

Example of photography and death essay

[Art & Culture](#), [Artists](#)



Photography and death:

Introduction:

Death in photography has always been a controversial subject and this continues to elucidate comments especially when considering the ethical implications of photography itself. Nostalgia is also an important element of photography and this has been revealed in several artist's work most notably those like Sally Mann and Luc Delahaye who have both treated the subject of death with some detail especially in their portrayal of dead and decomposing bodies. When one writes about death in photography, we also have to deal with the 'death of the subject'. After we press the shutter the subject 'dies' at that moment. They will never be the same as in the moment when the photograph was taken as they will be older, their mood will change, their energy or facial expression will also change. This also applies to landscapes and with practically everything else we photograph since things are not the same even a second after the picture was taken.

This statement which is briefly the topic of Roland Barthe's 'Camera Lucida' demonstrates that the death of the subject is an intrinsic part of photography. It is intriguing to note that Barthes was not a photographer but he essentially understood the philosophical implication of taking a photograph which is forever imprinted in time. The same argument is made by Susan Sontag in her seminal essay 'On Photography' which deals with historical views and the role of photography in the capitalist driven ambience of the 1970's. A typical example of subjects which died after they were photographed were the examples of photography taken during the Depression by Diane Arbus. These photographs showed the situation on

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farms during the Depression and are full of striking and emotionally disturbing imagery especially in their portrayal of children who were suffering from malnutrition. One could argue that this is subjective but there is no denying the power behind the images and that they freeze a moment in time which will never return. Thus we also have the argument of relating photography to politics which confirms the news value of photography as an important medium for preserving events.

Barthe's essay 'Camera Lucida' is also a reflection of the power of death and was written as a sort of catharsis for the death of his mother. The dialectical imagery which Barthes portrays is also crucially important since we are faced with the theory that the subject dies after the photograph is taken. And in a way a photograph is a relic of the past since when someone dies, the only memories left are the photographs of events which remain imprinted forever in time. The personal note of pain is also very much evident in the essay which contains an outpouring of grief and perhaps an imagery which means that life will never be the same again. In a sense the photograph of a dead body shows that this is being revered and is in a way a homage to that person who has expired and is no longer in this world.

Erina Duganne's "Photography After the Fact" discusses the work of noted photographer Luc Delahaye to explore the notion of death in photography. Delahaye's work photographing the struggles of the war in Afghanistan, in which the Taliban were ousted by allied military forces led to his art exhibition "History." In this project, Delahaye tried to excise the label 'artist' from his oeuvre as a photojournalist; at the same time, he also believes that there is some overlap between journalism and art. His pictures

of the Taliban are a case study in that line, as his documentation and portrayal of the deaths in this Taliban offensive have an extremely artistic bent to them – the framing of his images is crisp and dramatic, and the images themselves are extremely harsh. At the same time, they are excellent examples of photojournalism.

According to Delahaye, the images in his “ History” exhibition transcended mere photojournalism, and needed to be seen in a different context. That being said, the shocking nature of the images is also equally powerful and important, as it shows his attempt to show an artistic message through his photographs, shocking the audience into empathizing with the situation at hand. The violence in the pictures paints a delicate portrait of the horrors that were happening over there, a stunning commentary on the nature of death in foreign wars, while also being aesthetically powerful and interesting.

Delahaye believes that his work is personal and contemporary, noting that photographs are images that should be considered when thinking of artistic works, not just as a captured memory of an event that happened in history. Photographic essays like these have problems, to be sure, and there is always a stigma to them as being just photojournalism. Delahaye’s reputation as a photojournalist itself colours the work as a whole; the work in his “ History” exhibition often invites comparisons to other photographers who have taken pictures of similar subjects (namely dead bodies on the field of war).

One such example is Sally Mann’s exhibition called “ What Remains,” which was featured in The New York Times in 2000 – her photographs of bodies

which were decaying, bloated and destroyed were controversial and very affecting in the art critic world. The series was taken over a period of time at the University of Tennessee's anthropological facility at Knoxville, aka the "body farm", where human decomposition is studied scientifically. Many people believed that exhibiting such private images was insolent to the dead, but Mann believed that by allowing them to keep their anonymity and by not remodelling them she paid her respects. Mann photographed her subjects at the stage where decomposing bodies melt into and blend with the land, in a way she is the one giving them back to nature. Mann's fascination and obsession with death originates in her childhood with her father, a country doctor, who liked to say that death was one of the subjects for art, next to sex and whimsy.

The main point of this debate is the question of photojournalism's acceptability as art within the context of depicting violence; the issue of whether or not it is acceptable to show these things for artistic merit is what is being discussed. Sarah Boxer of the New York Times strongly criticized Mann's photographs because they were altered and manipulated to achieve maximum emotional manipulation. By photographing her subjects in different stages of decomposition Mann reminds us all that at the end we all turn into dust, we unite with nature, which keeps on doing its work long after we're gone. This work demonstrates the finality of life and death, which is not typically comparable to the work of Delahaye; his work is frighteningly real, and fairly accurate to the pictures he took. There is something also to be said for the idea of forging and altering photographs to achieve greater effect: does this alter the subject at all, and if so does it enhance or dilute

the effect? If you are looking at an arresting photograph of a dead soldier that has been manipulated, is the effect the same? Can you really count it as being a piece of real journalism, or a moment captured in time, when it has been doctored?

Duganne (2007) discusses in depth the idea of Delahaye's photographs transcending mere photojournalism and turning into art, and the resistance that this has engendered amongst art critics. Though the argument brings up much debate, Duganne's argument is that Delahaye's work and the changes made to it are for aesthetic effect. Furthermore, it is only possible to react to his photographs if it brings about a moral quandary – the question remains: Do these photographs merely elicit an emotional reaction, or is there real artistic merit to them? What is art? How does one analyze this work as a piece of art? There are two schools of thought on this; examining Delahaye's photographs from a purely aesthetic sense, one would call it a photographic reproduction; on the other hand, a holistic approach to the work showcases the message it is trying to bring out in the viewer. Here, Delahaye is clearly trying to depict the horrors of war, and the pitiable nature of its casualties. To that end, Duganne believes that Delahaye has achieved his overall objective of infusing meaning into art.

Duganne's article also discusses the issue of credentials and identifiers: is it possible to be an artist and and journalist? Where do these two job descriptions overlap? In the article, an incident is described where Man wished to take pictures of bodies at a mortuary, but she was not allowed in because she was merely an artist. Returning with her press credentials, she was permitted access and took as many pictures as she wanted. This is an

interesting example of the difference between perceptions of artists and photojournalists by others; artists are often given many more restrictions than journalists because of their perceived value. News journalists get access to places artists cannot, because their photographs are purported to have a specific utility. Delahaye runs into similar problems as Mann with this line between journalist and artist; he was permitted to enter the war zone in Afghanistan in order to photograph the scene because of his credentials and status as a photojournalist. If he had entered as an artist, with the intention of merely putting the photographs up as an art exhibition, he would have been denied access. This also points out the interesting advantage photojournalists have over other artists; their job allows them access to places other artists could not reach.

Another point raised in the Duganne article is the idea of capturing dignity in death. Susan Sontag wrote an article, *Notes on Duganne*, where she claims that photojournalists often obscure the faces of the bodies of American and European victims (for the sake of their families), but the same courtesy is not extended to foreign families. To that end, the photographic depictions of the dead of those from other countries is typically harsher and more horrific than those of people that might be identified. Delahaye's work is like this, as the dead Taliban soldiers are given no mercy or dignity in death in his photographs. This brings up the moral quandary of Duganne's article, in which she compares Mann's and Delahaye's pictures of the anonymous dead unflatteringly portrayed. Can the dead be used like this to express an artistic statement? Duganne does not comment one way or the other, but notes that Delahaye's work is a perfect example of a fine line being walked between

artistic expression and respecting the dead. By making the dead Taliban soldier seem to have a modicum of dignity in his death, Delahaye shows that death itself is fair and indiscriminating. The style and artistic creativity shown in Delahaye's work actually serves to bring dignity to the dead soldiers, showing the horror and peace the soldiers have while facing death far from home.

In the end, Duganne's final argument is that the difference between artists and photojournalists lie in the discussion of these moral dilemmas.

Photojournalists are often thought to be more well-respected than artists, due to the credentials that allow them access to places artists cannot go; conversely, artists are given greater freedom of artistic expression without the fear of editing or censoring by some other body. Duganne touches on issues of censorship in her work; in essence, artists are given the freedom to look at whatever topic they like without restraint, while photojournalists are still restricted by what stories they are permitted to tell, and what assignments they are given. This is possibly the biggest struggle faced by photojournalists in their quest to be artists.

Conclusion:

While Barthes and Sonntag are chiefly concerned with the death of the subject in their seminal photographic essays, other writers on photography such as Ashley le Grange and Liz Wells have also focused on the importance and immediacy of the subject in question. The art of photographing the dying has certainly been perfected by artists such as Luc Delahaye and Sally Mann who have taken this photography image to another level. What is

definite is that photography and its ability to freeze a moment in time will be forever debated.

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