Chapter 11

Photographs and Memories

Photographs and Memories: The (In)tractable Reality of the Still Image

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Introduction

When people ask, "What is your earliest memory?" this is the story I tell….

"I am three years old and I am walking along a corridor with my dad, standing on his left side, holding his hand, entering a bright white room where my mom, on a very high bed, sits holding my brand-new brother. Because of this memory, I have no conscious life without my brother's presence. This is the memory I share because a) it is, in fact, my earliest memory; and b) people love this story. It is the kind of story that one tells at a wedding (which, in fact, I did).

Many people, while touched by this story, are also skeptical of it. Their argument is that I was barely three years and could not possibly have a memory this clear. They also argue that because the event was emotional, or perhaps because I have heard others speak of my brother's

birth, my brain has created a false memory to match that emotion (this is the pseudo-science behind the unproven theory of *false memory syndrome*). Unfortunately, there are no photos from this event, no visual evidence, to either confirm or deny that this memory did in fact take place. Admittedly, I also question this memory. In my mind, I can clearly see my brother, sitting upright on my mom's knees. For anyone who has had even minimal exposure to a newborn, you know that a one-day old baby does not sit upright. Regardless, my brain remembers it. I have often wished that there was a photograph from that day. Photographs confirm our memories. We take photographs of special events, our travels, our friends, landscapes, architecture. We take these pictures to keep our memories alive but also to prove that things occurred. As photographer Roland Barthes said, the reality of the photographic image is that of "*what has been*" (1980, 85). So to prove an occurrence, to boast of an event, to display with pride, we take, and share, an undeniable image. "Every photograph is a certificate of a presence" (87).

Beyond proof of an occurrence, however, what is the role of photography? Photographs are record keepers of the past, sometimes our own past and often the past of others. We, or someone before us, set up an image, looked through a small square, a hole, or now a screen, pushed a button, and what they/we saw appears exactly as we witnessed it. Photographs, because of their *reflection* of reality (the camera captures light and *reflects* an image back to us), have the power to provoke an emotional response more than any other medium. The photograph becomes an intractable reality, "the mirror with a memory" (Wendell Holmes quoted in Sentilles 2010, 39), a reflection of what we are seeing. Because of this, photographs are also used to produce a certain effect, to elicit an end result. In fact, more than capturing fact, the role of the photograph is to provoke emotion. Not all photographs are factual but rather are *assumed* to be factual. Because a picture "generally depicts a scene that actually existed at some point" (Meyer 2008-2009), even if the scene "existed" only long enough for a photo to be captured (as in the case of portraiture), the audience views it as representation of an event and therefore real. Due to this perceived reality, photography serves to provoke a response.

FIGURE 11.1. Syrian toddler, Alan Kurdî, washed ashore in 2015 after his family attempted to escape Syria. (Photo courtesy of Demirören News Agency.)

This photograph was widely published not just to move us, but also to move us to action. For those who were pleading with countries to open their doors to Syrian (and other) refugees, this photo was used to elicit greater empathy towards those escaping their homeland. In this way, photographs also act as propaganda. We set up an image in order to tell a story. While propaganda may not always be laden with "loaded language" or filled with misleading facts, it is always used to promote or politicize a particular point of view and to produce an emotional response. This is why the picture of Kurdî was so widely distributed— dead babies tend to provoke a strong reaction.

My interest in the Holocaust began in 1985 with a simple photograph — although not simple in its image: barely alive bodies stacked many deep into barracks, staring into the camera with hollow eyes, with empty expressions void of hope.

FIGURE 11.2. Inside the barracks of Buchenwald concentration camp near Jena where many died from malnutrition when U.S. troops of the 80th Div. entered the camp on April 16, 1945. (Photo courtesy of the Buchenwald and Mittelbau-Dora Memorials Foundation, public domain.)

While I am certain that this is not the exact photo that I first witnessed, it captures a similar image, or perhaps evokes a similar memory. Of course, when I look at this photo now, I am not nearly as startled as I was some 30 years ago. I find myself wondering if the photo I first saw was much "worse" (to use a horribly subjective word), or if I have become, if not numb, then at least accustomed to these images. I scoured the Internet looking for a similar photo, something that would impact me in that same early way. But I could not find one, leading me to realize that it was I, and not the photo, that had changed.

Small and lifeless, Alan Kurdi's 15 minutes of fame is over for this same reason: the same photo that initially moves also serves to desensitize.

I do not recall how much I knew about the Holocaust prior to seeing that picture. I imagine that I had some knowledge of the event, but little enough that the photo was able to affect me in a way I cannot quite explain. I began to consume whatever information I could about the Holocaust. I read any information that I could access. As profound as some of the writings were — both the stories of survivors as well as academic comments, it was the images that I kept returning to. They

were the most "real" representations of what occurred. With art, music, painting, theatre, you can feign reality without ever having experienced the thing you're representing. While Susan Sontag categorizes photography as "having the unappealing reputation of being the most realistic, therefore facile, of the mimetic arts (1973, 51)" it still remains true, however, that "photographs furnish evidence. Something we hear about, but doubt, seems proven when we're shown a photograph of it" (1973, 5).

Photographic images help to situate a person at a particular place in time. In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes writes, "If I like a photograph, if it disturbs me, I linger over it. What am I doing, during the whole time I remain with it? I look at it, I scrutinize it, as if I wanted to know more about the thing or the person it represents" (1980, 99).

I was disturbed enough by those initial images of the Holocaust that the desire "to know more about the thing or the person it represented" was overwhelming. Within a couple of months, I knew far more about Nazi Germany and the Holocaust than my grade 10 history teacher. No one could understand my interest, perhaps even obsession, with wanting to understand what happened, and even more, how such a thing *could* happen. Many misunderstood my interest. In fact, when a question about World War II Germany came up in the aforementioned history class, my teacher responded with, "I don't know. Let's ask our resident Nazi." He, of course, was referring to me. It took me many years to realize how incredibly offensive that was. In fact, that initial photograph and my desire to "know more about the thing or person it represented," is what ultimately led me, not to a Nazi identity, but to a Jewish identity. It struck me as I was writing this that my teacher may have thought it would be more insulting to refer to someone as a Jew than as a Nazi.

While I appreciate the path that those photos have taken me along, I often find myself questioning the ethics of photography. The ease with which we can now take a picture means that many people are being photographed unknowingly and without their permission. (Think about this: nearly 1.54 billion smartphones were sold in 2017 (Statista n.d.). This means that over one-and-a-half billion people are walking around with a camera in their possession every day.) Amusing pictures of the poorly dressed roaming around Walmart (peopleofwalmart.com) have become a social media sensation; those individuals, likely poor, likely uneducated, many dressed in a way that would indicate mental illness, are not just the subject of a photo, but the object, too. Elizabeth

Edwards, in her essay "Objects of Affect: Photography Beyond the Image" speaks to this:

> Photographs, in their global consumption, are often of people, thus blurring the distinction between person and thing, subject and object, photograph and referent in significant ways. These relations circumscribe the interlinked dynamics of a photograph's social use, material performance, and patterns of affect as they are put to work through their material substance. (2012, 222)

In this way, the subject is objectified through the act of photographing him or her or it. While the question of ethics and photography is a relatively recent one, and there is no doubt that the "People of Walmart" is a grotesque display of objectification, can the same not be said for Holocaust pictures? While they may be significant evidence of a past event, and important teaching tools, were these photos not also further objectification of their subject? How likely is it that people — starving, dirty, and dying — would have consented to being photographed? Do we continue to objectify them every time we look at them? Photography, while being a social act, is also "bounded to a greater or lesser extent by power relations" (Edwards 2015, 240). In these images, it is easy to see on which side power, and lack thereof, existed.

As an object, the photograph is not the real but merely a representation of the real. If we look at a Holocaust picture, like the one that first fell into my hands, do we see real people or just a horrible event? I would argue that the people in those pictures became objects representing a bigger truth. But isn't the Shoah a bigger truth made up of 11 million individual truths? Moreover, does a photograph have the "social agency … to fulfill their social role" (Edwards 2012, 227) of eliciting affect *and* reflecting truth? Does a photograph not need to "fall into the right hands, both literally and metaphorically" (Edwards 2012, 227) for such things to occur? What of the photograph that falls into, or is taken by the wrong hands, the photograph that is manipulated to instill hate instead of compassion? Does it still elicit affect while reflecting truth? Regardless of the reality reflected in the photograph, does what one sees depend on the eyes seeing it? What of photographic "evidence" of things such as smiling, healthy-appearing children used to deny the Holocaust or the horrors of Indian Residential Schools?

Photos of real things in real time can be used to form false truths, as for example in this picture:

FIGURE 11.3. Keleti Railway Station; filled with the bodies of Syrian refugees, escaping their country, waiting for entrance into Germany, sleeping on cold floors, with little food, little safety, and an uncertain future. (Photograph taken by Bence Járány, posted by Rebecca Harms, Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 2.0 Generic, CC BY-SA 2.0, September 2015.)

While two different sets of eyes will see the same picture, undeniable "proof" that an event occurred, those two sets of eyes may "see" it differently. While I may see people *forced* to sleep on the floor like dogs, another set of eyes may see people *choosing* to sleep on the floor like dogs. One impression elicits compassion while the other elicits hate. The effect is different because the *narrative* has changed. Stuart Hall, in his essay "Encoding, decoding" deconstructs the linearity of mass communication — "sender/message/receiver" — into a structure "produced and sustained through the articulation of *linked but distinctive moments* — production, circulation, distribution/consumption, reproduction" (1993, emphasis mine, 128). Hall writes: "This would be to think of the process as a complex structure in dominance, sustained through the articulation of connected practices, each of which, however, retains its distinctiveness and has its own specific modality, its own forms and conditions of existence" (90-91). In other words, these images are linked in that they continue to go through the processes described by Hall, but "the specific modality" of each reproduction can alter the story completely. Fig. 11.3 with the slogan, "Let's help those

forced to sleep in train stations to access a better life" holds a very different "condition of existence" than the same image that says, "Let's help Hungarians have a better life by getting these people out of *our* cities." Both elicit effects, but how do we decide which one reflects truth?

As so-called realistic or undeniable as a photograph may be, the narrative that accompanies a photo greatly impacts the effect. This is largely why photography has been a constant companion to propaganda. The narrative is placed onto the image first by the photographer and then by the audience. Again, the subject is objectified in a way that the photographer can weave together a particular story. In this way, the "photographer's bias is unavoidable; therefore, no photograph can be completely factual" (Collins n.d.). What is shown on the piece of photographic paper, or on the screen, may look exactly as it was when the photograph was taken (although, as we will see, even that is not always the case), there is often much manipulation that occurs before an image is even captured.

Take, for example, the 1937 German exhibition entitled *The Eternal Jew,* an antisemitic art exhibition in Munich that contained hundreds of posters and photographs portraying Jews as communists, thieves, racially impure, and other negative roles in order to increase antisemitism and support for the Nazi Party.[1] While much of the exhibition was comprised of caricatures, cartoon-like drawings, there were also a number of photographs — real images — that served this same purpose. Photographs of Jews with full beards, large noses, long payot, served to exaggerate the difference of the "other." These were photographs of *real* Jews, or perhaps *real* photographs of people dressed as Jews. Regardless, the images shown were real insofar as the photograph captured what was in front of the camera. And because we take photographs to be factual, their ability to coerce is used to the full advantage of the photographer. While I believe that the first Holocaust photo I saw of Buchenwald (fig. 11.2 above) was an accurate *representation* of an event, it is likely that even *it* was manipulated by the photographer.

While fig. 11.2 appears to be untouched by the photographer's eye, when I look closer, I find myself asking: "Would almost every face — death peering out from behind their eyes — be staring into the camera if not directed to do so? Would a man, naked and emaciated, be

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1 "Der ewige Jude" opened in Munich on Novemeber 8, 1937, and drew over 400,000 people. See https://www.haaretz.com/jewish/1937-the-eternal-jew-expo-opens-1.5197145 and http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/worldwars/wwtwo/nazi_propaganda_gallery_05.shtml.

standing there, posing for a photograph unless strategically placed?" The photographer's job is not only to capture an image, but also to use that image to tell a story. And so, the photographer turns subject into object, knowing that every pose offers a different perspective, and that even the smallest gesture of the subject/object is crucial to the story being told. Consider this:

> In the supreme instant, man, each man, is given over forever to his smallest, most everyday gesture. And yet, thanks to the photographic lens, that gesture is now charged with the weight of an entire life; that … moment collects and condenses in itself the meaning of an entire existence. I believe there is a secret relationship between gesture and photography. The power of the gesture to summon and sum up entire orders of angelic powers resides in the photographic lens and has its locus, its opportune moment, in photography…. A good photographer knows how to grasp the eschatological nature of the gesture without, however, taking anything away from the historicity or singularity of the photographed event. (Agamben 2007, 24)

While a "good" photographer may know how to capture an image "without taking anything away from the historicity or singularity of the photographed event," they may also recognize the need to do just that. We have entered into a world where photograph manipulation has become readily available to even the most amateur photographer. In this way, it has become even easier for the photographer to tell a particular story.

In the Yolocaust Project,[2] artist Shanak Shapira created a website to protest against people using the Berlin Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe as a place of amusement or fun. In the project, Shapira alters pictures of real tourists at the memorial and places them onto real images of the Holocaust. For him, these tourists, laughing, picnicking, taking selfies at a memorial site, are disrespectful. They have failed to acknowledge what this memorial represents. That is his story.

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2 Shanak Shapira, "The Yolocaust Project." See https://yolocaust.de. Note: Mr. Shapira removed the Yolocaust photos in 2017 after those depicted apologized for their actions and removed their selfies from social media.

He then uses these images to convey *his* story. As for the audience, in spite of knowing that these photographs have been manipulated, they still find them upsetting. The photos have clearly been doctored, but it is still that of a real person being placed with real bodies. That these two images existed in different times seems irrelevant. While these pictures, as misrepresented reality, have offended many, one cannot deny that through photography, his story has been successfully told.[3] As is often the case, however, it is the photographer's story alone that is told. As the consumer, we then agree with the story or not, or manipulate the image further to tell our own story.

As a viewer, we understand that the story in someone else's photo cannot really be our own. Perhaps this is why a photograph is not a substitute for the experience of being there, wherever "there" may be. Photos of the Eiffel Tower do not lessen or satisfy our desire to go to Paris. Instead, photos can increase our desire for a particular experience. Eiffel Tower = Paris is beautiful! Come to Paris! We understand that a photograph is a photographer's story but that it can become our story too. While it's true that I had both a bodily response and a brain response to my early consumption of Holocaust photos, the story that I read through those photos didn't feel like my own. *I needed to place myself into those photographs. I needed to create my own story.*

As a graduate student, there is this belief or at least practice of not spending time on anything that will distract you from your end goal: i.e., your thesis or dissertation. I had embraced that to the point of putting anything not related to my field of study on hold. I am not in the field of Holocaust Studies and so there was no academic justification for me joining the field school. So, when one of my thesis committee members asked me why I was doing this ("this" being something that was going to take my focus away from my thesis), my only response was, "Because I have to." Like seeing photos of the Eiffel Tower, "experiencing" the camps through photographic evidence only deepened my desire to experience the significance of "place." I am not likening a trip to Paris to the Holocaust; I am saying that horror can elicit the desire to better understand what you see in the pictures. For me, images of

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3 Note: All twelve people whose selfies were used in this project apologized for their insensitivity and understood the artist's message. Each person agreed to remove their selfies from their own social media pages (Instagram, Facebook, etc.). As a result, I opted to not include these photos here. The photos are powerful and are worth seeing. For those interested, Google "Yolocaust images."

the Holocaust continue to be hard to view — they are agonizing, grotesque, so unimaginably horrifying as to seem unreal: people so emaciated that it is difficult to understand how they are still alive; dead bodies that are nothing more than skeletons sheathed in the thinnest layer of flesh; mass graves with people stacked three, four, or five high. These pictures continue to challenge my view of the world as an essentially good place.

As difficult as these images are, however, they created a desire for me to be in that place, in the same way that a picture of the Eiffel Tower may cause someone to dream of going to Paris. While the traveller recognizes that gazing upon a photo is many steps away from actually strolling down the Les Champs-Élysées, what I failed to recognize is that the photo also provides a filter, a safe place between the viewer and what is being viewed. I can look away from a photo; and, while a photo shows a real thing (with all the caveats previously mentioned) in real time, it is not reality. The truism of this was never more evident for me than in Ravensbrück. While some of the photographic images I saw were similar to what I had witnessed at the camp, it quickly became evident that looking at a photo and placing oneself into it are profoundly different experiences.

FIGURE 11.4. Crematorium ovens at the Dachau Memorial Site.
(Photo courtesy of Adam Jones, used with permission.)

FIGURE 11.5. Crematorium ovens at the Ravensbrück Memorial Site.
(Paige Thombs personal collection, July 2017.)

For example fig. 11.4 and 11.5 are essentially the same photo. With small exceptions (the colour of the bricks, the different metal), you could be convinced that you are looking at the same crematorium. I have experienced this image many times. In fact, I have experienced much more difficult photos than these. Some of the earliest Holocaust photographs I saw were of crematoriums filled with bones, hands, bodies not yet burned, and ashes. And yet, the photograph, the filter between the real image and the real, was far more protective than I imagined. When I unexpectedly walked into the crematorium, the experience was so completely different from what I felt by engaging with a photograph. It was visceral in a way that I have never experienced from a photograph. The real experience shut down my entire being: I could not move; I could not process the *actual* reality of what I was seeing. The real turned into reality. (I have spoken little of that day as I continue to process what I witnessed and how I responded.)

What is curious *now* is how my response to this photo has changed. Barthes says that "in front of a photograph, our consciousness does not necessarily take the nostalgic path of memory (how many photographs are outside of our individual time), but for every photograph existing in the world, the path of certainty: the photograph's essence is to ratify what it represents" (1980, 85). But this photo is no longer only evidence of "what has been," of historic trauma or evidence of someone else's memory; it is now evidence of "my memory."

A number of people have questioned why I would take a picture of a crematorium. It is a valid question, and one that I had to think about before answering. This image is no longer only someone else's story but also my own. As I age, I am aware of the fleeting temporality of memories. Going back to the start of this chapter, this photograph now serves as

evidence of an occurrence. This event is undeniable because I possess visual proof that I was there. It is a reminder of not only someone else's history, but also of my own. It possesses the "social agency" to "reflect truth." Bigger than this, however, it also possesses the agency to elicit *affect.* When I now look at this photo, I don't just see what I saw; I feel what I felt. For me, this is the magic of a photograph: not simply to show proof that something good or bad happened, but to connect us to what we felt when that photo was taken. Through this photograph, the reality of that moment remains tangible for me.

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