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THE HAUNTED PHOTOGRAPH: CONTEXT, FRAMING AND THE FAMILY STORY

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Abstract: In this paper we examine conceptions of framing and context as they apply to photographs and other visual historical material. In particular we focus on the ways that context and framing are operationalised in the intimate, fragmented space of family history and how they play out through the construction of narrative coherency, what these sites are, what we bring to the sites, and how the interactions between beholder and object manifest as encounters. To investigate this we present a selection of photographic items representing key moments from our own European family histories. Throughout we ask: is meaning primarily created through devices such as framing and context, or may there be subtle, inherent meaning embedded in items that we can sense?

> *Photos from those years have a different intensity; it's not because they record a lost world, and not because they are a kind of witnessing - that is the work of any photograph. No. It's because from 1940 it was illegal for any Pole, let alone a Polish Jew, to use a camera. So any photo taken by a Pole from that time and place is a forbidden photo - whether of a public execution or of a woman reading a novel quietly in her bed.*
>
> *Anne Michaels, The Winter Vault, p. 286*

We begin this exploration with the principle of narrative contingency, which we might call the process of 'finding the plot'. Humans make sense of the world and their lives through narrative (Denzin 2000); they shape experience by creating stories, 'the narration of a series of events in a plotted sequence which unfolds in time' (Lincoln & Denzin 2003, p. 240). As Salmon & Riessman (2008, p.78) state,'whatever the content, stories demand the consequential linking of events or ideas. Narrative shaping entails imposing a meaningful pattern on what would otherwise be random and disconnected'.

Family stories, and family histories in particular, make use of photographs and, increasingly, other forms of visual media such as videos. In this paper we, the authors, refer to visual artefacts from the lives of our ancestors. These ancestors lived through tumultuous periods of 20th century European history, experiencing dispossession and rupture. We present a joint family photo album that reflects these experiences in ways that are not immediately obvious, and by doing so investigate

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the generation of meaning from visual artefacts. The framework for this investigation will be Mieke Bal's (2002) distinction between *framing*, summarised by Frojmovic (2008, p.11) as 'an acknowledged active intervention on the part of the scholar/critic,' and *context*, 'an objectivist appeal to an allegedly pre-existing set of historical data'.

When someone reads or views a narrative sequence, the meanings they get from, or give to, an item such as a photograph will depend on what came before it and/or after it in the sequence. In the latter, meanings may be revisited, amended or created in retrospect by what follows in the sequence. In other words, new possibilities for the making and remaking of meaning are generated from the contexts and frames created by the narrative journey to that item, and from that item to other items.

But is that all? Maybe not. In this paper we explore the idea that additional knowledge may be embedded in the item itself, a kind of psychic metadata requiring intuition and detective work to uncover. Could meaning also be hiding *within* the photograph as well as on either side of it?

Context and framing: an exploration

This paper begins with a quote from *The Winter Vault*, a 2009 novel by Anne Michaels that is deeply concerned with issues of memory and trauma. If the quote were to either precede or follow a Polish photograph from 1941 within a narrative, the context provided by the quote would generate a new way of 'reading' that photograph.

However the quote refers to more than just explicit context. While it draws our attention to a set of historical circumstances that might help us to better read a photo (such as: taken in Poland in the early 1940s, when it was dangerous for Poles to do so) it also draws our attention to something purportedly embedded in the photo itself, something that we feel but can't put our finger on - the 'different intensity'. This 'something' is embedded in the risky action of taking that photo; of that subject, at that time, under those circumstances, a snapshot that captures a lot more than the subject being snapped. The quote is not simply, to again quote Frojmovic's summary of context, 'an objectivist appeal to an allegedly pre-existing set of historical data'. It is also an appeal to subjectivity that uses historical data to uncover aspects of the objects that are present but hidden, at least in part. A kind of ghostly presence, perhaps, or a coded message or messages, or a part of the item's DNA, its creation: in Walter Benjamin's (1932b) conception, the photographer is a priestly fortune-teller who reveals the future through the entrails of the image.

Perhaps, then, contexts can be tacit as well as explicit, intuitively sensed as well as consciously understood - and the exposition of explicit contexts can, like an archaeological dig, bring to the surface layers of other tacit contexts. This is something the storyteller W.G. Sebald achieved so successfully in his series of semi-historical, semi-autobiographical novels including The Emigrants (1993) and Austerlitz (2001). These works brought to the surface the buried, unspoken, melancholy sense of displacement and loss that accompanied the tearing apart of pre-war European social fabric. It is noteworthy that Sebald used a range of photographs and other visual material in these stories, harnessing the ability of

photographs from certain historical periods to haunt the viewer/reader. Sometimes this involved the repurposing of 'orphaned' photographs found in second-hand shops with no direct connection to the written narrative.

In her 1988 work *Narrative as Performance*, Marie McLean alerts us to Roland Barthes' concept of *énonciation* (or enunciation/utterance/speech act) which sees language as 'an immense halo of implications, of effects, of resonance, of turns, returns, salients;...words are no longer illusorily considered as simple instruments, they are projected as missiles, explosions, vibrations, machineries, tastes: writing turns knowledge into a festival' (Barthes 1978: 20). This, we believe, applies not only to written language but also to the visual language of images. Through their visceral power, images have the potential to generate 'explosions' of response. As Anne Michaels states in her 2009 Melbourne Writers Festival address, 'an image reaches you before you have any time to defend yourself against it'. Jill Bennett points out that 'images have the capacity to address the spectator's own bodily memory; to **touch** the viewer who **feels** rather than simply sees the event, drawn into the image through a process of affective contagion...Bodily response thus precedes the inscription of narrative, or moral emotion of empathy' (Bennett, 2005: 36).

Marianne Hirsch suggests why. She refers to photography's 'promise to offer access to the event itself, and its easy assumption of iconic and symbolic power' (2008: 107). Photographs 'enable us, in the present, not only to see and to touch that past but also to try to reanimate it by undoing the finality of the photographic "take"' (115). We insert ourselves into the narrative generated both by the photograph and by those things we know about the photograph; having 'lost the plot' of our connection with the past, experienced either directly or vicariously through family history, we try to create connection through our imaginative faculties.

Then there are the additional contexts generated through visual juxtapositioning; placing two or more media items together in a visual manner. This method was extensively deployed by Sebald, as can be seen throughout his novel Austerlitz (2001, pp. 4-5, 11, 52-53, 76, 86-89, 116, 196-197, 228-229, 248-251). Visual juxtapositioning is becoming increasingly common as technologies for creating and publishing media have grown in sophistication; however it has a long pedigree. It is the basis of filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein's (1949) theory of *montage*, itself borrowing from notions of *collage* or 'glue', developed by Picasso and George Braque, then used extensively by the Dadaists and Surrealists (Waldenberg, date unknown). Eisenstein's theory involved linking together images to create what he called a 'collision' generating new ideas, comparisons and metaphors. These may vary from closely related items to apparently unconnected imagery, as undertaken by Eisenstein in his 1928 film *October: Ten Days that Shook the World*.

Increasingly, video - and especially uploaded and shared digital video - is being used for the creation of sites of memory. Both authors are currently experimenting with this kind of use, including the following video snippet, which features juxtaposing items, two books from a family bookshelf that symbolise a century of German expansion and expulsion: http://www.vimeo.com/14568688.

To complicate things further, narrators also bring their own contexts to the narratives in which they engage. Tacit contexts are implicit in the way stories and their segments are seen/read/heard/interpreted by a narrator. Just as a work's creation involves the interplay of multiple forces, so too, does its consumption and

interpretation. Multiplicities of meaning of the type revealed by Barthes jostle for prominence in our consciousness as we encounter images, events and places. Marsha Berry (2009: 214) writes that:

> places in Germany, particularly the old pre-WW2 East are heteroglossic (Bakhtin, 1981) because it is difficult for an outsider cognisant of the Holocaust images and the Second World War to look at them without overlaying the black mirror of this other. This realisation is displaced, transferred and belated. Places are read against past narratives of modernisation and fascism.

As well as triggering grand historical and political contexts, encounters with locations also trigger memories close to home. In the autobiographical *A Berlin Chronicle*, Walter Benjamin (1932: 26) explores the idea of turning his life into a map, seeing his life as a kind of city resonant with layers of hidden meaning, with the seeker as archaeologist uncovering fragmented, unordered evidence of the past

In this era of increasingly mobile digital media, some interesting projects are emerging that seek to bring the ghosts to the fore. An example is the *StreetMuseum* (2010) application for the Apple iPhone. Produced by the Museum of London, this software program overlays archival photos of London streets, taken from the Museum's archive, onto 200 real locations when viewed via the iPhone camera. Viewers can then delve further into the historical contexts behind the overlaid archival images.

Here, the London street is literally framed and haunted by an archival photograph that has been digitised and recontextualised. It sets up a reflexive relation with the beholder, creating a site of postmemory (Hirsch, 1997) that invites an act of the imagination as well as remembrance. We read the contemporary street against the context of World War II and the bombings of London.

The Salvation Army International headquarters at 23 Queen Victoria Street, London, as seen with StreetMuseum app. From BBC Online: http://news.bbc.co.uk/local/london/hi/things_to_do/newsid_8700000/8700410.stm

Whereas the contexts and frames of such archival photographs are explicit and transparent, in the following section we expose the relations between context and framing in less transparent memory sites: those represented by our own family photographs. Here, we are interested in how context and framing are operationalised in the intimate, fragmented space of family history; what these sites are, what we bring to the sites, and how the interactions between beholder and object manifest as encounters.

Our photographs

Above is a photograph from an author's family collection. How to read it? We will imagine ourselves as someone who is seeing it for the first time (a response based on actual reactions noted by the authors):

It has an airy, informal, summery feel. The woman in the foreground is captured in what seems to be an unplanned moment of blurred movement, smiling. The other people in the background seem to be enjoying a stroll around the estate grounds.

Anything else?

It looks like Europe. It's from the past; a historical photo maybe. Chances are it's from a very different time.

Are any tacit contexts emerging yet?

Now we will add some snippets of explicit context:

- *the estate house pictured faces a large lake (behind the photographer, down the slope of the hill)*

- *on the back of the photo, in the handwriting of an author's grandmother's, are the lines: 'Koldemanz 1944.' This act of context - created by the photographer we presume - places the photo in the Pomeranian village of Koldemanz (now Kolomac), with the estate house being that of the grandmother's family.*

This explicit context places the photo in the calm before the storm: a few short months before the arrival of the Russian front in early 1945. The arrival of Russians and Polish forces resulted in the demolition of the estate house, the little Lutheran church where the author's grandparents were married in 1937 (which was located just behind the trees to the right of the estate house) and the German cemetery adjoining the church. Soon to follow was the expulsion of the German population.

Interestingly, the author was exploring and photographing the ruins of the estate house and church in the same week that the photo above came to light in 2005, as part of a collection of photos belonging to the author's grandfather and uncovered in a shoebox in a garage near Cologne by the author's aunt. Here are two photos of the ruins taken by the author:

And now to add some more personal context:

The arrival of the Russian front led to the author's grandmother, like many other Germans, poisoning herself and her children (the author's four-year-old mother and six-year-old uncle) in the forest near the village. According to a personal account written by a relative and subsequently published in paperback (Von Normann 1962), only a concerted and sustained effort by a Russian doctor saved their lives. And, by extension, the author's life too.

So how might we now read the photo? Perhaps:

There is a sense of foreshadowing. The woman in front is a ghost, impermanent and in flux. White crosses, like war graves, mark the windows. The estate house is doomed. To the right, darkness. The woman is escaping the front. The others walk blindly into it.

And so, the carefree summertime photograph takes on a completely new meaning; not replacing or negating its previous meaning but adding to and complicating it. The additional context cloaks the image with its resonance as, in the words of Marianne Hirsch (2008: 108), an example of 'images of "before" that signal the deep loss of safety in the world'.

But does the image possess a hint of this poignancy *without* the explicit context? Might somebody not familiar with the story see, in Barthes' words, the *punctum* (1980), the hidden, personal, wounding, subterranean counter-meaning puncturing the *studium*, the ostensible surface meaning of the image? We, the authors, can see the punctum in this image - but then we're operating within a framework of family knowledge that has given us different eyes. Perhaps you can see it more clearly?

Context, as hinted at by the addition of the two photographs of the church ruins, can be generated by juxtaposing temporal sequences to magnify the punctum of a specific image. To show more clearly how this may operate we present three photographs that may be viewed as a triptych or trilogy. Below is a photograph of a

mother and child. This photograph conveys unease and a lack of trust in the future. It is hardly a typical image of a very young mother and her son. It is the antithesis to the familiar carefully composed studio shots of family groups prevalent in the 1920s.

Do you need to know that this photograph was taken in Leningrad (now St Petersburg) in 1921 to experience the sense of foreshadowing? Do you need to know that the young mother lost her first child when she was 18 due to hunger during the Civil War that followed the October Revolution and was stoically determined that the boy in the photograph would not suffer the same fate?

We shall show you more of the mother, Vera - a photograph taken in 1915 when she was 15 in St Petersburg before the trauma of revolution overshadowed her life. Perhaps her pensiveness can be interpreted as a foreshadowing but it is just as likely to be the shyness of a girl from a 'good' family about to step out of the school room into her first social season. The expectation was that she would secure a good match.

Vera's comfortable, privileged world was shattered by the events of 1917 and its aftermath in Russia. Her son George was to join the Red Army. George's father was an officer in the White army and his grandfather was the first Polish Catholic General in the Czar's army. Later in life, the irony of these happenstances was not lost on George.

George is the father of one of the authors; Vera was the author's grandmother. George grew up in Leningrad and fought in WW2 with the Red Army as an officer. Ironically, George was part of the force that led to the self-poisoning of the other author's grandmother and her children. During the war George had had his own share of adventures, throughout which he carried the photograph of himself with his mother in a wallet. After being captured by the German army, the German officer in charge of the prison camp, by a quirk of fate, recognised in George a fellow officer and facilitated his escape. After this, George continued his war against Fascism with the British and American forces. The capture and subsequent escape also meant that he could not return to his homeland. Until after the death of Stalin, Vera had no idea whether her son was alive or dead. George also had no idea whether Vera had survived the Siege of Leningrad. Searching out the fate of loved ones in the former Soviet Union was problematic. Eventually they managed to connect and wrote letters with much meaning hidden between the lines. The final photograph in this trilogy is of Vera in 1967 taken in her apartment in Leningrad. Her gaze is away from the camera into the middle distance - she sent it to George with a simple caption written on the back - "thinking of you, love mama".

Framing 'framing'

In the previous section we presented a series of carefully chosen photographs in a particular order and have added specific commentaries. We have told two stories, weaving narratives from fragments that have been invested with symbolic meaning. We have created frames for the material we have presented using context, the 'objectivist appeal to an allegedly pre-existing set of historical data' mentioned previously, to give them a sense of historical weight.

But what precisely do we mean when we talk about creating a 'frame'? Conceptions of the term vary. In its general sense, it suggests a particular presentation of information, sometimes as a strategy to achieve particular ends. In its extreme use, it can even imply falsification or deception.

When conceptualised as a critical tool in Media Studies, framing becomes a lens through which research material is examined. Frojmovic (2008: 12) describes it as 'quite literally something that is (super)imposed on the image and can be inclusive or exclusive of its marginal spaces'. Framing can be seen as a kind of deliberate distortion or privileging that serves the purpose of fostering particular types of understanding. Entman (1993: 52) notes that 'to frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation'. This, as Fromjovic states, is 'an acknowledged active intervention' (11). As such, it appears to tally with the general conception of framing as an active process, but differs in that it is explicitly acknowledged.

In the social theory understanding of framing, however, frames are filters or 'schemas of interpretation' that people use to make sense of the world. As described by Gitlin (1980, p.6) 'Frames are principles of selection, emphasis and presentation composed of little tacit theories about what exists, what happens, and what matters'. Here, the word 'tacit' suggests a passive, unconscious process of interpretation - as opposed to the 'active intervention' described previously. Frames in the social theory

sense are seen as a mental shortcuts since by default we prefer to do as little thinking as possible (Fiske & Taylor, 1991), and we only shift frames or become fully aware of them when something forces us to replace one frame with another: an incongruity (Goffman 1974).

The word 'frame' has particular resonance when applied to images. The very act of taking a photo involves the creation of a frame, an intention. And through this frame, we look and attain glimpses into other worlds, whilst remaining safely removed from them:

> Small, two-dimensional, delimited by their frames, photographs minimize the disaster they depict and screen their viewers from it. But in seeming to open a window to the past and materializing the viewer's relationship to it, they also give a glimpse of its enormity and its power. (Hirsch 2008: 117)

From this we can learn about ourselves and indeed about our own frames:

> They can tell us as much about our own needs and desires (as readers and spectators) as they can about the past world they presumably predict...The fragmentariness and the two-dimensional flatness of the photographic image, moreover, make it especially open to narrative elaboration and embroidery and to symbolization. (Hirsch 2008: 117)

As Chare (2008: 96) states, the punctum is a guide that forces us to look outside the frames we have created: 'The punctum is not part of the meanings that we give to an image, rather it gives us meaning. Through the injury it causes, I feel something and I must ask why have I felt and what have I felt'.

Below is a photo of an author’s grandfather and grandmother, taken in their Lübeck apartment some four years after their Koldemanz marriage:

But we have added an additional layer of framing. Here is the photo as it emerged from the author's grandfather's shoebox in 2005:

This photo seems to have been carefully composed so that the portrait on the wall was in the frame. Who took it? To what purpose? What kind of contextual information could help us here? And how do the contexts we bring to the photo influence how we read it?

And what if we add some additional context, to modify the effects of the framing:

- *Rudolf and Leni became life-long pacifists and Social Democrats after their World War II experiences.*

- *The author's father, David, who is an Israeli Jew, believes to this day that Rudolf was an anti-Semite. David thinks he saw a book or magazine espousing anti-Jewish sentiments when he visited Rudolf in the 1960s.*

- *When the author was in Germany in 1998, his grandfather and his second wife Anne gifted him a book of Jewish life stories from the Rhineland-Palatinate, where they lived.*

On to another portrait of family life during World War II. Below is a wedding photograph taken in the early 1940s. If we were to tell you that the photograph was taken in Berlin, you would assume that the couple were German. You might even assume that the couple were getting married whilst the man was on leave from the Eastern Front.

However, the image was cropped by one of the authors to take out significant visual and textual clues that provide the context. Below is the original photograph as it appears in the family album. Now a different narrative emerges. The identity of the young couple becomes apparent through the Russian Orthodox Cross and the Cyrillic writing - exiles from the Soviet Union. Now you can assume that they are part of the Russian emigre community in Berlin.

The Russian emigre community shared a common narrative of a monumental *before*. Marlene Briggs (2008) observes that World War I (1914 -1918) is a significant site of postmemory and that 'the appeal of the period picture exceeds the factual and explanatory narratives which situate them in the historical context' (114). We would add that the Russian Revolution in 1917 and its aftermath is also a site of postmemory. In turn, postmemory is constituted in part by the concept of *aura*. Walter Benjamin (1932b: 119, 518) in *A Short History of Photography* refers to this interaction of subjective attitudes as: 'A strange weave of space and time: the unique appearance or semblance of distance, no matter how close it may be'. The aura also has a performative kinetic aspect whereby 'the aura is neither a stable attribute now an object, but an index of the dynamic fraught relationship between the beholder and the artefact' (Briggs 2008: 115). The ability of a photograph to create kinetic self-reflexive encounters with the beholder is also a quality constituted by postmemory.

To explore this effect in practice we present another set of family images. Below is a photograph taken before monumental events and circumstances forced the family into exile. The photograph is of a happy upper middle class couple with their first child in Tsarist Russia. Jenny's pride in her status as a happy wife and mother are palpable in her affect. Nicholas is secure and confident in his future and his ability to provide for his family.

The second photograph we present in this series is taken a few years later. The baby has grown into a protective big sister. 'Look at my brother' she seems to be saying, 'isn't he sweet?' The aura in these two images speaks of optimism and trust in a good future.

The context is redolent with a nostalgic vision of Old Russia that was very popular in the early part of the twentieth century. The children are self-consciously dressed in folk costumes masquerading as happy peasants. The backdrop is a carefully

drawn bucolic scene and the composition itself is painterly. We propose that such photographs are the stuff of postmemory as potent signifiers of that which once was and is no more. And what befell these children? Did they ever imagine that their father would spend five years in the labour camps in the Solovetski Islands while their mother frantically ensured their survival and that of their five younger siblings, that they would be exiled from their beloved homeland? In 1933, their passage to Berlin was arranged by their grandparents who had fled there in 1917. Below is a family portrait taken in 1933:

The girl from the photograph above is the woman in the bottom left and the boy the young man in the top right. The parents in the centre show visible traces of the trauma of the GULAGs of the Solovetski Islands. Their dreams and aspirations as newlyweds for their future family at the turn of the century were irrevocably broken. The aura is no longer one of optimism, rather it speaks of stoicism and a determination to endure whatever adversities fate puts in their path.

Another photograph of Jenny and Nicholas taken in the forest near Limburg in the late 1940s was used in an electronic art video work, 'Unforgotten' (http://vimeo.com/14660785). The piece deliberately sets out to interrogate postmemory through the aesthetics of loops, gaps and a restless sense of belatedness.

In conclusion

Acts of context creation and framing overlap. It can be said that the items selected for a family story/history - the number, type and nature of the stories, photographs and other items chosen, and those left out - is itself a frame. A further frame is then generated in the way these items are juxtaposed within the narrative. Furthermore, as can be seen in Katrin Himmler's candid history of her infamous Third Reich family, any new contextual understandings can further affect the way we frame family data:

> ...after my first researches I started to see these photographs with a different eye. My grandparents' romantic wedding photos, which I used to admire so much, had lost their innocence. Only now did I notice the Party badge on Ernst's lapel. Heinrich, his best man, posed outside the registry office with the happy couple. He was wearing his SS uniform... (Himmler 2007: 19)

In summary, one can say that all of the following occur within a framework of intention, unconscious motivation and circumstance (personal, social, historical, political):

- the act of *creating* autobiographical material
- the act of *presenting* autobiographical material
- the act of *consuming* autobiographical material

Within such layers of activity, conscious and unconscious, contexts and frames operate. They can be tacit or explicit; it's murky out there and the definitions and boundaries are not often clear. The punctum, says Chare (2008; 96), 'eludes, evades, escapes our efforts to ensnare it and catch it in meaning. It gives sense without being sensible'. One can say, however, that contexts are the building materials for frames, whilst contexts (and their juxtapositions) can also challenge - and shift - frames. And, in turn, frames may determine which contexts are included and which are left out.

The 'tripartate spaciality' proposed by cultural theorist Griselda Pollock (2008: 66) for the analysis of painting as visual representation offers one succinct way to gather together such disparate and overlapping attributes. It suggests looking at: 'the spaces that are represented, the space of representation, and the space from which representation was produced and that inscribes one possibility of its space of reading'. In these spaces, the encounter between the beholder and the object plays out.

In our own encounters with our family photographs, we have observed a phenomenon that we shall call the 'resonant beholder' in that the beholder resonates, like a musical instrument, with a kind of recognition. The beholder recognises *something* about the object; they may not be necessarily sure what that *something* is, but a response is triggered related to memory, or perhaps a yearning for memory, or for a sense of continuity and meaning. This resonance is the visceral experience referred to by Hirsch (2008) and Bennett (2005); the ability to, as previously quoted, '**touch** the viewer who **feels** rather than imply sees the event, drawn into the image through a process of affective contagion' (Bennett, 2005: 36).

All beholders, it can be said, resonate to some degree with visual material such as photos, but the type and degree of that resonance depends on the *something* that the object appears to be singing out to them, that the beholder takes from the object, within the space of the encounter. Family connections could be seen as one of the strongest generators of such resonance, or cultural connections, or the memory of specific events, places and times. The beholder may well be 'reading something into' the object – creating their own frames – or picking up on what is there within the object, or both. These frames can also change radically as new information alters the space of the encounter, as can be seen in Katrin Himmler's quote above.

In presenting our family photographs, we have both called on context and created our own frames. From the encounters generated we have woven narratives of family

that have simultaneously provided us with a deepened sense of our place in the world, and exposed our deep postmemorial yearning for our ancestral past: a tale of having 'lost the plot', and trying to find it again.

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