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An Iconography of the Flesh: How Corpses Mean As Matter

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Abstract

The structuring relationship between the material world and the world of culture is variously embodied in the figure of the corpse. To ask how corpses mean as matter is to attend to them as “things themselves”—by bracketing the freighted assumptions and naturally mixed feelings we have when we encounter something that cannot but remind us of our own mortality. Corpses force us to think of putrefaction—and allow us, via a complex system of cultural and representational practices, to just as quickly disavow this unpleasantness. Wherever the corpse appears, then, it brings with it ideas about the relationship between representation and the real, or, more precisely, about the matter of subjectivity.

This materiality also crucially constitutes the corpse’s *difference from* the identity of the deceased, and it is here where the corpse may thus do more than simply reference the past. The end point of the argument, then, is to work towards a vocabulary that allows this difference—this material remainder—to figure meaningfully in practices of grief and mourning that may not point exclusively back towards the deceased (and inevitably a particular version of that person’s legacy) but towards the future and towards polysemic, even conflicting ideas of the responsibility placed upon us by this death.

This paper opens a discussion of corpses as “vibrant matter” (to borrow Jane Bennett’s provocative term) whose materiality is an equal partner to their cultural significance. My reading opens a conversation about the very real work of corpses as *things* capable of organizing diverse affect that in turn may become considered action.

Following Bennett’s reading of Deleuze and Latour, I account for the corpse as both deceased subject and material object by framing it as a kind of assemblage. As *remains*, the corpse is essentially referential, the remains of *someone*. But remains are also material, matter that functions as an actant in concert with the processes of decomposition, with the interventions of photography and embalming, with the cultural practices of disposal that ritually encounter and resolve this “remaining.”

The corpse diversely and dynamically organizes the cultural, the representational, the biological, the subjective and the objective, the ritual and the metaphysical. I argue that lingering with the corpse as a dynamic assemblage allows for the development of a nuanced and materialistic notion of agency. I further suggest that this kind of reading provocatively develops Bill Brown’s question, “What might scholars accomplish through a materialist analysis of media?” Corpses are unique objects in that they already suggest themselves as *figures of the material*, thus literally embodying the question of what a materialist media studies might look like. Corpses communicate something to us about the flesh; they are the not-so-passive objects of technological, ritual and representational practices; they are the perfect starting point for a materialist communication and media studies.

Keywords

materialism, media studies, death, embodiment, assemblage theory

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Introduction

Dead bodies are material things that bear a referential relationship to an absent subject. They are in this sense a kind of medium, connecting the living to the memory of a deceased. As such, they are the perfect starting point to what Bill Brown has termed a “materialist analysis of media.”¹ The corpse is a material thing freighted with the most intense cultural meaning. To look at death practices from the starting point of the corpse is thus to inquire precisely into the relationship between the material and the textual, between the thing itself and the rich variety of representational texts required to make sense of it, to venture between the world of specific cultural and historical practice, and the universality of death. A materialist analysis of media begins with the corpse because the corpse is itself a complex figure of mediation.

For the corpse is precisely not a material object among others. It is a special kind of thing whose physical existence is a matter of no small cultural significance—and whose discursive power is inseparable from its materiality. This complex intertwining of the discursive and the biological is why the corpse is such a rich site for exploring what we mean by materialism. I am interested in sketching the outlines of a materialism that is neither inert, ineffable noumenon—the unreachable “thing in itself”—nor reducible to signification. This outline starts with the dead body, but it also implicates the study of media as both conduit and substrate in its refiguring.

The corpse combines the organic material of the body with the symbolic power of death. The corpse is, on the one hand, a material thing, subject to the laws of biology and physics. It has weight and heft; it will decompose at a certain rate under certain physical conditions; it responds to moisture and heat, and so on. On the other hand, these material properties provoke horror, as we all fear death and flinch at the thought of our own corpses. Nevertheless, because this powerful symbolism rests precisely upon the corpse as dead flesh, its meaning is not reducible to mere cultural effect. It is the corpse *as thing* that commands such powerful symbolic efficacy. It frightens because it is vulnerable and passive—because it scares us to imagine our own bodies as subject to the biological imperatives of decomposition. Corpses depend on the living to treat them with respect and dignity, to guide them carefully into some kind of *not being there*. The corpse is thus both a powerfully suggestive cultural text and an incontrovertibly material object.

Ritual practices surrounding the corpse constitute this *figuring* of a relationship between the material world and signification. They forge a kind of mediation, or tell a kind of story about what is being remembered here, in this way, through this flesh, this monument, this absence. How we prepare the corpse, how we lay it to rest, and how we mark the space of this passing are all highly symbolic practices that construct a contingent understanding of death, memory, and the meaning of life. These practices articulate cultural values: they designate inheritance, they affirm identity and continuity, and they provide a space for the memory of the deceased. They do so, however, with a material object as the centerpiece: the practices themselves account for and contextualize

¹ W. J. T. Mitchell and Mark B. N. Hansen, eds., *Critical Terms for Media Studies* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2010), 50.

the movement of this thing from *here*, from the present, to the *there* of memory, afterlife, legacy.

Furthermore, images of the corpse have been used in popular and devotional art for centuries to invoke the fleeting vanity of the living body.² Corpses may symbolize the power of the state, as in public executions, or the wrongful and horrible abuse of that power, as with photographs of atrocity. The corpse functions as an archetypal symbol of human finality, of the power of death as something that always threatens subjectivity from *elsewhere*, always destabilizes the present with the threat of flux, decay, disappearance and oblivion.

Wherever the corpse appears, then, it both figures (represents) and literally is a figure of a relation: between life and death, this life and the next, the present and the time of memory. The corpse is a literal figure for mediation, an object in transition between one kind of being and another. This is why it is such a compelling starting point for a materialist analysis of media. Attending to the corpse as a thing opens up a theorization of the material substrate of communication—it holds “media” accountable to its all-to-often latent connotation of physical medium. But by choosing the corpse as a starting point and not, for example, the radio wave or the fiberoptic cable, it is also possible to take seriously the symbolic power that this object wields. In other words, there is no biological determinism possible with the corpse, for its physicality is also the reason for its cultural power. To begin with the corpse, itself a hybrid object is to thus find a third way out of the long established tendency towards determinism in the field, be it technological, economic, or cultural determinism.

And, technologies of inscription and archive are central to the modern encounter with the dead. Friedrich Kittler reminds us that the “realm of the dead is as extensive as the storage and transmission capabilities of a given culture,”³ a remark that foregrounds the reasons why media studies might want to account for the corpse. If we want to understand better the role media play in our lives, we could do worse than to look at how they help us make sense of death.

What Is A Corpse?

Though we may intuitively know the corpse, at least enough to be afraid of it, the stakes of understanding it within a materialist media studies touch upon the question of ethics, of social action, and identity. So what is a corpse? A corpse may be said to be an assemblage of multiple elements, some of which are human and some of which are not. The flesh itself is taxonomically human, but because it is no longer living, it is not functionally human. It is also a particular molecular and chemical combination, and these are in constant flux both in the living organism and after it has died. Then there are the bacteria that undertake the process of decomposition, and the conditions (temperature, moisture, acidity) under which they work.

² Christine Quigley, *The Corpse: A History*, New edition (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2005).

³ Friedrich Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz, 1st ed. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 13.

There may also be introduced—by human agency—chemical detergents, resins, and waxes that slow this process of decomposition. A corpse may also be photographed, which is one human and technological way of halting this decomposition. I will look at both of these interventions as part of the emergent effects of corpses as assemblages, but I want to spend some time thinking about the corpse in itself, before these interventions.

The corpse is a special kind of thing, in that it has a special relationship to subjectivity. That relationship is one of reference, or pointing, a gesture towards. To refer comes from the Latin to bear or carry—to carry again, to bear again something to something else. To refer entails a kind of pointing or gesture. As “remains,” the corpse is a referential thing—it is the remains *of someone*. Even when that someone is not identified, a corpse always references a human departure, a subject who has left it behind. An anonymous corpse nevertheless refers, if only to a general sense of shared humanity, to the notion of a sovereign self with rights over the fate of its own flesh, if nothing else. The corpse is also a liminal thing. The relationship to subjectivity that makes it special is a fleeting one: as soon as decomposition begins, the corpse looks less and less like the deceased, and becomes more and more a site of horror and abjection. Its ontology is unstable, its resemblance fleeting, its power to refer bounded by time, and by the material constraints of the biological flesh itself.

As organic material, the corpse precisely differs from either living, embodied subjectivity or from the various texts that comprise the memory of that subjectivity. The corpse’s materiality is thus also the site of its difference from the deceased, and from the memory of the deceased, and hence the site of its polysemy. In the flesh—precisely where embalming and photography make their different interventions—the corpse *differs* as well as *resembles*, and thus points towards the heterogeneity of legacy. As organic matter, the corpse is taken up into a variety of assemblages that produce the effect of memory, legacy, inheritance. Nevertheless, because the assemblage is never merely the sum of its parts, the same corpse may give rise to a number of effects, both stabilizing and destabilizing. Embalming and photography, as technologies that work on the corpse as organic matter, are also parts of assemblages that produce inheritance and memory. But because these effects are emergent, they are continually produced and reproduced in different contexts. An assemblage of flesh and embalming that may produce the effect of identity in one moment may produce a destabilizing effect that turns identity into heterogeneity, or solemnity into farce. This possibility of a destabilizing effect is clear, for example, every time the Russian government debates whether to finally bury Lenin’s corpse or leave it on display. The longer it is displayed, the harder it is to maintain its identity with a revolution that has now ended. Its preservation—the very process that allowed it to signify permanent revolution—now threatens to turn his legacy into a morbid curiosity, his grave into a circus.⁴ Whether as solemn memorial or morbid curiosity, the corpse as material substrate is the condition of possibility for any kind of effect.

Attending to corpses as things, as non-human material elements in assemblages whose effects are heterogeneous and potentially destabilizing of proper identity helps

⁴ Ilya Zbarsky and I. B. Zbarskii, *Lenin’s Embalmers*, trans. Barbara Bray, First Edition; First Printing (New York and London: Harvill Press, 1999).

build the vocabulary needed to theorize a properly ethical materialist media studies. Asking how corpses mean as matter attends to them as things and allows us to understand how they embody mediation as both a concept and as a lived reality.

Assemblage Theory

In this essay, I theorize the corpse as “vibrant matter,” as a dynamic assemblage of both human and non-human elements. These elements include not only the complex confederation of affect, social and ritual practice, and biological substrate that make up the corpse as such, but also the technological means by which corpses are preserved and produced as socially meaningful: photography and embalming. If the event of death is an encounter with the corpse as a heterogeneous assemblage of material and affective elements, it is also mediated by technological interventions on the body that both facilitate its meaningfulness (by slowing decomposition and allowing for viewing, for example) and produce that meaningfulness (by collaborating to create a certain “look” for the corpse as a meaningful symbol). Assemblage theory furnishes a vocabulary to talk about the corpse in the fullness of its heterogeneity as a material object, as the medium for the production of cultural meaning, and as a powerfully emotional signifier.

The term “vibrant matter” comes from Jane Bennett, who identifies the “locus of political responsibility” in “a human-nonhuman assemblage.”⁵ Bennett is concerned to theorize agency as something other than purely human, particularly in the case of environmental crises that increasingly demand an understanding of how non-human forces such as electricity or waste impact the human. Human desire and intention reaches a stark impasse when it faces death, which always appears to us as something opposed to our own control or agency. We may wish for death, or wish it on another. But we are only at worst the bearers of death, whose arrival is always from without, otherwise than human, elsewhere, somewhere off stage. Death arrives, death takes us, death visits us—but even when we invite it, it is always a stranger who comes and goes at will. In theorizing the corpse, then, it seems that non-human agency—in this case, death itself—must be a key part of the picture.

Deleuze and Guattari use the word “assemblage” to distinguish it from functionalist theories of the organism. Rather than an organic whole of dependent parts functioning in unison, an assemblage is an uneven and shifting collection of disparate parts, none of which has essential dominion over any other.⁶

In assemblages you find states of things, bodies, various combinations of bodies, hodgepodes; but you also find utterances, modes of expression, and whole regimes of signs.... But an assemblage is first and foremost what keeps very heterogeneous elements together: e.g. a sound, a gesture, a position, etc., both natural and artificial elements. The

⁵ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2010), 36.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 24.

problem is one of “consistency” or “coherence,” and it prior to the problem of behavior. How do things take on consistency? How do they cohere?⁷

This coherence is provisional and strategic, organized around two different axes, the material and the expressive.⁸ These axes refer to the potential roles that the components may play in the creation of this emergent identity or consistency.⁹ As Bennett clarifies, the effects of any assemblage are “emergent in that their ability to make something happen...is distinct from the sum of the vital force of each materiality considered alone”.¹⁰ Material elements and non-material elements are therefore non hierarchically arranged and rearranged to create diverse effects.

These effects may be either stabilizing or destabilizing, or to use Deleuze and Guattari’s language, territorializing or deterritorializing.¹¹ In other words, the material and expressive elements of an assemblage may create the effect of a stable identity effect, or they may create an effect that is incoherent and chaotic, non identical and changeable.

When finding ways to articulate how the body itself functions within this process, it is vital to account for the multiple valences along which memory may reach forward into legacy and inheritance. Because the body itself is the literal site of difference from either the textuality of legacy and remembrance or the life of the deceased, this heterogeneity is an inherent feature, inseparable from its enfleshment. Understanding the corpse as an assemblage thus provides a vocabulary to theorize the multiple and contested legacies, for deceased whose identities are at any moment provisional and changeable. For example, the identity to which the embalmed body of Vladimir Lenin refers may *appear* to be stable, enshrined as it is within the political rhetoric of the tomb and the social practices of reverence that it organizes. Nevertheless, this identity is not stable, as the changing political and social conditions in Moscow amply demonstrate. Moreover, the move to *assert* a stable identity for the deceased—a fixed legacy—reveals much about the political and ideological investments in any particular context. To theorize the corpse as an assemblage whose effects may either stabilize or destabilize that identity, then, allows into the conversation those memories and legacies that are precisely *not* hegemonic, whose memories are marginalized and silenced. The condition of possibility for this polysemy is the corpse’s special materiality.

These are the stakes of thinking the corpse as the material beginnings of memory, inheritance, and ultimately ethics. Derrida explores the notion of legacy in *Specters of Marx*, showing how the relationship with the dead is one of responsibility to “those who

⁷ Gilles Deleuze, *Two Regimes of Madness: Texts and Interviews 1975--1995* (Semiotex, ed. David Lapoujade, trans. Ames Hodges and Mike Taormina, revised edition (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2007), 176–79.

⁸ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 88.

⁹ Manuel Delanda, “Deleuzian Social Ontology and Assemblage Theory,” in *Deleuze and the Social*, ed. Martin Fuglsang and Bent Meier Sørensen, Deleuze Connections (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), 253.

¹⁰ Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 24.

¹¹ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, 88.

are not there, those who are no longer or who are not yet *present and living*.”¹² In this sense, the living present is always ethically called by a beyond, by a “not there.” This calling happens via the concept of memory as a kind inheritance, more properly called legacy. Crucially, any legacy is heterogeneous, meaning that to accept (or reject) any legacy is to make a critical choice, to impose finitude.¹³ What the dead “would have wanted” is always an uneven terrain, and uncertain—it is always in some sense a secret that mocks us, asking us whether we understand, whether we can decipher it. Think of the US constitution, something we think of as an inheritance from our “founding fathers.” This document has been endlessly deciphered and interpreted, and each time—as for example in an Amendment—there is a critical choice made, an interpretation that puts the (provisional) stamp of finitude upon the endless and conflicting interpretations. The same is true of the kinds of legacy narratives woven (and continually revised) about the dead whose contributions we must always interpret even as we remember and celebrate (or vilify) them.

This critical choice can be understood as an act of memory or mourning. When we interpret an inheritance, we remember the person it came from, and act in their name. The amendment to the constitution identifies the founders’ intentions: in a sense, it remembers them as the fathers whose encrypted intentions we inherited. If I decide to keep the family land I inherited, to farm it rather than selling it, I am making a critical decision about the reasons why it was given me. In doing so, I also invoke the memory of those who bequeathed it, perhaps even justifying my actions by saying it was what they “would have wanted.” In every instance it is our responsibility to ensure that those who have the right to identify their dead are not only those who wield cultural and economic power.

In a more subtle sense, to make this kind of critical choice also identifies and localizes the dead. Again, this identification is a right all too often claimed by those who wield social power. To say, “this is what my father would have wanted,” is to also name this father, to identify him as the dead person whose inheritance I am now interpreting. To receive an inheritance, in other words, is to receive it *from someone*; whenever one deciphers that inheritance by making a critical choice then, one remembers the dead by identifying them, by reaffirming their unique identities, their desires, their connection to me and to my present. It is also to localize them, in the sense that to invoke the name is also to place it as elsewhere, in the realm of the nonliving.

Whenever I identify and localize the dead by invoking their memory in the interpretation of an inheritance, I also do it in the name of the generations to come. An inheritance is never mine alone, but something I may pass it along to those who come after me. You can even think of this in terms of genetic traits: I inherited my father’s blue eyes, and I may pass those on to my children, or I may not. But whenever I make that critical decision (to say, “this blue is my father’s blue”), in this moment of identification and localization I unite the dead with the unborn. That which is received from beyond—

¹² Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, The Work of Mourning & the New International*, 1st ed. (New York and London: Routledge, 2006), xviii.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 18.

from the *not there* of death—is also something that marks the present with a disjuncture that implies the *not there* of those yet to come.

The corpse is a critical player in this notion of inheritance as memory and responsibility. The corpse localizes and identifies the dead: it is always the body *of someone*, and it is always localized in a particular resting place. Even when these two conditions are not met, they still obtain: the unmarked graves of Argentina’s period of state terror, for example, serve as a localizer and identifier of the injustice done there. That the bodies of the “disappeared” are missing is itself the index of the terror, and human rights activism works in part by putting names and faces to those whom the state would seek to obliterate. It is this kind of marginalized voice, which struggles to name the dead and to demand the right to inherit in their name, that an assemblage theory of the corpse acknowledges in its heterogeneity. How we understand the corpse, then, and how we identify and localize it, becomes an absolutely central process to the responsibility to which the dead call us. This responsibility in turn becomes the basis for actions, for the critical interpretations of inheritance that make up our political and social life.

Using the language of assemblage theory, the corpse moves from the material to the expressive axis by means of reference. In the case of embalming and photography, reference is in a visual register: the corpse *looks like*. But even before these mediations, which operate at the level of appearances, the corpse refers visually. When someone is called upon to identify a body, often this happens through simple visual recognition. Though anyone who has seen the dead body of a loved one will tell you that the corpse is never identical to the living, that it lacks that ineffable spark, the corpse is uncannily like the deceased. It is *unheimlich*—at home and away from home, strange and familiar. We may say, then, that the corpse’s reference bears some relationship to the visual. Unlike the anonymous grinning skull of the skeleton, the corpse bears *likeness*.

More precisely, the modern corpse bears likeness by means of two major technological interventions whose bias is towards likeness or resemblance: photography and embalming. These technologies become in turn actants in the corpse assemblage, signifying in particular ways when articulated to the dead body and its deceased referent.

Photography and Embalming

“The photograph embalms time, rescuing it simply from its proper corruption”¹⁴

The line quoted above has occasioned an entire body of scholarship on the relationship between the photographic image, indexicality, and death.¹⁵ Photography is

¹⁴ André Bazin and Hugh Gray, “The Ontology of the Photographic Image,” *Film Quarterly* 13, no. 4 (July 1, 1960): 4–9.

¹⁵ This includes a long list of commentators. Besides the Bazin essay quoted above pieces that explicitly address these themes are Walter Benjamin, “Little History of Photography,” in *Selected Writings*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith, trans. Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter, vol. 2:1927–1934 (Cambridge, MA and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 507–530., Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981)., and Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, 1st ed. (New York: Picador, 2001). Sontag, for example, comments that all photographs are “*momento mori*” (*Ibid.*, 15.).

not only like embalming, however—embalming is like photography. Both technologies developed in the context of a “larger, emergent culture of preservation” in the nineteenth century.¹⁶ These media not only preserved the liminal, representational quality of corpses, but also shaped the look of the modern corpse.¹⁷ These practices thus came to delineate and police how bodies became meaningfully “legible” representations of death and its relationship to representation.

Photography and embalming are both media that seek to capture and forestall the corpse’s inherent liminality. Photography does this by capturing the image of the corpse before it rots; embalming does it by intervening chemically in the process of putrefaction itself. Despite their different techniques, both mediations preserve the appearance of the flesh as such. The embalmed corpse, like the subject of postmortem photography before it, looks “as if it were sleeping,” suspended between this life and the next.

Mediation of death via photography and embalming is also congruent with the effacement of death from modern life, making the corpse’s legibility—the conditions under which it may or may not meaningfully appear as legacy, memory, as reference to a deceased—not only an historical question, but also an ideological one.

As a result, with industrialization and urbanization—central movements in both the history of media and of the subject—the corpse is uniquely positioned in mass society as both “deceased subject” and commodity (object). Indeed, as embalmers became experts who had to be licensed and regulated, they began to be active and paid participants in private experiences of mourning. One has only to think of the quiet space of the funeral home viewing room and the laboratories hidden beneath to grasp the complex boundaries modern embalming maintains between public and private, science and nature.

I also see a crucial parallel between the wet mount emulsions that would democratize photography and the chemical solution that made the corpse a “postmortem subject”. Embalming is of interest not only as a technology-- the pump—but also because the fluid is a chemical used to preserve the flesh in *the appearance of life*. For both media, this chemical inscription becomes the basis for the corpse’s univocal reference to the deceased.

As photographs of the dead entered into the collection of artifacts and relics used in the cultural representation of grief and death, so too did ideas about how a dead body should look and be looked at. Generally, the corpse as we know it today may be said to have emerged out of what Crary has called the “disciplining of vision” in the nineteenth century.¹⁸ More specifically, the relationship between postmortem photography and embalming outlined here supports Gunning’s assertion that nineteenth century

¹⁶ Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2003), 292. Sterne is documenting the history of sound recording, which he places alongside embalming, canning, and other preservation techniques. *The Audible Past* thus makes an excellent case for embalming as a medium, though its main objectives obviously lie elsewhere.

¹⁷ John Troyer, “Embalmed Vision.,” *Mortality* 12, no. 1 (February 2007): 22–47.

¹⁸ Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the 19th Century* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1992).

photography produced “the standardization of imagery” for industrial societies.¹⁹ As photography established how to make visible the conditions of life under industrialization and modernity, it also provided a template to envision death under the same.

Photography predates embalming technology by about thirty years, and it wasn’t until about 1890 that embalming became widespread enough to replace ice as the dominant form of preservation.²⁰ Embalming inherited a certain ‘look’ for the corpse that portraiture and death photography had established, making its preservative goals not merely literal (stopping decomposition) but also symbolic, in the sense that the corpse signifies peaceful sleep. The practice of postmortem photography informed the aesthetics of embalming, the ways it represents death in the medium of the flesh.

This aesthetic represents death as peace, and as ultimately conserving the social identity of the deceased. People die in all kinds of confusion, agony, and bodily distortion. Funeral convention demands that we erase these signs of suffering from the countenance of the deceased. Just as embalming protects us, as Quigley writes, from the “sights, sounds and smells”²¹ of our loved one’s impending putrefaction, so does the arrangement of the body protect us from imagining their suffering. It places the body in a kind of future perfect, when the deceased *will have* been received happily into the fold of whatever afterlife awaits, at peace with her life and with those she left behind. Embalming and postmortem photography, create an image of what we imagine the experience of death to be life, the “as if” of modern, mediated death—not the past reality to which the facial expression and body position may seem to refer, but to an imagined place beyond.²² Because they use the body and the likeness of the deceased as the medium of this representation, embalming and photography, read as elements in assemblages, produce the effect of a stable identity that will persevere in memory even as the physical remains disappear.

Before the advent of photography, families with substantial means often commissioned deathbed portraits or death masks. Paintings had to be undertaken very quickly, but, like most portraits, were not necessarily prized for their realism.²³ Mourning portraits might depict living members of a family alongside the deceased, whose death was indicated only symbolically (a weeping willow in the background, a

¹⁹ Patrice Petro, ed., *Fugitive Images: From Photography to Video* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995).

²⁰ James J. Farrell, *Inventing the American Way of Death, 1830-1920* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1980), 159.

²¹ Quigley, *The Corpse*, 62.

²² Barbie Zelizer characterizes the “about to die” photograph as having a kind of subjunctive, “as if” function, allowing viewers to unconsciously imagine the outcome that is not depicted (death) never happened. Modern embalming arguably performs the same function in a different mood—a future perfect which erases the trace of death and makes an image of the deceased “as if” she were sleeping. See Barbie Zelizer, *About to Die: How News Images Move the Public*, First Edition (New York: Oxford University Press, USA, 2010), 12–15.

²³ Gina Giotta, “Disappeared: Erasure in the Age of Mechanical Writing” (Dissertation, University of Iowa, 2010). Giotta’s chapter “Victorian Photoshop” collects a number of useful observations about early photography and the tension between iconic resemblance and the libidinal investments of bourgeois portraiture.

pocket watch, etc.). Death masks satisfied the indexical urge to capture exactly the features of the deceased, though they were always taken after minimal composition of the features (eyes and mouth closed).²⁴ These practices, however, were limited to those with extensive means (or great renown) and were thus not widespread. Photography took over and democratized these practices, as well as providing a new, more faithfully iconic way of capturing the corpse in the short time before decay eats away at its resemblance to the deceased (or to anything human or living).

From about 1840 to 1890, before the widespread adoption of embalming, photographers could count on a steady income in funeral portraits. Moreover, professional photographers explicitly advertised that their services included portraits of deceased persons.²⁵ A family with neither the means nor the inclination for living likenesses might hire a photographer in the case of a death. Often these images were the only likenesses ever taken of the person (especially, but not only, if the deceased were a child). Moreover, corpses made much more compliant subjects than the living, whose stern, cramped expressions were often the result of having to hold uncomfortably still to accommodate long exposure times. Corpses were photographed at home immediately postmortem, before they were buried, as the unique way of preserving the appearance of the deceased. For this reason the focus is on the deceased's face and head, the close-up providing not just a memento, but also a faithful likeness.²⁶

In privileging iconic reference to the deceased, the practices of postmortem photography also developed a visual rhetoric about death in the medium of the flesh. Platitudes about the “pencil of nature” notwithstanding, corpse photographers did more than simply record likeness: they also created a portrait of death as peaceful sleep.²⁷ They might use mirrors or other reflective surfaces to accommodate lighting difficulties, and performed simple postmortem adjustments, such as rotating eyeballs in their sockets using the “handle of a teaspoon”.²⁸ Funeral photographer Josiah Southworth describes some of the tricks of his trade, assuring his fellow photographers that in the moments immediately following death bodies are meek and pliable: “Just lay them down as if they were in a sleep...Then place your camera and take your pictures just as they would look

²⁴For more on death masks, see Margaret M. Green, tran., *Undying Faces: A Collection of Death Masks* (Breinigsville: Kessinger Publishing, LLC, 2003), originally published by Leonard and Virginia Woolf in 1929. A theoretical link to the indexicality of the photograph is detailed in Margaret M. Green, tran., *Undying Faces: A Collection of Death Masks* (Breinigsville: Kessinger Publishing, LLC, 2003); Louis Kaplan, “Photograph/Death Mask: Jean-Luc Nancy’s Recasting of the Photographic Image,” April 2010.

²⁵Jay Ruby, *Secure the Shadow: Death and Photography in America* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1999), 52–54.

²⁶Ruby, *Secure the Shadow*.

²⁷For example, an 1846 advertisement for Boston firm Southworth and Hawes states “We take great pains to have Miniatures of Deceased Persons agreeable and satisfactory, and they are often so natural as to seem, even to Artists, in a deep sleep”. Cited in Floyd Reinhart and Marion Reinhart, *The American Daguerreotype*, 1st Edition (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1981), 299.

²⁸Charles E. Orr, “Post-mortem Photography,” *Philadelphia Photographer* 10 (1877): 200–201.

in life”.²⁹ In this way, postmortem photographers used the corpse as the medium to represent ideas about death in general even as they worked to capture the likeness (and thus secure the social memory) of an individual person.

Photography is thus a key player in the construction of the modern corpse. Postmortem photographs become different kinds of documents once other techniques of preservation are available to ‘secure the shadow’ in a different manner. After the advent of embalming, postmortem photographs were more likely to use special techniques to create a likeness that appeared to be not just asleep but actually alive. The negative might be rotated to give the appearance that a supine corpse was actually seated upright; or the negative might be painted to make it look as if the eyes were open. Here the appearance of life, and not just death as peaceful sleep, becomes for a time the special provenance of the photograph. As the funeral industry expanded, postmortem photographs increasingly recorded not only the deceased, but the *mise-en-scène* of the funeral parlor, with its ornate caskets, wreaths, and often with the mourners posed around the casket. In these images the corpse itself is very small and its likeness is not what is being recorded, but rather the event of the funeral itself.³⁰

Embalming takes over for photography the task of preserving the identity of the deceased in the medium of the flesh, at least for the period of time before the body is buried. Much like photography, then, embalming may be read as a media practice, that is, as an intervention that allows manipulations in space and time. Embalming conforms to a particular *image* of death first standardized in postmortem photography.³¹ Posed photographs of corpses produced an appearance of life that standardized how corpses would be called upon to refer to and memorialize the departed. These photographic conventions would later help determine the embalmed corpse’s social role, especially as these images began to circulate as commodities (*cartes de visite*, commissioned portraits, etc).

Modern embalming first emerged in the mid nineteenth century. In their *History of American Funeral Directing*, Robert Habenstein and William Lamers locate the Civil War as the first widespread instance of mechanical embalming in the United States, with “embalmers waiting and working in camps, on battlefields, in government hospitals, and in nearby railroad centers”.³² Modern embalming, sometimes called chemical or mechanical embalming, lengthened the time a corpse could remain open to the air without decomposition. In so doing, it also permitted the corpse to travel home for burial and arrive still recognizable as the deceased.

Previous to the use of modern embalming technologies, if corpses were preserved at all, it was for very brief periods either using some kind of ice-based refrigeration or (in the absence of ice) submersion in a cold creek. Burial happened almost immediately, and near the place of death—whether or not this was home (war dead were often buried or

²⁹ Josiah Southworth, “A Panel Discussion on Technique,” *Philadelphia Photographer* 10 (1873): 279–280.

³⁰ Ruby, *Secure the Shadow*, 16.

³¹ Troyer, “Embalmed Vision,” 30.

³² Robert Wesley Habenstein, *The History of American Funeral Directing*, 5th ed. (Milwaukee: National Funeral Directors Association, 2001), 212.

burned on or near battlefields, for example). In the rare occasion of an attempt to transport a corpse by rail, airtight metal caskets were used. These containers were meant only to transport remains, not preserve them; they sometimes failed even in this task, as they exploded under the pressure of the gasses released by the decomposing corpse.³³

Unlike other forms of preservation, embalming allowed the body to retain the appearance of the deceased for longer, more stable periods of time. Ice preservation, for example, does not slow decomposition enough to allow for more than limited transport or display—and, before refrigeration, it was at best messy and expensive and more likely impossible. Freezing the body, rather than simply refrigerating it, allows for preservation of the flesh but irrevocably destroys delicate tissues. Corpses that were frozen during the winter and awaited a spring burial, once thawed bore no resemblance to the deceased, and indeed presented a grotesque and troubling appearance. Embalming is chemical, not physical, and although it radically alters the chemical composition of tissues,³⁴ it actually *preserves* appearances as faithfully as any photograph.

The mechanics of chemical or mechanical embalming are relatively simple. The basic innovation is a hand-held vacuum pump (now electric) that injects the dead body with a preservative chemical solution using the circulatory system. The organic bodily fluids are first drained also using this vacuum pump, thus minimizing the embalmer's invasion into the body (Troyer 30).³⁵ Modern embalming uses already existing corporeal routes and processes (the circulatory system, osmosis) to radically alter the chemical composition of tissues via the introduction of embalming fluid.

Embalming fluid is a suspension of alcohols, resins, and waxes, along with detergents and disinfectants that pervade the tissues via osmosis. In time, further innovations in the injection of fluids into sensitive skin around the mouth and eyes would be used to create embalmings such as Lenin and Evita that are intended for permanent display. The funeral director's art may now involve a detailed range of manipulations, tools, and cosmetics, even including surgeries in some cases.³⁶ In an illustrative mingling of the entertainment and funerary industries, so-called "mortician's wax," which is used to rebuild crushed or torn facial tissues, was in the pre CGI period also a key tool for the creation of special effects in film and television.

Given the dramatic changes it introduced in funerary practices, it is remarkable how quickly embalming was naturalized as part of the cultural process of death. Now, instead of merely washing the body while it rested on a board suspended over buckets of

³³ Sterne, *The Audible Past*, 295; Habenstein, *The History of American Funeral Directing*, 334–5.

³⁴ The change can be compared to what happens to an egg white when it is boiled. See Christine Quigley, *Modern Mummies: The Preservation of the Human Body in the Twentieth Century* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2006), 5; Robert Mayer, *Embalming: History, Theory, and Practice, Fifth Edition*, 5th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill Medical, 2011), 113.

³⁵ Troyer, "Embalmed Vision," 30. In contrast, Egyptian embalmings included removal of viscera and even the brains by hand and then preserving them in separate jars. Here the purpose was preservation as such, not preservation of the appearance of life.

³⁶ Kennedy, for example, was prepared for public viewing even though in the end the casket remained closed. Because of the massive damage to his head and face, a team of postmortem cosmetic surgeons faced the enormous task of making his corpse not only presentable, but recognizable.

ice, families could bring the body to the funeral parlor where a technician would embalm and prepare it for burial under laboratory-like conditions. When chemical embalming was still a relatively new technology, some feared that because of this intrusion, the embalmed dead would not be allowed into heaven.³⁷ Nevertheless, within a generation, embalming was standard practice. The first embalming manual was translated from the French into English in 1840; between 1856 and 1869 eleven major patents were granted for fluids and processes, thus indicating a less than thirty year span in which Gannal's "new process" was being put to use and commodified.³⁸

Hence embalming's early appeal was not so much its power of preservation as such, but its power to preserve the *appearance of life*. An embalming ad from 1863 describes its service as "to admit of contemplation of the person Embalmed, with the *countenance* of one asleep".³⁹ "Countenance," a rather antiquated term, refers particularly to the face as an indication of mood or expression. It highlights the face's expressive, communicative function. In other words, the face is to be "read" as indicating peaceful slumber, thus reinforcing Victorian attitudes towards death as the "long sleep" that were also the rhetoric of postmortem photography. This signifying countenance, in both media, constitutes legibility as not only a deceased person, but as a commentary on the way of all flesh.

Embalming introduces changes similar to the changes introduced by mass communication media with regard to the manipulation of space and time. For example, the embalmed corpse "circulated outside of conventional time and space," whereas before embalming, a kind of "corpse time" had determined practices surrounding mourning and burial.⁴⁰ A manipulation in time—the embalming—therefore allows a manipulation of space as well.

Thus embalming not only emerged alongside major media such as sound recording, photography, the railroad (known to the nineteenth century as "steam communication") and the telegraph; it also shares in their narrative of technological domination over space and time. Human intervention in "corpse time" also allowed for physical transport of bodies. A preserved body, because it endures in time, is also much more easily transported in space, thus giving embalming technology a two-pronged domination and control over the 'natural' corpse.⁴¹ Insofar as chemical embalming privileges vision and allows for more control over the body in space and time, it partakes in many of the social changes wrought by an emerging mass media.

³⁷ Habenstein, *The History of American Funeral Directing*, 448.

³⁸ Jean-Nicolas Gannal, *History of Embalming, and of Preparations in Anatomy, Pathology, and Natural History*; *Including An*, trans. Richard Harlan (Charleston, NC: BiblioBazaar, 2009); Habenstein, *The History of American Funeral Directing*, 328.

³⁹ Habenstein, *The History of American Funeral Directing*, 217. Emphasis mine.

⁴⁰ Troyer, "Embalmed Vision.," 39.

⁴¹ This argument matches Carey's observations about the telegraph. See James W. Carey, "Space, Time, and Communications: A Tribute to Harold Innis," in *Communication as Culture, Revised Edition: Essays on Media and Society*, New edition (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), 142–172.

The embalmed corpse also exhibits the blurring between subject and object that characterizes the age of modern media.⁴² As “postmortem subject” and commodified object, the corpse disrupts stable dualities between subjectivity and objecthood. It may be read as a special object whose last remnants of subjectivity—the embalming that allows it to meaningfully reference the deceased—confer upon it a kind of marginal subjectivity. Nevertheless it is in its status as object that it circulates as commodity, either within the economic system of the funeral industry or, as Lock shows, as the “field” from which organs are “harvested” and sold/gifted/donated.⁴³ It is as thing—as flesh—that the embalmed corpse becomes a medium; it is on the flesh that embalming works and in the flesh that it presents itself as postmortem subject.

This great modernist push to manipulate or dominate space and time and to carefully delineate subject and object becomes poignant when we turn away from its very real associations with empire and sovereignty and turn to its historical attempts to eradicate death. However much embalming technology may master the corpse as object, it can never reanimate it. We look back on spirit photography and other early uses of archival media to “secure the shadow” as quaint, antiquated delusions. Embalming is one such delusion that persists to the present, obscured though it is by death’s general effacement from the practices of everyday life. The embalmed corpse therefore may be considered a particularly compelling archive of inscription practices at their most emotional root.

Conclusion

Corpses embody mediation without being wholly human, thus pointing us towards a materialist analysis of media. Photography and embalming are mediations that work upon the corpse to produce an assemblage of meaningful grief, memory, and inheritance. When we apprehend the corpse as a culturally legible yet wholly material object, then, we deploy a rich variety of interpretive strategies to make sense of the material. Using assemblage theory allows us to account for non hegemonic interpretations of the social value of any given deceased identity. Whenever a public figure dies, subsequent generations invoke and deploy her memory to legitimize actions and interpretations whose finality is never guaranteed. This memory has a material substrate, and it is this material substrate that makes real the possibility of polysemy and heterogeneity in memory and in the political action undertaken in its name.

⁴² Marshall McLuhan and Lewis H. Lapham, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, First Edition (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1994), 61–65.

⁴³ Lock excellently unpacks the economy of the gift, thus rendering the rhetoric of ‘organ donation’ suspect under late capitalism. See Margaret Lock, *Twice Dead: Organ Transplants and the Reinvention of Death*, 1st ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 316–319.

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