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Photography and Mourning: Excavating Memories of My Great-Grandmother

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**PHOTOGRAPHY AND MOURNING:
EXCAVATING MEMORIES OF MY GREAT-GRANDMOTHER**

by

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**SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS**

**PROFESSOR TRAN
PROFESSOR TALMOR**

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*In dedication to my grandfather and his three brothers,
who have instilled within me an interest to archive our
family's history and a desire to hear people's stories.
Now it's my turn to hear theirs.*

A special thanks to Professor Tran, Professor Talmor and Professor Macko
for their guidance and support throughout this process.

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History and Theory:

Photography has been linked with death ever since its inception. Many media scholars have studied the relationship between death and photography, and many have disagreed on the effect that photographs have on the mourning process. Most of those who have studied this topic did so before the times of advanced photo editing tools that may be able to influence the way in which we can conceptualize the presence of a deceased person. For my project, I have therefore decided to extend the field of research to the modern day and contribute to it by using photo technology. I reflect on and complicate the question: how does photography affect the mourning process?

In order to explore how modern technology can have an impact on the mourning process, I have created a production piece, titled “Excavating Memories of my Great-Grandmother.” For the project, I Photoshopped pictures of my great-grandmother and namesake, Eva, into photographs that were taken of my grandfather and his brothers after she had passed away. I conducted interviews with Eva’s sons and asked them about their mourning process and the effect that these manipulated images have on them. I have used theories about photography and mourning in order to inform my project and interview questions. It is crucial that I ground my research in history in order to discover what theories have preceded me and my contributions to the field. I argue that photo technology can be useful not only in helping the bereaved mourn a death, but can also help to elicit memories about and maintain a closer relationship with a loved one who has been lost.

Scholars such as Roland Barthes and Susan Sontag argue that photographs have been inherently linked with mortality ever since the invention of the camera. They claim to see death in

every picture, as the act of photographing is an attempt to immortalize the subjects and ensure that they are never forgotten. According to Sontag, photographs are marked with melancholy because they will eventually be connected to a memory and an indication of one's absence. She claims that the "ability of a photograph to record the unrepeatable essence of the passed moment is what makes photography melancholic" (Aytemiz 93). In essence, in every photograph, the moment that has been captured, has also been lost.

Some photographs are more blatantly linked with the dead than others. Post-mortem photography, the practice of photographing family members after they have died, is considered to be the first way to mourn through photography. This practice was very common in the Victorian Era and while it is no longer mainstream, it still occurs in some immigrant and ethnic working-class communities today (Hilliker 259). Researchers outline many reasons why family members took pictures of their deceased relatives. Hilliker notes that post-mortem photographs were popular in the 19th century because it was difficult for families to travel and communicate, and these photographs could be shown to relatives or friends at a later date. They played a role in maintaining family bonds over long distances. The photographs served as evidence that these relatives had existed and were also an attempt to keep their memory alive. Family members who took post-mortem photographs treated them as mementos, and some psychologists believe that having this talisman assisted in the bereavement process.

Another main reason why photographs were taken of the deceased was due to the lack of advanced technology at the time. Cameras sometimes took hours to produce one photograph, so it was much easier to capture a still corpse than a moving person. As technology improved and more photographs were taken of everyday life, this tradition of post-mortem photography van-

ished from the mainstream. As Aymetiz claims, “following the integration of portable amateur cameras into the leisure activities of daily life around 1888, photographs were used as a device for remembering or as an aid to memory” (Aytemitz 96). In fact, the invention of the Kodak played a large role in domesticating the camera and using it to “preserve happy family memories” (96). George Eastman, the founder of Kodak, acknowledged the connection that could be made between photography and memories in public perception and therefore created slogans such as “save your happy memories with a Kodak,” which helped to integrate the device into the family home (97). The common practice in the early 1900s then became capturing loved ones while alive, and using those pictures to mourn after they had passed away.

There are contrasting views in the field of Media Studies about how photographs of a family member who had passed away affect the spectator. While some think that they are simply pieces of evidence and hinder the grieving process, others believe that they have the ability to conjure up memories from the past and help the bereaved to mourn a death.

In his book, *Camera Lucida*, Barthes strays from his normal intellectual discussion on photography to write about it more emotionally, as it was written after the passing of his mother. He recounts his attempt to find the “air” of his late mother in photographs, but becomes frustrated when he isn’t able to do so. He finally finds a photograph, titled *The Winter Garden Photograph*, in which he feels struck by her presence. He terms the striking sensation he feels when looking at this particular photograph of his mother as the *punctum* (Barthes 27). He explains that all photographs carry with them a *studium*, which shows the intention of the photographer and provides context for the image. On the other hand, the *punctum* is not commonly found within a photograph. Barthes explains that the *punctum* “rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an ar-

row, and pierces me” (Barthes 26). The *punctum* is a highly specific detail that is decoded differently depending on the spectator and the personal background he or she brings to the image.

Barthes talks about the paradox of presence/absence that occurs within photographs of those who are now absent. The photograph represents something that was, but is not anymore. He terms this a “that has been” quality that is contained within a photograph. His mother is absent in his life, yet present in the photograph. He expresses frustration that the photograph is a flat layer of material, frozen in time, and unable to bring her back even though she is displayed as being present right in front of him. It is revealed that for him, photographs are not helpful, but in fact harmful in the grieving process, as they make him miss his mother and remind him more of his mother’s absence, than they do about how she used to be present.

Barthes claims that for him, photographs do “not call up the past (nothing Proustian in a photograph)” (Barthes 82). He continues, “the effect it produces upon me is not to restore what has been abolished but to attest that what I see has indeed existed” (82). His theory suggests that photographs counter “real” memories because they can fill “the sight by force” (91). Photographs are violent, he says, because they can block memories and create counter-memories, as images are constructions of events and not representations of reality. In his book, he calls out Marcel Proust as someone with whom he does not agree. According to Proust, photographs are more than just pieces of evidence and can be used to conjure up involuntary memories about the deceased.

Susan Sontag shares this similar perspective with Barthes, as she too criticizes Proust’s theory. She states that, “Proust somewhat misconstrues what photographs are: not so much an instrument of memory as an invention of it or a replacement” (Sontag 164). She believes that

photographs are not a realistic representation and can therefore be a threat to initial, authentic memories.

Many share Proust's perspective regarding the ability of photographs to trigger memories, including Elizabeth Edwards. In her book, *Photographs as Objects of Memory*, she writes that photographs "are made to hold the fleeting, to still time, to create memory" (Edwards 222). In his dissertation on mourning and photography, Aytemiz elaborates on this argument by stating that photography has the ability to connect the mourner with the dead person by "assigning a presence to the deceased" (Aytemiz 118), which can be explained as maintaining a "post-mortal social identity" (Hallam et al. 16). Those who have died gain a metaphoric presence through photographs. While it is assumed that after death, the dead cannot exist and be social, photographs challenge this notion by allowing the bereaved to continue to extract memories and by serving as a catalyst to start a conversation about the deceased.

Throughout the years, psychologists have entered the conversation about the role that photographs *should* play in grieving. In his famous essay titled "Mourning and Melancholia," Freud outlines the two different reactions one can have to a loss: mourning or melancholia. Freud states that mourning is a "regular reaction to the loss of a loved person" where nothing about the loss is unconscious (Freud 243). On the other hand, melancholia is an unhealthy reaction when the bereaved is unable to separate himself from an object of attachment and does not fully comprehend the loss. According to the Freudian mourning theory, recovery can only occur when a patient "emotionally detaches from the lost object and reattaches his/her free libido to a substitute object" (Aytemiz 89). Freud states that "when the work of mourning is completed the ego becomes free and uninhibited again" (Freud 249). According to this theory, photographs can be

used as a way to resist withdrawing from the object cathexis and can serve as a way to maintain a connection with the deceased that does not allow the bereaved to let go and complete the mourning process (Aytemiz 90).

Lately, this traditional mourning theory has been challenged and replaced with a more contemporary one. More recent psychologists recommend incorporating the deceased into family members' lives and support the "continuing bonds" model. In their book *Continuing Bonds: New Understandings of Grief*, authors Klass, Silverman and Nickman question past models of grief that are linear and finite, stating that perhaps this is a misconception of how people actually grieve. They suggest a "continuing bonds model," in which the bereaved does not eventually forget about the deceased loved one and move on, but rather finds a way to redefine their relationship with him or her (Klass et. al). They argue that this is a healthy relationship, and one that can be maintained by using photographs.

There have been many psychological studies conducted regarding the use of photographs in the mourning process. Schwalbe, Cloitre and Pearlman, authors of *Grief in Childhood: Fundamentals of Treatment in Clinical Practice*, state that the work they have done and the work of others show that bereaved children and adults benefit greatly from painting a connection to the deceased "and integrating their memories of their loved ones into their current lives" (Pearlman et al. 183). They state that it is important, especially for children, to be able to elicit positive memories of the deceased. This can be accomplished by using photographs to recall past events or feelings about their loved one.

In order to contribute to and explore the idea that photographs can be used as tools in the mourning process, I decided to create a collection of photographs of my great-grandmother by

using technology to place her in photographs of her family that were taken after she had passed away. William Mitchell views the invention of this digital imaging technology as important as the birth of the photograph in 1839 (Mitchell). It creates an era in which “you can no longer trust your eyes,” but also provides many opportunities to take advantage of this technology and use it for one’s benefit (Lister 1). Photoshopping images of Eva removes her from her linearity and places her in instances where she did not exist. In essence, this is not so different from the original practice of post-mortem photography popular in the late 1800s. Similar to post-mortem photographs, these manipulated images stem from a “related desire to hold on to the memory of the lost love one in a particular way” (Aytemiz 197).

Related Works:

As I began my research on death photography and mourning, I found a couple of artists who had created exhibits on this topic. Although neither artist I came across used the photo-technology that I did to manipulate photographs, they nonetheless inspired me and my work by showing me how important it is to consider the *way* in which death is displayed. Reading about how conscious they were about each aspect of their work helped me to understand how my art could impact individual visitors, and Eva’s sons more specifically, which impelled me to be very intentional about each piece of my production.

One exhibit that was similar to my project was titled *Memory and Mourning*. It was displayed in the Strong Museum in Rochester, New York in 1993, however traveled to other cities after its initial installation. The gallery was created by curator Debbie Smith and historian, Scott Eberle, who wrote an article, titled “Memory and Mourning: An Exhibit History,” which discuss-

es the exhibit's intentions, historical context and responses. It was an exhibit about death, commemoration and bereavement. The curator acquired the Johnson Collection and displayed post-mortem photographs, wreaths and trinkets made from the hair of the deceased, family *mementi mori*, and other souvenirs (Eberle 536).

The idea of the museum was to “explore [these objects’] effectiveness as therapeutic agents” (Eberle 539). The curator and historian acknowledged that death had become a shameful thing to talk about since the rise of medical advancements in the 1920s. They stated that this set the tone for how they developed the exhibit. Eberle and Smith disagree, however, on the effects of souvenirs and photography. While Eberle suspected that “formalized and protracted bereavement practices actually prolonged grief,” Smith believed that these objects would be able to restore and maintain connections with the dead and that “they held the key to recovering a spiritual sense lost in the present” (Eberle 539). These exemplify the two sides of the debate that has been going on among psychologists for many years. Their exhibit, similar to my project, emphasized the idea that “people are mortal. Death is natural. Grief is inevitable. Mourning is healthy” (541). Both my work and theirs provide the viewers an opportunity to discuss a rather taboo topic: death and grieving.

The intention of the exhibit, they stated, was more in terms of “social effect rather than scholarly attainment” (547). The exhibit, which showed how “forebears regarded their grief, and how they publicly played it out, provides an occasion to acknowledge and appraise our own grieving” (540). The process of looking at post-mortem photographs and memorabilia that have the essence of death allows the visitors, not the curators, to make it personally meaningful and complete the exhibit on their own (547). Eberle also spoke to the importance of providing warn-

ing labels for visitors before they enter the gallery, as the content may remind visitors of their experience with death and grief and may be unsettling to some individuals. This made me think about how I was going to introduce my project to my grandfather and his brothers, and made me aware that I needed to prepare them for what they were about to see.

Reading about this exhibit taught me that the way that I explain my project and intentions to my grandfather and his brothers before showing them the manipulated photographs is very important as this process might be emotionally jarring for them, bringing back the pain they felt when their mother died. It also made me realize that I am not the one who is finishing this project. It is the visitors and Eva's sons who bring their own personal histories with death and grief to the gallery and interpret it in their own way. I have only laid out the groundwork for these psychological processes to be carried out. Each visitor, I suspect, will be impacted by this in a different way.

Another exhibit that inspired me was titled *Rachel, Monique*, which was created by artist Sophie Calle in 2014. This exhibit was displayed in a neo-gothic chapel in New York City. French artist Sophie Calle created this installation to reflect on the death of her mother, Monique Sindler. She projected a video of her mother in her deathbed on the wall of the church and hung an enlarged black and white photo of her in her coffin. There were also photographs of the cemetery sculpture throughout the room and another large photograph of Ms. Sindler's tombstone. Audio of someone reading Ms. Sindler's diary was played out loud in the church while visitors perused the objects and photographs, being transported to a more eery and nostalgic time in history.

This exhibit informed my project in a more concrete way by inspiring the mood that I am trying to create with my photographs. The eery nature of the church, nostalgic sounds and framing of the photographs seemed to have a great effect on how the installation was perceived by the viewers. Calle evoked a sense of nostalgia in her gallery, which I also plan to do in mine. I am going to frame my photographs in antique frames and preserve the black and white nature of the photographs in order to make the visitors feel as if they are being transported back into the time in which Eva was alive. The audio of the brothers will be played aloud in the gallery, creating an immersive experience like Calle created with her mother.

Production Process:

The first step of my project was to create the Photoshopped pictures of my great-grandmother by placing her into pictures of her family that were taken after she had passed away. This is also where I ran into my first obstacle. I contacted my three great-uncles and my grandfather and asked that they gather all of the photographs they had of their mother. Although they are very invested in archives and family photography, they surprisingly had very few photos of Eva. This is probably due to the fact that cameras were not as advanced and commonplace when Eva was alive and photos weren't taken as frequently, but the lack of variety made it challenging for me to fit her into photographs of them after she had passed away. It was difficult to find pictures where her body could appear as a seamless addition since I only had a few body positions to choose from. While her sons knew that my project focused on memories of their mother, they were not aware of my plan to Photoshop her into pictures of them. I withheld this information until right before I revealed the photographs to them because I wanted to capture their real emotions, and

did not want them to have time to think about how they would be affected by this manipulation months before the interviews.

After gathering the photographs, I sorted them and decided to Photoshop three pictures due to the paucity of picture I had of Eva. My next step was to interview the brothers. For the first half of the interview, I asked them more general questions about their mother and how her passing affected their lives. About halfway through the interview, I explained that I had Photoshopped her into pictures of them because I wanted to find out how looking at pictures of her with them would affect their connection to her and memories of her. I prefaced this section this way so that they knew the intentions behind my project and understood that I was not trying to manipulate their emotions. I recorded these interviews on video and audio and later combined the audio into a ten-minute long compilation of memories that is going to be played aloud in the gallery while visitors are looking at the Photoshopped pictures hung on the wall.

Initially, I intended to play audio of them speaking about their mother and reacting to the photographs and I only recorded the videos for my own personal keeping. I did not want the visual of the video to distract the visitors from looking at the pictures, the most central piece of my gallery exhibit. However, after reviewing the interviews, I found that the effect of watching the video of the reactions did not have nearly the same effect as listening to their reactions. Watching their expressions and picking up on the moments of silence were too powerful not to show. The expressive gestures in the video would be lost if I only played the audio. I therefore decided to display their reactions to seeing the photographs on an iPad placed on a ledge below the photographs that visitors can individually plug into.

The feedback I received from my peers and professors during my work in progress presentation helped me to make a few final decisions about the display of my photographs. They made it clear that it was important for me to show the difference between the original photograph and the manipulated photograph, since visitors do not know who Eva was and would not be able to clearly identify the added body. In order to display both, I decided to print the Photoshopped pictures on transparent, loose paper and place them over the original, untouched images. That way, people could lift the image up and look at the original underneath to see where Eva had been added. As I mentioned in the “Related Works” section, I decided to frame these photographs in antique-looking frames in order to reflect the time period of the early 1900s and evoke the nostalgia that my grandfather and his brothers felt while recounting their memories of their mother.

Reactions to the Photographs:

My initial concern about this project was that the photographs wouldn't have a significant impact on the brothers. I feared that they would simply view them as “fake” images that they could not relate to, however, this could not have been farther from the truth. Upon handing them the photographs, all of the brothers were speechless, trying to make sense of seeing themselves with their mother later in their lives. Although they all knew that these were not true depictions of reality, seeing her in the context of their family later in life affected them deeply.

I found that the impact was different based on how old the sons had been when Eva died. In general, it seemed that for the younger brothers, the photographs made them think more about her absence and how this affected them, whereas the older brothers used the photographs as a way

to imagine the possibility of her presence. The first part of the interview was shorter for the younger two brothers, Sam and Esser, as they were not able to tell me as much about their mother. They were too young to remember and didn't have many stories about her. However, looking at the photographs helped them to recall other details about her, more specifically about her smile, personality and relationships with others. Sam, who was only six years old when Eva passed away, stated that he felt a big emptiness when looking at the photographs because he knows that people talk very highly of his mother, but he didn't have many clear memories of her. These photographs, he stated, "left a big void in [him]." While they instilled in him a feeling of emptiness, they also gave him the opportunity to come to terms with his mother's death and talk about how her absence affected him, something that he had never done before. Even though Esser, the second youngest brother, had difficulty conjuring up memories of his mother, his responses to the photographs did not lack emotion. He stated that these photographs "bring her back to life." They did not override his current memories as Sontag and Barthes might suggest, but instead helped to elicit memories that had escaped him. While the photographs were able to conjure up memories and prompt healthy conversations about their mother, they focused more on the effect of her absence than their two older brothers did.

The Photoshopped pictures had a very long-lasting and deep impact on the oldest brother, Harry. He stated that this was an "unbelievable sequence of putting her in there when she was not here." He thinks of his mother every day and always imagines how things would have been if she had been present in her sons' and grandchildren's lives. He is able to do so because he was 14 when she died and has much more vivid memories of her. Placing Eva right next to his late wife and children in the larger family photograph allowed him to imagine how they all would have

interacted with one another¹. He stated that “seeing how she might have been had she lived, all of the things I used to imagine of her. Seeing her own real grandchildren. It brings it all together.” These photographs offered him a tangible way to envision her with the rest of his family, something that he has tried to imagine on his own every day of his life. He focused on her presence and looked at these pictures with great joy, claiming that they helped him to feel even closer to her. After the interview, he stated, “this is going to affect my thinking of my mother, which I do all the time, the rest of my life.”

My grandfather was the last of the four brothers that I interviewed, and I could tell right away that he had been thinking about what my questions might be prior to the interview. He provided long answers, and sometimes strayed from the question by discussing his family history and memories from his childhood. I picked up on his desire to document his family’s life and the nostalgia he had for his past. Upon showing him the photographs, he began to list everyone in the picture and describe the setting and event. After I explained to him that I was interested in looking at the *effect* that these images had on him, as opposed to who was in them, he grew silent. He could barely speak without getting choked up and at one point, mentioned that he couldn't put into words how they made him feel. Similar to his brother Harry, the photographs made him think about how proud his mother would have been. He found most value in the family photograph because it allowed him to picture Eva with his wife and children². This was the most emotional I had ever seen my grandfather, and I wanted to ensure that this experience did

¹ See appendix b) for photograph.

² See appendix b) for photograph.

not take a toll on him, so I asked him if he saw this as a positive experience. He responded by saying, “yes, no question about it.”

Barthes helped me to understand why some photographs impacted the brothers more than others. For example, the photograph of three of the brothers with their mother in the center did not have a very powerful, emotional effect on Harry or Robert³. At first, Harry did not even recognize his mother in the photograph. He stated that he couldn’t connect with it and that it “[didn’t] really do anything for [him].” Nothing stood out to him, as in Barthes’ account of looking for the essence of his mother, which only pierced him in one photograph. After I asked follow-up questions, it became clear that this did not have any emotional impact on either Harry or Robert because the added photograph of their mother had been taken in Russia, long before they were born. This wasn’t the “Eva” that they knew. This photograph did not contain the punctum or “piercing effect” that the other two did, showing that for them, the emotional impact of the photograph was dependent on the mental image of her that they brought to the interview and how that matched the pictorial representation that they saw in front of them.

One of the more surprising parts of the interview was also something that all of the brothers had in common. After I finished asking them questions, they all requested copies of the pictures so that they could hang them on their walls or place them in their photo albums. I did not expect this, as I didn’t think they would want to place these manipulated images next to the ones that depicted reality, but this response demonstrates how they were able to establish such an immediate connection with the photographs and find great meaning in them.

³ See appendix a) for photograph.

Throughout this project, I have studied the history of death photography, learned about Freud's theory on mourning and read books by Sontag and Barthes about their analyses of photographs. The people that taught me the most, however, were Sam, Esser, Harry and my grandfather, Robert. I decided to create this project because I was named after Eva, born on the anniversary of her death and have been told numerous times that I share many similarities with her, but have always been surprised at how rarely my family calls attention to her life. I wanted to know how she acted, what she wore, who she was, and thought that I might be able to do so through the medium of photography. What I found astounded me. Not only were they able to open up to me about their memories of her, but this was the first time, after eighty years, that they had ever done so. Unlike Freud's mourning theory which suggests that photographs may prolong the mourning process, I found that using photo-technology allowed them to start or continue a healthy mourning process. These manipulated images can be used not only as a tool to recall memories and imagine the deceased as a part of one's life, but can give the bereaved an opportunity to begin the conversation about the death and its impact on him or her. I am very pleased that while learning more about the medium of photography and grief, I was also able to start a new conversation among the four brothers and at the same time, honor Eva's memory in a meaningful and enduring way.

Appendix:

The original family photographs taken after Eva's death are placed above the Photoshopped versions.

a)



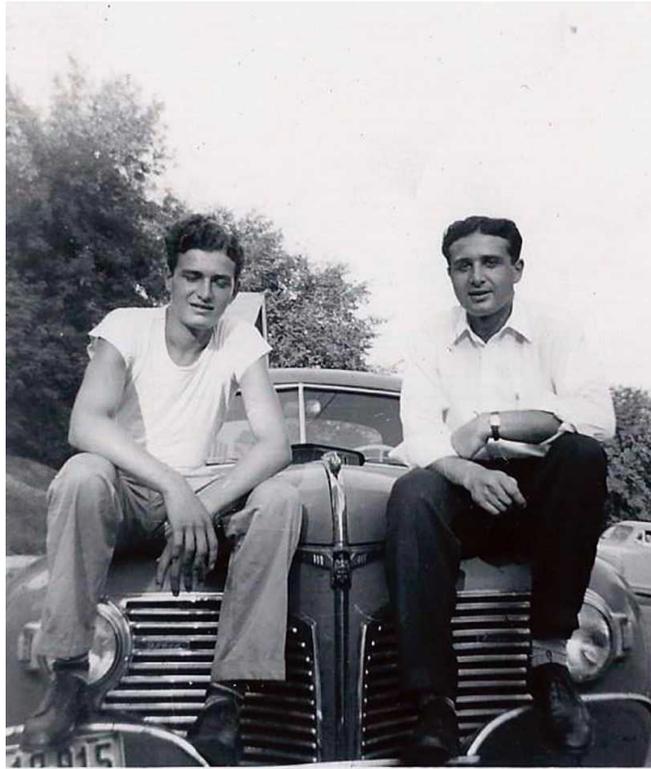
The manipulated version of the photograph replaces the sons' father with their mother.

b)



A family photograph taken in Minneapolis in 1959.

c)



An image of Eva holding Harry as an infant, Photoshopped into a picture of Harry and Esser taken 20 years later.

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