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## **Photographs and Memories.**

### **The Relevance of Visual Records in Life.**

*Photography is a medium of memory, a means of its materiality.  
As with historical narratives, it is susceptible to fade, rust, deteriorate,  
disappearing through the metamorphosis of chemical, technological, ideological agents  
with which it has been associated with over time, or just due to the drama of abandonment or  
indifference. But it also is a medium of rescue and its susceptible to reinvent itself as one of the adventures  
of human will.<sup>1</sup>*

Sergio Raúl Arroyo

A year ago I made a documentary about an Uruguayan refugee in Norway, Ana. During one of the interviews I asked her about her father. Part of her answer was: “He worked at a departmental store and I used to visit him there, after school. I remember I could play with the toys from the shop. The one I recall the most is a small motorcycle which I used to climb up and play with”.

Some weeks after, we went through her family photo albums and there was a picture of her climbing up that small toy motorcycle! Her older sister is holding her so she doesn't fall down. In the background we see other items like bicycles, small toy cars and so. While I edited the documentary I wondered if this picture could be the vehicle for her memory. Does she remember that moment because of the existence of the picture? Or is her remembrance independent of it? I personally believe that photographs have an important role in keeping memories alive.

#### **Images as Historical Objects**

Human beings have been recording events visually for the last 35,000 years, as a way to communicate and represent the world (Wright, 2008:1). How humans got the need and abilities to carve and draw those events or thoughts? Given that thousands of representations are found all over the world, we can assume that they became important both for daily and ritual life. These images have been studied scientifically for many years and researches have been asking themselves different questions about the motifs, importance and utility of the drawings and carvings: What do the paintings mean? Why they were made? Or, what were they for? Some answers have been found, but “Although the exact purposes of these images remain obscure, pictures in general, with their changing functions over the time-span of history, have formed an integral part of human culture” (Idem:1).

The answers to these questions vary and each of them contributes to the studies of images. However, centuries of pictorial representation suggests that images are of importance in human

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<sup>1</sup> My translation

history. As Cutting and Massironi put it: "Pictures can no longer be seen as an artefact (sic) of the development of a particular culture. They now seem likely be a defining characteristic of our species" (Ídem: 1-2). According to these meanings, we are visual animals.

In the current era of images, when billions of pictures are being taken and reproduced every second, it is worth questioning about the value of their existence. I believe what makes the difference between one or another photograph is the context. Not only the place or moment when it was taken, but also when its been looking at is what makes a picture relevant for both the personal and collective memory.

Memory, says Walter Benjamin "...is not an instrument for exploring the past, but rather a medium." And continues

...for authentic memories, it is far less important that the investigator report on them than that he mark, quite precisely, the site where he gained possession of them. Epic and rhapsodic in the strictest sense, genuine memory must therefore yield an image of the person who remembers, in the same way a good archaeological report not only informs us about the strata from which its findings originate, but also gives an account of the strata which first had to be broken through. (Benjamin, 2005: 576).

It is in this sense that I believe the context is important when we try to understand or give significance to an image.

In July 2004 the American photographer Susan Meiselas returned to Nicaragua to set "[Reframing history](#)", a street exhibition of the pictures she took during the Nicaraguan civil war. These pictures were printed in mural size and placed at the very same spots where they were originally taken in 1978-79. The exhibition further served as the basis for a series of photos and videos of the actual setting of the photographs and the people looking at them, expressing their emotions and memories about the civil war. In the [videos](#) we see men, women and children staring at the murals, their expressions say it all. For example, while looking at them a woman says "tears and dead, that's what war leaves in every country". Some children try to emulate the movement of the "[Molotov man](#)<sup>2</sup>". A man says: "I don't know if this is the same image, but I remember how they used to search us in busses. And if they would think that you could be a guerrilla, they would arrest you and kill you, just like that".

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<sup>2</sup> This image became an icon for the revolutionaries and was adopted as the symbol of the Sandinista overthrow of the Somoza dictatorship.

Another example of the use of photography to recall events and people is the movement *Madres de la Plaza de Mayo*<sup>3</sup>, meeting every Thursday since 1977 right in front of the *Casa Rosada* (Argentinian government house) carrying pictures of their missing children. They overcame the fear to the military dictatorial system and dared to march showing the portraits, so their sons and daughters wouldn't be forgotten. This kind of depiction of the missing ones has been adopted in countless demonstrations and political movements all over the world. The point is to not forget, to remember their faces.

When we take images out of their traditional place –museum, gallery, magazine, newspaper– is when they can tell us something different and even maybe transformed our point of view about ourselves and the community we live in. Graham Clarke (1997), in his chapter “What is a photograph?”, reminds us on a photo's dependency on context when explaining its functional level

Any photograph is dependent on a series of historical, cultural, social and technical contexts which establish its meanings as an image and an object. The meaning of a photograph, its efficacy as an image, and its value as an object, are always dependent on the contexts within which we “read” it.

And he adds

We might see a photograph in a news paper, magazine (on glossy or mat, thick or thin paper), album, frame, on a wall, taken from a wallet, on a document or in a gallery, in a box or locket, or as a negative or a contact print. Each change of context changes it as an object and alters its terms of reference and value, influence or understanding of its “meaning” and “status” (Clarke, 1997: P. 19).

When both Meiselas and the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo take their pictures to a different site, the meaning is transformed. A portrait of a missing son or daughter usually placed on an altar or a cupboard becomes the face of a whole community, the sign of political struggle against social injustice when shown publicly. When a forgotten event, like the goal of the Nicaraguan revolution, is brought back through the display of images, it comes back to life and invites people to reflect on the consequences of their struggle, about what could be and what has become of it. History needs to be recalled not only not to forget, but also not to be repeated.

On the other hand there is also a wish to forget. During the same project, Meiselas finds [Napoleón](#), a man whom she photographed during the war. She goes through his village showing the picture around, asking for him. She finally finds his parents who tell her that he has moved to Canada, and

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<sup>3</sup> Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo is a group of mothers in Argentina whom missed their sons and daughters during the military dictatorship from 1976 to 1984.

has a new life there. They also tell her about their other three sons. We see the struggle of the mother to keep her eyes dry while telling the story of each of her sons getting killed during the revolution. Her memories are so painful.

When Meiselas interviews Napoleón in Canada, he tells about his reasons to leave Nicaragua: "There came a moment when I didn't feel good being a Sandinist, I didn't feel good cheering for the party. It was as like an emptiness came into me, into my life... So, yes, it hurts a lot".

At another [video](#) she looks for four men from the National Guard that, back in 1979, were taken prisoners by the guerrillas. Apparently she manages to find two of them but, when confronted with their picture, they deny their identities. In the same video, she reflects afterwards:

It seems so strange. The one thing photography should be able to do is to identify and yet I don't know if these men are the National Guard's men in the photograph. Time changes so much of what people are and what things mean. Its true that photograph stops time but for people time doesn't stop. Maybe photographs tell a kind of truth about the moments they fix but, is it enough of the truth? And for people who must live in time, is that truth of any consequence?

This brings to my memory a book about the aftermath of the Hiroshima bombing where the Japanese people hated and discriminated the survivors, known as *Hibakushas*, because they remembered them about their country's defeat (Hersey, 2001).

Before the invention of photography only those who could afford to hire a painter could get an individual or family portrait, or a picture of a beloved possession such as a house or a horse. In the beginnings of photography acquiring one of those images was also reserved to a few, but the quick development of the cameras, film, printing and developing techniques and paper, made photographs available for almost everyone. The improvement of hardware which followed, helped photographers to move out from the studios, starting shooting exteriors and what was found in them: people, animals, social and political gatherings, wars. The location became crucial in the history of photography.

So, what's the role of photography in history? Must an image taken with a camera tell us a story and take us to places and times where we (actually nobody anymore) cannot be?

If the purpose of a picture is to capture an unrepeatable instant (when a person looks at the lens to be portrayed, or when a gun is about to be used, for example), then its *raison d'être* would not be to take account of a historical event, but merely to capture the moment when it happens. But it is not like that, for documentary photography will tell us a story and it is when the photographs are being

showed to the public through a newspaper, a magazine or nowadays a website, that they tell us a story or several stories at the same time. It is the context what makes a picture to become an object of history.

### **Memory and Perception**

One day I was looking at my family photo albums and found out that there were very few pictures of me, if any! I also observed that the amount of photographs decreased as the number of children in the family increased. I figured out that my parents neither had the time or the money to keep taking pictures of all of us. Bad luck I came last. This lack of images from my childhood makes it difficult for me to remember how I looked. I can't remember what kind of clothes I wore, or what my favorite toys were, neither how my body was shaped or what kind of facial expressions I had. It's almost like I have no past, no personal history. When people talk about their childhood memories, I must tell the stories I've heard from my parents and siblings. It feels fake and awkward and I become afraid of being asked questions because I won't have any answers.

The only photos of me are the ones from my school certificates. At first glance these pictures don't tell much about me: I stare at the camera, dressed in my school uniform with my hair fixed according to my age and the fashion of the days. One picture that differs particularly from the others is the one from when I finished kinder garden. It must be June 1976, I stand, in the middle of the school yard. The teacher is behind me holding my shoulders. The midday sun beats on my head, making difficult to keep my eyes open and to smile while pretending that my feet do not burn inside those shoes and socks!

The picture tells me what happened that very day, but I don't remember anything else from it. Though, due to the background of the picture –the back yard of the school full with other kids and their parents, all dressed in white, receiving their certificates and gifts– I can see some details. And details “constitute the very raw material of ethnological knowledge” (Barthes, 1993: 28). The viewer can discover threads of the collective memory in this community of children, parents and teachers by looking at it closely. The paper certificate is a valuable object when it comes to education in Mexico; the dress code for such occasions is also important; the presence of parents tell us about the commitment of the family to provide education to their children. Here the context of both the picture and the time and place where I recall it, becomes important in order to recognize myself as part of this community and its history.

I wish there were more pictures of me like the one I just described, because then I could relate myself to my own past in a more substantial way. I could probably gather more material for ethnological knowledge and by recognizing moments and places I could re-build my personal history, my identity as well as that of the community.

The Argentinian photographer Marcelo Brodsky has worked about his own identity through photography. After living in exile because of the dictatorship, in 1997 he goes back to Argentina and seeks for his memories through the image: "*La fotografía, con su capacidad exacta de congelar un punto en el tiempo, fue mi herramienta para hacerlo.*"<sup>4</sup> The picture he choose to start the process was the group photo with his classmates. He called them to a meeting just to recall the old times and started taking pictures of them. Then he learned that some of the students that also appear in that group photo, had gone missing or were killed during the dictatorship, just like his own brother at the age of 22. That was when the [Buena Memoria](#)<sup>5</sup> project started.

After some time, he proposed to the school an event to commemorate the ones that had gone missing or were killed during those dark years. This event allowed to awake the curiosity among the current students and it helped to talk about the missing ones. One of the former classmates of Brodsky, Martín Caparrós, an Argentinian writer and journalist who also collaborates in the project, realized that for the new generations was hard to believe that those students had attended the same school. For them they were part of an ancient history, even though it had been only ten years of distance from the dark years.

"La nueva Argentina era el resultado de esas muertes: por eso hacía todo por no hablar de sus vidas." (Caparrós, *Apariciones at Buena Memoria*<sup>6</sup>). With this realization Caparrós started to reflect about the life of those gone: they became a myth and a myth doesn't need explanations or details, he says. And he continues: "In that sense these people lost their personalities, they became the dead and therefore their personal lives, from before their death, were of no importance." With the collective action of only remembering them in sanctioned anniversaries and demonstrations, they got disappeared once more, this time by a democracy built up on top of those deaths (Idem). The result of the project is a photo-exhibition, a book and a web page (Ritchin, 2013: 129).

Again, these examples show how the change of context gives the images and the people in them a different meaning. In this case the meaning of collective memory, of the non-written, unofficial history, is for a community's struggle, for their right to autonomy, self government and self determination and, not least, to bring justice to the victims.

In *The Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty (2014) argues that when we look at pictures, or any image, we collect pieces of our memory in order to put together an interpretation of those images. The way we see them is connected with our known world and how it has been presented to us since we were born up to our education through a cultural frame. That is why we all have

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<sup>4</sup> Photography with its ability to freeze an exact point in time, was my tool (my translation).

<sup>5</sup> Good Memory.

<sup>6</sup> Appearances at Good Memory

different interpretations of what an image or a poem means or says to us, because our points of reference vary according to the environment we come from and live in. In this sense, memory plays an important role in our view of the world: it is memory that helps us to recognize the objects, faces or situations presented to us in images. However, by the time we recognize them “The evocation of memory becomes superfluous the moment that it is made possible, since the work that we expect from it has thus already been accomplished” says Merleau-Ponty (Idem: 20). That is why, when we see the portraits of the missing ones, we can't connect them with their own lives or with our own identity, because we know very little about them. The only thing we know is that they are missing and possibly dead.

In September last year (2014) a group of 43 indigenous male students were deprived of their liberty, and probably of their lives, by the local police in a town called Iguala in the state of Guerrero, Mexico<sup>7</sup>. After testimonies from witnesses and contradictions from the police statements, the reactions from the families, human rights organizations and people in the whole country were immediate. Demonstrations and marches were held all over the country and the world with people carrying pictures of the missing 43. These pictures were similar to those from my school certificates: formal portraits for official papers, with no traces of their personalities or stories behind them. The pictures were actually taken by the Mexican police investigators from the school records and, according to Dr. Leticia Quiroz (who uses the pseudonym of Ixchel Welt and was the first one to come out with this observation<sup>8</sup>), were manipulated so the faces of the students have the aspect of criminals. True or not, it made an impact in the public opinion and drove artists all over the country to create new images based in those pictures.

The result is a sad, beautiful collage of [illustrations](#) with the goal of connecting the faces of the 43 with their personal stories better than police records could. Afterwards the journalists started to ask the parents of the disappeared about their sons, instead of just focusing on the police investigations and people's demonstrations. The 43 students became persons, more than just another number in the horrifying statistics of the war against drugs.

Another picture I recall from my childhood is the one from second grade, in primary school. It is in black and white. I am sitting at the library by a desk with the book shelves behind me. A globe is standing at my right side, two cubes at the left indicating the classroom number: 2A, and there is an open book in front of me. My arms lie on the table, the right on top of the left, making a parallel line with the opened book. I hold a slight smile. This picture disappeared. Probably along with other pictures and papers that my father, in his confusion and loss of memory provoked by the Alzheimer's disease, tore apart and threw away. One day he was looking at himself at the mirror,

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<sup>7</sup> <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/07/world/americas/43-missing-students-a-mass-grave-and-a-suspect-mexico-police-.html>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sC2KPJHxiQY>. Videos in spanish.



annoyed by the man in front of him -"he has been following me", he later explained. He was unable to identify himself. That afternoon, my brother took out the family photo album and showed my father pictures from his youth, with his parents, siblings, relatives, colleagues, friends, wife and children. He stayed calmed and quiet for the rest of the evening.

Had those photographs from his past "spoken" to my father? Did he find himself in them, in the same sense that Barthes "finds" his mother in one of her childhood pictures? (1993: 68). It is of course impossible for me to know what came to my father's mind when he was confronted with his own past through those photographs, but I imagine that his set of memories were, somehow, put together in a piece of consciousness that told him "this is you, this is your life, your story, your history". It could have been the phenomena that Merleau-Ponty describes as perceptual consciousness: a merge of previous experiences and acts of remembering –not memories but perceptions– that gives atmosphere and significance to the present

*To remember is not to bring back before the gaze of consciousness a self-subsistent picture of the past, it is to plunge into the horizon of the past and gradually to unfold tightly packed perspectives until the experiences that it summarizes are as if lived anew in their own temporal place. To perceive is not to remember. (Merleau-Ponty, 2014: 23)*

## **The Utility of the Photograph**

With the billions of photographs, films and videos kept in archives at libraries, museums, and universities, one could say that human history is already recorded in images and there is no need to do anything beyond conserving and feeding those records. But if we look at what has happened to the perception of images in human history, we should think about different and novel ways of showing images, at spreading them in order to gain public attention to the problems we, image creators, are concerned about.

Famine, war, poverty and similar human problems haven't been solved by image makers. What photographers have accomplished in the history of social photography, is to give faces and locate the problems with the hope that politicians and civil society take action to solve them. There are several successful cases worth mentioning: the "Child labour" series made by Lewis Hine and the W. Eugene Smith's "Nurse midwife" and "Minamata" photo-essays, among others, got the proper attention and made politicians to take action over the problems depicted in them. This happened during times when photography diffusion was constrained to print media. With the digitalization of both photography and the media, things have changed.

"In our age there is no work of art which is regarded with as much attention as a photograph of oneself, one's closest relatives and friends, one's sweetheart", wrote Lichtwark as early as 1907

(Benjamin, 2011). In this era of selfies and social media profiles, these words seem to have been uttered by a visionary. Lichtwark could not have known about our digital times but he knew about perception and the way we interpret images. He was one of the founders of the field of museum education and also the first, at least in Germany, to bring up and research the topic of how children think and paint<sup>9</sup>.

In this time of rapid communications and succession of photographs every second, image creators have to think in the same way Lichtwark did, as visionaries. Just like Meiselas, the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo and the artists of the 43 student's illustrations, reinvented, not photography or art, but the way images are displayed. In *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger (2008), when addressing the meaning and importance of reproduction of art, states that "The way original works of art are usually approached -through museum catalogues, guides, hired cassettes, etc.- is not the only way they might be approached. When the art of the past ceases to be viewed nostalgically, the works will cease to be holy relics- although they will never re-become what they were before the age of reproduction" (Idem: 23). This explanation, even though was written before the internet, applies to the use of new media (multimedia or re-invention of the media) as a vehicle for gaining new audiences and to reconnect with the old ones.

So, is it possible, through photography, to get our memories (in the Merleau-Ponty sense) to awake and rebuild our social consciousness and identity? If so, how do we do that? Can we find any significance in our personal and collective history by looking at images? Let me go back to my personal relationship with photography in order to find an answer to these questions.

## Conclusions

I could go back to my home town and start photographing and interviewing my old elementary school classmates and teachers, like Marcelo Brodsky did in Buenos Aires. I may find the photographers or studios that made those certificate photographs and I could even find the negatives of the picture that got lost! I could also find out that some of the classmates have pictures of that time. All this information together would have some personal or historical value. I could even rebuild the history of my various schools and its people, for example. But, what would be the meaning of that? How could I give it a contemporary value, as well?

In order to achieve this, I could involve the current students and ask them to take pictures of their daily life, for example. Their photographs would tell me how it is to be a student at this specific time and social environment. I could also run a workshop where these students interpret mine and their own photographs in order to find the *punctum*, the detail that makes to expand the reading of the photography, which "...touches me if I withdraw it from its usual blah- blah: "Technique", "Reality",

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<sup>9</sup> Alfred Lichtwark at [Wikipedia](#).

“Reportage”, “Art”, etc.: to say nothing, to shut my eyes, to allow the detail to raise of its own accord into affective consciousness” (Barthes, 1993: 55). This would give them, both the pictures and the photographers, an identity and community meaning.

I could also take Ritchin's project *What Matters Now?: Proposals for a New Front Page* (Idem, 2013: 147) as an example for the students to encourage them to photograph the neighborhood and to choose the best examples of community life that themselves find in those pictures. I could do so many things.

Nowadays there is a tendency to say that if events are not in the social media it is like they did not happen. If there is no image (video or photo) to prove its existence and since almost every one have access to a camera, its easy to “document” what happens around you. This fictitious project could also include an analysis about how the students use their own pictures in social media, or how they depict themselves and their environment so their images “fit” in the social media frames.

It could also help me to reconnect with my personal history, but also allow the others involved to find a significance in the environment they develop themselves daily. It could give them a sense of community that many claim is lost in these times due to lack of proximity, due to the combination of digital communication, insecurity and economical uncertainty.

I concur with Ritchin when he asks about the role of image makers in the media revolution: how do we *want* to be changed? (Idem: 6). Because is clear that the way photography (and also documentary filmmaking) has been made and shown until now, has to be transformed into something wider. Images are now, mostly made with pixels and measured in megabytes. That is why we should be able to create ways of depictions to help communities to get the information that traditionally came with printed media and television. Because information is something the society will always need in order to make decisions, to demand services or to make changes, and also because people and society has the need to identify themselves through these depictions.

Along with the change in communication tools, the content that goes through those tools must also change into something adapted to the new media. Short written storytelling that bring us to documentaries or music videos; photo series leading us to online games; documentaries made with photographs; websites showing us, in real time, the daily life of a village, a city or even a jail. Possibilities are endless. One can find several examples of this kind of adaptation already for the internet, for tablets or mobile phones, and more are coming. Just like painters had to transform themselves with the born of photography, now documentary photographers and filmmakers have to do it as well, and it shouldn't be painful.

What I believe is of crucial importance here, is that we must take into account that our storytelling through images has to be aimed at remembering who we are (identity), where we come from (perception) and where we go (utility) as persons and as members of communities. We have to achieve a kind of storytelling that constructs personal and collective memories, because in that way we can reach wider and new audiences who are already following the trends in electronic communications. Maybe by this way we could continue to walk the path that all the wonderful documentary photographers in the history of photography have opened up to us and thus honor them.

I believe in projects like Reframing History. When I see the videos created by Meiselas that she has put together online with her old pictures, I think of the personal and collective consciousness awoken through her photo-exhibition. The new generations, those who didn't experienced the civil war, are confronted with a past they don't know directly, but by references (Meiselas photos, family stories and history books, for example). The moment they see the pictures, these kids put together a set of perceptual memories and their experiences by knowing the landscapes, the houses, the icons. When doing this, they may get to know the civil war, to recognize its actors and characters and to take the experience into their own lives. Hopefully they won't need to fight another one.

Another documentary photographer who have made a big impact on me is Joel Sternfeld with his series "On this site". In the text that accompanies the book, he explains how he came with the idea for the series, in Italy in 1990: "...As I drove I often saw roadside crosses and shrines at places where individuals had lost their lives in automobile accidents" (Sternfeld, 2012: text without page number). This experience, along with the fact that his own brother was killed in a car accident and that the violence in the USA seemed extreme to him, change the way he was seeing landscape. His book is dedicated "To those who will not forget" (Idem, no page number).

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