

**The Art of Dying. Depictions of death in the work of Andres Serrano,
Joel-Peter Witkin and David Buchler**

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Declaration

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Fine Arts, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg, South Africa.

I declare that this dissertation is my own unaided work. All citations, references and borrowed ideas have been duly acknowledged. It is being submitted for the degree of Master of Arts in Fine Arts in the School of Literary Studies, Media and Creative Arts, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg, South Africa. None of the present work has been submitted previously for any degree or examination in any other University.

Student name

Date

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Abstract

This dissertation explored visual representations of death in the photographic work of Andres Serrano and Joel-Peter Witkin, as well as the MAFA candidate's (David Buchler) own art practice. It looked at historical overviews of representations of death from the Middle Ages to present, as a means of contextualising and locating the reasons as to how images came to be the way they are in the present. Selected artworks were examined with particular theoretical reference to Phillipe Ariès' investigation into the changing attitudes towards death in Western society and Julia Kristeva's abjection theory. This dissertation focuses on the abjection of death and more specifically the corpse and the treatment of it in the work of Serrano and Witkin. This project explored some of the reasons why the images in this dissertation may be seen as disturbing and confrontational.

Preface

At the outset of this dissertation it is important to note some of the limitations of this research. The topic at hand is both a complex and extensive area of study, which warrants deep and continued research. This dissertation forms part of a Masters course and is therefore limited by the requirements and constraints of completing such a course. These factors have limited the time frame that this research has considered, namely the Middle Ages through to the present. The topic of death and its representation in art has a long history and includes some vast disciplines of study. To consider what was peripherally relevant but not always central to this research would have been outside the requirements and time frame of this research. For the same reason, this dissertation has exclusively focused on representations of death in what has been termed here as “Western society”. The term has been used broadly in this study. It is therefore important to note that the use of this term is not to reduce the West to a homogenous entity. Rather, this term is used to refer to the taken-for-granted norms, roles and attitudes toward death found to be common within this society. This work should therefore not be read as a conclusive text on the subject at hand, but a means for further dialogue and research in this very relevant and often controversial area of study.

This dissertation is the theoretical component of my MAFA; the exhibition of drawings, prints, video and installation; titled *and I had to think about dying when I didn't want to* – formed part of the practical component of my MAFA and was held in the Jack Heath Gallery in December 2008.

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Introduction

This dissertation will explore visual representations of death and their significance in Western society, focusing on works from Andres Serrano's photographic series *The Morgue* (1992) and a selection of works by Joel-Peter Witkin. This dissertation will also include historical overviews of representations of death from the Middle Ages to present, as a means of contextualising and locating the reasons as to how images came to be the way they are in the present. Since the theme of death in art is a vast one, selected examples of artworks have been chosen in order to highlight changing attitudes towards death. The selected images will be analysed with reference to Phillipe Ariès' investigation into the changing attitudes towards death in Western society. In particular, Serrano and Witkin's works will be examined in relation to Julia Kristeva's abjection theory.

The rationale behind this research project is an interest in the depiction of death in art, and contemporary expressions of the topic. There is a close relationship between this exploration and the candidate's (David Buchler) own art practice, which explores death in a personal context. The candidate's personal experiences of death and illness are events that have imbued concepts in his installations *You're going to be just fine* (2004), *I remember . . .* (2004) and *I must forget. I must let go* (2004) with a sense of mortality. In terms of the candidate's own creative production, it is imperative to gain an understanding of how different artists and Western societies' attitudes towards death are communicated through visual representations as a point of reference and meaning. This is due to the fact that the candidate's artistic production is directed and often informed by contemporary Western art-making practices.

Therefore, within the context of selecting appropriate artworks for the discussion on the representation of death in contemporary Western society, the candidate's own artistic production will be investigated briefly. Buchler's work aims to confront the ways in which death is characterised by fear and shame in contemporary Western society and by what Ariès terms the *invisible death model*. This attitude towards death appeared in the twentieth century, where death and dying were isolated and removed to the clinical environment of the hospital (Ariès 1974: 85). With reference to Kristeva's theory of

abjection, Buchler's work is self reflexive and portrays the ill and vulnerable body as an object being associated with death.

Therefore, this research is intimately related to the candidate's practical component of his MAFA, providing a rich and beneficial thematic background to his more personal investigations of mortality and abjection. The works of Serrano and Witkin in particular have long been an area of interest for the candidate, resonating with his own personal exploration of the themes of death in his artistic production. Serrano and Witkin explore, through their photographic depictions, the corpse as a primary signifier of mortality. Their engagement with twenty-first century attitudes toward death and abjection, as well as the taboos and shrouded secrecy that surround it, are of particular interest to the artist. They challenge these attitudes through exposing the usually hidden aspects of death to public view. In light of these artists, this dissertation will look at the materiality of the dead body and its embodiment of death. It will address the ways in which death, dying and the decaying body have been viewed, interpreted, and given social and moral meanings, and how these meanings are explored and challenged through the work of Serrano, Witkin and Buchler.

Furthermore, the aesthetic and formal beauty of their images of corpses is uncannily real. When viewing a photograph by Serrano or Witkin, the sense of deep fascination often overrides the feelings of intense horror and initial shock. This feeling is described broadly with reference to psychoanalysis and Sigmund Freud's concept of the uncanny. Freud's initial example of something that is uncanny revolves around the extent to which something is alive/animate or not alive/inanimate (Kauffman 1998: 27). The camera's objectifying gaze can be seen as befitting to the term, in that it is uncanny because it condenses situations, subjects, objects, and ultimately reality itself, into an image, changing it from what was the original animate into a now inanimate object (Middleton 2005). The concept of the abject is often associated with the idea of the uncanny, and can be related to the discussion on Serrano's work. The abjection of death and the corpse is due to the concept of it being foreign, yet undeniably familiar. The corpse, for example, leads to a feeling of uncertainty because one recognises the fact that the person (or loved one) is dead, yet now they become unfamiliar which leads to the abjection of the corpse (Middleton 2005).

The corpse, through its bodily decay and confronting reminder of our mortal nature, provokes disgust and horror within many people. The ways in which contemporary Western society perceives the living body is connected to an intense preoccupation with the body and the image of it. Today there is an over-saturation of images seen in fashion magazines, advertisements and reality shows such as *Extreme Makeover* where aesthetic surgeons transform people into the 'body perfect' (Detsi-Diamanti 2007: 164). This tanned, groomed, slimmed and operated-on body creates a sense of self identity. If one's sense of identity is closely tied to the body, nothing could be more threatening than disease and decay and, ultimately, death. As people in contemporary Western society become more distanced from death, death becomes more terrifying, which consequently results in a morbid preoccupation with the dead body (Clark 1993: 11).

By grounding this research in Julia Kristeva's writings in *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1982), the book in which she confronts thematics of mourning and melancholia, the emphasis is on abjection. The entirety of Kristeva's theory is beyond the scope of this dissertation, so a focus on the essential aspects is required. With regard to contemporary art practices, the common understanding of the abject is centred on the collapse of the inside/outside binary and a simultaneous attraction/repulsion response. As Kristeva notes; 'Abjection is not simply about disgust, it beseeches, worries and fascinates desire' (Kristeva 1982: 1).

Abjection refers back to the construction of identity and in particular Jacques Lacan's Symbolic Order. The Symbolic Order is the objective social and cultural order of law, language and morality, which is understood to represent the identity of the human subject once entered (Weedon 1997: 50). According to Kristeva, since the abject is situated outside of the Symbolic Order, confrontation with it proves an inherently traumatic experience. For example, the abject disgust or repulsion a person would more than likely experience in relation to death and, in particular, to the corpse, is due to the fact that this object has been cast out of the cultural world, having once been a subject. This corpse – something that *should* be alive, but isn't - is a reminder of our own mortality and the fear of the unknown.

Abjection's emphasis is on the expulsion of objects and boundaries that disrupt and threaten norms, limits and cultural identity. This process of rejection/abjection

constitutes the subject as a living being in the Symbolic Order. It is a reminder of the precariousness of our own life. Where necessary, links will be drawn between the artist's work and the larger discussion of psychoanalytic abjection theory.

This dissertation will involve finding elements of the abject in selected artworks and approaching the subject of death as an element one abjects. Julia Kristeva's *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1982), explores the notion of the abject which demonstrates itself to be a complex, psychological, philosophical and linguistic concept. Key aspects of her theory form the theoretical framework for this dissertation, and are invoked more explicitly later, to underscore the discussion of Serrano and Witkin's photographic depictions of the dead body.

This project will explore the phenomenon of death as represented and presented to us in the artworks of the chosen artists. Qualitative techniques begin by identifying themes in the data and relationships between these themes. The research begins by looking at the units of analysis, which in this case will be selected works of art. It will analyse these various works in terms of their influences, opinions and their particular representation of death. These units of analysis have been selected specifically in order to communicate the various approaches to the depiction of death in art.

This project will be a comparative research study in that the researcher will be comparing and analysing, through an art historical, theoretical, critical context, the artworks of Serrano and Witkin. This method has been chosen in order to evaluate relevant similarities and differences between the works, thereby aiming to find and reveal the general underlying structure which generates such a variation. This is useful in revealing certain attitudes towards death within historical and contemporary periods. This dissertation will therefore begin with an analysis and comparison of works from the Middle Ages to the present, thereby portraying to the reader the changing attitudes towards death over time within Western society. Through an investigation and interpretation of the works as a visual practitioner, the candidate's aim is to find similarities, differences and intersections between the various artworks. Ontological experience and personal involvement of the researcher is necessary in this research in order for the researcher to empathise and identify with the viewers/respondents of such works, as well as consolidating the candidate's emphasis that, while responses to death

may vary, the concern with mortality is truly a universal human condition. Death is an event that is universally experienced – whether through fear of one’s own demise or through the loss of family members or friends.

This dissertation will refer to Phillippe Ariès’ book *Western Attitudes Towards Death: From the Middle Ages to the Present* (1974), in order to gain some insight into Western attitudes towards death, from the early medieval conception of death as the familiar collective destiny of man, to the tendency in contemporary Western societies to hide death for shame and fear of it. This shall prove particularly valid in the interpretation of the artists examined. Ariès describes three attitudes towards death in Western history. In brief, the first attitude he describes existed in the Middle Ages, a period which was governed by rituals organised by the dying person himself (Ariès 1974: 11). Death was perceived as a logical order of human nature and therefore was not kept clandestine. The second attitude appears around the twelfth century and reveals an importance placed on one’s own existence and death. During this period, people were aware of being an individual, of having identities. The third attitude he describes began in the eighteenth century, where the focus on one’s own death shifted to a concern with the death of the other person. Later, around the mid twentieth century, there grew a resistance to accepting the death of another person. Death became a topic shrouded in secrecy, resulting in its taboo status (Ariès 1974: 55).

The monograph *Andres Serrano: Body and Soul* by Brian Wallis (1995) provides a selection of Serrano’s photographs and analysis of the works which informs the candidate’s study of images of death. Works made between 1983 and the present provide a well-documented investigation of his work, as well as themes of religious spirit and the material body and the artist’s interest in life, death and mortality. This is visible in Serrano’s work *The Morgue* (1992) and *Piss Christ* (1987).

In 1998, South African artist Kathryn Smith undertook a research trip to Paris to interview photographer Joel-Peter Witkin. This resulted in *Limits of Excess: Abjection in the Photographic Work of Joel-Peter Witkin* (1999), her MA dissertation which accompanied a solo exhibition of her work called *Lifetime Guarantee*. This text provides a well investigated research into the photographic work of Joel-Peter Witkin. Smith looks at the transgressive images of Witkin, through which she explores abjection

and the grotesque as a means of articulating excess. Smith pays particular attention to the Kristevian abject, as will this discussion on the depiction of death in the work of Serrano and Witkin.

Chapter one will focus on how selected artists have dealt with depicting death in their work from selected periods in art history. This will provide an overview of the depiction of death and how it has changed over the centuries. Relevant characteristics from Kristeva's abjection theory will be outlined in order to apply them to representations of the abject in images discussed in this dissertation. Philippe Ariès' discussion on Western attitudes towards death from the Middle Ages to present will be examined, and will outline the differences and changes seen through a selection of artworks. Isolated social issues of taboos around the representation of death will be discussed to explore the attitudes towards the dead in contemporary Western society. This chapter will also look at Buchler's artistic production and how other contemporary Western artists negotiate the subject of death in their work.

Chapter two will discuss the corpse – the epitome of abjection as formulated by Kristeva, and the postmodern association of filth and disgust associated with the corpse. It will look at nineteenth century post-mortem portraiture and the significance they held with regard to the attitudes towards death at the time and the later transformations. This chapter will also discuss the photographic work of Andres Serrano's *The Morgue* series, and selected images by Joel-Peter Witkin. These artists approach the theme of death as an issue of corporeality. Images of the dead body are the material reality of death – these are the primary signifiers of mortality in their work. This dissertation will conclude with an overview of key points discussed and conclusions reached. This research is accompanied by illustrations as points of reference highlighting the changes in visual representations of death and images that convey the abject.

Chapter One: Symbolic Representations of Death

But what use is art if it can't help us look death in the face (Julia Kristeva 1998).

This chapter traces attitudes in response to death in the West by examining various artistic approaches to the subject based on Philippe Ariès' seminal text *Western Attitudes Toward Death: From the Middle Ages to the Present* (1974). It will also outline certain aspects of Julia Kristeva's abjection theory in her book *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1982) that apply primarily to this discussion. Using abjection theory as a framework for this dissertation, this chapter will use certain examples of artworks in order to illustrate a broad overview of historical images of death. Whilst there may be inconsistencies or gaps in moving between widely separated periods in art history, the artworks selected have been chosen for their contribution to a contemporary visual vocabulary of death.

1.1. The Abject

The *Oxford English Dictionary* (1989: 26 – 27) defines the word 'abject' as 'miserable, craven, degraded' and 'abjection' as an abject state. However, these definitions may seem indistinct and vague in reference to contemporary Western attitudes towards death evident in the work of specifically Serrano and Witkin. Thus, it is useful to understand how abjection is expressed through more specific aspects such as death, decay and bodily waste – that which society deems abject and that which must be 'cast out' (*Oxford English Dictionary* 1989: 26 – 27). As Michael Herbst suggests, there is a relationship between Kristeva's theory of abjection and the understanding of society as a three-term complex consisting of two polarities with a threshold or boundary between them (Herbst 1999: 15). The boundary between these two polarities is imaginary, and by whatever means we try to exclude the abject, it still exists. When we experience the abject, our imaginary borders disintegrate and the abject becomes a threat because our identity system and sense of order has been disrupted.

The first polarity Herbst speaks about is the symbolic. It is an order that society is ruled by and ultimately deems what is correct and proper; that is the establishment of laws, regulations and prohibitions. The second polarity - the abject, is in opposition to the

first. It transgresses borders and boundaries defined by a particular society and is considered wrong and improper. The boundaries talked about here are positions at which bodily and social structures are especially vulnerable (Hallam 1999: 26). When the subject violates these boundaries they become abject. The symbolic requires the abject to recognize its own limits, and to strengthen and highlight what is considered acceptable and unacceptable, it uses the abject as a common ‘dumping ground’ for everything that endangers the Symbolic Order (Herbst 1999: 16). Abjection is what the symbolic must reject and restrain. As Fletcher poetically suggests, ‘The symbolic requires a border, a threshold, to protect the subject from this abyss which haunts and lures the subject closer to the edge’ (Fletcher 1990: 89). Furthermore, ‘it is an insistence on the subject’s necessary relation to death, to animality, and to materiality, being the subject’s recognition and refusal of its corporeality’ (Fletcher 1990: 89). Hence, death is regarded here as a challenge to the symbolic and a threat to society’s order of meaning and governance.

In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva describes the abject as something which is neither subject nor object; it is a threat against a not-yet formed subject (Kristeva 1982: 2). Often drawing on Jacques Lacan’s psychoanalytic theory, Kristeva suggests that abjection is first experienced at the point of separation from the mother. Abjection signifies a point where that which gave us our own existence is, in turn, revolted against. The child then enters the symbolic realm. Hence, when we as adults experience the abject, there is a complex feeling of fear and identification with it. This is because it is related to a state of being prior to signification and the threat of returning to an undifferentiated stage where we feel a sense of helplessness (Kristeva 1982: 13).

The abject is not a definable object; it has no real ‘object hood’, but transgresses that which is socially acceptable, which threatens the Symbolic Order. Hence, the necessity to eliminate that which threatens exemplifies the central paradox of abjection, according to Kathryn Smith (1999: 8). The abject is something which threatens the subject and its boundaries, something which must be excluded – a ‘revolt’ against a ‘threat’ (Kristeva 1982: 1). The act of excluding originates in a stage Lacan calls the ‘mirror stage’; a stage in which the development of subjectivity occurs in a child between the ages of six and eighteen months. When the child sees its image in the mirror, it is able to associate that image with itself. However, it does not have control over its bodily movements, and

the uncoordination of its body is experienced as ‘a fragmented body’ (Evans 1996 :115). At the point of realising bodily autonomy, Jane Gallop suggests ‘there is jubilation, but it is short lived, before ‘post-infantile angst’ sets in. As soon as the infant can posit that, prior to this moment, it was in ‘bits and pieces’, it recognizes the very real danger of regressing to this earlier stage’ (Gallop 1985: 78 – 80). In Kristeva’s words; ‘What is abject... is radically excluded and draws me towards the place where meaning collapses... On the edge of non-existence and hallucination...’ (Kristeva 1982: 2).

Corporeal waste is the second category of abjection. Kristeva mentions the corpse as a key example, which will be discussed further in Chapter Two in the photographic images of corpses in the work of Andres Serrano and Joel-Peter Witkin.

When something that is abject enters the external, social world, they become ‘filthy’. Therefore abjection is fundamental for the protection of a physical and mental well-being (Smith 1999: 8). If the Symbolic Order is threatened, abjection will then only arise. Herbst (1999: 115) is succinct in his description of the abject here, when he states that a person or a thing is abjected because s/he or it has opposed society’s standards and ideals. Hence, prohibitions and taboos are established in order to prevent this person or thing from becoming a danger to the structure and organisation of society. Taboo is a concept that refers to a strong social prohibition and avoidance, and involves socially constructed notions of danger and threat. Section 1.3 of this dissertation will discuss briefly the topic of death as taboo. Moreover, Kristeva suggests that the abject and its relationship to prohibitions is a perverse one because, instead of discarding or assuming a prohibition or law, it misleads, corrupts or takes advantage of them in order to better deny them (Kristeva 1982: 15).

According to Kristeva, in art there is a certain task to fulfill with regards to the abject: ‘In a world in which the Other has collapsed, the aesthetic task – a descent into the foundations of the symbolic construct – amounts to retracing the fragile limits of the speaking being, closest to its dawn, to the bottomless ‘primacy’ constituted by primal repression’ (Kristeva 1982: 18). Abject art is most often characterised as that which incorporates or suggests materials considered abject, such as hair, dirt, excrement, menstrual blood, rotting food or death - issues that confront social prohibitions and taboos and which transgress borders. It is seen as a somewhat materialist debunking of high art’s elevated status, and can be seen in Marcel Duchamp’s most notorious ready-

made, *Fountain* (1917) - a urinal which he signed 'R. Mutt'. Duchamp was involved in Dada, an anti-art cultural movement where he challenged modernist 'high art' ideals by placing found objects into the setting of an art gallery (Coutts-Smith 1970). For example, the object in *Fountain* is a urinal; as such, it is an object representing abject distaste.

Death and the corpse are ever-present dangers to the symbolic subject and are therefore abject. Death is feared because it means a return to formlessness, to a state where there are no boundaries. Yet Herbst suggests that, at the same time, death is not feared; instead, there is a desire for a return to such a state. 'This is the way of the abject; an interminable oscillation between desire for the nothingness and desire for the differentiated, ego-based existence of the symbolic' (Herbst 1990: 147). Sarah Goodwin suggests that any given cultural construct (including religion and poetry to psychoanalysis and medical technology) can be viewed as a response to death (Goodwin 1993: 4). This is particularly applicable to the abjection of death in contemporary culture. As such, Jean Baudrillard notes the eradication of a threat to the symbolic order. 'At the very core of the 'rationality' of our culture, however, is an exclusion that precedes every other, more radical than the exclusion of madmen, children or inferior races, an exclusion preceding all these and serving as their model: the exclusion of the dead and of death' (Dollimore 2001: 124). However, attempting to separate death from life results in a culture that is inevitably permeated by death, compounding and reinforcing our obsession with it (Dollimore 2001: 124).

This section has attempted to outline certain characteristics of Kristeva's abjection theory in order to apply them to representations of the abject in images of death to be discussed in this dissertation. The following section will explore changing attitudes towards death that can be located in selected visual images from the Middle Ages to the present. These historical representations of death have had much power and influence on contemporary artworks exploring the theme.

1.2. Historical Modes of Depicting Death

The skeleton need not be whole in order to play its role. It may be dismantled and divided into small pieces; each of its bones possesses the same symbolic value
(Philippe Ariès *The Hour of Our Death*).

This section will trace changes in the response to the subject of death in selected examples of artworks in the West. It will also identify the attributes which encompass the large visual range of depictions of death and dying. An exploration of earlier images of death in art history beginning at the Middle Ages provides an understanding of how images of death within contemporary art practice have arrived at this specific point of social currency. Davies (1997: 60) suggests that ‘From the medieval portrayal of life as a dance, with death in the background, to more modern existential depictions of death through a wide variety of symbols of desolation, artists speak against death for many’. This demonstrates that, throughout history, art has proven a significant means of engaging mortality and acted as a medium for human reflection on death.

The images, motifs, and concepts representing death have changed through the ages in Western culture, and act as guideposts in reading more contemporary images of death. Previously, rituals and responses to death have gone through immense shifts, but it is beyond the limits of this paper to track those changes. It is important, however, to track the changes in selected representations of death through noteworthy periods of art history and to look at the cultural and historical attitudes toward death.

The French historian, Philippe Ariès, writes that the phenomenon of death is culturally constructed in *Western Attitudes Toward Death: From the Middle Ages to the Present* (1974) and *The Hour of Our Death* (1981). He uses images of death throughout his research in order to show how Western culture’s responses to death can be traced through images. Ariès describes three attitudes towards death in Western history, occurring at different periods. The earliest and longest held of these attitudes occurred during the Middle Ages where people aimed to ‘tame’ their deaths by preparing for them. This became a familiar attitude in that the reality of death was not ignored, but rather seen as an important threshold which everyone had to cross (Ariès 1974: 28). If death became ritualised and ‘tamed,’ it simply meant that people were made aware of

their inevitable deaths, and could follow the ‘proper protocol’ of living and dying well and make the necessary preparations (Ariès 1974: 7). Furthermore, death was not so much personal, but a social affair in which the dying person’s bedroom became a public space, where family and members of the community were present (Robben 2004: 3).

In this context, the Latin term *memento mori*, literally meaning ‘remembrance of death’ has been linked with artworks reminding people of their mortality. These images were popular in Europe in the Middle Ages and Early Renaissance, typified by the *Danse Macabre* or the *Dance of Death* images (Meinwald 1999). In these works, death is often personified in the form of the skeleton. There is a connection to Ariès’ (1974: 28) second attitude towards death, which was characterised by a growing concern around the individual destiny of mankind, a destiny that was affected by a person’s actions during his/her life. Images of the *Dance of Death* acted as a reminder of the universality and inescapability of death.

As a graphic example, Hans Holbein’s *Dance of Death* (1538) is a forty-one piece woodcut that depicts Death playing a part in everyday life. The first four woodcuts are scenes from the Genesis: *The Creation*, *The Temptation*, *Expulsion of Adam and Eve*, and *Adam tills the Soil*. Death first appears in the third woodcut, *Expulsion of Adam and Eve* (**Figure 1**), and we witness him holding a musical instrument. The fifth woodcut, *Bones of all men*, portrays a group of skeletons playing a selection of instruments. The dance begins in the next woodcut with the Pope, and moves on to thirty-four other victims. Holbein depicts Death removing a child from his family in *The child* (**Figure 2**), and is later seen urging a farmer (**Figure 3**), a blind man (**Figure 4**), an old woman (**Figure 5**) and old man to their final sleep (**Figure 6**).

Art in the Christian tradition places much of its focus on the death of Christ. Some art historians have described Christianity as a highly developed death cult (Horowitz 2005: 542), which has encouraged an emphasis on such works in this section, and its relation to the abject. It is important to acknowledge these religious images because the photographs of Serrano and Witkin analysed in Chapter Two reference certain metaphors and symbols taken from this period of religious art.

The didactic images produced during this period of Christian history reinforce the notion that death is inescapable, regardless of one's status. However, the theme is not the hopelessness or despair toward death itself, but the importance and necessity of living a better life (Woods 2007). In addition, the closest danger of death was not hell, but purgatory. Purgatory was understood as a kind of entrance to heaven, a place where those who were saved were purged of any last remainder of their sins through various and fitting forms of punishment. Therefore the lesson of living well and doing good deeds during one's lifetime was often emphasised in order to reduce torture in purgatory (Woods 2007).

In *The Triumph of Death* (c. 1562) (**Figure 7**) by Pieter Brueghel, a panoramic landscape of death is depicted. The sky is thick with smoke from burning cities in the distance and the sea is littered with shipwrecks. Death is armed with a scythe, riding an emaciated horse, leading people into what appears to be a tunnel. An army of skeletons invades the apocalyptic landscape, slaughtering people, taking lives regardless of status – the king, the knight, the peasants, the mother and her child. Death also kills in a variety of ways, by drowning people, slitting throats and even hunting with dogs. It appears that Brueghel was familiar with the *danse macabre* motif, which greatly featured animated skeletons leading people to their doom (Stechow 1970: 76).

Another genre of representing death, the *vanitas*, reflects the same sentiment of the *memento mori*. The word *vanitas* is Latin for *emptiness* (Steffler 2002: 112). Ecclesiastes 1:2 from the Bible is often quoted in conjunction with this term; 'Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities; all is vanity' (Khadem 2006). Part of the still-life genre of painting, the *vanitas* are meant as a reminder of the transience of life and one's undeniable mortality. They also alluded to immortality in their encouragement towards living a better life and later being rewarded in the afterlife. These paintings attempted to blur the lines between life, death and resurrection. The most common *vanitas* symbol is the skull, which represents the death of man. Rotten fruit symbolises decay much like aging, and smoke, watches and the hourglass symbolise the brevity of life, reminders of the limits of human existence. Other symbols of life include moral messages of moderation, opulent wealth and fidelity. The symbols of resurrection include those that reference the Eucharist: bread, wine, grapes (Fuchs 1994: 115).

Religious art and especially Christian artworks express the notion of innocent and honourable suffering demonstrated in the images of the crucified Christ (Neuhaus 2007: 56). In Christianity, images are structured around what it means to be alive and what it means to die so that religious images of death have often centred on powerful notions of corporeality. The corporeal nature of Christian doctrine is further reinforced by examples of the Eucharist of the Catholic mass, where the bread and wine are believed to be transubstantiated into the body and blood of Christ (Flynn 1998: 65). The contemporary artist Joel-Peter Witkin references this emphasis on corporeality in religious art in extreme instances, which will be discussed in the following chapter. Christianity's rituals and images have always centred on abject materials: the corpse, a wounded body without borders, leaking and dripping blood. Renaissance painters such as Matthias Grünewald (c.1480 – 1528), Rosso Fiorentino (c.1494 – 1540) and Hans Holbein the Younger (1497 – 1543), depicted the dead body of Christ and often emphasised the decomposition or extreme state of rigor mortis beyond any natural representation (Miglietti 2003: 50). The depiction of the corpse is usually met with disgust, but images of Christ's dead body are always accepted and endured, because of the knowledge of him as once alive. This is in contrast to the image presented by, for example, Serrano or Witkin, where they represent death without the edifying impact an image of Christ would have.

The painting *Dead Christ or Foreshortened Christ* (1480) (**Figure 8**) by Italian Andrea Mantegna is an example of how such paintings of the corpse of Christ have influenced contemporary photographic representations of the dead body (St. George 2005: 121). Mantegna paints the body of Christ laid out on a slab after he was taken down from the cross. The viewer is positioned at Christ's feet (the same positioning in Andres Serrano's *The Morgue (Rat Poison Suicide II)* (1992) (**Figure 9**). The image portrays not an entirely peaceful face of death; Christ's head is slightly raised on the pillow and his brow is creased with lines of suffering (Miglietti 2003: 64). This image is filled with abject elements – the corpse, decay, Christ's wounds and the tears of the mourners. There is a clear contrast in skin colour of that of Christ's body painted in hues of green, emphasising death and decay, with that of the healthier flesh colours used on the mourners who weep at the side of the body. Miglietti (2003: 65) writes, 'Mantegna opts for a perspectival delirium, an all-involving and dolorous closeness to the lifeless body, an almost inevitable contact with the idea of the end'. This depiction of physical decay

is connected to Ariés' second attitude towards death, where there lay an interest in macabre themes and the increasing fear of physical decomposition (Ariès' 1974: 28). Furthermore, such images functioned as a kind of *memento mori*. During this time, people were made aware of their impending death. There was thus an appreciation for life while they had it (Ariés 1974: 45).

Hans Holbein the Younger's *The Corpse of Christ in the Tomb* (1521) (**Figure 10**) depicts the body of Christ in a state of decomposition. The viewer is positioned so close to death so that this corpse disrupts the Symbolic Order. The skeletal body is laid out on a slab covered by cloth. With the eradication of any signs or symbols, Holbein requires the viewer to confront the reality of death, emphasising the finality and visceral nature of it, similar to Serrano's photograph *The Morgue (Jane Doe Killed by Police)* (1992) (**Figure 11**), where he portrays the same isolated and profiled positioning of the body. Holbein isolates the figure of Christ by depicting the body entirely alone in the crypt. His body is contained in a small, confined space, that in no way links him to the beyond or any sign of transcendence, and there is no suggestion of an idealisation of the body (Lechte 1990). Sara Beardsworth asks: 'What is the meaning of hope if God is a corpse?' (Beardsworth 2004: 148). The viewer cannot easily identify with this painting, as Kristeva notes; 'it is not a sign of grief, it *is* grief' (Lechte 1990: 188).

However, the viewer is still affected by the image because they are given a premonition of their own death (Lechte 1990). Kristeva also points out that Christianity has aided in the imaginary identification with the death of Christ by presenting death symbolically, as a means of coping with death: 'In light of this identification, admittedly too anthropological and psychological in the eyes of a strict theology, man is nevertheless bequeathed a powerful symbolic device enabling him to live his death and resurrection in his physical body, thanks to the power of imaginary unification – and its real effects – with the absolute Subject (Christ)' (Lechte 1990: 37).

The corporeality of the suffering and dead Christ was common to the practice of devotion in the late Middle Ages. Christ is human and therefore subject to pain. This is seen in extensive visual displays of him suffering, which further emphasise his humanity and allow one to identify with such pain. As Kristeva suggested, images of the dead and dying Christ were aimed at imaging Christ in the believer's body and

imagination. David Morgan notes that, ‘To transform the pathos or suffering of Christ’s Passion into a sensation of compassion – a suffering with – in the viewer’ (Morgan 1998: 64). Furthermore, ‘if the devout viewer suffered and died with Christ in empathic response to images of the innocent Jesus tortured by grotesque guards and held up for ridicule, the believer was likewise resurrected and restored with the vindication of Jesus’ (Morgan 1998: 65).

Ariès locates his third attitude to death in the Eighteenth century, with a focus on humankind becoming less concerned with death and more concerned with the death of the other (Ariès 1974: 56). The Romantic movement in the Eighteenth century also influenced people’s attitudes toward death and the afterlife. There was a seemingly growing emphasis on feelings and emotions and of sentimentalization surrounding death (Majewski & Gaimster 2009: 145). People began to accept the death of the other (friend, family member, loved ones) with greater difficulty than before, and this came to be more feared than the death of the self (Ariès 1974: 67). What the survivors mourned was no longer the fact of dying, but the physical separation from the deceased (Ariès 1981). This demonstrated an unwillingness to accept the loss of a loved one, which motivated the somewhat romantic treatment of death through the growth of tombs and cemeteries seen in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Ariès 1974: 55).

Nineteenth century masters such as Francisco de Goya (1746 – 1828) and Théodore Géricault (1791 – 1824) created images of criticism and horror in response to war, depicted in scenes of mourning and trauma. Their work rendered moments of life and death with an un-idealistic reality. Their portrayal of the suffering and the dead is depicted as if captured in a specific frozen moment, much like a photograph of the same scene would do.

The paintings by Géricault dealt with death and horrific suffering in an historical and narrative manner, as seen in *The Raft of the Medusa* (1819) (**Figure 12**) (Eitner 1993: 183). Géricault was inspired by an event that occurred three years earlier, a crime noteworthy for its brutal horror and for its political implications. Eitner (1972: 21) notes that the painting depicts him grappling with a problem he had not faced before – dramatic narration and his attempts to choose from a series of episodes and a particular moment to sum up the central meaning of the event to the most powerful visual effect.

The Raft of the Medusa was created in response to the capsizing of the French ship *Medusa* off the west coast of Africa in 1816. The painting depicts the desperate survivors of the scene trying to catch the attention of a passing ship in the distance. A raft measuring sixty-five feet in length and twenty-eight feet in width was fashioned from parts of the destroyed ship for the survivors to float on. In this piece, Géricault portrays a scene of complete abject horror. After days passed, hunger, thirst and insanity took their toll on the survivors, resulting in suicide, murder and cannibalism (Eitner 1972: 9). The scene reflects Géricault's profound interest and fascination with death. We see it in his exquisite depiction of the figures struggling against the forces of nature in an intense portrayal of suffering, despair and death. Géricault went to extraordinary lengths to immerse himself in the experience of death and in every detail of the castaways' ordeal. His figures were created from sketches of corpses in the morgue of the *Hospital Beaujon*, and he obtained a rather macabre collection of severed heads and limbs which he brought into his studio to paint and to witness their gradual decay (Eitner 1993).

In Géricault's *Study of Two Severed Heads* (1819) (**Figure 13**), two bloody, severed heads are placed on a white sheet. The female head, seen positioned at the top left hand side of the painting, is tilted inward toward the head of a man, his open mouth and facial expression a macabre reflection of shock and suffering. It is said that the head of the woman was that of a hunchback who posed in the artist's studio, which suggests that it was painted from a living model but created to look like a severed head – an appearance of death (Eitner 1989: 61). French painter Eugène Delacroix (1798 – 1863) described this study as 'truly sublime' and 'the best argument for Beauty as it ought to be understood', as it proved the strength of art to transform what was gruesome and hideous in nature (Eitner 1989: 62).

There is resonance of Géricault's work in that of Joel Peter-Witkin's study of corpses and severed heads. We see it in Witkin's image *The Kiss (Le Baiser)*, *New Mexico* (1982) (**Figure 14**), referencing Géricault's *Study of Two Severed Heads*. Witkin even went so far as to re-create *The Raft of the Medusa* as an extremely politically charged image in his photograph *The Raft of George Bush* (2006) (**Figure 15**). Here, Witkin brings an historical depiction of death into the present day, and in his version, the raft becomes 'a contemporary ship of fools' (Witkin 2006). George Bush's party and regime

become the victims of their own rationale and hunger for both social and political power, whereas the people aboard the *Medusa* were the victims of class struggle (Witkin 2006).

As noted earlier, the third attitude towards death that Ariès describes arose in the eighteenth century and was characterised by a concern with the death of the other. This attitude encouraged the development of post-mortem photography, where the deceased were depicted as if asleep. These photographs maintained the presence of the deceased person within the presence of the family. Someone who is asleep may, after all, wake up, if only in the dreams or fantasies of the living (Meinwald 1999). This euphemistic description of death as sleep is to pretend that it, too, is temporary and it rejects the finality of death.

The genre of deathbed portraiture in paintings in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries generally depicted the attitudes towards death at that time. It is reflected in the work of Edvard Munch (1863 – 1944), who dealt with death and illness in several works. He was only a child when his mother and sister died of tuberculosis, resulting in a preoccupation with deathbed scenes as a means for catharsis which, as Thomas Messer suggests, is ‘a need for relief from emotional pressures through the act of visualization’ (Messer 1987). The abject is evident in Munch’s work, particularly in his attitude towards death and towards the decaying body after death. Here, Hodin (1972: 93) quotes Munch:

Death is pitch dark, but colours are light. To be a painter is to work with rays of light. To die is as if one’s eyes had been put out and one cannot see any more. Perhaps it is like being shut in a cellar. One is abandoned by all. They have slammed the door and are gone. One does not see anything and notices only the damp smell of putrefaction.

In the paintings *Death in the Sickroom* (1893) (**Figure 16**) and *Dead Mother and Child* (1897 - 9) (**Figure 17**), Munch depicts a scene of family members gathered in a room where the dead body of a relative lies. Although it is a scene of death taking place in the home surrounded by family and friends, the artist displays an obvious attitude of fear and anxiety towards the dead. As the Kristevian abject would suggest, in encountering the corpse – the ultimate signifier of death and the abject – the fragility of our own lives

is reinforced (McAfee 2004: 47). The figures in both paintings are seen removed or detached, and thereby perform the action of abjecting the dead.

In *Dead Mother and Child* the artist's five year old sister Sophie is seen standing by her mother's deathbed, blocking out the trauma of what lies behind her. The scene is made more traumatic by the young girl's large, terrified eyes and gaping mouth, and the viewer is forced to acknowledge the cruel reality of personal loss and suffering (Prideaux 2005: 211). It is also suggested that Munch's use of double and sketchy lines in such a work could be interpreted as a means of conveying the trembling emotion of the figures that surround the deathbed (Prideaux 2005: 155).

The attitude towards death during the nineteenth century was primarily characterised by the lessening ability to deal with the death of the other, and the desire to preserve the memory of the deceased as seen in post-mortem photography (Hallam 1999: 36). Nineteenth and twentieth century attitudes changed more rapidly than previous attitude changes, which took place over centuries rather than decades. Ariès notes the emergence of death's taboo status around the beginning of the twentieth century, which was generated by the First and Second World Wars (Ariès 1974: 85). Freud's notion of the 'denial of death' can be contextualised within this era. The phrase was taken from his essay *Our Attitude Towards Death* (1915), written when the First World War had been underway for 6 months. Just before the war, Freud believed the predominant attitude to mortality was an increased sense of denial which resulted in death being eliminated from life (Dollimore 2001: 119).

Ariès draws attention to the 'banishment' of death in the late twentieth century as follows;

When the image hunter (of death) reaches our own decade, he finds himself at a loss, on unfamiliar ground. The abundance of themes and scenes, which has hitherto made choices difficult, seems to have disappeared. ...That is because the change consists precisely in banishing from the sight of the public not only death but, with it, its icons. Relegated to the secret, private space of the home, or the anonymity of the hospital, *death no longer makes any sign*' (Ariès 1981: 266).

With the use of italics, Ariès emphasises the taboo status of death. According to him, death began to recede from view in the twentieth century and developed into a taboo subject (Ariès 1974; 85). It now became even more traumatic; no longer familiar, but wild (Ariès 1974: 14). Importantly too, as Ariès noted, death began to recede from public sight and in a sense became abjected, relegated to the clinical environment of the hospital. In terms of abjection and society's view towards death, Tina Chanter notes that when culture is opened to sources that are typically closed off or repressed by societal sanctioned taboos, it is the abject's revolutionary force that is unleashed through art (2008: 110).

1.3. Contemporary Views and Representations of Death

A number of aspects characterize the *invisible death model*, as Ariès (1974: 85) describes Western society's changing attitude towards death in the twentieth century. Contemporary Western society surrounds death with much shame and discomfort, and regards it as repulsive and disgusting. Ariès ascribes this current view as appearing around the beginning of the twentieth century, suggesting that cleanliness was then becoming a 'bourgeois value' (Ariès 1981: 568). Public health and hygiene at the beginning of the twentieth century was synonymous with a healthy way of life, it contained notions of what a good life should be (Mellemgard 1998). In the abject sense, then, the corpse was regarded as defiling. Furthermore, death began to be seen not as a natural part of life, but as a failure of the medical system. Death became concealed in hospitals where the ill and dying were relegated. Ariès writes, 'when death arrives, it is regarded as an accident, a sign of helplessness or clumsiness that must be put out of mind' (Ariès 1981: 586). These changes, in part, led to the taboo status of death.

Taboo is a concept that typically refers to a ritual prohibition and avoidance, something that is not said, done or touched. It thus involves socially constructed notions of danger and threat, including institutional mechanisms that keep it in place, and regulate behaviour (Allen 2006: 203). Littlewood (1993: 30) notes that, in contemporary Western society, death has replaced sex as one of the greatest taboos. In the 1950's, sociologist Geoffrey Gorer claimed that death had replaced sex as the new pornography of the twentieth century (Walter 2006). Currently, sex appears to have overflowed any

boundaries that once tried to contain it and is no longer kept hidden behind closed doors. Death is now kept in place by boundaries that society sets up. This is evident in the overt decline of the visibility of death in actual experience, where death in the West in the eighteenth century was a prominent and public affair and everyday life was full of symbols to constantly remind people of their death (Allen 2006: 223).

By the twentieth century, however, the visibility of death had changed dramatically. In his book *When Death goes POP* (2005: 49), Charlton McIlwain notes how, over the last century, death has become invisible. This, McIlwain argues, is due to a number of factors, such as medical intervention and technology affecting mortality rates, and the importance placed on funeral directors who are responsible for dealing with the dead. Death is also witnessed through popular culture representations which often display a denial over the reality of death and it being replaced with somewhat voyeuristic and vulgar views of it (Littlewood 1993: 70). Society becomes insulated from death because of these factors. Death is now abjected through coping mechanisms and processes of exclusion such as burials and cremations which protect and separate the living from the dead and from waste such as the corpse.

Death is a fear-based taboo and, like the abject, it threatens to disrupt the Symbolic Order. There is a fear of the finality of death and the loss of loved ones. Allan (2006: 225) suggests euphemistic expressions for death such as *missing* and *losing* someone 'captures death as malign fate and evokes the misfortunate lack caused by an event over which the bereaved has no control'. The word 'taking' is also used to describe the process of photographing and, with photography's claim to record what is real (Hallam 1999: 36), photographs are evidently 'taken' from reality. The action of taking a photograph results in halting a moment in time and capturing something that exists in a particular instant. According to Susan Sontag in her book *On Photography* (1989), this is essentially an attempt to negate the effect of death and denying another person or things mortality. Yet 'all photographs are *memento mori*' (Sontag 1989: 15). In effect, every photograph becomes an unconscious reminder of death.

As discussed above, the changing attitudes towards death have resulted in this topic becoming taboo in the twentieth century. Nonetheless, this remains a debatable issue. McIlwain (2005: 19) contends that to declare death as taboo overlooks the constantly

increasing fascination with death over the last few decades. The proof is in the fact that thousands of books have been written on how to deal with death and dying, vast archaeological and historical research is frequently being conducted, and there are public exhibitions on death. These aspects all suggest that death is no longer an entirely forbidden subject, although it perhaps remains one that is hidden in the sense that it is generally separated from the public space (Davies 1997: 1).

What Davies may have been referring to is the medicalisation of death in more recent times. This process resulted in death being removed from the community or public space and relegated to the hospital or similar institution better equipped for dealing with death (Littlewood 1993: 82). Ariès terms this development in understanding death in contemporary Western society as the *invisible death model*, where death is characterised by a sense of fear and shame and therefore seems appropriate for its placement in the hospital (Ariès 1974: 85). Elisabeth Kübler-Ross notes that the growing knowledge in science should provide people with better ways to prepare for our unavoidable death, yet the further our advances in science, the more we fear the reality of dying (Kübler-Ross 1969: 6). This situation arose from a somewhat mistaken belief, originating in the nineteenth century, that scientific medicine would ultimately be able to overcome death itself (Littlewood 1993: 70).

In modern societies, the medical world certainly plays an important role in managing and controlling one's life to various degrees. Pain-killing drugs have become increasingly used in this regard. In David's Buchler's installation, *You're going to be just fine* (2004) (**Figure 18**), the artist spent a period of three months collecting medical waste, such as the empty medicine boxes and bottles that two local pharmacies discarded every week. His aim was to display the amount of drugs being prescribed and consumed over a short period of time and the way in which people rely so heavily on medication to numb, placate and ultimately delay the process of dying. Contemporary society has become reliant on the capacity of medicine to control illness. The irony, however, is that pain-killing drugs, although controlling pain, also reduce one's life functions and involve the 'unintended consequence' of death (Davies 1997: 62).

Death in the hospital is no longer the occasion of a ritual ceremony over which the dying person presides while surrounded by relatives and friends. Instead, dying and

death has come to be seen as a medical condition and technical phenomenon (Ariès 1974: 89). Displayed in Buchler's work, *I remember. . .* (2004) (**Figure 19**), is a series of 28 collagraphs of printed text, crudely sewn together and hung on a wall. The inspiration for the piece was the artist's personal experience of being hospitalised and being treated for different illnesses during his lifetime. One particular experience emphasised in the piece is Buchler's year-long suffering from a narrowed oesophagus, causing the inability to swallow and other complications resulting in him being hospitalised for pneumonia and septicaemia, and later corrective surgery. Coded personal metaphors, certain phrases and words emphasise the artist's feelings of vulnerability and isolation especially within the medical environment. The text '*You have all the symptoms you must be isolated*', '*Just so hard to swallow*', '*holes in everything*', '*I'm making myself sick, I'm making myself sick*', '*can't eat can't drink can't run can't play can't eat can't swallow can't breathe can't sleep*', all reference his experience. Furthermore, illness, disability and inability to work, as Parry (1995: 121) suggests, are all seen as weaknesses and failures that are in opposition to any independence and self-sufficiency. People in contemporary Western society assign a somewhat magical power to doctors and hospitals. They expect modern medicine's ability to cure them of all their ills.

The phrases visible on the collagraphs, '*You have all the symptoms you must be isolated*', '*Andy's at home cleaning his shoes*', '*Billie's gone on holiday*', '*Sylvia's baking her head*', '*look who came to see you (how nice). I'm pissing blood*', suggest Buchler's feelings around the way in which the ill and dying hospital patient's role as an individual becomes more peripheral, almost abject. In *The Sociology of Death* (1993: 31), Clark suggests that this dispossession of one's social existence in the hospital setting is as a result of other people's physical, emotional and communicative withdrawal. For Buchler, it became apparent that the ill and the dying are relegated to hospitals where they are isolated, while the healthy and those believing in their own immortality have no need to visit and in fact avoid it by any means. This is suggested by the tone of the excuse phrases such as '*Andy's at home cleaning his shoes*'. There is a fear and denial of death represented in these phrases.

For the installation "*I must forget. I must let go*" (2004) (**Figure 20**), Buchler installed in a grid of twenty white hand-made boxes, objects that chronicled the day-to-day living

as a mortal being. Early in the planning process, the artist began searching for objects, old clothes, photographs, and other items that would influence the outcome of a piece that would speak of death and mortality – the conceptual framework within which he was working. Each box was a recollection of an experience or memory. A little drawing of a hospital bed is seen in one, glass sculptures designed by the artist contain samples of his hair, a pair of wisdom teeth, medical apparatus collected from surgeries he had undergone, things that became familiar to Buchler on his visits to hospitals. These images and objects document traces of memory in a subtly melancholic way. Fraught with psychoanalytic impetus, “*I must forget. I must let go*”, this piece turned into a medium of coming to terms with the past and acknowledging his mortality.

In this work, the artist is concerned with contemporary attitudes towards death and the social stigma around it, and furthermore, with the way in which it has become medicalised. As mentioned in *I remember . . .* the hospital patient’s role as an individual becomes more peripheral. There is a loss of identity. In this work, Buchler separates pieces of himself as isolated and contained objects for medical inspection. He presents the viewer with little naked self-portraits displayed in jars and test-tubes, emphasizing the way in which people are reduced to the status of objects and treated as mere things among other things. He presents himself as an abject object, pushed into a state of abjection filled with unstable boundaries. ‘Degradation as state and process’, as Herbst (1999: 15) puts it, ‘lies at the core of the term ‘abject’ and is a constant in human experience. In Buchler’s work we see glass tubes filled with coloured fluids, bodily fluids. The experience of literal abjection through illness is a time in which fluids and infection leak uncontrollably from the body. As in Kristeva’s theory, excreta such as urine and blood are polluting objects which emphasize the instability of bodily boundaries (Kristeva 1982: 4). By displaying these fluids, as well as hair, teeth and medical instruments, Buchler uses them as a means for dwelling on the abject. They provoke disgust and horror because of society’s inability to accept the fact that the body has limits (Grosz 1990: 92). It displays its materiality, its mortality.

Placement and the order of the objects inside the boxes was an important task for the artist. Central to the installation is a box containing a glass heart - symbolic of life, the fragility of our lives and human vulnerability. A nineteenth century post-mortem photograph of a deceased ancestor sits next to a little wooden music box which plays a

child-like melody. The notion of the comic and the tragic often walk hand in hand and is something the artist is interested in and portrays in his current work. Next to a stainless-steel kidney bowl with a figure resting inside is a box containing the small pencil-written words “see me” with a magnifying glass placed in front of it. It suggests the vulnerability one experiences when ill and the way in which our bodies become objects and sites of investigation within hospitals and doctors’ rooms. A white cassette tape in one box with a labelled inscription “a lesson in silence” refers to the inability of many people to talk about death.

There is a clinical approach to the treatment of the work. The artist has restricted his palette to black, white and yellows as much as possible. A palette that evokes a sense of illness, the colours of sickness. “*I must forget. I must let go*” becomes almost a self-portrait. The individual boxes invite viewers to lean in for snippets of a stage in a person’s life. It becomes a display of suffering and vulnerability. The fundamental and undeniable truths about the human condition are often disturbing. We deny our own mortality and even our own biology. Buchler feels it is the artist’s role to speak about this condition and our vulnerability.

The subject of death as featured in television, movies, documentaries and newspapers is ubiquitous. The *Death and Disaster* series by Andy Warhol (1928 – 1987) grew out of the repetition of real deaths that he was constantly exposed to via the media. Such repetition or overexposure often causes a deadened response from the viewer. The power of the images to stimulate empathy is reduced and they become ‘mute records’ (Thorpe 1980: 46). Peggy Phelan writes that the *Death and Disaster* series by Warhol ‘is an expression of the entwined relationship between the abstract force of death as repetition and the intimate experience of death as a starkly singular event. Warhol gives us an image of death as a condition of perpetual waiting, and death as experience of repetition’ (Phelan cited in Bluttal 2006: 214). We become desensitized when we are exposed to images of death over and over again in repetition through various forms of the media. Clearly this is one function of repetition, at least as expressed by Freud: ‘to repeat a traumatic event (in actions, in dreams, in images) in order to integrate it into a psychic economy, a symbolic order’ (Foster 1996: 131). Repetition of a traumatic event/object eventually drains it of its significance, as seen, for example, in the countless repeated images and footage of 9/11. Through repetition, people defend

themselves against the events'/objects' effects in an attempt to restore and maintain the Symbolic Order.

The *Death and Disaster* series encompasses celebrity portraits such as Marilyn Monroe after her suicide, and silk-screened photographs taken from the newspaper of previously 'unknown' victims of tuna fish poisoning and car accidents. As these unidentified people die, they acquire brief (fifteen-minute) fame, but the cost of that fame is their death (Bluttal 2006: 214). Warhol's choice of subjects are ones that are already familiar and exist within the dimension of the mass-media and advertising image. They therefore seem inoffensive because they originate in a space where the real has already disappeared behind its depictions (Miglietti 2003: 68).

Warhol's *129 DIE IN JET* (1962) (**Figure 21**) is a painting depicting the front page of a tabloid newspaper showing the photograph of an airplane crash which carried the headline 129 DIE IN JET. This became the first of his many disaster series. Warhol began the Marilyn Monroe series soon after her suicide in August 1962 (Crow 1996: 53). His images of Monroe were taken from publicity photographs and turned into symbols of eternal youth and beauty. In *Gold Marilyn* (1962) (**Figure 22**), Warhol presents the image of Monroe as an icon: the face is set up against a gold background which is representational of a traditional sign of an eternal other world (Crow 1996: 53). Patrick Smith comments on Warhol's consideration of the stillness and silence of an untroubled, 'machine'-like, or 'deadened' existence: one that is forever carefree, attractive and glamorous (Smith 1986:127). An obsession with youth, beauty or consumerism is a means by which society distract themselves from their mortality (Warhol 2004: 112).

In other examples such as *Tunafish Disaster* (1963) (**Figure 23**), *Suicide* (1964) (**Figure 24**), *Ambulance Disaster* (1963 - 4) (**Figure 25**), and *Electric Chair* (1964) (**Figure 26**), suggest how such morbid imagery fuels our interest in unnatural deaths and disasters. *Tunafish Disaster* shows a link between consumerism and death in a rather bizarre depiction. It represents a moment when the supermarket's promise of good and trustworthy products is destroyed (Crow 1996: 60). The electric chair series was created from a photograph of the chair in Sing Sing Penitentiary in New York, where 614 inmates had been put to death. The very act of an execution is a strong form of social

control by removing the existence of a person. In his book *Death, Ritual and Belief* (1997: 64), Douglas Davies writes that an execution is ‘one of the clearest examples of society using death to demonstrate that society itself is of the greatest value’. Furthermore, the extreme action of forcing a person into a position of abject submission is achieved through the act of execution (Herbst 1999: 343).

The impersonal nature of the *Death and Disaster* series contributes to the attitudes towards death in Western society in the twentieth century, where we witness death as taking place at a distance. In such representations, we experience ‘death by proxy... There is death, but it is not my own... death occurs *at* someone else’s body and *as* an image’ (Goodwin 1993: x). These pictures highlight the notion of death as being outside of everyday life, inevitably resulting in an anesthetized reaction. The everyday inundation of images of death makes them seem more and more remote and impersonal, which allows for staring a bit longer, making the horrible seem more ordinary.

This chapter has attempted to outline the changing attitudes towards death from the Middle Ages through to the present using examples of art from selected eras to illustrate this change. From the changes seen, twentieth and twenty-first century society wish to avoid experiencing the reality of death and we witness, through forms of social rejection, how death has become taboo and furthermore, abjected. We see representations of death that confirm the denial of death. Many of the images discussed present death and the corpse as a violation of boundary and are transgressive in context of Kristeva’s abject. The photographic artists analysed in the following chapter set out to confront taboos around death and explore the visceral reality of death as well as the complexities of portraying such a topic. Photography can be seen as having a particular role in documenting and disseminating information about the reality of death in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. They are images that disturb and repulse, but at the same time draw us in to the reality of death. These artists become the reliquary for housing society’s fears and repressed thoughts about death. Postmortem photography and Joel-Peter Witkin attempt to dissolve the boundaries between life and death in order to show how, after all, contemporary Western culture is saturated with death.

Chapter Two: The Depiction of the Corpse in the Photographic Work of Andres Serrano and Joel-Peter Witkin

What pleasure is to be found in looking at a mangled corpse, an experience that evokes revulsion? Yet, wherever one is lying, people crowd around to be made sad and to turn pale... as if some report of the beauty of the sight had persuaded them to see it.

(St Augustine. Confessions).

The previous chapter briefly explored the notion of the corpse as the utmost signifier of abjection. It also looked at examples of visual depictions of death that have been referenced by contemporary photographic artists. These will be further analysed in this chapter. Since the 1970's, there seems to have been a dramatic increase of interest in photographic images of death. They generally include images for medical purposes, forensic photographs and postmortem photography. This chapter, however, will discuss images of death in the visual art context by looking at examples of Andres Serrano's morgue photographs and Joel-Peter Witkin's photographic tableaux of dead bodies. Death, and particularly photographic depictions of the corpse, in contemporary Western societies is generally not a comfortable topic.

2.1. The Abject Corpse

The corpse is that from which the living remove themselves in order to purify themselves of the threat of defilement it presents (Chanter 2008: 91). It is in this regard that human responses to the dead are conveyed through notions of impurity and fear. Anthropologist Robert Hertz suggests that such responses are universal in that, when death occurs, the body which was once living ceases to exist, and the dead body is transformed into a threatening object of horror and dread (Holden 2000: 41). Douglas Davies argues that the corpse is a far more dynamic entity than is grasped by modern life-experience, where bodily decay has become masked or inhibited. For a great majority of cultures in history, the corpse was viewed as a dynamic element in that it changed and decayed (Davies 1997: 39). The corpse, as Elizabeth Hallam suggests, is no longer a secure body. Its orifices threaten to leak and contaminate the external world with internal fluid and matter. Its decay renders its surface no longer intact (1999: 128)

Since the nineteenth century, there has developed a physical and symbolic separation between the living and the dead. The link between hygiene and disease was first established during the nineteenth century which, along with the physical separation of the living from the dead, has resulted in the increasing perception of the corpse as polluting, both physically and symbolically. The notion of physical pollution is based on the fear of contamination by disease and decay, and symbolic pollution from the dread of mortality, which the corpse stands to signify (Hallam 1999: 128).

The modern concern with public health has resulted in the dead being separated from the living. The body of the deceased is often removed to the mortuary or chapel and requires the services of a skilled professional. These professionals and spaces play an important role in counteracting the corpse's ability to contaminate. After death, the body loses the human qualities associated with vitality. As such, it is this professional's role to represent the corpse as inoffensive and harmless to the living, and to re-establish the body's boundaries and ultimately transform the corpse from a defiling object (Hallam 1999: 129).

Drawing on Mary Douglas (1966), the boundaries of what is considered pure and impure, the boundaries of cleanliness and uncleanness are established in connection with cultures' individual taboos. In Julia Kristeva's *Powers of Horror*, the author is first of all concerned with the conditional boundaries the infant creates in abjecting the mother and becoming a full, autonomous subject. Furthermore, she is also concerned with the ways in which social and cultural boundaries are used as protection against that which is considered abject, such as dirt, menstrual taboos, excrement, and sites that are considered disgusting and unclean (Chanter 2008: 20).

The body is inherently significant in relation to the abject in that it is constantly 'dropping' hints (from body fluids and excrement to aging) of our eventual 'fall'. Of all bodily wastes that bring upon the effects of abjection, the corpse is the most disturbing. Kristeva states that the corpse is the epitome of abjection and is concerned with a falling away. Here it is worth quoting Kristeva at length:

The corpse (or cadaver: *cadere*, to fall), that which has irremediably come a cropper, is cesspool, and death; it upsets even more violently

the one who confronts it as fragile and fallacious chance. A wound with blood and pus, or the sickly, acrid smell of sweat, of decay, does not *signify* death. In the presence of signified death – a flat encephalograph, for instance - I would understand, react, or accept. No, as in true theatre, without makeup or masks, refuse and corpses *show me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These body fluids, this defilement, this shit and what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There I am at the border of my condition as a living being. My body extricates itself, as being alive, from that border. Such wastes drop so that I may live, until, from loss to loss, nothing remains in me and my entire body falls beyond the limit – *cadere*, cadaver (Kristeva 1982:4).

As Kristeva suggests, the abject is necessary and has fundamental importance even to the establishment of human subjectivity. ‘What I permanently thrust aside in order to live,’ (Kristeva 1982: 3) in a way, indicates that abjection can neither be destroyed nor abjected. Abjection will always encroach upon the very borders of our life, as Kristeva suggests. Kristeva focuses on the borders of the body in particular and the corporeal nature of the subject which must expel that which threatens it. Once these defiling elements are expelled, they are considered unclean and abject. Kristeva emphasizes that these bodily fluids and the corpse serve as the abject other to the self. The corpse indicates the rupture of the distinction between subject and object – a loss of the essential factor in establishing self-identity. It therefore exemplifies the concept of abjection.

Furthermore, the abject is known by the visceral or bodily responses that it induces, notably retching, nausea and vomiting. ‘The corpse – the most sickening of all wastes - is a border that has encroached upon everything. It is no longer ‘I’ who expel, ‘I’ is expelled (Kristeva 1982: 3-4). This suggests that, when faced with the corpse, the prime object of abjection, man reacts bodily, producing his own abjection. It evokes responses such as horror, repulsion and fear, which may therefore literally threaten our bodily boundaries to the verge of expulsion. In this ontological reaction, Kristeva notes, ‘the phobic has no other object than the abject’ (Kristeva 1982: 6). It is almost as if the

corpse assaults the senses of the living. Necrophobes may develop physical symptoms of nausea and a great sense of uneasiness when they even think about a corpse. For others, it is perhaps less traumatic: they may only experience a fear that is a result of the unknown. However, vomiting can be seen as our reaction to a threatened breakdown in meaning caused by the loss of distinction between subject and object, between self and other (Kristeva 1982: 4). Through the act of abjection, what is abject can be released, expelled, abjected, and the ill feeling from within is discarded, thereby restoring bodily boundaries. It becomes a means of personal preservation. Kristeva helps us understand how vomit can function in this way in the following two quotes:

The spasms and vomiting that protect me. The repugnance, the retching that thrusts me to the side and turns me away from defilement, sewage, and muck (1982: 2).

“I” want none of that element... “I” do not assimilate it, “I” expel it... I expel *myself*, I spit *myself* out, I abject *myself* within the same motion through which “I” claim to establish *myself*... During that course in which “I” become, I give birth to myself amid the violence of sobs, of vomit (1982: 3).

As previously noted, abjection is linked to the mother – the abject separation of one body from another at birth. The child’s desire for separation, for becoming an autonomous subject, is later established and he throws up in order to cleanse himself so as to construct ‘his own territory, edged by the abject’ (Kristeva 1982: 6).

In the aesthetic arena, the question of who or what represents the corpse has multiple meanings, possibly grounded in the power of fascination. As Aristotle reminds us, “though the objects themselves may be painful to see, we delight to view the most realistic representations of them in art, the forms for example of the lowest animals and of dead bodies” (Aristotle cited in Goodwin 1993: 7). Aristotle’s quote can aptly be transposed onto contemporary Western society’s attitude towards death, and in particular the current popularity of reality television and the fascination with all things visceral and macabre. Many representations of the corpse can be seen in European paintings. Some are sentimentalized to the point that what is represented is not a corpse

at all, but a pose. In this regard, postmortem photography of the nineteenth century drew on the conventions of earlier portrait painting (Hallam 1999: 35). The medium of photography and its relative accuracy in recording appearances allowed representation, not of death, but of the dead, the corpse. The medium's capacity for reproduction and the simple nature of 'taking' a picture meant that the sanctity of death became somewhat reduced to a staged pictorial fiction, an illusion of reality.

2.2. Postmortem Representations

All photographs are memento mori (Susan Sontag 1989: 15).

Photography was developed in 1839 in France by Louis Jacques Mande Daguerre who made images laid down by mercury vapour on metal. These were often called mirrors with a memory, or daguerreotypes. Since then further developments were made (Leggat 2006). During the medium's first 60 years, the camera regularly made portraits of the newly deceased. Eighteenth and nineteenth century painters like William Sidney Mount (1807 – 1868) occasionally painted them, but it was often only the wealthy who could afford paintings.

During the nineteenth century, post-mortem photographic portraiture became largely available to middle and lower-middle classes. An early emphasis on portrait photography demonstrates the desire to fix an identity in the image and to have the image 'live on' after one's death. When somebody dies, their image becomes static. Forgetfulness will soon set in, and the image of that person slowly begins to fade. A photograph of the deceased acts as a stimulus and allows the deceased's family to recall and remember that person by looking at a photograph (Vollmann 1994). Western society has a culture of keeping and viewing photographs and there is somehow a resonance with death in such acts. Furthermore, Susan Sontag states that 'few people in this society share the primitive dread of cameras...but some trace of the magic remains, for example, in our reluctance to tear up or throw away the photograph of a loved one, especially of someone dead or far away (Sontag 1989: 161). According to Philippe Ariès, when photography first appeared in the 1840's, it was also the time when attitudes toward death were connected to romantic notions of 'the death of the other' (Ariès 1974: 55).

An example of a photograph that appears to be a denial of death and at the same time a memorial image, is *Dead Child* (1850) (**Figure 27**). The photograph depicts a little girl peacefully lying on a large fur blanket, her hands resting on her lap. She has been carefully positioned to appear resting. She holds one of her dolls. Another image *Untitled: Death Scene* (1854) (**Figure 28**) is a somewhat romanticized depiction of death. The image depicts a child who lies asleep, placed on a large chair, while his/her siblings gaze out at the viewer. As seen, there was a tendency to present the deceased in a life-like manner so that they appeared as though in sleep. ‘In the ideology of the late nineteenth century, death did not really occur. People did not die. They went to sleep. They rested from their labor’ (Ruby 1995: 63). Hence the postmortem photographers treated the dead as living beings and attempted to create an illusion of them asleep. In Erin Silver’s essay *Missing, Presumed Dead* (2005) she looks at an article published in the *Philadelphia Photographer* in 1877 by Charlie E. Orr, describing an approach to photographing the dead;

... It is no easy manner [sic] to bend a corpse that has been dead twenty-four hours. Place the body on a lounge or sofa, have the friends dress the head and shoulders as near as in life as possible, then politely request them to leave the room to you and your aides, that you may not feel the embarrassment incumbent should they witness some little mishap liable to befall the occasion... (Orr cited in Silver 2005).

There are several other accounts by nineteenth century daguerreotypists who describe their approaches to photographing the dead and the necessary manipulation of the corpse to achieve the intended effect. For example, in 1873, Josiah Southworth stated;

You can bend [the corpse] till the joints are pliable, and make them assume a natural and easy position... you can carefully turn them over just as though they were under operation of an emetic. You can do this in less than one single minute, and every single thing will pass out, and you can wipe the mouth and wash off the face, and handle them just as well as though they were well persons (Southworth cited in Silver 2005).

In *Secure the Shadow: Death and Photography in America* (1995: 7), anthropologist Jay Ruby notes the existence of memorial portraiture in the home and how the photographs became ‘a normal part of the image inventory of many families – displayed in wall frames and albums along with other family pictures’. Elizabeth Hallam suggests; ‘the importance here is the way in which photographs form cultural representations which ensure that the dead remain socially active, as a continued presence within the social and imaginative life of families’ (Hallam 1999: 36). Postmortem photographs not only allowed the memorialisation of an individual for the family, but also the preservation of the images of those who had died prematurely, especially at a time when infant mortality was particularly high. This ritual of photographing the deceased has gradually decreased because of changing attitudes towards death as a clear result of medical advances and social changes. In short, death has become taboo.

In *Death and Representation* (1993), Maurice Blanchet posits an analogy between the corpse and image:

Both the corpse and a representation are ‘uncanny’ in that they suspend stable categories of reference and position in time and space. The cadaverous presence is such that it simultaneously occupies two places, the here and the nowhere. Neither of this world or entirely absent from it, the cadaver thus mediates between these two incompatible positions. Uncanniness occurs because the corpse, resembling itself, is in a sense its own double. It has no relation to the world it appears in except that of an image (cited in Bronfen 1993: 12).

Contemporary artists aim to confront the reality of death and mortality within wider public domains by relocating the corpse through photographic images within the art gallery. However, these issues are still widely contested. For example, an exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London in March 1991, titled *The Art of Death*, was postponed as it coincided with the Gulf War in which Britain was heavily committed. According to a newspaper report, the museum authorities ‘decided that the Gulf War, and the prospect of numerous casualties, would be just the wrong moment to dwell on mortality. So the exhibition was put off until a time at which (it was anticipated) only

the normal number of people would be dying' (*The Independent Magazine*, 6 April 1991/ cited in Hallam 1999: 38). The notorious exhibition titled *Sensation*, sponsored by Charles Saatchi, first took place at the Royal Academy of Art in London in 1997. It later toured to Berlin but was rejected by Australia and prompted outcry in America when it opened at the Brooklyn Museum of Art in 1999 (Stallabrass 2001: 201). It included Damien Hirst's (1965-) controversial *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living* (1991) (**Figure 29**), a dead shark in a tank of formaldehyde, which foregrounds notions of denying inevitable death, stopping the process of decay and trying to preserve the unpreservable. The exhibition also included Ron Mueck's (1958-) contribution of a silicone sculpture of a man, half life-size, lying naked, and placed on the ground, titled *Dead Dad* (1996 – 1997) (**Figure 30**) (50.8 x 259 x 96.5cm). Society coerces artists to feel and express what it often cannot integrate. Yet society has institutionalized these aspects as taboo through patterns of social rejection (ab-jection).

2.3. Andres Serrano

Much of Western culture finds authority and value in corporeality. Elaine Scarry argues that 'when some central idea or ideology or cultural construct has ceased to elicit a population's belief – either because it's manifestly fictitious or because it has for some reason been divested of ordinary forms of substantiation – the sheer material factualness of the human body will be borrowed to lend that cultural construct the aura of a 'realness' and 'certainty' (Scarry cited in Goodwin 1993: 9). Thus we witness a proliferation of images of AIDS victims on deathbeds and anti-abortion campaigns displaying foetuses. In a similar sense, Andres Serrano's victims, dead from disease and crime-related incidents, all paradoxically can be seen as expressions of contemporary life.

It is evident from the nature of Andres Serrano's work that he has a profound interest in, or perhaps obsession with, life, death and mortality. There is a tension between his photographic directness and a theatrically baroque stylization of his provocative themes that are characteristic of the artist's methodology (Reimschneider & Grosenick: 2000: 458). Serrano questions established Western taboos in a way that erases borders. His

visual imagery exposes death and the decaying body – that which is considered unspeakable and abject in contemporary society.

In 1992 Serrano produced a series of photographs that would forcefully compel viewers to confront the reality of death. *The Morgue* series was met with great controversy and uproar in response to what many people perceived as a violation of the privacy and sanctity of death (Ruyter 2006). Serrano produced a representation of death as being something very real and inescapable; however, so too were the postmortem photographs discussed earlier, which suggests that there is nothing revolutionary about the living gazing at images of the dead. This is proven by the great number of photographic artists alongside Serrano and Witkin who produce images depicting the corpse. AA Bronson presents us with the corpse in *Felix, June 5, 1994* (**Figure 31**), an image depicting the artist's partner a few hours after his AIDS-related death. Bronson writes of the image; 'Dear Felix, by the act of exhibiting this image I declare that we are no longer of one mind, one body. I return you to General Idea's world of mass media, there to function without me' (Bronson 2002). This is evidence of the rather impersonal and multiple depictions of death displayed in the media today. Further depictions are seen in Pieter Hugo's *Sixolile Bojana* (2005) (**Figure 32**) and *Monwabisi Mtana* (2005) (**Figure 33**) taken from *The Bereaved* series in which the artist photographed men who had died from AIDS-related illnesses in a morgue in Khayelitsha, Cape Town. All of these images echo a tradition that is more than half a millennium old.

Furthermore, the convention of recording the dead is far older still: we see it in medieval sarcophagi often bearing a life-size sculpture of the body inside, and in the faces of honoured Roman nobles that were cast in plaster death masks for posterity. The interest in death is so deeply ingrained in humans as to be almost instinctive. However, at the very fundamental centre of existence, death is a somewhat indefinable mystery. Through photography, artists such as Serrano attempt to define and portray the unknowable. These photographic images of the dead present the viewer with reality, as Susan Sontag suggests 'a photograph is not only an image (as a painting is an image), an interpretation of the real, it is also a trace, something directly stenciled off the real, like a footprint or a death mask' (Sontag 1989: 154). In an article published in *New Art Examiner* entitled *Death Watch*, Martha McWilliams (1998) notes, 'Thanks to

photography and the information explosion, we know everything about the form of death but, in a secular society, nothing about its content. The mystery of being and not being, of existence and non-existence, and ultimately, of knowing and not knowing, may set up a tension too strong for any artist working outside a shared symbolic system to manage'. This is what artists like Serrano are required to negotiate when photographing the dead. They operate at the edge of a shared symbolic system, and it is a risky place (St. George 2005: 59).

With the co-operation of a pathologist and forensic expert, Serrano was able to photograph bodies housed in a morgue under his jurisdiction, providing that the deceased were not identified. When he first arrived, he witnessed an autopsy of an eight-year old girl and decided he would have to work at a rapid pace or he would not have the emotional detachment to continue the work for long. He photographed 95% of the bodies that came through the morgue door over a period of three months (Miglietti 2003: 75). The morgue is a place where the body is reduced to an object of investigation and measurement - a space which is usually secluded from public view. It is a place filled with forbidden sights - and Serrano reveals what society hides by photographing bodies in such a space. His images give the morgue an air of artistic glamour (Arenas in Wallis 1995).

The reality of some of these images is hard to stomach but, as with much of Serrano's work, the power of his images lies in their serenity. The formal beauty of his work owes much to the Baroque era - its evocative lighting, the thick, black backgrounds like velvet curtains, simplicity of forms, the closely cropped, emphatic narratives, transform them into beautiful still-lives. Serrano says; '[viewers are] seduced and then they feel tricked when they realize what they're seduced by. To me that's the works' saving grace - that it doesn't repel altogether, that it works on more than one level.' (Wallis 1995).

We enjoy looking at the most exact portrayals of things we do not like to see in real life. Before most people actually see a dead body, experiences of death have been played out many times in different forms through the media. Western culture cultivates a magnetic attraction to the dark side of experience. Evidence for this lies in the content of daily newspapers, television series such as *Six Feet Under*, and popular films like Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* and Oliver Stone's *Natural Born Killers*. However, this makes

it difficult to imagine or visualize death other than through media filters because of the transformation of real deaths into fictionalized deaths (Ruby 1995: 12). This results in a strange sense of familiarity with death, rendering it into an ordinary event to which the viewer becomes desensitised. This is perhaps why Serrano's images are often difficult to view. Serrano makes death overtly visible in his photographs of corpses, and viewers are caught between the compelling presence of these representations and being entirely aware of what could be seen as an intrusive and disrespectful act of voyeurism (Ruyter 2006).

The impact of visual representations of death on the viewer's psyche centres on the perceived difference between the real and the imagined body. While it may be argued that the production of visual images of the corpse acts as a distancing technique, helping to control and cope with an emotionally fraught life event, contemporary artists have begun to challenge the perceived boundaries between the real and the imagined corpse. Artists have utilized the medium of photography, with its perceived ability to provide verisimilitude, as a means to provide a public forum for the detailed examination of the physical aspects of death (Hallam 1999: 36).

Kathryn Smith points out that the fear and aversion in abject representation is made more effective with the 'reality' of the situation, more likely if the image is photographic (Smith 1999: 12). In many cases, photographs provide us with evidence of things we hear about, but perhaps doubt, which then seem more real when presented with photographs of them (Sontag 1989: 5). Taboo subjects tend to encourage voyeurism, and Smith notes that '[t]his results in a double excess – of subject and medium, often thought to approach the sublime. A photograph – we exercise full voyeuristic potential – we stare all we like. The more taboo something is, the more it is desirable. We (deliberately?) locate ourselves in the middle of the attraction/repulsion paradox' (Smith 1999: 12). When viewing photographs of the dead, one looks closely at them because of their authority. We are intrigued and simply want to see what death looks like. Serrano responds to a taboo in society and confronts it head on, but in such a seductive and skillful way as to allow it to be re-introduced into society through the photographic image. They are presented to us in a way that we do not have to touch or smell; we can walk away or turn the page. The medium affords one the opportunity to examine closely, which would not have been possible if the person was alive. Merely

looking at photographs of the dead is a simple act of confronting, and we begin to acknowledge death. These images also act as *memento mori* in that they can encourage us to live more positively in light of our mortality.

In *The Morgue* series, there is often that moment when familiarity and unfamiliarity coexist. Serrano works around the mystery and the overwhelming nature of death. He used a large-scale, colour format for this series (125.7 x 152.4 cm) and the images he produced fascinate and attract, enticing the viewer to look longer, as much due to the scale and detail as to the subject. Yet at the same time there is a feeling of repulsion and disgust. This juxtaposition of repulsion and aesthetic appeal correlates with the notion of the sublime. For the critic James Usher, the power of the sublime is such that it ‘takes possession of our attention, and all our faculties, and absorbs them in astonishment’ (Usher cited in Shaw 2006: 2). In broad terms, Philip Shaw describes this phenomenon:

Whenever experience slips out of conventional understanding, whenever the power of an object or an event is such that words fail and points of comparison disappear, ‘then’ we resort to the feeling of the sublime. As such, the sublime marks the limits of reason and expression together with a sense of what might lie beyond these limits (2006: 2).

Thus the sublime is directed to something beyond the scope of the ordinary, or something that exists on the precipice between the ordinary and the other. It can be seen as a response (and possible coping strategy) to a threatened boundary or an encounter with the abject.

As theorized by Edmund Burke, the sublime is greater than the beautiful. Immanuel Kant regards the sublime as specifically gendered and masculine in this regard, it is a darker force than the beautiful, which is light and charming, and implicitly feminine. The sublime engages feelings of difference and defense (Shaw 2006: 9). Serrano’s image *The Morgue (Infectious Pneumonia)* (1992) (**Figure 34**), presents the viewer with a close-up of a man’s face half covered by a red drape, masking and symbolizing the life-force that remains beneath the skin. The engagement with such an image goes beyond attraction. Instead, one is caught up in an alternating rhythm of attraction and repulsion. For Burke, the ‘source of the sublime’ is whatever is in any way terrible, or is

conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror' (Burke cited in Shaw 2006: 48). This is originally located in Burke's concept of man in the early nineteenth century finding himself face-to-face with the vastness of unspoiled nature. A sublime landscape is one which appears to threaten the viewer because of its greatness in dimension compared to the limits of the human body. Faced with the overwhelming nature of enormous mountains and the mystery of deep and dark caves, the viewer first experiences a feeling of terror or fear and then astonishment (Hack 2002). Furthermore, Burke writes; 'to make anything very terrible... obscurity in general seems to be necessary' (Burke cited in Shaw 2006: 48). It follows that whatever is obscure (our ideas about death, for example), is terrifying and therefore sublime in that it often cannot be presented to the mind in the form of a distinct and unambiguous idea (Shaw 2006: 50).

Despite its seemingly transparent relation to reality, photography's hold on the world is illusory, and Serrano is primarily concerned with what is seen and what is unknown, and between appearance and the anxiety of meanings (Ferguson in Wallis 1995). In his images, almost all the clues to the person's identity are concealed. What is revealed through the medium of photography is the visceral and truthful reality of death. Furthermore, Serrano's images of death reference the difficulties contemporary Western society has in responding to issues of death and dying. Society has projected its rejected emotions around the subject of death into the role of the artist (St. George 2005: 59). Perhaps Serrano hopes that society will respond differently to death when confronted with the death of a child. The death of a child is a tragic death because it articulates the fragility of life and illustrates our transience and mortality. In *The Morgue (Fatal Meningitis II)* (1992) (**Figure 35**), the image could be one of a child sleeping peacefully, except for the fact that the blanket it is wrapped in covers the lower part of the child's face and mouth. Its closed eyes and long eyelashes are the only visible features. It is alluring and intriguingly beautiful, but still difficult to view. It is almost as if a 'natural', hierarchical order is followed when thinking about death. When one hears of an eighty year old person dying, the young can almost relax because death is based on a 'natural' chronological order of time. If a thirty year old is killed, perhaps the realization of the fact that we have little control over our death offers comfort. But when confronted with an image of a dead child such as this one, it is difficult to view because

in current times we expect or rely so heavily on medical advances or preventative measures that were nonetheless not good enough to save this child's life.

The Morgue series somewhat glorifies the grotesque and the dramatic, often bordering on the theatrical - recognizable in the compositional arrangements and dark backgrounds particularly visible in the closely-cropped and dramatically lit images *The Morgue (Fatal Meningitis II)* (1992) and *The Morgue (Infectious Pneumonia)* (1992). Serrano renders death as 'heroic' and 'romanticized' as he imparts grandeur to even the most ordinary of deaths. Here the viewer is obliged to confront the corpse, to approach the abject. And society's fear of it lies in the fact that this had once been a living being. It is a time of uncertainty, a threat to ordinary life. There is something about its silence, coldness, discolouration and the inevitable processes of its materiality that add to this threat and uncertainty. Serrano strips the corpses of any identity; the individual is no longer present and what remains is only flesh and bones, dead meat, a vile body.

In Roland Barthes' key text on photography, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photographs* (1981), he speaks of certain elements that are, at times, evident in an image. The first element he speaks of is the *studium*, a general, average effect the image has on the viewer. To recognize the *studium* is to acknowledge the photographer's intention, and the second element 'will break (or punctuate) the *studium* (Barthes 1981: 26). This element that disturbs the *studium* Barthes calls the *punctum*: 'this wound, this prick, this mark'; 'sting, speck, cut, little hole'. It is further described as 'that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)' (Barthes 1981: 26 – 27). Barthes goes on to say that very often the *punctum* is a 'detail' i.e. a partial object, details that 'prick me' (43 – 47). Whether or not the *punctum* is triggered, it is an addition, 'it is what I add to the photograph and what is nonetheless already there' (55). Barthes describes it as a fluctuating element, the *punctum*, he states, is not evident in the pornographic or journalistic photographs as they transform 'reality' without 'doubling it' or being meaningfully challenging (41). Perhaps the most disturbing of Serrano's images are those which at first seem the least threatening. The *punctum* is evident in Serrano's image *The Morgue (Fatal Meningitis)* (1992) (**Figure 36**), where we see the feet of a dead baby – the child's sock impression still evident acts as that 'jarring' element. The *punctum* appears again in *The Morgue (Death Due to Drowning)* (1992) (**Figure 37**), where an identity tag is attached to the wrist of a dead child.

The dead bodies in Serrano's images contain signs and clues to another act, as in the case of homicide or suicide, where the marks of a traumatic death are found. Serrano's images represent the end of a life, but the beginning of an investigative process. The sense of an untold story is overwhelming. In an image entitled *The Morgue (Rat Poison Suicide)* (1992) (**Figure 38**), a reclining woman is depicted, her face covered by a black shroud. Rigor mortis has set in, her hands are tightly clenched and her arms raised and flexed slightly above her chest. The dramatic lighting on her arms highlights the small hairs that stand up straight, pulling and tightening the skin. These goosebumps are an eerie suggestion of something still living. The shock is tangible and unmistakable. The image confronts the viewer with the reality of a painful death, since cyanide or rat poison causes the muscles to convulse (St George 2005: 60). The acceptance of death requires a confrontation with fear – the fear of the unknown, a fear which ultimately everyone has to come to terms with in some way. Not only is our own death unknown, but it is unknowable. *The Morgue (Rat Poison Suicide)* appears inspired by a fear of death – the horror of a traumatic death – and is simultaneously connected with society's fear by presenting death in such a shocking and realistic way.

In *The Morgue (Rat Poison Suicide II)* (1992) (**Figure 9**), Serrano has photographed a foot resting out of a white body bag, speckled with blood from a neat wound that resembles the stigmata of Christianity. There is probably no other part of the human body that is as vulnerable, as unguarded, as the foot; it connects us to the ground (St George 2005: 14). The title of this image provides us with information which locates it in relation to a traumatic death. Suicide is a disturbing and confrontational reflection on society's fears and shadows. The specific, objective nature of Serrano's title also tells us how the person died but, visually, the fact that he/she is dead is not clear. The zipper on the body bag is a clue and it seems that with a number of Serrano's images, the power of them lies in what is not shown, but what is implied and what is left to the imagination (St George 2005: 60).

The Morgue (Death by Drowning II) (1992) (**Figure 39**), presents a cropped image of a body clearly decomposing. One can make little comment about the identity of the corpse; even its sex is indeterminate. The bloated flesh has changed colour, the skin is mottled and the mouth is like a gaping wound in the face. We witness the rotting flesh of another unidentified person in *The Morgue (Jane Doe Killed by Police)* (1992)

(**Figure 11**). This is an image that could be described as showing death as confrontationally as possible (St George 2005: 104). What is visible in this image is a traumatized face. Her means of death is not entirely clear. The figure's skin almost appears charred and ripped. A bloody wound to the temple and sunken deep holes where the eyes were are graphic and brutal depictions of death. She is removed from any other detail in the background that could distract the viewer who as a result is forced to recognize the visceral texture of death. Serrano has photographed the face directly on its profile, hence there are no distractions of space and the face shares the same as that of a living spectator. The angle is somewhat unusual in Western art and recalls the painting by Hans Holbein the Younger (1497 – 1543), *The Body of Christ in the Tomb* (1521 – 1522) (**Figure 10**), in which the positioning of the body creates a sense of claustrophobic victimization and emphasizes the vulnerability and finality of death (St George 2005: 105).

Images of death are a confronting reminder to everyone across all sectors of society that we are mortal. The images of these corpses suddenly turn into a premonition of our own fate. Furthermore, as Amelia Arenas suggests, 'as a whole, they bring to mind another traditional Christian motif, the Ages of Man, in which the image of the baby, a lovely maiden, a hag, and a skeleton illustrate with implacable logic the workings of mortality on our flesh and warn us against vanity' (Arenas in Wallis 1995). The titles of some of the works in *The Morgue* series such as *Rat Poison Suicide* and *AIDS-Related Death*, encourage one to view them as a sign of our collective self-destructiveness. These blatant and shocking titles are a crucial part of the images in that they in some cases contradict or increase the seductiveness of the lush photographs (Arenas in Wallis 1995).

The existing quality of transgression and abjection in Serrano's work gains significance if one reads his images through the framework of his ethnic background. In looking at Serrano's oeuvre, one sees a profound interest in religious symbols and corporeality, and the fact that he is a Latino artist from a Catholic background lends itself to this interest (Arenas in Wallis 1995). Is there something about a Catholic perspective that pushes certain artists towards the corporeal and the transgressive? Eleanor Heartney's article *Postmodern Heretics* published in *Art in America* (1997), examines how a Catholic upbringing may affect and influence the work of artists such as Serrano and

Joel-Peter Witkin. Although these artists claim to not be practicing Catholics, Heartney argues that it often emerges as a more-or-less conscious undercurrent, resulting in fundamentalist viewers claiming the work to be blasphemous or sacrilegious, due to this mixture of the sacred and profane (Heartney 1997: 33). An emphasis on the physical body has long been an important element in Catholicism. Heartney notes, ‘All the major mysteries of Catholicism – the Immaculate Conception, the Crucifixion and Resurrection, the Transubstantiation of the Host into the Body of Christ, the Ascension and the Assumption of the Virgin Mary – emphasize the role of the human body as vessel of divine spirit’ (Heartney 1997: 33). Serrano’s images transgress beliefs and confront the abject directly. He relies on the belief that self-actualization can be found in devotion to an aesthetic of transgression, where ‘art practices, canons of art history, and all ‘Great Traditions’ must be interrogated. Essentialist understandings of identity – gender, race, nationality – must be questioned. And hedonistic reveling in the transcendent powers of the imagination must be celebrated’ (Arenas in Wallis 1995).

In the 1980’s, Serrano began exploring bodily fluids and sparked controversy when he immersed a plastic crucifix in brightly coloured urine in an image titled *Piss Christ* (1987) (**Figure 40**). As in Kristeva’s theory, excreta such as urine, blood and sperm are polluting materials which emphasizes the instability of the body’s boundaries. Furthermore, we deny our excretory bodies and functions because they signify mortality. ‘Such wastes drop so that I might live’ (Kristeva 1982: 3). As a Catholic, Serrano was taught that the crucifix was just a symbol, and the fluid works he produced only became Catholic when he began submerging religious objects in them (Heartney 1997: 34). In such a case, it is evident that the artist’s attraction to religion tends to be a visual aesthetic element rather than an entirely philosophical one.

2.4. Joel-Peter Witkin

From a Catholic perspective, many associations can be drawn from material in Joel-Peter Witkin’s oeuvre. The child of a Jewish father and a Catholic mother, Witkin’s work maps out the threshold between life and death, which for a Catholic believer creates the ultimate boundary between the human and the divine. Heartney suggests that ‘such iconographical evidence does not firmly establish Witkin’s interest in Catholic themes – the images could be seen as a subset of his larger interest in re-creating motifs

from Western art history (Heartney 1997: 35). He creates a new history for himself through reference to paintings from art history, including the work of Bosch, Goya, Velasquez, with the most obvious artistic influences on his work being Spanish Baroque religious art and Surrealism. Such works are rich in compositional arrangement and defying aesthetic conventions in their fascination with the often morbid and grotesque. What primarily defines surrealism is the combination of dream and reality seen in Witkin's work, along with his interest in still life's and 'exquisite corpses' – in an attempt to bond the sacred with the profane, as in the case of Serrano's work. The attraction and repulsion complex seems fundamentally embodied in his work. Smith suggests that abjection and Surrealism are 'close cousins' in terms of their fundamental transgressive condition and their psychoanalytic foundations (Smith 1999: 40).

What is so compelling about Witkin's work is the way in which he draws attention (and beauty) to aspects of life that most people fear and ignore. He responds to pressure exerted by conventions in society to express what society otherwise does not express or experiences as too difficult to articulate. His work deals mainly with bodies, often with death and corpses: he photographs cadavers, amputees, dwarfs, and people with odd physical capabilities – people who are most often cast aside and marginalised by society. Due to the transgressive nature of the content of his images, his work has been labeled exploitative and has sometimes shocked public opinion (Heartney 1997: 35). It is no surprise that this abject work was often marginalised because of this challenging aspect. The images of Witkin's work that will be discussed are those which strongly relate to the themes of death and abjection. The corpse is the prime symbol of death. It is a signifier which has meant the end of life or death and, as discussed, it is regarded as a destabilizing entity that is excessive, wasteful and ultimately polluting. 'The potency of pollution is not an inherent one; it is proportional to the potency of the prohibition that founds it' (Kristeva 1982: 69). Society places much stress on creating order and structure around the corpse to ensure that it remains unable to enter or threaten the social order. What remains of the dead, the corpse, is kept clandestine, concealed from us in order to prevent an unwanted threat, while the people dealing directly with corpses are often considered 'different' (Smith 1999: 15). Kristeva adds;

Corpse fanciers, unconscious worshippers of a soulless body, are thus preeminent representations of inimical religion, identified by

murderous cults. [...] Worshipping corpses on the one hand, eating objectionable meat on the other: those are the two abominations that bring about divine malediction and thus point to two ends of the chain of prohibitions that binds the biblical text and entails a whole range of sexual and moral prohibition (Kristeva 1982: 110).

Witkin claims that the trigger for his fascination with the macabre occurred when, as a child, he bore witness to a car accident in which a young girl was decapitated;

It happened on Sunday when my mother was escorting my twin brother and me down the steps of the tenement where we lived. We were going to church. While walking down the hallway to the entrance of the building, we heard an incredible crash mixed with screaming and cries for help. The accident involved three cars, all with families in them. Somehow, in the confusion, I was no longer holding my mother's hand. At the place where I stood at the curb, I could see something rolling from one of the overturned cars. It stopped at the curb where I stood. It was the head of a little girl. I bent down to touch the face, to speak to it – but before I could touch it someone carried me away

<http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/biography/JPWitkin.html>).

Unsurprisingly, many ethical debates emerge when presented with Witkin's images. In the United States, with the exception of medico-legal investigative purposes, working with or photographing dead bodies is strictly prohibited. In order to avoid any such restrictions, Witkin therefore would only photograph unclaimed bodies in locations other than the United States, like, for example, Mexico (Smith 1999: 15). He treats the bodies and body parts as still-life objects, often surrounding them with the tropes of still-life paintings such as bowls of fruit, though he also produces more intricate and carnivalesque tableaux. His depiction of body parts and food in juxtaposition references an important part of Catholic religious celebration and spiritual ritual with the abject. In *Still Life, Mexico* (1992) (**Figure 41**), quintessential symbolic objects of Catholicism (bread and wine) in which Christ (his body) is believed to be spiritually present, are arranged along with a fish, a peach and an amputated leg, placed on a white napkin. The

notion of receiving the Eucharist in which Christ offers himself in the form of the bread and wine is well established, as Kristeva points out by combining the body and bread (Smith 1999: 17). She notes that;

The tie between the multiplication of loaves and the Eucharist is well known; it is established by another of Christ's statements, this time bringing together body and bread, 'This is my body.' By surreptitiously mingling the theme of 'devouring' with that of 'satiating,' that narrative is a way of taming cannibalism. It invites a removal of guilt from the archaic relation to the first pre-object (abject) of need: the mother (Kristeva 1982: 118).

In *Feast of Fools* (1990) (**Figure 42**) we see a heap of body parts. The viewer's eye constantly moves around as Witkin's composition is filled with an intertwined mixture of fruit, vegetables, an octopus and other seafood, a corpse and various body parts – hands, feet, a leg. Smith suggests that a feeling of horror arises from this violent juxtaposition of decay and nourishment, waste and goodness (Smith 1999: 17). What is disturbing is the presence of the dead baby, partly buried under still-life objects, in the middle of the image. The baby, with a mask around its eyes, leans against an arm with its chin pushed down on its chest, drawing the viewers attention to the line of stitch marks indicative of an autopsy.

Witkin's images all have a very strong light/dark contrast which carries reference to life and death. The image is visceral and Witkin tries to find beauty where others find disgust. In *Still Life, Mexico* and *Feast of Fools*, the display of food represents sustenance and yet also emphasises the transitory nature of life in the decay of material substances.

To an extent, Witkin appears to manipulate the visual codes of Baroque and Rococo still life paintings to downplay the often-explicit content, to blanket it with art historical 'acceptability'. One might agree with Smith's suggestion that, whilst Witkin's utilization of body parts has aesthetic validation, the viewer's shock is intensified because of the image's almost 'banal quality' (Smith 1999: 17). Essential to the notion of the abject is an associated catharsis. For Kristeva, abjection is closely bound to both religion and art, which she sees as a means of purifying the abject (Kristeva 1982: 17).

Therefore, when Witkin presents us with an image of decay, or of a corpse, it perhaps also proposes an opportunity to acknowledge one's fear of death and infection.

The various means of purifying the abject – the very catharses – make up the history of religion, and end up with that catharsis par excellence called art, both on the far and near side of religion. Seen from that standpoint, the artistic experience, which is rooted in the abject it utters and by the same token purifies, appears as the essential component of religiosity. That is perhaps why it is destined to survive the collapse of the historical forms of religions (Kristeva 1982: 17).

Art takes the form of religion in this instance, giving the viewer something to be disgusted at, yet something one can be purified of. Art straddles the secular and the sacred, as discussed briefly in relation to works such as Serrano's *Piss Christ*, but it can also be seen within Serrano's *Morgue* series, with his invasive views of the naked dead body combined with a sense of warding off the unknowable, the world hereafter. And in the case of Witkin, he places objects of both reverence and fear alongside those that are more ordinary, such as an altar.

Many of Witkin's photographs reference and allude to classical art, which provides the viewer with the sense that what they are witnessing is in some way familiar. Perhaps one of Witkin's most simple and elegant images is *Corpus Medius* (2000) (**Figure 43**). The image depicts a man's body that has been cut in half. The cadaver is photographed from the waist down. The legs are gracefully lying on a table covered in black cloth. A drawn curtain hangs to the left of the image. The corpse's feet are crossed at the ankles; his flaccid penis rests across his leg. A line of stitches is visible on the man's belly, leading the eye to the curve of the penis, along the leg to the feet and back again. The carefully arranged body is tilted in a $\frac{3}{4}$ view so that we can see inside the severed mid-section. Witkin's image references the beauty evident in the partial figures of classical Roman and Greek sculpture. It is interesting to note that, during the Renaissance, the creation of the portrait bust by the Romans resulted in the interest and democratization of the partial figure (Elsen 1969: 13). This fragmentation of the figure gave rise to an aesthetic in which the progressively broken down qualities were made desirable. In the Baroque period there was a desire by connoisseurs to have souvenirs of ancient

fragments, hence the motivation for producing partial figures (Elsen 1969: 17). Witkin's use of art historical references and photographic skill, however, are directed towards the corpse – the most potent taboo in contemporary Western culture. To photograph the corpse is one way to confront this taboo around death. Furthermore, to photograph fragments of bodies ruptures this taboo at an even deeper level, displaying what is abject (St George 2005: 244). Now the viewer is confronted by disgust and horror at the destruction of the integrity of our own body image and the assault against preserving and maintaining the body intact and within its limits (Elsen 1969: 92).

Witkin's *Portrait as Vanité, New Mexico* (1994) (**Figure 44**), references the still-life vanitas genre, and notably Philippe de Champaign's (1602 – 1674) painting *Vanitas* (1670) (**Figure 45**). The genre representing death reflects a similar sentiment to the *memento mori* – 'remembrance of death'- and forces the viewer to confront the transience of life. In *Vanitas*, the viewer comes face to face with the skull, and therefore with their own future destiny. The human skull also suggests physical decay and death, which is closely aligned with the abject. Witkin's image depicts a naked, masked man with one arm, standing behind a plank of wood. This image alludes to Bacchus – the Roman God of wine and the associated notions of excess and virility. Garlands of grapes hang from either side of his head. The man's hand rests on a skull positioned on the plank, and his penis, echoing the same vertical line as his arm, points to the skull, close enough to penetrate it (St George 2005: 115). Witkin creates another world by draping his subjects in art historical props. Ivan Berry (1998: 34) describes Witkin's photographic tableaux as elaborately constructed moments in time that are staged, fictional representations of both a nightmare and fantasy world. In this way Witkin's work incites a dual perspective, inviting us to see both the horrific and sacred and through these to find beauty in the grotesque.

Like Serrano's images, Witkin's photographs call to mind the tradition of post mortem photography, in his attempt to re-create a new scene, which ultimately and ironically makes the signs of death more vivid and clear. Novelist Michael Dibdin writes in *The Pathology Lesson* (*Granta* 39: Spring 1992), 'Nothing that matters can happen to the dead, and nothing that happens to them can matter'. The irony of his tone conveys his awareness that the deceased are subject to a great deal of manipulation by the living. Witkin tries to shape and construct the meaning of his images through the use of

costumes and props and his alteration of the photographic print. He intensifies his abject context in the physical processes to which he subjects his negatives and images. They appear almost abused – gouged, scratched, splattered and stained with chemicals, giving them the worked appearance of something abject and suggestive of decay. Witkin’s ‘interventions’ on the image’s surface become as much a part of the process as the way his scenes are manipulated or staged. He intervenes by moving, setting up and positioning his models (corpses).

The photograph *Man Without a Head* (1993) (**Figure 46**) is an example of this manipulation and intervention. In his relaxed pose, the body of a man without a head sits occupying a liminal space between life and death. The figure is casually seated in the corner of a tiled room, naked except for his socks, his hands resting on his thighs. He has been positioned on a chair covered with black cloth and a white drape hanging behind him. To the left of the image is a blackened window, and a black table covered with a white cloth. To the right of the image is a doorway. It is a clinical and featureless room.

Despite the relaxed pose of the man, the picture is made intensely disturbing by the fact that he has no head and the interior of his neck is clearly visible, revealing the inside of his body, as in *Corpus Medius* (**Figure 43**). Abjected parts of the body that should remain on the inside are explicitly portrayed in this photograph. The image allows the abject in, and it encroaches upon every social taboo and conventional boundary. Mutilated bodies become phobic objects; their threat is tied to the frailty of the Symbolic Order and the impossibility of mastering death. They signify that which is unnamable and unrepresentable; they localise the fear of nothingness (Chanter 2008: 90). What forces a reaction to the image is our realization of the fact that we are witnessing a photograph of a man without a head, and it is almost too horrific to be true. ‘The assault is real’ (Smith 1999: 15). Witkin says of *Man Without a Head* in an interview with Andres Serrano:

What I wanted to do was not make a photograph per se. I wanted (as I always do) to honour the condition of this man... I acknowledged the fact that I had the power to direct this, and said... ‘Lets lift him up and put him on a chair.’ ...But he kept falling off, and the blood was

coming out of him, and the only way I was able to position him was to take his hands and balance him; so he was informing me, in death, how he should be photographed. And he had socks on, and the socks were the convincing factor in making the photograph. Had he not been wearing them, it would have been too raw and punishing, but the fact that he had those socks on meant that he was still in a very, very contemporary human circumstance (Celant 1995: 38 – 39).

Parallels can be drawn between Witkin's process of photographing this body with that of the post-mortem photographers of the nineteenth century and their attempts to capture a moment that has deliberately been staged, along with their attempts to maintain the bodily boundaries of a deceased person. Furthermore, the socks humanize the image because they represent a prosaic action of the living and of daily life that somehow provides the corpse with a lived reality. The socks are Barthes' *punctum* in this image.

Witkin explores a process of re-examining what we regard as beautiful, resulting in images of raw horror and intense fascination. This encapsulates our conflicting opinions when viewing a photograph by Witkin, or Serrano. Uncannily beautiful and threatening, they are transgressive in their violation of the boundaries of the Symbolic Order in Western society (Smith 1999: 12). This relates to the psychoanalytic concept of the uncanny. Sigmund Freud's *unheimlich* ('uncanny') is defined as ambiguity about the extent to which something is, or is not, alive (Kauffman 1998: 27). 'It derives its terror not from something externally alien or unknown but on the contrary, from a feeling of familiarity that arises, which defeats our efforts to separate ourselves from it' (<http://theliterarylink.com/uncanny.html>).

Freud associates the taboo with the uncanny. For Freud, '[taboo] means, on the one hand, 'sacred', 'consecrated', and on the other 'uncanny', 'dangerous', 'forbidden', 'unclean'... Thus 'taboo' has about it a sense of something unapproachable, and it is principally expressed in prohibitions and restrictions' (Herbst 1999: 108). In Western culture, the sight of the dead body is predominantly regarded as taboo. They are objects that the law of the symbolic – that is, the codes of conduct established in the social order by the symbolic's symbols and languages – prohibits. Geoffrey Harpham maps out a set

of reactions to the taboo which also refers to the Burkian sublime: *fear* (anxiety, horror); *awe* and *fascination* (astonishment); *mirth* (laughter); and *disgust* (repulsion). Fear and disgust can be placed under the general term repulsion; laughter and astonishment can be placed under the general term attraction. In short, taboos cause an emotional wavering of feelings of attraction and repulsion (Herbst 1999: 108), which correlates with Kristeva's theory. Some people are drawn to the abject just as Serrano and Witkin are in their overt display of confronting it. Kristeva describes this aspect of the abject as *jouissance*: 'One does not know it, one does not desire it, one joys in it' (Kristeva 1982: 9). Barthes describes it as 'a pleasure without separation' (Kearney 1994: 328), for abjection 'does not radically cut off the subject from what threatens it (Kristeva 1982: 9). Kristeva suggests that it is because of this 'passion' that 'one thus understands why so many victims of the abject are its fascinated victims – if not its submissive and willing ones' (Kristeva 1982: 9).

Generally when a society has a secret it is called taboo. And all cultures have them. They appear to be essential for controlling society, while many creative people seek to challenge those taboos they find unacceptable. This is true of photographs of the dead. Taboos arise to reassert the boundary between the living and the dead. Jean Baudrillard in *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (1993) notes his position on the taboo status of death when he writes that we no longer know how to relate to the dead: 'Since, today *it is not normal to be dead*, and this is new. To be dead is an unthinkable anomaly; nothing else is as offensive as this. Death is a delinquency, and an incurable deviancy. ...They [the dead] are no longer even packed in and shut up, but obliterated' (Baudrillard 1993: 126). There appears to be such secrecy around death and the reasons for this abjection lie in the social construction of boundaries and limitations, manipulations of power, and the need for protection. To reveal these social concealments, rejections and taboos, is all part of Serrano and Witkin's agenda.

This chapter has attempted to outline the representation of death in the photographic work of Andres Serrano and Joel-Peter Witkin. It has explored notions of the abject corpse primarily within Kristeva's abjection theory. The corpse has been, and still is, regarded as a defiling, polluting, abject object. Contemporary Western society wishes to contain it within the limits and boundaries of the Symbolic Order. However, before this, with the first appearances of photography in the nineteenth century, post-mortem

photographic portraiture allowed one to 'record' death, and particularly the corpse of a loved one. This essentially ensured that the deceased remained an important part of everyday life.

Contemporary Western society's attitudes towards death have gone through a number of shifts and changes. These have been explored throughout this dissertation, highlighted by works of art. There appears to be a conspiracy to conceal real death in contemporary society. Media portrayals of death are constantly acted out through film and television, which ultimately allows society to distance itself from accepting any reality or emotional pressure which is really part of accepting the reality of death. This reinforces the taboo status of death.

In Serrano and Witkin's work, however, the viewer is forced to confront death and the corpse, to approach the abject and its uncertain territory. Yet they both manipulate the viewer into finding beauty in what people find most difficult to look at.

Conclusion

This dissertation has attempted to explore visual representations of death in Western society, looking specifically at artistic representations from the Middle Ages to the present.

To achieve this objective, the works of Andres Serrano and Joel-Peter Witkin have been explored, along with the importance and significance of abjection in relation to the role their images play in contemporary Western visual culture. Furthermore, the work of the candidate, David Buchler, has also been explored. These works have been analysed with reference to Phillipe Ariès' book *Western Attitudes Towards Death: From the Middle Ages to the Present* (1974), and Julia Kristeva's abjection theory presented in her book *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1982).

This research has grown out of the candidate, David Buchler's own experiences and subsequent art practices which have explored and represented notions of death and mortality. As discussed above, death has become a rather complex issue. Taboos around death do not only have to do with corpses, but also with other aspects that society wishes to contain or suppress – such as those aspects of dying that Buchler deals with: the process of dying, sickness, hospitals. Many institutions constantly ensure that these aspects remain hidden and secured from public view. This research has therefore been a means of both continuing academic discussion in this area and allowing the candidate to further engage with a topic relevant to his own art practices. It therefore stands to reason that he has elected to explore the works of Serrano and Witkin, both of which have had a significant influence on his artistic production to date. In hindsight, the process of this research has allowed the candidate to gain further insight, at both an academic and applied level, into the representations of death and the abject in these artists' works. The interest in researching often abject imagery extends the belief that there is always an ever-present, probing desire to further one's understanding about our mortal nature and about death. With this premise, Buchler's artistic work and research is given ground.

In chapter one of this dissertation, the concept of the abject, and more specifically Kristeva's investigation into the abject, were outlined. In this section, the abject was found to be not so much an object or a subject, but rather a threat against subjects. It is

as a result of this threatening quality of the abject, that subjects must exclude and revolt against that which is seen as a threat. Kristeva highlights the corpse as a key example of abjection. As a result, it has been seen how representations of the corpse and death, when entering the social world, become seen as a threat to the structure and organisation of society, and are therefore largely prohibited and avoided by society. However, as Ariès illustrates, the attitudes and representations of death have changed over time, and it has only been within the last two centuries that these representations have been constructed as abject and taboo. To this effect, Ariès outlined three attitudes towards death in the course of the Middle Ages to the present.

It has been described how, in the Middle Ages, death was not ignored, but prepared for and to a large extent ritualised. This context allowed for and encouraged the production of representations of death in this era. Around the twelfth century, the interest in one's own existence and death developed. Later, around the eighteenth century, the attitude shifts towards a concern with the death of the other person. Later still, exacerbated by the First and Second World wars, drastic changes in attitudes towards death occurred, and death's taboo status was cultivated. However, it has been noted that death has not always been regarded as taboo, nor was the display of the human corpse necessarily gratuitous. Instead, it has been and was used as a purposeful means of conveying the extremes of the human condition, as in Géricault's intention to portray extreme suffering in *The Raft of the Medusa*. Some of the works analysed hold much significance even currently. Holbein's *Dance of Death*, for example, holds the same messages today as it did to the illiterate of the time: that there is no protection from death.

Chapter two dealt primarily with photographic representations of death, notably in the work of Serrano and Witkin. A framework was established with regards to the abject corpse in order to discuss photographic depictions of it. It was emphasised that abjection refers to a collective condition of our humanity and is based on oppositions and boundaries between the living and the dead. Serrano and Witkin both couple life and death in their work, and this counters the split between death and life that society has constructed.

Since the abject is situated outside of the Symbolic Order, confronting it can often prove to be a difficult task and traumatic experience. The living discard the corpse in order to protect themselves from the horror of mortality (Herbst 1999: 353). Hence, Witkin and Serrano's artworks reflect such anxiety around mortality. However, as in the case of death, it was highlighted that abjection can never be abjected. As Kristeva suggested, it will always encroach upon the borders of our lives.

Works such as *Portrait as Vanité, New Mexico* by Witkin are contemporary vanitas, a reminder of our death. In order to understand the basis of Witkin and Serrano's arguments, it was important to acknowledge at various points throughout this dissertation, the impact and influence that historical images of death have had on contemporary artists. The development of photography and postmortem portraiture of the nineteenth century, including attitudes towards death at the time, were groundbreaking. Images of the deceased had a profound impact on people's lives during the time and they ensured that the dead remained an important and unforgotten part of everyday life. Now, these old photographs are hidden away; kept clandestine. Witkin and Serrano both possess great photographic skill and have referenced and re-invented these images directed at the corpse, aiming to disrupt the silence around death. Furthermore, these artists attempt to photograph 'real death': the kind of death that is most repressed in death images presented to us in popular culture. Serrano most significantly explores this in his *Morgue* series, revealing the truthfulness of the corpse. When confronting one of Witkin or Serrano's images, one responds to the formal beauty, but also feels shocked or even repulsed. The aestheticization of Serrano's large-scale images in particular, contradicts the subject that has been brought to bear – the death of a person. However, the formal beauty of the image often holds the horror of the occurrence at bay.

Many images in this dissertation look at the normality of death and the intensity of death. For example, the *Dance of Death* images in the Middle Ages were made to reflect and teach people that death was inevitable, that it was a normal part of life. Serrano and Wikin's works reveal a more graphic, unedited portrayal of death. This juxtaposition has been used to invert expectations and thus present a greater understanding of the changing attitudes towards death. In addition, the investigation into various historical and artistic representations of death has been to find differences and

similarities between them, which will ultimately result in a new creative vocabulary on the subject. From this research, it is clear that the production of art that explores and depicts content of this nature is complex. Artists working within these themes of death and the abject appear to be presented with several challenges. It has been shown that this has not always been the case, but that these challenges are largely influenced by current views and reactions towards death and by what is considered abject in contemporary Western society.

This research into death as a topic was conducted because social reactions to death have been so various and have notably shifted over time. Therefore, the attitudes and responses to the subject of death in art remain fluid, which means that artistic responses to the subject offer a unique social contribution.

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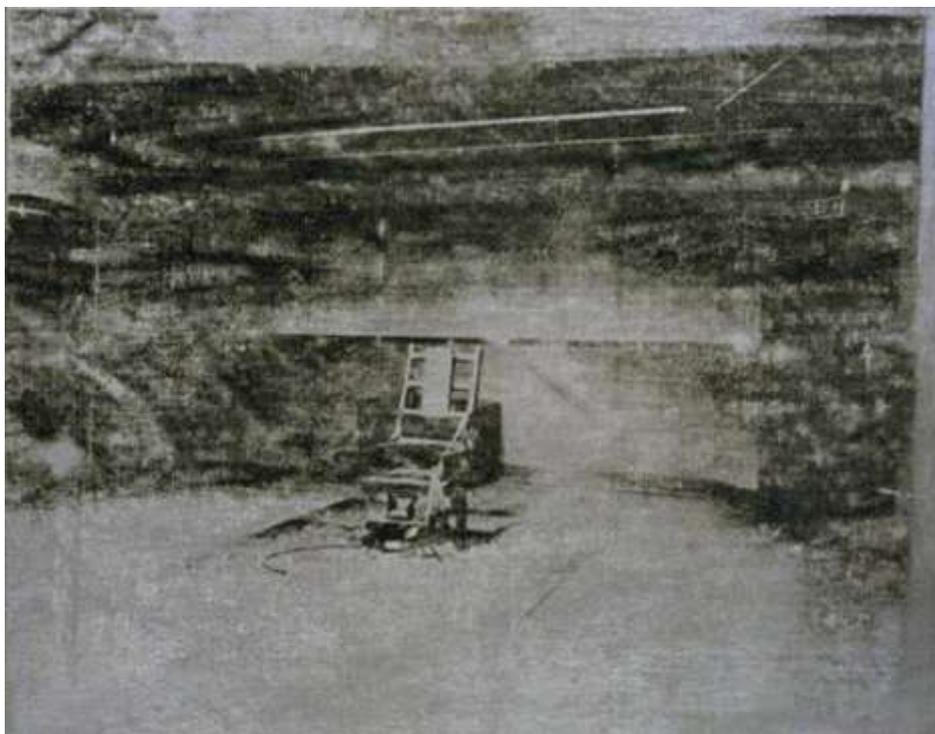


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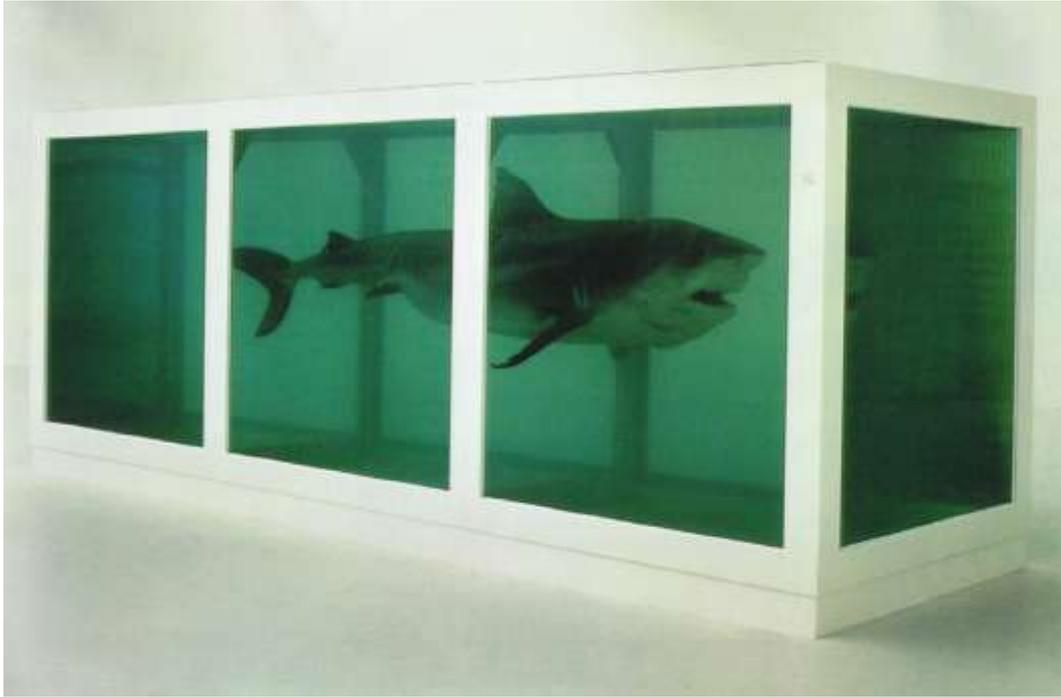


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