Shadows of the Dead: Mediating the Archive Photograph

edited by Peter Doyle & John Potts

The essays in this issue of Scan are derived from papers originally presented at Ghost Town, a one day symposium on film, photograph, memory and the present, held by Macquarie University Media Department in Sydney in October 2004. Speakers at that event — media and cultural studies scholars, historians, museum curators — were invited to describe and reflect upon their various research engagements with archive photographs. Although given no specific directions to do so, all speakers selected a number of photographs to show, either as photographic transparencies or as PowerPoint presentations. Some used the photographs as illustrative supplements to a primarily oral/verbal presentation, others used the photographs as prompts in broader discussions of the ontology of the photographic image. Yet others dealt primarily with intrinsic content of the photographs, using the visual artefact as evidence.

In turning those diverse talks into peer reviewed scholarly essays, contributors reported a surprisingly consistent set of “staging” difficulties to be overcome. The talks on the day of the seminar privileged the visual: the carefully chosen photographs projected onto a large screen in a comfortable, dimly-lit, acoustically well-designed room inevitably produced an almost cinematic experience. The progression of discourse and image over the whole day - a melding of the pleasures of the gaze and the pleasures of the text - had a cumulative effect on participants, establishing seductive rhythms of mood and ideas.

But those relationships between image and verbiage needed to be rethought for the essay form, in which, necessarily, the lexical/textual has priority, from which the aural “grain” of the presenter’s voice is absent, and in which the images are reduced to a few square inches of jpeg on a computer screen. Such seemingly minor design matters (page layout, formatting, framing, placement of images) as well as more structural “idea design” issues (“storytelling” and scholarly exposition questions) together replicate in miniature some of the explicit debates, problems and uncertainties surrounding photographs, the photographic archive and our relationships with them, which the essayists in this issue address.

Lindsay Barrett in The Utilitarian Philosopher considers an early period in the life of scientist, philosopher, economist William Stanley Jevons, who as a young man in the mid nineteenth century worked at the Sydney mint. Barrett finds Jevons’ photographic perambulations through the city and countryside to be a kind of synecdoche of Jevons’ larger life work, all of which involved an almost obsessive desire to observe and record. Barrett sees Jevons, who later developed utility theory, a central concept and sine qua non of neoclassical economics, as “an example of the panoptic machine made human, and turned loose upon the world.”

Sue Doyle’s Doomed Streets of Sydney 1900-1928: Images from the City Council's Demolition Books detects in the images in question visual traces of a series of dichotomies which both operated within and largely structured the culture of Sydney at the time — such as urbanism versus suburbanism, health versus morbidity, future versus past. Doyle’s photographs are simultaneously products of and agents of the forces she describes. At the same time they offer to the historically informed contemporary sensibility a sometimes sly, even subversive commentary on those processes.

Caleb Williams in Haunted by a Vitality that is No More negotiates a set of cryptic images drawn from a collection of early NSW police negatives. Their accompanying documentation long since lost, these images invite interpretation, and Williams here combines a close reading of the visual content with a kind of poetic ‘riffing’ which sometimes approaches in rhythm and style the ‘free association’ of psycho-analysis.
Peter Doyle’s Public Eye: Sydney Police Mug Shots 1912-1930 also considers images from the NSW police collection limiting the discussion to offender portraits or ‘mug shots’ produced mostly in the 1920s. He finds in these images anomalous qualities of ‘presence’ and apparent agency in the subjects which go against established police photographic procedure of the day, and which more broadly challenge simplistic totalizing formulations of the photographic gaze as purely and inevitably authoritarian.

These articles are representative of a field of cultural enquiry and production which has engaged writers, researchers, historians and film-makers over the last ten to fifteen years. This field has produced its own mode of expression: a form of writing that blends analytical detail with theoretical meditations. A key figure in this regard has been Luc Sante, who presented the keynote address at the Ghost Town symposium, and who is featured in the Information section of this issue.

Sante’s book Low Life: Lures and Snares of Old New York (1991) led to a renewed enthusiasm for lost histories of the modern city. His subsequent book Evidence (1992) helped create a worldwide interest in the archive forensic photograph. His influence has been felt in both the direction of his research - focusing on archival police photography - and the style of his writing, which manages to be both artistic and forensic.

The poetic register of his writing is apparent in Evidence, which begins: “Time in its passing casts off particles of itself in the form of images, documents, relics, junk.” (Sante 1992: ix) His books are beautifully written, yet paradoxically, the objects of his analysis are often confronting, gruesome. The images he studies often show murder victims, photographed in their bloody death positions by workmanlike police photographers, who were often policemen themselves. The locations epitomize banality: bedrooms, bars, alleys, vacant lots. The archival images uncovered by Sante disclose “the texture and grain of a lost New York, laid bare by the circumstances of murder.” (x)

Sante's analysis of these photographs of obscure and forgotten homicides proceeds on (at least) two levels. First, he provides a detailed dissection of each photograph, drawing significance from tiny details, contextualising the image where possible with what little is known of its immediate time and place. The second level is a more general reflection on mortality, as provoked by the instrument of photography. He remarks of the homicide photographs that “[l]ives stopped by a razor or bullet were frozen by a flash of powder…” (x). For Sante, photography is a medium in more than one sense; it is a “conduit between the living and the world of spirits” (1992: 61). Following Roland Barthes’ observation in Camera Lucida (1981) that every photograph is about death, Sante suggests in Evidence that “[p]hotography, like murder, interrupts life” (1992: 61). Sante’s writing here and elsewhere combines the lyrical theorising of Roland Barthes, the cool empiricism of Dashiell Hammett, and the elliptical meditations to be found in Walter Benjamin’s essays (1968).

The field opened up by Luc Sante has its hazards as well as its challenges. As he remarks in Evidence, homicide photographs will unavoidably and regrettably incite “morbid fascination and dull voyeurism” (1992: xi). He acknowledges the “act of disrespect” in the “act of looking at them” (xii), one component of the ethical complexity pertaining to archival research. This ethics attaches to the full sweep of archival work: the thrill of the search, the shock and joy of discovery, the strange intimacy between researcher and object, issues of ownership and propriety, questions of respect, even the breaking of “taboos”, in re-presenting images of the dead.

Sante's keynote address Trespassing, or, the Ethics of Archives, published in the Information section, offers an important discussion of ethics and the photographic archive, drawing on his experiences preceding and following the publication of Evidence.

Also in the Information section of this issue, Sante discusses his life as a flaneur of cultures low, raffish and residual in an interview with Peter Doyle.

In addition, the Information section contains an essay by Geoff Barker, offering a professional archivist and curator’s take on ethics and procedures surrounding digital reproduction of archive photographs.
References


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