



The Future Imperfect: Memoir and the Family Photograph

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Abstract

In 'The Future Imperfect' Petra Rau reflects on the meaning of her mother's narrowly averted attempt to discard the family photo albums, and on the function of the photo album as a retroactive personal narrative. The difficulty of reading family photographs that precede one's own experience and recollection is the subject of the second part, an excerpt from the as yet unpublished family memoir *Hinterland*.

Keywords: Memoir, Life writing and Photography, Family Photography, Family Album, Forgetting, Time and the Photograph, Mourning.

Zusammenfassung

In 'The Future Imperfect' reflektiert Petra Rau über den nur knapp vereitelten Versuch ihrer Mutter, das Familienalbum zu entsorgen und über die Funktion des Fotoalbums als retroaktive persönliche Erzählung. Thema des zweiten Teils, einem Auszug aus den noch unveröffentlichten Erinnerungen *Hinterland*, ist die schwierige Deutung von Familienfotografien, die dem eigenen Erleben vorausgehen.

Schlüsselwörter: Memoiren, Life Writing und Fotografie, Familienfotografie, Familienalbum, Vergessen, Zeit und das Foto, Trauer.

Towards the end of her life, but probably much earlier, my mother embarked upon The Great Disposal. She did not want to leave our parental home ‘in a mess’, as she put it, for us to sort through after she was gone. She was fit, she had time, she would do this herself – as an act of kindness. She announced this one day to explain the steady number of cardboard boxes which appeared in the garage and which my sister was to take to the local tip (‘when you have a moment’). My sister was running a business so the moments were few and far between, and as the boxes piled up, mum roped in a helpful neighbour. Until one day my sister did have time and an empty boot, and popped to the garage. She found a single banana box and in it the family photo albums. She quietly took the box, put it in her car and drove home, too upset to mention it to anyone but me. As far as mum was concerned, the albums were gone and were never mentioned again.

Of course we could have assumed that an octogenarian had made a near-catastrophic mistake. Except that over the course of The Great Disposal, other familiar things had gone missing from the attic, from our late father’s room, from the garden even. Some of these vanishing acts we noticed when it was already too late, others we would only come to realise when we did clear the house after her death. It made grieving harder because it added unexpected losses to already conflicted emotions. Foolishly, we had not taken precautions and claimed any ‘stuff’ we cared about because doing so seemed indelicate. Mum had always exercised a robust command over her possessions: she had been the family curator, in charge of acquisitions, display, storage and record-keeping, above all she had had, during her lifetime, absolute authority over the family narrative even if we all knew – and why wouldn’t we – that it was a fabulous mythography. What family is not strangely invested in its own fictions?

Both my sister and I were certain that the banana box incident was not an error. Our three photo albums (red, yellow and green) had been languishing in the bottom drawer of an *altdeutsch* dresser in the living room – the one room our mother spent most time in, watching, or sleeping in front of, daytime TV and which had remained entirely unscathed by The Great Disposal. That bottom drawer had been badly stuck ever since I was little, which was why the albums had only rarely been taken out. They’d been neglected but safe, or so we thought: who throws away their own family albums? The moment you open them, you’re engrossed, surely.

That we did not confront her tells you how strained our relationship was and how futile we must have deemed our protest. We both believed our mother to be entirely capable of throwing away the photographic record she herself had arranged so long ago. In our affrontedness we mistook these images of ourselves *for* ourselves. Their

disposal made us feel rejected. And we had unashamedly thought of these albums as an heirloom, something that should be passed to us as part of ‘our past’ or, more precisely, our future memory work. Was this generational continuity not the purpose of the family album, no matter how contested the memories or conflicting the interpretations of the photographs?¹

None of our assumptions were unusual – as long as what was in that banana box were indeed the family albums. What if mum had arrived at a different reading of ‘family’ or ‘album’? What if she no longer recognised (in both senses of the word) the past she had once constructed? If she could author that narrative, surely she could also edit or delete it? And did her purge, by releasing the albums from their original purpose, give us in turn greater license to read the pictures how we saw fit?

Quite early on in her book *Family Secrets*, Annette Kuhn states that ‘with the proper motivation, memory work, especially when it draws on the readily available resource of the family album, is easy to do, offers methodological rigour, and is fruitful in countless, often unexpected ways’.² Quite some premise: what is ‘proper motivation’? Why should the family album always be ‘readily available’? (And what turns a bunch of photographs into a family album?) What if the memory work elicited by looking at photographs is not ‘easy’ – and has not been encouraged? What exactly would make memory work viable as an interpretation or contextualisation of a particular visual artefact? As Kuhn weaves the threads of social class, gender, individual and national history into her own memory work, it soon becomes clear that no one would start thinking about the family album unless the visual narrative it constructs prompted at least as many questions as memories. What exactly does one see in a photograph? Perhaps this, then, is ‘proper motivation’: acknowledging how recalcitrant photographs are as authenticating documents of life writing and working attentively and visibly with (and around) their opacity.³

Of the three albums, the green one was the most intriguing. With its stiff black cardboard inserts and fancy tassel it offered a glimpse into another world, ‘life as it is’, as Virginia Woolf once said about the cinema, ‘when we have no part in it’.⁴ Many of the black and white photographs were formal studio portraits or showed people posing for the camera, the vast majority of whom were entirely unknown to me, people who had been in my mother’s life long before I was born; whom I had never seen and in all likelihood would never meet: friends from her youth, relatives stuck behind the Iron Curtain, colleagues on a weekend outing, fellow patients in a sanatorium. And there was mum herself, linking arms with other girls, costumed for a fancy-dress party, never quite facing the camera but looking a little as if in search of direction. For us, her past remained oddly out of focus despite the sharpness of these

images. This was the national narrative too, East and West of the Iron Curtain: time for reinvention, eyes fixed firmly on the future.

Everyone in the green album was stunning: well-dressed, well-coiffed, well-lit, manicured or gloved, shod in pumps or patent leather brogues, wearing deep-cut evening dresses, or organza blouses with narrow waists, and the men: double-breasted suits, starched shirts, winter coats with astrakhan collars, and immaculately combed-back brilliantined hair. No button was ever loose, no lock dared stray. A different world entirely from the daily drudgery of soiled nappies and broken toys that lay ahead; a fantasy life well beyond the dreams of the factory girl and the window cleaner my parents actually were.

I suspect – I don't know – that the green album was compiled during the time of its sequels, the red and yellow albums with their baby and toddler photos. Its narrative arc ends like a Victorian novel, with a wedding (in colour), and it has an air of retrospection. The grammatical expression of memory, according to Roland Barthes, is the perfect tense.⁵ The tense of the photograph, in contrast, is the aorist (a past tense without knowledge of duration of completion): the not-knowing of the present as imperfect. Looking through my mother's tassled green photo album, I was not so sure that the perfect and the imperfect – memory and photography – could be so easily separated, particularly when the person in the photograph had struck a pose. Pre-Polaroid's instant development, before digitally predictive image availability, such photographs fold time like impossible origami: they freeze the moment and project it into the future as the past. People face the camera knowing that their as-yet-unseen image will be looked at in the future and replace them as they are in this moment. Prepared for such time-travelling transubstantiation, they arrange themselves for the future perfect tense of anticipated recollection: *I will have got married, I will have had children, I will have celebrated Christmas with my in-laws and prayed to god they never find out what they must never know otherwise the whole house of cards will come crashing down.*

The green album was the photographic equivalent of the black-and-white movies my mother watched on Sunday afternoons on the regional TV channel, comedies with former UFA stars Willy Fritsch and Lilian Harvey, Zarah Leander or Heinz Rühmann – anodyne versions of the thirties and forties carefully stripped of the reality of those decades in which my parents grew up. She can't have seen these films when they first came out; she would have been too young, and her family too poor to afford the cinema. Yet she loved these films precisely because they seemed timeless: the past minus history. The green album, I realised, was a way of constructing a (sartorial) past she could remember even if she did not want to share what those glamourised pictures screened off. Unlike most family albums, her images did not prompt anecdotes,

recollections or potted biographies. If anyone asked questions about this elegant lady or that roaring party or those strange mountains we got monosyllabic, brush-off answers rather than nostalgia. What purpose had the album served beyond giving the appearance of a conventional album (and by implication a conventional family, a conventional past)? Was it a private museum, an archaeology of a life left behind? If films provided my mother with the script for romance, and women's magazines taught her how to dress, was this album her own attempt at explaining to herself, retroactively, how she had got herself a husband, children, in-laws, a house and a mortgage after all she'd been through (even if the 'all' in that phrase was never knowingly fully disclosed to us)?

I can't in good conscience say that it was the mysteriousness of the photos in the green album that eventually made me write my version of our family's story, but it certainly played its part in generating questions and possible readings that needed contextualising, verifying or dismissing. I could not let our stories disappear, not least because I did not see them (or us) in the narrative of twentieth-century Germany I encountered so often in the British popular imagination. It would be a story of remarkable and resourceful 'ordinary people', above all working-class women, who often don't think their own lives are worth recording. It took years of delicate questioning, travelling hundreds of miles to villages in the middle of nowhere and a decade of research in Central European archives. Until I found out about the chaos of my mother's early life and the historical maelstrom in which our family got scattered, it had not occurred to me how much effort achieving an ordinary life might entail for those whose start was anything but ordinary. My mother had had no viable role models to imitate, no normality to rebel against. All she could do was conjecture, invent and reinvent and hope to avoid the pitfalls of familial patterns. She was looking for scripts and eventually she compiled her own. Yet ordinariness, once achieved, turned out to be so limiting that she reverted (as her sisters sneered) 'to type'. That I wrestled with her complexity – and still do, posthumously – determined the trajectory of the memoir: in the end it became a book about my mother.

The photographs, their origami temporality and the question of seeing became part of the memoir project. So much so that some of this process, however flawed, needed to be incorporated into the storytelling if only to highlight how opaque some of my hinterland was.

Strictly speaking, one never understands anything from a photograph. Of course, photographs fill in blanks in our mental pictures of the present and the past. [...] Nevertheless, the camera's rendering of reality must always hide more than it

discloses. [...] In contrast to the amorous relation, which is based on how something looks, understanding is based on how it functions. And functioning takes place in time, and must be explained in time. Only that which narrates, can make us understand.⁶

Her bequest to me: to step into her storytelling shoes and narrate how she/we functioned. Just as her truth might emerge from the albums as the version she thus visually willed into being (not so much a memory but a reassuring script), getting at my truth would have to entail wrestling with my father's image-making and my mother's visual mythography.⁷ I could hardly use these rescued photos as straightforward illustrations, like neatly-captioned glossy plates in the middle section of (auto)biographies. None of us, despite the diktats of Instagram, is merely a Balzacian 'aggregate of appearances'.⁸ By the same token, we bring to images not just our scrutinizing gaze but also, in Julia Hirsch's words, 'all we know of what lies beyond the edges of the picture'.⁹ I knew our reality to be a slippery thing; I had to let the reader see me negotiating it, and occasionally slip, then as now.

Below is a short extract from the middle section of *Hinterland* in which I ponder over what exactly can be seen in some of the images from the green album before I later unfold the unseen story of the yellow one. This section is the hinge in the book where the narrative arc pauses on my parents' debacular marriage before it bends back to my mother's family. To me, she remains the most enigmatic character. And if she hadn't been and hadn't found it so difficult to write her own script I would never have needed to ferret around in the past. I would perhaps have been full of memories rather than full of questions, and without the slightest storytelling impulse. I have that to thank her for: she made me a writer.

Seeing Things

It must have been a hot day because Opa had his shirt sleeves rolled up. He'd come up from haymaking in the yard for his afternoon coffee while I was doing my homework at the kitchen table. I don't think I was paying much attention until I heard Oma laugh. When I looked up, Opa had pulled Oma towards him into a faux-reluctant embrace and gave her a peck on the cheek. She chuckled, cupped his cheek and smacked him right on the lips. This was what it looked like when two people who were married got on, I remember thinking.

I don't think I ever saw my parents engage in a similar act of affection or any kind of physical contact reminiscent of former intimacy. The pictures of the young couple

in my mother's photo album show them more relaxed, well turned out for Sunday walks, smiling even. There must have been a time, then, when they enjoyed each other's company. When I first found and leafed through this album with its black and white studio portraits and its red-tinted prints of family events, this version of the past was more unreal than the quaint people in medieval garb from Grimms' Fairy Tales. By the time I was able to read and write, my parents' battle lines were so entrenched that it was quite impossible to imagine that they had ever got on. And yet this was evidence. Photographs of social outings with relatives; pictures of the young couple in their flat at Christmas; a weekend promenade in the spa town nearby; a holiday (really?) in the Alps.



My parents' documented past on these images looks so implausibly normal and yet so remote that it is hard to believe it ever happened. In fact, I find it impossible to believe in the reality of any of these photos. To see my father in a suit would have required a special occasion: a funeral or a rare visit to Aunt Marianne and Uncle Martin's flat, which had the same formality. But there he is, in suit and tie, some time in the late fifties or early sixties when the cut of men's trousers and jackets became generous again. If I had asked my mother to date this photograph she would have said that it had been taken before they were married because in her mind, that marriage was such a complete disappointment that she could not allow herself to admit that she might

once have believed otherwise. The shadow over her eyes makes it difficult to see what she is gazing at: my father's knotted tie? She is not looking at him, that's for sure. Nor is she entirely relaxed, with her hands folded in a way that makes her arms defensively angular. As if she did not expect him to put his arm around her and pull her close; as if she did not want to hold his hand. But maybe she is just trying to keep

her balance in high heels on soft ground. And her chin protrudes the way it used to when she tried to arrange her face for a photograph but instead of projecting nonchalance often just looked awkward. Merely a handful of such images survive of the young couple. If no one had photographically stage-managed their relationship for future commemoration, my sister and I would have no indication at all that they had known each other before our arrival. Even in those images they look as if they are rehearsing romantic set pieces but have no script or stage direction. ‘Look amorous,’ someone must have suggested, and the couple moved two inches closer.

When I look at photographs of my mother — not snapshots but posed images — I see a searching for something, a self-conscious arrangement of looks and limbs as if she was trying on her body for size or wearing a self that might be slightly too tight. She always looks to me as if she is on probation, always on guard, always half expecting to be caught out.



There is one photo in particular that my father must have taken, perhaps on a walk out of town, where the fields started. She stands in a stony farmer’s track, in front of

a gleaming wheat field, in her Marlene Dietrich outfit and high heels. She always dressed aspirationally — for the life she wanted to lead not the one she actually found herself living. Here she seems to have expected an afternoon of shopping in the city, yet she ends up in a country lane in the middle of nowhere. She looks young and slightly unsure whether she can pull it off for this audience of one. Somehow she always ended up in front of the wrong background. It became easier once they were married: then photos showed new furniture, and babies at various stages of significant progress, the spouse-as-parent: people trying to build a home.



I don't know who took this picture of my father in the winter of 1969/70. I remember that grey glencheck winter coat, it was scratchy and kept for best. A thin man, he still wore it in the Nineties. The trilby he was never seen without, not even at the height of summer. He looks like a Soviet spy in a Sixties thriller, taciturn and not to be messed with. His hands in his pockets, one of them cradling a gun? There is a sadness in his gaze, a disenchantment with the

world. He has just spotted the people who are watching him and is realising that he has been duped all along. Taken for a fool.

There are a lot fewer images of my father because he was usually the one behind the camera. On the few occasions when he is on the other side of the lens he looks out of place and, often, at a loss. He too seems more at ease when his hands are busy with a tool or a machine that requires skill and concentration, whether it's a camera or a pair of carving knives. In fact, in this photo he is forty years old and things aren't going too well. According to Aunt Marianne, by that time he kept a little red pocket calendar to keep track of marital intimacy. When my mother became pregnant again in 1969 he had reason to believe it might not be his child. They were hoping for a boy this time: a Peter. When it turned out to be another girl, they just adapted the name to its female form. Almost fifty years later, two of my aunts asked me point blank whether I was sure that I was my father's daughter. I tried not to be offended by the gleeful fire

poking and replied both times, ‘I think I look like him, don’t you think?’ I realised then why my face had been subject to such peculiar scrutiny when I was growing up. What seemed obvious to me now had perhaps not been visible then.

It must have been one of those glum days in Franconia when the mercury has expended all its energy stretching to around zero before it is about to contract again, and the snow fall is so fine and imperceptible and slow that you can still see into the distance but the world blurs around the edges. The light isn’t good, and the photo turned out a sickly yellow, like milk gone sour. It’s of course the bottom half of that image, below the elbows, that makes for the incongruity. His hands on the high push bar of a perambulator: not a sight seen very often in that decade. It would be easier to believe that he is using the pram as cover for a wad of illicitly gained cash or



manœuvring into place a cleverly packaged stack of explosives rather than push his (his?) three months old daughter along a wintry lane on a January afternoon. The pram makes him look uncertain as if he didn’t quite know how he ended up in this situation. The strip of negatives either side of this image doesn’t help me either, no one else was on this walk apart from my five year old sister and my mother. I imagine she took the photo, and I can only guess what he was thinking when he looked at the woman holding the camera, fixing him for posterity in the paternal pose as she pressed the button that released the shutter.

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About the Author

Petra Rau is a Senior Fellow in the School of Literature, Drama and Creative Writing at UEA. She is the author of several books and edited collections on war writing, fascism and film, among them *Our Nazis: Representations of Fascism in Contemporary Fiction and Film* (Edinburgh 2013). Most recently she has co-edited a collection of essays, entitled *Europe in British Literature and Culture* (Cambridge University Press, forthcoming 2024). *Hinterland: A Family Memoir* emerged, like a latent image in a chemical bath, from British-Academy funded research on the postwar representation of forced migration and a Leverhulme Trust funded project on working-class women in twentieth-century Germany. Petra is currently working on a non-fiction book about Lake Wannsee near Berlin and on a collection of essays about grief and posthumous objects.

Notes

¹ Holland, Patricia, 'Introduction: History, Memory and the Family Album', in: Jo Spence & Patricia Holland (eds), *Family Snaps: The Meanings of Domestic Photography*, London: Virago, 1991, 1-15.

² Kuhn, Annette, *Family Secrets: Acts of Memory and Imagination*, London: Verso, 1995, 6. See also Hirsch, Marianne, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Postmemory*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1997.

³ On the instability of life writing as non-fiction and the role of photography within it see Adams, Timothy Dow, *Light Writing and Life Writing: Photography in Autobiography*, Chapel Hill & London, The University of North Carolina Press, 2000, and, more recently, on the ongoing difficulty of gaining purchase on the relationship between text and image in life writing see Schmitt, Arnaud, *The Photographer as Autobiographer*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022.

⁴ See Sontag, Susan, *On Photography*, London: Penguin, 1979, 165. Woolf, Virginia, 'The Cinema' [1926], in David Bradshaw (ed.), *Virginia Woolf, Selected Essays*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009, 173.

⁵ Barthes, Roland, *Camera Lucida* [1980], trans. Richard Howard, London: Vintage, 1993, 91.

⁶ Sontag, Susan, 1979, 23.

⁷ On truth in memoir see Gornick, Vivian, *The Situation and the Story: The Art of Personal Narrative*, New York: Farrar, Strass and Giroux, new ed., 2002, 91-92.

⁸ Sontag, Susan, 1979, 159.

⁹ Hirsch, Julia, *Family Photographs: Content, Meaning and Effect*, New York & London: Oxford University Press, 1981, 131.