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Photography and Personal Mythology

Since its public announcement in 1839, photography has radically influenced the way individuals represent and know themselves and their world. Of all forms of personal records made and kept in the modern age, photographs are among the most prevalent and the most highly treasured. Beyond being a medium for conveying information, photographs have taken on a psychological function in everyday life by serving in the creation, maintenance, and transmission of personal mythology.

WHILE seemingly the most unmediated of visual representations, photographs have always been carefully constructed to convey the particular worldview of their creator. Photographs serve as records of events and also function as fundamental tools for sharing not only past experiences but values as well. Individuals use photographs to create and reinforce personal myths, which may include those of happiness, familial harmony, prosperity, social standing, conformity to norms and ideals, and social respectability. Whether or not the images actually correspond to the lived reality of the creators, the veracity of the records adds to their power and believability.

Throughout time and in all geographic areas, people have told stories which explained their place in the world. Mythologies develop and evolve in order to provide the knowledge essential to function in a

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society, defining the values and taboos of the culture. Myths attempt to answer the mysteries of life. In order to facilitate remembering and transmission, these cultural lessons are enshrined in narratives, which are told and re-told to successive generations.

Just as myths develop for societies and cultures, they also develop on the more intimate scale of the family and the individual. These personal myths serve the same function as cultural myths: to guide individuals through their lives.[1] Myths serve to construct models through which the individual makes sense of the world. They address concerns of identity, direction, and purpose in an individual's life, functioning to interpret knowledge and experience, aiding in processing new information, and providing understanding to those unknowable, essential questions of life. Through the repeated telling of familial stories, myths are unconsciously transmitted between generations, providing family members with a sense of history and defining their place in that history. While family myths may be conveyed spontaneously, stories are more likely to be told when prompted. In the modern age, one of the stimuli most likely to evoke narratives is the personal photograph. Indeed, photographs have become the primary record-keeping practice which informs and perpetuates personal mythologies in the modern world.

F OR NEARLY 170 years, particularly since the introduction of Kodak's first camera, which put the means of representing oneself within reach of the vast majority of society, very little in life has remained unphotographed. Photography has become the primary means of representing, understanding, and remembering for the modern individual. Not everything in life is documented, however, as photo-memory is very selective. Typically it is only the momentous life occasions, such as weddings, baptisms, and graduations, which are photographed. Additionally, special times such as holidays, vacations, or noteworthy milestones in a person's life, particularly those of an infant's life, are frequently recorded photographically. These events are recognized as being significant and, as a result, are worthy of being memorialized in a photograph. Everyday life has traditionally remained outside the purview of photography. Furthermore, it is only the positive aspects of life (as it was or how we would like it to be) and those things of which we are proud that are typically documented. In his sociological study of family photographs in New York homes, David Halle comes to the conclusion that pho-

tographs "serve as records and reminders, not of power, status, or ancestry, but of good times."[2] According to Halle, photographs are reflections of the purpose of modern life: to spend time enjoying the company of one's family. Photographs serve as reminders of happy moments in the past.

Idealization occurs in the creation and recitation of all life stories with positive elements being highlighted and negative ones glossed over. This certainly occurs in the creation of family photographs. On the level of representation alone, personal photographs take on a mythic quality. They show family life exclusively as idealized and harmonious. Through selective photographic representation, the family is constructed "as myth," according to Deborah Chambers, by "capturing a preferred version of family life."[3] Photographic narratives of family life and, as a result, future knowledge of that family life are shaped by representational norms. These norms, ideals inherited from previous generations and represented in the media, are what Marianne Hirsch calls the "dominant mythologies of family life."[4] They are internalized by family members and used in the construction of visual representations of the family in photographs. Familial photographs inevitably reflect how the family believes it *should* be represented. It is practically unthinkable to photograph the family under less than ideal circumstances.

The role of photography in personal myth-making extends beyond the frame of the image, becoming even more prominent in the display of the images. Narratives of family unity are constructed through

the arrangement of framed photographs in peoples' homes and in the creation of photograph albums. By grouping images of family members together in photographic displays, a unified family group is created through the representation of family members, regardless of the realities of time and geography that serve to fracture and separate the family unit. Halle discovered in his examination of the display of family photographs that groups of photographs, sometimes including dozens of individual photographs, are the dominant mode of display and that photographs of single individuals are very rarely displayed on their own without other photographs around them. Halle suggests that there is a taboo about presenting individual photographs in this manner, as it betrays a fear of loneliness and separation, and the preferred method of grouping images represents the desire for closeness in the family.[5]

The display of photographs of family members becomes even more important for the maintenance of the myth of family unity when family members are spatially separated. According to Gillian Rose, the greater the distance of the family member, the more meaningful photographs of them become.[6] The photographs act as surrogates for the family members, forging a cohesive family bond visually, if not in reality. Rose remarks, however, that while forging a presence for the missing individuals, the photographs serve as a reminder of their absence.[7] By making a claim for their presence within the family, the inevitability of death, the ultimate absence, which as Roland Barthes famously states inhabits every photograph, is acknowledged.[8] As with geographic distances, temporal absences in the family are circumvented through images. Time's effect on separating family members can be combated as images of family members over several generations can be brought together symbolically in one place. Regardless of geography or even mortality, photographs function to construct an integrated, ever present, and united family.

WHILE the role photography plays in preserving memories is widely acknowledged, photography plays an equally if not more important role in memory work in its ability to evoke memories, particularly in the elicitation of narratives that relate to action outside the photographic frame. While an image may contain information about a particular instant in time, the memories and stories it instigates can go well beyond the moment the snapshot was taken, evoking images, feelings, anecdotes, and even full

Proustian reveries. The power of photography to bring to mind sto-
ries, legends, and tales of the individuals shown, but not necessarily
related or limited to the instant the photograph was taken, or about
family life surrounding the figures depicted, is where photography's
role in personal myth-making comes to the fore. It is the power of
photographs to instigate storytelling rituals that is of the utmost
importance for the creation and perpetuation of personal mythology.

The meaning of any photograph is not static. While a great deal of
information may be gleaned from simply viewing an image, the
meaning of the photograph depends on numerous external factors,
primarily relating to the viewer's relationship to the photograph and
the people, places, and events depicted in it. For the individual, the
representational limits of the image do not equate with limited mean-
ing. The discursive possibilities offered by photographs are seemingly
endless, as photographs do not suffer from having their meanings
anchored by text. The reading of the photograph is conducted with,
through, and around the image. The viewer is given free reign to fol-
low associations brought to mind by the image, whether or not the

memories are specifically related to the image that evoked them. Without text to direct the reading, viewers can create their own significance for the image, and there is no pre-established narrative to confirm or deny the validity of the meaning created in the viewing.

Photographs are situated within larger, personal narratives that include information external to the photographic image. By bringing what David Jacobs calls "extra-photographic knowledge"[9] to bear in the reading of photographs, the understanding and meaning of the image becomes personally significant for the viewer and can reach far outside the photographic frame. In this scenario, where individuals create their own meaning in their reading, the photograph itself does not necessarily function to prove or disprove a fact. By its existence, the photograph testifies to the existence of the individual depicted or the actuality of the event represented having occurred, which can spark personal associations for the viewer. Viewing photographs initiates a process of remembering wherein meaning is created as the personal significance of the image extends beyond what is depicted.

The photograph serves as a cue that allows for the recitation of the story and the transmission of the memory and personal myths. While storytelling can be spontaneous, the presence of a photograph offers a way into the narrative, instigating the process of remembering. The images set the stage for telling, presenting a vista for a story to unfold in. The narrative thread is given a definitive starting point with the image, as stories about the photograph expand to incorporate elements of events and people that are not necessarily included in the image. Recollections are in no way limited by what is shown in the photograph as the memories brought to mind may have little or no correlation with the photograph being viewed. The photographs are just a starting point for tales of family myths, providing visual reference for the creation of a genealogy and stories of utopian times in family life.

The viewing of photographs, particularly of albums, is rarely done in a vacuum. There are rituals involved in the sharing of images, with snapshots being passed hand-to-hand and pages of albums flipped while being accompanied by a narrative provided by the compiler of the album or the family member who inherited the photographs. The viewing of photographs is inevitably accompanied by storytelling, where the photographs and their personal meanings are conveyed to an audience. While removed spatially and temporally from the people depicted, photographs allow for a connection to exist between gen-

erations and provide an axis around which personal mythologies are created and shared. As oral narratives are created to supplement the visual narratives provided by family photographs, a family history is crafted. The photographs are often introduced with the words "This is …" as the image stands in for the person represented. The viewer is invited to look at the photograph as if gazing at the individual. Access to anything but the most superficial knowledge about the person is deferred until the story continues. With the photographs in front of them to structure their stories, the keepers of family lore are able to transmit the important family myths to future generations.

The transmission of family myths across generations is enhanced by the fact that family photographs are one of the types of personal documents that are very frequently passed on to succeeding generations. As documents, they have exceptional staying power, often being the only surviving material trace testifying to the individual's existence. Where textual documents are often not willed to children, family photographs, which are felt to contain some trace of the individual they depict, are very often treasured by the descendents of those pictured. As photographs are inherited, so are the family myths.

WITH THE ascendance of digital photography, alterations have undoubtedly occurred in the practice of taking and circulating images. For example, more photographs are being taken, as there is virtually no cost associated with taking a digital image; the opportunity to instantly view images taken results in the possibility of restaging images to get the photographic image that is desired; images can be instantaneously uploaded and distributed through e-mail and the Internet, reaching more people in less time than ever before; and the means of altering, editing, and manipulating have been simplified to the degree that no expert knowledge of digital imaging software is needed. Photographs are no longer saved for only the special times in life, as all public and private spaces are subject to photographic representation. The concurrent rise in popularity and availability of digital cameras, camera phones in particular, and blogs, along with photo-sharing sites like Flickr, have meant that the scope of activities photographs depict has come to include the mundane aspects of daily life in addition to the momentous occasions. Furthermore, as the costs associated with photography – including the cost of film, processing, and printing the images, as well as the costs related to distributing them through the post – have
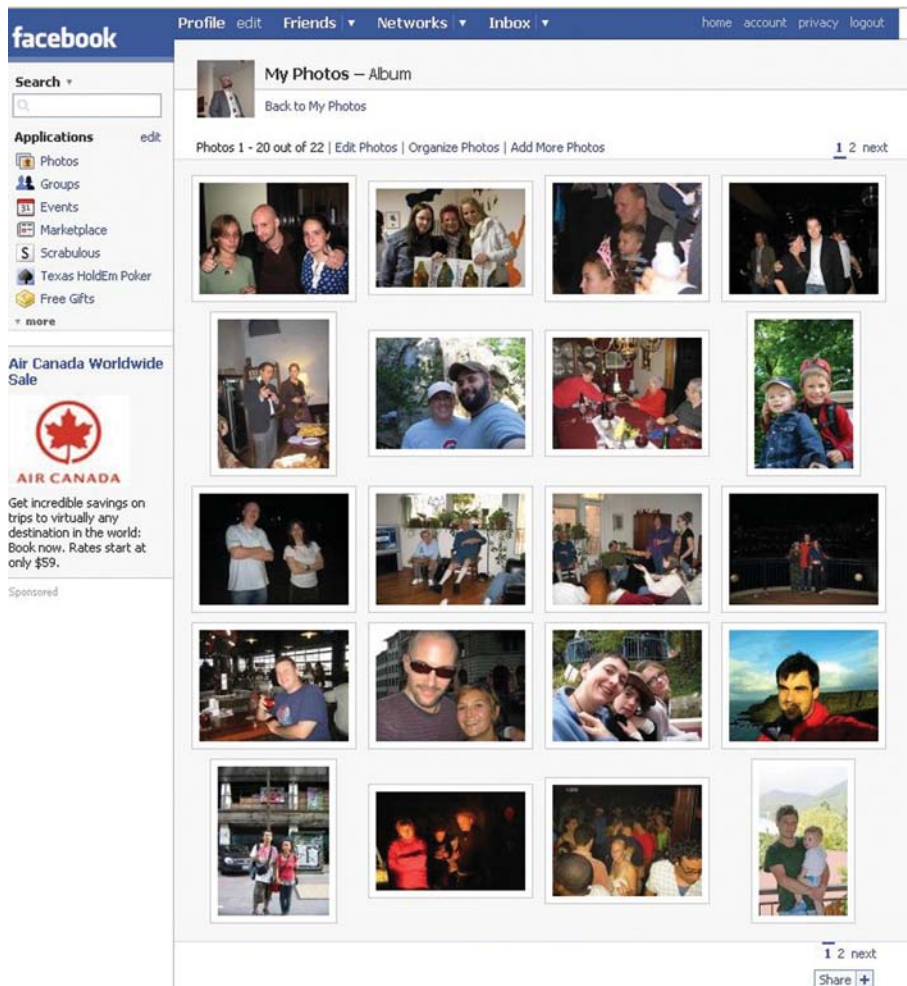
become negligible with digital imaging, photography is being engaged in on an unprecedented scale.

While elements of photographic practice have changed, the meaning of photography and the role images play in personal myth-making have remained stable. Family photographs are still taken and circulated, in print and now in electronic form. As with sending photographs by post, the oral narratives that accompany the viewing of electronically sent photographs are not present. Like sending photographs through the mail, textual narratives can be applied to enhance the understanding of the viewer in letters and, electronically, in e-mails and through tagging or providing online descriptions. The storytelling and the transmission of knowledge that accompany the

viewing of photographs, however, particularly across generations, may not be occurring in the same fashion, and that family knowledge may be at risk of being lost.

In blogs, online dating sites such as Yahoo! Personals and Lavalife, and in social networking sites including Friendster, MySpace, and Facebook, photographs play an important role in presenting one's self and gaining knowledge about others. In these online environments, constructions of online identity take on a mythological dimension, and narratives about the self are created and conveyed to a dispersed, and potentially global, audience. Individual's profiles in these online environments are undoubtedly idealized, with certain aspects of the individual's personality being highlighted, while others are suppressed, and it is possible to fabricate personality traits. The photographs chosen to represent the individual portray a particular facet of their personality that they wish to convey to the online community. It reflects how they see themselves and, more importantly, how they wish others to see them. Profile pictures frequently can be seen as conforming to one of a number of portrait types. In these, individuals are depicting themselves according to a representational norm that can be read and understood by the viewing audience. Each particular portrait type connotes something in particular and plays a role in the construction of the individual's personal mythology. While the move to digital photography has been a radical step in the evolution of photography, the motivations for the creation and circulation have remained largely unchanged.

THE IMPORTANCE of personal photography goes well beyond the ability to accurately represent the world. In fact, the factual depiction is less important than the ability to construct narratives in a seemingly objective manner. Regardless of the form a

photograph takes, from daguerreotype to JPEG, photographs serve a role beyond simply documenting the world. They have been and remain essential for the creation and transmission of stories about oneself in the modern and postmodern ages. In placing the means to represent oneself in the hands of the individual, photography has allowed people the opportunity to create idealized visions of themselves and their families which can be passed on to, and affect the understanding of, future generations.

Notes

1 David Feinstein, Stanley Krippner, and Dennis Granger, "Mythmaking and Human Development," *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 28/ 3 (Summer 1998), 23–50.
2 David Halle, "The Family Photograph," *Art Journal*, 46/ 3 (Fall 1987), 223.
3 Deborah Chambers, "Family as Place: Family Photograph Albums and the Domestication of Public and Private Spaces," *Picturing Place: Photography and the Geographical Imagination*, edited by Joan M. Schwartz and James R. Ryan (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2002), p. 113.
4 Marianne Hirsch, "Introduction: Familial Looking," *The Familial Gaze*, edited by Marianne Hirsch (Hanover: University Press of New England for Dartmouth College, 1999), p. xvi.
5 Halle, "The Family Photograph," 222.
6 Gillian Rose, "Family Photographs and Domestic Spacings: A Case Study," *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, new series 28/1 (March 2003), 11.
7 Rose, "Family Photographs and Domestic Spacings: A Case Study," 11–13.
8 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, translated by Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), p. 96; Rose, "Family Photographs and Domestic Spacings: A Case Study," 12.
9 David L. Jacobs, "Domestic Snapshots: Toward a Grammar of Motives," *Journal of American Culture*, 4/1 (Spring 1981), 99.