing the remains of the event the viewer can imagine what occurred, the corpse need not be viewed.

Contemporary post-mortem photographs are rich sumptuous images yet appear to have little substance to the viewer they are meaningless objects of sublime beauty. In my opinion I feel that contemporary post-mortem photography ceases to be an object of mourning, a catalogue of death, or a trophy as it is now the apparent subject of artistic discourse. Contemporary death/post-mortem photographs depict the idea of death and the dead as art, as objects rather than invitations to contemplate death to a greater degree. The presence of death within contemporary photography is implied through the presence of the cadaver or in the act of taking the photograph and its subsequent viewing as a corpse. Absent is the existential examination of death and mortality.
Jeffrey Silverthorne, ‘Woman Who Died In Her Sleep’, 1972 *

* (Jeffrey Silverthorne wishes to be a witness, to document, to explain. Silverthorne believed that if he saw the morgue he would learn “something”, not about death but life. For Silverthorne’s photographs are the remains of life a lived. Silverthorne’s aim with the “Listen...” series was to photograph the morgue to undertake a conversation with death. In his work, Silverthorne combines the age-old ideals of Eros and Thanatos to create an image of excess that creates a recording of beauty at once detestable and illicit. The defining photograph of the post-mortem genre is Silverthorne’s Woman who died in her sleep. It is according to Loren the only contemporary image that has visualized “so powerfully...the combined embrace of sexuality and death”. Taken in 1972 the photograph presents the viewer with a nude, her body relaxed as if asleep, echoing the Victorian aesthetic of “the last sleep” which implies that the corpse is asleep. It can be seen especially in the photographic depiction of children, they were placed in their cribs, or held by their parents arms as if asleep, and thus “alive”. The photograph is viewed as disturbing, highly erotic due to the positioning of the corpse. Silverthorne photographed her from above, echoing Alphonse Bertillon’s photographie stereometrique. She is placed on the mortuary slab caught half awake, her head tilted down, her eyelids slightly parted. Though the subject is dead, she still exudes sexuality due to the positioning of her arms and the sleeping stillness of her body which suggests a lover’s arrival. She is enticing the viewer to slip into her bed. Silverthorne places the viewer in the position of a lover, one who is watching their beloved asleep, relishing the anonymity of the act. Silverthorne's photograph depicts the aesthetic beauty that is present in the inherent sensuality and beguilement that she exudes in death, a modern day Ophelia. Once the viewer has begun to travel through the photograph he or she is made painfully aware of the presence of death. The black stitching of the autopsy that slices through her breasts, awakens in the viewer either attraction or repulsion. There is a classical beauty present in the photograph that is marred by the pathologist’s intrusion. Silverthorne does evoke a presence of death, by removing the viewer from the immediate space of the dead. He allows a time to pass between the time the viewer first looks at the photograph and the point at which they realize they are viewing a corpse. The viewer is at first enamoured by the subject then repulsed. Death is not a pretty sight and this realization is a hard accept.)
In determining how contemporary post-mortem photography is not an object of mourning one needs to examine the society it is a part of and that has created such imagery. Contemporary society does not view death as intimately as it once did. It is a more recent advent that society as a whole, views and experiences death, on an explicit level, while at the same time being totally removed from it. In the past death was experienced both on a personal level and within a communal setting. In these instances death was not usually recorded in a concrete form, in the past death was viewed as it happened; it was an up close and personal experience. This makes the viewing of death different in contemporary society, now society views death second hand, because funeral parlours and hospitals remove us from the intimacy of personally experiencing death. Primarily contemporary society experiences the death of others through the media, especially photographs this is helping to alienate society further from the actual horror associated with death.

Death in the past had to be personal to be fully acknowledged, which has continued into contemporary society where personal experiences of death are emotionally charged, but the death society views in galleries or in news broadcasts, collectively holds little of the true emotive effect of dying. Death holds for contemporary society a macabre fascination because unlike in the past one does not see death as it occurs. As viewers we are perhaps curious to explore the true nature of death, for it is with the latter half of the twentieth century that one can see the increased appetite for images of death or dying. Death is now through its presentation in galleries has been taken out of the private setting of the family and placed into public view, yet society is still cushioned from its true force. The photographic images of death are now presented through the ethereal sympathetic nature of monochrome or the intense sensuality of colour. The richness of contemporary photographic images is reminiscent of Gabriel J. Lippmann’s early forays into colour photography. Whereas his images elicit a certain muted tonality contemporary colour post-mortem photographs lack. The aims and intent of each photographer who explores death are as varied as their subject. Sue Fox’s Post-Mortem series presents the eviscerated cadaver as merely a vessel, Andreas Serrano’s Morgue Series echoes classical sculptures of antiquity and Lucinda Devlin’s The Omega Suites implies the future action within the space. The amount of absent space is what allows the photographic sentence to be read. The sentence is constructed from the physical presence of the photograph and the implied absence of the spaces between the photographs. It is not in the content of the photographs, the viewer reads the sentence in how they move across the photographs dislocating the space of the gallery. If one equates a photographic sentence as a line of poetry one can see in examining a Haiku there is a quicker tempo, the photographs are placed closer together, a quicker tempo. In contrast if the photographs are farther apart hence a slower more controlled reading, not unlike the slow resonance of Baudelaire. A photograph it is an implied absence, it is what we imagine or perceive to be absent, without it ever been physically present in the photographic plane in order to create an inaccurate meaning. The absent spaces that exist between the photographs themselves and the viewer and the photograph are required to allow the word/photograph to be read, the absences are important for they define the spaces within which the presence (actual photograph/written word) occupies. They also define the space within which the viewer must occupy and exist within to read the photographic sentence. Smaller more intimate photographs require the viewer to impress their presence within the
physical space of the photograph. The larger more imposing photographic pieces of contemporary art push back the viewer, displacing them from the physical photograph this displacement or distance could be equated to the distance a death creates. This distance exists in two ways the first the physical distance between subject and photographer in the creation of the work, secondly as noted above between the viewer and photograph. Traditionally the subject is removed from the photographer. Both are physically present within the same space, due to the camera’s presence the photographer is prevented from directly interacting with the scene. This is best illustrated with documentary particularly war photography. The photographer does not feel a part of the ongoing moment, the camera becomes a substitute for his presence, and the photographer in this instance is absent for the event. For the photographer to interact or instruct his subject in for example portraiture or still life photography, he/she must physically remove him/herself from behind the camera and make the adjustments they seek. The camera is an inanimate object incapable of instructing the subject to alter it’s positioning or remove a blemished peach. Although in just having a camera present a person will oft times adopt certain classic stances. For the most part appearing uncomfortable and stunned, unable to appear natural and relaxed. The absence of the photographer from the scene is inherent with the medium. Although subject and photographer are physically present within the same space, the camera’s presence becomes a physical barrier to the photographer’s interaction within the scene. The photographer is not a part of the ongoing moment, the camera becomes a substitute for his presence, and the photographer in this instance is the absence. I converse with my subject, examining it through my eyes and the eye of the camera, speaking through the resultant photographs. The camera within my practice is an extension, it does not remove me from the space I am in, and it records an alternate view of the subject.

Absence and presence manifests itself in many ways when examining photographic death, as subject and the photograph as object. For a photographic image to read correctly by the viewer there is always a need to hold back a certain part of the photographic image. As photography is seen as a real and truthful medium, the retention cannot be a physical one but an implied absence. This absence is beyond the actual photographic surface of the print it is present within the greater invisible space of the viewer’s own emotive experiences and intellect.

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Martin Richardson, 1999. Wax Heads at Madame Tussauds, London. A pre-photographic business that began in 1770 illustrating our innate need to capture a physical absence but with an incomplete meaning.