

Affect(ive) lies out-with-in

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Requiem

Hear me Duygu, my dear 'no-go acts' confidant! Forever rest in peace under a picturesque sky. Something is broken inside of me when you are gone, and I am too hurt to be concise, clear or sensible now. I remorse for not caring enough, because I thought we would have more time. My photo-academic folks will quit calling me a snapshot killjoy for all I care, I'd have preferred to photograph instead of writing and baring my soul now. So I regress, and take solace in make-believe pictures again.

Photography is a familiar territory I regard myself to be in quasi-professional contact with. Although having majored in its theoretical criticism at the art college, I love taking pictures that I can spare and share. They render being-in-time evidently memorable, so I can visually and vocally remember. Like everyone else, I shoot my precious family, stellar friends, scenic travels, and one-of-a-kind happenings I intend not to forget. Right before your eyes, at the tip of my tongue and in-between our hands; these pictures I accumulate resonate with everything I hold dear in life. The act of photographing is a shared mode of address like language, and I cannot help but to depreciate its collectively achromatic and monolithic accent *in* and *for* the everyday. One way of framing the very confines of our intangible subjectivities is possible through the effectual inter-relationships of photographic images. A photograph, facial in particular, becomes whom it depicts, and I wish to short-circuit this. Neither canonizing them as remnants, nor narrating them as personal occasions, I scholarly disapprove of all ubiquitous pictures that circulate in shared platforms these days; I find them mnemonically erratic, and truthfully dithering — simply *melancholic*.¹

But before photographically challenging the idea of an adopted melancholy fostered by lingering encounters with my own loss, I turn to Walter

¹ Here, in reading Sigmund Freud's *Mourning and Melancholia*, I use the term melancholic for its pathological undertones and narcissistic outlook on self-torture.

Benjamin's short and stimulating history of photography to discharge what is immanently trapped inside of me as a malady; a photograph is an addictive, affective "adjunct" that I cannot resist but to depend upon for establishing a restorative bond with what is already long-gone.² It stirs up a buoyant past, swallowing me up into a mental state that oscillates like a stuttering pendulum, held at or suspended from a web woven with clinging memories. But I wish to re-forget something anew in each one I take or look at. They shall only appear as a spark, and I desire to embrace the one that ignites what is coming, not gone.

Seen in this way, pictures are present(s) for the future; yet I endlessly photograph to approximate the past. Performing an inherited *you press the button, we do the rest*³ attitude, I use the camera backwards and forwards to physically arrest that which attempts to always run away — a moment in time. These brief instances are each indeed as irreplaceable as our loved ones, and they will disappear if not photographed. Hence, neglecting them as they come can be consequentially disquieting for the psyche. This malaise emerges when instances cease to be pictures, but instead become photographs of remembrances — visual flashes one feels obliged to devote oneself to and meditate upon. At this delicate moment, the following text takes up a personally paradoxical task to formulate an auto-ethnographic framework of a photographer's ongoing love-hate relationship with the medium. I wish to (re)make peace with the non-conceptual photographing of not-nothing, but of everything. In doing so, I embark upon an unsettling

² Walter Benjamin, "Little History of Photography," in Walter Benjamin: *Selected Writings, Volume 2, 1927-1934*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland and Gary Smith, trans. Rodney Livingstone and others. (Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London: Harvard University Press, 1999), 508.

³ George Eastman's motto to market the No. 1 Kodak camera in 1888.

journey, and simultaneously stimulate indefinite responses to the following two questions: How do I forget a photograph, and, Can a photograph speak?

(Grand)mother, mon amour?

Photographs are woven into the fabric of my daily life so much so that they become imaginary likenesses beyond sheer presence or absence, conjuring a realm where my eyes are now aware of what my psyche was incapable of feeling before. I render such a photographic site at the juncture of “optical” and “instinctual unconsciousness” in Benjamin’s terms:⁴

... No matter how artful the photographer, no matter how carefully posed his subject, the beholder feels an irresistible urge to search such a picture for the tiny spark of contingency, of the here and now, with which reality has (so to speak) seared the subject, to find the inconspicuous spot where in the immediacy of that long-forgotten moment the future nests so eloquently that we, looking back, may rediscover it. For it is another nature which speaks to the camera rather than to the eye: “other” above all in the sense that a space informed by human consciousness gives way to a space informed by the unconscious.⁵

The contingency that Benjamin speaks of here also resonates so much with what Roland Barthes later coined as *punctum*, that which is extremely personal.

... This time is it not I who seek it out (as I invest the field of the studium with my sovereign consciousness), it is this element which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me. A Latin word exists to designate this wound, this prick, this mark made by a pointed instrument: the word suits me all the better in that it also refers to the notion of punctuation [...] A photograph’s *punctum* is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me).⁶

⁴ Benjamin, “Little History of Photography,” 512.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 510.

⁶ Roland Barthes, “History as Separation,” in *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1980), 26–27. After his mother’s recent death, Barthes uses the conceptualization of *punctum* to lead him out of a labyrinth of family photographs. He rediscovers his mother in “the Winter Garden photograph” (not illustrated in the book) that calls out for his name.

Whatever I need the picture to be forms a mind-image of itself through an effortlessly sovereign, eye-piercing detail that captivates me in affective terms; not necessarily in this order, but effectively subduing my eyes to fixate, lapsing my tongue to articulate, conditioning my psyche to remember, and educating my memory to catalog. Then, these *camera lucida* induced details of Barthes’ *that-has-been* moments immortalize the idea of a tangible permanence with that which I have already lost. Trailing the historicist without a hesitant glance, I photograph as if “nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost for history.”⁷ I hold onto, look at, show off, close in, or talk about these photographs, because I consciously want to undo what the corporeal and psychic significance of loss necessitates — mourn, get along, and move on.

I insistently remember a picture of my late grandmother without ably (or wanting to for the crux of my argument) visualizing her face, regardless of having grown up in its close proximity. A sun-bleached photograph affixed to the corner of a framed portrait (of my siblings and myself), hung right next to my mother’s bed. Grandma is casually photographed in her usual spot, at our previous home, on a type of velvet armchair that leaves a distinct sitting imprint. Rattling with golden bracelets, her wrists brush against the wooden armrest. Mismatched with the pattern she is seated on, she wears a calico skirt pulled up to just below her bustline. These visual traces utter a sense of photographic togetherness I cannot refuse to let go of with her — despite when, where, and how dispassionately I saluted the news of her adieu.

For mom, that armchair also seems to be the equivalent of what the photograph stands in for to me. After several inner-city relocations, it still serves well for her window-gazing pastime. Coincidence? I say not, because this is how personal possessions stimulate a confining melancholy. In particular, the photographs obstruct the routes to a virtual

⁷ Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn. (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 254.

'redemption' by functioning to be the means to their own ends. They plug the outlets of memory, which is always already burning with the desire to remember. Following Benjamin's conception of historical materialism as a new mode of looking, I must rather (re)view the same cherished portrait with 'cautious detachment'. First off, I remember the image because my mother referred to it umpteen times (otherwise it would not be binding to my eyes or ears): this picture's 'affect' is imposed, trans-generational and illusive. The nature of its sadness comes from a close-knitted family, whose solidarity leans on the walls covered with voiceless portraits as such. All these pictures are spoils of familial (dis)engagements representing a visually uniform narrative. This is also what a photographic album is all about, living (remaining) victors of momentous occasions transfer a kind of veiled happiness to their progeny and acquaintances behind the silence of (temporal) loss in ideal pictures. I ought to negate this memorable past and welcome only the appearing image-spark of whatever my granny *Hediye* (means 'gift' in English) or someone says somewhere, someday.

A Make-Believe Picture: César the Leftover

I am wandering around *Le Marché des Enfants Rouges*, the oldest food market in Paris, which literally translates as *The Market of the Red Children*. Besides that which is edible, a stall of photographic appetizers draws me closer. Emerging from a heap of small-scale found photographs, a picture with juvenile presence arrests my sight. I turn its back-to-front and a lead pencil inscription, *César*, gently shouts out my name.

On 13.11.2014, perhaps just a date of 'stunted temporality' amongst Yael Navarro-Yashin's buzzwords, non-photographing becomes charmingly peculiar to me. I found a picture that took a photograph of me, so the memory-image of what I remember is not resolved but rather stays afloat, impulsive and volatile. Indicative of a merely impersonal discovery, this is a day most would emphatically refer to as 'ordinary'. But coming into

contact with this vision that is decisively *not of me* marks it as a self-reflexive and auto-photographic encounter with the discordant harmony in photographing conventionally.

César the Leftover, who is unearthed from a suitcase rummage in Paris, now sits neatly framed inside a cabinet of curiosities in my flat. Knowing that this photograph is nothing and everything to me, its provenance is simply played out in flux and reflux for all the coming visitors' prying eyes. I have no control of whatever he likes to speak about: what I hear only becomes corporeal when I wrap others and myself up in the things he says — with or without an aftereffect. Sometimes he is a tourist posing for an uncle at the gardens of Dolmabahçe Palace, another time he is just a sulky kid having dropped his plaything on the ground. But he is never the same thing twice.

Gathering an unheard-of affect with-in César, one which I cannot yet fully articulate in terms of 'hows' and 'whys', I move toward the conceptual implications of bumping into a look-alike anonymity instead of sticking with genuine blood ties in 'family' photography. Bearing in mind Benjamin's proposition that "the past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again",⁸ I want to rethink photographic considerations of *punctum* as affect. What this Benjaminian notation suggests is that the visible and multi-imaginative detail of a photograph irreversibly glues its own mind-image to the susceptible condition of human memory. So I wonder: Just because the photograph belongs to a complete stranger, does it mean that I can't feel it in affective terms? I encourage myself to embrace a form of anonymity because a photograph like that of César has a transformative potential: I can freely remember anything from what I view from this remote position, and didn't see before. In this way, I can drain gaps here and there to forget what I want to, in order to partially desensitize my clinging memory.

⁸ Ibid., 255.

Thinking in retrospect of the chronological progression of events that took place around my traumatic loss and photographic gain, I never stopped relating to the past, but instead was always shifting the legitimisation of why I photograph. First, I let loose an unconscious drive force to partake in an inherently melancholic photographic dilemma. Then, with César, I devised a plaything like defense mechanism to fend off an infrequently haunting but extremely parasitical ghost, which is ineffably residing in me since 23.09.2012. In photographically re-forming these melancholy inducing moments, I re(live) and create non-photographic memory-images with people, places or objects of previously unknown origin or familiarity. I don't know what I am doing, but certainly *this-has-been* unexpected of me.

