Chapter 18

Beyond the Photograph:
The Phenomenon of Confabulation in Family Photographs – Counter–Memory and Narrative From the Silenced Shadow Archives

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ABSTRACT

This chapter studies the oral-performative-interactive register of family photographs with a focus on excavating previously silenced private memories and forging them into counter-narratives generations later. Conducted in a Hungarian divided memory context, the research explores how confabulation can be utilised as an excavation strategy. In the performative data gathering process, the participant interacting with the listener is transformed into a storyteller; through the confabulative process, they inscribed their subjective voice and gained ownership of their past, subsequently rendering their narratives counter to the dominant ideological frameworks. The chapter reports on the methodological challenges and strategies of capturing confabulation through a fine art research practice, taking up two positions, two roles: autoethnographic and archivist-edit.

INTRODUCTION

The research studies the oral-performative-interactive register of family photographs, with a focus on excavating previously silenced private memories and forging them into counter-narratives, generations later. My research interest that triangulates between photography, autobiography and silence, roots back to a specific phenomenon I encountered in 2009. During my Bachelor's studies, I had to work with family photographs. This caused frustration and anxiety, because I didn't know if I had any. When I approached my maternal grandparents, to my surprise, they were outraged by the innocent inquiry.

They raised their voices and argued about the necessity and the value of family photographs. At that moment, I felt unfairly attacked, however now, I have to admit, by asking them to engage with past, I was the one who inadvertently caused harm. On top of the – finally located – pile of photographs was my grandmother's, Vera's, bicycle ID from 1942. But Granny refused to identify with her effigy and the person it depicts. I didn't know it then, but I broke a taboo and brought to the surface a deliberately forgotten past. As Henry Greenspan explains (2010), to make sense of loss, you need the information that contextualises it (p. xiii). Vera, whose visual index is on the photograph, is not identical to Granny. Granny could restart her life, as she, maintaining the status quo of conspiracy of silence, rendered Vera – her difficult unprocessed past – invisible, keeping her locked away in a crypt (Schwab, 2010). Except that this time, Vera, in a form of haunting (Schwab, 2010) postmemory (Hirsch, 2012b), returned from beyond the silence, beyond the photograph. As Granny got older and her hold weakened, I witnessed the pain that the unconscious haunting of Vera caused. It directed my focus to conscious forms of excavation; photography's relationship to autobiography and storytelling–memory-work.

It took me years to make sense, because my toolkit – comprised of formal training in photography that emphasises visual literacy – was inadequate, as what Granny fought against were meanings that bypassed the visually coded, intended readings. I am still conflicted by the medium and intrigued by this phenomenon, the uncontrollable force, which re-activates and superimposes the materiality of the photograph with meanings that are compressed into and lay latently under the visible surface of the image, waiting to be excavated.

Martha Langford's (2008a) theory on the oral-photographic framework (pp. 19–20) and 'empathic filling' (2008b, p. 235) guides my inquiry. Langford argues that family albums are both material and immaterial–oral open-ended objects. A storyteller, who provides the narrative's scaffolding, can always re-activate it. However, when the storytelling became challenging – such as the identification of the character or the context of a series of photographs was difficult to read –, to maintain the structure of the oral scaffolding, the storytellers filled in the gaps, projecting their romances, desires and conflicts into the narrative.

In my Master's Research studies (2011-2012), I embedded Langford's theory into fine art photographic practice. As my late father's family past was also unknown, I assembled the – then found – photographs into an album, asking participants to recount the lives of my paternal grandparents. The output is a photobook *Confabulations On My Imaginary Family Album* (author, 2012a) where I bound the collected readings with the pages of the album. During the process, I noticed that I strongly agreed with or refuted some of the readings. Realising, I constructed my entire missing family narrative. In my dissertation (author, 2012b) I coined the term confabulation to describe the phenomenon. I use the term to nominate the combination of two significant aspects of storytelling: the act of 'going beyond the photographic frame' while reading a family photograph and the act of filling in missing narrative-memory gaps with new meanings.

Confabulation

Through the concept of confabulation, I can rethink the relationship between photography and memory. Both terms encompass an epistemic causal ontological understanding, where they act as 'true' records of the past. However, this myth is refuted by both photography theory (Sekula, 1986) and memory studies (Bernecker, 2010). The concept of confabulation creates a space where the photographs' relationship to truth is of secondary importance to their narrative nature and the ontological issue that neither photogra-

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