

Integrative Seminar II: Visual Culture
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Bridge 4: Research Paper
THE FAMILY ARCHIVE AND THE IMPORTANCE OF
PHOTOGRAPHY IN OUR PERSONAL LIVES

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Ever since its origination in the early 1800s, photography has been a prevalent aspect within our lives. In our current time, our most common method of consuming photographic content has become through the means of visual culture, including social media, the internet, or just our camera rolls. Whether we consciously comprehend it or not, photography is ubiquitous.

One specific realm of photography is present throughout our lives, which is often overlooked but still plays a big part in the way we are able to define our identity; our family photographs. Since we are not able to step outside currently, this time has prompted me to look inward and explore my roots. In this process I stumbled upon what can be described as my family's personal archive of photographs. Within this extensive collection I found photographs all the way back till the time of my grandparents' wedding, fifty years ago and beyond. These glimpses into my family's past brought about a sense of clarity and validation of who I am and where I come from. It made me appreciate my culture, along with the course of history related to my family and events that took place prior to my birth and the world that subsequently surrounded me.

The effect this access to my family archive had on me changed the way I was able to connect with my family members and myself. Hence, I was motivated to examine the importance and influence of photography within our personal lives. The presence of photographs from our past has a significant impact on how we are able to distinguish ourselves in the present.

Hearing stories from our past does help us understand who we are and our place in the world we are in presently, but seeing photographs from before our existence can just about transmit us into those periods of our history we did not physically experience. "Photographs furnish evidence. Something we hear about, but doubt, seems proven when we're shown a photograph of it."¹ Susan

¹ Sontag, S. *On photography*, 1st ed. RosettaBooks LLC, 2005.

Sontag mentions this in her book, *On Photography*, in which she describes a myriad of ways in which photography has an essential place in our lives with the aforementioned effect. Roland Barthes also describes this in his book, *Camera Lucida*, “a photograph mechanically repeats what could never be repeated existentially.”² This access we have to our past helps us create a connection and understand the path of time that has endured leading to and affecting the present. This effect and power of photography in our lives extends beyond the confines of the four-walled frame, into the realms of our emotions, psyche, relationships, and identity.

The premise of this exploration is based on the validity of a family archive, but can be challenged when relating it to the subject of photography, as the common notion is that family photographs do not fall under the themes of art photography or photojournalism, and are created by amateurs. Yet, it is important to consider these terms in relation to photography because these classifications are complicated to delineate in many cases. To support this, we can compare the careers of two popular photographers: Garry Winogrand and Vivian Maier.

Winogrand was a renowned personality with a great career — Winogrand was open to the world with his work, shot countless rolls of film over the course of many decades, had shows at the MoMA, published books, and was very successful.³ Vivian Maier, on the other hand, by profession, was a nanny. She did not show her photographs to anyone, travelled the world, and led a very private life. But over the course of her life she carried a camera with her at all times, also shooting countless rolls, but left almost a thousand undeveloped, and rose to fame posthumously.⁴

² Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. Hill & Wang, 1981.

³ *Garry Winogrand: All things are photographable*. Directed by Sasha W. Freyers. 2018. Greenwich Entertainment.

⁴ *Finding Vivian Maier*. Directed by John Maloof, and Charlie Siskel. 2014. Ravine Pictures.

Both Winogrand and Maier took pictures of the children in their life, and Winogrand's family work was the content of his book, "The Animals", where he used to make pictures every time he took his children to the zoo.⁵ Maier's work, when it was exposed to the world posthumously, included a substantial amount of videos and photographs of the children she used to take care of, as well, which is considered to be part of her work.⁶ This is why I believe that there is a thin line between the classifications we can attach to photographs, which creates a stronger argument for the importance of the family archive.

"Cameras go with family life"⁷, writes Sontag, and furthermore supports this premise by citing the prevalence of the camera in the household as a significant growth in the consumption of photography as a subject and practice across time; along with the psychological effect it has on the way we deal with moments and relationships in our lives. She claims that a considerable amount of photographs in family albums feature the extended family, "[memorialising] and [restating] symbolically... the vanishing extendedness of family life."⁸

To evaluate this notion, I considered it from the perspective of a large Indian family. I carefully explored the kinds of photographs in my family archive, and found further evidence to corroborate this claim, as there are multifarious pictures of the many extensions of my family and the time we have shared together, from before my parents' birth until now. Navigating the branches of an Indian family tree cannot be done easily, and many of these connections are lost as time passes. Yet, these kinds of

⁵*Garry Winogrand: All things are photographable*. Directed by Sasha W. Freyers. 2018. Greenwich Entertainment.

⁶ *Finding Vivian Maier*. Directed by John Maloof, and Charlie Siskel. 2014. Ravine Pictures.

⁷ Sontag, S. *On photography*, 1st ed. RosettaBooks LLC, 2005.

⁸ Ibid.

photographs offer a path back to them, acting as a reminder of the time and many unbreakable bonds we share.

“Through photographs, each family constructs a portrait-chronicle of itself—a portable kit of images that bears witness to its connectedness. It hardly matters what activities are photographed so long as photographs get taken and are cherished.”⁹ In essence, a photograph instigates an emotional response from its viewers. The archive in my house was accumulated over the course of many decades, mostly by my father. Through the course of my research, which included looking through numerous albums and collections of miscellaneous photographs from different time periods, I interviewed him to understand how and why this archive was formed. I learned that he began finding and putting albums together from the year 1990, when he was around my age. Growing up in a household with little to no access to this type of record of his past, he became fascinated by his dad’s camera that was occasionally used, and began exploring the practice of photography and subsequently assembling albums.

“I had no training in the field, so I would keep shooting and wait till the roll was developed to see how I could improve in the next. ...I think I became a decent photographer.” My Dad continued to maintain this record from the 90s until the present, regularly documenting parts of life both before and after my birth. I asked him about how it feels to look at these moments from the past, and he told me that there is a wave of nostalgia that encompasses us, but having a physical representation of those times in the form of a photograph allows you to actually hold and experience the information within the frame and take a moment to recall and connect with the past.

⁹ Sontag, S. *On photography*, 1st ed. RosettaBooks LLC, 2005.

As I was in the midst of analyzing and screening through this plethora of photographs, I noticed all the members of my house flock towards my research space, which happened to be the living room. Over the course of the few days I was engaging in this process, I had conversations with different members of my family as they picked up an album or a photograph and started recalling the people present, along with the time, place and even the way they were feeling in that moment. “I’d had a fight with your grandfather right before this was taken”, said my grandmother as she stumbled upon a polaroid in the collection I took out. She pointed out details that I would have never otherwise found out about my family if she hadn’t looked at the photographs.

The way this activity triggered these near-forgotten memories from her life made me wonder if there is a scientific relation to how photographs can keep our neurological sense in relation to our memory strong over time. In an article published in 2014 by BBC, it was stated that old photos are being used to help trigger memories in people with Alzheimer’s; as there is a direct connection between our deep-seated memories and emotion.¹⁰ This process is being used with patients to encourage the process of sharing and communicating. This can also be classified as another branch of art therapy, essentially, and can have a powerful positive impact even in our regular lives.

There can be many arguments revolving around the subject of the influence of a photograph, but what can be agreed upon as fact, as explained by Sontag, is that “Reality has always been interpreted through the reports given by images.”¹¹ In his reflections on photography, Roland Barthes explores similar concepts in relation to the power of the photograph and its representation of the world — but more importantly, of us. He writes, Lineage reveals an identity stronger... more reassuring as well, for

¹⁰ Heyden, Tom. “The Trove of Old Photos Helping People with Dementia.” BBC News. Last modified October 14, 2014. <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-29596805>.

¹¹ Sontag, S. *On photography*, 1st ed. RosettaBooks LLC, 2005.

the thought of origins soothes us. Our family — whether biological or chosen, is all that matters at the end of the day. We cannot hold our experiences and the time we share together in any form other than memories — but can revisit them through photographs. In the interview with my dad, when I asked him how he would feel if he ever lost these images, he laughed in disbelief and said “Terrible. I would be devastated if I ever lost these and hope to preserve them forever.” Photographs have the ability to provide a sense of comfort and additionally inform, identify, communicate, but most importantly, immortalize moments in time with those we consider family.

Bibliography

Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. Hill & Wang, 1981.

This source provides insight into the influence and prevalence of photography extending beyond the camera, including personal anecdotes and examples of archival black and white images. Barthes elucidates a philosophical perspective in relation to the concept of photography, covering the effect it has on us as its subjects, and the way we represent ourselves through it; along with the notion that the photograph provides a clear view of the world, hence, delineating it the Camera Lucida.

Finding Vivian Maier. Directed by John Maloof, and Charlie Siskel. 2014. Ravine Pictures.

The Oscar-nominated documentary about the mysterious yet brilliant photographer Vivian Maier takes us on a journey uncovering her life and a plethora of completely unseen work left behind by this extraordinary individual. Beginning with just a box of old negatives and undeveloped film, John Maloof navigates an investigation and exposition of Maier's work and past, giving her posthumous fame - which remains a controversial topic due to the description of her extremely privately-kept life.

Garry Winogrand: All things are photographable. Directed by Sasha W. Freyers. 2018. Greenwich Entertainment.

This documentary showcases the long and successful career of the man who was called a "poet", "athlete", and "philosopher" of photography, Garry Winogrand. It describes the course of his life in conjunction with his career, showing all the ways his personal life affected the work he created along with his vibrant spirit; leading to the production of some exceptional and inspiring work.

Heyden, Tom. "The Trove of Old Photos Helping People with Dementia." BBC News. Last modified October 14, 2014. <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-29596805>.

This article cites evidence of the use of old photographs triggering memories in patients with Alzheimer's and explains how there is a deep-rooted connection between imagery and emotion that has a positive effect on memory.

Pahwa (Grandmother), Nisha. Personal Conversation. Home, April 22, 2020

The conversations I had with my grandmother through the course of my research on this subject impacted the way in which I dealt with it, because it provided deeper emotional and informative insight into my family history and showed me (in real-time) how a family archive of photographs draws people in and connects them back to their past and experiences.

Sontag, S. *On photography*, 1st ed. RosettaBooks LLC, 2005.

This was the main resource that expanded the way I view the subject of photography, as it highlights the various themes and elements attached to photography in relation to our real lives. In addition, it presents a summary of the history of photography along with the major trends attached to the practice and how became an extremely prevalent aspect of visual culture and consequently our lives, over time.

Suri (Dad), Yogesh. Personal Interview. Home, April 21, 2020.

The interview I conducted with my dad elucidated the practices and the very different manner that photography was dealt with around thirty years ago. I was able to understand the impetus behind

my dad's efforts to gather and preserve these moments from our life and understood the influence his actions in this realm had on me as I was growing up, which allowed me to introspect about the significance photography has had throughout my life.

Personal photographs from family archive, miscellaneous black & white prints, 1950-1970.

Personal photo albums from family archive, 5x7" colored prints from travels and other, 1990-1999.

Personal photos from family archive, 35mm color negatives, miscellaneous, 1990-1999.

Additional photos and albums from family archive, digital prints, 2000-present.

All photographs from this archive found in my home contributed to the genesis of this project and research, providing insight into my family history and culture. Additionally, it instigated conversations that helped me understand my origins and the life and experiences my parents, grandparents, and other relatives had before I was born and how the events in time took place to lead us to where we are now. It can also be cited as the evidence of the origins of my fascination with the subject of photography, which influenced me to become the person I am today.

Supplemental Work:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Q8uspYRkNk&feature=youtu.be>