


Chapter 15

In the Absence of the Photograph

Phil Hill

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0671-6857>

West Herts College, UK

ABSTRACT

This chapter considers the specific materiality of a defaced family photograph and the absence of narrative that it represents. The photograph is interrogated to open a dialogue and understand how the meaning of it has changed over time after the point it was made and not only the depicted moment that it shows. The photograph is discussed from the personal perspective of re-discovering the cut photographic print within the family archive and the shift in interpretation that it started. The chapter brings together this personal encounter with a defaced, undesirable photograph and other examples of theory and practice that deal with similar themes of intervention, photographic materiality, distributed memory, and absence that demonstrates the significance and value of photographs placed on a timeline over a singular moment. This is how photographs are part of a range of factors that support the construction of autobiographical memory.

INTRODUCTION

When viewing family photographs in relation to autobiographical memory, the image is only part of the process. Other factors such as photographic materiality, its presentational form, and the context in which it was made versus an evolution of feeling towards the photograph inevitably changes over time. The photograph is not a static object despite its ability to freeze moments and should be instead situated on a spectrum to be able to understand the complex and nuanced meaning that can be attached to it. As Elizabeth Edwards and Janice Hart on the materiality of photography reminds us, *an object cannot be fully understood at any single point in its existence but should be understood as belonging in a continuing process of production, exchange, usage and meaning* (2004, p. 4). Whilst Tim Fawns, who introduces us to the idea of distributed memory, points out *everyday autobiographical memory involves a coalescence*

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-6684-5337-7.ch015

In the Absence of the Photograph

of different kinds of remembering, realised through social and material processes (2020, p. 905). These other factors are abstractions, completely absent for a third-party viewer who gazes only in the present. If however, the photograph in question has been re-visited, re-contextualised, defaced, or even deleted, then we can gain a sense that something else is happening, either during the making of the photograph, albeit out of the frame, or in the time since. This continues to support the idea that the image alone is not to be trusted without the support of those other factors.

This chapter is a result of finding such a photograph in my own archive. Seeing an image cut in half with the other absent is so completely jarring that it has been impossible to move beyond it. The photograph presents a fundamental question that I am compelled to understand: Why keep a photograph that wounds you? I also want to understand the life of a photograph after it was made and the challenge that represents to an established autobiographical account of my family. To explore this, I will look at the work of Joachim Schmid and the attached ritual associated with photographs. I will draw close comparisons to the work of Karl Ohiri who has a significant and poignant body of work documenting a painful relationship breakdown through changes in material presentation. This will connect to the work begun by Elizabeth Edwards and Janice Hart who position photographic materiality as important to the interpretation as the depicted content of the image itself.

Throughout the chapter, I refer to some of the later works of Roland Barthes because of the autobiographical relationship that *Camera Lucida* (1993) has with personal archive and family photographs continuing to be relevant to contemporary discourse. This will be presented in tangent with *Mourning Diary* (2009), which creates new ways to understand the value of poignant photographs with deeply attached emotions. Barthes also posits a useful justification for keeping undesirable and painful memories with the idea of *integrated rejection* that is contained in his lecture notes of *How to Live Together* (2013). I will also discuss autobiographical memories in relation to photographs that have been discarded, defaced, and even deleted. This will converge with ideas presented by David Bate on involuntary memory responses (2010) and Tim Fawns key concepts of blended remembering that seeks to consider the widest range of phenomenological factors highlighting the absence in photographs that still make them so compelling to us.

The discussion within this chapter, informed by my own experiences of the defaced photograph, creates a framework in which the image is available for interpretation based on a spectrum of distributed factors. This deepens understanding of the photograph beyond the static position it is seen in the present context. This then provides the viewer with a more nuanced, informed, and rounded method to understand a compulsion towards photographs, even those that are absent either phenomenologically or in its material presentation, which elicit a great amount of pain for the author.

Looking at Family Photographs

Whilst I was looking through a family album brought down from my parent's attic where it was stored for years, I saw a photograph I overlooked previously in an ageing photo album from the late 1970s, before I was born. The photograph had an orange hue, presumably from its age. I am uncertain of the author, although it was most likely my father, who took most of the photographs in this album using his basic 'cosmic' 35mm camera and continued to do so throughout my childhood until it broke sometime in the mid-nineties.

17 more pages are available in the full version of this document, which may be purchased using the "Add to Cart" button on the product's webpage:

[www.igi-global.com/chapter/in-the-absence-of-the-
photograph/318925?camid=4v1](http://www.igi-global.com/chapter/in-the-absence-of-the-photograph/318925?camid=4v1)

This title is available in Advances in Media, Entertainment, and the Arts, e-Book Collection, Education Knowledge Solutions e-Book Collection, Library and Information Science e-Book Collection, Media and Communications e-Book Collection, Social Sciences and Humanities e-Book Collection, Social Sciences Knowledge Solutions e-Book Collection. Recommend this product to your librarian:

www.igi-global.com/e-resources/library-recommendation/?id=126

Related Content

Interior Archives: An Experiment in Autobiographical Fiction

Annabel Jane Dover and Alex James Pearl (2023). *Handbook of Research on the Relationship Between Autobiographical Memory and Photography* (pp. 1-21).

www.igi-global.com/chapter/interior-archives/318909?camid=4v1a

Interface Tesseracto UI and the Hologram: A Zero UI Proposal

Marcos Luiz Mucheroni (2019). *International Journal of Creative Interfaces and Computer Graphics* (pp. 56-64).

www.igi-global.com/article/interface-tesseracto-ui-and-the-hologram/236638?camid=4v1a

Energy and Environment

(2014). *Computational Solutions for Knowledge, Art, and Entertainment: Information Exchange Beyond Text* (pp. 200-217).

www.igi-global.com/chapter/energy-and-environment/85391?camid=4v1a

Advanced Spatialities

Ulrich Gehmann and Martin Reiche (2013). *International Journal of Art, Culture and Design Technologies* (pp. 48-57).

www.igi-global.com/article/advanced-spatialities/85523?camid=4v1a