

# Photographic Postmemories: Looking at pictures and family after Brazil's military dictatorship

By

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B.A. (Communication), Simon Fraser University, 2015

Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the  
Undergraduate Honours Program  
in the  
School of Communication  
Faculty of Communication, Art and Technology

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Dec 11<sup>th</sup>, 2014

In January 2014, I came across a disturbing image on Facebook. A friend of my father's had tagged him and eleven others on a poster entitled *Wanted*. Below the headshots it said, in summary, that those twelve "comrades" had been missing since the previous general strike and that any information about their whereabouts was of extreme importance. My father's photograph was the third from left to right, in the middle row. He looked expressionless, as did the others, staring right towards the camera, as one does in portraits used in governmental documents. The man who posted the image also indicated on the social network that it dated back to 1986, which happens to be right after a violent and oppressive period of military rule that governed Brazil for twenty-one years.

Seeing the poster was shocking, to say the least. My first reaction was to look away in disbelief and in fear of the story behind the image. My curiosity, however, led me to examine it several times more and to stare, again and again, at my father's young features, which began to represent a past I seemed to be unaware of. My father had been missing? Why? What had he done? Did he suffer? Did "they" get him? Numerous questions filled my mind while I scanned my memories for clues that could explain the existence of the poster. I could not help but imagine my father as a guerrilla hero, wearing a red star pin on his chest, a Che Guevara cap and sleeping underground, next to stolen machine guns and bloodstains.

To the best of my knowledge, at that point, neither one of my parents had been involved in any activity that either supported or protested the dictatorship, especially in the early 1970s, the most heated years, when they were both quite young. Though, could it be that a revolutionary spirit blossomed in my father's early

adulthood, in the 1980s, when the military were still in power? Could it be that he had been hiding a bloody past from me? If so, why had it remained untold? After all, abundant are the rumors, tales, images, movies, books and documentaries that tell and retell the stories of oppression and resistance from the coup d'état in 1964 to the return of civil rule in 1985. If he opposed such a violent regime, should he not be proud of his actions instead of hide them?

“But you know that is a joke, right?”, answered my mother when I inquired about the poster. Confused and perplexed, I asked her to continue. She explained that my father had indeed been part of a syndicalist movement in the 80s<sup>1</sup>, when he was working at a state bank, but he was never abducted or tortured. The poster was a parody of magazine covers from those times, used by the government to publicize the photographs of people who opposed the regime. I had indeed seen some of those covers before, many of which are present in museum exhibits on the military dictatorship nowadays. My father confirmed my mother’s explanation and said the bank’s high executives transferred his eleven colleagues and him from the central building, in 1986, to different branches in the suburbs as a means to demobilize their syndical activities, which were gaining momentum at the time. During the 80s, reallocation was a minor consequence to leftist activists compared to the torture sessions and murders many succumbed to just a few years before.

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<sup>1</sup> de Almeida (2002) describes the late 70s and early 80s as a period of resurrection for Brazil’s syndical movements, with unprecedented strikes across the country’s main capitals, in spite of competing, distinct leaderships. My father joined the movement after he got a job at a national bank, in the mid 80s, when military repression had dissipated almost completely.

It appeared then, thankfully, that my father had not suffered any of the commonly feared punishments of the military government, from which I conclude that my fear and my apprehension had no basis on reality. He neither slept next to machine guns in underground guerrilla headquarters, nor did he face the evil torture rooms of the military. I should state, however, that both my parents support left wing parties in Brazil, meaning that they would not have encouraged the military rule. That makes me a “gray zoner”, a term Susana Kaiser, an Argentinean scholar, uses to define those who “were not “direct victims” of the repression – as is the case with children of the *desaparecidos* - and were neither human rights activists nor advocates of military rule – all of whom know well where they stand regarding the past” (2005, p13).

Strangely, however, the truth was not enough to appease the personal impact the poster has on me, as my discomfort when looking at it remains intact. In fact, not only does the discomfort linger, but it recurs in many of the images I have seen portraying the struggle between the military and those who resisted their rule, as well as through some of my parents’ pictures from those times.

## **QUESTIONS**

Such an intense personal reaction to an image that belongs to my father’s past as well as the imagined connection between the picture and the oppressive regime that ruled the country for over two decades, raised questions about the relationship between images, history and memory. Why do such emotions come to mind when I look at images from the 60s, 70s and 80s, in Brazil? What photographic

elements prompt my imagination to trigger such intimate feelings? How is my family related to this? Are they at all? How do images from the past inform me about a period I did not live in? Those questions are located under a larger, main umbrella question that I will attempt to address in the first part of my project: How do photographs mediate my relationship to the military regime in Brazil? Perhaps, like Susana Kaiser's (2005), "my personal memories are intertwined with the collective memories of the terror" (2). The study I propose is a rather personal investigation, an autobiographical reading that will address my own investment in specific photographs that constitute, for me, postmemorial fragments of the dictatorship in Brazil. They mediate my relationship not only to a national past of fear and *desaparecidos*, but also to a familial past (Kuhn and McAllister, 2006, p5), a past that rendered through family stories and collective memory, may or may not have existed. In doing so, I will be constructing postmemories and engaging with postmemorial work that strives to "activate and re-embody more distant political and cultural memorial structures by reinvesting them with resonant individual and familial forms of mediation and aesthetic expression" (Hirsch, 2012, p33).

### **Historical Background**

The military dictatorship began in the morning of March 31<sup>st</sup> 1964, when general Olympio Mourão Filho's troops invaded Rio de Janeiro, with the support of army headquarters across Brazil. The *coup d'état* removed João Goulart (commonly referred to as Jango) from the presidency and immersed the country in 21 years of authoritarian rule. An intense and steady, though not sustainable, improvement of

the national economy legitimized the military regime in the eyes of the elites, but at what cost? The dictatorship left irreparable scars of violent oppression, torture, abductions, censorship and sense of disempowerment among those who opposed it (Balthazar et al, 2014).

Although Balthazar et al (2014) affirm that “there is no consensus in the country about the reasons that led the military to depose Jango in 1964”, they suggest a few motivations for the *coup* to take place. The first was a clash between the anticommunist rhetoric held by high army officials in Brazil. Even before Jango became president, generals and colonels, who saw the candidate to the presidency as an ally of the Soviet Union, opposed him. The second reason was the American support, which arrived in Rio de Janeiro in the form of a naval military fleet, securing the largest South American economy as a territory of capitalism under the Truman Doctrine. The U.S. had also been financing the right-wing opposition since 1963. Finally, the third reason was Jango’s incapability of passing socialist reforms through Congress, as his party did not have a majority of the seats - one of his main goals was to install a wide land reform in the country. Such reasons led him to pursue political maneuvers conceived as dangerous by the military and the elites, including an alleged proposal of ‘rule by decree’.

After the *coup*, the population was split politically, and many of those who actively opposed the regime were arrested, tortured, exiled or even murdered. The bloodiest year was 1969, following the declaration of the 5th Institutional Act (A.I.5 – *Ato Institucional n5*), which granted the government the power to shut down Congress and municipal assemblies (de Oliveira, P. A. M., 2000). The main

consequence of this Act, however, was the denial of *habeas corpus* to political prisoners, who became targets of abduction, torture and murder (de Oliveira, P. A. M., 2000). The 1970s was a violent decade (de Oliveira, P. A. M., 2000) and in 1985, the military regime came to a closure. In the following year, Brazil had, for the first time since 1964, a civil president, though the people would only be able to vote for their own representative in 1989.

Since the end of the regime, Brazil has been living by a *política de esquecimento* [politics of forgetting] (King, 2013). Indeed, Nolen (2014) affirms that “unlike its neighbors, Chile and Argentina, and other countries in Latin America that lived through dictatorship in the Cold War era, Brazil has left the events of those years largely unexamined.” A possible explanation to this phenomenon is the Amnesty Law installed in 1979 under President Figueiredo. Noticing their increasing lack of political support, the military proclaimed amnesty to all political criminals at the time, which set free members of the underground guerrilla that had been jailed by the government, but also shielded members of the army from legal prosecution after the regime fell. Subsequently, the armed forces have never acknowledged their crimes, unlike in Chile and Argentina (Balthazar, 2014; Nolen, 2014).

The Brazilian media has recently renewed their interest in the dictatorship, signaling a break with the ‘politics of forgetting’ (King, 2013). Current President Dilma Rousseff created the *Comissão Nacional da Verdade* [National Truth Commission] in 2012 as a means to investigate the tortures, abductions and murders that occurred during the regime (King, 2013). In addition to that, a rich

archive of photographs taken during the dictatorship was opened to public consultation at the National Archives in the same year. Coincidentally, in 2014, the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the *coup d'état* that forced João Goulart out of the presidency of Brazil in 1964 became a compelling reason for journalists, politicians and former activists to look back at the period of authoritarian rule.

Despite the fierce censorship from 1964 to 1985, the dictatorship was a rich period of production of political art. Some of the most politically engaged visual work made at that time can be found in the book *Brazilian Art Under Dictatorship: Antonio Manuel, Artur Barrio, and Cildo Meireles* (2012) by Claudia Clairman, curator at the MoMA in New York. However, unlike Chilean and Argentinean artists such as Alfredo Jaar and Marcelo Brodsky, whose current works still engage with memories of brutal atrocities during military regimes in their respective countries, contemporary Brazilian artists seem to have refrained from doing the same, a fact I infer from the lack of evidence of any work of this sort in academia after the fall of the military regime. I would like to suggest that, just like the available artistic language post-Holocaust was unable to justly represent the sheer brutality of the Nazi camps (van Alphen, 1997, p43), an aesthetic style or perspective is yet to be developed in relation to the existing (post)memories of the military regime.

## **THEORETICAL BACKGROUND: Feminism and Postmemory**



I am certainly not the first to be interested in the familial and personal feelings a picture evokes, especially images that are indexical<sup>2</sup>, iconic<sup>3</sup> or symbolic<sup>4</sup> of some sort of trauma or unresolved issues from the past. Each in their own manner, works by Annette Kuhn (2002), Kirsten McAllister (2006), Martha Langford (2006), Gillian Rose (2012), Nawal Musleh-Motut (2012), Jo Spence (1991), Lorie Novak (2012) and Marianne Hirsch (1997; 1999; 2001; 2012) have moved past structuralism and paved the way for scholars willing to treat photographs as objects and images whose importance goes beyond the conclusions drawn from semiotic analysis. All of the writers mentioned above have approached memory and photography from a feminist perspective and developed an array of concepts, ideas, methods and terms that will assist me in this paper.

As Marianne Hirsch (2012) explains,

“Feminism and other movements for social change also offer important directions for the study and work on memory. They make activism integral to scholarship, they open a space for the consideration of affect, embodiment, privacy and intimacy as concerns of history, and they shift our attention to the minute events of daily life. They are sensitive to the particular vulnerabilities of lives caught up in historical catastrophe, and the differential effects trauma can have on different historical subjects. It is important, also, to note that they bring critical attention to the agents and the

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<sup>2</sup> Index: “In Peirce's semiotics, an index is a sign that is physically linked to, or affected by, its object.” (Martin & Ringham, 1999) A photograph is an indexical medium because light coming from the subjects it represents directly affect the formation of the image, which shows literal traces of what was in front of the camera.

<sup>3</sup> Icon: “icon is a sign which resembles the object it signifies. A portrait, for example, is an icon because it resembles the subject represented. A diagram of a house is the icon of a house.” (Martin & Ringham, 1999)

<sup>4</sup> Symbol: a symbol relates a word or idea to a concrete object, scene or action with which - though essentially different - it entertains some kind of semantic connection. (Martin & Ringham, 1999)

technologies of cultural memory, particularly to its genealogies and the traditional oedipal family structures where these often take shape” (p15).

Expanding the simple analysis of images’ visual structures to include the mnemonic and subjective importance pictures have for different viewers, whether positive or negative, “restore experiences and life stories that might otherwise remain absent from the historical archive.” (Hirsch, 2012, p15) Indeed, Wells (2000) points out that feminist artists and scholars, in an attempt to deconstruct the male gaze that historically dominated media production, began to engage in autobiographical analyses and ‘memory work’, resisting the cohesion of family photos at a personal level, refusing to accept the truthfulness of conventional family narratives transmitted visually. In fact, Hirsch suggested that feminist artists and scholars:

“scrutinize and refuse the sentimentality attached to the figure of the lost child that often mediates traumatic stories, enjoining us to queer that figure and to engage in alternative patterns of affiliation beyond the familial, forming alternate attachments across lines of difference” (Hirsch, 2012, p15).

Annette Kuhn, for instance, in her essay *She’ll Always Be your Little Girl*, included in her book *Family Secrets: Acts of Memory and Imagination* (2002), presents an investigation of a picture from her childhood as a “site of conflicting memories” (p13). Specific visual elements, how and where the image is kept, as well as the writings on the back of the print, point to a dispute over the ownership of memories between Kuhn, who was too young to remember the time when the photo was taken, and her mother, whose subjectivity seems to be the predominant view conveyed. She also points out the mutability of the memories pictures produce

depending on the cultural and familial contexts of creation and interpretation. Now an experienced scholar in memory studies, Kuhn resists the memories imposed by her mother's gaze when she was a child. Her mother's memories mutate into Kuhn's postmemories through memory work, which leads her to wonder, "[a]m I making public what I have consciously known but never before revealed, or am I seeking knowledge that is as new to me as it is to you?" (2002, p2).

In a similar vein, Nawal Musleh-Motut (2012) negotiates her Palestinian identity through the investigation of her own emotional investment in a photograph that depicts her young father in Jerusalem, Palestine, in 1947. Her analysis of the picture is tightly connected to both the historical context in which it was taken and her family history. Her study exemplifies Marianne Hirsch's argument that family photography is "the family's primary instrument of self-knowledge and representation—the means by which family memory would be continued and perpetuated, by which the family's story would henceforth be told" (1997, p6). The picture Musleh-Matut analyzes becomes a site of reflection, where the scholar acknowledges history, but discovers and builds her own story, from her current perspective, related, but not limited to, past events. She, thus, challenges the existing tale in the photograph and, like Kuhn, forces memory to mutate.

In their works, Kuhn and Musleh-Matut explore what Hirsch has defined as postmemory. Since Kuhn was too young to remember the time that specific childhood photograph was taken and Musleh-Matut was not even alive when her young father posed for the picture taken in Jerusalem, they are both looking at memories that are not theirs. So, whose memories are they? If they are not the

scholars', why are they so relevant to their work? Why do Kuhn and Musleh-Matut "remember" them? What impact do those memories have in their lives and whose are they after all? Hirsch wrote that postmemory:

"characterizes the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that precede their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events that can neither be understood nor recreated." (Hirsch, 1997, p22)

Hirsch defined postmemory and its types while looking at art and literature produced by the generation that, like her, grew up surrounded by traumatic stories from the Holocaust, absorbing and expressing their understanding of the past in quite particular ways. The post-generation heard those stories from the mouths of close relatives, or saw them stamped on intimate objects, especially family photographs. Postmemory is, thus "distinguished from memory by generational distance and from history by deep personal connection." (Hirsch, 1997, p22). As a Japanese Canadian descendent living in Canada, Kirsten McAllister (2006), for instance, deconstructed old photographs of the Okada family, taken while they were being held inside concentration camps in Western Canada, during the Second World War. Her mother had lived in one of those camps and told her stories that helped shape the scholar's connection to the past in mythic terms that did not directly identify the losses her family underwent.

When scholars and artists develop work that reflects social trauma present in their family stories, and where the transmission of memory is inter-generational, as in Musleh-Matut's case, Hirsch defines postmemory as *familial*. Conversely,

*affiliative* postmemories, whose transmission is intra-generational, are the “result of contemporaneity and generational connection with the literal second generation combined with structures of mediation that would be broadly appropriable, available, and indeed, compelling enough to encompass a larger collective in an organic web of transmission” (Hirsch, 2008, p115).

Although *affiliative* postmemories seem to be more distant from the reality of the original memories when compared to *familial* ones, both types result from “imaginative investment and creation” (Hirsch, 1997, p22). When performing memory work on old photographs, one retells past and present, recreating happenings and impressions from one’s own point of view and, thus, giving them new meanings, inductively (Kuhn, 2002, p2). In fact, imaginative investment is so determinant in the development of postmemories that private and public experiences and feelings often collide, blend and become indistinguishable (Hirsch, 1999, p6; Kaiser, 2005, p2; Kuhn, 2002, p4; Novak, 2012, p 56).

Hirsch believes the two spheres invade each other. Just like pictures from public archives would fit perfectly in many people’s family albums, for their personal lives are strongly related to wider historical happenings, the *familial* is necessary, and frequently used in museums and memorials, to activate intra-generational, contemporary empathy (Hirsch, 1997, p39). In other words, *familial* identification is an essential element for the transmission and construction of *affiliative* postmemories (Hirsch, 2012, p35), and, consequently, for the inclusion of members of the post-generation, such as myself, into a wider collective memory.

In order to look into my post-mnemonic relationship to the military dictatorship in Brazil, I will use two photographs as objects of Postmemory Work. One of them is public and the other, private.

## **METHODS**

In part 1 of the study, I would like to go beyond a simple visual analysis, which would fall short of depth, complexity and subjectivity when assessing my relationship to the images in question. I will use concepts discussed by visual theorists like Barthes and Metz under a larger methodological umbrella Marianne Hirsch employs, called Postmemorial Work, which I believe to be more appropriate for my study. Building on Barthes's *Camera Lucida*, visual theory, scholarship on the Holocaust, trauma studies and feminist scholarship, such method expands on the structural visual analysis of images by opening room for the assessment of a personal, intimate connection between the scholar and the pictures.

She suggests that Postmemorial Work

“ [...] strives to *activate* and *re-embody* more distant political and cultural memory structures by reinvesting them with resonant individual and familial forms of mediation and aesthetic forms of expression. In these ways, less directly affected participants can become engaged in the generation of postmemory that can persist even after all participants and even their familial descendants are gone.” (Hirsch, 2012, p35)

As previously stated, like other feminist methodologies, to which activism is inherent (Hirsch, 2012, p16), Postmemorial Work “opens space for the consideration of affect, embodiment, privacy and intimacy as concerns of history [...]” (p16), giving a voice to stories, often intimate and personal, that have been

suppressed by larger social and political structures (p16). In the context of this study, I believe the examination of my *familial* and *affiliative* connections to specific photographs will shed light upon my relationship to a violent political event and contribute to a better understanding of how the military regime and its legacy affect me.

Indeed, Postmemorial Work considers the blending of public and private spaces, memory and media. Hirsch argues that

“Family life, even in its most intimate moments, is entrenched in a collective imaginary shaped by public, generational structures of fantasy and projection and by a shared archive of stories and images that inflect the broader transfer and availability of individual and familial remembrance” (p35)

Postmemorial Work situates photography in this crossroads of public and private memory. As a medium of indexical and iconic character, photographs give an account of what has indeed happened. In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes talks of what pictures show as *ça a été*, or that which has been/taken place (1981, p6). So, images of traumatic social events not only confirm what really happened at the time – murder, torture, violence, in the case of Brazil – but their repetition in the media renders them emblematic of the political situation lived at the time (Hirsch, 2012, p107). Photographs such as the one I will analyze in the following sections, thus, tell the story of what is visible on their surfaces, what they indicate as real occurrences. I believe, however, through my postmemorial work, that they will attain symbolic significances, connotations that go beyond their surfaces.

The first photograph I will analyze, is publicly available online and Herzog's case is widely discussed in Brazil despite the violence it evokes. A few pictures of Herzog can be found through a simple Google search: Herzog + *ditadura*. The photo in question was published for the first time back in 2004, in several newspapers, including the New York Times.

### **VLADIMIR HERZOG**



I was fourteen when the *Correio Braziliense*, a newspaper of large circulation in Brazil, leaked a classified photograph of Vladimir Herzog's case, in October 2004. It sparked heated conversations among my parents, aunts and uncles, who had lived through the military rule and remembered when Herzog, an admired journalist who openly opposed and resisted the government's oppression, disappeared in October 1975. At that time, the government circulated an "official" photograph of him, hung by his belt in a cell, alleging the man had committed suicide. Suspicions that the



image had been staged were confirmed soon after its publication, revealing he had, in fact, been murdered. (Rohter, 2004).

Unlike the staged photograph, this new image, published nearly two decades after the end of military rule in Brazil, had never left the archives of the feared Department of Order and Social Politics (*Departamento de Ordem e Política Social* - DOPS). It caught my attention right away and has not left me alone since, coming back to haunt my thoughts every so often, as if it wished to be more than just an image and wanted something from me (Mitchell, 1996). Herzog appears naked, indoor, sitting on a surface made of wooden planks, close to the room's back wall. The image is granny, black and white and very contrasted – it has extremely dark points, as well as white, overexposed grains. It looks like flash was used in the snapshot, for we can notice light hitting the journalist directly, coming from the photographer's point of view, shading the back wall. Although the image is not distorted, I dare suggest that the picture taken with a relatively wide lens, probably a 35mm, which allowed for a medium-full shot, framing the journalist's body from the head to right below the knees.

Clearly, whoever took the shot, was right in front of Herzog. Since torture sessions were highly secret and confidential<sup>5</sup>, it is safe to assume the photographer was a member of the military, or at least a person who was trustworthy enough to have access to the torture sites and not reveal the secret – an accomplice. The

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<sup>5</sup> The secrecy around tortures and murders are one of the reasons why president Dilma Rousseff established a Truth Commission to investigate human rights violations. In the preliminary reports release, new cases of *desparecidos* were identified and elucidated (Ferraz et al., 2014).

photographer's perspective, thus, also represents the perpetrator's point of view, equivalent to what Hirsch calls the "Nazi Gaze" (2012, p136).

Thinking back to photography's capacity of indexical portrayal (Barthes, 1981, p4; Metz, 1985, p84), this closeness between perpetrator and victim reveals a great act of cruelty. It is the proof that all the horrendous murders that happened during the military regime, censored by the state, actually took place and that someone was cold enough to watch and document them.

Herzog represents a lot more than a soon-to-be-murdered political activist. My emotional impressions when staring at it are comparable, and much similar, to those I felt when I first glanced at the Wanted poster. Herzog appears to me as a fatherly figure. The resemblance between him and my father is staggering. Like the latter, Herzog has some hair on his chest and on his limbs, his belly is slightly protuberant, his head is half bald and he is wears a watch around his right fist. The pictures poor quality and the fact that Herzog covers his face transform the referent of the image into a generic character. Like Robert Frank's *Cowboy*, from his book *The Americans* (1955), Herzog's body could belong to anyone of the hundreds of men tortured during the dictatorship as a consequence of their political activity, which leaves room for imagination. Indeed, Hirsch (2008) affirms that "postmemory's connection to the past is [...] not actually mediated by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation." (p107), which makes sense taking into account the generational gap between those looking back at the past and the traumatic event itself. The reason why postmemories are not memories is because there are not entirely based on a lived reality.

At this point in my analysis, the indexical cruelty explicit in the perpetrator's point of view renders the picture symbolic to me. The mercilessness inherent in the gaze of a photographer who snaps a shot of a man being tortured indicates how much pain and humiliation political activists were willing to submit their bodies to, in order to defend their ideals. Juxtaposed with spiteful injustice, represented by the photographer, Herzog embodies fatherhood, for me. It reminds me of how far parents would go to protect their children from situations of discomfort, pain, sadness and injustice. Parents want to ensure their children have a better future where justice and liberty are guaranteed.

Just like Hirsch (1997) and Barthes (1981) relate *familial* look and motherhood, and umbilical chord between truth and photograph, I would like to suggest that the image of a suffering, exhausted Herzog, who is being punished for demanding a better country for his family, resonates with a simple and strong premise that runs in many families I have met, including mine: my parents would be willing to give their lives in order to leave a better world behind for me and my sister to live in.

More than a protector and a martyr, Herzog appears to me as a guardian angel in the picture. The bright light on the wall behind him forms two white wings, one on each side, split by a shaded area right behind the journalist's head. Undoubtedly the *punctum* of the image for me, the "element which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me" (Barthes, 1981, 26), the shapes of wings on the wall are simply a coincidence, but I cannot refrain from noticing them every time I glance at the picture. The *punctum* is indeed, a point of irrational

impression (Isé, 1997, p13) and of personal, familial resonance (Barthes, 1981, p53) as opposed to social and cultural, hence the impossibility to affirm that other members of Brazil's postgeneration would see wings of an angel behind the journalist. I suspect the reason I saw them is closely related to my father's evergreen determination to protect his family. In the next section, I will present an interpretation based on what Barthes's calls the *studium*, which contrasts with the *punctum's* personal, irrational character for the former is accessed culturally and socially.

## **FAMILY ARCHIVE**



Unlike many other families, mine does not pin up family photographs all over the house. We have only four or five displayed in the living room and we keep most of them a dozen massive folders inside a closet in our apartment. I still remember the day my parents bought those shiny, plastic folders and had my sister and I help them categorize, by date, place and subject, all the photographs we had taken as a family until then. As big as the folders were, they did not have enough room for all the pictures, so some of them, mostly the really old ones, from my parents' childhood, and even before that, are kept in two large, brown envelopes. My father has one and my mother has another.

During my lifetime, I recall my father looking at the old photographs twice only. The first time, we were leaving town to visit his father, my grandfather, far in the interior. His old man was very ill at the time and he, his son wanted to cheer him up with pictures from a time he was still young and healthy, surrounded by his happy wife and his five children. The second time was this summer, when I asked him to look at them.

There were about forty photographs in the envelope, many of which looked timeworn, with corners folded, defects on the surface and a yellowish appearance. They ranged from the time my Italian great-grandparents settled in Brazil, at the end of the XIX century, to the mid 1980s, when my father graduated from college. Interestingly, there were no records from the 1970s. Most of the photos complied with a rather traditional repertoire of domestic life, as Bourdieu describes in *Photographie: Un art moyen* (1965): family dinners, trips, church, birthdays, Christmas and friends.

While looking at the photographs from my father's envelope, I wondered whether I was going to find explicit visual clues that would place them in the context of the military regime, but the picture's connection to the dictatorship turned out to be rather subtle. That should not be surprising, however, for, if picture-taking is considered to be an act that immortalizes "the high points of family life" (Bourdieu, 1965, p19), it is fair to assume, that a camera would not have recorded any negative impacts of the dictatorship on the family. Instead of tanks, soldiers and protests on the streets, I found the story of a middle class family seemingly untouched by the oppression, yet not affluent enough to be part of the class that thrived during the military regimes in Latin America (Kaiser, 2005, p1).

The following photograph shows, from left to right, in the front row, my aunt Thauar, my uncle Kriver, my father Klauss and my aunt They, who is standing right in front of my aunt Thelde. My grandfather, Idagmar, is right next to my grandmother, his wife, Hilda. To her left is her sister, Irma. On the back, it says "*Família na Praça da Liberdade*" (Family at Liberty Square), there is a stamp of the lab "*Agfacolor - Labôr Studio*", which developed and printed the film, and my father's name is written in very light ink, in a calligraphy different from the description of the photo. I assume he wrote "Klauss" on the back when his siblings and him were deciding who would take which pictures from the family archive to their respective homes. The image is not dated.

When my father described the photograph to me this summer, he said he was five years old when it was taken, so the year was probably 1965. The family had moved from the interior to the state capital, Belo Horizonte, a few months after my

grandfather got a new job in the city. He rented a house close to *Praça da Liberdade*, a much-celebrated public space. This was probably one of the first pictures they took after moving to capital.

Despite the poor framing (my aunt Thaurar's feet were cut) and odd composition (the subjects are slight off-centered, but not enough to admit it was intentional) it remains a conventional family portrait, as it invites a *familial gaze* (Hirsch, 1997, p10) due its structure. The subjects are all grouped together, in a certain hierarchy. The children are in the first row, lined up. Their father, the tallest, stands elegantly behind them and beside the mother, who is right at the center, appearing to be holding her husband's arm. Her sister, a single aunt who helped raise the kids, stays on the edge of the family's core, less visible, perhaps less important, behind all its members. Their disposition is so clearly family-like that their facial expressions are of very little importance. In her book *Family Frames* (1997), Hirsch looks at Ralph Eugene Meatyard's *Family Album of Lucybelle Crater* (1974). In his work, the artist photographs masked people posed as families. In doing so, the artist comments on the conventionality of family portraits, showing how artificial posing and faking are. So, even if my aunts, my father and my grandparents were wearing masks, they would still look like a family to me and to whoever stares at the image.

Here, "imaginative investment and creation" (Hirsch, 1997, p22), inherent in memory work, become an essential part of my interpretation. The *punctum* of the image, the blurry, light-colored car in the center does not seem to be pertinent to

this study. What bothers me the most about this image is at the level of the *studium*, which Barthes (1981) describes as:

“A kind of general, enthusiastic commitment, of course, but without special acuity. It is by *studium* that I am interested in so many photographs, whether I receive them as political testimony or enjoy them as good historical scenes: for it is culturally (this connotation is present in *studium*) that I participate in the figures, the faces, the gestures, the settings, the actions” (27)

After a hasty glance at the *punctum*, my eyes jump right to the empty pavement of the square, on the right-hand side of the picture. The vacuum in the right portion yells for something to fill it. My eyes, then, scan for other people in the square, on the uncovered, light area in the lower half, disrupting what Hirsch calls the *familial gaze* (p103) and diverting my eyes from the *family romance* happening in the center-left portion of the frame. The photograph quickly stops being the narrative of a happy, successful family moving to the capital and becomes a disturbing evidence of a time when families and young couples did not crowd the square on a sunny day, like they do nowadays.

It would be inaccurate to affirm, of course, that nobody was enjoying the open-air at *Praça da Liberdade* because of military curfew or any other authoritative measure of the government; after all, my father’s family was there. Also, it could be that the photographer waited for the exact second when nobody else was in his viewfinder to take the shot. Or it could simply be that, in the 1960s, less people frequented the place. Irrespective of the reason for the lack of people at the square, the scene appears haunting and somber to me, like a ghost town. It is as if the heart of the city had stopped pumping. As an inhabitant of Belo Horizonte, the city where



the photo was taken, my cultural access to the *studium* has its details based on my own urban experience. I have stepped on that pavement over a hundred times and have never seen it empty. So, unlike Herzog's image, whose *punctum* affects me personally and intimately, my understanding of the Family portrait is cultural, through the *studium*.

My impression is that, in moving to the capital, where the military acted more strongly, my father's family was stepping into the unknown. Coming from the interior, they were, perhaps, unaware of the full political picture in the country. Their *family romance* was directly related to the search for social ascension and a *coup d'état* did not influence their daily lives in any way, though it is now glaringly there in the empty square.

### **CONCLUSION: Flashbulb Memories**

In this essay, I am not only "editing" my past, carefully deciding what stays and what goes" (Kaiser, 2005, p2), but also exploring my postmemories through photographs. As a gray zoner in South America, my understanding of the dictatorship is constructed via "inter- and intragenerational dialogue (including the extended family, friends, neighborhood, and community), education, and the communication media [...]" (p3). Moreover, my relationship to the past blends public and private narratives, attesting to the pervasiveness of violence and fear (p13) inflicted upon the previous generation, as well as to experiences transmitted via various media within an intra-generational web (Hirsch, 2008, p115).

Ultimately, my postmemories are, by definition, *affiliative*, since they result more

from mediatic and intra-generational narratives than from family stories, but they seem to attain a *familial* significance as well.

I endowed the first picture I analyzed, a public image that does not have any indexical connection to my family whatsoever, with deep *familial* resonance through its *punctum*, Herzog's physical features and the symbolic status the photograph attained in my perception. More than understanding how the picture mediates my postmemories, I am constructing my *affiliative* relationship to the military regime, a process whose accomplishment depends on *familial* identification (Hirsch, 2012, p39).

The second photograph I looked at already had an indexical *familial* element to it, but there were not any traces of the dictatorship. So, just like I endowed Herzog's picture with *familial* resonance through postmemorial work, the juxtaposition of my father's family and the deafening silence and emptiness around them, in the second image, became a point of discomfort for me. Interestingly, Susana Kaiser (2005) concluded from the interviews she carried out for her book, that "the past was present in the silences and that those silences actually 'spoke' – and often quite loudly – transmitting memories through them [in an] atmosphere of terror" (81). Such atmosphere is highly incompatible with the *family romance* happening at the center of the picture.

Clearly, becoming aware of my imaginative investment was essential in order to capture the *affiliative* postmemories hovering over both photographs and to describe them in a fashion that hopefully makes sense to readers who are not familiar with my personal and cultural backgrounds. The two images selected for

this work represent what Kaiser (2005) has called “flashbulb memories”, “a blend of personal circumstances and historical events, which are of high importance to an individual, and whose details are remembered with extraordinary accuracy”. (p54)

## **REPRESENTING POSTMEMORIES (Part 2)**

Following the appearance of truth commissions and memorials across the globe, as well as the expansion of memory as field of study and art, Hirsch (2008) suggested there might be

“a need for inclusion in a collective membrane forged by a shared inheritance of multiple traumatic histories and the individual and social responsibility we feel toward a persistent and traumatic past—what the French have referred to as *‘le devoir de mémoire.’*” (111)

The artworks, books, movies and documents, such as photographs, she and other scholars analyze in their texts both embody and communicate how the post-generation relates to past events, contributing rather strongly, as they should, to the dialogue around social trauma. Since those (re)presentations of atrocities are such an active voice in postmemorial debates, they have been a hot topic of discussion among art critics and scholars.

In her book *Empathic Vision* (2005), Jill Bennett suggests that the artworks that best represent trauma do so via “effective triggers for profound thought” (p7), reaching for the viewer’s attention emotionally, without repeating the trauma itself. The pieces she looks at, by Doris Salcedo and Sandra Johnston, for instance, do not reference trauma directly, prioritizing “cognition instead of recognition” (p11). The

scholar sustains that realistic, violent depictions of trauma do not justly represent it, as they conceal the political flows surrounding the damage and expose the victims (p64). Moreover, the artworks she analyzes are deprived of any historical context, distancing the viewers from the facts and appealing to their senses instead.

In a similar vein, Ernst Van Alphen (1997) dismisses documental records and realistic depictions of the Holocaust as appropriate representations for a post-generational debate about past atrocities (p150). He believes that photographs and first-person documents reminiscent of the Shoah are inscribed in a historical language that is insufficient to justly describe the experience European Jews went through (p43) and it is precisely this unrepresentability that qualifies the Holocaust as a traumatic event. Here, it is worth remembering Adorno's (1981) dictum "to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric" (p200).

With that in mind, Van Alphen developed the term Holocaust Effect, while looking at works by Charlotte Salomon, Armando and Christian Boltanski. Those artists succeeded in bridging the symbolic gap between traumatic experience and visual depiction, allowing viewers and readers to "experience directly a certain aspect of the Holocaust or Nazism, that which led to the Holocaust" (p10). For instance, Boltanski created a series of short filmstrips that were taped onto the strips of feature-length movies to be screened in film festivals. Spectators were presented with very short scenes of violence comprised in those filmstrips in the middle of a "conventional" movie, being shocked not only by the brutality contained in Boltanski's work, but also by the lack of appropriate context for such violent scenes. Nothing preceding or succeeding them were indicative of their existence,

just like the Holocaust. So, Van Alphen's approach to visualizing trauma differs from Bennett's in the sense that the former defends the reenactment of the structures of trauma as a just representation, like in Boltanski's work, while the latter prefers to look at work that moves away from the symptoms of social violence.

As a Brazilian who lives in the legacy of the military regime, I believe it is my *devoir de mémoire* to develop an artistic a vocabulary for a just representation of my postmemories, inviting the viewer to engage empathically and critically with them. Movies, documentaries and exhibits about the military regime are abundant in the country and some of the most powerful visual art made in that period can be found in the book *Brazilian Art Under Dictatorship: Antonio Manuel, Artur Barrio, and Cildo Meireles* (2012) by Claudia Calirman, assistant professor at CUNY in New York. However, unlike Chilean and Argentinean artists such as Alfredo Jaar and Marcelo Brodsky, whose current works still engage with memories of brutal atrocities during military regimes in their respective countries, contemporary Brazilian artists seem to have avoided the topic. I went as far as emailing professor Calirman asking for direction in my search for post-dictatorship Brazilian art, but she did not have any leads either.

So, the inspiration to represent my postmemories came from elsewhere. Lori Novak and Shimon Attie, two artists of the Holocaust's post-generation were especially influential in my final work. In *Past Lives*, Novak photographs layered projections that interrelate her personal, family pictures with images of the Holocaust, conveying the strong influence the event had in private memory through a "triangulation of looking" (Hirsch, 1997, p158). The artist decontextualizes both

family and public photographs and puts them in dialogue with one another in a new, imaginative environment.

It is crucial to point out that her piece does not conform to the lines of thought Van Alphen and Bennett defend, as *Past Lives* does not depart from the referent, choosing instead to depict, through photographs (index) victims of the Shoah. Moreover, she uses family pictures in her artwork, which fall under the category of first-person accounts Van Alphen dismisses as an appropriate method of visualizing trauma. The strategy of blending public and private photos, however, is essential to the “triangulation of looking” she wanted to present, and unless the viewer knows the images are in fact related to the Holocaust beforehand, there are not any iconic clues in them that will lead to such conclusion.

Shimon Attie also photographs layers in *The Writing on the Wall*, but instead of decontextualizing them, he inserts them back where they belong. His work consists of photographing projections of pre-Holocaust pictures of Jews from Berlin onto the old, yet, renewed walls of a Jewish neighborhood in the city, the Scheunenviertel, in a “condensation of past and present” (Muir, 2008, p306). The projected photographs work as palimpsests that add another layer of meaning to both the images themselves and the walls in the neighborhood, re-opening the process of remembering and of memory construction (p312).

My goal in this part of my Honours Project is to develop a visual vocabulary that does not replicate trauma, but which represents the structures of my own postmemories. The challenge is to reference the military regime indirectly, like Johnston, Salcedo and Boltanski did and, at the same time, use public and private

images, since their blend is an essential part of how I relate to the past, as shown in part 1 of this study.

The path I chose was to use the *studium* as a point of *familial* identification and to manufacture a *punctum* that creates discomfort and estrangement. Notably, Isé (1997) has written extensively about the digital *punctum*'s malleability and instability. I began by picking photographs of groups of friends and relatives from the two envelopes where my parents keep their old pictures. I made sure that the chosen images had been taken between 1964 and 1985, the period of the dictatorship, and that they were conventionally happy-looking, welcoming of a *familial gaze*.

Next, I chose from the Internet, based on personal preference, photographs of wide circulation depicting oppression in Brazil. In each of them, I found a particular person or group of people that either seemed to be unaware of the brutality taking place next to them or who did not evoke violence in the context of the image. Subsequently, I digitally cropped and transferred those people onto the family photographs I had chosen. I selected non-violent elements in an attempt to reference the dictatorship through an index, and not iconically. The same light that bounced off the non-violent element in the frame, also bounced off the violent ones, meaning that they were both there (*ça a été*), at the same time, within a distance from each other short enough to let them fit the same frame. It is as if the non-violent element were a witness of oppression and yet, displaced from its context, it does not resemble (icon) the military regime. After digital treatment the non-violent item became what I would like to call an *aesthetic punctum*, as I shall explain.

In terms of composition, I tried to fit the alien fragments inside their new frames in a fashion that would neither seem awkward, nor outshine the main subjects in the image. In fact, I believe they could well be part of the picture's natural composition, though slightly alienated from the *family romance*, if it were not for a few aesthetic details.

Although I digitally adjusted size, brightness, contrast, blur, grains and added some shades, I deliberately did so only up to the point where the new fragments in the images were at the verge of looking natural in the pictures, as if they had actually been there when the shutters of the cameras captured the light in front of them. My intention was to create a synthetic *punctum*, purely aesthetic, that causes sensorial discomfort and estrangement, precisely because it does not match the visual standard of the rest of the image. At the very first glance at the picture, the new fragment automatically jumps right at me, yet I am unsure whether it is part of the original image. Hopefully, such device will invite critical inquiry, as Bennett suggested, and lead the viewer to wonder why his attention is being dragged somewhere else, to a point that may or may not belong there.

When the *punctum* diverts my eyes from the group of people happily posing at the center, it exerts the same function of a bare scenario in Brecht's plays or a lengthy repetition of the same frame in Godard's movies, creating a V-effect. The new fragments momentarily disrupt the viewer's *familial gaze* towards the photograph, affirming that not even the frame of a picture is always a safe place for *family romance*. This disruption is meant to be subtle, not aggressive, attesting that the



military regime did not represent a big shift for the lives of some families, like my father's, and mother's for that matter.

The sensorial oscillation between the *studium* and the *punctum*, ultimately an indexical trace of the military oppression, acknowledges the existence of something odd, disruptive and unwelcomed in the joyous narratives originally told by the images. The fact that they are both within the same diegetic space, attests that they attain significance together and are, thus, inseparable, even though the light of the *studium* was captured at a different time and place from that of the *punctum*.

It is essential to mention that the *punctum* is, by nature, a point of highly personal identification, a Proustian element in the photograph (Barthes, 1981, p41). The artificial *punctum* I created, however, is not personal at first, but *aesthetic*. It draws the viewer's attention not because it evokes an intimate connection, but because it is visually distinct, though only slightly, from the rest of the frame. So, in a sense, it should attract the sight of any viewer, which means it is not, by a Barthesian definition, a *punctum*, despite the fact that it "stings, specks, cuts" (Barthes, 1981, p27) the image.

I insisted in naming the alien element a *punctum* because it embodies how my postmemories work. In her definition of postmemory, Hirsch (1997) affirms that the stories of the generation-after are "[...] evacuated by the stories of the previous generation [...]" (p22), which certainly aligns with the analyses of the pictures in this essay, as well as my reaction to the *Wanted* poster. Thus, the photographs into which I inserted the new elements work, as in Attie's piece previously discussed, like palimpsests, of which the original story was partially removed, forcefully, by a

foreign subject, unexpectedly. In a sense, this *punctum* mimics my personal relationship to the military regime, where ghosts from the dictatorship disrupt *family romance*. Thus, although the *aesthetic punctum* pricks the image for any viewer, it was conceived from the awareness of a personal postmemorial experience and an intimate relationship to the past, reason why I called it *punctum*. It is a point of personal investment for myself, as a member of the generation-after. Whether it appeals personally to my compatriots, or not, would only elucidate how homogenous or heterogeneous postmemories are in Brazil. As an artist, though, I believe making my *punctum* available to other viewers to be my *devoir de mémoire*.







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