



*World in a Jar: War and Trauma*



Robert Hirsch

# Light Factory



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To learn more about this project and other works visit:  
[www.lightresearch.net](http://www.lightresearch.net)  
Book design by Molly Jarboe

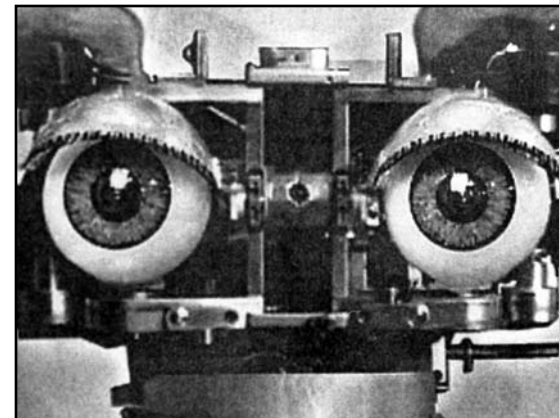


from being fully engaged in thinking, making, and writing about the world. I reflect on what the ancient Israelites called *hochma* - the science of the heart - the capacity to see, to feel and then to act as if the future depended on you.

This belief system ties into the notion I call the “Possibility Scale,” which suspends the outward scientific model of experiment and observation proposed by John Locke and David Hume by proclaiming: “If I can imagine it, there could be a way to make it happen.” This artistic thinking allows one to visit regions once deemed out of bounds or inhabited by demons for the purpose of pushing our limits of understanding. Consider Leonardo da Vinci, Jules Vern, H. G. Wells, and now William Gibson, the father

of the cyberpunk science fiction, all whose fantastic works, created outside the margins of their times, anticipated future inventions and societal transformations.

Time is the key. Time calls all of us and measures change. If there is no time, there is no change. If there is no change, there is no action. If there is no action, life stagnates. And we need to foster creation, for creation propels life and provides hope. Where there is no hope, evil takes hold. Right now the real struggle is not between good and evil, but between hope and evil for it is at this juncture that the mind’s eye can offer up possibilities for new and innovative realities. Can photography play a part in this? I think so...



I want to thank the staff of The Light Factory for this opportunity to present and talk about *World in Jar: War & Trauma* here in Charlotte. As the project is here for you to view, I am going to convey the key concepts, driving forces, and themes that contributed to its making in hopes of expanding your interpretation of the work. Accompanying my talk is a PowerPoint presentation of select individual project images (images are available at: [www.lightresearch.net](http://www.lightresearch.net)). I will be happy to take questions after my talk.

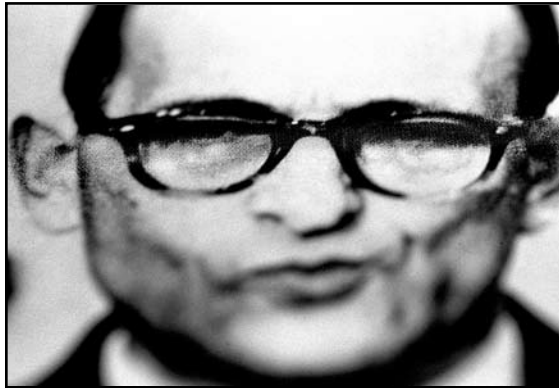
*World in a Jar: War & Trauma* curates and re-imagines key components from historical and original images to explore the workings of our collective societal memory involving loss, popular culture, religion, tragedy, and wickedness over the past four centuries. *World in a Jar* has allowed me to personalize impossibly large themes by dislocating the specifics in favor of the general. It is built on my interest in historical research and what history and images can and cannot teach us. It has evolved from my obsessive re-examination of history that is fueled by my collecting of books and pictures, which in turns allows me to rework and reinterpret these images to explore life’s Big issues.

*World in a Jar* is a free-form montage that rethinks the customary linear narrative format. Each jar is a building block for a new structure. This permits each photograph to not only present its own split-second historical reference, but also informs the context and interpretation of the surrounding images. The project’s flexible configuration allows it to be a perpetual work in progress, recreating itself each time it is installed and thereby encouraging new meanings and dialogues to emerge. This open-ended creation and viewing experience, emulating how our own memories are constructed, can convey an endless tale that exists outside of chronological time.

#### **Where Does Art Come From?**

Through the process of making representations of representations, I take on issues of originality and reproduction. Originality is the ability to think and act independently and in turn to express ideas differently from previously recognized views of a similar subject. Fresh ideas come from re-contextualizing the past. We draw in memories of things we never directly experienced. The more one knows about how art is made, the more derivative and evolutionary one knows art is. Our society’s cultural heritage is founded on a practice of transformative art – one of borrowing, sharing, re-borrowing, and amending – the full range of ways new art learns from, builds on, and emerges out of the old. In music one can hear how Scott Joplin borrows from W.C. Handy, George Gershwin borrows from Joplin, Igor Stravinsky and Miles Davis from Gershwin, Aaron Copland from Stravinsky and Davis, and now movie composer John Williams, who has scored all of Steven Spielberg’s blockbusters, from Copland. Consider one of our popular cultural icons: *Steamboat Willie*, the 1928 Walt

Disney cartoon that introduced Mickey Mouse. *Steamboat Willie* is based on Buster Keaton's 1928 silent film *Steamboat Bill, Jr.*, which itself borrowed from a 1910 song, *Steamboat Bill*. Disney snatched creativity from the life around him, mixed that with his own talent, and then imprinted that mixture into the character of our society. Select an art form and you will find this 1-2-3 combination of snatch, mix, and imprint. As Picasso quipped, "Bad artists copy; Great artists steal."



### What Pictures Can Signify

Most of the project's images were made from other photographs, as well as from drawings, paintings, and prints for the purpose of questioning the nature of the photographic image. It is a Socratic process allowing me to engage in a philosophical and visual dialogue with other times, places, and makers, following the principle there is no correct first version of how an image should look. I am not redefining an image as much as I am inquiring into metaphysical contradictions and opposing social forces that swirl around each image. I am asking each picture a question while examining the origin of the image and how its meaning has changed over time.

Plato understood the importance of this practice

of communication when he observed, "those who tell the stories also rule." Philosophers tell us that images rule dreams, and politicians tell us that dreams rule actions. Such images, dreams, and actions are not necessarily benevolent and can, in fact, be malevolent. Evil always has an obligatory fairy-tale in which one-group concocts a narrative of self-glorification that dehumanizes another group. This myth making converts Those people into powerful enemies whose existence is responsible for society's ills and a terrible danger to the future of the group seeking power. The Nazis fabricated giant lies, such as the 1940 film *The Eternal Jew*, which portrayed Jews as wandering cultural parasites. In 1994 a similar dis-information campaign was carried out in Rwanda where the Hutus demonized the Tutsis as "cockroaches" and proceeded to indiscriminately murder 800,000 of them in a genocidal campaign lasting just 100 days.

My imagining intention is to evoke an inner state of consciousness and grapple with a subject beyond its external physical structure. This approach can be likened to the Japanese concept of *shashin*, which says something is only true when it integrates the outer appearance with the inner makeup of a subject. American writer Herman Melville referred to the purely surface view of reality as "a pasteboard mask." Such a multi-sheeted mask conceals the intuitive world of the "thing in itself" – an unknowable, inexpressible reality that lies "behind" or beyond what we can observe with our five senses – an idea dating back to Plato's concept of delving into the multifaceted, interior panorama of the world. Life is not a simple, straightforward, smooth continuum with pointed delineations. Walking at sundown one observes the day does not have an abrupt border with the night.

the lesson of the countries to which the Final Solution was proposed is that "it could happen" in most places, but it did not happen everywhere. Humanly speaking, no more is required, and no more can reasonably be asked, for this planet to remain a place fit for human habitation.

### Conclusions

Quantum physics has shown that our world operates on chance and random action, thereby blowing giant holes into classical religious notions of predestination, heaven and hell, as well as utopian political ideologies, such as communism and fascism, that have their roots in the authoritarian impulse of faith, which criminalizes thoughts as well as actions. Their common denominator of submission makes no distinction between public and private life and insists on arbitrating everything from diet to sex, always asking the same question: Are you one of US? Such imposed orthodoxy makes pluralism – the tolerance of difference - unachievable.



Working from a foundation of Pragmatism, American philosopher Richard Rorty stated, "It is impossible to step outside our skins." Rorty argued we are always dealing with multiple and conflicting claims of truth, none of which can be conclusively established, and we choose our beliefs on what is useful for us to believe. For



Rorty, this looped back to the importance of democracy, for democracy facilitates an open-minded society like the model John Stuart Mill advocated in *On Liberty* (1859), in which rival claims of truth can compete and accommodate one another. Without free discourse there can be no intellectual, social, or scientific progress. Ideally, *laissez-faire* societies do not appeal to a higher authority or legislate deep disagreements about what constitutes virtuous behavior, rather they agree to leave each of us the social space to do as we please as long as it does not hurt others. When this open space to exchange and debate ideas is prohibited, there can be no social peace. For Mill and Rorty it is not enough that one has an unexamined belief that may be true; one must understand why a belief is a true one.

People ask me if working with such subjects and images is depressing, but just as darkness is another shade of light, this state of mind can be a compelling motivator when used to commune with one's own soul. Darkness can bring a silent calm that restores our mental, physical, and spiritual well-being. Often, compelling art is the result of angst and tears. Regardless, it is better to confront this aspect of human nature than to ignore it, while not forgetting to acknowledge the past for the purpose of focusing on the present. For much of my contentment comes





opportunities, and doing what they think they can get away with. Hobbes thought a strong government was necessary to protect people from their own self-centered and odious deeds. Without a legitimate and rational Authority there would be no security. According to Hobbes people would constantly be in a “state of nature” –that is– a “war of every man against every man,” thus making life “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short,” leaving no place for art or culture.

### Human Evil

In the past people believed in Natural Evil, such as earthquakes and tsunamis, which were brought on by a vengeful God to punish the wicked. Although fundamentalists may still believe events such as 911 are the result of America’s wicked ways, most people acknowledge evil in terms of human cruelty with Auschwitz as an extreme manifestation. Whether expressed in theological or secular terms, history makes it abundantly clear there is no intrinsic code of ethics. Evil is something humanly constructed and individually acted out by human hands.

In *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (1963) Hannah Arendt postulated that evil, regardless of where it takes places, could simply be a function of banality – the tendency of ordinary clerks and teachers to

conform and carry out despicable acts without critically thinking about the results of their action or inaction. An awareness of history tells us the suffering of the innocent is not the result of individual power hungry, paranoid, sociopathic, mass-murderers like King Leopold II, Hitler, Stalin, Mao, or Pol Pot. Rather, the mass catalog of evil is made-up by average, street-level bureaucrats who actually implement the horrendous policies and the general populace – all who benefit in some way from these death-worshipping ideologies. Eichmann failed to recognize the “Golden Rule” and its principle of humane reciprocity. Rather, he claimed no responsibility because he was just “doing his job” – “He did his duty...; he not only obeyed orders, he also obeyed the law.”



Immanuel Kant postulated people are their own moral legislators; in Eichmann’s case, he knowingly forfeited being the ‘master of his own deeds’ and made Adolf Hitler his personal legislator. Arendt insisted that moral choice remains even under totalitarian conditions, and that this choice has political consequences even when the chooser is politically powerless stating:

[U]nder conditions of terror most people will comply but some people will not, just as



Rather, life is a complex web of fluctuating motivations that combines good intentions, self-deception, generosity, selfishness, benevolence, and malice. Life is more likely an indistinct penumbra filled with counterpoints, subtlety, and false appearances, reminding us of the difficulty of transcending the bounds of our own mind, when attempting to access the “thing in itself”.

Although Photoshop has become a verb, people still want to believe their own eyes, even when they are aware they are only seeing pixels, thus validating Grouch Marx’s observational wisecrack, “Who you going believe – me – or your lyin’ eyes?” During the mid-twentieth century Henri Cartier-Bresson’s concept of “The Decisive Moment,” that fraction of a second when the essence of a subject is revealed, defined full-frame 35mm photographic truth. Now we can have countless, dynamic, digital moments. Just because something is in flux or has been constructed from many different pieces of time and space doesn’t mean it isn’t true. What we refer to, as The Truth is where our legends commingle with fact to form an accepted cultural reality, which is why allegory remains a favorite method for expressing moral, political, and spiritual messages.

### Illness

When I was five I became deathly ill with Rheumatic Fever for months. I recall lying in bed at night crying because I thought I was going to die. I realized my parents couldn’t help me and I was alone in the world. It left me physically weakened for years and made me acutely aware of my mortality. I lost my child-like sense of indestructibility, which separated me mentality and physically from my peers.

### Religious Training

While recovering from Rheumatic Fever I spent a number of winters with my mother’s parents in Miami Beach. My grandfather was a religious man and I went to Hebrew school three times a week including Saturdays, which was “Shabbat” or the “Sabbath.” But I didn’t feel like one of God’s Chosen children. I challenged the teachings about stories in the Torah or Hebrew Bible and was placed in a special class for disruptive boys that were ruled over by the lumbering and pockmarked Mr. Stein, who we referred to, rather uncharitably, as Frankenstein. Eventually, I did make my Bar Mitzvah, officially becoming a man in the eyes of Judaism. Ironically, this empowered me to drop out of the Synagogue, which I did, leaving the religious traditions of Judaism behind.



Nevertheless, I remain a member of the Tribe whether I want to or not, for it is imposed upon me not only from within, but from without by a world that will not allow me to forget. In the end, when push comes to shove, I will always be a Jew. That said, I do not believe in an afterlife and I don't think that moral principles or the meaning of life depends on religion. What matters are actions we take in the ONE life we have to live.



### The American Civil War

The past is heavy; it has weight. My late father was a native Floridian and had a fascination with the American Civil War. As a child my family took summer road trips from New York through the South where we encountered the remnants of Jim Crow racism. These trips exposed me to extreme poverty, what it meant to be white in America, and how strange the idea of discrimination based on Color was. We visited major Civil War battlefields and rummaged through endless antique and pawnshops as my father searched for firearms and memorabilia. My father, a Lifetime member of the National Rifle Association (NRA), had more than 50 nineteenth century firearms on display in our house. Our father and son bonding activity was target shooting. In our TV room my father had a reprint of the *1911 Photographic History of the Civil War* edited by Francis Miller. I spent time

looking at the thousands of photographs in this 10-volume collection, which I now have and used in making this project.

### The Atomic Bomb

Going to elementary school during the Atomic Age of the Cold War I was subjected to the "Duck and Cover" drill. A siren would sound through the school's PA system. Without explanation, our teachers would lead us to our hallway lockers where we were instructed to silently get down on our knees and put our hands over our heads as we heard the bomb doors being closed and locked behind us. In my limited understanding, I knew the US had dropped two atomic bombs on Japan as I watched *Godzilla* (1954), a monster created by atomic testing who ravished Japan. *Life* magazine printed photos of people building and stocking fallout shelters as well as arming themselves to fend off unwanted visitors. The 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis took the country to the brink of nuclear war. Global, above ground, atomic testing produced such high levels of strontium 90 that milk was no longer served in our school cafeteria. Living through such everyday threats of nuclear terror made me an existentialist before I even knew what one was. Today there are over 25,000 nuclear weapons worldwide.

### The Black-and-White Post Holocaust World

In 1961, I watched, on a black-and-white television, the trial in Jerusalem of Nazi official Adolf Eichmann for crimes against humanity for his role in administering the mass deportation of "undesirable" people to ghettos and extermination camps. Watching with me was my mother's father whose family had vanished up the death camp's chimneys. I was stunned. My family had never talked about it. I knew my father had left college to enlist in the Army Air



Yes, we know that photography keeps company with death and images are not always used as a force for good. Terrorists recognize this power and purposely create and distribute abominable images, such as the murdering of *Wall Street Journal* reporter Daniel Pearl who was targeted because he was Jewish. Those who advocate repression and violence make what is cruel in their hearts even more callous for the purpose of intimidation, making us afraid to act, thus allowing them to impose their will upon us. Reportedly, the top selling bootleg DVD in Baghdad is of a man being beheaded with a knife. In our own country the defining image of the Iraq invasion has shifted from the official media moment of the toppling of a statue of Saddam Hussein to the sadistic amateur snapshots made in Abu Ghraib Prison to videos of roadside bombings posted by insurgents on the Internet. The result of such hideous pictures has been a simultaneous protective indifference and an inculcation of compassion. Why? An engaging image contains within it the capacity to sensitize and stimulate our latent exploratory senses by generating empathy. Such photographs assert ideas and perceptions that we recognize as our own, but could not have given concrete form to without first having seen those images. Yet, photographic images alone lack the capacity

to bring about social change. Ponder Martin Luther King, JR's, observation: "Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter. In the end, what we remember is not the work of our enemies, but the silence of our friends." What images can do is awaken our awareness, draw us in, and inspire action, but to be effective we need to understand the context and history that brought these images in being. Without this historical component we will likely continue replaying the past.

### What is Evil?

For ages philosophers have wrestled to define the nature of Evil with little success. This is because evil threatens human reason by challenging our expectation that the world makes sense. What we can observe is that evil generates cruel, depraved, destructive, hateful, injurious, and vicious behavior that begins on an individual level; and is the result of a failure of imagination, the inability to see beyond one's own circumstances. In *Leviathan* (1651), Thomas Hobbes wrote people were naturally wicked and basically selfish creatures who would do anything to better their position. Left



to their own devices they would act on their foul impulses. People commit vile deeds that are within their reach, making the most of their



saga of revenge, *Kill Bill* (2003 & 2004), treats death as a comic book experience. What is not dealt with in such productions is the necessity to consciously make the decision about when to look at things that are truly upsetting and when to look away because maturity comes from understanding the threat of mortality. I held my dog Koko as the vet “put her to sleep,” and heard her cry out as unconsciousness overtook her as her life force vanished. I leaned into my father’s deathbed and photographed him moments after he died. We are motivated by death. Death makes us realize that we only have a short time to prove our existence was meaningful. Death is the ultimate teacher, for death always wins.

### The Depiction of Suffering

Since the 1980s, the sharp condemnation about photographic representation by critics such as Martha Rosler, Abigail Solomon-Godeau, and Allan Sekula left little space in the academy for documentary style work. One of their principal gripes swirled around the depiction of suffering, a critique rarely applied to literature, music or painting. These academics contend photographs, such as those by Sebastião Salgado and James Nachtwey, should not aestheticize their subjects for this contaminates the so-called “real” with visual pleasure, thus

beautifying pain. This approach labels such images as being detrimental to constructive social engagement rather than recognizing that they might awaken one’s compassion, and that such an acknowledgment could be a first step toward social justice. Pictures can be exploited, but de facto censorship is worse. Yes, the act of picture making involves aestheticizing a subject, but more importantly it transforms a subject. A good photographer can capture and transmit a subject’s sensibility to others. Although there are limits on what photography can represent, and any emotional attachment to an image is unstable and subject to manipulation, it is necessary to feel and acknowledge the suffering of others before we can act to alleviate it. One way we recognize the anguish of others is by seeing it in images, thus suppressing such images curtails any form of intellectual, emotional or social engagement.

However, 911 caused many people to revisit their previous views. In her book, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003), even Susan Sontag changed her position about the power of photographs to represent deprivation, humiliation, and suffering in a positive manner. Why? Finally, some critics acknowledged that pictures are more accessible than words. Since people are not intimidated by photographs they see privately in books, magazines, TV, or on the Internet it gives them permission to ask questions about what these photographs show them. Studying such images allows us to contemplate the brutality and hatred we inflict upon each other. Pictures can make us feel, but only if we develop the creative power to imagine ourselves in situations besides our own. However, neither art nor artist is protection against cruelty and bestiality. I do think there is the prospect, if not for redemptive liberation, at least for some kind of solace in Art.



Corp before Pearl Harbor and spent 5 years in military service during World War II, but I had no perception of the enormity of the atrocities the Nazis had systematically perpetrated. I couldn’t comprehend murdering people based on no more than faith in a fictitious, racist viewpoint. It made me wonder how anyone, including my religious grandfather, could believe in an angry God that would allow such things to happen.

Seeing the black-and-white photographs made at the concentration camps after their liberation by the Allies, naked corpses of women and men with numbers tattooed on their arms, degradingly piled like so much kindling, made me feel as if my head had been split open and filled with monstrous fiends. No images, before or since, have so powerfully affected me. They left an indelible streak of anxiety upon my psyche. Clearly, everything I had previously been taught to believe about the world was wrong. Suddenly, I found myself bound up with ancient hateful beliefs that resulted in the horrific deaths of millions of people. Their anguish, sorrow, and terror, like undeveloped film, were latently tattooed inside me.

These appalling, grainy, black-and-white photographs of the Shoah subconsciously

influenced my future direction to work in black-and-white photography, which I saw as being more authentic and raw than the gloss of color photographs. I began making interpretive images about the Holocaust when I was in my mid-twenties, but it took me 30 years of wrestling with the enormity of these ghastly crimes before I was satisfied I was not trivializing the subject. Although I have taught and extensively written about color photography, it has only been since completing this project that I have begun to make pictures in color.

As a member of “the hinge-generation,” Jews living between the experience of the Holocaust and its memory, I believe that as last of the Holocaust survivors die it is essential for artists to find innovative ways of remembering what happened. The failure to do so is akin to a belated Nazi victory because what they did will quickly and deliberately be concealed and forgotten. Even now Holocaust deniers, such as the President of Iran, cynically attempt to rewrite history and erase the Shoah in an attempt to eradicate Jewishness from the region whence it came and to weaken and undermine the humanist values of rule of law, tolerance and respect for core rights, such as free expression, that we have fought for over time.





That said, I reject the notion of myself as a victim of victims, damaged by calamities committed on someone else by unknown demons in another time. I don't believe that actual trauma can be transmitted across generations, but I do think a wounded spirit can be inherited. However, at this point, not much can be accomplished by assigning blame. Yet, those, like the late, former UN Secretary General Kurt Waldheim, who helped commit such crimes, should not be allowed to conceal their acts and history needs to hold him and others like him accountable.

The paramount problem remains: Is it still possible to believe in other human beings? My wish is for each of us to be respectful towards to one another, to find our own place in this life, to understand and take responsibility for our actions, and to carry out individual acts that leave the world a better place than we found it.

### Civil Rights Movement

My rude awakening to the Holocaust sensitized me to the 1960s Civil Rights struggle. We humans seem to be hopelessly overwhelmed and powerless when confronted with the suffering of more than two people, but my first attempt to take action was forced by my parents who refused to let their thirteen-year old boy get on a bus to attend the 1963 March on Washington, D.C. Instead, I carried out small acts, such as not eating lunch and giving that money to "Snick" (The Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee) and circulating petitions urging new civil rights legislation. I also cut photographs of the civil rights demonstrations and the often-violent reactions to them out of magazines and montaged them onto my bedroom walls, doors, windows, and ceiling so that I lived surrounded by these images. Naively, I was bewildered that America could still operate like this, especially when the bodies of three voter registration

workers – James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner were found buried in an earthen dam 6 weeks after they went missing during the 1964 Freedom Summer in Mississippi. Forty years later I felt a sense of justice in seeing the 79-year old former Ku Klux Klan leader and part-time preacher convicted for one of the most heinous crimes of the civil rights era. The act of facing and unmasking cruelty is itself a victory over malice.



### The Vietnam War

I became aware of the Vietnam War in junior high school from looking at *Life* and *Newsweek*. I initially supported the war effort. I read about the Domino Theory and thought it sounded prudent to stop the Communists from taking over Southeast Asia. However, the photographs I saw of a Buddhist monk who set himself on fire to protest anti-Buddhist policies of the US backed government caused me to start questioning what we were being told. In the spring of 1965 I went to my first anti-war rally in New York's Central Park. By the time I graduated high school I was regularly attending and photographing war protests and in 1967 was involved in anti-war project called Vietnam Summer. In 1971 I was drafted, but eventually declared, "mentally unfit" for military service. Ironically, three years later I was accepted into

the Peace Corp, but was denied final admission because of my so-called military record.

### The Double Image & The Uncanny

Photography is the act of seeing double. A photograph becomes a stand-in for the original. The photographic process reveals our cultural quest for copies, from the simulacra of Las Vegas to art and fashion forgeries. In the project's catalog essay (available at: [www.lightresearch.net](http://www.lightresearch.net)), Gary Nickard discusses Otto Rank's *The Double: A Psychoanalytic Study* (1925), in which the uncanny – that is the seemingly intense sensation of the supernatural, strange, unfamiliar, weird, and unsettling – arises from the doubling of reality in the form of ghosts, reflections, shadows, and twins, and how this eerie notion can include photography. In one sense, a photograph is a shadow or reflection that is formed by a lens and captured onto light-sensitive material. If a photograph can be identified as a category of Rank's "double," then it can also serve as an example of the "uncanny," an "energetic denial of the power of death." In *Camera Lucida* (1981) Roland Barthes concluded that the relationship of the photograph to the double, its confusion with reality and time, constitute an uncanny concern with death. Thus it is precisely the direct and real connection between the subject and its image – the certainty of a physical existence within the past – that death and photography become inextricably bound, providing a human-made process of circumventing the grim reaper.

### Death and American Culture

In popular American movies, such as the four *Die Hard* films (1988 – 2007), death is impersonally portrayed as Bruce Willis entertainingly kills archetypal bad guys in the most fantastical ways. Quentin Tarantino's bloodletting two-part