The Unseen

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Two of the most famous photojournalists of the twentieth century, Margaret Bourke-White and Lee Miller, have both written about their experience of photographing scenes of horror during World War II, both commenting in different ways on the phenomenon of blindness in photography. 'The blind[ness] lasts as long as it is needed — while I am actually operating the camera. Days later, when I developed the negatives, I was surprised to find that I could not bring myself to look at the films. I had to have someone else handle and sort them for me', writes Bourke-White of her work in Russia.[1] Similarly, Lee Miller spoke of not truly seeing the scenes that she encountered at the Nazi death camps until after her photographs were developed.[2] These were things that were too terrible to be seen directly at the time, but only afterwards, after forming in the darkness inside the camera's chamber, waiting to be developed by the light.

In his early writings, Freud uses the metaphor of the camera to explain the unconscious as the place where bits of memory are stored until they are developed into conscious memories. Like the photograph waiting inside the camera, traumatic memories become lodged in the psyche as a kind of glitch — they cannot always be voluntarily brought to consciousness. Instead they must either be 'developed' through a process of therapy, or persist in the form of flashbacks outside of our control.

Darkness and blind spots persist, also, through the Rama family archive. Every photograph has at least one corollary that is unseen — the absent records of violence, loss and the unspeakable. Four blank pages attest to the period of unseeable expulsion which lies at the centre of this family's story: a blind spot that is the fulcrum of their

history — the gap that causes every other part of their story to make sense, and yet makes no sense.

In Western Europe, we are accustomed to associating deliberate gaps in knowledge with censorship and manipulation. But darkness is part of life — not everything than can be seen should be looked at, and not everything that exists is visible. Each person's emotional survival depends on the selection and relegation of certain memories of the past; the jettisoning of the intolerable and the inadmissible makes us who we are, or who we choose, consciously or unconsciously, to be.

The family photo album — a ritual object that varies little in communities across the world — is a space where this process is made uniquely visible. Family albums are repositories of selective memory, used to make sense and creative narratives, stories that we can own and use to build an identity. The fact that much of what makes up the 'true' story of a family is invisible in such an archive — we deliberately do not photograph the painful moments, the arguments, the tears, the unhappiness — does not make the archive any less authentic. Because family photography is not about evidence or documentary value. It is about something else entirely. This distinction is especially important when a family is facing a history like the one opened up here, a history of trauma, loss and exile. To see the gaps or blind spots in the Rama family photo album as censorship or distortion is to misunderstand what photography of families — especially displaced and traumatized families — is for.

Paradoxically, Vira Rama explains to me that in their case, it was in fact the happiest moments that had to be hidden from view — evidence of the family's success and prosperity that made them a regime target. For their protection, these were the pictures that had to be buried in the dark.

Darkness not only helps shape and guard our past. It also, if we allow it, opens up the spaces of the future. As Rebecca Solnit writes:

> *Most people are afraid of the dark. Literally when it comes to children, while many adults fear, above all, the darkness that is the unknown, the unseeable, the obscure. And yet the night in which distinctions and definitions cannot be readily made is the same night in which love is made, in which things merge, change, become enchanted, aroused, impregnated, possessed, released, renewed.*[3]

The obscurity and uncertainty of darkness are also the qualities that make possible the hope of a better future. Both pessimism and optimism, as Solnit explains, are types of certainty in which we believe the future is knowable. Only darkness allows for the possibility that things will be different — and maybe better — than we can foresee.

Even the most expert professional photographer understands how important this kind of of uncertainty is. No amount of planning or foresight can supplant the power of the ‘optical unconscious’, the elements of a picture that cannot be seen until after shutter has been released. Some of the most celebrated photographs in history have been the results of this kind of happy accident, or the willing embrace of serendipity. To say nothing of the kind of photographic blindness that has made possible the recording of human atrocities like those attested to by Lee Miller and others.

Digital camera technology means that we no longer have to leave pictures in the dark, waiting for them to develop. But even when I take a photograph on my smartphone, the moment of capture is marked by a split-second of darkness on the screen, like the blinking of an eye. This micro-metaphor, this little slice of blindness, can still tell us something about the tension between seeing and not seeing, and the many functions of photography in our lives.

The final metaphor is not a photographic one. Vira tells me that his story is one of destruction and re-growth. You can burn down a forest, he says, but life will come back. Because the traces of life remain buried, unseen in the dark. "Maybe it will take twenty, thirty years and it will be different, but it will grow. Maybe even into something more beautiful."

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[1] In Anne Wilkes Tucker et al., *War/Photography: Images of Armed Conflict and its Aftermath* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2012), p. 167

[2] Sharon Sliwinski, *Human Rights in Camera* (University of Chicago Press, 2011), p. vi.

[3] Rebecca Solnit, 'Woolf's Darkness: Embracing the Inexplicable', *The New Yorker,* April 24, 2014 (online).