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Death is a part of life that is not discussed enough due to many people fearing it, but not in photography. Instead, photography has long held a mirror to the human experience since the invention of the camera, capturing moments of joy, sorrow, conflict, and reflection. Within this essay I will be discussing how death can be seen through the photographic lense, through existence research I have found how death has been photographed through centuries from post-mortem portraits in the Victorian era to graphic war photography and modern artistic interpretations. Photography has engaged with death to document, remember, aestheticize mortality.

In the mid-1800s, shortly after the invention of photography, death became one of its earliest and most intimate subjects. When photography was first introduced, death played a significant role in how people engaged with the new medium. During the Victorian era, the most popular way to remember a past loved one was to have them photographed in a 'post-mortem' way. Post-mortem photography was a form of photography that would capture the deceased person posed as if they were asleep or even to make them look lifelike, they were often dressed in formal clothing and surrounded by the deceased person remaining family members. Post-mortem photography become a way to memorialize loved ones, and due to the high infant mortality rate and the rise of incurable diseases, many families turned to this method to preserve the image of a recently deceased relative so that they could be remembered forever.

Post-mortem photography had mixed reviews during the time, some saw it as distressing where others saw it as a beautiful way to remember a passed loved one. Many writers and poets of the time had something to say about post-mortem photography for example British poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote in a letter to Mary Russell Mitford "It is not merely the likeness which is precious in such cases – but the association and the sense of nearness involved in the thing ... the fact of

the very shadow of the person lying there fixed forever!” Browning E. (1843) She wrote this after seeing a post-mortem portrait. She describes how such images evoke not just likeness but a profound sense of presence and connection.



Nadar F. (1885) Victor Hugo on his deathbed

Photographers main work during the Victorian era was mainly focused on post-mortem photography, one of those photographers was Félix Nadar, Nadar was a 19th century French photographer who focused most of his work on post-mortem photography with one of his most famous images being an image of Victor Hugo a well know French politician and writer of the 19th century, on his deathbed that was taken on May 23rd 1885. During the Victorian era in Britian and America post-mortem photography was part of the ‘good death’ tradition, emphasizing dignity and peace. Post-mortem portraits were an intimate part of the mourning process, these portraits were often displayed in homes, placed in lockets, or tucked into family albums, a testament to the emotional and cultural role death played in domestic life.



Kirchner E. (1880) dead child on a pillow

During the 19th century post-mortem photography was often used to preserve the memory of loved ones, especially children, who may not have had their portraits taken before death. Emma Kirchner a German Photographer knew that, and she focused her work on capturing touching images of deceased children that were posed in a peaceful manner. Post-mortem portraits were an intimate part of the mourning process. Towards the end of the 19th century post-mortem photography started to decrease in popularity as it was starting to be considered morbid and disrespectful to the deceased. Times were changing and so were peoples thought process of what death photography should be like.

During the early 20th century photography portering death evolved more than ever, it moved beyond private mourning into the public eye of the entire world. Documentary photography particularly war and conflict photography, became the new form of capturing death in photography, photographers could capture death not only in the quiet aftermath of loss but in the chaos and brutality of real-time events. with images showing not only one deceased person but a whole group of them.

War photography was created to document armed conflicts and their effects on people and places. The images capture the chaos and carnage of what humans can do to each other during a war. War photography has been used since 1847 all away to the current day. The first official war photographs were taken in the Crimean war in 1853-1856 by a photographer named Roger Fenton he used the wet collodion photographic process during the Crimean War, which required a large amount of equipment including cameras, glass plates and chemicals. This, and the harsh landscape of the Crimea, meant a van was essential for travelling and working in the region. During the American civil war photographers Mathew Brady and Alexander Gardner captured the first ever image of dead soldiers on a battlefield which you can see in the image below. As time goes on more chaos and carnage are caused because of occurring wars currently taking place, we can see a repeating pattern of how photographers seem to use the same scenery, for example in most photographs taken you will occasionally see weaponry, machinery and often the bodies of soldiers.



Brady M & Gardner A. (1862) The Dead of Antietam

Taking pictures in war zones also means carrying the heavy responsibility of dangers, photographers must be willing to put themselves at risk by getting as close as possible to the conflict trying to avoid near strikes also having a heavy impact of their sanity, with seeing the horrors and despair war can cause,

witnessing inhumane acts men place on one another , families being torn apart , women and children losing their life's and empires destroyed.



Mccullin D. (1976) Lebanon, East Beirut

Don Mccullin, who is a world acclaimed British war photographer has seen his half shares of the consequences of what a war can do to a country and its people. Don Mccullin begun his photography work in 1959, photographing the local gang from his hometown, London 'The Gu'vnors'. In 1960 Mccullin started working for Sunday's time magazine where they sent him to capture the conflict in Vietnam and Cambodia, starting off his war photography.1966-1984 was considered a significant part of Mccullin career as he covered numerous conflicts and humanitarian crises by taken these images he gained popularity and in 1993 he was the first photojournalist to be awarded a CBE (Commander of the British Empire).And then in 2017 he was knighted for his lifetime services to photography. However, all these achievements came with great risks as example the image above shows a war affected village in Lebanon, in the image is a *young boy playing on a lute. He is celebrating with his friends, and in front of them is the dead body of a Palestinian girl laying in a rain puddle. Speaking in an article with The Gentlemans Journal Don Mccullin describes the story behind the image "Only*

minutes earlier I had been told to stop taking pictures or I would be killed. The boy called to me: "Hey Mistah! Mistah! Come take photo." Frightened for my life, I shot off two frames. Soon afterwards I learned that the Christian Phalange had put out a death warrant for me for taking this photo." Mccullin D. (*The Gentlemans Journal: The stories behind Sir Don Mccullin's most iconic photographs*). Mccullin took war images to document its brutality and human cost, hoping to create a "silent protest" against its futility and to give a voice to the suffering of its victims. War photography is one of the main mediums of capturing death in photography and due to the invention of social media the images are more widespread therefore nearly everybody in the world can see the mortality.

In our present time photographing death is still quite common and is used in many job fields, the most popular being crime scene photography which the practice of using photography to document a crime scene and its evidence. It is a crucial part of forensic investigations, providing visual records that can be used in court and to aid in reconstructing the events of the crime. There are many criteria for crime scene photography, but my focus is the homicide scenes and what the public eye does not witness in the morgue. Where the photographer's main task is to Document body position, wounds, surroundings, and potential murder weapons. In every murder case, the camera becomes a silent witness—capturing what the eyes might miss, preserving the scene for those who must later interpret it, and helping to ensure that justice is based on truth, not assumption.

A well-known homicide photographer was Weegee, whose real name was Arthur Fellig, Arthur Fellig's nickname phonetic rendering of Ouija, because of his frequent, seemingly prescient arrivals at scenes only minutes after crimes, fires or other emergencies were reported to authorities who is arguably the most famous homicide photographer. He became known for his stark, nighttime images of crime scenes in New York City, often arriving before the police. His work, particularly his first solo exhibition "Weegee: Murder is My Business," helped establish forensic photography as an art form. Arthur felligs most well-known work was the start of his career where he established a 9-crime scene of photographs, one being pictured below.



Fellig A. (1930) Untitled crime scene

Morgue photography is often controversial subgenre of documentary and post-mortem photography that confronts death in a literal form. Typically, morgue photography involves photographing deceased individuals that are in the morgue often before autopsy or burial and has been used for forensic, journalistic purposes. Morgue photography continues the legacy of post-mortem portraiture, more specifically post-mortem photography from the Victorian era. The differences between Victorian post-mortem and current post-mortem are that in the Victorian era they done post-mortem portraits to remember lost loved ones and current day post-mortem photography is to capture the body for evidence or for knowledge for case studies. Some photographers do morgue photography as a reminder of how we all are going to die eventually. Cathrine Ertman is one of those photographers speaking in an article with Refinery29, Ertmann mentions the reason why behind her work she says "It tries to break down the taboo by showing something we rarely have access to and that death can be both hard to look at and also beautiful...It is

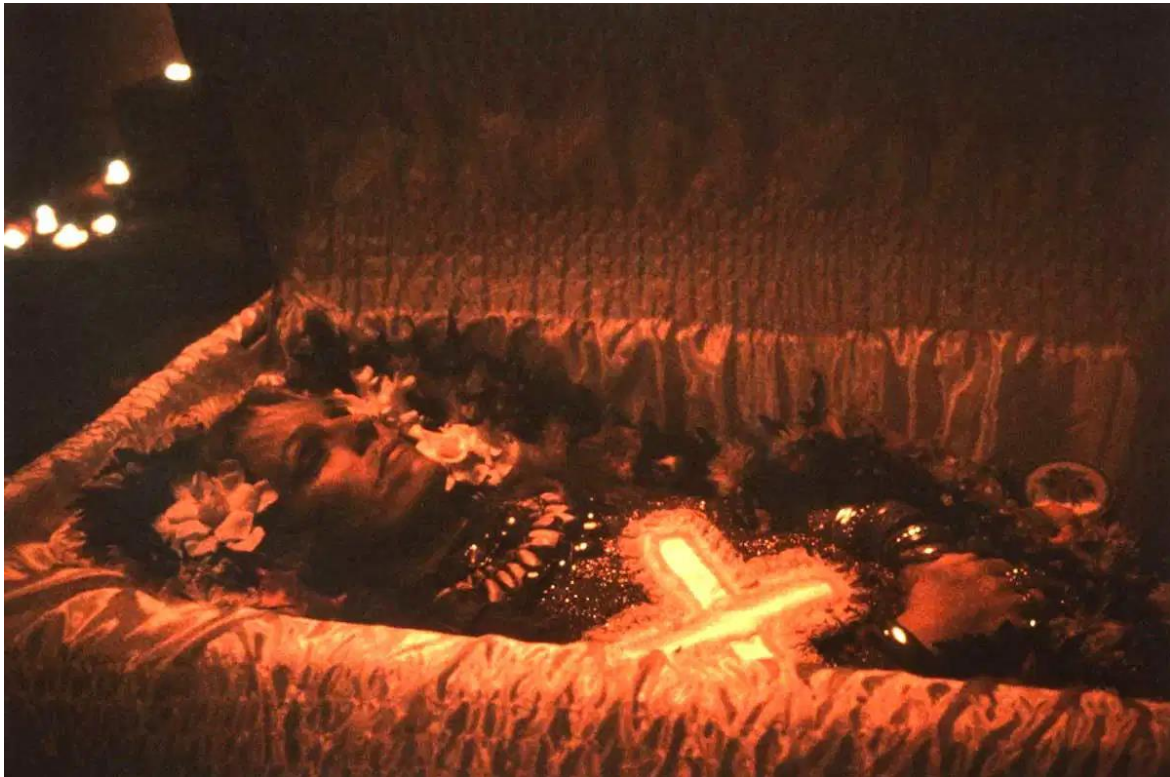
one of the only things we all share, regardless of gender, nationality, age, or language." Ertmann C. (2019) About Dying:



Jeffrey S. (1973) Lovers, accidental carbon monoxide poisoning

Some photographers do morgue photography to get an understanding of death. Jeffrey Silverthorne was an American photographer that was well known for his series of images that depicted dead people at the morgue. Silverthorne was one of those photographers, he took the images to explore the boundary between life and death, capturing the dignity and vulnerability of the deceased. In 1972-1973 he created a series called Morgue that was shot in the Rhode Island state morgue. These large-format images depict corpses with a haunting intimacy. Silverthorne said that he created the series because “the Vietnam War was still flowering death capturing the dignity and vulnerability Change and death were in the air, and the morgue was where I could find physical evidence.” Crime scene photography and morgue photography are closely related yet they are so different, while crime scene photography focuses on what happened, morgue photography often asks what remains. Both crime scenes and morgue photography nowadays are often kept out of the public eye, often only being seen by the public if they need to be.

Death in photography has long been a well-known subject not only as a documentation form but also as an artistic form. Death in photography holds a unique and haunting place in an artistic form capturing the fleeting moments that are already ghosts by the time the shutter clicks. Photographers use the subject of death not only to document reality but also to express deeper philosophical, cultural, or personal meanings.



Goldin N. (1989) Cookie in Her Casket

A well-known photographer that has used death as a personal subject is Nan Goldin, Goldin is an American photographer that focuses her work close to her personal life, for her work Goldin documents the LGBT subculture and the HIV/AIDS crisis that was happening in the 1980's. One of Goldin most haunting and intimate work is a post-mortem portrait of her close friend Cookie Mueller, who died of AIDS-related complications. The image is part of The Cookie Portfolio; Goldin created the series for a personal purpose documenting their 13-year friendship. Goldin is one of those photographers that capture death as an art form.

Not all photographers have humans as their subject some have animals such like Amanda Stronza who is an anthropologist, Photographer and artist based in Austin, Texas. Amanda Stronza photographs animals that have lost their lives on the side

of the road. Her work mainly focusses on her empathy for the animals that have lost their lives suddenly, she moves the deceased animal to a bank on the side of the road and then gives them a memorial to show that someone did care and that they will not be forgotten and left on the road to be run over again and again.



Stronza A. (2022) Bob cat kitten

The use of death as an artistic form in photography is complex and often controversial, but it remains one of the most powerful tools for confronting human vulnerability, freezing memory, and engaging with the most valuable aspects of life. Through photography, death is not just recorded it is interpreted, questioned, and sometimes even made beautiful.

In photography, death is a powerful theme that has been explored in countless ways. Photographers have long used the medium to document death through depictions of war, violence, or through more intimate portrayals of personal loss and mourning. Death in photography freezes a moment in time, allowing viewers to engage with the reality of mortality from a distance that is both confronting and contemplative. From the early post-mortem portraits of the Victorian era to modern projects that focus on war, postmortem, death is shown not merely as an end, but

as a subject of emotional depth and social commentary. Photography has the unique ability to preserve what is transient, making it a fitting medium to explore themes of loss and remembrance. It can evoke empathy or provoke critical thought depending on the intent and context. While some images can dehumanize or humanize death, prompting a deeper reflection on life. They remind us that behind every death is a life, a story, and emotions. Ultimately, photography allows us to face the inevitability of death with a lens that blends realism and reverence challenging us to confront the end not only as loss, but as part of the broader narrative of existence. In this way, death in photography becomes a mirror of our own humanity.

How is death looked upon in photography?

list of resources

Articles

- MacMillen, H. (2019). *This Is What Death Really Looks Like*. [online] Refinery29.com. Available at: <https://www.refinery29.com/en-gb/about-dying-death-photos?>
- TIME.com (n.d) photographing the dead. [online] available at: <https://time.com/photographing-the-dead/>.
- Journal, T.G. (n.d.). *The stories behind Sir Don McCullin's most iconic photographs*. [online] The Gentleman's Journal. Available at: <https://www.thegentlemansjournal.com/article/stories-behind-sir-don-mccullins-iconic-photographs/>.