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Visual codes of secrecy : photography of death and projective identification

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Visual Codes of Secrecy: Photography of Death and Projective Identification

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree

Doctor of Philosophy

from

University of Wollongong

by

Julia St George BCA Hons

Creative Arts 2005

I, Julia St George, declare that this thesis, submitted in fulfilment of the requirement for the award of Doctor of Philosophy, in the Department of Creative Arts, University of Wollongong, is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. The document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

Julia St George
-- August 2005

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Abstract

My thesis examines the nexus between secrecy, death, photography and the psychoanalytic dynamic of projective identification, which is an unconscious psychoanalytic interaction which translates and potentially transforms rejected or denied experiences. The visual codes of secrecy, evident through the content and form of photographic images, exist as a nuanced means of social communication. I write about how social secrecy regarding death translates into the visual image. I have isolated social issues of taboos around the representation of the dead in contemporary western culture to explore the dynamics of cultural secrecy.

My argument is that photography is the most appropriate form of artistic visual expression because of its links to truthfulness and revelation. It allows a fresh perspective on secrecy through the analysis of images from the difficult genre of postmortem photographs by artists such as Jeffrey Silverthorne, Sue Fox and Andre Serrano. The thesis exposes the concealment/revelation paradox indexical of secrecy. I focus in particular on the photographic treatment of the dead body by artists Sebastião Salgado and Joel Peter Witkin, referencing their work in relation to projective identification. Some of the images of the corpse in my thesis are disturbing and confronting – my argument identifies some of the reasons this is so. This study breaks apart collusive patterns of thinking which adhere around the photographic codes of secrecy.