



## THE ICONOGRAPHY OF AUTOEROTIC ASPHYXIATION: FROM FANTASMATIC FETISH TO FORENSIC FACT<sup>1</sup>

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### *I. Images Bearing Witness*

It is to psychiatric and forensic experts that society allots the task of interpreting the nature and function of some of the most intimate and complex of human experiences, among them manifestations of sexuality and conditions of death. The interface between the two, central to certain strands of continental philosophy such as the writings of Georges Bataille, is articulated practically and authoritatively by forensic science in its role of making meaning out of ambiguous scenes of solitary death. A person dying in unusual circumstances becomes the object of an inquiry to ascertain both cause and mode of death, whereby experts arriving at a death scene have in mind certain categories that they subsequently use to help "explain" the type of death concerned (murder, suicide or misadventure).<sup>2</sup>

Amongst these categories, the term "auto-erotic fatality" is a construction of forensic science used to describe an apparently accidental death resulting from dangerous self-inflicted practices designed to enhance sexual pleasure during masturbation. These most usually involve a form of asphyxiation such as strangling, hanging, or plastic bag asphyxia.<sup>3</sup> The label

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2. In most States of the USA, for example, the mode of death must be identified on the death certificate as either natural, accidental, suicidal, or homicidal (usually abbreviated as NASH). See *Amok Journal: Sensurround Edition. A Compendium of Psycho-Physiological Investigations*, ed. Stuart Swezey (Los Angeles: Amok, 1995), 28.

3. The following sources will give the reader an idea of the diversity of methods documented: *Autoerotic Fatalities*, eds. Robert R. Hazelwood, et al. (Lexington: Lexington Books, 1983); Stephen Leadbeatter, "Dental Anaesthetic Death: An Unusual Autoerotic Episode," *The American Journal of Forensic Medicine and Pathology* 9 (1988): 60-63; Riazul H. Imami and Miftah Kemal, "Vacuum Cleaner Use in Autoerotic Death," *The American Journal of Forensic Medicine and Pathology* 9 (1988): 246-8; Ronald L. O'Halloran and Park Elliot Dietz, "Autoerotic Fatalities with Power Hydraulics," *Journal of Forensic Sciences* 38 (1993): 359-64.



Fig. 1.

“asphyxiophilia” is also used in the fields of sexology and psychiatry as an umbrella term for various manifestations of voluntary oxygen deprivation in the service of erotic pleasure.<sup>4</sup> Since living asphyxiophiliacs seldom present themselves to the psychiatric establishment for clinical diagnosis and treatment, almost all available “scientific knowledge” of this phenomenon has been accrued by forensic experts observing death scenes; that is, this category of person has been retroactively constructed as an already-silenced (self-silenced) subject.

Scientific accounts of these practices constitute a particularly rich corpus for analysis of the mechanisms of authoritative sexual epistemology. The double “secret” offered by

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4. John Money defines the term as “a sexual peculiarity in which sexueroic arousal and facilitation or attainment of orgasm are responsive to and dependent upon self-strangulation and asphyxiation up to, but not including, loss of consciousness.” See John Money, Gordon Wainwright and David Hingsburger, *The Breathless Orgasm: A Lovemap Autobiography of Asphyxiophilia* (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1991), 15-16. Hereafter cited in the text as B. Other terms used to describe this phenomenon are “hypoxyphilia,” “autoerotic asphyxia,” “sexual asphyxia” and “Kotzwarraism,” the latter after an eighteenth-century Czech composer who died of asphyxiation in the course of an erotic transaction with a prostitute.



asphyxiophilia (the “meaning” of an extreme and eccentric sexual desire and the discovery of the hidden cause and mode of death) exaggerates and literalizes the processes of discursive production of knowledge by which, according to a Foucauldian critical perspective, the whole field of sexuality is made to signify in the modern Western world. The writings of Michel Foucault bring to light here the complex net of interested power relations subtending the apparent neutrality of medico-legal and juridical discourses. Foucault’s project strikes at the very heart of the question of the status of interpretation. Foucault states: “There is nothing absolutely primary to interpret, for after all everything is already interpretation.”<sup>5</sup> These words summarize a premise that originates in Nietzsche’s writing on genealogy and morals; namely, that nothing lies outside of discursive production. For Nietzsche, there is no ontological reality capable of being described, there are only the processes of language and interpretation that *create* an object *and* its meaning.

However, forensic medicine continues to operate according to a positivistic logic of evidence, interpretability, and truth. By exposing and exploring the elemental details of, for example, a crime scene, they offer apparently verifiable assumptions based on observable phenomena. They contend that the key to the truth lies somewhere within the composition of the puzzle; that objects in the world are enigmas awaiting decoding. In addition, most scientific discussions of asphyxiophilia are forced to limit themselves to an assessment of static *post-mortem* evidence. Significantly, the body of evidence subjected to eager scrutiny here is not always, or not only, the literal *corpus delicti* of the dead asphyxiophiliacs themselves. When describing the standard characteristics of the asphyxiophiliac death scene, many researchers have made mention of the presence of visual stimuli set up by the practitioner, whether in the form of superimposed pornographic materials, meticulously executed self-portraits, or mirrors carefully positioned to offer a partial reflection of the act. Many photographs found at the scene of death depict (apparent) simulacra of (seemingly) dead and dying bodies, bound and constricted in such a way as to reveal the mechanisms of asphyxia.

The prevalence of wishful self-representation in these cases is consistently and insistently documented within the scientific accounts of asphyxiophilia. Visual representations of

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5. Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, Freud and Marx,” in James D. Faubion [ed.], *Essential Works of Michel Foucault, 1954-1984: Volume Two: Aesthetics, Method and Epistemology* (New York: New Press, 1998), 275.



Fig. 2.

suspended, gagged and strangled dead bodies watermark entries on asphyxiophilia in medico-legal textbooks and articles in journals of forensic medicine and pathology. We do not wish to claim that more visual material is collected and reproduced in studies of asphyxiophilia than for other types of death, yet because images of (seemingly) dead bodies play such an important part in asphyxiophilic scenarios, the forensic process of collecting and reproducing images acquires a singular value here. The status of these illustrations of asphyxiophilia becomes radically ambiguous, as it is frequently unclear whether the images have been created *post mortem* by the forensic expert for the purpose of



edification, or lifted straight from the death scene where they are presumed to have served as pornographic or affective icons for their owner. Whether the photographic subject is alive or dead is often extremely difficult to establish. The most unambiguous element perceptible in these strange cases is the desire of the commentator to be provided with a corroborative confessional account from beyond the grave.

Thus, just as images created by asphyxiophiliacs apparently attempt to represent, before the event, exactly what will be seen in the “real” *post mortem* forensic photograph, so the pictures used by the professional as a source of documentary evidence may serve the unintended aim of arousing sexual enjoyment. In this way, the status of the image becomes radically indeterminate, as it blurs the boundary, firstly between fantasy fetish object and meticulously registered forensic fact, and secondly, between signifiers of life and death themselves (causing the viewer to wonder whether this is a wishful image of fantasy death or a record of actual misadventure).<sup>5</sup>

A third realm in which representations of apparent auto-erotic death are offered to the avid observer is the space of the art gallery. The closest thing we have to auto-erotic scenes transformed into art and released to the general public on their designers’ own initiative are Pierre Molinier’s effigies of auto-penetration, and Fakir Musafar’s pictures of “body play,” such as the notorious *Suspension* of 1964.<sup>6</sup> A more recent example of how auto-erotic fatalities inflame the artistic imagination is offered by “Artists” and “Acrobats,” paintings featured in a 1983 exhibition by Heike Ruschmeyer, based on enlargements of forensic photographs of accidental deaths from a 1963 textbook.<sup>7</sup>

In this article, we aim to demonstrate that the strange similarity and self-identity of these objects produced by sexual fantasy and forensic research reveals not only the blind spot of the objective scientific process, but may also serve as a striking illustration of the fascination afforded by (apparent) spectacles of death, a concept that, above all others, paradoxically resists and compels interpretation. This fascination obtains most obviously for the asphyxiophiliac, most covertly for the

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6. On Pierre Molinier, see Wayne Barewaldt, *Pierre Molinier* (New York: RAM Publications, 1996); *Pierre Molinier*, edited by Jean-Luc Mercié (Genève: Bärtschi Salomon Editions, 1999). On Fakir Musafar, see Kristine Ambrosia and Joseph Lanza, “Fakir Musafar Interview,” in *Apocalypse Culture*, ed. Adam Parfrey (Los Angeles: Feral House, 1987), 106-117 and Fakir Musafar, *Spirit + Flesh* (Santa Fe: Arena Editions, 2002).

7. See Heike Ruschmeyer, *Maßlose Zeit: Bilder und Zeichnungen 1978-93* (Berlin: Staatliche Kunsthalle, 1993), and Waldemar Weimann, *Atlas der gerichtlichen Medizin* (Berlin: Verlag Volk und Gesundheit, 1963).



Fig. 3: Fakir Musafar, *Suspension* (1964).

forensic scientist, and, as a brief discussion of the third realm of artistic and filmic representation will suggest, more or less universally for the modern spectator, whose desire for the knowledge and pleasures of death is constantly interpolated, in however naturalized a fashion, by a culture saturated



with images.<sup>8</sup> Thus, the apparently marginal fantasy world of asphyxiophilia, constructed by the forensic discourse, reappears in this light as an extreme, but surprisingly acute paradigm to demonstrate the mechanisms of the lure of the image, on the one hand, and the workings of sexual epistemology, on the other.

## ***II. Fantasmatic Fetishes: Nelson Cooper and the Girl in the Mirror***

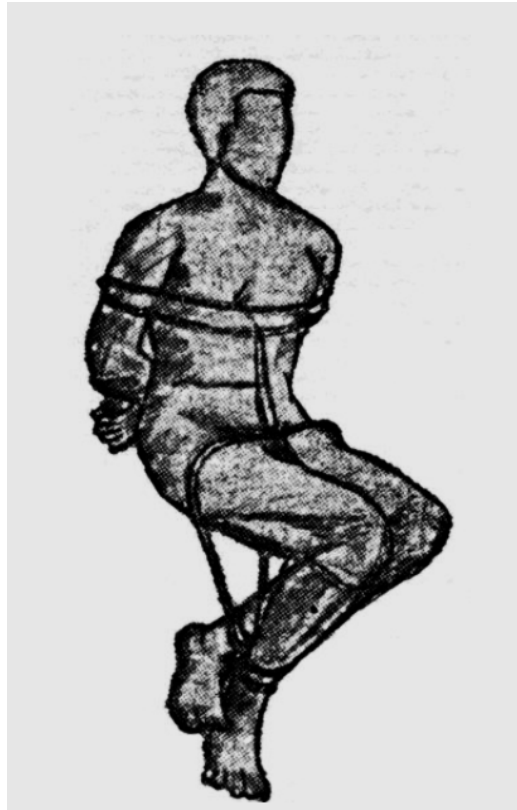
If forensic science provides the bulk of available information on asphyxiophilia from the retroactive vantage point of accidental death, a few accounts of the behavior and fantasy encountered by living practitioners of this “paraphilia” can be found in works of sexology and, to a lesser extent, clinical psychoanalysis. An examination of works produced in both these disciplinary fields reveals that great significance is attributed (necessarily, where the “talking cure” is at stake) to the role of *self-disclosure*. In his *History of Sexuality* (1976), Foucault asserted that *scientia sexualis* functions precisely by placing great emphasis on sexuality as the secret per se. This secret, constructed as such through its very articulation in the analytic scene, becomes an object of knowledge and a false talisman of truth.<sup>9</sup> What is particularly striking with regard to cases of asphyxiophilia, however, is the emphasis placed upon visual self-representation and image rather than words within the confessional sphere.

In one of the scarce psychoanalytic contributions to the topic, Kronengold and Sterba described the case of a twenty-four-year-old student who had developed a habit of masturbating either in front of a mirror, after having strapped his arms and legs with a complicated

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8 The boldness of this claim might require some nuancing when taking into account, for instance, the specificities of gendered subject positions. Most of the (dead) practitioners of asphyxiophilia reported on in the available literature, and almost all the authors of the forensic textbooks in question, are male. Shortage of relevant material means that work has still to be done on the ways in which the discourses surrounding asphyxiophilia might be differently constructed if the practitioner or the commentator were female. In the case of the artist Heike Ruschmeyer, our interest in her work for this article lies only in the fact that she re-presents existing forensic images in the guise of art. The significance of her status as a specifically female artist falls outside of the remit of the present paper.

9. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Vol. 1: An Introduction* [1976], trans. Robert Hurley (London: Penguin, 1998), 51-73. Hereafter cited in the text as HS.



**Fig. 4:** From Kronengold and Sterba, “Two Cases of Fetishism” (1936).

system of ropes, or by hanging bound and head downwards from the hinge of a door.<sup>10</sup> To show how the young man applied the ropes to his body, the authors included a copy of a drawing he had made in their paper (Fig. 4). It is unclear to the reader whether this drawing was made on the man's own initiative, or upon Kronengold and Sterba's request. Either way, the image demonstrates the extraordinary detail and accuracy with which he was able to represent himself in the throes of his passion: the very image that he enjoyed contemplating in the virtual space of the mirror during the act of masturbation.<sup>11</sup> This suggests either that the bodily self-image in its most desired state was the

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10. Eduard Kronengold and Richard Sterba, “Two Cases of Fetishism,” trans. Bettina Warburg, *The Psychoanalytic Quarterly* 5 (1936): 63-70.

11. For a case in which the asphyxiophilic, a sixteen-year-old boy, had produced drawings of himself in a crouched position as if seen through a keyhole, see H. W. van Lunsen, “Auto-erotische asfyxie: ervaringen met praktikanen van wurkseks en nabestaanden van slachtoffers,” *Nederlands Forensisch Tijdschrift* 10 (1991): 5-10.





most appropriate self-articulation the young man could make or, of course, that this self-objectification represented the desired object of the psychoanalytic practitioners.

The figure of the reflective device in auto-eroticism, whether literal in the case of the mirror or more contrived in the case of the drawing, also figures prominently in *The Breathless Orgasm* (1991), the only existing autobiography of a (self-designated) “Asphyxiophilic Still Living” (B 171). The autobiographer is Nelson Cooper, a young man who sought professional help for his compulsive habit of choking himself while fantasizing that he or another was being strangled to death by a sexual killer. More or less by coincidence, his case came to the attention of the leading American sexologist John Money, who seemingly encouraged him to write down his story. The confessional narrative produced is heavily influenced by Money’s therapeutic discourse and, at the time of writing, Cooper was heavily medicated using the antiandrogen drug, Depo-Provera. Cooper’s eagerness to adopt the term coined by Money to describe his “illness” is attested to in the account, and it is striking that the young man accepts the lure of diagnosis as a preferable alternative to an unknown desire.<sup>12</sup> Thus, the self-representation produced by Cooper—the precise details he chooses to disclose and the significance he attributes to given aspects of his sexual life—is necessarily refracted through the lens of the discourse of professional healthcare.

The confessional account is constructed skillfully to offer the reader a glimpse at the sexual *Weltanschauung* of the paraphiliac protagonist, the “Asphyxiophilic” with upper case letters. In the following extract, Nelson Cooper describes how he had started strangling himself at the age of sixteen, to an accompanying fantasy of death:

I strangled myself in front of an angled mirror, using a nylon pantyhose. I wore a tight pair of men's 100 percent-nylon, see-through bikini underwear and pretended the whole time that a homosexual killer was throttling me. I struggled like mad in front of a mirror which was aimed at my buttocks and my legs. After I choked to

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12. Money’s Preface to *The Breathless Orgasm* opens with the following—highly sensational—words: “There was a monster in Nelson Cooper’s life. Only later did he discover that it had a name: ‘asphyxiophilia.’ For most of his youth, this monster was unspeakable. Nelson was literally incapable of speaking about it.” In a letter by Nelson Cooper to the American Association of Sex Educators, Counselors, and Therapists, included at the end of the book, he writes—in terms reminiscent of Money’s own, hyperbolic, idiom: “to be at the mercy of a paraphilia is like being a slave to lust and ecstasy. It commands me. I have no will of my own when my paraphilia takes over.” He signs this letter: “The Asphyxiophilic Still Living.” See Money, Wainwright and Hingsburger, *The Breathless Orgasm*, pgs. 11 & 171.



the point where my dizziness got too much for me, I broke off the pantyhose, fell to the floor as if I were dead, and immediately masturbated until I climaxed in a super, great orgasm. (B 22)

The presence of the mirror in the auto-erotic scene is an oft-commented-upon element in accounts of auto-erotic fatalities. In Hazelwood, Burgess and Groth's influential paper, the authors state that "reflective devices serve to allow the victim to observe [the] self in a specific role, plot, or [as a] character of a fantasy scenario."<sup>13</sup> Indeed, according to Nelson Cooper's account, the mirror is only supposed to reflect himself to the extent that the reflection displays an *idealized* self-image. More specifically, Nelson puts the mirror at a certain angle so that it only reflects his buttocks and his legs, thus cutting away the rest of his body, including his genitals, from the field of vision. In this way, the mirror's reflection enables him to (re)create the fantasy "a woman is being strangled," which subsequently increases sexual arousal and provides the catalyst to orgasm. Hence, the image reflected by the mirror seems to communicate how Nelson *wanted to see himself* and not how others, inadvertently walking in on the scene, would see him. Carefully manufactured and systematically controlled, the images represent at once an object supporting identification ("This is me dying, or dead") and a visual springboard for transcending one's own bodily status ("This is not me, because I am alive/not a woman").<sup>14</sup> This open-ended visual image of death—open-ended because it offers itself for the identificatory pleasure of participant, analyst and voyeur—is the privileged desired object not (only) of this particular subject of desire, but (also) of the confessional discourse.

Without wishing to pursue the question of interpretation that fascinates the mental health professional—i.e., "Why are asphyxiophiliacs drawn to such self-images?"—we can profitably explore the structural processes visible in descriptions of this phenomenon within a broader cultural context. Recent theories of spectatorship and gender identity, undertaken particularly in the field of queer cinema studies, have proposed that *any* viewer watching any filmed erotic spectacle—whatever their sex, gender or sexual identity—may enjoy a wide, explorative range of identifications and

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13. Robert R. Hazelwood, Ann Wolbert Burgess and A. Nicholas Groth, "Death During Autoerotic Practice," *Social Science and Medicine* 15 (1981): 131.

14. For a Lacanian meditation upon the significance of this fantasy, see Dany Nobus, "Une jouissance à couper le souffle: à propos d'un cas d'asphyxie auto-érotique," *La cause freudienne. Revue de psychanalyse* 31 (1995): 117-23.



Fig. 5: From *Dial M for Murder* (dir. Alfred Hitchcock, 1954).

desires “which are multiple, contradictory, shifting, oscillating, inconsistent and fluid.”<sup>15</sup> Although these mechanisms also apply in the field of reading, visual spectacle particularly encourages this quality of identificatory mobility.

It is perhaps not coincidental, then, that film plays an important part in facilitating the fantasy world that Nelson Cooper describes. The specific role of film in Cooper’s sexual economy is two-fold. Firstly, Nelson describes how televised stranglings and drownings in popular entertainment exercised a compulsive fascination for him, and how he would replay them numerous times until they became part of his inner fantasy gallery: the “warehouse of stranglings and drownings” he carried in his head (B 126). Moreover, the desired image on the screen was grafted, in imagination, onto the fantasy-infused spectacle staged in the mirror:

When I choke myself for real it is similar to the strangling on *Dial M for Murder*, and I do it in front of a mirror. The strangling scene in *Strangers on a Train* is

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15. See Caroline Evans and Lorraine Gamman, “The Gaze Revisited or Reviewing Queer Viewing,” in *A Queer Romance: Lesbians, Gay Men and Popular Culture*, eds. Paul Burston and Colin Richardson (London: Routledge, 1995), 45.



Fig. 6: From *Dial M for Murder* (dir. Alfred Hitchcock, 1954).

my favorite [. . .] This scene recurs most often in my fantasies, except that I substitute any girl I want for the original actress. I imagined that scene over and over again in my mind for at least three years. I thought it was a sensuous and beautiful death. (B 126)

The second way in which film reportedly functions in Nelson's case is as a creative alternative—or a means of externalizing—the private fantasy incubated in the mental space. A student of film, Nelson directed a short feature of his own, *Water Angel*, which treats the death by drowning of a young girl. Nelson explains retroactively (following telephone therapy sessions with John Money) that the girl who dies in the film and the girls who die in the fantasy, are “replicas” of Peggy, a child with whom he was in love as a boy, and whose death by drowning he had been unable to prevent.

What is significant here is the attempt on the part of the commentator—both Nelson Cooper and John Money—to relate the meaning of the fantasy stranglings to earlier events, whether real (the death of a child) or fabricated (classic cinematic murders). This attempt to determine the genesis of the fantasy and behavior—albeit with the explicit aim to free Nelson



**Fig. 7:** From *Strangers on a Train* (dir. Alfred Hitchcock, 1951).

Cooper of suffering—may serve the ancillary but structurally determined aim of constructing a fixed narrative of meaning, an internal logic to the provocatively puzzling paraphilia. Yet this rigid retracing of a single rooted “cause” is, in fact, dynamically very different to the way in which Nelson describes experiencing his sexual enjoyment. When casting the agents and victims to star in his fantasy scenarios, Nelson Cooper crosses gender and generation, introducing an infinite variety of content into his iconographic structure. In this way—and surprisingly—his asphyxiophilic fantasies



and visual rituals suggest the fluidity and slipperiness of fantasizing/viewing positions, despite a paradoxically rigid and extreme marginality.

For John Money, a “paraphilia” is a rigid, compulsive and fixed sexual practice with a strong ritualistic aspect.<sup>16</sup> Yet Money himself concludes, based on his encounter with Nelson Cooper’s case: “Fantasies and dreams of asphyxiation, usually by either drowning or strangulation, engaged both the self and partners as victims: this is an antipodean duality which is a basic principle of the paraphilias” (B 61). Ironically enough, then, the sexologist recognizes in the structuring of the paraphiliac fantasy, the very interchangeability of subject/object positions highlighted by progressive theorists of spectatorship. At the same time, however, he retains the binaristic idea of the “doer” and “done to” with stark disregard for the plurality and variation of possible identifications reported by Nelson, and the fact that two or more people are always present in his fantasy, in contradistinction to the intensely auto-erotic nature of the act in the world.

It is possible to argue that the deceptive multiplicity and simultaneity of fantasy positions enabled by the image of the dead self/other on the page/in the mirror obtains not only for the creator/practitioner of such images, but also for a larger public of unintended voyeurs, and that it is these very qualities that endow the asphyxiophiliac representation with an enduring fascination.

### ***III. Forensic Facts: or “How to Annihilate, by Arousing, the Enjoyment of the Other”***

The asphyxiophiliac’s purported propensity to consolidate his macabre choreography by means of self-constructed images meets its match in the inclination of forensic experts to portray and expose the auto-erotic ritual. Confronted with the dozens of corpses hanging from ceilings in medico-legal publications, one has the impression that these images are as mandatory an inclusion for forensic specialists as they are an essential element of many an “asphyxiophiliac’s” sexual code. Keen to offer interpretations of intentionality—even their own—forensic scientists have proposed various

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16. In the Glossary of *Lovemaps*, Money defines “Paraphilia” as “a condition occurring in men and women of being compulsively responsive to and obligatively dependent upon an unusual and personally or socially unacceptable stimulus, perceived or in the imagery of fantasy, for optimal initiation and maintenance of erotosexual arousal and the facilitation or attainment of orgasm.” See John Money, *Lovemaps: Clinical Concepts of Sexual/Erotic Health and Pathology, Paraphilia and Gender Transposition in Childhood, Adolescence and Maturity* (New York: Irvington, 1986), 267.



motivating factors for this phenomenon.

The motive most frequently advanced by researchers is that these pictures detail the physical evidence found at the scene of death, thus substantiating investigative and legal decisions. Additionally, photographs help police officers with the reconstruction of the fatal scene, when the cause and mode of death are equivocal, or when it is unclear how the accidental asphyxia has happened. In one case of asphyxiophilia occurring outdoors, pictures were taken of the deceased man's position and then a child's doll was used to understand how the mechanism had gone wrong.<sup>17</sup> This procedure has the added advantage of preventing junior police officers from having to re-enact the scene of death by putting their head into the fatal stranglehold of a defective ligature.<sup>18</sup> Apart from these two reasons, which make claims for a desire to understand and explicate, one might draw attention to the fact that the image is also a substitute for the lack of knowledge on the part of the specialist. Grasping for clues in one of the most extraordinary auto-erotic fatalities ever discovered—an airline pilot who had a fatal sexual encounter with his Volkswagen Beetle—Rupp stated in a 1973 paper: “In a majority of cases handled by the Medical Examiner’s Office, the scene is the most important aspect of a death investigation. In this particular case, the scene is everything; and once again, we have graphically illustrated the fact that we know very little about some aspects of human behavior.”<sup>19</sup> Here, as in many other papers on auto-erotic fatalities, the images are required to stand in place of knowledge, to mask its absence. In exchange for what cannot be said, they are held to speak for themselves. The compulsive enactment of a sinister craving leaves forensic experts baffled, and they can only bear witness to what their eyes have contemplated through photographs of the scene.

However, it is important to note that the forensic images may not only bear witness to profound ignorance and deeply-felt perplexity, but also to an extreme fascination with the universe of the “asphyxiophilic.” Time and again, authors emphasize how unusual, imaginative and incredible the observed sexual practice is, whereby these qualifiers probably reveal more about the observer’s own state of mind than about the observed situation. Hence, the forensic images are triggered by the idea—“I don't know what it means, but I like it”—a principle we could designate as

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17. See Jehuda Hiss, Sharon B. Rosenberg and Lester Adelson, “Swinging in the Park: An Investigation of an Autoerotic Death,” *The American Journal of Forensic Medicine and Pathology* 6 (1985), 250-5.

18. However, as photographs are not always considered sufficiently revealing, an officer might still be asked for assistance. For example, see Hazelwood, Burgess, Groth, “Death During Autoerotic Practice,” 132.

19. J. C. Rupp, “The Love Bug,” *Journal of Forensic Sciences* 18 (1973): 259-62.



Fig. 8

“the enjoyment of ignorance.” This is the principle that also describes the widespread human fascination for death and violence. Scenes and representations of dying and dead bodies are avidly-consumed fantasy fodder on television and film, and even within the pages of our daily newspapers. Nelson Cooper’s extravagant response of sexual excitement to the sight of a filmed murder by asphyxiation may therefore be nothing more than the logical extreme of our culture’s own adrenalin-fuelled fascination with spectacles of death and violence. In this respect, the fatal legacy of the asphyxiophilic ritual—the forensic image—produces an even more titillating, because “real” trace in the world of the conjunction of sexual ecstasy and death, that ever-so-codified trope of sexual discourse which nonetheless seems to whisper the possibility of transcendence.

In the introduction to this article, it was pointed out that few forensic documents include pictures of which it is stated explicitly whether they have been taken by forensic





photographers or by the asphyxiophiliacs themselves. Sometimes it is made clear that the picture is part of the forensic dossier, but more often the reader is left in the dark as to its origin. Yet even when the picture is attributed to the forensic photographer, one could deservedly raise an element of doubt as to the correctness of this attribution, since asphyxiophiliacs are known to produce exactly the same types of pictures: *self-portraits of the artist as a dead person*. The forensic pictures are thus fundamentally ambiguous. Although they are presented as forensic facts, they are a replica of the fantasmatic fetishes of the asphyxiophiliac. Hence, even when forensic experts do not include the asphyxiophiliac's self-portraits, they are nonetheless represented by their own images. As such, the forensic pictures document, unintentionally yet unavoidably, part of the asphyxiophiliac's enjoyment. This crucial ambiguity points to the facticity of accepted generic and utilitarian distinctions between the status of images produced in apparently "private" and "personal" circumstances, and those produced for alleged professional edification.

That said, through the incorporation of these images in medical books and journals, the bodily and imaginative enjoyment of the subject is unmistakably transferred from the intimacy of his playing-room to the widely accessible scientific domain. Put differently, in the sphere of the real, the pictures involve a radical breach of privacy, whereby the instruments of somebody's enjoyment are exposed to a wide audience. When including documentary evidence in their papers, researchers violently expose the subject's enjoyment, which, it can be argued, is a surreptitious strategy to annihilate it.

Finally, it is possible to argue that the forensic facts may also be designed as surreptitious sexual props for the fantasy of the asphyxiophiliacs in question. A possible objection to this may be that forensic experts would surely assume that asphyxiophiliacs are unlikely to be interested in images displaying the tragic fate of some of their kindred spirits. Yet, as indicated above, these images are fundamentally ambiguous, to the extent that it is difficult to tell, not only whether they are asphyxiophiliac self-portraits, but also whether the characters are really dead. But even when the images leave no doubt about the victim's irrecoverable condition, this may well ignite what the experts assume to be the asphyxiophiliac's ultimate fantasy: *to gaze at oneself as a dead or dying person*. By filling their texts with images of corpses, forensic experts may thus respond to an enjoyment of arousing the desire of those very people whose tragic fate they intend to describe in their papers.

Auto-erotic death and asphyxiophilia, of all the categories of sexual behavior and identity constructed by authority disciplines, are among the most apparently extreme in their rejection



of reproductive sexuality and the false assumption of a natural link between sexual pleasure and life. There is, perhaps, something seductive in this attempt to fall through the gaps in what Foucault calls a *bio-politics of the population* (HS 139). Auto-erotic fatalities seem to speak a willful resistance on the part of the individual to the dual imperative to locate sex in the sphere of reproductive heterosexual partnership on the one hand, and to keep the body healthy and alive, on the other. These deaths thus signify symbolically as a loss of control—via the mediating emotion of a loss of comprehension—on the part of a society “in which political power had assigned itself the task of administering life” (Foucault, HS 139). Images of asphyxiophilia, apparently bearing witness to the impossibility of resisting the ineluctable pull of the death drive, thus stand as epitomes of simultaneous fascination and dread for those still caught in the regulatory mechanisms of bio-power, haunted by the “grumble of death” (Foucault, HS 156) to be heard at the heart of sex.

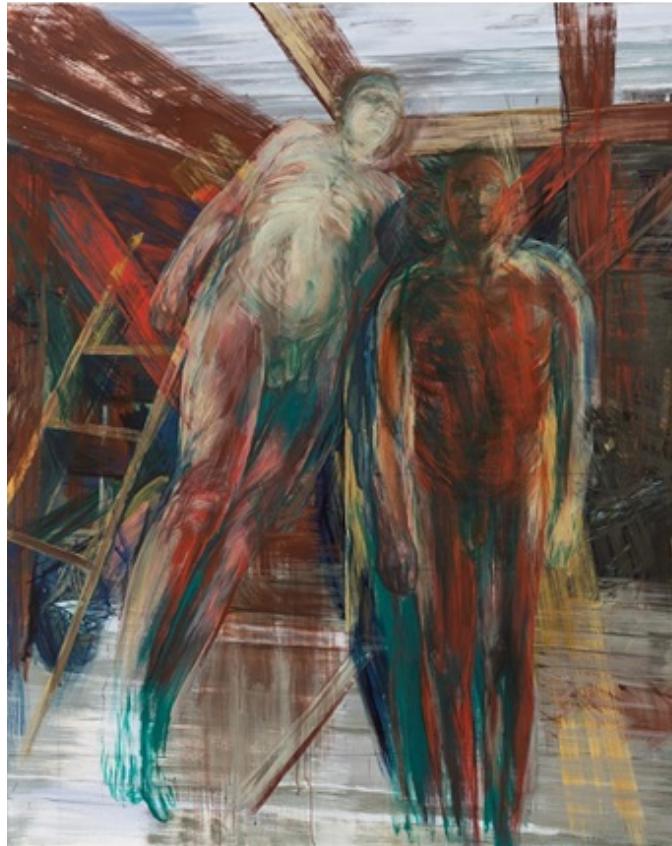
#### ***IV. Artistic Aspirations, or Icons of Impossible Possession***

When forensic images of auto-erotic fatalities or photographic fetishes of fantasy death are displaced from their context in a manual for edification, and relocated in the sphere of the art gallery, does their status and function change radically, or is it merely exaggerated, called to attention, put into scare quotes? For Louis Althusser, art enjoys a different relationship with knowledge to that of the ideologies, such as science. Althusser states that “the peculiarity of art is to make us see . . . make us feel . . . something which *alludes* to reality.” For him, art retains an “internal distance” from the ideology which produces it.<sup>21</sup> If this is indeed the case for forensic photos made into art, such as Heike Ruschmeyer’s “Artists” and “Acrobats,” then the mechanism of the enjoyment of ignorance to which we have borne witness above is highlighted precisely by the new position the images occupy in relation to their viewers/voyeurs.

Ruschmeyer’s entire *œuvre* to date comprises drawings, photographs and collages depicting subjects who have died in unusual circumstances, as victims of murder, rape and suicide. The focus of her pictures is thus the traumatic nature of the rupture between life and death and the trace it leaves in the world for those who survive the exit of the individual in question. The only

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21. Louis Althusser, “A Letter on Art,” in *Lenin and Philosophy, and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: New Left Books, 1971), 222.



**Fig. 9:** Heike Ruschmeyer, *Akrobaten II* (1983).

collection that does not graphically depict deceased bodies is her series of burial images in which, for once, the dead body is already covered rather than revealed garishly to the viewer's sight. "Artists" and "Acrobats" are images of auto-erotic death given a sheen of glamour. The fatally suspended hanging bodies caught in the still life of their solitary pleasures are re-composed as dynamic, colorful bodies—the "acrobats" of the title—and inserted into gaudy *mises-en-scène* in which they are propelled through the air, often in pairs or groups: strange, phantom-like apparitions, at once bodily matter and yet strangely weightless and airborne.

The superimposition of digital enhancement upon photographs lifted from a forensic textbook may at first appear ethically problematic in its willful aestheticization of the traumatic image. It would indeed be possible to argue that this enhancement of the images seeks to prettify horror, to escape from the raw stuff of photographed flesh towards the mediated matter of painted-on color. This might be seen as a strategy to make familiar the unfamiliar, to tame the encounter with the beyond.



**Fig. 10:** Heike Ruschmeyer, *Tischgebet* (1986).

Such an argument, however, though perhaps generally tenable, misses the point with regard to the specificity of this collection of pictures. We have seen above the extent to which it is difficult to ascertain the mimetic, evidential or authorial status of the images of auto-erotic fatalities that litter forensic texts. More so than in the case of murders or regular suicides, the factor of self-representation and the series of complex wishful identifications engendered in the case of auto-erotic death images highlight particularly acutely the absence of any possibility of neutrality or absolute knowledge. Similarly, we have witnessed the sheen of glamour which the images progressively acquire as they are voyeuristically called upon to signify within the discursive processes of forensic science. These images already connote what Laura Mulvey in her seminal article—describing the woman’s body in cinema, rather than in the spectacle of death—calls “to-be-looked-at-ness.”<sup>22</sup>

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22. Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” [1975], in *Issues in Feminist Film Criticism*, ed. Patricia Erens (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 33.



Fig. 11: Heike Ruschmeyer, *Erlkönigs Tochter II* (1986).

The aesthetic nature of Ruschmeyer’s “acrobats” effectively shows up, then, rather than mindlessly reproducing, the prurient voyeuristic relationship existing between the “ordinary viewer”—and in image culture, we are all ordinary viewers—and the spectacle of self-inflicted death-by-pleasure.

In Ruschmeyer’s collection of auto-erotic images, the surreptitious glance, at once troubled and pleasurable, enjoyed by the student or layperson perusing the medical textbook, is replaced by the *invitation to gaze* at an object of art provided for public consumption in the space of the art gallery. The private experience, already mediated by its inclusion in the forensic text, is transformed into an object for contemplation that offers a dark mirror of the negated desirous fear of otherness. The shocking image of death is absolutely put on offer, but its capacity to mean, its opening onto interpretability, remain radically occluded to the gaze that seeks to comprehend. The concept of the “gaze” in psychoanalytic theory implies something more than the look. It is of the



**Fig. 9:** Heike Ruschmeyer, *Monolog XXVIII* (1988).

order of the phallic: transcendental, not reducible to the physical eye or the mere look.<sup>23</sup> The forensic image projected in the gallery both appeals to, and speaks the impossibility of, the possessing gaze. Thus, these conceptual pieces of art are as much concerned with addressing and critiquing the mechanism of the gaze and its fantasy of mastery, as they are with offering an object for pleasurable contemplation.

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23. See Kaja Silverman, "Fassbinder and Lacan: A Reconsideration of Gaze, Look and Image," *Camera Obscura* 19 (1984): 54-84.

