

Eternal Recall: Memorial Photos in the Digital Environment

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ABSTRACT

While many would imagine that postmortem photography as an aid in grieving for a lost child had vanished with the Victorians, it is still with us in the 21st century. Today's photographic and digital technology allow images of stillborn babies or those who lived only a short while after birth to be viewed, uploaded and shared over the internet. Elaborate slideshows complete with music and animated fade/dissolve sequences provide a way to memorialize and mourn in a modern society that discourages the display of grief. Digital retouching removes all evidence of the tubes and machines of medical intervention, and makes even the most damaged babies look almost healthy in their photos. These retouched digital memorial images document what would previously have been impossible to show and create a sanitized view of a traumatic reality, a technologically advanced version of Victorian portrayals of dead children as merely asleep.

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K, Computing Milieux, K.4, Computers and Society, K.4.0 General.

INTRODUCTION

During the 19th century, the invention of the daguerreotype allowed those of modest means to capture the fleeting image of a deceased loved one, a tribute previously available only to the wealthy in the form of painted memorial portraits or sculptures. Postmortem photography seems incomprehensible or morbid to many people today, but the tradition of visually documenting a death continues. Carefully crafted portraits of the departed serve now, as they did then, as artifacts of comfort. Copies of postmortem photos were once sent to far-off relatives, carried around in wallets, and displayed in albums as part of a family's

personal history. [6] Our increasing use of digital media in management and sharing of images of the dear departed represents an evolution of technology but not of the functionality of memorials. Photos provide hard proof not only that someone lived, but also that he or she died.

Modern digital technology has allowed the practice of postmortem photography to undergo a quiet revival, making the images available to a much wider audience of family and friends (and also to strangers) when posted on the Internet. Digital slideshows of photos set to music create the illusion of animation, adding movement to that which is permanently stilled. Regardless of format, memorial photographs play a critical role in grieving because they keep the dead present in time long after they vanish from the visible world.



Figure 1. Cabinet card of Eliza L. Aughe, 1885 (top);
Carter Janes, stillborn in 2009 (below).

Around 1800, Thomas Wedgwood struggled to preserve pictures captured in silver salts on glass plates before they

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turned completely black; the technology had only advanced to the point where it was possible to capture but not fix a fugitive image. [3] Roland Barthes wrote of the indexical function of all photographs as signposts that point to an unseen original, irretrievably linked to and inseparable from its referent. Photos certify the presence of *what has been*. [2] In the case of a stillborn baby, the index points to a child no one ever knew or really even saw for very long, whose visible history is limited to the output of a few month's worth of prenatal technology: sonograms and fetal monitor records. But it is difficult in the extreme to mourn without seeing a dead body; consider the unreal quality of grieving for those who left never to return home, lost at sea or missing in action. [6]

In a sense this attempt to pin down and freeze the invisible in a photograph remains constant no matter what the era; the Spiritualist movement of the mid-19th century used the new technologies of electricity, telegraphy, chemistry, biology, and photography to try to capture spirit photos pairing the iconic accuracy of their subjects with the transparent insubstantiality of ghosts [4], while today's digital retouching alters an image to create a permanent record of something that never existed—an index cut free from its referent, pointing to what only *should have been*.

The high infant mortality rate of the 1800s meant that children, who for the most part had never been photographed while alive, became the first targets of the desire to preserve memory via imagery [1]. The medium was young and not yet commonplace as a routine way to document an existence, and people did not have today's reflexive urge to visually record every moment. Early photographer's advertisements urged "Secure the shadow ere the substance fade," [5] warning that death was the first, last, and only chance to obtain a likeness of the child.

Daguerreotypes frequently portrayed the subject dressed in his or her Sunday best, posed comfortably on a bed or in a parent's arms as if asleep, denying the reality of the death. The ability to manipulate images beyond a suggestion of peaceful slumber was very limited, but more importantly the desire to do so was not as prevalent as it is today. Like the embalming process, which pretties up a corpse for display (she looks so peaceful in her casket!), the widespread use of Photoshop has created a climate of fantasy around photographs of the dead; if viewers are even aware that pictures have been altered, they tend not to care much about it. The ease of digital retouching allows modern photographers to use raw files almost like blank canvases to create an editorialized, greatly improved portrait of a dead child, far more comforting to behold than harsh reality. Upsetting information is permanently erased, and viewers are presented with an image that generates a positive memorial experience instead of a traumatic one.

"For children who were not born alive, in practical terms it means I fix skin tears, skin mottling or discoloration, skin slippage, bone slippage, lip discoloration, and so on. Those

images usually come with a desperate plea for someone to try to do something to make the image more comforting. When I receive these photographs, they are very harsh. They have, perhaps, at most one discernible eye, a very flat nose - along with other flat features because the structure that holds the face in place has deteriorated, perhaps lips, but often quite distorted, and very dark skin that makes it very hard to distinguish one feature from another. Working with them is well beyond retouching or restoration — it is more akin to creating an image from scratch." [Nancy Reeves, retoucher, in correspondence with the author]



Figure 2. Shyanne Waddell, before and after retouching, 2009.

The medical technology that keeps an ailing baby alive during its brief existence—the nasogastric tubes, respirators, and heart monitors of life support—presents a separate challenge for retouchers. Especially in circumstances where the photo was taken by a family member or hospital staffer, the image tends to be of low quality, depicting a baby nearly obscured by the machines. Years ago the only witnesses gazing at the child in postmortem or deathbed photos were its bereaved parents and siblings; now the infant is located at the center of a composition free of other humans, surrounded by modern hospital machinery instead. How to reconstruct what that

individual looked like, and rescue it from its overwhelming techno-environment?

“I try to get photos of either siblings as infants or the parents as infants in order to be able to see the general shape of whatever features are hidden...I may borrow lips, nose, etc. from a family member. (I started retouching by restoring old photographs, and borrowing features from siblings or parents is one way to repair cracks or water damage that destroys features or entire faces.) Sometimes, particularly if I have partial features, I will actually paint in the missing features.” [Nancy Reeves, in correspondence with the author]

Without the disturbing presence of the life support machinery in the pictures, the baby appears peaceful and safe, unthreatened and unviolated. Removing the visual evidence of the systems that kept the child alive can be seen as a method of reconstitution, re-humanizing him or her into a part of the family. Photographs have been described as having a scandalous effect: beholding an image of a dead loved one provokes an astonishment that has something to do with a hope of resurrection [2]. The machinery may be necessary, but in recording the tale for posterity no one wants to gaze upon its cold presence that dashes any possibility of resurrection.

Advances in personal photo technology over the years made it increasingly simple for individuals to bypass the services of professional photographers and record their own significant events of all types, from births to deaths. The widespread availability of reliable flashbulbs in the 1950s allowed anyone to take a (pretty good) picture, and was the beginning of a spectrum of self-documentation moving through the 1960’s with the introduction of the inexpensive Polaroid Land camera and continuing on to the present with disposable cameras, digital cameras, and ubiquitous cell phone cameras. [6] At any place, at any time, it’s highly probable that someone is going to have a device ready to record the goings-on. But that doesn’t mean you are going to get a good picture; most people still hire a photographer when they want to capture and preserve memories of a milestone event.

Until recently, a hospital staffer or relative might snap some pictures of a stillborn baby for grieving parents. As the only surviving evidence of a child’s presence, these often blurry, poorly lit amateur prints were at least better than nothing.

Professionals have once again entered the realm of postmortem photography, perhaps as a result of a growing awareness that such images are important in the grieving process and deserve to be treated as artistically as possible. Now I Lay Me Down to Sleep (NILMDTS), founded in 2005, is a national volunteer organization of photographers who make their services available at no charge to families who have experienced an early infant loss, traveling to the hospital at the time of delivery and documenting the experience as completely or as minimally as the parents wish.

“In addition to digital images, most of the NILMDTS photographers also provide a DVD set to music, with fade in and fade out between images for movement, some images in black and white, some in color, and it gives some degree of animation to it. The parents react very positively; it is a format they can share electronically if they want to. They may not share it widely. Enjoy is not perhaps the right word but they do derive some degree of satisfaction in having these photographs. Some tangible evidence of that child’s brief existence is comforting.” [George Delgado, photographer, in conversation with the author].



Figure 3, James Dennis, stillborn in 2008.

I asked a mother of two girls who died shortly after their births if she felt differently about the pictures taken by the nurses for her first child and by a professional for her second.

“The photos I have of both Shyanne and Piper are a comfort to me. The ones of Shyanne were printed off and given to us by the nurses. Piper’s pictures [were] taken by NILMDTS. We got a DVD slideshow and a CD with pictures we could print off. I am just happy to have a picture of my girls. One of the photographers did do some editing of the ones the nurses took for me and did a wonderful job making them look better. But if I would have been offered a NILMDTS photographer with Shyanne u bet in a heartbeat I would have had them done.” [Rebecca Waddell in correspondence with the author]

Her photos are saved on Facebook as albums, one for each child; depending on what level of privacy settings are in place, anyone could potentially view them. The audience for memorial photos has expanded with the reach of the internet, and in an era where community is frequently defined as an online group of people around the world whom you’ve never met yet consider your friends, these

online albums serve a dual function as both intimate memorials and public monuments. Additionally, the Internet represents a new form of eternity for memorial photos, an environment of virtual images that will exist in perpetuity untouched by the ravages of time. Unlike photo prints stored in albums, digital images will not fade, curl, crack or otherwise visibly decay. The files may become corrupted but will probably exist in several locations simultaneously—on servers, hard drives, and CDs—and so are far less likely to vanish completely. The memorial images are available for eternal recall.

The persistence of memorial photography across cultures and eras proves that humans have a deeply felt need for external forms to supplement unreliable memory. The accompanying notions of decay, transience, and permanence remain constant over time and choice of media; digital technology has merely increased the ways we disperse our cherished memories, and provided unprecedented opportunity to modify images in order to improve a sad tale and create a fantasy vision of the way we wish things had turned out.

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