

THE DIALECTICS OF SEEING AND NOT SEEING THE PARADOXICAL IMAGE OF DEATH IN SCHELS' AND LAKOTTA'S *LIFE BEFORE DEATH*

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ABSTRACT – This paper addresses a series of contemporary black-and-white photographs of terminally ill people, before and immediately after the moment of their deaths, from Life before Death – An Exhibition of Photography on Dying by German photographer Walter Schels and journalist Beate Lakotta. Paradoxically, these photos show death by refraining from showing it. They do not give unequivocal evidence of death because no mutilated bodies are shown. The moment of death is insinuated by the juxtaposition of a living body in the photo on the left and a presumably dead body on the right. The photos entail an aesthetic paradox; death is simultaneously shown and concealed. As such, they employ a rhetoric of dissimulatio – concealment of an uncomfortable truth by displaying something else – and engage in a dialectics of not seeing and seeing. Schels' photos dissociate death from the body, producing grief in the viewer and undermining the popular fear of death. The photos are novel in their assemblage of existing motifs associated with death: the sleeping figure of the death mask, and the before-and-after treatment views of medical illustrations. Death confined to the dividing line between the images remains ineffable where the body appears intact.

INTRODUCTION

Images showing “aesthetic anathema” – images of bodies mutilated by illness, war, and natural disasters – manipulate both the gaze and the body of the observer. They elicit a visceral perception such as fear or disgust. This

article focuses on images that show a ‘disgusting’ dead body by paradoxically refraining from showing its deadness by addressing a series of photographs compiled for *Life before Death – An Exhibition of Photography on Dying (Noch mal Leben – vor dem Tod. Eine Fotoausstellung über das Sterben)*, 2003-2012, by photographer Walter Schels and journalist Beate Lakotta.¹ The series depicts terminally ill people in a portrait format. The photos, which were arranged into diptychs, present the subjects before the moment of death with their eyes open on the left, and after that moment with their eyes closed on the right. Outright proof that the body on the right is dead is omitted; death is confined to a dividing line – a gap – between the images. By doing so, the images obstruct the manifestation of disgust – which is linked to one’s awareness of one’s own body – and instead prompt emotional empathy with the depicted subject; that is, the photos transpose a visceral reaction related to one’s own body to an emotion towards the other. The viewer experiences empathy before a body that seems alive.² In this sense, Schels’ photos entail an aesthetic paradox, which is twofold: the photos obstruct an aesthetics based on engagement with one’s own body, and they are able to produce grief in the viewer because a mutilated, and therefore disgusting, dead body is absent.

The present article elucidates this paradoxical aesthetics. It argues that the image of death in *Life before Death* is informed by a dialectics of not seeing and seeing: that which is missing produces empathic arousal. As such, Schels’ photos refer to the ancient rhetoric of *dissimulatio*; a rhetoric that conceals the subject of speech and thereby paradoxically underlines the presence of the missing subject. It produces a spontaneous and authentic affect in the receiver.³ This rhetoric is art historically associated with the portrait of the ancient king Antigonos Monophthalmos (382-301 BCE), who was blind in one eye. The portrait, painted by Apelles, showed the subject’s intact side in a three-quarters view, concealing his blind eye.⁴ The rhetoric is relevant to the agenda of *Life before Death*; Antigonos’ defect is concealed so as not to diminish his authority, just as the sight of a dying body is omitted in order to acknowledge the personality of the terminally ill.

1. The series is published in print and available online at <http://www.randomhouse.de/Buch/Noch-mal-leben-vor-dem-Tod-Wenn-Menschen-sterben/Beate-Lakotta/e226825.rhd>.

2. See for instance Horst Bredekamp, *Theorie des Bildakts* (Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2010).

3. Fanny Népote-Desmarres and Thilo Tröger, “Dissimulatio artis” in *Historisches Wörterbuch der Rhetorik 2*, ed. Gert Ueding (Tübingen: De Gruyter, 1994), columns 886-888.

4. J.J. Pollitt, *The Art of Ancient Greece: Sources and Documents* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 162.

Schels' photos do not show death. Rather, they insinuate death by proposing a relationship with existing motifs and formats related to death. The spectator is familiar both with the applied format (before and after treatment) and the motif (the portrait of a sleeping figure understood as dead). The insinuation of a theme or subject evoked by its omission becomes evident in medical illustrations, which show the subject before and after treatment, but do not disclose the medical procedure. Such illustrations present intact bodies; the sick-but-still-whole body before and the intact-and-healed body after the operation. They omit the intrusion into the body's insides. In a similar vein, death masks show the dead as intact; the subject's face seems asleep, free of contortions suggesting pain. In this context, Schels' photos merge the motif of the seemingly-alive-but-dead figure extracted from death masks with the before-and-after format of medical illustrations. While the motif of the sleeping figure *indicates* a dead body through the suggestion of sleep, the gap of medical illustrations *conceals* the physical deformation involved in the process of dying.

Along these lines, this article investigates the image of death shown in Schels' photos and continues to propose that the photos indicate death in terms of a "pseudo-absence" which is informed by a double absence: the absence of a mutilated body, compounded by the absence of colour in the black-and-white photograph. According to the early modern trope of colour as flesh, established by Cennino Cennini (1370-1440) in a treatise on painting, I understand colour precisely as indicating life and presence. The black-and-white of the photographs establishes the aura of a past moment, so that photography becomes a metaphor for memory. In this sense, the depicted subject becomes a distant other. Death is dissociated from the seeing self and becomes transposed onto a deceased relative. The gap in the presentation of before-and-after images, which informs the reading of Schels' photos, suggests a demarcation line between a normal and an abnormal state. Death becomes readable as an intrusion into the body, a view that should be concealed. To demonstrate the contrast with depicting an evidently dead body, the article turns to Théodore Géricault's *Study of Two Severed Heads* (c.

1819), which depicts the moment of death as frozen in the decapitated and bloody subjects. With their explicit view of death, Géricault's paintings produce disgust, which triggers a reception related to one's own body.

In sum, Walter Schels' photos do not explicitly show death, just as they do not produce an engagement with one's own corporeality and mortality. They allude to formats and motifs that obfuscate death. In *Life before Death* Schels accesses a set of existing motifs and the novelty of this series lies in the particular arrangement of these motifs.

LIFE BEFORE DEATH

As death is anathema in Western society, it is rarely shown in images of popular media. In particular, the aspect of dying in a hospice has seldom been considered by popular contemporary art. *Life before Death* brings the often solitary death in a hospice from society's margins to its centre of attention. The series consists of 45 diptychs showing terminally ill people before and after the moment of death; on the left their eyes are open and they are alive, while on the right their eyes are closed, immediately after the moment of their deaths.

The photographer, Walter Schels, is known for his black-and-white portraits of politicians, animals, and premature children, which he photographed for the German magazine *Der Spiegel*. For *Life before Death* Schels and Lakotta randomly approached the subjects in hospices in Berlin and Hamburg and asked if they could document their last days. Lakotta recorded their interviews, and Schels photographed them. The exhibition was shown at several museums, art galleries, and churches in Europe, Israel, and the UK between 2003 and 2012, most prominently at the Wellcome Collection in London in 2008. According to an interview published by *The Guardian* in 2008, the artists' motivation was to overcome their own fear of dying and the helplessness it implied. In the interview Lakotta stated: "We all know we are going to die, but we do not really believe it will happen to us. Death is some-

thing that happens to other people. Astonishingly enough, people in the hospice have the same feeling.”⁵ Their intention, Lakotta added, was not to break a taboo or to shock people but to share experiences.

Each subject is depicted in two large (60cm by 70cm) black-and-white portraits (Figs. 1, 2, and 3). On the left, before death, the subject is facing the viewer frontally. On the right, set in the same light and perspective the deceased subject is portrayed as possibly sleeping. A visible gap is left between the hanging pictures in the exhibition spaces. Each diptych is accompanied by a text recording the person’s first and last name, age, date of birth, and date of death, as well as a brief narrative on his or her life and last days in the hospice. Some entries in the catalogue include personal photos with family and friends. Contrary to the notion of death as ‘the Great Equalizer’ the subjects portrayed by Schels cannot be considered uniformly equal or anonymous. The large portrait format redefines them as individuals and, with the photo on the left, indicates the personality of a once-living human being. As such, the photo on the left refers to the title of the series, *Life before Death*. The subtitle, “an exhibition of photography on dying” – which was omitted in exhibitions outside of Germany – is not represented in an equally explicit manner. The image of the person on the right is ambivalent, the subject neither evidently sleeping nor evidently dead. The photo shows the subject between a state of alive-nearly-dead and dead-still-breathing. It conceals the moment of dying and banishes it to the dividing line between the images.

DEATH AS SLEEP

Despite the exhibition’s emphasis on showing persons with individual lives, the photographs also attempt to show death. But where exactly can death be seen? Setting the biographical records aside, how can spectators be certain that the subjects are dead and not merely asleep? There is no mutilated body, so the viewer infers the person is dead from the motif of the sleeping figure. The photos strictly refrain from showing motifs related with pain or

5. Joanna Moorhead, “This is the End,” *The Guardian* (1 April 2008).



Fig. 1
Walter Schels: Klara Behrens
(2004) in *Noch Mal Leben vor dem
Tod: Wenn Menschen Sterben*.
(München: Deutsche Verlagsanstalt,
2004)

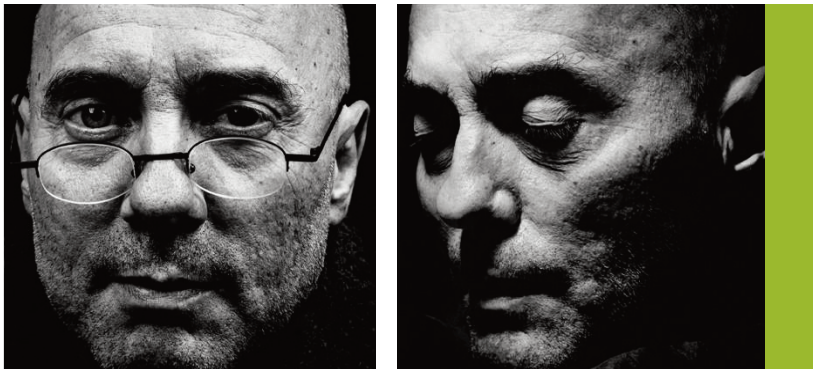


Fig. 2
Walter Schels: *Heiner Schmitz* in in
*Noch Mal Leben vor dem Tod: Wenn
Menschen Sterben*. (München:
Deutsche Verlagsanstalt, 2004)



Fig. 3
Walter Schels: Maria Hai-Anh Tuyet
Cao in *Noch Mal Leben vor dem Tod:
Wenn Menschen Sterben*. (München:
Deutsche Verlagsanstalt, 2004)

disgust. Instead, the photos obfuscate the moment of dying by referring to the postmortem motif of *thanatos* as *hypnos* – death as sleep – which is framed by the portrait format.⁶ Death acquires the positive connotation of sleep, euphemistically avoiding any indication of pain or illness.

6. See for instance Ovid, “Book Eleven” in *Metamorphoses*, trans. John Dryden (Cambridge: Nabu Press, 2014).

A rhetoric based on a withholding of knowledge links Schels' photos to *dissimulatio*. The rhetoric of *dissimulatio*, which conceals something existent and thereby makes it present, demands empathy from the observer. In this sense, the photos contain a paradox: that which is supposed to be revealed, the moment of a solitary death in a hospice as a social anathema, is not disclosed. Instead, the spectator's gaze focuses on the large head shown in the portrait; a format historically linked with presence and beauty in artistic representation.

Yet the aesthetic effect of *dissimulatio* seems temporary. Disgust, an experience of the abject, confronting us with the imminent decomposition of our own bodies, is kept from the observer.⁷ Instead, the observer engages in a collective aesthetic experience of grieving: many visitors cry at the exhibition. The spectator is not located in the position of the dying individual; rather, the viewer finds himself in the position of the bereaved. In this context, colour insinuates bodily fluids and serves as the prime stimulus of disgust. Colour also suggests presence, as will be argued later in my discussion of Géricault. Devoid of colour, Schels' photos neither elicit disgust nor identification with the subject. Instead, the interpolation of memory by means of the photograph causes empathic arousal, a process which begins with the view of the subject after death. This view is linked to a picture, a photo of the dead, which elicits an emotion akin to grief felt upon the loss of a close friend or relative. As a result, the spectator does not experience reflection on his or her own mortality but rather re-experiences the loss of loved ones. Based on an understanding of photography as a medium linked with memory and past as opposed to actuality, the photos transpose the possibility of a self-centred emotion to an emotion towards the other. Death becomes entangled with a black-and-white image that at the same time stands for the past. The medium of photography becomes a metaphor for memory, the freezing of a vibrant moment to a stable image.⁸ Here, too, lies a paradox: it is the black-and-white surface – not the depicted theme – that suggests death. The black-and-white photograph renders life lifeless.

7. Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 1-5.

8. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida – Reflections of Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), 89.

POST-ABSENCE VERSUS PSEUDO-ABSENCE

Research conducted in the field of cultural studies recognizes an analogy between death and portrait.⁹ The portrait makes the subject eternal and at the same time evanescent. It implies that the depicted individual has existed. At the same time, the portrait paradoxically outlives the subject. It renders the body redundant. As opposed to painted colourful portraits, colourless death masks and black-and-white photos of deceased individuals are seen as media of duplication. As such, they are considered as incapable of indicating the presence associated with the painted portrait's representation. Instead, these media *duplicate* the moment of death by duplicating the face in size and form and simulating its texture. Death masks capture the face of the deceased after death but before decomposition. They depict the body while it gradually ceases to exist, in a state between life and death. In his text on "The Visibility of Death in Photography", Martin Schulz referred to the original meaning of the Italian term for portrait, *ritratto*, as "dragging or pulling the face out of the body". According to Schulz, black-and-white photography and the death mask do not *drag*, that is, make present, but rather *double* the dead body by being colourless imprints.¹⁰ The imprint of the shadow of man becomes analogous to the plaster cast imprint. These media echo the dead body only to show the absence of presence, an absence of colour and liveliness. In photography, the moment of dying is projected onto a black-and-white surface, while death masks reiterate the dead face in achromatic plaster cast. Along these lines, the artistic representation of death is a phenomenon that must involve colour to acquire a sense of presence. Death signifies an absence, but it is the absence of life in terms of a presence. Both death masks and black-and-white photography indicate the absence of presence. They display death as a distant phenomenon.

The black-and-white photograph of a death mask of an unknown subject from Florence (Fig. 4) depicts the plaster likeness of a person's face after the moment of death. It displays individual traits; a prominent nose, oblong lips, a furrowed complexion. The spectator can assume that the person was old,

9. See *Die Neue Sichtbarkeit des Todes*, eds. Thomas Macho and Kristin Marek (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 2007); or *Kopf, Schädel, Gesicht, Trajekte Zeitschrift des Zentrums für Literatur- und Kulturforschung* ed. Sigrid Weigel (Berlin: Kadmos, 2012).

10. Martin Schulz, "Die Sichtbarkeit des Todes in der Fotografie," in *Die Neue Sichtbarkeit des Todes*, eds. Thomas Macho and Kristin Marek (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 2007), 411.

lean and male. But neither the man's individuality, nor signs of an affiliation to a social collective, nor his hair or clothing are visible. Initially the spectator encounters a bald head with closed eyes, but as the head is fragmented the man cannot be mistaken as asleep. The death mask freezes the moment *after* death, the moment after the eyes of the subject closed. In this sense, the plaster cast signifies a "post-absence", that is, an absence that can be seen in the physically empty space of the verso of the mask. This absence does not suggest presence, neither of the man nor of death; it is entirely vacant.

A photograph of an anonymous dead woman (Fig. 5) shows the moment before the woman's funeral depicting her with her eyes closed, dressed and laid out in an open coffin. The picture focuses on the woman's face, which is old, framed by a pillow and the coffin's padding. The photograph seems to serve as a posthumous portrait that outlines the individuality of the subject. It shows an intimate moment of farewell. The man to the right of the coffin emphasizes this moment. A friend or a relative, he takes leave with a farewell gesture by touching the casket. At the same time, this gesture foreshadows

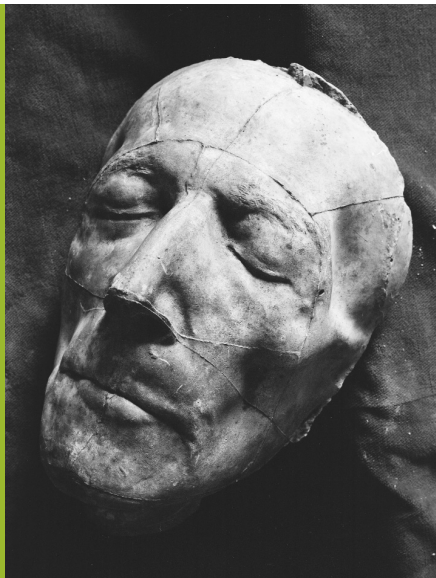


Fig. 4
Artist unknown. Death Mask.
Anonymous. Florence. Palazzo Pitti e
Giardino di Boboli

the ritual of carrying the coffin to the cemetery. Both the death mask and the photo of the dead woman show a deceased subject but do not entail either the presence of a living human being, nor of death. As an imprint of the moment after death, this image likewise depicts a post-absence.

Unlike the death mask or the photograph of the dead woman, Schels' photos embrace the view before and after death, where death is understood as oscillating between presence and absence. This juxtaposition implies that death is a phenomenon that can be neither clearly classified nor shown. In the diptych of Maria Hai-Anh Tyet Cao (Fig. 3), the portrait on the left suggests a living person, who looks directly at the observer. The photograph shows a piece of clothing; the woman wears makeup. These aspects stress the subject's individuality, and indicate the presence of a living being. Paradoxically, being black-and-white, the photograph on the left as signifying presence becomes the picture of absence. The picture on the right does not negate presence; it shows an intact, seemingly sleeping individual. It can be read as an image showing a "pseudo-absence" informed by a double absence; the lack of a mutilated body and the lack of colour.

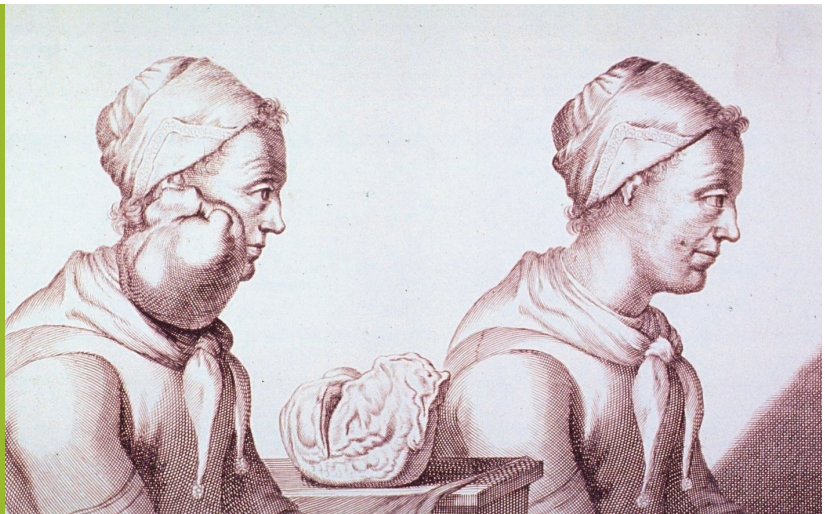


Fig. 5
Anonymous dead woman in a coffin

THE GAP

The view before and after death in Schels' photographs links the series to conventional medical illustrations showing the view before and after treatment, employed from the seventeenth century onwards. The Flemish engraving of Clara Jacobi depicts the patient with an enormous tumour on the right side of her face (Fig. 6). In the same frame, the woman is shown before the extraction of the growth on the left and after the procedure on the right. While the extracted tumour, which lies on a wooden table between the subjects, shows a deep incision, the woman's face after the treatment seems cured and unscarred. The extracted tumour on the table and the lack of tumour in the woman's face on the right indicate the intervention of a second party who is not displayed. The extracted tumour both links and separates the view before and after the treatment. The tumour suggests that the subjects can be understood as the same individual; the growth on the table is both linked to the growth attached to the person's face and to the face without the tumour. At the same time, the tumour separates both sides of the picture. It serves as a demarcation line between that which was and that which is. This division is further stressed by the positions of Clara Jacobi, who sits on opposite sides of the table. The tumour as linking and separating

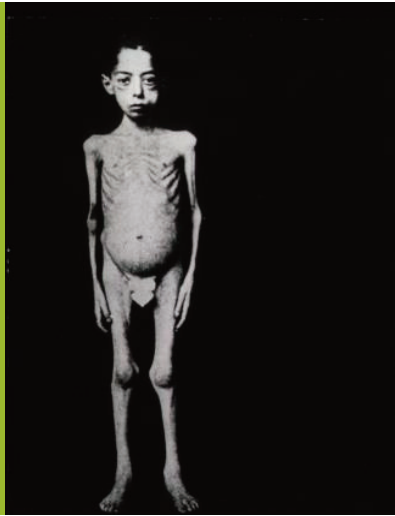
Fig. 6
Artist unknown. *Clara Jacobi*. 1689.
The Netherlands. Engraving.
National Library of Medicine.
Bethesda, USA



the two sides of the picture implies a reading of the women as the same person while at the same time suggesting that they are not shown simultaneously, but rather chronologically. In this sense, the tumour stands for something ontologically different; it indicates time. The juxtaposition of the view before and after the extraction indicates the progression of the disease, the operation and the convalescence. The extracted tumour reifies a non-material entity by its fleshiness. The tumour on the table seems bigger than the tumour attached to the woman's face and suggests the growth of the disease. The tumour also acquires an immaterial quality: it becomes congruent with the gap between both views of Clara Jacobi and indicates a time sequence – the progression of the disease – but it also suggests a chronology that implies medical intervention.

Two early twentieth-century black-and-white photographs assembled in a diptych show a boy before and after treatment with insulin (Fig. 7). The photos were taken for the World Health Organization and are drawn from the archive of the National Library of Medicine in Bethesda (USA). The boy is naked except for an ivy leaf covering his genitals. He is facing the viewer. On the left, he appears skeletal. On the right, he is evidently well-nourished. A dividing line separates the photographs. This juxtaposition of images showing two extreme states of the same body triggers a comparative gaze. The habitual reading direction guides the gaze from left to right and vice versa, eventually resting on the image on the right. Interestingly, the gap between the images does not initially catch the onlooker's attention even though it lies at the centre of the diptych. It only becomes visible through the back and forth movement of the eyes. While the tumour and the space between the subjects in the engraving of Clara Jacobi were seen as linking and separating both sides of the image, the gap between the photos can only be understood as dividing both views of the boy. The dividing line stands for the application of medical treatment. It seems to metaphorically block the progression of the disease. It further promotes a reading in terms of normality and abnormality while privileging the view of normality on the right. The white stripe implies a chronological sequence with a positive outcome: the picture on the left stands at the begin-

Fig. 7
Photographer unknown. *Child suffering from diabetes, the before-and-after views reflect the change after treatment with insulin.* Photos taken for the World Health Organization. National Library of Medicine, Bethesda, USA



ning of the sequence, and the picture on the right showing that the boy has recovered stands at the end of the sequence. The time frame, the continuous application of medicine, overlaps with the boy's recovery. The juxtaposition of these images, and the body's drastic change, implies improvement and promotes the application of insulin. In this sense, the gap shows the progression from an abnormal to a normal state. The gap, however, must be understood critically as a boundary between the pathological and the normal, which dissimulates contradictions of the positivistic logic of the diptych, such as complications of the medical treatment, pain, or side effects.

As part of our iconic memory, the logic of medical illustrations informs the spectator's perception of Schels' photographs. With the view before and after death the diptychs seem to indicate a temporal progression. Read with the logic of medical illustrations one can also interpret Schels' photos as promoting euthanasia, which allows for a peaceful death as suggested by the photo on the right. Such a reading would overlap with the artists' agenda of advocating overcoming the fear of dying. Read as the progression from an abnormal to a normal state, Schels' diptychs indicate the abnormal state in the picture on the right, the image of death, while the white stripe could be understood as the progression of a disease that kills the subject and is there-

fore withheld from view. Both deliberately pointed interpretations show that viewing Schels' work in the same manner as the before-and-after medical treatment images leads the photos to adapt a positivistic logic. They privilege the view of an intact body and exclude aberrations from the normal.

GÉRICAULT'S DECAPITATED HEADS

Following these images that *dissimulate* death, the focus switches to the depiction of dead bodies shown as pierced and wounded. Géricault's paintings of the decapitated heads of cadavers of criminals, today located at the National Museum in Stockholm, form a strong counterpoint to the ubiquitous black-and-white faces of Schels' photos. They explicitly show death by means of colour and the depiction of an injured body. Géricault acquired the heads from the morgues of the Beaujon and Bicêtre hospitals and kept them in his studio until the stench of decomposition became unbearable.¹¹ Until recently, due to the lack of a signature, date, and title, art historical research discarded the paintings, five in all, as preparatory studies for Géricault's monumental *Raft of the Medusa* shown at the Paris Salon in 1819. The paintings of severed heads are therefore dated to the same year. The anonymous heads are believed to prefigure the shipwrecked sailors of the *Raft*, although none of the heads appears in the painting.¹²

Géricault's studies render death as caused by the guillotine. *The Study of Two Severed Heads* (c. 1819, Fig. 8) shows the result of execution; the decapitated heads of a woman and a man. The incision performed by the guillotine is indicated by the cuts underneath the throats. The heads were placed on a white cloth, which is stained by the blood coming from the severed necks. The heads show different stages of decomposition; the head on the left, which belonged to a woman, is white and blue. The white impasto indicates the lack of blood circulation while the brownish complexion of the man's head signifies life; his head still seems to be losing blood. Already corpses with their individual traits still apparent, the heads indicate the presence of a once-living human being.

11. Nina Athanassoglou-Kallmyer, "Géricault's Severed Heads and Limbs: The Politics and Aesthetics of the Scaffold," in *The Art Bulletin* 74 (December 1992), 599.

12. *Ibid.* 599.



Fig. 8
Théodore Géricault: *Study of Two Severed Heads*. Oil on canvas. About 1819. The National Museum of Fine Arts, Stockholm, Sweden.

Géricault's study drastically proposes an analogy between death and colour. Since Cennino Cennini's treatise on painting written in 1400, pigment became entwined with flesh. In *The Book of Art* Cennini elaborates on the mixing of colours, which, when layered correctly, can suggest liveliness and flesh:

Take a little *verdeterra*, and a little well-tempered *biacca*, and go twice over the face, hands, feet, and all the naked parts. [...] Then [...] you must prepare three gradations of flesh-colour, one lighter than the other, laying every tint in its right place in the face, taking care not to cover over the whole of the *verdaccio*, but shading partially on it with the darkest flesh-colour, making it very liquid, and softening off the colour in the tenderest manner.¹³

13. "How to Color Faces, Hands, Feet, and Flesh Generally," in Cennino Cennini: *The Book of Art* (London: George Allen, Ruskin House, 1899), 127.

For Cennini, colour not only signifies flesh, but becomes flesh in the act of painting. Strikingly, Cennini advises the painter to use the same ground colour, the *verdaccio*, in order to paint the face of a dead man:

On a panel you must lay it [the colouring] on in the usual way as directed for colouring living faces, and also shade it in the same way with *verdaccio*. You must use no rosy tints, because dead persons have no colour; but take a little light ochre for your three gradations of flesh-colour, mixed with white, and temper in the usual manner, laying each tint in its place, and softening them into each other, as well on the face as on the body. And in the same manner, when you have nearly covered your ground, make the lightest flesh tint still lighter, reducing it to pure white for the highest lights. Then mark the outlines with dark *sinopia*, mixed with a little black [...]¹⁴

Géricault painted the dead body in an almost Cenninian manner. The head of the man shows a brownish complexion covered with white and black spots indicating hollows, protruding bones and the insides of his mouth. A stream of red sullies the cloth. In Cenninian terms, the painting not only shows the materiality of the dead body, but becomes its surrogate body where the colour of decomposing flesh is linked to living flesh, which is in turn linked to blood. Moreover, the view of the decapitated heads produces a visceral emotion in the viewer, creating a synesthetic experience; the viewer imagines the stench of decomposition and the sticky and soft surface of decomposing flesh. By means of disgust the spectator acknowledges death as linked to his own body.

Another aspect that explicitly promotes the sight of death is the subjects' open mouths. According to Nina Athanassoglou-Kallmyer, decapitation, far from bringing instant death, caused excruciating pain to victims, whose senses were believed to remain alive for several minutes after severance of the head.¹⁵ The agony of a gruesome death by guillotine is especially inscribed onto the head on the right with its eyes staring wide open, its features distorted by pain, and the open mouth shown as a black hole. The female head with its slightly open mouth and the closed eyes signifies a moment after the agony, the ceasing of life. By showing an open mouth, Géricault's studies reject a doctrine notoriously acclaimed by the German writer and philosopher Gotthold Ephraim Lessing in his *Laokoon* (1766):

14. "How to Color a Dead Man, His Hair and Beard." Ibid. 128.

15. Athanassoglou-Kallmyer, "Géricault's Severed Heads and Limbs", 609.

The simple opening of the mouth, apart from the violent and repulsive contortions it causes in the other parts of the face, is a blot on a painting and a cavity in a statue productive of the worst possible effect.¹⁶

Lessing considers the marble statue of the dying Laocoön and his sons, with their mouths wide open, an artistic antithesis. The ancient statue associated with the Greek sculptors Agesander, Athenodoros and Polydorus shows the Trojan priest fighting sea serpents, which, according to the Greek myth, eventually kill him and his sons. Their facial contortions and open mouths suggest their pain. Laocoön's body entangled by the serpents becomes the centre of attention; he is bigger than the figures of his sons and positioned centrally so the viewer's gaze is directed towards his strained body, and his open mouth suggests his agony.

With his study of the severed heads Géricault seems to surpass Lessing's doctrine. In the tradition of Laocoön, Géricault not only provides an insight into that which should not be disclosed by art – the body's inside – but he also shows a fragmented body, indicating the act of killing. The open mouths of the decapitated heads pinpoint corporeal fragility and further mirror the incision of the guillotine. The open mouth formed into a scream in response to the violent fragmentation of the body serves as an actual premonition of death. The body's opening was initiated by the opening of the mouth, which references the incision and the missing body.

Hence, Géricault's heads could fruitfully be considered in opposition to the portraits of Schels' series. The depicted heads are the material remains of a once existing body. But they are also the remains of the act of killing. They are mere stumps, not even corpses. Géricault's paintings show what Schels' images dissimulate; death as the result of an opening of the body where colour evinces the presence of death. In showing anonymous severed heads frozen in the agony of dying and in the process of decomposition, the study becomes a portrait of death.

16. "Die blosse weite Öffnung des Mundes, – bei Seite gesetzt, wie gewaltsam und ekel auch die übrigen Theile des Gesichts dadurch verzerret und verschoben werden, –ist in der Malerei ein Fleck und in der Bildhauerei eine Vertiefung, welche die widrigste Wirkung von der Welt thut." Gotthold Ephraim Lessing. *Laokoon oder Über die Grenzen der Malerei und Poesie* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2001), 21. English translation in Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Laocoön: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry*, trans. E.A. McCormick (London: Johns Hopkins University Press), 45.

CONCLUSION

In this article Schels' photos have been discussed as dissimulating death, and shown in the context of death masks, photos of dead subjects, and medical illustrations of the view before and after the treatment. Compared to Géricault's paintings, which evince the presence of death by an open body and the application of colour, Schels' photos can be viewed as merely showing a pseudo-absence. This absence is informed by the lack of an open body and colour. Rather than elucidating mortality as integral to our physical existence, Schels' photos show death as an abstract phenomenon. Death is projected onto the old and sick other. Agonies of dying, medical treatments and their side effects, which entail an engagement with one's own body, are withheld from vision. Through a collective *aisthesis* of grieving, the viewer is dissociated from the body. The photos seem to claim that death can be made visible by a juxtaposition of presence and absence. Death, then, is confined to the dividing line between the image of a living body and that of a dead, yet seemingly sleeping body. As such, Schels' photos customize death as a portrait of a seemingly living individual and make it understandable in the context of the intact bodies of popular media where photography becomes a tool of *dissimulatio*.

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