The personal darkroom: keeping in touch with family photographs

ILinca Vânău

The light was dim and the Gaelic radio station was playing in the university's darkroom. As I was pouring the chemicals into trays, my mind was seeking for a subject for this project. I realised at once I already was at the starting point of the only kind of a research I could fully delve in at this point in my life. So I began thinking about the reasons why I am so drawn to this room, to developing films and making photographic prints. I started looking closely at my own desire to make and hold the photograph, to encounter it. Photographic images are commonly thought to form an underlying, and often unnoticed, current in the information age. Despite the ubiquity of images and the complexities of the visual theory maze, I am still always impressed by the mere possibility of reviewing a moment that is no longer in front of my eyes; by the photograph's potency to 'mechanically repeat what could never be repeated existentially' (Barthes 1981: 21). This amazement, charged with fascination and gratitude, boosts whenever particular photographs, which speak to me directly, reveal themselves as fundamentally different from massive flows of anonymous images. On the run from this 'inventory of appearances', put forth by universalising technology (Edwards 2004: 190), I pose to reflect on my family photographs and portraits of friends that I took throughout the years, as I feel them enriching me.

Sensing this territory as an anthropologically revealing one, I wanted to talk to other people about their interaction with the world of personal photographs, while staying outside debates about the market-led image environment, or ambiguities about authorial intentions. Instead, the focus is on the subjective response of two of my friends, Aisha and Livia, to equally subjective images of their own choice. So, for the first time since I know them, I opened the subject of photography in a few long conversations. This approach is rooted in Roland Barthes' way of closely examining his personal response to photographs in Camera Lucida (1981). For Barthes, the photograph encodes twin possibilities of being experienced: its *studium*, denoting the semiotic content disclosed by a photograph and its *punctum*, denoting a touching detail, a wound, an understanding straight to the heart. It is the *punctum* that interests me here. This type of micro focus speaks directly to anthropological methods; 'the framed fragment, teased out, removed and caressed through the interplay of colour, texture and form - relate very directly to anthropological practice. Participant observation in anthropology has stressed the minutiae not out of a desire for wholeness per se but of the realisation that what looks insignificant to one way of thinking and

perceiving may be singularly significant to another' (Banks 1997: 67). I began by asking Aisha and Livia if they keep any photographic prints on them.

For the last few months, Aisha has been carrying a series of four photographs of her grandmother on her. She took them last winter with her digital camera, and later chose to have them printed on photographic paper and sheltered in her notebook. It does not happen often that she prints her virtual images, but for fear that this certain series might disappear, if her computer fails, she did print it. Also, she told me she prefers to have a print she can hold and not just 'an image that seems to float on the screen in front of you like a mirage'. The photographs are taken shortly one after the other and show her grandmother, now 88 years old, at a family dinner gathering. Instead of focusing on moments of togetherness, Aisha chose to photograph her grandmother alone, enveloped in a static, patient absence and an impenetrable air, while her daughter (Aisha's mother) is merely a blurred profile on the left hand corner of the photograph. Aisha told me she cherishes these prints of her grandmother because they document 'something of her which is fading as she loses her memory'. They are important as personal documents because they record what has not yet been lost, but most certainly will be lost soon. At the same time, Aisha pointed to the irony of her taking the photographs because of her own inability to conjure up images without prompts. Thus, these photographs can serve as prompts for nostalgia—a nostalgia which would exist anyway, but is enhanced and revived through them. For Aisha, having a photograph as an object is also the equivalent of some kind of 'proof of a moment of a life'. As such, photographs 'seem to lend a vicarious stability and substantiality to fickle memories, providing structural support, factual evidence, and narrative coherence to human biographies. They are convenient biographical props to be (re)appropriated by human subjects and put into the context of their lives in the present tense' (Breitbach 2011: 37). At times, Aisha takes photographs for fear that 'time passes without leaving us anything', and this is a way to take something away from time's rush. This attempt to capture and control time is a way for individuals to 'gain a certain purchase upon their temporal experience' (Rapport 2007: 261) by conceptualizing their lives in terms of significant moments, like the ones these series portraits. Yet, through these photographs of her grandmother, Aisha does not seek to construct an overly-coherent narrative of their relationship:

'I don't really want too many photographs of her like this, because in a decade or so I might take them at their word, and forget she was many other things in many other moments. Having a

printed photograph must remind you it is only a photograph of a small second and wouldn't have existed for you if you hadn't clicked your forefinger down. A photograph should remind you of all the moments that are crowded around the one you took away, all the mini-moments before and after that you cannot look at but you must see' (Aisha).

This concern with being truthful to one's lived experience, and not to merely construct a coherent narrative from disconnected fragments, is indeed also an anthropological concern. While anthropologists seek to be truthful in this way, their access is limited to a few excerpts of someone's life, which they then serve as prompts for analysis. To deepen this access, visual methods can be employed in fieldwork, in either an exploratory or a documentary fashion. In the former case, photography, as well as film, serves as an exploration through which an understanding might develop; in the case of the documentary approach, the recording of data is relevant for subsequent analysis (Banks 1997: 11). Aisha herself pointed to the relevance of photography in revealing something that is not always present or visible at the time it is recorded; 'The photos of her also recreate the reality of her fading in a way that I don't fully grasp when I am actually with her'. Thus, visual mediums can be understood to record more of 'reality' than memory alone, or a notebook and pencil (Idem: 12). And while what one may feel now about a family photograph can change over the years, the photograph remains a visual memento in correspondence to its unchangeable and undeniable prototype. What is at stake then is a permanent negotiation between experienced reality and interpretation. For Aisha, it is precisely the balance between them that can provide access to what the photograph ultimately elegises—'all the things that move freely on and through, and escape the shutter' (Aisha).

Livia has been carrying a photograph of herself and her older sister when they were 5 and 7 years of age, previously kept at home in a much treasured blue shoe box, and a small Christian Orthodox icon of the Mother of God. In the photograph, the sisters are each holding a big fish, their attention childishly straying from the camera. Livia tells me how she often looks at her sister's dirty hands and that fills her with love— Livia mentioned love consistently in relation to both people and small details in her photographs. When I visited her at her house, she showed me another photograph of herself and her sister much later in their lives, when they were 21 and 23 years old; 'When I look at this and see my sister leaning against me with her eyes shut, I feel that she loves me', she said. Somewhere in the street, the two girls stopped to pose for the camera.

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While Livia looks outwards, her sister's eyes are not engaging the viewer, she communicates an immersion in her feelings only:

'When I was in Holland, she was also abroad, and it was one of the first moments in our life when we were separated. When she came to visit me I felt very happy, but also ashamed because I did not go to see her. She came as the 'older sister', to see what was happening with me. She was worried. But I embraced her in that way, as in the photograph, because I wanted to tell her that I am fine, that it's going to be fine. I keep that photograph to remind myself of that period, of our relationship, of her, of our love' (Livia).

While Aisha talks about the photograph as a prompt for nostalgia and aid for fading memories, Livia understands the photograph as a portal that enables one to relive the photographed moment; 'The moment I look at it, I am there and then'. At times, this movement through the portal appears reversed, and the past overflows into the present as if to manifest a presence in the now. This feeling is especially prominent for Livia with the Eastern Orthodox Byzantine icons, which she keeps on her as well as displaying them extensively on the walls of her small room. Differently from the Western traditions of image-making, where the emphasis is on naturalistic and illusionistic depiction, the Eastern Orthodox icon is not merely a depiction, but a manifestation of the holy person (Freeland 2008: 52). As such, it can distribute presence through its reference and connection to the prototype: 'Early Christian prototypes served to presence the incomprehensible divinity of a universal God over scales of time, space and local tradition that transcend immediate visual and physical co-presence, through its earthly material manifestation: Christ' (Buchli 2010: 187). Livia recalls moments of restlessness or loneliness in which she seeks to be reminded of, and at the same time, reconnected to this presence. Yet, while I write 'presence', the word could be safely replaced with 'love'. Livia also showed me an album in which she kept prints of icons instead of photographs. Upon looking at them, she moved her forefinger along and stopped at each one, alternating the biographies of the objects ('This is a gift from someone I met at Church; this I bought myself on a train journey' etc.) with those of the saints they represented ('This is Saint Nicolas Planas, protector of the married ones, he lived in Athens etc.). The icon directs our memories as well as our imagination, but it is primarily 'a material centre in which there reposes a divine force, which unites itself to human art.' (Freeland 2008: 15).

Both icons and photographs can open up a mystical non-linear world yet, to an extent, conditioned by personal experience, individual need and spiritual readiness. This personal world,

even though it is subject to constant reinterpretation, is still a significant resource for weaving the narrative of one's life. One's life 'story', despite reaching chronological coherence, is aided by the individual's own phenomenology of experience. To arrive to sequentiality, life narratives depend on a coagulation of momentary feelings or incidental revelations, more than on socio-cultural factors or a focus on the 'linearity' of their life:

'When I look at these two photographs, I remember many things of the smell and the texture of those moments when they were taken - how it felt to hold that fish in my hands; how the weather was always rainy and foggy in Maastricht and my feet were always wet no matter what shoes I wore; the sound of the river below this stone terrace where the photo was taken; how my sister walked in that new coat she had' (Livia).

To narrate time in this manner is to tame its enormity and make it become human; 'Time comes to have a certain texture, a way of its being humanly experienced' (Rapport 2007: 284). When Aisha looks at the photographs of her grandmother at the family dinner, she does not only remember the feel of that particular occasion, but also, as she told me, 'the quiet afternoons we used to sit and chat in her living room.' Thus, while it is true that photographs record a moment suspended in time and space, they can also open a space for questioning, and transform the moment into a portal towards ongoing encounters. This power can be understood to be inherent in the image, but activated in different ways by the needs of the perceiving subject. Even if they temporary sink into oblivion and are not objects of daily concern, family photographs can rush back to their perceivers full of reminders and new meanings. Always there to encounter our gaze, the photographs' obedient static nature allows and prompts pensiveness (Barthes 1981: 55). Equally crucial to the pensiveness they invite is the 'sentiment of remembrance' they provide (Barthes 1981: 70), which is not remembrance as a function of the mind but as a sentiment of the soul. Thus, photographs are both the wound and the first aid kit.

Talking to Livia and Aisha, and thinking closely about my own relationship to visual images, I realised the ways in which we intimately conduct a sort of anthropological fieldwork of the most scrupulous kind, especially whenever we are faced with images of our younger selves, friends or family. One the one hand, the results of these personal encounters correspond to the intensity of self-conscious questioning. One the other hand, they depend on the ability to receive knowledge and feeling in an unmediated manner—an understanding straight to the heart. With regards to photographs, 'questioning itself makes the viewer acutely conscious of lived experience and the

ambiguous nature of its representation precisely through the agency of lyrical photographic expression, embodying narrative depth, through associations and a multiplicity of closures. Such images make no claim to be primarily documents in the conventional sense of the "knowability" of culture' (Clifford 1988: 43). Instead, they perform a quasi-iconodule mode of channelling the various facets of a personal past and memories; they act like a dowsing rod of a hopefully successful search for the same old spring of the cherished historical experiences. This process is itself something of a 'darkroom', as the intensity of the emotions varies during different interactions with the photographs.

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