DEAD MAN BATHING ASSESSING THE ICONOGRAPHY OF THE CORPSE IN THE BATHTUB

Veronika Riesenberg
Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Germany

ABSTRACT – *This article investigates the history of crime scene imagery from both forensic and artistic perspectives. It elucidates the entanglement of the rise of photography and the establishment of modern criminalistics, discusses the appropriateness of attributing aesthetic qualities to photographs of violent death, and traces the photographs' contextual and semantic shifts in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The author examines a number of historical and contemporary, forensic and artistic, documentary and staged crime scene images that have never before been selected for comparative study. All of the images – including contemporary artworks by Izima Kaoru, Melanie Pullen, Eileen Cowin, Hiroshi Sugimoto, Thomas Demand, Michael Schirner, Johann Kresnik, Angelika Bader and Dietmar Tanterl – share the same motif: a case of death in a bathtub. Two major pictorial traditions are identified, both initiating from the deaths of public figures and their post-mortem depictions: Jean Paul Marat (1743-1793) and Uwe Barschel (1944-1987). By tracing the motif along and beyond these axes, a specific iconography of the corpse in the bathtub unfolds.*

INTRODUCTION

In its early history, photography was generally regarded as a true record of reality, directly impressed into the light-sensitive layer of the photographic plate by the sun or, according to photo pioneer Henry William Fox Talbot, by the "pencil of nature".[1] Unlike the potential subjectivity of an artist's skill and interpretation, photography promised a consistently reliable, authentic,

'natural', or at least apparatus-based recording technique. Although image manipulation can be traced back to the nineteenth century, faith in photography's realism was unbroken until the 1970s, when the 'new' medium was recognized as art, and digitality presented possibilities to undermine the indexical relationship between the picture and its referent.[2] Nevertheless, photography continues to be widely employed for documentary purposes today.

As objective documentation is "the key to a successful crime scene investigation",[3] photography contributed significantly to the advancement of criminalistics. Crime scene photography dates back to the 1860s.[4] At that time, a distinction was made between "descriptive" and "explorative" crime scene photographs: the former served to visually fix the crime's aftermath and secure ephemeral evidence, whereas the latter was dedicated to enabling the discovery of details invisible to the human eye or overlooked by on-site investigators.[5] Crime scene images therefore share with other photographic genres a quality of presenting what "has been" in the Barthesian sense[6] – a quality of particular relevance for crime detection. Yet they are photographs unlike any others. In particular, they are unflinching records of violent and untimely deaths, which are typically accessible to only a small number of police investigators and forensic scientists, and may elicit shock, sadness, or disgust in a general audience.

The status, visibility, and reception of crime scene images have changed in recent decades. Likely fuelled by a number of high-profile murder cases in the 1990s, an increasing vogue for forensic sciences and a broad "sensational fascination" with crime scene photos is readily apparent in popular media.[7] As with other sub-genres, such as private or scientific photography, formerly marginal and highly specialized crime scene images have undergone re-contextualization, re-evaluation, and institutionalization. Since the 1990s, they have been recognized for their aesthetic value and displayed in gallery spaces and museums. Simultaneously, artists have brought criminalistics and forensics into focus by following investigative methodologies,[8] or by making a

1. William Henry Fox Talbot, *The Pencil of Nature* (New York: Da Capo Press, [1844] 1969).

2. Hubertus von Amelunxen, "Fotografie nach der Fotografie: Das Entsetzen des Körpers im digitalen Raum," in *Fotografie nach der Fotografie* (Dresden: Verlag der Kunst, 1995), 118.

3. Max M. Houck, Frank Crispino, and Terry McAdam, *The Science of the Crime Scene* (Oxford: Elsevier Inc., 2012), 113.

4. Since the 1880s crime scene photography has been directly linked to the anthropometric identification system established by Alphonse Bertillon in Paris. In addition to the "Bertillonage", he also developed a standard for crime scene photography consisting of an overview of the whole scene, a view from above, and a side view of the victim. The photos were fixed on cardboard and accompanied by technical inscriptions to create a three-dimensional reconstruction of the corpse and its spatial conditions. Katharina Sykora, *Die Tode der Fotografie. Totenfotografie und ihr sozialer Gebrauch* Vol. I (München: Wilhelm Fink, 2009), 502.

5. Wilhelm Urban, *Kompendium der gerichtlichen Photographie: Ein Handbuch für Beamte der Gerichts- und Sicherheitsbehörden, sowie den Unterricht an kriminalistischen Instituten und Gendarmerien* (Leipzig: Otto Nemnich, 1910), 2-3. See also

Sykora, *Die Tode der Fotografie*, 502-503.

6. Barthes' characterisation of photography's "noème" as "ça a été" is probably the most-quoted dictum in his groundbreaking essay *La chambre claire* (1980). See Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981).

7. For example, the serial killings by Jeffrey Dahmer and the O.J. Simpson murder trial. See Houck et al., *The Science of the Crime Scene*, Introduction, xx.

8. In the same way analogies between crime detection and medicine, psychology, archaeology, or art history were drawn, movements and groups like "artistic research" or the German "Spurensicherung" ("evidence securing") movement emerged that were devoted to quasi-investigative methodologies. For more concerning the widespread "evidential paradigm" see Carlo Ginzburg, "Morelli, Freud and Sherlock Holmes: Clues and Scientific Method,*" History Workshop Journal* 9 (1980), 5-36. For an example of an exhibition focusing on investigative artistic strategies, see *Scene of the Crime*, ed. Ralph Rugoff (Los Angeles: MIT Press, 1997).

9. *Scene of the Crime: Photographs from the LAPD Archive*, ed. James Ellroy and Deborah Aaronson (Los Angeles: Harry N. Abrams, 2004).

crime scene their motif, either by working with existing footage or by staging their own scenes. Before substantiating the crime scene image's theoretical aestheticism, this development will be illustrated by examples of historical crime scene photography and contemporary artistic practice.

Exhibitions like *To Protect and Serve: The LAPD Archives* demonstrate the curatorial interest in historical crime scene imagery.[9] Initially debuting at Fototeka Gallery in Los Angeles in 2001, the exhibition presented long-forgotten photographic material from the 1930s to 1960s, mostly originating from the Special Investigations Division of the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD). Like other exhibitions based on police archives,[10] it revealed that crime scene photographs – particularly historical ones – are not objective reports of reality but rather subjective documentation of personal perceptions, inextricably linked to their contemporary social and cultural conditions in the same way that products of traditional artistic genres respond to their own.

One of the exhibited images is a 1931 black-and-white police photograph of a dressed male corpse in a bathtub. It features a clear composition dominated by the diagonals of the bathtub and verticals of the hanging towel and shower curtain, structuring the image plane and dividing it into areas of finely modulated grey tones. The man's legs, in dark trousers, are bent with his shins pressed to the white bathtub wall, which reinforces angularity in the composition and provides contrast. In addition to the aesthetic qualities inherent in framing and photographing the scene, the image bears a 'signature' directly engraved into the negative. It contains the Division of Record (DR) code, an abbreviation identifying the case, the name of the photographer (Maxwell), and the date (4-17-1931). It was customary at that time for photographers to claim authorship of their photos in this quasi-artistic manner.[11] A distinct self-identification as photographer-artist is particularly evident in the images of crime scene photographer and photojournalist Arthur Fellig (1899-1969), well known by his pseudonym "Weegee", who operated between investigation and sensation throughout his life. As Tim B. Wride describes, Weegee

and his kind demonstrated a "tremendous sense of their own mastery of the process, an overlay of humour and irony, and a cinematic sensibility that at its best borders on the operatic".[12] Despite the quasi-artistic identities and practices of these photographers in their own time, only today do we recognize the artistic qualities in the crime scene images they took; they were not originally valued as artistic, but retrospectively they radiate historical, social, cultural, and aesthetic significance.

Another historical crime scene photograph to which aesthetic qualities can now be attributed is found in the *Compendium of Forensic Photography* (1910) by German criminologist Wilhelm Urban. It depicts a female corpse in a bathtub (Fig. 1). Urban used it to discuss and exemplify the best possible way of photographing crime scenes and bodies. Here, the body of a young girl was found partially submerged in a wooden high-boarded bath in a washing cellar, and no other picture than one from above would have been possible.[13] This view from above onto the scene was usually applied in the early years of crime scene photography by means of a ladder pod and was associ-

10. Exhibitions have been based on police archives in New York, San Francisco, Amsterdam, Rotterdam, and other cities. See for example Luc Sante, *Evidence: NYPD Crime Scene Photographs: 1914-1918* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 2006), and *Plaats Delict Amsterdam: Foto's uit het Amsterdamse politiearchief '65-'85* (Amsterdam: Nieuw Amsterdam Uitgevers, 2006).

11. Wride, Tim B. "The Art of the Archive", in *Scene of the Crime: Photographs from the LAPD Archive*, 21.

12. Ibid. 21.

13. Urban, *Kompendium der gerichtlichen Fotografie,* 16.

Fig. 1
Wilhelm Urban, Historical crime scene photograph, c. 1910
Credits: Wilhelm Urban, *Kompendium der gerichtlichen Photographie: Ein Handbuch für Beamte der Gerichts- und Sicherheitsbehörden, sowie den Unterricht an kriminalistischen Instituten und Gendarmerien* (Leipzig: Otto Nemnich, 1910), 18.

ated with scientific distance. Additionally, as a temporal coincidence, it can also be related to new perspectives in avant-garde art, for example in Russian (constructivist) photography and film that employed bird's-eye and frog's-eye views.[14] The proximity of scientific and artistic modes is crucial; although the photograph conflicts with our conventional aesthetic perception, the forensic photographer has unconsciously internalized aesthetic principles that are utilized intentionally in artistic works.

One contemporary artwork perfectly demonstrates this juxtaposition of scientific and artistic: the C-print *Matsuyuki Yasuko wears Gucci #1* (1996, Fig. 2) by Japanese photographer Izima Kaoru (born 1954). It also depicts a female corpse in a bathtub photographed from above, but unlike Urban's photo, which presents the subtle crudity of the site without euphemism, Kaoru has staged the whole scene and exaggerated its artificiality with the corpse's unnatural pose and an almost fish-eye effect of distortion. It is part of his long-running series *Landscapes with a Corpse* (1995-2008), which fluctuates between crime scene and fashion photography, risking transgression of the boundaries

14. Susanne Regener, "Verbrechen, Schönheit, Tod: Tatortfotografien", in *Fotogeschichte: Beiträge zur Geschichte und Ästhetik der Fotografie* 78 (2000), 31.

Fig. 2
Izima Kaoru
Series: *Landscapes with a Corpse*
Matsuyuki Yasuko wears Gucci #1, 1996
100 x 127cm, C-Print/Diasec
© Izima Kaoru, Courtesy Van der Grinten Galerie, Cologne, Germany

between 'good' taste and kitsch. In this series, Kaoru captures Japanese models dressed in *haute couture* and staged gracefully as dead bodies. For each work he photographs "the victim in various pictorial steps until the corpse – always with her eyes wide open – is visible in a long shot."[15] Thereby the artist adheres to police photography conventions: from the periphery to the centre, from the overview to the detailed image. Yet Kaoru's "neoromantic portraits" and "modern visions of Pre-Raphaelite heroines" as Roy Exley describes them,[16] do not convey the horror of a real crime scene. Although his works never completely abandon their disturbing components, the scenes seem surreal, and their protagonists appear calm and peaceful, even beautiful.

With her series *High Fashion Crime Scenes* (1995-2005), American photographer Melanie Pullen (born 1975) also explores the line between the documentation of death and its aesthetization via photography. In intertwining crime scene and fashion photography, her artistic method is remarkably similar to Kaoru's: in a costly and time-consuming process, she dresses her models in high fashion and uses cinematic light and staging. However, unlike Kaoru, who depicts fictional death scenes, Pullen refers to real crimes and re-stages photographs from police archives, including LAPD images like those in the abovementioned *To Protect and Serve* exhibition. The artist explains how her work was motivated by the richness in detail captured by forensic photographers like Weegee, such as "the perfume bottle on the dresser, the knocked-over lamp" and the additional mundane yet illustrative elements that told "those people's stories". These details fascinated her so much that she "totally overlooked the crime scenes altogether".[17] While denying any affinity towards violence, she emphasizes being "curious about the response people have to violent images",[18] an aspect of artistic intention and viewer reception that will be elaborated on in the course of this article.

AESTHETICIZING THE CRIME SCENE IMAGE

The images discussed above demonstrate that crime scene photographs in general, and particularly photographs of bathtub deaths as discussed here,

15. Translation by the author. Peter Weiermair, "Everybody Dies Someday," in *Landscapes with a Corpse*, ed. Izima Kaoru (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2008), 174.

16. Roy Exley, "Die Exotik der Entfremdung: Die Fotografie des Izima Kaoru," in *Landscapes with a Corpse*, 178.

17. Melanie Pullen cited in Jessica Hundley, "Fashion victims. Old-style crime scenes mix with haute couture in Melanie Pullen's photographs," in *Los Angeles Times* (17 June 2004), 14.

18. Interview Whitecanvas/Melanie Pullen, undated. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e25apFmrc_I. Accessed November 13, 2014.

can be forensic, artistic, or both; the line between "those images that are aesthetic statements masquerading as evidence and those that are forensic images masquerading as art"[19] is blurred and can better be drawn on the basis of the original function and context of use than on the basis of aesthetics. But how appropriate is it, after all, to attribute aesthetic qualities to crime scene images, especially photographs of corpses? As discussed below, the perception of the aesthetic qualities of both forensic and artistic crime scene photographs are best understood in relation to the images' three potentialities for the viewer: voyeuristic attraction, historical distancing, and narrativization.

The first, voyeuristic attraction simultaneously draws and repulses viewers to and from visual records of violence. Death scenes – including suicides – elicit voyeuristic curiosity by permitting viewers to transgress spatial and moral boundaries and break social taboos.[20] With regard to Melanie Pullen's *Rebecca* (2004, Fig. 3), for example, the viewer glimpses into the spheres of privacy and intimacy, and the body appears both offensive and attractive at the same time, aligning eroticism and atrocity. In cases where the bodies appear revolting, mangled and deprived of their dignity, voyeuristic curiosity nevertheless arises from the viewer's emotional response and sense of involvement in the scene. Fascination with crime scene photos also results from a certain multiplication and power of the gaze: by looking at the image, the viewer replicates the viewing of the real crime scene and of the victim by both the criminal and the police; the violent view of the perpetrator and the scrutinizing perspective of the investigator are appropriated by the viewer's gaze.[21]

Regarding the second aspect, historical distancing, most of the exhibited material originates from the first half of the twentieth century. The images' subjects as well as the photographic quality can easily be recognized as bygone. This provides the viewer with a comfortable temporal distance that, along with the presentation environment (exhibition design, hanging, and framing, for example), separates the images from the viewer's present. As

19. J. Ellroy and T. B. Wride, "Introduction," in *Scene of the Crime: Photographs from the LAPD Archive*, 21.

20. Sykora, *Die Tode der Fotografie*, 516. For a broader discussion of the monstrous and repellent in visual culture and the arts, see Umberto Eco's study *On Ugliness* (Milan: Rizzoli 2011).

21. Sykora, *Die Tode der Fotografie*, 516.

Fig. 3
Melanie Pullen
Series: *High Fashion Crime Scenes*
Rebecca, 2004
109.2 x 144.8cm, C-Print
© Melanie Pullen

with Maxwell's and Urban's photos, the use of black-and-white photography may foster the impression of a time gap. This allows the viewer to avoid emotional response, especially to gruesome and shocking subjects. Through this more objective approach he or she is better able to regard the images as part of cultural and pictorial history, separate from contemporary events and reality.

The third aspect, narrativization, concerns not only pictorial narration but also the unfolding of the image's narrative according to the imagination of the viewer. As stated by narratologist Christine Walter, an image reaches its highest narrative potential when it depicts a "decisive moment" as defined by Henri Cartier-Bresson,[22] which enables the viewer to reconstruct a certain degree of 'beforehand' and 'afterwards'.[23] Crime scene photos, however, do not feature the distinct decisive moment: the moment of death itself. As they show the remnants of an event – an attack, an assault, a fight – they enclose fragments of what happened 'beforehand', but they do not indicate specifically what will happen 'afterwards'. In that respect crime scene images capture a narrative 'zero point' with a unilateral back-

22. Henri Cartier-Bresson, *The Decisive Moment* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1952).

23. Christine Walter, *Bilder erzählen! Positionen inszenierter Fotografie: Eileen Cowin, Jeff Wall, Cindy Sherman, Anna Gaskell, Sharon Lockhart, Tracey Moffatt, Sam Taylor-Wood* (Weimar: VDG/Verlag für Datenbank und Geisteswissenschaften, 2002), 57-59.

ward orientation.[24] While the actual narration of the image is poor in this context, the possibilities for narrativization by the viewer are rich: the clues implying the 'before' event provoke imagination. The images "engage the viewer in a process of mental reconstruction" of prior events, prompting him or her to take on the role of investigator.[25] However, whereas the latter must solve the case, the former is free to reach across and beyond the actual events "in a goalless activity of speculation and interpretation".[26] Crime scene photos therefore create a productive reception momentum: they initiate imaginary and interactive processes between image and viewer.

With the blurred lines between fact, fiction, forensics and art in mind, the iconography of the corpse in the bathtub can now be articulated along two major axes, which can be called the Marat and the Barschel lines. In addition to the iconic motif established by Jacques-Louis David's famous *The Death of Marat* painting (1793), the relatively recent (1987) photograph of Uwe Barschel's body in a hotel bathtub can be identified as an iconographically similar, yet separate, branch of the pictorial corpse in a bathtub tradition.

TOWARDS AN ICONOGRAPHY OF THE CORPSE IN THE BATHTUB: DAVID'S *DEATH OF MARAT*

The archetypal antecedent of artistic crime scene imagery, which introduces the bathtub corpse to visual arts, is Jacques-Louis David's *The Death of Marat* (Fig. 4). It depicts the French revolutionary Jean Paul Marat stabbed to death in his bath. Marat was president of the Jacobin Club, a fanatic advocate of popular sovereignty and one of the most radical leaders of the French Revolution, which had become totalitarian by this time. To ease his itching skin disease, he spent several hours each day in a medicinal bath. On July 13, 1793 Charlotte Corday, a Girondist who hoped to help the cause of the moderates, murdered him in his bath. David, himself a radical Jacobin and influential political figure, not only painted Marat's death scene at the behest of the National Convention, but was also significantly involved in the quasi-

24. The idea of a spatial-temporal 'zero point' is also brought up by Sykora, *Die Tode der Fotografie*, 508. In this context a particular death in a bathtub piece is noteworthy: the music video for the song "Breezeblocks" by British pop band Alt-J seems to literally allegorize this narrative 'zero point' by playing in reverse a story in which a girl is drowned in a bathtub following a fight. Accessible at http://vimeo.com/39435342, last accessed November 13, 2014. For bringing this video to my attention, I want to thank Imma Ramos.

25. Ralph Rugoff: "Introduction" in *Scene of the Crime*, 18.
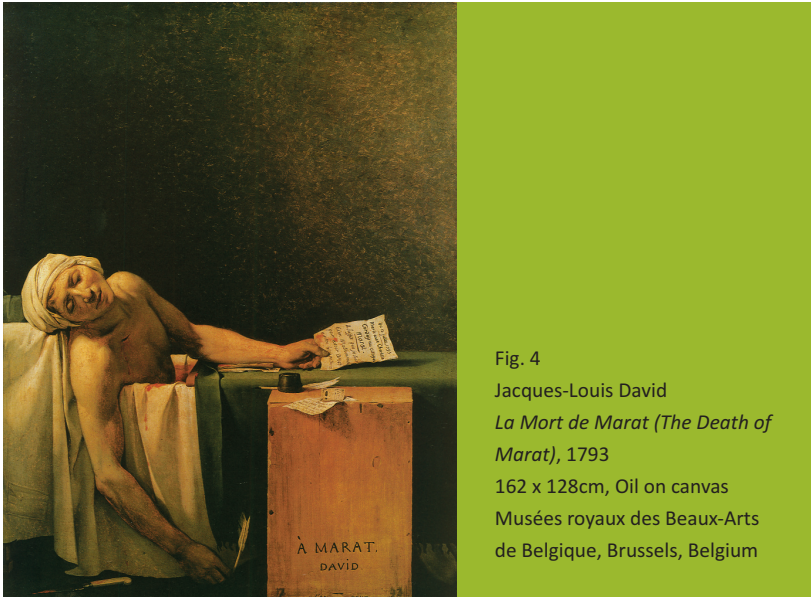
26. Ibid. 18.

Fig. 4
Jacques-Louis David
La Mort de Marat (The Death of Marat), 1793
162 x 128cm, Oil on canvas
Musées royaux des Beaux-Arts
de Belgique, Brussels, Belgium

royalistic and pseudo-religious martyr cult which quickly developed around Marat. He organized the presentation of Marat's body in his apartment, arranged a public funeral procession and ceremony, prepared Marat's tomb, and commissioned Marie Tussaud to make his death mask.[27] With his painting, David 'returned' Marat to the people, as he put it, having taken vengeance for him by visually memorializing his assassinated body "so that enemies would blanch with fear when beholding the distressed face of the man who has become a victim of his love of freedom."[28]

In the painting, the dying Marat is slumped in a wooden bathtub. With his last ounce of strength he holds a letter; his right arm, with quill in hand, sinks downwards in *pietà*-like manner.[29] His upper body leans against the right wall of the bathtub, and his head tilts towards his right shoulder so that his face turns to the viewer with closed eyes. Blood drips from a wound at his clavicle, while the murder weapon lies in front of the bathtub. By depicting the aftermath of the murder instead of the act itself, as is conventional in history paintings,[30] and by including the dagger and centring the body in a close-up view, David anticipates the customary rules of crime scene photog-

27. Mme Tussaud's uncle, Dr. Philippe Curtius, later created a wax figure of Marat and exhibited it in his cabinet. Thomas W. Gaehtgens, "Davids *Marat* (1793) oder die Dialektik des Opfers," in *Kritische Berichte* 2 (2008), 67-80.

28. Translation by the author. Richard Muther, *Geschichte der Malerei im Neunzehnten Jahrhundert. Erster Teil* (Paderborn: Klassik Art [1893] 2013), 139.

29. This comparison was elaborated by Klaus Lankheit, *Jacques-Louis David. Der Tod des Marat* (Stuttgart: Reclam 1962). A comprehensive summary of research can be found in Jörg Traeger, *Der Tod des Marat: Revolution des Menschenbildes* (München: Prestel Verlag, 1986), 10-11.

raphy. Nonetheless, the painting is not an authentic record of Marat's murder, but an artistic portrait that presented him as a hero and martyr.[31]

David's painting is iconic in two ways: not only do references to Marat's death necessarily evoke David's painting, but other depictions of corpses in bathtubs also seem to be associated with this ubiquitous work. Along this iconographical axis and directly referencing David's *Marat*, some artworks, such as Joseph Roques' painting of the same year and name (Fig. 5), focus on Marat's corpse after the murder. Other works depict the murder itself, showing Charlotte Corday in or immediately after the act of stabbing, thereby maintaining the narrative but diverging from David's iconography. Paul Jacques Aimé Baudry's *Charlotte Corday* (1860) and Edvard Munch's *Marats dødt* (1906-07) focus on the murderer, depicting Corday as a fierce and beautiful aristocratic heroine and as an eroticized *femme fatale* (Figs. 6 and 7).

The iconography of Marat's death is neither restricted to David's immediate successors, nor to Marat's body as the subject. Numerous artistic approaches to the theme can be discovered even in recent art history.[32] The photograph

30. For example, see the different depictions of Judith decapitating Holofernes by Michelangelo Caravaggio (1598-99), Artemisia Gentileschi (1620), Valentin de Boulogne (1626), or Francesco del Cairo (1648-54).

31. Thomas W. Gaethgens, "Davids Marat (1973) oder die Dialektik des Opfers"; This interpretation was first presented by Klaus Lankheit in *Jacques-Louis David*.
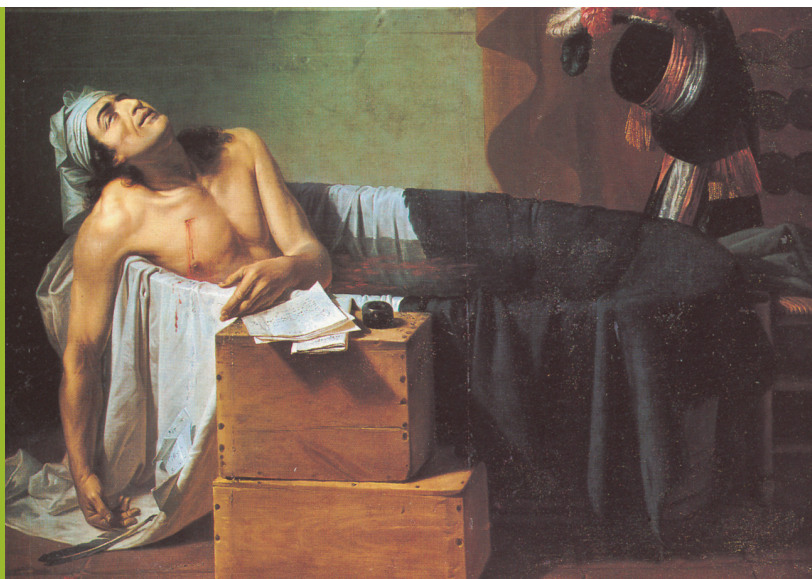
32. Modern and contemporary interpretations of the Marat theme can be found in the work of Pablo Picasso, Renato Guttuso, Valerio Adami, He Xiangyu, Janis Kounellis, and the Lake Stage set by David Fielding in Bregenz, Austria (2011).

Fig. 5
Joseph Roques
La Mort de Marat (The Death of Marat), 1793
125 x 161cm, Oil on canvas
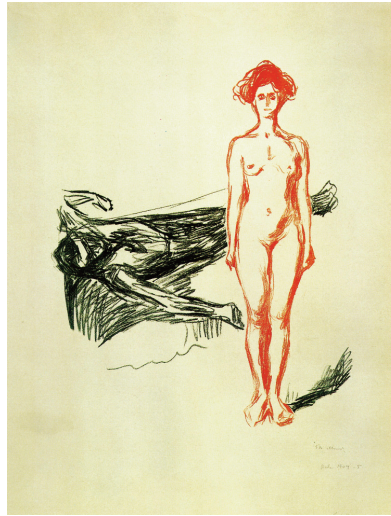Musée des Augustins Toulouse, France

Fig. 6
Paul-Jacques-Aimé Baudry
Charlotte Corday, 1860,
203 x 154cm, Oil on canvas
Musée des Beaux-Arts de
Nantes, France

Fig. 7
Edvard Munch
Marats dødt, 1906-07
44 x 35.5cm, Lithograph
Kulturhistoriske Museer Oslo,
Norway

Untitled (Set of Marat) (1997, Fig. 8) by American artist Eileen Cowin (born 1947) provides an illustrative example. As indicated in the subtitle, it suggests theatre photography, depicting Marat's bathtub as a carefully lit prop standing out against the dark background as though on stage. While directly referencing David's iconography, which can easily be recognized, it establishes a more distanced viewing perspective than does the painting, and in contrast to the former, Cowin's bathtub is deserted. The blank space where the body once rested invites the viewer to re-play the 'stage' imaginatively and initiates the interactive processes between image and viewer. At the same time, the theatricality inherent in David's painting is directly thematized by Cowin to reflect a newly-emerged phenomenon in contemporary art: the blurring of dividing lines between traditional artistic genres – such as theatre and two-dimensional arts – and the potential performativity of a (photographic) image traditionally considered static.

Another contemporary artwork using the corpse in a bathtub motif is Hiroshi Sugimoto's (born 1948) silver gelatin print *The Brides in the Bath Murderer* (1994, Fig. 9). Although the subjects bear no narrative link to David's *Marat*, the formal analogies between this image and Baudry's painting *Charlotte Corday* help in approaching this contemporary photograph with the same
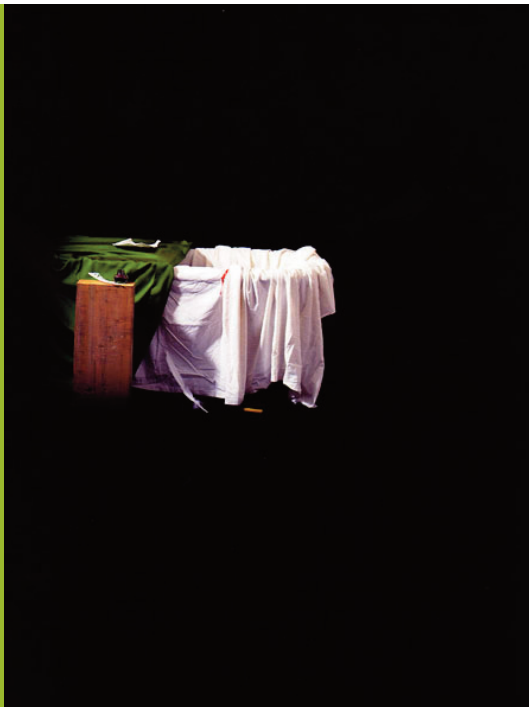
Fig. 8
Eileen Cowin
Untitled (Set of Marat), 1991
127 x 101.6cm, Cibachrome,
Edition of 5
© Eileen Cowin

Fig. 9
Hiroshi Sugimoto
Series: *Chamber of Horrors*
The Brides in the Bath
Murderer, 1994
50.8 x 61cm, Silver gelatin print
© Hiroshi Sugimoto

iconography. In comparing the two works, an inversion of the genders to male victim and female murderer is apparent, while the pose of the figure in the bathtub is likewise inverted. Whereas Marat's upper body protrudes from the water in a sitting position in *Charlotte Corday*, the upper body of the woman in *The Brides in the Bath Murderer* is completely underwater whilst her lower extremities extend over the foot of the bathtub. Corresponding to Marat, whose armpit rests on the edge of the bathtub with his arm hanging towards the ground, it is the hollow of the woman's knee that rests on the edge, her lower right leg and foot dangling, and her left leg protruding from the water with foot outstretched. As in Marat's case, her limbs do not look relaxed and limp, but tense and stiff as if after mortal agony.

The early twentieth-century furniture and decoration, the turn-of-the-century clothing and grooming of the murderer, and Sugimoto's use of black-and-white photography suggest the image's historical authenticity. Its medial complexity is however heightened: this crime scene is not real, but staged, and moreover staged with wax figures, as part of a series called *Chamber of Horrors* (1990-1994) taken at Madame Tussaud's in London.[33] While reminiscent of *Marat*, Sugimoto explicitly refers to the British "Brides in the Bath Murderer", George Joseph Smith, who married three women between 1912 and 1914 and, to snatch their possessions after their deaths, drowned them in a bathtub by yanking up their legs. This image is simultaneously forensic and artistic; while iconographically reflective of depictions of Marat's murder, it references journalistic representations of crime. Sugimoto's subject and medium recall the Victorian mass media's portrayal of shocking serial killings, such as the elaborate reporting of London's "Jack the Ripper" murders at the end of the nineteenth century. This sensational journalism might have stimulated the establishment of the crime scene picture as a modern artistic genre.[34]

CONTINUING THE TRADITION: THE DEATH OF BARSCHEL

The second axe of the corpse in the bathtub iconography was launched by a relatively recent incident in German history: the death of politician Uwe

33. Notably, a life-size wax representation of David's *Death of Marat* is also staged at Madame Tussaud's in London.

34. Artistic crime scene images can be found in the work of the late Expressionist and New Objectivity artists Otto Dix, George Grosz, and Rudolf Schlichter, who depicted murders of women in an exacting way. See Regener, "Verbrechen, Schönheit, Tod", 35.

35. The controversial copyright-protected image can be viewed on *Stern's* website here: http://www.stern.de/politik/geschichte/uwe-barschel-deal-mit-todesfolge-597976.html. Accessed 13 November 2014.

36. The murder theory was, for example, argued by attorney and chief investigator Heinrich Wille, while the death by suicide theory was argued by Attorney General Erhard Rex. Heinrich Wille, *Ein Mord, der keiner sein durfte: Der Fall Uwe Barschel und die Grenzen des Rechtstaates* (Zürich: Rotpunktverlag, 2011); Erhard Rex, "Der Tod des ehemaligen Ministerpräsidenten des Landes Schleswig-Holstein, Dr. Dr. Uwe Barschel, am 11. October 1987 in Genf: Mord oder Selbstmord?", http://www.schleswig-holstein.de/GSTA/DE/Informationsmaterial/Dokumentation/Beitrag_GStA_Rex/doku_teil1_rex__blob=publicationFile.pdf, last accessed 13 November 2014.

37. Norbert F. Pötzl, *Der Fall Barschel: Anatomie einer deutschen Karriere* (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1989), 288.

38. Sebastian Knauer, *Barschel – Die Akte: Originaldokumente eines ungelösten Kriminalfalls* (Berlin: B&S Siebenhaar Verlag, 2009), 437.

Barschel in 1987. Barschel was found dead in the bathtub of his hotel bathroom in Geneva by German journalist Sebastian Knauer (born 1949). Knauer photographed his corpse, which was then published on the front cover of the widely-read German magazine *Stern*.[35] Although it was proven that Barschel died of a prescription drug overdose, the particular circumstances of his death remain largely unexplained; neither murder nor suicide has been ruled out.[36] However, the actual scandal – and a key difference from Marat's case – resulted from the publication of the journalistic photo depicting his corpse rather than from his death itself. Knauer's intrusion into the private sphere of Barschel's hotel room and his exploitation of Barschel's dignity for journalistic purposes caused a heated reaction, which pushed his death and its circumstances into the background. In response to the negative reception of the photograph's publication, the German Press Council ruled that *Stern* magazine had offended the professional ethics of journalism by supporting Knauer in entering the hotel room and by printing the image more than once – whereas the initial publication was deemed acceptable as a historical document.[37]

Of particular interest in the Barschel case is the fact that photos taken by the Geneva police were actually unusable due to a technical defect causing overexposure, making Knauer's journalistic photos the only 'real' evidence records.[38] Knauer's case is one of the rare recent examples of a capital crime scene entered by a journalist and a current crime scene photo made accessible to the public. In this context, the photograph inherits a substantial complexity by equally touching the fields of criminalistics and journalism in an unusual and rare manner. It intertwines aspects of politics, sensationalism, and voyeurism, and it sparked a debate on the morally defensible limits of (photographic) reportage. Further, by serving as a model for manifold artistic reactions, it extended its influence on the arts, thereby demonstrating anew that the shifts between different applications of photography in general and of crime scene images in particular – criminalistics, journalism, and art – may sometimes be inseparable.

In the same way that the publication of Barschel's crime scene photo elicited a stronger reaction than his death and the political affair he was enmeshed in, most of the artistic approaches to the Barschel theme are less approaches to the event than approaches to the image, its circumstances of production, and the modes of image distribution in general. This has implications for the best-known work appropriating the Barschel image: *Badezimmer/Bathroom* (1997, Fig. 10), a large-scale photograph by German contemporary artist Thomas Demand (born 1964). Since the early 1990s, Demand has been reconstructing and photographing life-size cardboard models of historical, political, and cultural sites, including crime scenes. By means of replicas, Demand's works refer to real crime scenes but omit the criminal event, the

Fig. 10
Thomas Demand
Badezimmer / Bathroom, 1997
160 x 122cm, C-Print/Diasec
© Thomas Demand/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn, Germany

victim's body, and any traces of the crime in favour of depicting only the site. Demand thus intentionally undermines the function of the forensic photograph as a record of the visual remnants of a crime. Furthermore, the abstraction or removal of the human protagonists intensify the crime scene photo's general gaps and omissions of narrative content, leaving even fewer traces of a 'beforehand', as discussed above. By detaching the images from their former context and original meaning, Demand potentiates the crime scene image's need of viewer narrativization.

Fig. 11
Michael Schirner
BYE BYE, GEN 87, 2002-2011,
207 x 160cm, Digigraphie by
EPSON,
© Michael Schirner, Courtesy
Galerie Crone, Berlin, Germany

Additional artworks appropriate and vary the Barschel theme in the same manner as Demand by reflecting on the conditions of Knauer's photograph, as in Michael Schirner's (born 1941) series *BYE BYE*. It is made up of iconic mass media images with the human subject digitally removed, including Knauer's Barschel image, titled *BYE BYE, GEN 87,* (2002-2011, Fig. 11). By eliminating the protagonists – as Cowin also does – Schirner removes the event while retaining recognition, thereby reflecting on the mechanisms of mental imagery and collective memory. In a way that is comparable to the reception of Demand's works, the viewer is torn between remembrance and oblivion, recognition and confusion.

Other works direct the political dimensions of the case into new channels. This applies to Johann Kresnik's (born 1939) highly acclaimed dance drama *Macbeth*, which premiered in Heidelberg, Germany in 1988, shortly after Barschel's death. Kresnik distinctly analogized the Scottish king Macbeth and Uwe Barschel by interpreting the junction between power and violence, finding common ground in the effects of political ambition and power plays. While retaining Shakespeare's story, Kresnik employed imagery evocative of the still-recent *Stern* photograph. In collaboration with controversial Viennese painter Gottfried Helnwein (born 1948), who created the stage setting and equipment, Kresnik integrated bathtub scenes into his production: at the beginning, a huge bathtub stands before the stage in the orchestra pit and a priest repeatedly fills it with buckets of blood and offal. Subsequently, a dozen bathtubs standing in a mortuary-like background become visible, each one holding a bandaged person. Towards the end of the play, Macduff wraps a white towel around Macbeth's wrist in the same way Barschel was found and beds him in a bathtub. The play ends with the curtains closing from both sides, hiding everything on stage but the well-known and closely appropriated 'image' of a dead man bathing.

EPILOGUE

Although the corpse in the bathtub is a relatively rare and unconventional artistic motif, the interpretations of it are numerous enough to foster specific

traditions that together create a unique and identifiable iconography. Two traditions have been defined here as constitutive for this iconography: those of Marat and Barschel. The crucial difference between them lies in the specific characterization of the subjects, as conducted by the image and author; while David's painting laid the basis for interpreting Marat's death as a martyrdom and contributed essentially and intentionally to his posthumous heroification, Knauer's intrusive journalistic photo and its hasty publication further tarnished Barschel's already negative reputation by broadcasting his untimely death in a spontaneous and degrading way. Further, while David's painting served as the pictorial climax of the political devotion central to Marat's life and death, Knauer's photo summarized the misfortune and failures of Barschel's political career by damaging his dignity in a situation where he could no longer defend himself. Additionally, while David's *Death of Marat* is a masterfully painted and highly aesthetic work of art, inspiring imitation yet unsurpassed, Knauer's photographic depiction of Barschel was never intended as art but was rather aestheticized and transferred into an artistic context by subsequent artistic interpretations.

In conclusion, the friction between artistic interpretation and journalistic documentation – being equal starting points for (further) artistic approaches despite the differences between them – can be illustrated by one last work: Angelika Bader and Dietmar Tanterl's *Es lebe der Tod* (*Long live death*, 1987).[39] The triptych consists of two Cibachrome close-ups of David's Marat painting and Knauer's Barschel photograph and a central panel on which is written "Es lebe der Tod". It is the first and, as yet, only known work to explicitly connect Marat and Barschel artistically, and thus visually thematizes what has been elaborated in this article by theoretical means: the possible nexus between Marat and Barschel as initiated by their "lowest common denominator",[40] that is, their pictorially-documented bathtub deaths. The temporal proximity of Bader and Tanterl's work to Barschel's death garnered it a generally negative reception,[41] which reflects what has been outlined: that, although the depictions of Marat's and Barschel's deaths share a comparable motif and contribute to one overall iconography, the tempting analogies

39. Angelika Bader and Dietmar Tanterl, *Es lebe der Tod*, 1987, Cibachrome, 132 x 189cm, 132 x 225cm, 132 x 189cm.

40. Martin Blättner, "Das Gedächtnis öffnet seine Tore", in *Kunstforum International* 149 (2000), 397. Translation by the author.

41. The work was regarded as shameless and irreverent and provoked a scandal after its release in 1990. Gaehtgens, "Davids *Marat*", 78.

between them must be considered carefully, and the single examples of corpses in bathtub images must be individually assigned to one of the two lines, or to neither, as with the forensic and forensically-inspired images offered in the first part of this article.

Veronika Riesenberg is a Curatorial Assistant at the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Germany, and received her PhD in Art History from Berlin University of the Arts in 2014. Her dissertation is the first comprehensive monograph on German contemporary artist Thomas Demand (born 1964) with special attention to current discourses on model theory. Veronika specializes in the history and theory of photography and in art history since the 1960s, with a particular interest in the artistic use of (architectural) models, and in media transformations and hybrid art, primarily at the interface between sculpture and photography.