

## Chapter 17

# Embodying the Family Album: Photography as a Mnemonic Device

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### ABSTRACT

*The chapter approaches the subject of personal memory vs. historical memory within photographic family albums. It explores the possibilities of investigating photographic archives through embodiment and performance. The albums in question belonged to the author's grandparents and represent a period in Portugal's past scarred by one of the longest dictatorships in history (Portuguese New State 1933-1974). The chapter explores the relevance of photographic family albums within unique historical times. The research analyses the photographs in the family albums through an iconographic approach, focusing specifically on images of the grandmothers. Representative of two women's lives during this historical period, both women lived under the same dictatorial regime, but one on mainland Portugal and the other in the Portuguese overseas and colonial territories (India, 1951-61 and Mozambique 1962-75).*

### INTRODUCTION

This chapter approaches family photographic albums as historical documents from unofficial sources. It investigates the possibilities of exploring photographic archives through embodiment and performance photography. The family albums, which are the focus of the investigation, belonged to my grandparents (on my mother's and father's side) and encompass the period of the Estado Novo Regime (Portuguese 'New State' 1933-1974).<sup>1</sup> The dictatorial regime took over in 1926, under the military rule and in 1933 was established under the constitution of the 'New State', which lasted until the military coup on April 25<sup>th</sup> 1974, summing to a total of 48 years. The political regime forms the binding element of the two families as well as the core context of the historical period contained within the archives. The analysis of the archives focuses on this political regime, as the central element, it is the context from which all images are analysed. The investigation, on which this paper is based, was originally developed in the PhD thesis "Gazing at the Family: archives, performance and Portuguese photography (1940-1975)"

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(University of Westminster, School of Arts, 2019). The visual work produced in the interpretation of the family archive is titled “The Archive is Present”.

The essay examines the following key questions: (i) how can family photographs be read along a historical context and what is their relevance? (ii) how can performance photography be used as a practice method for the critical interpretation of archives? (iii) Can embodiment be used as a mnemonic device?

The aim is to investigate identity formation in the generations following the end of the Portuguese dictatorship and colonial empire. To understand the identity of women and how it was influenced by the previous generations who lived respectively on the mainland and in the colonial setting.

It discusses methods for analysing family archives. The analysis is divided into two parts: firstly, the analysis focuses on two women (my grandmothers) and juxtaposes them, creating an index that joins both archives together. Secondly, the family archives are analysed separately to create typologies of imagery. The research assumes the family albums as an existing archive. The focus is not on the construction of the family album itself, but on how the album can be read and interpreted today, taking into consideration the historical and social context of when and how it was made. The goal is not simply identifying distinctive familial traits, but specifically finding the general from the particular, in order to construct an image of female identity during particular times. It is a search for identity formation within this particular historical setting.

My family’s past is intrinsically related to the history of the country, both in mainland Portugal and in its overseas territories. Accordingly, a dichotomy is represented by the two different branches of my family. Firstly, my grandparents (on my mother’s side), who moved from Lisbon to Goa and Daman in 1951 to work as civil servants, where they lived until 1961. Between 1962 and 1975 they lived in Mozambique, where they continued to work as part of the state apparatus. In 1975, after the military coup that ended the colonial war and the dictatorship, they finally returned to the mainland. Secondly, my grandparents (on my father’s side), always lived in Lisbon, conforming to the traditional values imposed by the constrictive dictatorial regime that they lived under. My grandparents on my father’s side are identified as Fernandes and on my mother’s side as Janeiro.

Under the dictatorial regime, Portuguese society was extremely patriarchal and conservative governed by religious and traditional values. Although both my grandmothers had the same roles - daughters, wives, and mothers - they were diametrically opposed: my mother’s mother was an emancipated independent woman while my father’s mother maintained the traditional values imposed on women during the ‘New State’ regime. This chapter explores the way these archives portray two different female roles in Portuguese society during the dictatorship. This investigation argues that there is a specific identity construction attributable to the combination of the two sides of my family, characterised by my two grandmothers, asserting that these two identities, and their construction in visual representations, are present within the photographic albums. Ultimately, these different identities contributed to the identities of women of the post April 25<sup>th</sup> generation – my generation (April 25, 1974 was the date of the military coup that ended the *Estado Novo* regime). I use images of myself to signify my own generation.

The intention is to establish and question the relation between what is represented in the family albums and the lives of the women in these diverse territories, and if, and how the way of posing for the photograph, of setting up the photograph, was impacted by this particular time in Portugal’s history. The intention is to analyse the archives by searching for signs of the way of life during the *Estado Novo* (New State), especially its impact on the lives of women.

To effectively carry out this task it is necessary to understand the politics of the ‘New State’ and its propaganda strategy. This is covered in the following section.

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