Secure the Shadow: Death and Photography in America

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Death and the way society comes to terms with it have become a major area of scholarly and popular interest, as evidenced in the work of such well-known figures as Philippe Ariès and Elisabeth Kübler Ross. Photographs and other forms of pictorial imagery play an important role in these investigations. *Secure the Shadow* is an original contribution that lies at the intersection of cultural anthropology and visual analysis, a field that Jay Ruby's previous writings have helped to define. It explores the photographic representation of death in the United States from 1840 to the present, focusing on the ways in which people have taken and used photographs of deceased loved ones and their funerals to mitigate the finality of death.

Sometimes thought to be a bizarre Victorian custom, photographing corpses has been and continues to be an important, if not recognized, occurrence in American life. It is a photographic activity, like the erotica produced in middle-class homes by married couples, that many privately practice but seldom circulate outside the trusted circle of close friends and relatives. Along with tombstones, funeral cards, and other images of death, these photographs represent one way in which Americans have attempted to secure their shadows.

Ruby employs newspaper accounts, advertisements, letters, photographers' account books, interviews, and other material to determine why and how photography and death became intertwined in the nineteenth century. He traces this century's struggle between America's public denial of death and a deeply felt private need to use pictures of those we love to mourn their loss. Americans take and use photographs of dead relatives and friends in spite of and not because of society's expectation about the propriety of these means. Ruby compares photographs and other pictorial media of death, founding his interpretations on the discovery of patterns in the appearance of the images and a reconstruction of the conditions of their production and utilization.

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