



BEYOND HORROR: TAKING PICTURES OF THE DEAD IN MEXICO

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Resumen:

La práctica de fotografiar a los muertos no está circunscrita a reportes policiales o estudios forenses solamente; tampoco es una simple nota al pie en la historia de la fotografía. Debido a su historia y cultura, este fenómeno es particularmente predominante en México, y ha incluso permeado el trabajo de artistas extranjeros que han trabajado en el país. Este ensayo analiza fotografías postmortem de diversas fuentes: una colección de memento mori mexicanos, el trabajo de Joel-Peter Witkin y la cobertura mediática de la “Guerra contra las drogas”, a fin de elucidar el papel de este fenómeno en la sociedad.

Palabras clave: Memento mori - fotografía postmortem - fetichismo - narco - México - Witkin

Abstract:

The practice of taking pictures of the dead is not only circumscribed to police reports or forensic studies, nor is it merely a footnote in the history of photography. Due to the country's history and culture, this phenomenon is particularly prevailing in Mexico, and has even permeated the work of foreign artists working in the country. This paper analyzes postmortem photographs from different sources: an archive of Mexican memento mori, the work of Joel-Peter Witkin and the media coverage of the “War on Drugs,” in order to elucidate the role of this phenomenon in Mexican society.

Keywords: Memento mori - postmortem photography - fetishism - narco - Mexico - Witkin

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A famous photograph by Manuel Alvarez Bravo, *Obrero en huelga asesinado* (Picture 1) from 1934, portrays the body of a young man who was killed violently and lies lifeless on the street. Its resemblance with some of the gruesome images that nowadays appear in the Mexican press is certainly uncanny.



Picture 1. *Obrero en Huelga Asesinado.* Manuel Alvarez Bravo, 1934

The practice of taking pictures of the dead is not only circumscribed to police reports, forensic studies or sensationalist papers, nor is it merely a footnote in the history of photography as art. Some photographers have devoted a substantial part of their work to photograph the departed, and dead and photography have a long history, from Hippolyte Bayard's self portrait as a dead man and Nadar's self portrait surrounded by skeletons in the catacombs of Paris, to the well-spread practice of keeping pictures of the dead as memento mori during the Victorian era. But due to the country's history and culture, this phenomenon is particularly prevailing in Mexico, and it has even permeated the work of foreign artists who have stayed in the country.



Picture 2. *Executed man in Zihuatanejo.* IRZA News Agency

A few years ago I was introduced to Carlos Palacios, who kindly shared his photographic archive for my research. Palacios owns a collection of postmortem photographs taken by his father, Alejandro Palacios, during the first half of the twentieth-century in rural areas of central Mexico, where the Victorian custom of keeping pictures of the dead was still in practice, and had melted with local beliefs and religious practices. What role do these and other pictures of the dead play in Mexico's society? Are there analytic tools that can help us start understanding their prevalence in today's world, and their migration into new spheres over the Internet, in blogs and social networks?

Almost since its inception, photography was perceived as a way of preserving –and thus, of memorializing, human experience. Today's possibilities of recording the human experience are virtually unlimited. As Hans Moravec wrote in a controversial article titled "Pigs in Cyberspace", the virtualization of information, the capacity to preserve images, sounds and text not only on stone or paper but in the airwaves as well, increases the breach between human biological capacities and the capacities of machines and technological devices. Our age is witness to all kinds of attempts, in theory and in practice, to migrate the human world into the cyberspace, in order to *preserve* humans themselves. Moravec theorized, in his 1988 book *Mind Children: The Future of Robot and Human Intelligence*, about the possibility of transferring the human mind into a mechanic device, and this idea of the *preservation* of humans is not only a subject of speculation. Cryogenics and plastination are examples of technologies for storing and preserving human bodies. However, these processes can only preserve them postmortem, or in a state of pre-life –I think about the embryos preserved in today's fertility clinics across the world. Likewise, the subject whose image is preserved in a photograph is always someone from the past: even if I take an instant photo of myself with a cell phone, by the time I look at it the person who I was at the moment of the snapshot has changed. The likeness in the picture was frozen in a moment that is now gone by: the picture, even an instant picture, is already a memorial, a reminder of things gone.

If this is true for these forms of preserving and recording the human experience, then an image of a dead person is doubly infused with death. Pictures of the dead capture a moment when a human body is in the process of becoming something utterly different – an object, one might say, a posthuman body¹. These images represent a borderline between the human and the non-human. By taking pictures of the dead, we are not trying to preserve a human being's presence, but its absence –perhaps the presence of Death itself? Simultaneously, throughout time people have kept these photos as mementos, as objects whose presences are felt, and signify something. Objects of a certain emotional value, and with which they establish some sort of emotional relationship.

According to Freud, there is an essential link between the refusal to acknowledge death, and a fetishistic interaction with objects². In Freudian terms, when a person's psyche is unable to acknowledge the absence of an ideal object, it sometimes creates or selects another object which, in psychological terms, stands as a substitute of the missing one but, at the same time, constitutes a constant reminder of the fact that the other object, the ideal one, is missing. Concerning the treatment of two brothers who had problems dealing with the death of their father, Freud writes that "it was only one current of their mental processes that had not acknowledged the father's death; there was another which was fully aware of the fact"³. The fetish, in this sense, works like a prosthesis –by the same token, prostheses display a mechanism similar to that of fetishes: they substitute

1 For an explanation of the many ramifications of posthumanism, see Andy Miah, "Posthumanism: a Critical History". In B. Gordijn & R. Chadwick (Eds.), *Medical Enhancements & Posthumanity* (New York: Routledge, 2007).

2 I'm using Freud's notion of fetishism as an theoretical tool than can help shed light on a phenomenon as complex as postmortem photography; I'm not using it in clinical terms. For other examples of this use of Freudian terminology, see Elisabeth Bronfen, *Over her Dead Body. Femininity and the Aesthetic* (New York: Manchester University Press, 1992), 108.

3 Sigmund Freud, *Standard Edition of Psychoanalytical Writings*. (James Strachey, transl.) (London: Hogarth Press, 1975), 32.

a missing limb, while perpetually signaling the absence.

This fetishistic mechanism doesn't only shed light on the production and circulation of pictures of the dead, but is useful to understand photography in general. The camera operates like a prosthetic human eye, and it is a fetishistic eye. On the other hand, according to Christian Metz, a photograph –I'm referring to the actual print, is a type of fetish. Photographs –the material pictures, objects that can be seen and touched, end up substituting, standing in the place of the fragment of reality that they portray, which necessarily no longer exists once the picture has been taken. For this reason, they are at the same time reminders of its absence. In the words of Metz, “the photographic take is immediate and definitive, like death and like the constitution of the fetish in the unconscious... Photography is a cut inside the referent, it cuts off a piece of it, a fragment, a part object, for a long immobile travel of no return”⁴. From Metz's perspective, all photographs also display what he sees as the ambivalent nature of human rituals of mourning and bereavement: they are “a compromise between conservation and death”⁵.

This connection between photographs and death, which I have followed through the line of fetishism, is also at the center of Roland Barthes's reflections on photography. In *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes goes as far as suggesting that the essence of photography is death itself. For him, it “represents that very subtle moment when, to tell the truth, I am neither subject nor object, but a subject who feels he is becoming an object: I then experience a micro-version of death (of parenthesis): I am truly becoming a specter”⁶. He compares the photographer's work during the long process of staging and taking a picture to that of the embalmer: “the (terrified) photographer must exert himself to the utmost to keep the Photograph from becoming Death... but when I discover myself in

⁴ Christian Metz, «Photography and Fetish», *October*, 34 (1985): 84.

⁵ Ibid, 85.

⁶ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida. Reflections on Photography* (R. Howard, transl.). (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 14.

the product of this operation, what I see is that I have become Total Image, which is to say, Death in person”⁷.

Keeping these ideas about death, the fetish and photography in mind, I now turn to the work of two photographers who, in different times and with very different purposes in mind, dedicated their work to photograph dead people in Mexico. Joel-Peter Witkin, the American photographer, traveled to Mexico City during the 1990s. There, he gained access to one of the city's morgues where he managed to get permission to use some of the corpses for his photographs. Alejandro Palacios was a small town commercial photographer in the state of San Luis Potosi, where he traveled to small towns and villages to photograph the deceased, by request of their families, during the 1950s and 1960s. Selecting a small number of samples from their body of work will allow me to delve deeper into the mechanisms behind these pictures of the dead. By juxtaposing these images with others taken from online papers and blogs devoted to cover the impact of the battle between the drug cartels, I intend to suggest that, beyond the horror, and in spite of the different purposes behind these images (aesthetic, biographical, journalistic, to inspire terror) they all are expressions of an interest in the close examination of the boundaries between subjects and objects, between the human and the non-human; a fascination with the borders between life and death.

Joel-Peter Witkin's *Glassman* depicts the stitched body of a dead man. He is sitting on a chair, supported by straps. In an interview with Michael Sand, Joel-Peter Witkin talked about the process of selecting the model and taking this photograph, all of which took place at a morgue in Mexico City. He made arrangements so the drivers of the morgue's truck let him use the bodies right after they picked them up: “When found, the bodies are just thrown on the gurneys, face-down. Their noses get broken. The trucks are loaded with maybe six people, and they just lie on top of each other, somewhat bloated. They're all stretched out. Their identities are taken, their clothes are taken away, and

⁷ Ibid.

records are kept”⁸. One of these anonymous corpses was the model for *Glassman* (Picture 3). Witkin explains that the body was that of “a punk”, and that there was nothing “remarkable” about it. However, he claims the body started to change during the autopsy. After witnessing –or imagining– this transformation, Witkin asked the technician not to clean it up. He sat the body on a chair and started taking pictures: “I spent an hour and a half with him, and after that, he looked like a Saint Sebastian. He looked like a person who had grace. His fingers, I swear to God, had grown 50 percent... As if they were reaching for eternity”⁹.

After his death, this man had been stripped from his identity. Following Barthes, we could claim that, placed in front of the camera, his corpse, already closer to an object than to a person, was, again, objectified. However, Witkin disavows this objectifying power of the lens. He even denies the reality of death, the stillness of the corpse in front of the camera. He wants to see him move, even when this impossible movement of the man’s fingers cannot be captured in a still image.

But the image itself suggests an upward movement of the fingers. There’s a vertical line that effectively cuts the picture in two: it emerges from the man’s genitalia –which are outside the frame, continues through his fingers, which are made to point upward, and follows the stitching from the autopsy into the subject’s neck and head. Moreover, the various scratches and stains that surround the corpse, which Witkin made after the take, during the process of developing and printing, convey a certain violence and drama, which are accentuated by the subject’s gesture. It is as if the face and hands in Witkin’s photograph attempted to establish a link between this corpse and its previous human life, by imitating a gesture. But the result is rather grotesque: a parody of the ability of human hands and gestures to convey meaning. In the end, this man’s identity is never recovered:

⁸ Michael Sand, «Joel-Peter Witkin», *World Art*, 1 (1996):196. Retrieved on November 29th 2010, <http://www.zonezero.com/exposiciones/fotografos/witkin/jpwdefault.html>

⁹ Ibid.



Picture 3. *Glassman*. Joel-Peter Witkin, 1994

his wound, pose and fake gesture flaunt his lifelessness. But by appearing in this picture, this body becomes a part of a powerful object: this image jumps; it hurts. One could even say it moves.

A photograph of a dead person accentuates the power of photography to transform a human body into an object –Barthes puts it. But by portraying a corpse, by looking death into the eye, so to speak, the resulting object is a quite powerful one –a fetish. But this process of fetishizing a corpse must not be seen as particularly violent or dehumanizing. After all, our culture is prolific with images of models, movie stars and celebrities who are fetishized by the lens, and we have read that Witkin's obsession with his model for *Glassman* involves a disavowal of this person's anonymity and ultimate destiny: Witkin seeks to redeem his model somehow. This process of turning the corpse into an object of desire for the lens, of making a powerful object out of it –the final picture, this process of fetishizing it conveys a desire to surpass the limits of humanity, to transgress mortality and open a possibility of the survival of the human beyond the boundaries of what it means to be human.

I have stated that a dead body is a posthuman body. In posthumanism, human identity is not perceived as something stable. It is seen as the result of an interaction of different objects and forces. From this perspective, a person's clothes, tools, the bacteria and food inside the body all intervene in the construction of his or her self; so do social conventions, the weather, and his or her interaction with other humans, objects and animals. This involves a reshaping of traditional Western conceptions of what it means to be human, a reshaping so radical that, in a sense, it is a symbolic decapitation.

In this context, decapitation must be read as the removal of what has commonly been considered the seat for human consciousness, a single region in the human body where identity resides, and reason reigns. After all, the head itself is already a composite. It includes the eyes, “windows to the soul,” and source of the gaze. It includes the mouth,

another opening, and source of discourse and language. And most importantly, it is the seat of the brain –which is also a composite: a complex network of neurons, electric impulses and chemicals. In sum: if human consciousness does not reside in a single place inside the human body, but is the result of a combination of different elements within the body and outside of it, the boundaries between human and non-human become unstable, and must be revised. From this point of view, environmental conditions, chemicals absorbed through the stomach, stimuli from gadgets, cell phones, other humans, animal companions, and, indeed, the limitless network of interactions that a human being establishes with its surroundings would have to be understood as constituent parts of human consciousness, and not simply as objects that some sort of homunculus inside the human head manipulates and operates. In this sense, the illusion of identity vanishes: I am as much inside my head as in the cup of coffee that I am drinking, in the dim light that enters through my window, which I see with the corner of my eye, and inside a virtual computerized environment.

From the set of images taken in Mexico, two of Witkin's photographs deal with the issue of decapitation. *Man Without a Head* (Picture 4) is, in fact, a staged scenario for a post-decapitation. In this image, the body is sitting down on a chair or stool that has been covered by a dark piece of cloth. He is completely nude, and is only wearing socks. There are no supports or devices to keep the body in place, like in the case of *Glassman*: it looks almost abandoned there. There is a closed window in the upper-right corner of the image, and a blanket placed behind the body seems to be hiding something –stains on the wall? It also could be scene as part of a macabre theatrical scene.

As I've said before, Barthes compared the task of the photographer with that of the embalmer, and describes it as a series of attempts to bring some life into the picture, to animate the photograph. In *Man without a Head*, Witkin's techniques of *re-animation* necessarily started with the effort of moving this heavy corpse in order to place it in front of the camera. Why choose this setting for the image? There are bloodstains on the floor.



Picture 4. *Man Without a Head*. Joel-Peter Witkin, 1993

The body seems to be resting casually there: no intricate poses, no growing fingers. The treatment of the scene seems to be, again, a parody: the socks, far from bringing any trace of humanity to the corpse, accentuate its abandonment. The hands are resting on his legs, as if he was taking a nap. It all looks like a macabre spectacle, a static theater with traces of violence all around it. The body itself looks as if it were about to fall. Perhaps the traces of violence, the imminent fall of the body and the shock this image produces cannot effectively produce movement. As Barthes pointed out, objects in a photograph appear always as dead: they're motionless. But the image of a headless human corpse resting on a chair is definitely a powerful one. As with the picture of a human torso dropped on a blanket in the street by the people from a drug cartel, the care taken to set the scene, the symbols around the body and the framing of the picture cannot make sense of the image, but they can't erase its power either. It seems to go beyond human comprehension.

Head of a Dead Man, on the other hand, shows a human head placed on a dish—perhaps an evocation of the death of John the Baptist. Witkin produced a drawing for this photograph, dated one year after the picture itself. It is made in the form of an *ex-voto*. *Ex-votos* often include an image of the specific body part that was healed by the Saint or Virgin to whom they are offered. The drawing not only features the head of the man, as does the photograph, but also the rest of his body, hidden under the piece of wood where the plate with the head rests. It also features the photographer in the act of taking the picture of the head. But the photographer's body is missing: we can only see his head, hands and feet—or his shoes, rather—which seem to be floating in the air. The

photographer's skin is pale, and the cord his hands are holding—the camera's shooter—is shaped like a cross. The names of other photographers—Witkin's influences: Diane Arbus, Weegee, Daguerre, Eugène Atget, August Sander and Charles Nègre—form some kind of nimbus or aureole around the disembodied head of the photographer drawn in the picture. The text of the *ex-voto* can be translated as follows: "I give infinite thanks to the holiest Virgin of San Juan de los Lagos for having taken me safe and sound from my



Picture 5. *Picture of an executed man.* Blog del Narco

work. In gratitude I dedicate this lamina.”

Written below the image of the photographer’s hands, another note ambiguously states: “fotografiar es rozar”, or “rezar”. To photograph is to rub, or to pray. Both readings are highly suggestive. If to photograph is to rub, then the emphasis is put on the action of the photographer over the objects he manipulates: the bodies, his implements, the negatives and prints. If to photograph is to pray, then the emphasis is put in the aspirations behind that activity: seeking some form of transcendence, sending a message to a higher realm of reality. The drawing discloses how Witkin photographed the head of the dead man,

revealing that he performed the “decapitation” himself. Since the head he photographed was actually still attached to the body, it is an artificial decapitation, but a decapitation nonetheless.



Picture 6. *Head of a Dead Man.* Joel-Peter Witkin, 1990

In his book *La Guillotine et l'Imaginaire du Terreur*, Daniel Arasse establishes a connection between the act of taking a photograph and the action of the guillotine. They are both swift, and they both perform a cut: to take a picture is to crop a piece of reality. But beheading is no minor cut. It is a farewell to the brain, a farewell to reason and to human life, as we know it. A disposal of what we have traditionally considered the seat,

the source, the window into human consciousness and identity. It is impossible not to link this photograph with the hundreds of decapitated bodies that have been scattered throughout Mexico during the past six years. It is as if the body in Witkin's image, also from Mexico, was not a rarity, but the first of a series, and the work of the artist, his staging of the image, his encapsulation of violence, his symbolic decapitation, a sign of things to come. Nowadays, headless corpses are multiplied in a game of mirrors by the proliferation of photos and videos that circulate through the Internet and the press. In many occasions, the people from the drug cartels stage these videos and photographs of the executions and of mutilated corpses in order to use them as a form of terror. Seen as objects, deprived from the intentions of their makers, the similarities between some of these images and Witkin's work is uncanny.

Witkin has acknowledged his obsession with decapitation on several occasions. In his 1976 Master's thesis, he discusses an incident that took place during his childhood, and left a strong mark in his mind. When he was six years old, he witnessed a car accident outside his house in New York City. While he was standing there, he saw an object rolling toward him: "It was the head of a little girl. I bent down to touch the face, to ask it—but before I could touch it—someone carried me away"¹⁰. Witkin relates this experience with his obsession with masks, severed heads, pain and death. A severed head still has a face, but the face can no longer speak, it cannot respond when it is questioned. A body without a head, and a head without a body, reveal the grim fact that, after death, the human body is effectively turned into an object. It can be dismembered, disjointed.

The incident of the little girl's head has a strong connection with Witkin's conception of photography:

"Out of it I see many roots extending to my visual work in my use of severed heads, masks, and my concern with violence, pain and death. I am no longer the helpless

10 Giordano Celant, *Witkin* (New York: Scalo, 1995), 49.



Picture 7. *Head of an executed man. Oaxaca*

observer, but the objectifier who chooses to share the 'hell' of his confusion visually, rather than to confront the quality that distinguishes a vital and functioning being from a dead body"¹¹.

Witkin's role as an "objectifier", even if it comes from a narcissistic desire to stop being a "helpless observer", must not be understood as an ordinary form of self-affirmation that would put Witkin in the place of the external, complete and totalized subject before the objects of his experience. Rather, like in the famous passage in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* where Freud talks about his observations of his grandson's *fort-da* game, this

11 Ibid.

desire of manipulating objects, of cutting them, making them disappear inside the camera obscura, making them reappear in the negative only to make them disappear again under layers of encausting and other chemical processes, is directly related to the death drive, to an impulse that overrides mere libidinal satisfaction. As an artist, Witkin is not the Romantic rebel who “confronts” the status quo, the processes of classification and distinction between a vital being and a dead body. Instead, he shares his confusion, his lack of understanding of the nature of life and death, his thriving towards a state without distinctions, where death and life overlap.

Witkin’s photographs constitute a macabre version of posthumanism. Seeking for consciousness beyond the brain and abandoning narrow conceptions that equal human essence to rationality, or that believe there is a center, a single seat of human consciousness, seems to be a hopeful vision of posthumanity, one that embraces freedom, plurality and complexity. But Witkin’s images reveal that figurations about an acephalus posthuman future must first deal with the realities of violence, confrontation and death. Once again, this vision is horrifying, but if there is a place for humans in a posthuman world, these snapshots of the dead reveal the radical nature of absolute otherness, they show that between humanity and posthumanity lays the unexplored realm of death.

The acephalus body has been used as a metaphor for a world after the demise of humanity in other occasions. It haunted the imagination of George Bataille. The first issue of Bataille’s journal *Acéphale*, from 1936, features a drawing of a decapitated human body by André Masson. The body wears no clothes, and there is an image of a skull over its genitals. This figure, according to Agamben, would become the insignia of a ‘sacred conspiracy’ plotted by Bataille, and manifested in his interest in myth, religion and mysticism. For Bataille, says Agamben, the acephalus body was linked to eschatological preoccupations about the end of History, about a future world without humans, but also with the ancient topic of the distinction between humans and animals¹². Describing

12 The question of the animal is quite a current one. It is not casual that, alongside debates about cyborg

Bataille’s ‘conspiracy’ as it manifests itself in *Acéphale*, Agamben writes:

“Though man’s evasion of his head (‘Man has escaped from his head, as the condemned man from prison,’ reads the programmatic text) does not necessarily entail a return to animality, the illustrations of issue 3-4 of the journal, in which the same naked figure from the first issue now bears a majestic bull’s head, attest to an aporia which accompanies Bataille’s entire project”¹³.

This aporia has to do with Bataille’s willingness to embrace the imminent end of human history, the end of man, and his desire to preserve art, love and ecstasy as mankind’s legacy to the posthuman world. Before the Second World War, Bataille had attended a series of lectures about Hegel given by Alexander Kojève during the 1930’s, lectures in which Bataille was an active participant (p. 5). In Kojève’s view, the end of History would bring about a state in which the surviving human specimens would still produce architecture, technology and other distinctive human activities, but they would do so in an animalistic way, much like bees build hives. This view was inadmissible for Bataille, who wanted to secure a place for spirituality, myth and “joy in the face of death” (p. 6) in his vision of the posthuman world. For Bataille, the animal represented a setback: a form of involution with which he was not at all comfortable. This is where Agamben finds the tension of Bataille’s aporia. Bataille knew that the abandonment of reason and logic could potentially turn humans into animals. He was probably quite aware of the fact that the acephalus body, besides being an esoteric symbol, entailed a great amount

politics and the ethical implications of today’s advances in biotechnology, some authors are talking about an ‘animal turn’ in the humanities. This connection between two apparently opposed poles –the animal and the cyborg– is certainly not new: in *Man as Machine*, Julien Offray de La Mettrie had already proposed both the notion that humans are machines, and that the distinction between humans and animals is not an essential one, but one of degree –an idea that would fully impact Western culture only after Darwin. In La Mettrie’s view, which takes Descartes’s speculations –developed in texts like *The World*– to their utmost consequences, humans are something like animal machines.

13 Giorgio Agamben, *The Open. Man and Animal* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), 5.

of violence and horror. But he was also convinced that spirituality, art and ecstasy would survive the demise of mankind. Therefore, if there was going to be a world after the end of humanity, its inhabitants could not be mere animals, or animalized human beings. They would have to be an entirely different thing: a hybrid, a composite of different parts –some animal, some human, a creature capable of trespassing the threshold of death with joy, eliminating the power of death as a final threshold. An impossible monster, like the Minotaur. A joyful creature, like a dancing corpse.

The corpses in Witkin's photographs may not be dancing, but they have certainly been moved, dragged around, posed in a certain way. The same thing can be said about many of the bodies that are left on the streets in Mexico by the drug cartels these days. In many cases, they are executed somewhere, and then driven to a major avenue or plaza, in order to arrange a macabre spectacle for the people, the authorities, and the lens. These moving corpses evoke the idea of the reanimation of the dead; a very uncanny idea, but one that has appeared several times during the history of photography.

In 19th century memorial photography, bodies were often posed as if they were not dead, but sleeping. The images seemed to convey a double idea: on the one hand, they were memento mori, reminders of transience; on the other, they evoked human transcendence, the possibility of life after death. Far from removing death from the horizon, these images focus on, expand, and blur the frontier between life and death, between subject and object, between human and non-human, showing us a more complex vision of ourselves. Joel-Peter Witkin's work recreates the motifs, colors, textures and shades of 19th century memorial photography. He alters the negatives and prints of his pictures creating effects similar to those we can see in ambrotypes and other photographs from that era. There is definitely a connection. Most examples of Victorian postmortem photographs constitute, in terms of the composition, variations of the genre of the portrait. In most cases the body is posed as if the person were sleeping; sometimes, the photographer would sit the body up and even open its eyes artificially in order to create the illusion that the body was

looking at the camera. All of these efforts were employed in order to give some liveliness to the corpse. They created the illusion that there was a possibility for the deceased person to move and direct his or her gaze towards the camera. Most of the times the results, however, far from creating the illusion that the person was alive, made it obvious to the viewer that the subject of the picture was a cadaver –a very fetishistic turn.

The custom of photographing the dead was very common in the 19th century, but it almost disappeared from most Western countries during the 20th century, when death started to be exorcised from modern societies. However, this practice continued in certain parts of the world; the photographs taken by Alejandro Palacios in San Luis Potosi constitute an interesting example. But more than presenting the characteristics of a portrait like most Victorian memento mori did, the pictures in Palacios's archive are almost always taken as snapshots. The framing of these images seems less staged than that of the Victorians. By contrast, many of the bodies are garlanded and wear costumes, especially the bodies of children. These peculiarities of the Mexican postmortem photographs reveal more evidently the negative pole of the fetishistic nature of these objects. The Mexican photographs display the bodies as what they are: cadavers. There is no intention to hide the fact that these people are dead, not by opening their eyes, nor by making it seem like they're sleeping. Many of these snapshots are taken in cemeteries, probably just moments before the burial. However, the bodies in Palacios's photographs seem to have been reincorporated into the community (Picture 8). The elaborate ornamentation, which implies a heavy manipulation of the corpse, works as a way of welcoming the body into the community as what it is: a dead body. In some images, the coffin is lifted up and leaned towards the front, as if the corpse was standing up, making it look as if it was posing for the camera, just like everybody else. Posing, yes, but as what it is: a corpse.

This reincorporation of the body into the community is even more evident in the case of children (Pictures 9 and 10). It was a tradition in Mexico that when an infant died, he or she was dressed up in garments that represented the clothing of the patron saint.



Picture 8. *At the cemetery.* Carlos Palacios's Postmortem Collection

They are popularly referred to as “little angels”. In one of Palacio’s images, for instance, the props used to disguise the little boy include a crown. He is also covered with plant ornaments and displayed in front of a tree. The image was taken outdoors, and the small table on which the body lays is standing on naked soil. In another picture, the mother and the child are also photographed outdoors; the plants are even more exuberant, and they almost seem to be growing out of the dead body. The corpse rests inside a cart –of the kind that would be used, precisely to carry dirt and soil, as if pointing towards an organic connection between death and life: the dead body as returning to the ground, in order to generate new life.

Palacios’s pictures do not attempt to produce something resembling life by focusing on facial features, on the smile or on the sleeping eyes. Rather, they seem to capture, in the manner of a snapshot, the efforts made by the relatives of the infant –who are following now long lost popular traditions, to animate the corpse directly, to disguise it with the mask of life. In a sense, it is as if the moment of birth and the moment of death were collapsed into a single image. It is a similar mechanism to that of the fetish. All the examples of photographs of the dead that I have examined display this same internal tension. The corpses are moved, there is a staging –or, like in the case of Alvares Bravo’s photo, a framing, an angle; there is an effort to reanimate the bodies in order to reincorporate them to the world of the living somehow: by incorporating them into art pieces, into family albums, or by using them as powerful weapons in a war of terror. Victorian postmortem photography disavowed death by creating the illusion of life; Joel-Peter Witkin shows the brutality and violence of death, but also disavows it through the power of photography to create fetishes. In Palacio’s pictures, death is disavowed through symbols and garments. Every time the reality of death is blatant; but every time the dead move: they reach us, they haunt the photographs and haunt our minds. They are, in effect, animated.

Without art, tradition and ritual, without the excess of the sublime, of spirituality, of myth, without eroticism, as Bataille would probably put it, the dead and the living run the risk of becoming entirely objectified. In the context of the so-called War on Drugs, a corpse displayed on a public plaza is like a weapon. But once it is touched by the camera, it becomes animated –this is why the drug cartels use these images as soldiers, emissaries of demise. Therefore, in spite of their grotesque nature, these pictures of the dead must be preserved, studied, pondered upon. In a world where the traditional Western model of humanity, which was consolidated during the Renaissance, is now in crisis and will probably soon collapse, these pictures offer a possibility of reintegrating the reality of death into society, while preserving its tension, its fetishistic power.



Picture 9. *A child*. Carlos Palacios's Postmortem Collection.

In order, however, to avoid falling into a totalizing negativity, into an overvaluation of the static dimension of the fetish, I would like to appeal to Bakhtin's idea of a "pregnant death", a death that gives birth to life. Bakhtin's comes across this term during his study of medieval feasts and carnivals. This is not a simplistic idea like the "circle of life;" it includes the horror and grotesqueness of death, much like the photographs I have examined here. The carnival is a celebration of the grotesque; in it, all distinctions are erased: everything is mixed. Rich and poor, beautiful and ugly, life and death: they're all collapsed into a single moment of excess and movement. According to Bakhtin, the grotesque nature



Picture 9. *Mother and child*. Carlos Palacios's Postmortem Collection.

of the carnival is based upon the principle of degradation: "(d)egradation here means coming-down to earth, the contact with earth as an element that swallows up and gives birth at the same time. To degrade is to bury, to sow, and to kill simultaneously...

Degradation digs a bodily grave for a new birth¹⁴. In the carnival, all things must pass through the threshold of death: they are all swallowed and buried in order to be renewed, to be incarnated in a new materialized form –the grotesque and moving picture of the carnival itself. Death in the carnival, in Bakhtin's words, it is a "regenerating and laughing death." By finding ways of incorporating this state of hybridization into our society, it is possible to rise above the emptiness of animal brutality, to find solutions that go beyond destruction and repression. More than our horror, these pictures of the dead demand our attention. Moreover, they demand our action: they test our ability to display joy in the face of death, and to construct a new society, new life out of the degradation of the soil on which we walk.

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14 Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Indiana, U.S.A.: Indiana University Press, 1984), 21.