

XXVIII Visible Evidence: Images of History

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Panel: Images of History / Images of the Future –The Family Album and Public Archive - Sana Bilgrami, Edinburgh Napier University; Dr Stephen Connolly, UCA; Dr Kayla Parker, University of Plymouth

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Paper Title: Archive / Album - Images of History / Images of the Future

Dr Stephen Connolly

See accompanying visual presentation PDF

Abstract –

This presentation critically reflects on the film *Family Album and Other Images*, (48' 2022), an auto-ethnographic work that explores a 'personal history as 'implicated in larger social formations and historical processes.' (Russell 1999) The film explores a hidden event in the life of filmmaker's father, implicating it with his career in the space race of the 1960s. This expanded context in the film is made evident in visual material that can be framed as images of history, and at first can be contrasted with images from a family archive in the film. As the work unfolds however, the differences in the claims made by these artefacts to support the films narrative appear to dissolve.

Family Album and Other Images

35' 2022

Presentation

Hello and Welcome –

I'm going to explore a single image in my auto-ethnographic film *Family Album and Other Images* - to respond to the theme of the conference *Images of History*. I will first play a clip from the film - to show the moving image context - and then

talk around the image itself. These are preliminary notes to a film that has been constructed in a practice-as-research framework.

How is the image placed within the film? The images within the topic of dad and the means of transport - are arranged in this sequence. The slide of the sports car illustrates a critical narrative point in the film - the migration of my father to the US and his which in a sense is a defining event of my father's life.

This is a re-framing commonplace family images as *Image of History*. Because I'm speaking about still images - and a vision of the moving image as a platform for montage - visual communication across images placed in temporal sequence - with sound. So for this invocation of *Images of History* - I'm concerned with the moving image as a combinatory visual assemblage - rather than the image as indexical record of an *event* unfolding before the camera - as - for instance - the celebrated *Zapruder Film* - and others - moving images of a more or less *historical* event.

Instead of this indexical record - what if we consider the photograph as a product of a performance - a visual document as outcome of a negotiation between photographer; photographed; and audience. Broadly speaking, this is Azoulay's "civil contract" of photography - image making reframed as a social activity foregrounding the encounter between - image makers and the visualised - filmmaker and subject - to make visual statements in and of the world; and these statements are mutually *recognised* by others.

In this case - the outcome of the photographic encounter is destined for a family archive. This is visual (auto)biography; a sequence of visual documents that complements and supplements the movement of the family unit through time. This temporal gesture invokes Derrida's notion of an archive as a reach to the future and an instruction -

the archive has always been a pledge ... a token of the future ...

what is no longer archived in the same way is no longer lived in the same way.

(Derrida 1996 pp18)

The archive creates messages – instructions - for generations to come. On these terms, the image becomes temporal - a key attribute of an *image of history* - rather than a specification of contents or recording of evidence.

Therefore - the *Image of History*. It shows my father Albert at the wheel of his new car in 1963, a MG-B. The photographer is my mother, Julie. The picture is taken in Montréal, Canada. Both parties to this encounter from Manchester in the UK; they are yet to be married, and only been in Canada for less than a year.

The immediate context of this photographic encounter; the archive reveals the image is one of four in a deliberate photo session - marrying couple, car and location. I'm guessing the first shot - it feels hurried and poorly framed. The car moves location and next two shots - taken by my mother - show my father at the wheel. It is these that make it into the family album. For the last - the couple swap roles - and my mother takes the driving wheel.

These multiple takes indicate performance and staging of the image. We can accept this action of visualisation as a communication for the future - the results of which are consciously destined for the family album. In content - they have a new car - and they literally possess it - dad in his sunglasses posing as “mastering” the car - and very much indicating someone in control of a sense of destiny - or at least as the driver - where they will be going. Two further comments could be made - the church in the background is clearly of interest to the young couple. Also - Julie is by the more accomplished photographer - her images have a sculptural form and energy in their composition and a clear notion of communication.

Let's discuss the pictured relationship with the car. The car is a premium industrial object. Godard filmed the MGB factory in Oxford for *British Sounds* in 1968 – illustrating in his terms an alienated labour force harnessed for the assembly line production of the MCGB, a paragon of bourgeois consumerism.

As an image of person with an object of some meaning to them - we can compare with an image from the other branch of my family taken 2 generations before. This photographic encounter is with a professional; it is ritualised; staged within

tight constraints. The objects are ambiguous. What is the plate we see Kathleen with - is it decorative? Why a depiction of rose on the plate? Is the plate just a material accessory for the plinth as a platform for the photographed pose?

In contrast - the car is indivisible from the driver – it is a staged composite identity – masculine; technocratic; privileged. To the viewer - the car as an aspirational object. What is the visual repertoire of automobiles at that time – had my parents channelled a visual form in the media?

For the North American market in 1963 – these are examples of MGB promotional material emphasising the design and formal qualities of the car.

Concurrent examples of images advertising US cars celebrate the normative social values of car ownership - a Chevrolet *Parisienne* on the left. Avatars or social “types: animate the advertising for the *Comet* on the right – a complex identity with the dulux dog in the foreground.

MGB advertising seeks to connect with a more personalised ownership of the diminutive sports car - to stress the relationship between personal identity and the vehicle - later in the 1960s. MGB advertising caught on to this - illustrating the relationship between car and owner. And undoubtedly pushing this into the territory of hetero-normative sexual allure later into the 1970s.

To come full circle with this - we finally consider the image in the regime of an individual biography. If we line up the images of my father and movement as a general theme as sequenced in the film *Archive/Album and Other Images* - we see the colour and Kodachrome slide - the first mass-use colour photographic process. Unlike the black and white photographic objects destined for a book - the slide only reveals itself on *projection*. This is the intended mode of reception of the image - the *projected* still image - offering spectatorial conditions close to cinema or the moving image.

And I would argue once images are projected - in sequence - we begin to lay the conditions for narrative and storytelling. My intuition tells me this cinematic dimension available to the materials of biography - makes a qualitative difference in the resources for the imagination I believe. It is this point that marks images

like these as *Images as History* - they are markers on the way we re-imagine ourselves.

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Stephen Connolly

Stephen.connolly@uca.ac.uk

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