

MEMENTO MORI:
POSTMORTEM PHOTOGRAPHY IN THE
PANNONIAN RUSYN COMMUNITY

The insatiability of the photographic eye changes the terms of confinement in the cave, our world. In teaching us a new visual code, photographs alter and enlarge our notions of what is worth looking at and what we have a right to observe. They are a grammar, and even more importantly, an ethics of seeing (Sonntag 2005: 3). Postmortem photography had emerged in England in the Victorian era, the desire to create these photographs during the delicate moment of death came from the desire to perpetuate the image of the deceased, making them eternal. This representation of the body was captured in an image that would forever (or at the very least a long time) preserve the identity of the deceased. Unlike the preservation of the body itself, such as embalming or mummification, the image turns into a means to challenge immortality (Borgo, Licata, and Iorio 2015: 104). These authors believe that the foundation for success of postmortem photography dates back to the Renaissance, a period in which the clergy and nobility were portrayed in paintings on their deathbeds. Ancient forms of *thanato metamorphosis* aimed to preserve corpses. Therefore, immortalizing death in a photograph was a way to give to the body a kind of visual mummification that would ensure its apparent integrity by preserving this moment and preventing later decomposition (Borgo, Licata and Iorio 2015: 109). Unlike mummification in ancient Egypt, these photos can be considered images of a funeral art, much like the masks that the Romans made using a facial cast of the dead (Borgo, Licata and Iorio 2015: 109).

Postmortem photography of the Pannonian Rusyn community (Slavic minority in Serbia) in Ruski Krstur, at the beginning of the 20th century, was produced by a self-taught First World War veteran, Osif Budinski, followed by his son Josif. These photographs have been forgotten for at least half a century, but were fortunately very well preserved. An older system of conservation was

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employed, one that included preserving the negatives on glass plates. Even after the invention of cellulose film, the father Osif insisted on conserving his photographs on glass, unlike Josif. The glass plates were kept as a collection in the archive of the Parish of the Greek Catholic Church²² in Ruski Kerestur, Serbia. The discovery had initiated a project of digitalization and a search for the families of the people in the photographs. Apart from the postmortem photographs that depict specific religious customs of adults and children, the collection included many photographs from the early 20th century and the interwar period. These photographs have value not only for the ancestors of the families depicted in them, but also serve as a source from which we can learn about or remember how our ancestors lived. The collection has been saved from decay and used for a number of exhibitions²³ portraying the culture of Pannonian Rusyns in the context of the most common ethnographic theme of rites of passage – christenings, graduations, weddings, and funerals of the community. One unusual aspect of the collection is the inclusion of photographs of deceased children, reflecting a cultural custom of preserving the memory of the deceased because of a high mortality rate in children at that time.

Looking into the photographs chosen for this essay we will consider the work of Borgo, Licata and Iorio which offers an analysis of three different styles of the *memento mori* photographs – the first being an expression of serenity, portraying the person as if they were asleep as a way to conceal the reality of the moment, the actual state of death emphasized by symbols such as crucifixes, flowers, and holy books (Borgo, Licata and Iorio, 2015: 105). In analyzing the allegorical aspect of this custom, the authors have concluded that this moment became a performance of death, rather than a commemoration – the family members, the priest, the photographer, and his assistants were present as well as their bulky equipment (Borgo, Licata and Iorio 2015: 106). The second style represents the “Alive but Dead” and, as the authors conclude, the denial of death is much more evident, photographing the deceased in an upright position to keep the eyes open, or drawing pupils over the eyelids directly onto the photographs: a sort of *ante litteram* photoshop (Borgo, Licata and Iorio 2015: 106). The third style of the

²² Together with experts from the Institute for the Protection of Cultural Monuments of Vojvodina and the Museum of Vojvodina, in 2015 the Institute for Culture of Ruthenians in Vojvodina began working on the digitalization of glass negative plates kept at the Parish of the Greek Catholic Church in Ruski Krstur.

Source: <https://zavod.rs/library/e-database/photography/glass-plates-of-budinski-photographers/>

²³ This essay is partly inspired by my bachelor thesis on the Pannonian Rusyn community, which was defended in 2019. Source: https://issuu.com/svetlosc/docs/03_v_za_web. Additional context: From the author’s bachelor thesis, one of the interlocutors states how they have never seen postmortem photography in other ethnic groups, and never in the Serbian community – however, this was a personal remark, and there are many cases of postmortem photography especially on gravestones in Vojvodina.

postmortem photographs depicts the deceased person hidden within the family and it is usually quite difficult to differentiate the deceased from the living – only a meticulous observation can capture details to identify the deceased, such as an expressionless look or the central position of the dead. The deceased was inserted perfectly as “alive among the living” (Borgo, Licata and Iorio 2015: 107). An additional fourth style is proposed by the authors, named “the hidden mother”. The child would be placed in the lap of the ‘mother’, held by a figure completely covered with a sheet (Borgo, Licata and Iorio 2015: 107). The conclusion of this research offers an interesting perspective, that by understanding the Victorian culture, we can state that this custom is not an indicator of an obsession with death, it actually demonstrates the full acceptance of death (Borgo, Licata and Iorio 2015: 108). The photographs chosen for this essay depict what the authors Borgo, Licata and Iorio call funeral photography, in which the children and adults are already laid in the coffin, surrounded by their family members. What is most interesting is the choice of clothing for the children, which is always white, to denote the purity of the child – even the children’s caskets would have been painted white for this exact reason. What is known from this period is that the children had been christened as soon as they were born and not 40 days after birth, due to the previously mentioned high mortality rate so that they could – as was believed – go to heaven, but also have a proper Christian burial.

Drawing on the work of Marianne Hirsch, and her understanding of the photographic image as a medium that clarifies the connection between familial and affiliative postmemory and the mechanisms by which public archives and institutions have been able both to reembody and to reindividualize “cultural/archival” memory (Hirsch 2008: 115). As she continues to explain, more than oral or written narratives, photographic images that survive massive devastation and outlive their subjects, function as ghostly revenants from an irretrievably lost past world (Hirsch 2008: 115). Additionally, Walter Benjamin cultivated a photographic style of writing. In his work, he thinks photographically; that is to say, he conjures up the workings of self and memory in photographic terms. He observes how it is said that when a person dies, it takes over the articulation of a life to the person who still just about lives, evoking the cliché of the proto-photographic strip of images of a life whirring through a dying person’s head. For Benjamin, memories burst up at moments of crisis (Leslie 2015: 32). Understanding this approach, postmortem photography exists as an evocative memory of the person who has passed away. Capturing their last image is to create an evocative memory for the family members, or in other contexts to evoke memories and feelings toward ancestors and their lives.

Considering Hirsch’s understanding of postmemory and the reembodiment of cultural memory, this essay showcases the context of the postmortem

photographs which have been exhibited in a museological context to depict the culture of the Pannonian Rusyn community and its past. These photographs have been used as a peculiar bricolage – changing their meaning and use from a family portrait, a *memento mori* of a lost child or family member, they are modified into an exhibition. As Susan Sontag notes – to photograph is to appropriate the thing photographed. Photographed images do not seem to be statements about the world so much as pieces of it, miniatures of reality that anyone can make or acquire (Sonntag 2005: 2). All photographs are *memento mori*. To take a photograph is to participate in another person's, or thing's, mortality, vulnerability, mutability. Precisely by slicing out this moment and freezing it, all photographs testify to time's relentless melt (Sonntag 2005: 11).



Photo 1

The photograph depicts the deceased Franjo Bučko before the burial. The deceased is placed in an open casket for friends and family to give their last goodbyes before the funeral ceremony begins.



Photo 2

The only information given for this photograph is the name of the father – Janko Tirjakla with his family. The classical composition of these postmortem photographs of children usually depicts the parents, and other family members looking at the child, as guardians.



Photo 3

Depiction of the preparation and last goodbyes to the boy Ljubomir Ljupko Arva, photographed with his parents and grandmothers. One can derive fashion rules for women in the community from these photographs. It is known that women of this period wore head scarfs after getting married, especially to religious ceremonies. The colors of the clothing and scarfs depended on the age of the woman.



Photo 4

The Photograph depicts a girl Irinka Hardi, with a specific custom called „straža” (eng. *keeping guard*). Family members and friends would gather around the deceased and keep him or her ‘safe’ before the funeral. Children would rarely wear black clothes for a funeral, it was more common for the adults.



Photo 5

One of the most heartbreaking photographs of the collection depicts a soldier who had come home on leave only to find his child deceased and had to prepare for the funeral. The family has not yet been identified.

SOURCES

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MEMENTO MORI: ПОСМРТНА ФОТОГРАФИЈА У ПАНОНСКОЈ РУСИНСКОЈ ЗАЈЕДНИЦИ

САЖЕТАК

Фотографија, као нови визуелни код, изменила је начин на који посматрамо свет и границе онога што сматрамо дозвољеним да видимо. У том оквиру, овај рад истражује постмортем фотографију панонских Русина у Руском Крстуру почетком XX века, показујући како је ова пракса обликовала локалне визуелне и културне представе о смрти. Анализа открива специфичне modele памћења и начине визуализације покојника који су били карактеристични за заједницу.

Кључне речи: посмртна фотографија, Русини, Војводина, Руски Крстур, почетак XX века, представе о смрти.

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