MEDICAL HUMANITIES

Do certain rituals adapt to psychology or does psychology adapt to rites? Post mortem photography: the last "picture of life" in "death"

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Summary. In death and mourning, why should we think that rites adapt to psychology and not vice-versa? Or believe that psychological workings grow into a rite or ritual? When analysing practices related to rites of passage, death emerges as a rupture – or breakage – of social status. (www.actabiomedica.it)

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Does the term 'post mortem photography' conjure up any images in your mind? These "portraits of death" started during the daguerreotype era in the second half of the 19th century, and later gained popularity in Europe and North America.

From a contemporary point of view, these images could evoke feelings of disgust and lead us to think that the authors of these portraits had some sort macabre and grisly taste.

This is not the case. We must learn to change our point of view and to observe these images with the cultural, psychological and social mindset of the time (1).

Consequently, we can think of different cultures tried to maintain the human features with mummification (2). Challenging the eternity through the preservation of one's image is an action that is just as much a part of bygone cultures as it is today.

However, we struggle to accept the pictures of the dead and not of the living. It is interesting to remember the words of the great anthropologist, Alfonso Di Nola:

Cultures – more specifically various cultures in differentiated manners – are aimed at creating protection and defence systems or ideological mechanisms that serve to dissolve many disturbing situations and make them acceptable: cultural organization transforms the risk of disintegration and collapse of the self and the world into a new sense of security, which is the victory of life when in crisis (3).

In death and mourning, why should we think that rites adapt to psychology and not vice-versa? Or believe that psychological workings grow into a rite or ritual? When analysing practices related to rites of passage, death emerges as a rupture – or breakage – of social status. More specifically, there is an ambivalent phenomenon that fluctuates between destruction and construction, between crisis and the strengthening of cultural aspects and categories. Different societies at different times in their history have been characterized or defined by the development of specific solutions to the issue of death. Yet while dying is a disruptive and entropic process, which introduces chaos and certain type of "bio-social disorder", on the other hand, through the symbolic meanings that it receives, according to specific trans-cultural modalities, we find the generation of sophisticated forms of organiza-

tion, giving order to certain places, connoting certain spaces, while also building cosmologies and orientating behaviour, as we can see from the practice of post mortem photography in the Victorian Age.

In fact, these photographs represent a sort of visual mummification, where the semblance of life becomes necessary in order to express the spirit of the deceased.

We recommended leaving the eyes open, and we placed him sitting next to a table. We had to wait to work seven or eight hours; in this way we could seize the moment when the painful twitching disappeared, so we could play on a semblance of life [...](4).

The custom to take a photograph of death has had negative connotations, although during the Victorian Age this practice represented a sincere homage to the deceased – a way of perpetuating the image of the person who had died. In rendering their memory eternal, post mortem photographs offered a possibility to obtain the last "picture of life" in "the deceased", before time corrupted the body. The success of post mortem imagery dates back to the Renaissance, when the clergy and the nobility were depicted on their deathbeds. In the 19th Century, the creation of the daguerreotype, with the lower costs of photography, permitted post mortem photography to reach the lower classes. Starting in 1840, post mortem photography became so popular that it represented the most lucrative source for photographers of the time. The iconography of the photos can offer an interesting interpretation of their meaning. We can identify three iconographic styles. In the first, which we might call "the last sleep", the deceased is lying on a bed and shows a look of peacefulness. The person who has died is photographed in a way that makes them appear to be sleeping. Certainly, this type of portrait is the representation of memento mori – an allegory of death that guides us towards its acceptance. In the second style, the deceased is in upright position with open eyes. "Alive but dead" is the name given to this style. This type of portrait shows a certain denial of death. Lastly, the third style shows the deceased hidden among family members, and it is usually quite difficult to identify the dead from the living. Only a meticulous observation can capture details

Figure 1. Third style Post mortem photo. The girl in the middle is the deceased. The photographer has drawn the pupils over the eyelids for giving an appearance of life

to recognise the deceased. Perhaps we could call these photographs "living corpses". As this photograph demonstrates, we are dealing with a picture that attempts to deceive the unwitting onlooker. Within this frame of a peaceful family moment, the other people shroud a corpse with artifices such as to make it look even a living person. This is also done because in this type of scene, the typical iconographic concerns for a funeral were deliberately avoided. Only the most meticulous and careful observation can catch the details that identify the deceased as truly dead – for example, a blank look or a central position compared to the other people present. The deceased, who was usually a child or quite young, is perfectly placed as a living person among the living. In this way, we are reminded of an unfounded prejudice in Victorian society, where there was a certain inclination for that the grotesque and

horrid. An analysis of the iconography of post mortem photos allows us to understand the real meaning of this custom: the need to preserve the image of the deceased in order to make them eternal. At the beginning of the 20ᵗʰ century, post mortem photography was gradually replaced by photographs of the funeral itself, with the deceased inside a coffin. Therefore, the protagonist of post-mortem photos is not the deceased, but rather the funeral. Death was not denied (5), but rather emphasized with the use of photography.

With the onset of photography, death became a "culturally malleable" and not irreversible event, as a temporary distancing from death, aimed at a sort of continuity with life. The photograph therefore becomes an additional tool to make the deceased "last" within the realm of the living. The photograph establishing itself in the progressive sclerosis of memory, remaining close those loved ones, as surviving realities.

The personal crisis that arises when mourning can take on aspects similar to a delirium of the mournful event [...] These stopgaps are found in the dynamics of the mourning period as tools for release and resolution, and then as a way of readapting to historical reality, which will eventually be accepted and recognized as a veiled, sweet, and beneficent memory of melancholy (6).

The picture presented in this study leads us to consider the fact that the photograph can be seen as a document that defines certain aspects of the person taking the picture, rather than those who are photographed, showing the worldview of these people and highlighting what these people and the social context associate to death. Therefore, what is the photograph if not the effort to capture a moment by interrupting and almost denying the inexorable flow of time? This photograph, for those who took it as well as for those who choose to have it taken, is transformed into an attempt to cope with death by carrying out a sort of solemn exorcism, an artifact that leads to immortailty by knocking the deceased out of the continuum of their natural path. Death's disorder is retained through the photos within the area of recognition. In fact, we have the impression that the photograph shown here, like all photographs, has the ability to bring everything to a rational domain – the viewer falls into the illusion

that they are looking at a specific reality. This reality, however, completely omits the "pain of others", the title of the book by Susan Sontag (7). Nicholas Mirzoeff calls this phenomenon as the "illusion of transparency" (8): illusions, mirrors, and this *de-realization* lead us to believe in the objectivity of what we observe without understanding that this is what a specific political, social and cultural context wants us to see. The case of the post-mortem photography described in this paper pushes us to new thinking with regard to the ritual of photographs in the Victorian Era and allows us to observe them in their real function: namely as a tool that shapes the concept of death and mourning in Victorian society by denying the signs of suffering experienced before the last breath and the emotional atrocities caused by the premature loss of a young life.

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