How is Photography used to evoke/ Represent/interfere with memory and emotions?

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Summary:

This piece of writing will explore how photography is used and what effect it has on how we as individuals express emotions and recollect memories. The aim of this is to develop a

better understanding and knowledge of the impact photography can have on our emotions as well as memories.

Introduction:

The concept of capturing life events to preserve memories through photography has always intrigued me as I find it a way to connect to the past on an emotional level. This interest has led me to want to explore the impact photography has on our memories, emotional connections and the different ways it can affects us whether that has a positive or negative reaction to our natural responses. The many ways I aim to explore this is by using resources such as articles, books and artists work to support or dismiss my question of how photography is used to evoke/ represent/interfere with memory and emotions. My main focus areas will be looking at memories, emotional connections, emotions shown through photography, manipulation and memory along with medias impacts on memory in social media and news. This question resonated with me as it is a reason that I originally got into photography as I loved taking photos of the world and people around me to capture memories. Looking back at photographs has always been an enjoyable activity for me whether it's family photos or photos that was taken by me or photos that are part of history events as feel there's a deeper level that photography can bring psychologically. Photography is a powerful tool that we have access to explore and express a lot of topics through for myself it's also a place to connect with the world. To remember a certain emotion that was felt that particular day.

The first chapter will explain what memory is and the factors that contribute to how we are able to remember past events that have an impact on who we are. Looking at the work of Thomas Friedrich Schaefer that recreates childhood memories as a way to evoke viewers to recollect their own memories. Then I aim to Link memory and emotion into Photographer work by Peter Finnemore who's work touches on generational memory and personal memories. I will be reflecting this back to what connections my personal memories integrate through others work.

The second chapter will talk about collective memory and remembering injustice through photography, looking at how memories and emotions can be shown through the work of Danielle Zalcman's project "Signs of your identity". Within this project she explores how the government of Canada and churches used Indian residential schools to assimilate young Indigenous students where they were punished from speaking their own native languages as well as engaging into Indigenous traditions instead teaching them western Canadian culture. Through this we learn how memories can be represented emotions and memories.

The third chapter will be exploring going more in depth with emotions and the connections we have. As well as how photography can interfere with our memories due to how we capture photos. By looking at how social media can impact the memories and whether the images can be manipulated due to the way we react around a camera such as whether the image is candid or posed in a certain way.. Using a collection of articles online i'll be able to reflect on all three chapters to come up with conclusion on how photography impacts us and how we feel.

Chapter 1 – Personal Memories

Defining memory itself is a complex topic as there are many factors that contribute to how the human body processes the world around itself. The main three factors are working memory, short term memory and long-term memory. Working memory is where the brain is able to remember information for a limited time whereas short term memory isn't as long and can last up to 30 seconds of information. Long term memory is where the brain is able to store "large quantities of information for potentially unlimited duration." (Praveen Shrestha, 2017) which is how someone is able to remember their past.

Long-term memory is what I looked more in depth into as that explores lifelong events along with how we recollect personal memories. There are four sections that make up Long-term memory which are Episodic, Semantic, Autobiographical and Visual memory. Episodic is the event of remembering certain situations and experiences which are special to an individual such as a first kiss, prom or a certain birthday though these memories can differ between one another. Autobiographical refers to an individual's personal history or past which teaches us about our self-identity and how we are the way that we are. Endel Tulving identified the differences between semantic and episodic memory in 1972 and was the first to acknowledge that semantic is memory of general knowledge such as fact then episodic recollection of past events. Lastly, visual memory is the concept of viewing an object,

mentally creating an image and being able to use that knowledge later on such as when we learn to read we visualise a word so that we are familiar with it eventually learning to process words that become part of normal life. Episodic and semantic memories are “types of memories that provide you with a sense of personal history as well as a shared history with other people in your life.” (Verywellmind, 2020) which is where connections come in as we connect with others through storytelling and sharing visual media such as photographs and videos.

A photographer that caught my attention previously is Thomas Friederich Schaefer as he takes fragments of photos and memories from his childhood then recreates the memories in a studio. Through his work ‘Experimental Strategies’ Schaefer tries to make the scenes he photographs as accurate as possible to his own memories and the viewers memories. Schaefer aims to evoke viewers own memories through this collection of work which works as I feel our natural instinct as humans is to find connect to a piece of art, “we are always looking at the relation between things and ourselves” (John Berger, pg. 9) That is a main reason to why his work is so impactful as it’s made for the sole purpose of relating to your own past memories and emotions.

Figure 1- Thomas Friedrich Schaefer, “Experimental Spaces” (2017)

The above photograph shows a woman in the kitchen and a man at the table who i’m assuming represent his parents’ relationship. As this project is designed to evoke memories and emotions, it’s interesting to think that everyone will have a different memory that this can trigger whether that’s an old memory or a memory that got lost with time. “The way we see things is affected by what we know or what we believe” (John Berger, Pg. 8) shows that what we see is up to our own personal experiences. This Photograph creates a narrative within the viewer while already having a significant narrative to the Thomas Fredrich Schaefer. Right now, the image makes me remember back to when I was younger how my own parents’ relationship was with each other. For example, of how my father would go to work while my mother would stay at home to look after my siblings and I. Another thing to note about memory is that “our memories can change because each time we revisit them they become vulnerable.” (Scientific American, 2017) so that each time we view a piece of art similar to Schaefer’s work that is made to evoke emotions and memories that we might not have the same reaction twice.

Through childhood photos we connect to our past selves though we also are able to connect to many other individuals and family members due to have family photos that will be passed down generations along with stories. One photographer who captures generational memory through their photography is Peter Finnemore who has a 30 yearlong project called ‘Gwendraeth House’ (which is an umbrella title) and is still an ongoing project to this day. The collection of work is based around a house that Finnemore owns in Wales that has been around in their lives for 5 generations of his family. Through Finnemore work he evokes memories of the generations that came before and have passed by capturing the house

inside and out. Generation Memory is a powerful way to evoke “memories because they connect experiences, beyond the lifetime of individuals, with the wider cultural existence of social communities” (Wydra.H 2018)

Figure 2 – Peter Finnemore, Wallpaper Fragrance ‘Gwendreath House’ (1996)

Peter Finnemore uses light, shadows, emptiness or objects to create unique meaning within his photography. The shadow that looks like a Human face adds a depth of history as it feels like that represents the past generations that have lived through the house and that the presence still remains in the walls of the house. The wallpaper seems dated compared to modern day as the photo was taken in 1996. Wallpaper is a symbolic message of time passing by and unravelling as in a lot of houses there’ll be layers of wallpapers from

different people, different stories which is just genius way to evoke emotion. Sometime with art and photography. I believe you have to allow yourself to feel and connect to feel the emotions that are portrayed.

Figure 3 – Peter Finnemore, Dream Traces “Gwendreath House” (2010)

This is another image created by Peter Finnemore called ‘Dream Traces’ whereas mentioned he has a great way of showing the process of time through the interior of the house as the walls are peeling that shows the process of aging and growing up. There are marks on the walls that look as though have been painted around which could symbolize keeping sentimental photographs that have now been moved showing change. Though Schaefer and Finnemore work show memory in two completely different forms, as Finnemore work has been developed for over 30 years sharing the life of the house in different stages and

Schaefer work has been recreated to resemble childhood memories they both aim to evoke and awaken viewers memories with the techniques to question an image deeper which is why they work together well. Both Artists provoke thinking and conversations on what the viewer thinks the image represents to them.

Chapter 2 – Collective memory and Viewing Injustices.

Figure 4 – Daniella Zalcman, 'Signs of your Identity'

Daniella Zalcman work 'Signs of your identity' is a collection of multiple exposure portraits of young indigenous survivors, using sites and memories to share their boarding school experience to engage in the cultural genocide and intergenerational trauma. This project brings attention to educate on the experience that many young indigenous people faced.

This project is being used to brings light to Canadian history from the 1870's where the Canadian government created Indian Residential School to assimilate young indigenous people into Canadian western culture. From the ages of as young as three children were taken from their homes to church run boarding schools then were punished for speaking their native language or engaging in any traditions that were part of their culture. The children were routinely assaulted physically and sexually, in some cases they were even subjected to medical experimentation. The last residential school closed in 1996, only 25 years ago which is shocking to think how that's not that long ago and means these places operated for more than 126 years. I remember hearing in the news a few months ago about how many children within the indigenous community went missing without any leads which has now been brought to the media attention on the dark and horrific events that took place in Residential boarding schools. More than 1,000 unidentified graves were discovered at the site of 3 schools. The above photo is of Mike Pinay, who was in 'Qu'appelle Indian residential' school from 1953-1963. In the passage written next to his is a quote from his experience. "I was away from my family from age 6 to 16. How do you learn about family? I didn't know what love was. We weren't even known by names back then. I was a number. Do you remember number? 73?" (Mike Pinay on 'Signs of your Identity') These words have so much emotion as the pain is felt through reading, isolated and unloved in this residential school away from his own family and to be treated as just a number among thousands. Within his memory there are some tipis which is traditional pat of Native American history.

VALERIE EWENIN
Muskowekwan Indian Residential School
1965-1971

"I was brought up believing in the nature ways, burning sweetgrass, speaking Cree. And then I went to residential school and all that was taken away from me. And then later on, I forgot it, too, and that was even worse."

Figure 5 & 6, Valerie Ewenin by Daniella Zalcman 'Signs of your Identity'

The layout of these images also comes with a text of writing that has the persons' name, what school they went to, how long they went and a quote from the conversation Zalcman had with each individual. This one is of a person called Valerie Ewenin, her quote on the right says "I was brought up believing in nature ways, burning sweetgrass, speaking cree. And then I went to a residential school and all that went away from me. And then later on, I forgot it, too, and that was even worse." (Valerie Ewenin on Danielle Zalcman 'Sign your identity')I couldn't imagine the amount of trauma you would witness in such an atmosphere being forced into an environment that wants to get rid of everything you were brought up to and learnt within culture. Ewenin has an object within her double exposure that appears to be a window that could represent the many emotions she felt during the time. "The technique of overlaying her portraits of survivors with artifacts from their memory enabled her to tell a story that is profound, nuanced, compelling, and enduring." (Tom Hundley, Pulitzer Center)

Zalcman work is what is considered as a collective memory as she has created a safe space for a variety of people from one particular culture and background to share the hardships that they faced due to the hands of the government and church. The oppression, abuse, genocide and integrational trauma represent the emotions and memories of those who were affected by this disgraceful legacy that Canada had for 120 years. Through this work i've been educated massively as this isn't something would've known a lot about if those photos didn't catch my attention, it's angered me that this went on for so long and many generations had to suffer through coercive education in attempts of erasing culture and language. As a person who had little knowledge of Indigenous people, this photography project and photographs has truly opened my eyes to how the government still have systems in places to this day. Indigenous people are a huge part of society. That's the positive side of photography how it is able to connect people through the images, it evokes anger, disgust, sadness while also starting important conversations. " The peoples whose stories we tell, they are the experts" (Danielle Zalcman, 2021 Pulitzer Center) the stories of the people we capture is an important job to accurately represent how the person is feeling.

A theme that is in Peter Finnemore work and Danielle Zalcman is how in the photos selected they are all in black and white. Black and white is visually pleasing as it not overwhelmed by colour the messages become clearer. Black and white photography was created in 1820's so it also adds a nostalgic feel to the photos which is perfect when exploring past history through memories. Black and white photography can portray a stop in time, so the viewer is able to focus on the deeper emotions expressed through the photo. Time is also known as a way to reflect many take a time out to reflect on how you feel. Expressions are able to appear more prominent within black and white photography as it highlights the little details.

Chapter 3 – Media, Emotions and Memory.

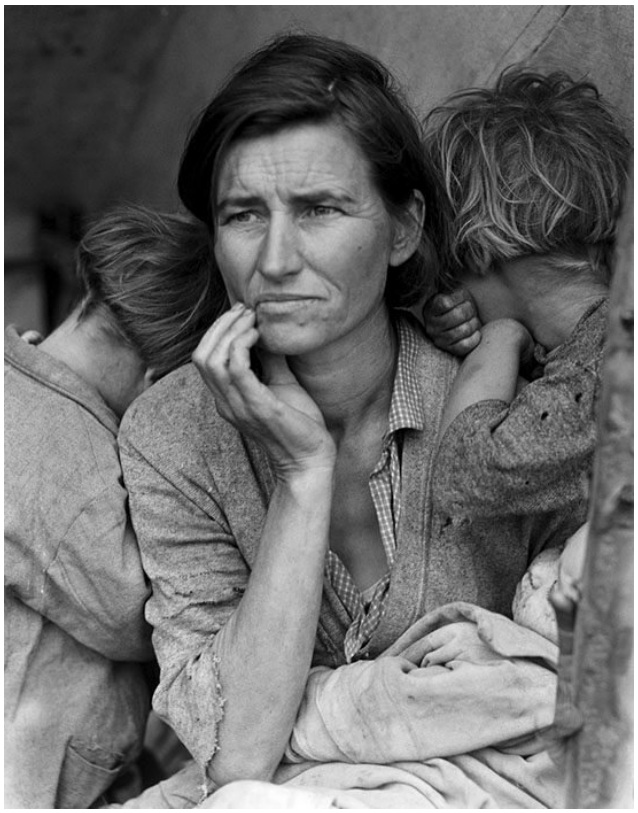
Social media is a big part of today society through this it can have a huge impact on how we express our own identities along with how we are able to show emotion and memory. At times social media can make us feel afraid to be vulnerable or to have a certain online profile where life isn't reality. "behind perception, emotion, creativity, personal identity, interpersonal communication, and human relationships help explain how we create visual images, how we share them, and how people react to what they see" (John Suler's, Image and psyche) this sums up how there are many different ways that visual images can be captured there's not one particular and with social media it's easy to manipulate how a photo is viewed.

Many people nowadays use mobile phones and social media as a way to preserve memories and capture the world around them. I believe that with social media we now have a new way of seeing life as we are able to enter a digital error where majority have access to anyone and everyone. Though technology has its positives and negatives, think mobile phones are a big distraction to paying attention and living in the moment

"The first step to forming a lasting memory is to pay attention. Without attention, our brains won't store the sensations we experience in the world around us." (Brian Resnick, Vox, 2018) we pay a lot of time now looking down or through our phones trying to find an aesthetically pleasing image that can be posted on social media. If we don't pay attention then we won't be able to remember or have issues with remembering a detail, like how it smelt to be in that environment, how it felt or looked like. As mentioned in the first chapter

that if we don’t pay attention then our short-term memory can no longer support our long-term memories. While taking photos the attention most likely goes to the phone, so you are able to make sure that everything is in frame or everyone’s smiling or not blinking. Once you take a photo through your phone at event majority of people will spend extra time looking at the photo to make sure the shot was received. I find even myself in concerts sometimes i’ll forget to actually live in the moment as i’m focussing through the screen to create a post on social media instead of putting the phone down. Though phones aren’t all bad as they help remember the visual memory, but we’ll not be appreciating the stimulation that the memory could bring us. “If we’re so focused on photos and visuals, we’re more likely to ignore other stimuli around us. And what gets ignored does not get remembered.” (Brian Resnick, vox 2018)

Moving on from how using phone photography impacts our memory another thing that can happen due to social media is ideas and images can be manipulated. Normally photography as a subject and career path is used as a way to share stories from a variety of people, meet lots of different people learn about culture. Photography can become repetitive and a way to show negative light on a subject some photographers can be very stereotypical with what they produce. This is where false truth comes into light how people will manipulate an image to be perceived a certain way.

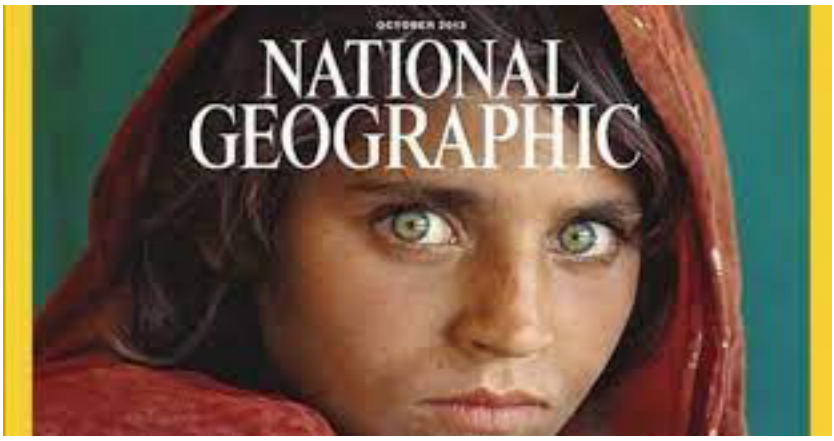


Dorothea Lange, Migrant Mother 1936

This is a famous photo by Dorothea Lange which was part of an assignment for Farm security administration. With the photograph there is a woman staring intensely off into the distance while her two children are slummed with their faces away from the camera. They appear to be homeless or living in poverty due to them having mud on their faces and arms. The clothes they're wearing seem to be tatty and have holes in. The story behind the image as Lange explained the interaction was "I did not ask her name or her history. She told me her age, that she was 32. She said that [she and her children] had been living on frozen vegetables from the surrounding fields, and birds that the children killed. She had just sold the tires from her car to buy food." (Dorothea Lange) After hearing the meaning behind this

photograph and experience the image is more captivating and evokes emotion as these were taken to show the poverty America was facing in the Great Depression. Though years later the Woman in the photo, the ’migrant mother’ was found who was Florence Owen Thompson. She shared a different perspective of what happened while taking the photo and what the meaning was. Florence was happening to be at the camp in Nimpo, California where the picture was taken as her car was broken down. The story was originally made up by Lange in a way to propose an emotional photo with a deeper meaning behind it. Lange had previously planned the photo and what she wanted to portray before the two met. This shows how some photographers are willing to push narratives but also shows if it was that easy then to fabricate an image it is possible to happen with normal people on social media and within the media as there is an unlimited amount of technology. The images present a nostalgic depth to American beauty and how far some people will go to create something that causes a reaction.

Another story that also connects to how knowing the truth behind a photo can change your whole perspective and how you feel over a certain way. There’s a popular photo that has been around for years on social media and on national Geographical magazine covers which is the photo of ‘green eyed’ girl from Afghanistan.



Steve McCurry, 1984

Sherbat Gula is the girl in this photograph for many years. Her pierce bright eyes show much emotion behind it as though she is looking at the viewer directly recently this photo has been trending due to the woman getting to evacuate from Afghan to Italy people believe she wouldn't have been able to without the magazine cover.

Conclusion

There are many factors that contribute to how photography is captured, made to bring people together as it's been around for many years the history of photography stays with us and develops as time goes on. Photography to me is an emotional outlet which is why I believe the impact a photo can have on the viewer is incredibly important. I like to look deeper within a photograph and question how it makes me feel, what it represents or how it can interfere with us as humans. Through connections of our own family history and others we can always find something that connects to us as something will trigger your thoughts relating to that subject matter.

Photography has its ways of evoking emotions through darker subject matters bringing light onto important topics such as the work of Daniella Zalcman which was immensely powerful and educational, there was a lot of emotions involved and thought that was put into it. The layers to represent memory was very evoking as it was as if you were hearing the stories themselves. There's Many that can relate to that topic of intergenerational trauma, so it allows representation for a lot of individuals and for their truth to be positively accurately displayed. Black and white photography adds a much deeper meaning to photography it takes the viewer back in time to add a nostalgic feel to an image. Family connection that

past history can be explored is through hearing stories that can be passed through generations. The interesting thing was to learn about how a very popular image from the Great depression in America taken by Dorothea Lange actually had a whole false history behind it that was just for show in the end which represents how photos can interfere with what we think we know through photography.

“Memory weaves its way through photographic acts of capturing, organising, viewing and sharing.” (Tim Fawns, blended memory pg 903) this is something that think is very true as everything we do has an impact, we learn and we teach through events. Photography is a perfect way that enables us to engage with many different experiences whether that through ourselves, family, other photographers. So overall, I believe that visual imagery has a significant way on how we process the world and how it effects our memory and emotion.

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