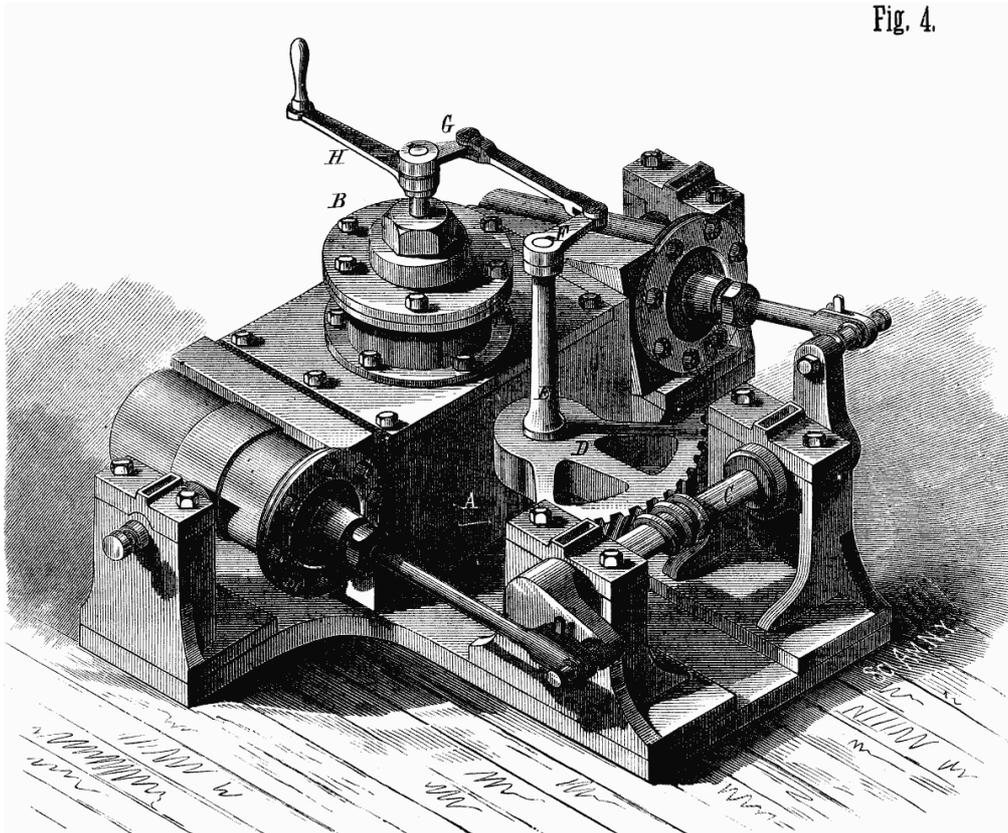


Memory Generation

On The Apparatus Of Remembering



A thesis by Ina Marie Schmidt, 2012.

Introduction

The debate on the impact of photography on culture is inexhaustible. Be it static images, security footage, family photos, or the rise of digital and online photography. Of these numerous subjects, I find that family photos are the most interesting. They're suited very well for displaying the discrepancy between what is shown and what is implied. They offer insight into the mechanisms that people use to alter reality —always into a brighter, happier version of life— and how they want to be seen.

I've chosen to take a closer look at family photos. Everybody owns, collects and reviews them. Hanging on the wall, collected in a box under the bed, or nicely arranged in a photo album, family photos are to be found in every home. But why are family photos of such importance for us? They are personal documents, but the universal language used in them is present throughout all family collections. The mental and emotional accessibility of other's family photos is limited, even though they appear almost identical.

This paper is divided into three chapters, in which I explain different aspects that, together, form my statement. The chapters are, in sequence, concerned with the referential, temporal and social aspects of family photos. Every chapter starts with an explanation of a photo taken from a random family photo collection.

I decided not to provide photos in this paper since I am not interested in the interpretation of specific examples. Relating the three main aspects of this paper to each other makes my point in a much more complete and generally applicable way. Showing example photographs would only weaken that approach.

I won't be focusing on recent developments in photo collecting habits through digital photography. My research will focus on the traditional, physical collections of photos in the closed system of the family.

The sources I used are various: Sociological experiments, historical photo archives and literature which touches on the ambivalent, thematic obscurity of photos.

I researched family photos and historical photo documentation. Especially material concerning the Holocaust is interesting, since it is often such a good example of not depicting what is at hand.

In the first chapter of this paper, I will be dealing with the referential aspect of family photos. I will focus on the discrepancy between what is shown and what is implied. This chapter deals with the habit we have of using family photos to memorize our past. Yet our memories are never displayed in the photo. The photos always refer to something that is placed outside of them. I will call this the *reference aspect*.

The second chapter deals with the different moments of viewing family photos. The actual moment the photo is taken, the past encoded in it, and the moment the photos are reviewed —again and again— in the present. The chapter researches this repetition of making sense of what we see by placing the past in the present and even in the future. This process of creating meaning and generating memories also changes with time. It can even become contradictory and confusing. I will call this the *temporal aspect*.

In the third and final chapter I will research the social impact of family photos. The family becomes a place of producing meaning through the shared photographs and all they entail. By viewing family photos, the family members shape and confirm their identity as a unit. They emphasize their bonds as they make up their history. I will call this the *social aspect*.

These three aspects provide approaches to deal with family photos in academic and artistic research. From them, I formulated the thesis that family photos are always open to a multitude of interpretations; through different people, in different context, in altered temporal situations. As such they have no real value as evidence, be it historical or otherwise.

Chapter 1 – The Referential Aspect

The discrepancy between what a photo shows and what it implies.

First, an example. We will start with a photo taken from a family photo collection; A group of people (from your family) pose. They're in front of a house. The photo is a black and white print. The house doesn't look familiar. Other attributes such as clothes and two chairs —occupied by two children— suggest a time long gone. You try to make sense of what you see, but the image can only be read in some vague historical context. Even then, no references are available. No signs or public buildings that could be understood in a greater historical context. In Roland Barthes' words¹ the photo is only interesting as subject for study:

“What I feel about these photographs derives from an average affect, almost from a certain training. [...] I believe this word exists in Latin: it is studium, which doesn't mean, at least not immediately, “study”, but application to a thing, taste for someone, a kind of general, enthusiastic commitment, of course, but without special acuity.”

The photo provides little information, it doesn't even evoke your emotions. When you view the photo together with your grandparents, it will trigger their memories. They will try to place the image in the family history, which they remember, more or less. Through the process of actively remembering they will start telling stories. They might tell you about the location, the place your grandmother was born. It's a small town in Silesia —now located in Poland— close to the border with Germany. It was the last winter they spent in their hometown. A few months later they were expelled and deported into West-Germany. That was back in 1945.

Without their memories the photo remains void of meaning. Your grandparents' memories are the content of the photo. What they see in the photo triggers memories that are not necessarily visible in the image itself. In this context, the image becomes a historical document, historical evidence.

Without these references pointing outside the photo, what would the value of the photo be? Of what exactly would it be evidence?

As shown in the example, family photos refer to memories. What these photos depict is not necessarily shown in the image itself. It is generated by actively remembering the past situation or the context in which the

image has been created. In her essay *Remembrance, The child I Never Was* Annette Kuhn² uses a similar example. She talks about a photo from her own family photo collection. She observes that the photo is only a “prop, a pretext”, it is evoking “memories which might have little or nothing to do with what is actually in the picture.” The photo only sets the scene for recollection. It is a reference to something not present in the picture.

The narrative around the photo is more important than the image itself. The picture takes on the function of a symbol of something we want to be remembered. A symbol is always unimpeded by its true form.

The only real evidential value these family photos have is their use as material for interpretation. Evidence through which to remember, to place memories into a larger context of the past at the time the photo was taken. Such a photo can be compared with a riddle, with clues left behind at a crime scene. The major problem is however that memories are imprecise and random. Which makes the references supporting the evidential value of the photo equally vague. On top of that, different people have different memories, which creates varying references from these same family photos. This can lead towards conflicts between family members.

In this regard I would like to emphasize the function of family photos in a situation of conflict. By creating a photo album we try to fill the gaps in a unstable family situation. We might even bring a non-existent family into being. To create a coherent family history is the desire of people who experienced family collapse. But family photos can never be evidence of all these ideas and hopes we project on them. In order to show what the photo is evidence of, we must regard it in a greater context. A context that lies outside of the photo itself.

In her research *Memory Work*, Annette Kuhn discusses³ a method to actively remember through the use of photos. She refers to a participant that joined her workshop. The participant, in his twenties, recently moved from China, his fatherland, to Britain. The photo he brought with him shows him as a child. It shows him and his mother in front of a house. In Kuhn’s interview the conversation briefly touches on what is shown in the photo. The participant’s memory is imprecise. He switches the subject to the situation outside the photo. The participant then tries to make sense of the photo and to place it in a historical context. He points away from the image, searches for references that he can link to the photo, which have nothing to do with what is actually visible in the photo. From trying

to remember where the house was located and who took the picture, he moves on to a much more general question of the political situation in China and tries to connect it to what the photo contains.

The referential aspect can also vary. Variation between personal memories and references of a more general, historical kind. It is worth, in this regard, to point out literature that compares thematic obscurity of photos with the way our memory works. The author W.G. Sebald's work is a good example. He often deals with the theme of perishability. He describes situations and objects from time past, his book *Austerlitz* is a good example of this kind of *Erinnerungsarbeit*⁴. In this book, the nostalgic desire, the longing for something unreachable and long gone is the main subject. Several photos are displayed in the book itself. At times they function as evidence, accompanying and supporting the text. In other situations, they are vague reflections of what the lead character observes. There is a constant switching between fact and fiction. Doing so, Sebald disproves the photo's ability to provide the evidence he is looking for. He uses amateur photos. Photos that could have been from any family collection. Sebald compares and links photos and the way we remember during the entire book.

Photos can refresh memories, but they can also complicate our way of remembering. In his book, Sebald touches on the uncertainty of human memory, but at the same time he shows the character longing for something unknown. The character does this to make sense of his past. As with family photographs, what really happened is less important than the histories we imagine and project upon them.

Family photos reflect a world that is similar to the one we're surrounded by. They mirror objects and situations —probably not always our reality exactly, but realities we can relate to nonetheless. Jill Bennett has argued⁵, that sight is deeply connected to "*affective memory*". She states:

"images have the capacity to address the spectator's own bodily memory; to touch the viewer who feels rather than simply sees the event, drawn into the image through a process of affective contagion"

And so:

"Bodily response thus precedes the inscription of narrative, or moral emotion of empathy."

The reflective character of photos makes it easy for us to identify with the portrayed situations. Even when viewing family photos from a completely

different family, we try to find similarities and place them in our understanding of the photo.

In this context it is also of great value to take a look at photos of historically meaningful events. Marianne Hirsch discusses⁶ in her essay *The Generation of Postmemory* how memories of important events —such as the Holocaust— are transmitted to the following generation and which function photos have in the transfer of family history. Hirsch points out that sometimes photos are the only document left because the tragic events are still too painful to talk about. The new generation tries to make sense of the pictures without the stories. Hirsch says:

“The fragmentariness and the two-dimensional flatness of the photographic image, moreover, make it especially open to narrative elaboration and embroidery and to symbolization.”

In Hirsch’ example, reference from the photo is created when one possesses a certain knowledge of history, which then gives it a new purpose. What we refer to by reviewing these photos in the present is what we learned from family history and collective history. We search for evidence in the photo by identifying ourselves with what we see. We try to understand the little hints a photo can show us. This lets us place the photo in a greater context, as we try to see what is not shown.

A very speculative way of dealing with images, indeed.

Historical photo archives are, in this way, always facing a dilemma. The ideal archive wants to preserve an objective recording of history. But how to be objective using ambiguous testimonies? Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer in their essay *Incongruous Images: “Before, During, and After” The Holocaust*, discuss⁷ the evidential value of private photographs in the historical context of the museum archive. They find that historical archives are only interested in acquiring private photographs if the images contain historical evidence. This means that the photo shows places or people that refer to a specific period and can be traced back.

Furthermore Hirsch observed:

“The archivist selected some of the photographs and discarded others with confident gestures. What determined the choices, we asked her? An important material consideration, she responded, was the quality of a print. But more importantly: she was not interested in photographs that could have been taken anywhere. She preferred images of public and institutional rather than personal, familial life.”

Hirsch remarks that all the photos selected by the archivist did not show events pertaining directly to the Holocaust. The grim situation is not visible in the photos in the museum’s archive. The accompanied written information is the only direct reference one can find. Hirsch questions:

“What, in this sense, can these truly incongruous photos tell us about the past, about our present relationship to it, and about photography’s evidentiary value? We again see that, as historical documents, they raise more questions than they answer.”

The pictures are only interesting as means of interpretation, but not as documents of proof. Hirsch concludes her essay by stating that the museums she visited are more likely to pick iconic images for display, even though the situation shown is ambiguous and their sense of truth questionable. Hirsch says⁸ that perhaps, ultimately, the photos tell us more about what we want and need from the past than about the past itself.

I want to conclude this first chapter with an observation by the French art historian Georges Didi-Huberman. He finds⁹ that in regarding photographs we simultaneously find truth and obscurity, exactitude and simulacrum.

Precisely this double regime of photos is what makes them precarious evidence of the past.

Chapter 2 – The Temporal Aspect

How our photos change during creating, viewing and reviewing.

Another example. Again a photo collected by a family member. A color photo you find in your parents' photo book. The photo shows four people, sitting on a bench. The place is unfamiliar to you. The photo shows trees and a small path in the background. You identify the people as your parents and your two older brothers. When you were eight years old, you saw the photo for the first time. The photo was taken in the park at a health care centre which your mother stayed at for some weeks. It is 1985. At the time, they tell you that your mother was overworked and had to stay at the health center for some weeks.

Again, without memories referring to the unknown, the photo would be an ineffective way to convey information. Only memories and stories give the photo its meaning.

Your family situation changed. Your father moved out of the house. Reviewing the same photo now, your mother's interpretation has changed. She points out the —already visible— decay of the marriage. No, she wasn't overworked, she was unhappy and stressed because of that situation.

Would her interpretation differ if her situation changed again? For example, if she found a new husband and were happy after all?

And what about the actual situation in 1985, when the photo was taken? If the situation was already complicated, why would there have been a need for taking this photo, this situation? Usually family photos reflect happy moments, moments worth being capture. Moments worth presenting, as this is how we want our past to be seen by ourselves and others. This example shows how arbitrary the references outside of the photo can be, and how rapidly they can change.

In the first chapter I wrote about generating meaning through memory. In this second chapter I want to deal with the different temporal situations a photo is placed in during its creation and review, and how progress of time changes our view on them.

As already mentioned in the first chapter, we need to be aware that memories and the act of remembering are not very reliable instruments.

But we also shouldn't underestimate the importance of generating meaning which makes us collect photos in the first place.

This is the *temporal aspect*: Taking the photo, viewing and reviewing it. Photos in a family context are made to be shown around, to show you what once was. They reflect a tiny fragment of a moment — a basic principle of the technique— which shows a scene, often posed or otherwise artificial, that we think is worth being captured.

When someone then creates the family's photo collection, he or she places the photos into an album. They reject photos, determine chronological order. Photos collected in a family album are placed in a linear way. We start at the beginning of the book and read each photo one after another. We place them in context to each other like the album creator meant. We normally don't doubt the order of the photos. Even if they're kept in a box we still make chronological connections.

With time our perception changes. According to knowledge, or what we learned from the past, we understand things in a different way. Kuhn observes¹⁰:

“memories evoked by a photo do not simply spring out of the image itself, but are generated in an intertext of discourses that shift between past and present”

While time passes by our perception of what is shown —or what the reference is— can change. Even up to the point of becoming contradictory.

In her essay Kuhn discusses a photo of herself as a child. The photo is interesting for interpretation because it has been viewed and referred to in different periods and by different people. The photo was taken in 1982 by her father. Right after he developed it, it was indexed on the back by her mother. Two years later —Kuhn by then eight years old— placed the photo into her own album and scratched out the marks that her mother made, and replaced these with what she thought was more appropriate for the photo. Her conclusion:

“each [...] protagonist might tell a different tale, or change their own story at every retelling.”

With every reenactment or re-staging of the photo, details can be added or dropped, new connections can be made. Emotional expressions can change the meaning of the photo. By constantly placing the images from the past in our present and trying to make sense of them, we generate

ideas as to what the photo is evidence of. This fluidity of generating meaning and memories makes it even more difficult to find real proof in family photographs. Or as Kuhn stated:

“The struggle is now, the past is made in the present. Family photographs may affect to show us our past, but what we do with them – how we use them – is really about today, not yesterday.”

And further she notes:

“These traces of our former lives are pressed into service in a never-ending process of making, remaking, making sense of, our selves – now.”

We are constantly trying to make sense of ourselves in the present by using family albums as a reference and memory generator. Every reviewing of the family photos opens up new interpretations and possibilities.

The function of historical photo archives is to preserve our past. By means of building up a collection of images that *witnessed* a certain event. But what can a photo—a document that shows a millisecond of a moment—without referring to the interests of its maker, actually be witness of? Furthermore this *historical event* is interpreted only much, much later. Only then is it declared *meaningful*. We impose our ideas of evidence only afterwards.

Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitz investigated¹¹ how family pictures have been used in the context of a historical museum archive. In their essay they focused on how family photos were adopted into different museums which create exhibitions on the Holocaust. In the first chapter I already mentioned the kinds of photos museum archivists prefer; High quality photos of public and institutional situations. The chronological order of this archive is divided as follows: before, during and after the Holocaust. Hirsch is questioning the efficiency of such a timeline. She mentions that people who look at photos, whether in private or public collections, do

“bring knowledge to them that neither their subjects nor photographers would have possessed.”

By viewing and reviewing them in a constantly changing present—quickly becoming the past—we read them differently.

She further mentions that the viewer:

“always contextualizes the images historically in past, present and even in the future [...] an awareness of future history - of events yet to-come that could not have been known”

This applies to the subjects in the photo or the taker of the photo at the time it was taken. Hirsch takes a closer look at the images categorized as *during the Holocaust*. They show no evidence of the bad things that happened during this period. By further researching and interpreting the photos, they even raise more questions. This instead of showing what they were selected for.

History can provide identity, it can provide past to relate to. But who decides what is history? The function of the Holocaust museum is to keep the memory of the Holocaust alive, to prevent future societies from making such mistakes again. The function of a family photo collection is to generate family history. A family history that one can proudly look back at. Unfortunately they can also create conflicts and disagreements.

Chapter 3 – The Social Aspect

The shared viewing of photos and creating meaning from them.

An example. You are sitting at a table with your family, photos are handed around. The photos show different members of the family during a family holiday, pictured twenty years ago. One member of the family had won the lottery and invited the entire family on a trip to the Baltic Sea. Without these references—which are not directly visible in the image—you could make much less sense of what is shown.

The photos are discussed, different interpretations and memories of the photos are provided. Each of the people at the table remembers something very different from each other. Each takes their own references from the photo. However, in this group of family members they are all open to a collective memory. People are willing to find consensus, by giving up or adjusting their personal memories to create collective family history.

Twenty years later, the same pictures are shown. Will the stories be the same? Probably old memories will be obscured, and new memories will interfere during the moment of review. It may be that different people are present. As such, when forming the collective memory, the photos will be read differently. Perhaps the family situation changed. Members of the family divorced or split up. How will these memories be interwoven into the present interpretation?

As already implied in explaining the referential and temporal aspects—and now also visible here—the meaning of a family photo is in constant flux. So what is the purpose of collecting family photos? If the photos contain little to no evidence, why are we referring to them? Why are they important to us?

Earlier, I explained that we use photos as storage for our memories. Shifting between past and present, the photos stimulate and generate memories. We place them in cultural context and historical moments. The image only works as a trace, which is not necessarily visible in the image itself, but it forces the activity of creating meaning. In this third chapter I want to concentrate on this creation of meaning, which I regard as a social process.

By putting the photos on the table, showing them around, we continually generate new meaning. Family photos are infinitely capable of making

new meanings, as long as they are discussed. Martha Langford states¹² in *Suspended Conversations* that photos are references to memories, which are generated in an oral tradition. She calls it a *performative oral tradition*. Our family photos are intended to be shown, to spark a conversation based on them. Even though the context of the origin is missing, we are happy to recreate —from these fragments of our past— a coherent story of our family.

If family photos contain little evidence and are untrustworthy when providing an objective view of the past, what is their value? In her essay *Photography and cultural memory: a methodological exploration* Kuhn explores¹³ how, through actively viewing a family photo, memories are being produced. In her essay she calls this process *memory work*, an active practice of remembering to reconstruct the past. In most societies photographs are regarded as repositories of memories. They are used as opportunities for performing Kuhn's memory work. It is most likely to be carried out in the closed system of family. By doing so these family members —who are both subject matter and reviewers— create their history and shape their family bonds.

In this context I want to explain Kuhn's method of how to *read* a photo:

1. Write a simple description of what is shown, take the position of all subjects and objects, empathize with what is shown.
2. Consider the context of the production of the image by asking where, when, how and by whom the photo was taken.
3. Consider why this photo was taken. In this last step, incorporate the greater value of the photo; Who or what was the photo made for, who owns it, who saw it and where is it kept?

By following this sequence, every significant detail is subject to further interpretation. This performative act is similar to how photos are circulated in a family context. Kuhn's method can't be regarded as a truth generator, the photograph is simply a stage for active interpretation. It can give us an understanding on how our memory works and what the most likely story of the photo is. It shouldn't be taken as a method of producing proof of past events.

As I explained earlier, memory is non-linear. Forming family history is a random act. Shaping the past depends on who participates in the discussion on a certain photo, and who has the better argument.

In *The Generation of Postmemory* Hirsch explains¹⁴ how a historically traumatized generation transmits memories to the next generation, sometimes even without talking about it. She states that photos play an important role in this process. Photos are falsely taken as references providing access to the events they depict. The unimaginable becomes a symbol through the photos that are left.

The embedding of general cultural and social memory into our private family history is also possible. In the memory work experiment that I mentioned earlier, the participant did not have strong memories on the situation depicted, which made him change the subject of the conversation away from his actual past and towards a greater historical perspective. In this case it was the political situation of China right after the revolution. He takes general historical information and embeds that into his own personal history.

Furthermore, information can be transmitted in a non-cognitive way. It can be transmitted through body language and behavior. This silent transfer of the family's past to the next generation is articulated¹⁵ in Sebalds *Austerlitz*. The main character in Sebalds' book grew up isolated from his family. A victim of the *Kindertransporte* during the Third Reich, he was taken from his family in Czechoslovakia as a very young child. He was deported to Britain, growing up knowing nothing about his past. He only learned about it when already an adult. Even though he did not know about his past, he always felt loss and the absence of something unknown. In the book, Austerlitz is constantly seeking for references to his unknown past in objects and photos. As the character himself puts it:

“Our concern with history, [...] is a concern with preformed images already imprinted on our brains, images at which we keep staring while the truth lies elsewhere, away from it all, somewhere as yet undiscovered.”

And Marianne Hirsch clarifies¹⁶:

“The images already imprinted on our brains, the tropes and structures we bring from the present to the past, hoping to find them there and to have our questions answered, may be screen memories—screens on which we project present or timeless needs and desires and which thus mask other images and other concerns.”

Drifting from facts into fiction, our personal desires become the main influences in the shaping of our personal family history. From our vantage

point in the present, we seem not to notice we spend an extraordinary amount of attention to ourselves in history.

The social aspect is deeply linked to power. We have the power to delete memories by destroying references. We constantly reform our history. We can cut out parts of the photo, we hang photos on the wall and take them away again. A loved person can become a hated one. An image of a pet can be too painful to look at because it died tragically.

Here, it is interesting to sidetrack a little, to see what we tend to collect in our family photo albums. A few weeks ago I visited someone who collects and sells family photos from all over the world. He referred to the family albums as “*books of illusion, one cliché after the next*”. He said all family photo albums are pretty much the same, regardless if you open a photo book from Japan or one from Italy. There’s a small cultural difference, of course. For example; In China before the revolution, less photos were taken by Chinese families than those in Europe. However, the themes in these books remain the same altogether: Weddings, vacations, the first baby, a gathering of friends and family members. They are mostly big occasions that had to be captured as a reminder of this special moment. Always, smiling people faced me while browsing through the nameless photo books in this shop. As Kuhn outlines: “*The promise is of a brighter past in the future*” is primarily a desire to have a brighter past. Looking at these photo books I can clearly see what she means.

I remembered reviewing my own family’s photos together with my grandmother. One person —my grandmother’s sister— stands out. Of all the people being captured, she was the only one who looked rather sad and unhappy. She was only visible in a few group portraits. There were no portraits of her alone, even though everybody else was captured regularly in such a way. When I told my grandmother about my observation, she explained that her sister was mentally retarded.

To quote the shop owner again: “*If you find any photos of unhappy or sad people, of someone being very ill, someone beating his wife, a father with his abused child, tell me! These are impossible to find!*” He further mentions, “*if I look at all the photos I have seen so far, what are we complaining about? We seem like the happiest people!*”

John Tagg mentions¹⁷ photography's:

“nature as a practice depends on the institutions and agents which define it and set it to work”

The same applies to family photographs. There are certain rules to what kind of photos are collected in the album. No one wants to be reminded of the bad moments in life. When we look back at our personal history we want to be reminded of success and happiness. Of moments that show us that life is worth living for, and to remind us we were once lean and beautiful. A fairytale, one happy end after another!

Conclusion

Family photos are seldom a true and precise illustration of a family. Objectivity remains an impossibility when we truly analyze them. They depict idealized concepts of our families. An idealization of reality is staring back at us, browsing through a family album.

They can be compared with souvenirs; not directly showing what is matter of fact, but referring to something invisible. The photos carry a deeply coded meaning that is only revealed within the social system of family—in a performative act of family conversation— The viewing of family photos is never of short duration. They are viewed with pleasure, the process is an emotional act, an intimate situation, a ritual. The members of the family drift away on a journey through the past. At different reviews they provide ever-expanding interpretation. They generate memories and meaning. In time, multitudes of new memories are generated. The moment you want to pin them down, they slither away.

Family photos contain a huge amount of information, but it's only decipherable through careful reading and interpretation by the right people. They can tell us a lot about family situations and the owner's needs and desires. To give them only *one* meaning is wrong, because they often conceal that of which they are evidence.

The importance and value of family photos is mentioned¹⁸ very clearly in the film *Blade Runner*. Genetically engineered robots, called replicants, are enhanced with artificial memories of their past. Photos that refer to their non-existent past have been given to them. This way they can create their identities. In the film, family photographs are used to give the replicants a sense of belonging and stability. The robots function more effectively by being included into society. The photos make them feel human.

I claim that the same applies to family photographs, in reality, to real humans. Family photos shape our identity, they give us a sense of belonging; To the family, to the world in general. They tell us: *Hey, I also have a family, I share happy moments, I go on vacation. I am part of our social system, I belong to this world, I am part of this world.*

Even though they might not contain reliable evidence, they help us place ourselves in the greater context of our history. Family photos are a method of making sense of our life.

Colophon

This text was written as a final thesis for the master programme at the Sandberg Institute in Amsterdam, The Netherlands

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