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The face is a picture of the mind with the eyes as its interpreter.

— Marcus Tullius Cicero, “Orator”[1]

Photographers deal in things which are continuously vanishing.

—Henri Cartier-Bresson, “The Mind’s Eye”

Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.

— Arthur C. Clarke, “Profiles of the Future”

The first thing the plague brought to our town was exile, the narrator notes. A feeling normally as individual as the ache of separation from those one loves suddenly became a feeling in which all shared alike.

— Albert Camus, *The Plague*[2]

My ophthalmologist got COVID. He was out for a harrowing six weeks. He said, “I stayed home. I wasn’t going to make my wife a curbside widow.” Curbside pickup, curbside drop off. This is life in the time of COVID.

The separations between family members, husbands and wives, parents and children, grandparents and grandchildren, lovers, and friends at the entrance to the hospitals is beyond wrenching. Accompanying the dying by being at the deathbed of a loved one, to hold their hand and talk to them is what we do, it’s the last rite, the last privilege, now summarily disrupted by this pandemic.

Enter Plague 2.0. A digital pandemic. Where would we be without technology? We live on Zoom, die on FaceTime. Nurses use this platform to help families have those final moments with their dying loved ones. The nurses provide the handholding in the family's absence. "Virtual" reality is here to stay, feeling less virtual, and more real. It's the way we live now. We live behind screens. We ZOOM ("travel somewhere in a hurry") Thanksgiving, funerals, weddings. We are "elsewhere" and "there," "present" and "absent" simultaneously. Family members in different parts of the world zoom in for FaceTime deathbed farewells. It is the last "image" that many families will have.

The video-artist Nam June Paik's assertion a half century ago that "skin has become inadequate in interfacing with reality, that technology has become the body's new membrane of existence" has materialized. No more human contact. Just plastic. Through another screen, TV, the media seeks to put faces to those who died as in "Lives Well Lived," where snapshots and the mention of a singular particularity help to memorialize those lost to COVID.

Photographs of "Those We've Lost" are posted on Facebook, courtesy of *The New York Times*. A generation ago, those murdered on 9/11 were memorialized in the same paper's "Portraits in Grief." At the time of this essay, we're nearing two hundred 9/11's in terms of the numbers of "Those We've Lost." Mourning photography is not new. It arrived with the birth of the first commercial photograph in the form of the Victorian post mortem photograph. Seeking to "fix" the image, it is a record, a keepsake, and a likeness to "have" of the lost object so we don't forget through time what they looked like.

FaceTime. Time with a beloved's Face.

Victorian postmortem portraits and COVID-19 digital FaceTime farewells while separated by over a century are links in the evolutionary chain of the mourning portrait. Both are "animated" either by the gaze, as in the case of the mourning portrait, or by the image and/or dialogue, as on FaceTime. Technology mediates the process of mourning. Victorian mourning photography changed how people were able to view death. For the first time, it gave a record of remembrance—a fixed image of the deceased and usually the only family portrait. This tradition has become modern. Hospital photographers specialize in taking portraits of stillborn babies in the arms of their mothers. Keepsakes. Part of mourning is wanting to hold onto the object; the worry is that, at some point, we will forget them, that their face will fade as we live in time without them.

More than 250 billion photographs have been uploaded to Facebook with another 350 million uploaded every day as of 2013. The need to capture the image in Victorian times "ere the substance fades," is once again in vogue as families assemble with the deceased and capture the last family photograph.

And yet there is another side to this—witness Freud in "Mourning and Melancholia," Barthes in *Camera Lucida*, and Benjamin in "Ocular Unconscious" respectively: mourning is internalizing the object (Freud), the image cannot be captured, (Barthes), and it is the Unconscious that is enlisted

by the camera (Benjamin).[3] Barthes says, “a photograph is always invisible; it is not what we see.”[4] Not that insight will obviate the need to document everything in our lives.

My Mother Dies

I was in the hospital room with my mother when I noticed that she stopped breathing. It was quiet, soundless, no bother, no fuss, just like my mother.

The day before I had brought her tulips, and now I broke off each bulb, gently peeling off the petals and placing them, one by one, across her bed sheet. She looked beautiful. Even in death she had no wrinkles, something everyone who met her would remark upon and that she would just laugh off. It was 2006. We had cellphones then. I remember because I called my husband. Then, cell in hand, I wanted to take a picture of her just like this, surrounded by the red petals, the white sheet and her sweet face, but I felt like it was wrong, intrusive. I had this cascading series of rapid fire “bursts” i.e., quick photographic shots in succession in my mind’s eye of Annie Leibovitz photographing an enshrouded Susan Sontag and capturing the moment her stretcher came off the plane after her cancer treatment in Seattle. The next “burst” was remembering a documentary showing Leibovitz documenting her own father’s death. The more I saw these optical memories the more I saw another one: that tell-tale twitch at the crease of my mother’s eyelid when something made her uncomfortable. The smallest tell. Taking the photograph would have been an invasion of her privacy. It would have made her uncomfortable. So, I didn’t.

Victorian Postmortem Photography: “Secure the shadow ‘ere the substance fades”

When the first official photograph was announced in 1839, most people were amazed at seeing the exact likeness of their loved one fixed on paper. Reactions ranged from awe at the newest scientific invention to anxiety at it being sacrilegious. It bordered on the uncanny as viewers felt the gaze of these deceased children penetrated them as if they were alive: “the image itself carries the power of sight.”[5]

Victorian mourning portraits were ushered in by the response of Queen Victoria to the untimely death of her beloved Albert at age forty-two. She had her family pose for a portrait under a bust of Albert, captured this moment in an official photo, and then wore black for the rest of her life. At the same time, the daguerreotype and tintypes, vastly cheaper to make, democratized the availability of this new medium, and there was no shortage of photographers ready to capitalize on mourning portraits or on people’s desire for them.

“Secure the shadow, ere the substance fades”: a brilliant advertising slogan expressed families’ desire to have this one keepsake of their departed, often with themselves in the picture, this proof of what once was in a world where antibiotics were not yet invented and epidemics of typhoid, diphtheria, cholera, and scarlet fever ravaged families. Photographers often posed the dead child standing up, supported by a kind of metal back brace, with the arm of the parent lending

additional support. Eyes were replaced by glass and painted over in order to create an appearance of aliveness. So lifelike were these portraits that Karl Dauthendey, a successful daguerreotype photographer in the mid 1800's, said:

We didn't trust ourselves to look long at the first pictures...We believed the tiny faces in the picture could see us.[6]

It is Anna Seitenmacher's gaze that penetrates me. We lock eyes, I am riveted. I am sure she can see right through me.



Fig. 1 August Sander, "My wife in Joy and Sorrow," 1911

This photograph (Fig.1) was taken by the preeminent German photographer August Sander of his wife, Anna, holding their newborn twins. One of them would live only a few hours beyond the taking of the photograph. Elsewhere, Sander documented with precision what he termed his “types” in his project “People of the 20th Century.” Here, he fixes his lens on this all-too-brief family. The title, “My Wife in Joy and Sorrow,” makes me wonder if one twin was named Joy and the other Sorrow. They call to mind the Gemini twins, Pollux and Castor, bookends of the emotional spectrum. They will no longer be “parallel,” neither in the skies nor in their mother’s arms. They are, in fact, Helmut and Sigrid. It isn’t the twins though who arrest my gaze. It is Anna’s. Her face, for me, registers neither Joy nor Sorrow.

She is staring straight at me, the viewer, saying “see I had these two children.” I feel helpless to assuage her weariness, or her stoicism. She is offering up evidence of the existence of this moment, capturing the aliveness of both twins. This will be the one photograph to document the existence of the twins, soon to be decoupled, with their mother. It is one of the most iconic portraits of its time. In fact, it “breaks time” as a photograph from another century becomes a way for a present-day viewer to understand their own experience. [7] This photograph bears witness that once there were two. It is a ceremonial photograph, the last thing his father could do for him, and for the surviving twin, which was to document Helmut’s brief life and to immortalize him in this iconic photograph. I found no photographs where Sander was included in the family circle.

In Walter Benjamin’s essay, “The Little History of Photography” he anticipates the photograph’s “breaking time”:

No matter how artful the photographer, no matter how carefully posed his subject, the beholder feels an irresistible urge to search such a piece for the tiny spark of contingency, of the here and now...to find the inconspicuous spot where in the immediacy of that long forgotten moment the future nests so eloquently that we, looking back, may rediscover it.[8]

And, in fact, over a century later, in January of 2020, MoMA held a conference on Sander where this photograph was used as the starting text in a discussion on the loss of a child at birth. Lucy Gallun, one of the curators at MoMA, responded by telling the moving story of the stillbirth of her own child.

In contrast to the austerity of the Sander, the mother here (Fig 2) is exquisitely dressed, paying homage to the occasion. She is adorned with jewelry, earrings, and a gold brooch at her throat, all of which attest to the weight, the gravitas of this moment. All the gold, however, cannot make up for the fortune she has lost. It is a portrait in grief. Her eyes are on an inward, interior journey, reflecting her pain and perhaps imagining the future all contained in her arms, lost. It is one of the saddest photographs I’ve ever seen, markedly different from the scores of other Victorian mourning photographs with their uncanny life-like representations.

Another genre of Victorian-era photographs of the dead, spirit photography, ushers in the doubled experience of absence and presence while looking at it. The accident of a double exposure added to the coffers of one William Mumler who discovered it. The “double” appearing in the upper part



Fig 2. "Mother Holding Her Baby, Dead From Measles or Chickenpox" C.1857, (photographer unknown), Stanley B. Burns, MD & The Burns Archive

photograph seemed like a presence, a spirit. Mumler recognized this and promoted these images as capturing the presence of the departed. His most famous photograph is of Mary Todd Lincoln with her husband in the upper corner (Fig.3). Women especially coveted this type of photograph as they believed their husbands were looking out after them. Mumler was tried for fraud and larceny and ultimately acquitted, but I believe without knowing it, he anticipated by a century the photograph as a "transitional object":



Fig 3. Mary Todd Lincoln (1818-1882) (untitled spirit photograph with Abraham Lincoln's shadow): © President and Fellows of Harvard College

Photographs if used in a transitional manner, can facilitate healthy mourning, the acceptance of loss and transience. They can do this, paradoxically, by offering a temporary respite from loss by furnishing us with the experience of recapturing and reconnecting with, our lost objects (as well as with lost time and our lost past selves) in a potential space of illusion. While contemplating a photograph, we can momentarily feel that our loved one it depicts is still with us, across time and distance or the even more unbridgeable gap of death – or that we ourselves can fleetingly be transported back to the objectively irrevocably lost moment portrayed in the photograph.[9]

If mourners believed their loved ones were watching out for them and saw them as hovering spirits in the photograph, they could console themselves with this spectral presence and titrate their grief.

In *Camera Lucida* (1980), Barthes is on a quest for a specific photograph. It is not clear whether he has ever seen this photograph before, but when he finds it, he will know it is the one. Functioning as a transitional object for him, it delivers “a sentiment as certain as remembrance.” It was a finding in two registers: “it held both my mother’s being and my grief at her death.” She was both present and absent. Therefore, the photograph is a kind of “absented presence.”[10]

The Absented Presence: Barthes’ “The Winter Garden Photograph”

While reading Barthes, I became fixated on the most famous photograph in the world that doesn't exist, "The Winter Garden Photograph" of Barthes' mother, Henrietta. The absence but continual presence by rhetorical description of this picture dominates the second half of *Camera Lucida*. Spend some time thinking of these two paired words: Winter Garden. Even the name is an oxymoron conjuring up an exotic landscape encompassing frost, death, and memorial flowers.

Barthes teases the reader. In Part I he introduces the word "punctum," i.e. that object in the photograph that "pierces" or "wounds" the viewer. It is our "beholder's share," what we as viewers have an emotional resonance with in the painting, or in the photograph (27). Part II is his homage to his beloved mother. I was deep in the boxes with him of faded photos, searching with him for this particular photo of his mother, the one showing the "truth" of her. She had recently died. It is pure ekphrastic writing. It includes what Barthes believes is the photographer's prompt to his bashful mother as a child—"step out a little so we can see you"—and indeed we almost expect her to step off the page so we can see her too (67). I stop my reading at this point because I'm only four and a half pages through this second half of the book and it is littered with photographs so surely, I will find this one that tells the "truth"; but it's not in there. Several pages later, in parentheses, in an aside to the frustrated reader, Barthes admits: "I cannot reproduce the Winter Garden photograph for you. It exists only for me. For you (the reader) it would only be an indifferent picture, no 'wound'" (73).

How does he know what would wound me or not? Barthes negates his own truth in saying this because he doesn't know what if anything would resonate for the viewer in the photograph. I'm already imagining the image he does write about—the placement of his mother's hands: "she was holding one finger in the other hand, as children often do in an awkward gesture" (69). And I'm eager to see a winter garden.

Ironically, because it is an ekphrastic description, the text becomes its own photograph. And, this stops me in my tracks—this realization that the text becomes its own photograph. And then, I thought about the passage I wrote about my mother's death. Certainly, if I had taken a photo of her, it would have looked exactly as I described her.

"The mind's eye" dates back to the 14th century when Chaucer used it in the "Lawyer's Tale" circa 1390: "It were with thilke eyen of his mynde, with whiche men seen after they ben blynde." In his book *The Mind's Eye*, Oliver Sacks gives mind-boggling present-day examples of Chaucer's quote. People who have lost their sight but made conscious efforts to heighten their visual cortex, "the inner eye," were able to construct visual worlds for themselves. One reported feeling he lived in a "painter's studio" so vivid were his visualizations, and another described seeing objects in front of him—so much so he repaired his entire roof.^[11] Recently, at the Safra Center for Brain Science at Hebrew University, people blind from birth were trained to "see" images through sound. Current research indicates the brain is more pliable and even people blind from birth can be "reawakened" to processing visual information.

My mind's eye gave me the photograph with which to write an ekphrastic description. I was writing with light, my own internal light. I began to think about which was more powerful, the photograph or the written word — which paints a better picture? Which allows more light in?

Apparently, I wasn't the only one that was riveted by the fantasy provoked by the absent reproduction and present description, the absence/presence, of Barthes' missing photograph. It resonated enough with the two hundred artists, photographers, curators, and art historians that Odette England, an Australian-British artist, writer and curator, invited them to contribute what was evoked for them by this most famous photograph that has never been seen. The book, *Keeper of the Hearth: Picturing Roland Barthes' Unseen Photograph* was a celebration of the 40th anniversary of *Camera Lucida* and was published in January 2020, just as the pandemic was making its way across the globe, highlighting the connection between memory, death, and mourning through photography. I could not resist ordering this book. What a perfect narrative exercise in co-construction, stimulating the "mind's eye" of the participants. The book is a treasure. Some artists responded with the written word, others with a photo. Some photos were specially crafted for this project, some were found. We as readers/lookers do not know. None of the photos have captions.

I will highlight four that spoke to me because they all evoke absence/presence.



Fig 4.

Photographer Dan Estabrook, contributed a photo (Fig 4) of a child in a Winter Garden. Estabrook uses collages and tintypes, a favorite medium for Victorian mourning photography. Here he places a large tintype portrait in the center of the garden. It commands one's attention for several reasons. Using Barthes "punctum" as my internal Geiger counter, I was struck by the fact that her face was ghosted out, replaced by a silvery bluish circle. I noted that she was placed in a Victorian Winter Garden all by herself; one has to walk down a long walkway to get to it. She sits in a chair, her finger positioned awkwardly in her other hand, exactly as Barthes describes. I keep returning to the blue orb face. Even without a magnifying glass, it is possible to see or imagine the spectral images ("extras" in Victorian spirit photography) that are reflected on that polished silver orb; these extras concur with Barthes' ultimate conclusion that every photograph represents a kind of death. I imagine Barthes walking down this runway, trying to find the "truth" of his mother. Every viewer then becomes Barthes, met with multiple reflections: his mother, the one in the photographer's mind's eye, and the viewer's own beholder's share of what they project onto the silver orb.

Alejandro Cartagena uses a blade to deliberately remove details from a photograph to see how identity, form, memory and absence are reconfigured, yet still familiar to the original object. In his offering to this project, a small ghostlike white figure is situated among potted palms, the head



Fig 5.

having cut-outs at strategic points to intersect with the palm fronds so that plant and head merge in one seamless image (Fig 5). Nature ultimately claims the body.

Tierney Gearon's (Fig.6) is a subtle sepia-toned photograph of a nightgown against a muslin curtain and held up to a window so that the light diffused by the curtain softly animates the gown. It is to my way of looking a nightgown, which adds a layer of intimacy to the photograph. It seems as if the wearer has just woken up and hung it by the window to air out the night's creases and dreams, making it fresh for the next time.

Fig 6.

Ultimately, it is Sonja Thomsen's blue rectangle (Fig.7), which haunts me the most. I passed over it several times, not seeing anything but a blue rectangle with some upside-down, inverted numbers running along the top and the same configuration for the number "3" on the bottom left corner. I kept musing about why she would include just a piece of blue paper. I continued thumbing through the book, repeatedly looking at the images. It was on one of these thumbings that I spied something that I had not seen before. It looked like a crease on the blue rectangle itself. My first thought was how did I deface this? Maybe through all these "thumbings" even though I handled each page as if it was an archival document? I kept staring at it and then I saw it. It was the barest of outlines, a silhouette of a woman but it had the most subtle 3D dimension. I ran my finger ever so slightly over it to feel the imprint. There was none. It is a haunting representation of "presence/absence" and it was this image that brought Freud's metaphor of the Unconscious as the "negative" in photography to mind:

Fig7.

It has long since become common knowledge that the experiences of a person's first five years exercise a determining effect on his life, which nothing later can withstand. Much that deserves knowing might be said about the way in which these early impressions maintain themselves against any influences in more mature periods of life – but it would not be relevant here. It may, however, be less well known that the strongest compulsive influence arises from impressions which impinge upon a child at a time when we would have to regard his psychical apparatus as not yet completely receptive. The fact itself cannot be doubted; but it is so puzzling that we may make it more comprehensible by comparing it with a

photographic exposure which can be developed after any interval of time and transformed into a picture.
[12]

Freud is talking about memories lying in the freezer of the Unconscious and when they are triggered by what could be an incidental detail, they *could* become conscious.

In this representation of a photographic negative, which is how I have come to see Thomsen's evocative image, this barest outline has the potential to be developed or erased. She is there but not there, absent, but present.

I run my fingers over the figure as if I can coax her into being, the way Barthes imagines the photographer has coaxed his mother to "step forward a little."

What emerges is that the photograph that has never been seen but has intrigued everyone who has studied Barthes is not critical for imagining Henrietta's mimesis. Every artist saw something in his mind's eye. ("It is not the photograph that we see.... we see through the photograph to the subtle beyond") (59). It is the mind's eye that retains the image.

FaceTime Farewells

Technology drives perception. In the 1900s, the invention of railways and automobiles provided a different viewing frame as passengers looked out windows while they themselves were in motion. As Peter Bennet writes, "The new apparatus of transportation itself became an apparatus of vision." [13]

Now Face Time accomplishes the same thing:

"I sat my IPAD on the exam room chair exactly where M would have sat if he'd been there."

"He 'sat' with me through three hours while four drugs were infused. He was there 'virtually.'" [14]

We become tourists, simultaneously embodying "a position of presence and absence, of here and elsewhere." [15]

A family gathers on zoom to be present at the deathbed of their father. They are all over the world. One is at an airport, crossing time and space to be present for the moment. What does it do to the family's perception of their loved one to see them attached to machines, to have them become, in a sense, a "cyborg?":

In today's technological world, scholars, filmmakers and artists have begun to consider the absolute loss of presence. For instance, in David Cronenberg's film *eXistenZ* (1999), the film centers around the premise that the characters cannot determine whether they are playing a game or are "real." On a more practical level, mediation infiltrates every level of our existence, whether through email, language or codified gestures. Recent scholars have begun to think beyond the binaried distinction of presence and absence to more technologically informed evaluations of being. The cyborg describes the integration of man and

machine, where technological forms conventionally associated with absence become integrated into being or presence.[16]

Caro's mother is still alive—and fighting, as Caro urges her to—but she also appears to be being swallowed by the very machine whose tubes she herself was made to swallow, almost one with the the device that's helping pump her lungs. "Mama Linda," Caro says: my beautiful mother. "I love you so much." [17]

FaceTime has been invaluable in assisting the living to say goodbye to the dying and sometimes vice versa. Or, at least, to be together in silence. Or to witness.

For COVID-19 cases, often patients themselves are unable to participate in these calls because they are in prone positions to mitigate against "air hunger." For those that can, it can afford comfort both to the dying and for the living to hear "last words."

It isn't without its drawbacks.

Palliative care doctors worry that patients are so markedly changed from when they entered the hospital, even two weeks before, that they struggle to prepare the families for this change. Pronating patients to mitigate against air hunger makes it impossible to see their faces.

The iPhones are in Ziplock bags to protect against germs and often slide around and are difficult for nurses to maneuver when they are trying to position the patient so they can be seen by the family. Last rites are being administered on FaceTime. "It's (FaceTime) less than ideal, it sucks, it's lonely and it's isolating."

A recent article in the *New England Journal of Medicine* suggests that video conferencing with mobile workstations that include a video platform will become more widespread in hospitals so that patients who are able can communicate with their families.[18] CNN reported that hospitals are stocking enough iPads to "rival a modest Apple Store." These platforms are also being used in palliative care where patients have lost the ability to speak but can still see and hear their loved ones. In one instance, an iPad was used to connect a patient to his wife. They sat in silence for six hours — "just seeing each other's faces was enough." Many families just want to see their loved ones, even if they can't speak or are disoriented. It has happened that during these FaceTime calls the patient sometimes "comes -to" and has a moment of clarity, which provides comfort to the family. Other times, family members do not want to remember their loved ones looking like cyborgs.

A hospital encourages a patient who doesn't want to say "goodbye" to their family prior to being put on a ventilator to do so. Once intubated, survival is questionable. An article in the *Journal of Aging & Social Policy* on "Bereavement in the Time of Corona Virus" recommends that health care workers can share "respectful digitized photos of the dependent's face to provide evidence of death and protect against the pain of ambiguous loss." [19]

The pain of FaceTime Farewells is overwhelming. It is incomprehensible to witness, to hear about anecdotally, and to imagine. Every day on TV and in the news, there is another wrenching story of these last moments. Health care workers have become the substitute for the family, putting the additional burden of psychological trauma onto their overwhelming workload. PEW reports indicate the level of stress in health care workers caring for COVID patients is similar to that seen in combat veterans.

Going forward there will be much to document. It remains to be seen how FaceTime goodbyes have impacted our culture. For some, I suspect it will be much better than nothing. It will be some kind of closure. For others, it can be the beginning of a traumatic mourning.

Mourning Becomes Elect(ronic)

Mourning was transformed first by Victorian post mortem photography and now through the ever-increasing velocity of optical/video/digital technological inventions. These fixed and now not-so-fixed images can potentially aid the mourner in a gradual acceptance of loss or help to deny it by the increasing ability of technology to promote “aliveness.” It seems that as technology’s capacity to render aliveness increases, there is an equivalence between absence and presence. In Victorian mourning photography, the image itself was uncanny; it seemed to carry the power of sight. Technology has now reached new levels with the image having the power of *life*:

During and after the disaster (of the Sewol ferry), mobile phones functioned in a pivotal way to generate not only complex ways in which we might understand the entanglements between co-presence and deadness, but also the ways in which grief and loss (and those lost) can be channeled and memorialized in new and remediated ways. Mobile media become haunted vessels for and of grief. They become interlocutors between liveness and deadness across multiple forms of presence, co-presence, and telepresence.[20]

The hologram is an example of just such a technology.

Holograms. The word holography comes from the Greek words ὅλος (holos; “whole”) and (grammḗ, “letter, line”). If a hologram is cut into pieces, each piece projects the entire image. Holograms exist of Michael Jackson in concert five years after his death. I watched it on YouTube and could not tell that it was his “likeness.” I thought it was live.

Holocaust Museums are prerecording interviews with “Survivors.” This term, “survivors” refers to surviving the concentration camp but it takes on another meaning here as they become immortal, preserved on video. Well before they have died, they elected to go for a series of interviews where they are asked two thousand questions, all anticipating what school-aged children/teenagers/ everyone might want to know about their experiences. They are holograms, but one can see them, hear them; they cross the boundary into “aliveness” as they sit in a chair and answer whatever question is posed to them in the present.

With the contemporary conceptual video artist Tony Oursler, we come full circle almost two centuries later to the modern-day version of Mumler’s “spirit photography.” Oursler speaks about how he was captivated by Victorian “Spirit” photography, ultimately resulting in “The Influence Machine.” He describes each invention along the technological spectrum as a “twilight moment” as in the beginning, no one knew what those inventions could ultimately become. For Oursler, they have become “electronic effigies,” video projections that occupy a liminal space between absence and presence and are used for remembering the dead.

Under the Skin, “A Second Skin” and Beyond

In a visceral way, Esther Schor underscores the physicality of mourning when she writes about her own response to the hundreds of letters of condolence she received after her mother died:

In writing these letters, I came to understand sympathy as the will to join a suffering person *under the skin* (emphasis mine), conjoined with the sad knowledge that such a feat is not possible. I came to understand mourning as a recognition that the loneliness of death is something we are blessed with not being able to know in this life; mourning left me with a profound recognition—almost a physical sensation—of the difference between death and life. [21]

The tactile remnants of hair and ashes are as close as one can get to “under the skin.”

Christiane Holm describes a historical example of the absence/presence of tactile remains in the practices of keeping mourning jewelry containing locks of hair in the eighteenth century. The precise moment that the hair is cut, Holm says, marks a “rite of passage,” defining both absence and presence. The present “presence” of the body anticipates its future “absence.” The hair will last forever, but it is now disconnected from the body. The jewelry has both a “revealed function” and a “hidden story” by its valuation of the object and its connection to an intimate sphere of the body. Holm states, “the wearer of the jewelry presents herself as a participant in a hidden intimate network, from which other viewers are excluded.”[22]

Cremation jewelry remains in vogue. Jewelers are designing rings and locketts that hold some of the ashes of the deceased. “Fingerprint” jewelry is another current specialty.

It is not only hair and ashes that have become a second skin:

Mobile technology is becoming more than wireless—it is wearable, ethereal, second skin, and second surface. These wireless technologies are hovering in and around many facets of every-day life, often unflinchingly. The movement toward wireless technologies and seemingly seam-less modes of co-presence also creates new seams of boundaries and limits.[23]

Going beyond a “second skin” is Donna Haraway’s pointed question “In A Cyborg Manifesto”:

Why should our bodies end at our skin? Since our machines have become disturbingly lively and we ourselves frighteningly inert, the cyborg is an organism, a creature of social reality. [24]

Indeed, we are seeing the insertion of cyborgs into our cultural and actual lives. In the movie *Her* (2013), a man copes with the devastating loss of his wife by developing a relationship with his AI assistant; in Ishiguro's latest book, *Klara and The Sun*, an AI becomes a trusted friend and a potential substitute for a dying daughter.

Artists show us the future. Moon Ribas, a choreographer, designed a chip to sense seismic activity and had it implanted in her elbow. 24/7 she is able to sense earthquakes worldwide. She incorporated technology into her dance piece "Waiting for Earthquakes," performed in Israel. Performance artists like ORLAN and Stelios Arcadio, AKA "Stelarc," believe the human body is "obsolete" and they have become cyborgs by choice. Stellar had an artificial ear attached to his arm and believes that "technology is an appendage of the body." "Transhumans" are getting implants in their hands that function as IDs to store medical information, function as keys to unlock doors, and in general "upgrade" the human body. As Danielle Knafo notes, "Human beings have now entered an era of unprecedented technological development that is progressively eradicating the boundary between plastic and flesh, wire and artery, computer and brain." [25]

Early on in this paper, it was suggested that the spirit photograph functioned as a transitional object, allowing the bereaved to grieve at their own pace and ultimately separate from the person who died. Donald Winnicott first named the phenomena of the transitional object or "TO" by detailing its "hand to mouth" function, and that it has the distinction of being the first "not-me" object for the baby. [26] Condition #5 mandates that the "TO" "must do something that seems to show it has vitality or reality of its own." [27] This paper was written in 1953 and it could not be more relevant to how today's smartphone functions. It goes from hand to mouth and has a vitality all its own. Winnicott forecasted that, by age seven, the infant would no longer need this object as they have achieved separation from the breast. But, as the psychologist Rivka Ribak more recently points out, smartphones are not given up — they are not even "transitional" — they are upgraded to the next model. [28] They serve as a metaphorical umbilical cord to allow teenagers to separate and navigate geographical distance away from their parents while assuaging parental anxiety. Each knew the other was a stroke away, and parents were "absent- though- ever-present." [29] The umbilical cord is not cut between the dead and the living as well.

Absence is virtually becoming presence through these devices. What happens in a culture where the virtual becomes more real, encouraging the denial of death? In a chilling statement that may forecast our future, Knafo writes, "technology is an ontological orientation against limitation, against trauma and the traumatic context, and *especially against mortality*" (emphasis mine). [30]

Rambert Redux

At the start of this paper, I offered a series of epigraphs, including one from Albert Camus' *The Plague*. We now return to Rambert, the journalist who found himself in Oran because he was reporting on living conditions in the Arab section of the city. Caught like all of us in the plague, he is trapped and unable to travel back to Paris to be with the woman he adores. He does everything he can, feeling he is an exception to the rule as he is only in Oran on assignment, an innocent

bystander. He stands in line at the government agency for hours to get a travel waiver, all to no avail. He tries to explain to the doctor, Rieux, whom he feels does not evidence enough understanding for his plight:

If only you knew what this sort of separation means to people who are fond of one another.[31]

We know, Rambert. We're caught now too. We may be in the same city (as our loved one) but there is a different border we can't cross.

If only Rambert lived in our time, he could have FaceTimed his beloved every day. Nam June Paik's assertion that technology would be the new skin interfacing with the world was forecasting a future of cyborgs devoid of humanness. Ironically, it is Technology/FaceTime/IPADS and mobile tablets that have facilitated these most cherished human connections.

My Winter Garden Photograph

I had the privilege of witnessing my mother's death. The image of her surrounded by the red tulip petals is a thing of beauty in contrast to those images emblazoned on the memories of those whose last "photo" of their loved one is perhaps tied to a machine.

When I return to that moment, I see more and remember more in my mind's eye. My sitting next to her in absolute silence. That she was there, and not there. If I had photographed her, it would not be the "truth" of her because I would be out of the frame, and she would not want that. This way, I'm with her.

The photograph is a fixed image, caught in a moment in time. When that time is passed and one returns to that image, what does one see? I have a mantel full of photographs of family members who have died. I am approaching or have surpassed their ages. The gulf widens, and I am no longer able to "keep them" with me. The ocular images however play on a continuous loop in my mind's eye. I can revisit many time zones in my relationships with all my loved ones. They don't keep me tied to the fixed time of the image. I hope in time that will also be true of those who experienced the trauma of saying goodbye over FaceTime. Right now, many may be stuck in the trauma of horrific images, but with more time they can turn to a different page in the photo album that more accurately captures the shared totality of their lives present in their own mind's eye. For as Barthes said,

Whatever it grants to vision and whatever its manner, a photograph is always invisible: it is not what we see... we see to the subtle beyond (59).

It is those invisible photographs I treasure the most.

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Cover Image: Nurse Marta Fernandez holds up a tablet computer over the chest of 94-year-old Maria Teresa Argullos Bove so that she can speak to her sister, children and grandchildren from her hospital bed at the COVID-19 ward at the hospital del Mar in Barcelona, Spain, Wednesday, Nov. 18, 2020. (AP Photo/Emilio Morenatti)

[1] Marcus Tullius Cicero, *Cicero on Oratory and Orators*, trans. J.S. Watson (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1860), Kindle edition, loc. 258.

[2] Albert Camus, *The Plague*, trans. Stuart Gilbert (New York: Vintage, 1991), 67.

[3] See Sigmund Freud, *Standard Edition*, vol.23, trans. James Strachey (New York: Vintage, 1999), 243-244; Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, Trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1980), 55-57; and, Shawn Smith and Sharon Sliwinski, eds., *Photograph and the Optical Unconscious* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).

[4] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 6.

[5] Shawn Smith and Sharon Sliwinski, eds., *Photograph and the Optical Unconscious*, 8.

[6] Quoted in Shawn Smith and Sharon Sliwinski, eds., *Photograph and the Optical Unconscious*, 8.

[7] For a definition of "breaks time," see, Keith Moxie, *Visual Time: The Image in History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 6.

[8] Walter Benjamin, "Little History of Photography," in *Selected Writings* vol. 2, pt. 2, trans. Rodney Livingston (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1999), 510.

[9] Dimitrios Mellos, "Psychoanalytic Exploration into the Memory and Aesthetics of Everyday Life: Photographs, Recollections, and Encounters with Loss," Ph.D. diss., (City University of New York,

2014), 91.

[10] Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 70 (from here on, cited parenthetically).

[11] Oliver Sacks, *The Mind's Eye* (New York: Vintage, 2010), Kindle edition, loc. 208.

[12] Sigmund Freud, *Standard Edition*, 125-126.

[13] Peter Bennet, "Bleached Out: Photography and the Aesthetics of Loss, Forgetting and Erasure," M.Phil. diss., (University of Brighton, 2014), 40.

[14] Ronda Wendler, "Cancer treatment during the COVID-19 pandemic: Facetime keeps couple connected," *MD Anderson Cancer Center* (April 10, 2020), <https://www.mdanderson.org/cancerwise/cancer-treatment-during-the-coronavirus-covid-19-pandemic-facetime-keeps-couple-connected.h00-159381156.html>.

[15] Anne Friedberg, *Window Shopping: Cinema and the Postmodern* (Berkeley: University of California, 1994), quoted in Bennet, "Bleached Out," 40.

[16] Amanda Bell, "absence/presence," *The Chicago School of Media Theory* (2021) <https://lucian.uchicago.edu/blogs/mediatheory/keywords/absence-presence/>

[17] Murat Oztaskin, "Saying Goodbye During the Coronavirus Pandemic in 'The Last Call,'" *The New Yorker* (June 11, 2020): <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/video-dept/saying-goodbye-during-the-coronavirus-pandemic-in-the-last-call>

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[20] Kathleen Cumisky and Larissa Hjorth, *Haunting Hands: Mobile Media Practices and Loss* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017) Kindle edition, 133.

[21] Esther Schor, *Bearing the Dead: The British Culture of Mourning from the Enlightenment to Victoria* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 15.

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[23] Cumiskey and Hjorth, *Haunting Hands*, 207.

[24] Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 25.

[25] Danielle Knafo and Rocco Lo Bosco, *The Age of Perversion: Desire and Technology in Psychoanalysis and Culture*, (London: Routledge, 2017), 10.

[26] D.W. Winnicott, "Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena-A Study of the First Not-Me Possession" *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 34 (1953): 89.

[27] Winnicott, "Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena," 93.

[28] Rivka Ribak, "Remote Control, Umbilical Cord and Beyond: The Mobile Phone as Transitional Object," *British Journal of Developmental Psychology*, 27.1 (2010): 192.

[29] Ribak, "Remote Control, Umbilical Cord and Beyond," 191.

[30] Knafo and Bosco, *The Age of Perversion*, 20.

[31] Camus, *The Plague*, 87.