

Why old photographs evoke a nostalgic response that modern photographs cannot

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My whole family liked to take photographs, a disposable camera in hand to document the family gathering and children growing up. Now almost 20 years later each member has a box, album or bag filled with dusty, slowly fading images. I've always loved looking back on old photographs as it brings back memories of times forgotten. I recently was able to look at the images my Grandmother has kept and came across many of when I was younger, for example, recalling the memory of the first time I had cut my hair myself and realising it was a lot worse than I first thought. Seeing people and animals who are no longer with us looking happy and enjoying the moment captured in the image creates a strange feeling of adjustment without them being around. This is why I would like to look into this topic. Old photographs are filled with many emotions, regret, happiness, sadness, all from a few photos of times you've accidentally put aside compared with newer photographs that are a lot more accessible and recent to the person.

Emotions

We are never prepared for what emotions photographs will bring to us. For me personally, old photographs bring a slightly happier memory as there was more togetherness in my family in the earlier years while now as adults, we are all busy and have less time for each other, causing weeks or months of not speaking to one another. While researching I found the most common emotion is sadness due to old photographs showing a better time or a person who is no longer with us. The underlying theme to feeling sad whilst looking at older photos is the longing to be back in that time as it was a lot happier compared to that of what the person is dealing with now. This feeling is also known as nostalgia, I will go into more detail with the physical side of nostalgia in my second keyword.



Figure 1 - Thomas Friedrich Schaefer (2014-2016) – Experiential Spaces #1

Photographer Thomas Friedrich Schaefer's series Experiential Spaces is inspired by fragments of his childhood memories. His aim was to stimulate the viewers to bring out their own childhood memories too. He commented "I tried to reimagine my first memories to investigate my past...For example, chocolate ice cream will never taste the same like the one you had when you were five years old" (PetaPixel, 2017). I like Schaefer's initial response of wanting to 'investigate' his own memories and pull out certain feelings from those photographs like how he added on about chocolate ice cream. I feel old photographs definitely can trigger old feelings, smells and tastes of what you can remember on that day and I think it's important if you want to do this type of photography that you take senses like this into consideration. In his first image of the series 'Experiential Spaces #1', the scene he created is really quite nostalgic despite not having experienced that. The lighting works really well in setting the scene and the hints of blue do negotiate childhood for me. The overcrowded cupboards filled with art supplies and toys definitely relates to parts of my childhood. The hue of the light on the desk with the child doing homework while the father is watching tv with a beer through the door shows it must be late at night. The overall setting for this image is really clever and well thought out since as soon as I saw the image it made me feel nostalgic.

The difference with more modern photographs taken on a DSLR camera or phone is that they are a lot more accessible to look back on and show people. It could also be that more recent memories don't require a trigger to evoke the event depicted. The speciality that lies around old film photographs is most of the time there is only one physical copy of that image. When in modern times you can share that image around media as many times as you want and you still have the original copy in your photo album. Now I definitely think the modern equivalent is more convenient as you don't have to carry around physical copies of photographs that could get damaged, instead it is all on one device that can store all the images you want to show. However, the main point now is that some photographers aim to evoke emotion to show their audience while in older photographs they do that naturally.

The further back you go, especially in the Victorian era, the slower the photographing procedure was. Meaning the family getting photographed would have had braces in place on their arms, legs and necks to insure they keep still enough to have the photograph taken. During this period, you weren't allowed to smile as these images would have been captured in an exposure duration of between 5-10 minutes. In this process you were not allowed to see the family's personalities due to the stiffness and bleak looks on their faces.



Figure 2 –_Unknown – Victorian Photography

As time went on it was normal for most families to own a film camera or have access to disposable cameras. At the time it was the best way to capture any moment as fast as you could. Any emotion would be seen through it as unlike the early 1900's, the cameras would include shutter speed making the capture almost instant. This was the ideal time as the photographer could photograph the family in any emotion they'd like as it was freewill and just out of kindness and wanting a keepsake photograph. These days, photographers can be hired out to do family photography with DSLR cameras. From what I've seen in family photography it looks very staged and played up to the camera to portray the typical happy family life; everyone's usually dressed the same and are in similar poses. The photographer helps pose the family to get the perfect shot, which is understandable as a family probably wouldn't know how to act in front of a camera, however I can't stop thinking how staged these photographs end up looking. On the other hand, people who decide to document family life through the camera on their phone end up relating back slightly to the film camera days yet it doesn't feel the same, it's not as personal I feel. These days we have many options to document events, DSLR cameras, phones, laptops, tablets while back in late 1900's early 2000's that was the only option along with video tape recorders. I think the whole point is having that physical image or tape to hold makes the situation feel a lot more personal and special.

Nostalgia

One of the biggest emotions manifested by old photographs is nostalgia. According to the dictionary, nostalgia is "a sentimental longing or wistful affection for a period in the past." (ScanCafe, 2018). We have a want to connect back with the past times, records, clothing, jewellery but the most popular will always be old photographs. It brings a sense of being there even while you're not, a feeling of going back in time. A new photo trend on social media involves families recreating their old family photos which can be extremely powerful in the way they show the 'then and now' and concomitant passage of time. A photographer that has brought a more professional approach to this trend, Conor

Nickerson's photo series 'Childhood' has his older self photoshopped into old images of his younger self.



Figure 3 –_Conor Nickerson (1997-2005) - Childhood

Describing the inspiration for the project “While looking through some old family photos, I wondered what it would look like if I tried to photoshop myself today into them , placing myself into eleven childhood moments”. I think the project is a perfect combination of the old and modern format. Using a modern technology such as photoshop and using that to reimagine old photographs is a creative and effective way to visualise nostalgia.

Another photographer who took a different take on the theme of nostalgia is Chris Porsz with his photo series “Reunions” . While casually photographing strangers back in the early 80’s he decided to track down those people and retake the images in recent years.



Figure 4 –_Chris Porsz (1979) – Reunion
– School Friends



Figure 5 –_Chris Porsz (2016) – Reunion
– School Friends

These photographs entitled ‘School Friends’ were originally taken in 1979 while the reshoot was done in 2016. I think this series is a more communal sense of nostalgia compared to Nickerson’s images due to it involving a lot of people who might have not seen each other since the older photograph was taken. Personally, I believe that statement could be true as in the newer photograph they don’t look as comfortable to be around each other as in the older photograph. Despite that, this project may have allowed connections to be rebuilt again. Looking past the people in the foreground it’s also interesting to see how the background has modernised as they’re photographing in the same location. The sign is in the same place yet the pavement and houses to the left have both changed since the original image was taken.

20th century writer and critique Roland Barthes created a photobook based on love and grief, written directly out of the loss of his mother in 1977. This book was called *Camera Lucida*, published in 1980, an inquiry into the nature and essence of photography whilst also being a eulogy for his mother.

Camera Lucida is Barthes' first and only book devoted to photograph, whilst also being a literary theorist and philosopher, Barthes used these attributes in all cases. Stating that photography doesn't have to be all culture based and following the rules, its allowed to effect the body and mind just as much. In the first half of the book he splits an image into two sections, the first half he which he calls the studium, is the manifest subject, meaning and context of the photograph and the second being the punctum: that aspect of a photograph that holds our gaze without condescending to mere meaning or beauty (The Guardian, 2011).

As this book is also a eulogy for his mother, the second half is based around her. When he goes looking for old photographs, each one he finds he believes the face is not quite her despite her looking like herself. In the end he found an image of when she was 5 years old standing in a winter garden, he comments on her true likeness and the "air" that he remembers. However, Barthes never includes the image and only comments on it making the reader wonder. Barthes in his discreet manner stated "It exists only for me. For you, it would be nothing but an indifferent picture" about not showing the audience the photograph. Whilst researching this I kept re-reading over Barthes finding the images of his mother as I've felt that same feeling before whilst looking through my own old photographs and videos. After adjusting to live without someone around its quite a strange feeling to be remembered that they were once here with you. It's not so much a sense of forgetting the person but throughout time you forget little things like not being able to picture their face or remember their voice. When reminded of how they looked and sounded its slightly uncomfortable as you've not been reminded in so long. I believe this was the form of nostalgia Barthes was feeling, being able to point out a face but not feeling like you know them anymore.

Disposable

Disposable camera, disposable memories. Most of my childhood photographs were taken on those Kodak or Fujifilm disposable cameras as actual film cameras were quite expensive growing up. My

grandad had a Minolta auto focus film camera that he bought for documenting holidays with my nan, yet when the children started growing up it began documenting them instead. I was given his film camera during first year of university so I could get to grips with how film worked. The camera had been sitting in a cupboard unused for years since he passed, the camera and case still smelt like him. Even having not seen him in 11 years I still remember the distinct cigarette smoke and aftershave which now the camera carries and relates back to my keyword of emotions.

In this generation it has become more of a trend to shoot with disposable cameras, clearly this trend wasn't started by photographers. The so called 'iPhone Generation' are switching to the disposable cameras to relate more with the olden days yet it isn't to express nostalgia but to gain more social media followers. Thousands of Instagram celebrities such as Kendall Jenner and Gigi Hadid have had disposable camera accounts since 2019 but I believe this trend picked up due to the Youtuber David Dobrik using a disposable camera to take photos of events and his friend group, making this part of his brand. Capitalising on this, he made an app called 'David's Disposables' which mimics the effect a film camera would give off. This isn't the first film camera app either, 'Huji Cam' and 'VHS Cam' are in the same bracket, turning the iPhone camera into a vintage camera (Insidehook, 2020). Personally I don't like the idea of these camera apps, I'm more familiar with the app 'Huji Cam' as a lot of my friends use it and when they ask me for an opinion of the photo they took I'm greeted with a low contrast image with a generic pink or red lens flair. I believe if you're interested in this style of photography then why not experiment with it more with an actual film camera instead of an app as it takes all the fun out of shooting the image.

The main obsession with this generation and the disposable camera I feel is because its seen more as a novelty. Trying to take a photograph with your phone is seen as an everyday occurrence now, no one is phased as they try to get their angles to try and look as good as possible. Yet bring out a film camera and all of that care is gone; people are seen trying to look like the retro and vintage images you see over the internet. I've seen this first-hand when I brought my film camera to a garden party,

when taking the images everyone was acting different compared to how they'd act to a phone since they're used to a phone. There is no opportunity to obsess over how the photograph looks which in the end produces more of a memory. When in developing they kept asking me to send them over just to put them on their social media to show how much of a good time was had during the event.

Overall I still stand by my title, I still believe that older photographs carry a more important and nostalgia feel to them and my research backed me up throughout. In Porsz's work the original image becomes more prominent compared to the remake as the models seem so posed and distant. Nickerson's work brings both older and modern elements into the images, still making the photographs look and feel nostalgic thanks to photoshop work. I believe no matter how hard people try through technology to mimic the style of film nothing will compare to the original camera and film itself and the original memories its able to create.

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