

Memento Mori: The Case of Post-mortem Photography in Costa Rica

“The custom of photographing corpses, funerals, and mourners is as old as photography itself” (Ruby 50).

As Jay Ruby has stated, post-mortem photography has been around since the beginning of this art form. Despite its longevity and its prevalence in most countries of the world, this phenomenon awakens strong, often negative reactions from most people. This paper will include a brief introduction of the evolution of this custom, principally in the United States and in England, a context in which it was particularly popular, in order to later focus on the reality of this practice at home, in Costa Rica. The initial part of the paper, addressing the Anglophone context, is a necessary component because the first photographers that arrived in Costa Rica were European (principally English), and American. After this introduction, the discussion will center on the Costa Rican reality of the phenomenon, a reality that was obtained by interviewing people who had this type of photographs as well, as other individuals who are directly related to the process of death and mourning, such as morticians and funeral directors. The Costa Rican findings are limited to the Catholic tradition, since the country has been predominantly Catholic since colonial times and because as a researcher, I wanted to investigate whether there were significant differences between post-mortem photography in an Anglophone, mostly Protestant milieu, and this type of photography in the Costa Rican, mostly Catholic tradition. In fact, one of the main conclusions in the study is that Catholic beliefs *do* determine the funerary rites performed, and they influence aspects related to taking pictures of the deceased. The final section of the paper will concentrate on a discussion of the beneficial role of post-mortem photography in

the experience of mourning, thus dismissing—or at least challenging—reactionary views against this practice.

Author's Biography

Ilse M. Bussing holds a B.A. in Comparative Literature, from the College of William and Mary, a Master's in Latin American Literature, from the University of Costa Rica, and a Ph.D. in English Literature, from the University of Edinburgh. Her Ph.D. thesis 'The Haunted House in Mid-to-Late Victorian Gothic Fiction', explored the convergence of architecture and social history in a specific site, thus revealing one of her main research interests, the interdisciplinary study of space in life and fiction. She is lecturer in English and Comparative Literature at the University of Costa Rica, as well as in the Master's in English Literature program, where she teaches a Gothic Literature specialty course. Her publications focus mostly on the Gothic.

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