



Mementoes
A Meditation on a Personal Archive
ASSIGNMENT TWO : 7VC015
Contemporary Contexts in Digital
and Visual Communication
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“Memories Are Made of This”

(Gilkyson et al., 1955)

Dean Martin’s mellifluous rendering of the song encapsulates a timeless sentiment; the memories of love and family, but that song evokes a deeper personal memory; the memory of the author’s Father and his own childhood. Tellingly, “Memories are made of this” was also the slogan that Kodak chose to market their best-selling Instamatic camera in the 1960s (Wells, 2015, p.167).

The song is one of many that this author’s Father recorded on reel-to-reel magnetic tape in the ’60/70’s and - like the copies of old photos he keeps (many taken on an Instamatic camera) - is also haptic. To handle the spools themselves can feel highly “charged” in the sense that Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton suggest; that we invest “psychic energy in an object [and] that object becomes "charged" with the energy of the agent” (1981, p.8).

Beside his tape-memories there exists what Meir Wigoder terms “an orphanage” (2001, p.29); a pile of uncatalogued family photos in boxes, albums and envelopes inherited, in the main, from his Mum and Dad. In Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton’s survey of American households they list under photograph “memento,” “recollection,” “heirloom,” and “souvenir”...all combined in the class “Memories” (1981, p.8). Olga Shevchenko argues that the metaphor of the photo as memory was established early on, indeed in 1859 Oliver Wendell Holmes dubbed the photo ‘a mirror with a memory’ (2015, p.273). It was the counterpoint to the irreversible flow of time, preserving the past. This technology emerged at a time of ‘memory crisis’, a ‘general anxiety’ in the 19th and early part of the 20th century. The camera was ‘mobilised’ to preserve and accurately represent the disappearing past; in effect, what was being lost (alongside a dying generational folk memory) would be retained as an image memory as opposed to a memory image. These images would then eventually become “Treasured Memories” persevered in albums (Batchen, 2004, Olick, 2014, Terdimen, 1993, Kern, 1986, cited by Shevchenko, 2015, pp. 272-273).

The seeds of this essay were sown several years ago following the passing of the author’s Mother in 2013. He wrote to himself in a private journal “Roots. Mum is the door that opens onto the past...” (Langford, 2013) but then, to extend the metaphor, those seeds had lain in largely fallow ground since 1993 when his Dad died :

...After Dad told me he had prostate cancer...they both stood together on the doorstep to wave goodbye...And Mum when widowed would always do the same. Until the time she could no longer do so & [sic] stood @ [sic] the window. And after that no more (Langford, 2013, p.5).

Though Mum said “I may be in the departures lounge but I haven’t taken off yet” (Langford, 2013) when death finally came it set in train some kind of an existential crisis -

“I have to go back to explore my past. I have to go back to explore who I am. To know thyself...I have lost my voice and I have to go back (perhaps in time)...” (Langford, 2013). This notion of going back (rather like reminiscence, recollection), literally and figuratively perhaps, recalls Sarah Sentilles discussion of how Roland Barthes, John Berger and Susan Sontag -

- Appeal to theological language to describe photography’s ability to cross boundaries—to make the dead present, to allow viewers to “time travel” and visit the past, to make visible what otherwise remains invisible (2010, p.508).

The authors Mum travelled back in time through her unfinished memoir (a keepsake in his archive) “Here I go Tim, trying to remember while I still have my marbles” (Langford, 2006, p.1) while he has chosen to evoke memory, largely through photographs because “More than any other object in the home, photos serve the purpose of preserving the memory of personal ties” (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, 1981, p.69).

Mementoes - A Meditation on a Personal Archive pays homage to Sarah Sentilles theological inference “Ultimately, Barthes compares looking at photographs to a kind of *private meditation* (authors emphasis) practiced by believers in the Middle Ages, what he calls “under-the-breath prayer...” (2010, p.507). Indeed Barthes Camera Lucida (1981) is a key source text and writing this essay expresses a deep, personal yearning to “meditate” on selected photographs in order “to explore who I am” through memory and the visceral feelings that sometimes result.

Wounds that resurrect very strong personal traumas

(Wigoder, 2001, p.29)

Mette Sandbye, in her study of family photography, relates the practice to “phenomenological aspects such as emotions, affects, and feelings” (2021, p.129). This personal experience can appear banal to outsiders since family photos have “deep meaning only for those who have participated in their creation” (Kaufmann, 1980 cited by Sandbye, 2021, p.127). Figure 1, was taken in the 1970s (likely by Tim Langford) beside the River Severn of Mum and Dad. Figure 2 is the spot he searched for and the angle the author sought to replicate the original. Was it a forensically researched attempt at authentication? Tim Langford comments;

‘A few years ago I went searching for the place where we took this photo... as if I was trying to re-ignite, re-construct the memory of this photo - the spot we took it felt like a place of sanctity...’

Imbuing that place with ‘sanctity’ - the very act of seeking it out, like a pilgrimage perhaps -



Figure 1



Figure 2

suggests he transferred the “psychic energy” he invested in the original photo to the location itself. Geoffrey Batchen identifies the need to transform a photo in order “To induce the full, sensorial experience of involuntary memory...from an image viewed at a distance on the wall into an emotional exchange transacted in the heart” (2004, p.94). Here the past and its memory (the old photo) is transformed by placing it in the present (Figure 2) at the potential same site in order to affect an emotional transaction. But what if Tim Langford was mistaken about the location ? The question is a segue to Margaret Olin’s (2002, pp. 99-118) fascinating critique of Roland Barthes “mistake” in *Camera Lucida* (1981) when singling out a necklace his Mother wore in a photograph that isn’t in fact present. For a lucid, brief overview of Olin’s arguments see Angeliki Tseti (2013, pp. 2-3). That item of missing jewellery led Barthes to evolve his “punctum” theory -

which is focussed on the emotional impact of the loss of his Mother and his memory of her (this author empathises with his meditation on her absence - see Figure 3).



Figure 3 : The authors Mother - June Langford, taken with her Box Brownie camera, before he was born.

As Olin comments “The *punctum* is the detail that is not there, or that one wishes were not there. Absence, in this book about loss, is presence” (p.110). The punctum is the thing, perhaps the detail in a photograph that has a visceral effect on the beholder “...that leads him (*Barthes*) to characterise photographs as wounds that are capable of resurrecting very strong personal traumas” (Wigoder, 2001,p. 29). The author’s punctum (photo, Figure 1) may be the rubber dinghy; it may be the plastic cup of tea (bottom left) that makes him emotional; their relative youth; but his gaze is also directed to his Mum (looking a tad stiff) and Dad (so relaxed) captured in such a natural way. When he returned to the possible location (Figure 2) the place summoned up their memory, the memory of the family rubber dinghy outings. Tim Langford comments when writing these two sentences: “At this very moment I have tears in my eyes”. Standing alone on that spot that day was to experience a profound sense of their “absence”.

Sarah Sentilles (2010, p. 515) characterises Barthes perception in terms of “...the photograph is animate in two key ways: as trace (containing something of the photographed subject) and as animator (affecting the viewer)”. Could it be that (Figure 2) being physically present there was to experience a “trace” that was actually contained in what Langford called “a place of sanctity...” which of course was entirely in the mind or memory of the beholder ? As if summoning up their presence like a seance. Olin’s forensic critique of a number of Barthes mistakes and misidentification vis-a-vis his punctum theory (she acknowledges the veracity of his wound) leads her to posit “If the immense power of the photograph does not come from that which was in front of the camera, it lies elsewhere” (2002, p.114) and that is the -

...relation between the photograph and its beholder...what I would like to call a “performative index,” or an “index of identification.” *Camera Lucida* allows us to see its narrator use photography to satisfy his desire to possess or commune with his mother, to absorb her into himself and preserve her there through his identification with her (p.115).

Angeliki Tseti calls this “the pictures lying in the beholder’s memory” (2013, p.3) in other words the ‘memory image’. Sentilles states that Barthes attaches an “ontological” status (which the author understands as the nature of being, ones existence) to photographs (p. 513). In the light of Tim Langford’s journal entry in 2013 (“I have to go back...”), following the loss of his Mum and his observation that this precipitated an “existential crisis”, suggests the relationship he has to his cache of family photos is ontological.

“The me - experiencing - now - becoming aware of a prior-me...”

(Reed, 1994, cited by Neisser, 1994, p.8)

In his introductory discussion about memory and “self-narratives” Ulric Neisser (1994, pp.1-18) states that the self “of yesterday” is a “reconstructed version” (p.8). An “I” and a “me” are not the same thing: “...The I is the remembering self inventor and constructor of the remembered me” (p.9). Dan Albright makes the opposite case, the remembered self inventing “the present self as its continuing invention” (1994, pp.19-40, cited by Neisser, p.9). In calling into question the reliability of memory (C/ref. with Barthes mistake), identity even, how then is one to interpret a photo of a past self ? Catharine Keenan writes; old photographs -

...remind us that memory is a phenomenon that occurs in the present. It refers to the past, but is always shaped by our present perceptions of that past, omitting and even adding details according to how that perception changes...”(1998, p.61).

Keenan (1998, p.62) refers to Walter Benjamin’s belief that the photograph “turns all life's relationships into literature”, “...he seems to mean that the vacuity of the photograph, its inability to mean anything on its own, is perversely the lure that leads us *to encase it in narrative*” (authors emphasis), whilst Geoffrey Batchen discusses the conflict between memory and the photograph claimed by Siegfried Kracauer, Barthes (2004, pp.15-16), in sum “...photography and memory do not mix...” (p.15). Let us to turn to this authors childhood and examine these selected family photos (Figures 4-7) and his reflections -

Figure 5 Mum, me est. age 12, Spain, 1970s



Figure 6

Dad, me est. age 12, Spain, 70s



Figure 4 Dad & me 1960s



Figure 7
Dad, Gill & me
est. age 14/15



Personal reflections : Figures 4-7

‘As “the remembering self inventor and constructor of the remembered me” I wish to suggest there is a narrative here, that is shaped by my perception of the past, my memories, but nonetheless is contained in these photos. It’s both visible (note body language) and invisible (outside the frame). “To encase it in narrative” thus: I loved sitting on Dads knee (Figure 4), I’m comforted, loved (I remember his ‘Brylcreem’ smell, the masculinity): Figures 5 on - onset of puberty, yes looking awkward, gawky - my memory tells me a detachment and distance grows - I’m looking away, I can barely look at the camera. I’m no longer so close to my Dad but my sister is. As Marianne Hirsch (1997, p.173) observes “Looking at pictures of oneself as a child can be a disturbing experience” and what is invisible is the story I tell myself that from the age of eleven I experienced a disturbing, unsettling time becoming increasingly estranged. I became secretive, alienated, came to feel shame - over my appearance, how I behaved towards Mum and Dad (a kind of rejection), over the consequences of puberty. I couldn’t negotiate the transition from wearing short trousers to long trousers. To this day I’m still upset by it though therapy has really helped. But I miss them terribly and want to tell them I loved them.’

This is the authors “self-narrative”. He has controlled, curated and edited those photo’s to encase them in his narrative. It reinforces his memory of what Hirsch identifies in photographs as “the traces of a turbulent inner world” (1997, p.173) and raises the question of whether “Photography has affinity not with memory, but with trauma” (Shevchenko, 2015, p.280, cites Ulrich Baer, 2002).

But are these photographs also self-validating “false memories” claimed by Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin, Roland Barthes and Susan Sontag (Keenan, 1998, p.61) ? The movie *Memento* (Directed by Christopher Nolan, 2001), a vivid narrative about memory (constructed from the character Leonard’s mementoes, notes and polaroid photo’s), ultimately requires the spectator not only to make sense of a story that goes backwards in time but to question the veracity of the protagonist, Leonard, own version of events. In essence his “confirmation bias” (Tobias, 2012).

The author is both the beholder and user of his Mementoes - “Memories Are Made of This”.

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FIGURES : IMAGES

Figure 1

Langford, T. (circa 1970s) *Mum and Dad, River Severn (private family collection)*. Bridgnorth: Tim Langford.

Figure 2

Langford, T. (circa 2015) *River Severn location, the spot he searched for (private digital collection)*. Bridgnorth: Tim Langford.

Figure 3

Langford, T. (circa 1952-56) *The authors Mother, June Langford (private family collection, possibly taken by Eric Langford)*. Bridgnorth: Tim Langford.

Figure 4

Langford, T. (circa 1964) *Dad & me 1960s (private family collection)*. Bridgnorth: Tim Langford.

Figure 5

Langford, T. (circa 1970) *Mum, me est. age 12, Spain, 1970s (private family collection)*. Bridgnorth: Tim Langford.

Figure 6

Langford, T. (circa 1970) *Dad, me est. age 12, Spain, 70s (private family collection)*. Bridgnorth: Tim Langford.

Figure 7

Langford, T. (circa 1972-3) *Dad, Gill & me est. age 14/15 (private family collection)*. Bridgnorth: Tim Langford.

