

EssayTitle:

A Glimpse into the Unconventional: The Family Album of Lucybelle Crater by Ralph Eugene Meatyard in Comparison to American Family Photography of the 1950s and 1960s.

Theme Focus: De/constructing the Human: Self, Identity and Other

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ABSTRACT

This essay examines two aspects of photography – the conventional and unconventional. First, the interplay between formal and candid images, cultural ideals (particularly those espoused by Kodak's advertising), and the nuanced aspects of American post-war family photography. Formal photographs, characterised by well considered poses and facial expressions, can present an idealised, often commercially driven, image of a cohesive family. Conversely, candid photographs appear to capture spontaneous moments, yet even these seemingly unfettered images may harbour preconceived ideas shaped by societal norms.

Secondly, looking through Ralph Eugene Meatyard's *Family Album of Lucybelle Crater*. By hiding his subjects' characteristics, Meatyard challenges viewers' preconceptions about photography's ability to represent authenticity and reality.

The study also looks at the relevance of Meatyard's work in the context of a period characterised by social unrest and Cold War anxiety drawing on the works of theorists like Hirsch, Barthes, and Bourdieu. Meatyard and colleagues such as Davenport question the sacredness of familial imagery by moving away from didactic aesthetics and toward personal expression, indicating a shift towards subjective representation.

Introduction

Within the domain of family photography, which appears to be dominated by spontaneity and warmth within the family, there is a complicated interaction between pre-established social standards and ideological undercurrents. This essay delves into a complex analysis of family portraiture, analyzing the complex dynamics that formulate these pictures and how the audience interprets them. The landscape of family photography was significantly shaped in the United States throughout the mid-20th century by the ever-present influence of Kodak's advertising strategy. However, behind the surface of seemingly carefree photography is a well-designed structure that reflects dominant societal beliefs and ideologies.

Ralph Eugene Meatyard, an optometrist by trade who pursued an interest in photography, entered the photographic scene in the 1950s. His unconventional style challenges the norms of the conventional family portrait. Meatyard challenges viewers to consider the ambiguities of identification and anonymity by revealing, via his lens, the normality of American life contrasted with unsettling surrealism. His seminal work, *The Family Album of Lucybelle Crater*, which presents mysterious masked individuals who conflate illusion and reality, is evidence of his departure from the norm. Meatyard's work explores the uncanny and existential reflection, going beyond simple photographic reportage. By deliberately using masks, he creates a powerful metaphor for the depersonalisation that permeates modern society and forces spectators to consider important issues related to mortality and selfhood. Meatyard challenges the established conventions of family photography with his thought-provoking images, bringing viewers into a world where the commonplace acquires new meanings and the familiar becomes unnerving.

This essay compares and contrasts Meatyard's avant-garde vision with the traditional conventions of family photography as it navigates the field of familial photography. It attempts to untangle the complexity of interpersonal ties and the enduring legacy of familial memory by analysing the nature of identity and recognition within familial images. Readers are encouraged to consider the enduring power of visual narrative and the elusive nature of photographic reality through this investigation.

The Post-war American Family Photograph.

It seems that family photographs have certain qualities, and the viewer has unconscious and predetermined expectations when looking at them. J. Hirsch outlines these expected social norms regarding formal and candid photography separating them into 'formal' and 'candid' photographs. For a formal photographer we fix our hair; for a candid one, mess it a bit. The formal photographer says "Sit up"; the candid one says "Relax." Formal photography is static; candid photography, dramatic. Yet, despite these differences, formal and candid family photography share the same history and use the same fundamental images". (Hirsch, 1981, p.15). In the United States during the 1950-60s, formal family photography dominated family albums, permeating American culture. This approach to family photography was highly influenced by the advertising vision of the photography company Kodak. According to West:

...the oft-noted fact that so many family snapshots look remarkably similar, ... children at play, family members grouped on front porches, automobiles, Christmas trees – that are striking only in their to the resemblance to the images in Kodak ads. (West, N.M., 2000, p.182)

This seems to suggest, particularly regarding candid snapshots, that what seems carefree and spontaneous already has a set of controlled values preordained by Kodak's extensive advertising and ideology, what seems informal could just be artificial – the candid mimicking the formal. This observation was not exclusive to 1950s and 60s America, in 1854 Søren Kierkegaard made a comment regarding similarity of daguerreotypes at the very dawn of formal photography:

With the daguerreotype everyone will be able to have their portrait taken - formerly it was only the prominent, and at the same time everything is being done to make us all look exactly the same – so that we shall only need one portrait. (Sontag, 2002, p.207)

M. Hirsh alludes to the family ideology, "The rigid conventions they follow seem to shore up dominant familial myths and ideologies" (Hirsh, 1999, p.xvi). Evidence suggests that ideologies, both personal and collective (e.g. Kodak), play an important part in family photography; it may also imply a type of perpetual theatre that is incapable of escaping its own making.

According to Halle "Most family photos are informal; they depict people at leisure-in the back- yard, at the beach, on trips and outings within the United States, and on vacations abroad" (Halle, 1987, p.217). In Fig 1, we see an American family photograph. It shows four closely grouped figures that, although there is no certainty, probably depicts a father, mother and their children. In the background we see a house which and in front of the house is a garden. In the foreground, the family are behind an iconic white picket fence. John Mort, the production designer for the tv show 'The Americans' states, "The white

picket fence is a kind of shorthand for Americana,” (Dolan, 2019). The family are behind the fence, which gives the impression of territorial ownership, the children are penned in between the fence and the presumed parents, and again there is a sense of possession or unity. They are well dressed and well presented and all smile whilst looking directly at the camera. They stand there, frozen, waiting for the photographer’s instruction, of perhaps, ‘say cheese’. The entire composition is not particularly interesting; it is no more than a typical photograph you would come to expect from post-war America, however, this kind of photography is valued from a socio-cultural or historic perspective. This distinction is further exemplified in (Barthes, 1981, p.26), “Thousands of photographs consist of this field, and in these photographs I can, of course, take a kind of general interest”, Barthes calls this state ‘*studium*’. He goes on to say, regarding photographs –

“...most provoke only a general and, so to speak, polite interest: they have no *punctum* in them: they please me or displease me without pricking me: they are invested with no more than *studium*.” (Barthes, 1981, p.27)



FIG 1. American family photograph/Getty



FIG 2. American family photograph/Pinterest

According to Barthes, ‘*punctum*’ is a second element that disrupts the *studium*, in simplistic terms, an element of a photograph which is stirring. Or as Barthes states: “The photograph’s *punctum* is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me).” (Barthes, 1981, p.27). In the conventional world of family photography, it is hard to imagine Barthes’ *punctum*. The artificial posturing, concepts of the ideal and frozen smiles only constitute itself to the amateur. According to Bourdieu, “Nothing is more directly opposed to the ordinary image of artistic creation than the activity of the amateur photographer” (Bourdieu, 1990, p.5). Bourdieu is suggesting that the artistic and the amateur are opposed. Are we more likely to find *punctum* in artistic photography? Not entirely, in terms of

punctum Barthes does not differentiate between different types of photographs or their creators. *Punctum* is as much to do with the spectator, as it is the subject, or referent. Barthes makes this clear when referring to his late Mother's photograph when she was a young girl, "It exists only for me. For you, it would be nothing but an indifferent picture, one of the thousand manifestations of the "ordinary"," (Barthes,1981, p.73)

In Fig 2, we see a colour photograph, incidentally, colour was a very unpopular medium within the Art photography world during the 1960s. For example, the photographer William Eggleston was criticised by photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson, saying, "You know, William, colour is bullshit." (Burroughs, 2016). However, colour snapshots, although expensive, were often used in vernacular photography. The image shows two people, possible husband and wife, standing in front of a car. The background is a street scene which looks like a respectable American neighbourhood – we also see another white picket fence. The posing is a little less formal than Fig.1, nevertheless certain ideologies are at play, especially regarding ownership and self preservation "...gathering our selfhood together, performing our identity, presenting ourselves to the camera, holding ourselves steady in a mock tableau that mimics the stasis of the photograph itself." (Green, D. and Lowry, Joanna. 2006, p.66)

The family album of Lucybelle Crater.

Ralph Eugene Meatyard was, to the public eye, a family man. In 1950 "he bought his first camera that year merely to photograph his first child...in 1954 he joined the Lexington Camera Club" (Ralph Eugene Meatyard et al, 2004, p.9). Before these events, he had no experience of taking photographs or knowledge of the photographic practice. In the following years, his infatuation with photography compelled him to take photographs, using his family as subjects, on a weekly basis – usually on weekends when he was not working as an optician or partaking in other numerous activities. Meatyard's photography is far from the restraints of conventional photography, deviating from the standards or traditions of the usual family vernacular snap shot. The American writer Guy Davenport, who became one of Meatyard's best friends, said on seeing Meatyard's photography for the first time,-

I remember thinking that here was a photographer who might illustrate the ghost stories of Henry James, a photographer who got many of his effects by introducing exactly the right touch of the unusual into an authentically banal American usualness (Keller and Ralph Eugene Meatyard, 2002, p.22)

Meatyard's photographs were certainly unusual; curator Cynthia Young commented, "He regularly crossed the boundary between the assumed reality of photography and the strangeness of his images"

(Ralph Eugene Meatyard et al, 2004, p.12). Davenport also describes America as banal and usual - this could describe characteristics of any society at any time, people needed to feel safe even if that meant embracing the mundane and ordinary. However, America during the 1950s and 60s was experiencing great change and unease in the light of the Cold War, “Americans faced the future with a combination of exuberant optimism and nervous anxiety” (Lipsitz, 1981, p.2). In terms of art photography, new subjective aesthetics were emerging replacing didactic ones such as Edward Steichen’s exhibition *The Family of Man* (1955).

Steichen’s aim was to represent “people from around the world” who “were depicted in dignified scenes that sent a universal message of hope.” (Mortenson, 2014). This is a sentiment that Meatyard and other photographers were pushing away from in favour of a more individualised approach and confronting post-war anxiety, Mortenson goes on to argue that “By the mid to late 1950s, however, photographers began to explore the disintegration of the human figure in their work, challenging the sanctity of such images in the process.” (Mortenson, 2014). A lunge towards individualism that is clearly repeated throughout Meatyard's work. There are distinct chapters throughout Meatyard’s photography, in his own words (1959): “...rock photographs, glass photographs, light photographs, painting in ice, uncanny photographs, emotionalist photographs, no-focus photographs, and the latest, photographs made through the influence of Zen” (Ralph Eugene Meatyard et al, 2004, p.34). Yet masks dominated especially in his later work – ‘*Romances*’ and ‘*The Family Album of Lucybelle Crater*’- both dissimilar and at the same time using paralleled motifs. See Fig. 3 and 4.

The Family album of Lucybelle Crater was Meatyard's last and probably best-known work, photographed between 1970-72 and published in 1974, two years after his death. The published work consisted of sixty-four photographs each depicting two people wearing different masks. There are only two masks and both masks appear in every photograph, the mask wearers are Meatyard’s friends and family. At first glance, the photographs in the *Lucybelle* Album are immediately arresting to the viewer. They challenge the traditional preconceptions we have regarding conventional poses and the relationship between the people within the photograph.

Meatyard’s breaking from convention within family portraiture elicits a feeling of unease in the viewer, enticing the viewer to consider the photographic process, and highlighting the presence of the work’s creator. Meatyard is aware of this convention, stating in 1959, that his photos are called ‘uncanny photographs’, and describing them as being ‘not surreal, but which give the feeling of not being of this world’ (Ralph Eugene Meatyard et al, 2004, p.34).

In his 1970-72 work *Lucybelle Crater and Eastern Man's Friend* Lucybelle Crater, (Fig.3), we see two masked figures against a white brick wall. Both are off-centre and one appears to be male, standing in front of the female figure. Across the lower half of the male masked figure is the projection of a shadow who the viewer presumes to be the photographer, causing the image to have two monstrous figures as well as the unreal or 'ghostly' image of another figure from outside of the photographic landscape. Barthes describes this concept as being a signifier without signified again drawing attention to the construction of the image, and the 'haunting' presence of the works creation – “the terrible thing which is there in every photograph: the return of the dead” (Barthes, 1981, p.9). This self-reflexive act echoes the idea Barthes presents of a photograph being “always invisible” (Barthes, 1981, p.6) and not always being directly what we see. In addition to this, it can also be a replication of the ghostly, or otherworldly, with the masks serving to disrupt the viewer's equilibrium. Whilst being unsettling to the spectator, the striking nature of seeing these uncanny masks also allude to the idea of Barthes' concept of the interplay between “operator”, ‘spectrum’, and the ‘spectator’ (Barthes, 1981, p.9). In *Lucybelle Crater and Eastern Man's Friend* there is further disruption, and it can be argued that the Barthian idea of the shadow in this image being the *punctum* (Barthes, 1981, p.26), to pierce through the cultural spectrum of expectation within family photography, and ultimately breaking from the genre.



FIG 3 - Lucybelle Crater and Eastern Man's Friend Lucybelle Crater, 1970-72 by Ralph Eugene Meatyard



FIG 4 Lucybelle Crater and her 46 year old husband, Lucybelle Crater, 1970-72. by Ralph Eugene Meatyard

The unease felt by the audience that is described by Barthes as being the *punctum* or the disruption of reality is also explained by Freud's Uncanny, both theories addressing the unsettling nature of Meatyard's work. Meatyard's use of props, particularly masks, suggests an interest in the human psyche, particularly

Freud's theory of the *uncanny*, or '*Unheimlich*', the German translation of which is unhomely. Meatyard's son, Christopher recalls his father purchasing the masks from Woolworths in Lexington, Kentucky and commenting, "a mask "serves as non-personalizing a person." (Zax, 2011). Meatyard goes on to state his awareness of this effect, remarking that "everyone is connected, when you add a mask you take away the differences...erasing all sense of personhood" (Zax, 2011). It is this depersonalisation that is omnipresent in his photographic series *Lucybelles Crater*. Each image confronts the spectator with masked figures in various poses, with Meatyard commenting, "everyone is masked, and everyone is identified as Lucybelles Crater." (Zax, 2011), acting to both unify and alienate the viewer at the same time.

The presence of the masks is arresting to the audience, perverting the photographic encounter and creating an uneasy or *uncanny* feeling. According to Freud the *uncanny* is that which "there is no doubt that this belongs to the realm of the frightening, of what evokes fear and dread" (Freud, 2003, p.123). The colloquial forms of the uncanny can be found in the realm of horror, namely ghosts, hauntings, and masks. In his entire series of *Lucybelles*, everyone is masked and hidden. For example, in *Lucybelles Crater and Her 40 Year Old Husband Lucybelles Crater (Fig. 4)*, two masked figures are stood facing the camera, one with arms crossed and the other to the side. The image has a particular feeling of unease and directness, maybe more so than the majority of the series. It is the first image in the book and combined with uncanny elements it is enigmatic and foreboding. This again shows the Meatyard's idea of revealing and hiding, the direct exposition and confrontation of the viewer with the uneasy feeling evoked by that which is within the realm of the *uncanny*, the familiar '*heimlich*' and the unfamiliar '*unheimlich*'. This duality, the themes of hidden and unhidden are reflected throughout the series. His work is at once seen, and hidden, familiar and unfamiliar, alienating and unifying, paradoxically being thematically dichotomous and the same.

Meatyard and Conventional Photography

The most fundamental aspect of Meatyard's '*Family Album*' is the fact that the identities of the subjects are concealed. This creates a paradox within the context of family photography, for the main concepts of family photographs sit within identity, recognition and memento. Bourdieu says of family photographic practice, "...it can adapt to any sort of instrument, however rudimentary or old, as long as it is capable of carrying out the function assigned to it, namely that of supplying pictures which permit recognition" (Bourdieu, 1990, p.32). Bourdieu is proposing that a fundamental principle of family photography is recognition, already we can see the flaw that reveals itself when simple recognition is subverted as we readily see in Meatyard's

images. When identity or recognition is denied then meaning dissipates and we might as well be looking at photographed strangers. History books are full of strange faces in which we find meaning usually combined with a significant name or title, a literal recognition which Meatyard also denied by giving all his subjects the same name to avoid associations, “And when you name something, other things are associated with that name.” (Interview with Ralph Eugene Meatyard, 1970). The paradox of Meatyard's work in this series seems to be at one and at odds with conventions in photographic posing, Hirsh's ‘construction of the subject in the familial, and the way that the familial is the ideological’ (Hirsch, 2002, p.100). The poses repeatedly utilised by families in traditional conventional photography ultimately stem from the same idea. Meatyard states:

“If you use a person that's known, a particular face, a visage that is known this could happen, up to a point. And that is the point that with the mask on, no matter what the mask is, I don't try to hide the fact that it's a mask, and I could do the same thing and use the same mask all the time. You don't know the difference between the mask and what's underneath it. You recognize it as being a mask but it's on top of something else. Whatever else that's underneath could be your mother or your father or me or anybody else in the world and you wouldn't know the difference for sure. You might think you knew, but you wouldn't know for sure who was under there”. (Interview with Ralph Eugene Meatyard, 1970)

A comment that demonstrates an awareness of photography's constraints, and, arguably a cynical observation regarding photography's limitations. Meatyard is aware that a group of people posing in conventional family photographs are just as anonymous as the masked figures in Lucybelle Crater's album. The spectator could be Lucybelle Crater, at once anonymous, omnipresent, everyone and nobody, looking at and being confronted by their own ultimate anonymity and cosmic insignificance.

An acute awareness of the paradox of human existence seems to be the driving force behind Lucybelle Crater. Lehan poignantly states, “Giving each friend or loved one an interchangeable name, and obscuring their faces with masks, Meatyard, in this very personal family album and swan song, meant to convey the universality of human struggles, our oneness.”(Lehan, J., 2002). An existential experiment that is a response to Meatyard's contemplation of his impending death. Mulligan (2002) noted this:

There is about the Album Meatyard's coming to terms with life's finitude that bears no witness to the expressions of anxiety or resignation that usually accompany such an event. Instead, existentially speaking, the photographer has found himself at home in the world.” (Mulligan, 2002, p.151)

The album as a whole, despite being Meatyard's final work, and despite Meatyard being aware of this, is a confident and somewhat fearless expression. Mulligan goes on to acknowledge the masks' significance within this swansong:

And the mask, once an emblematic harbinger of indeterminacy has become a bodily site of new awareness and understanding of personal being. A subject of contemplation, it assists in defining the tangible facts of Meatyard's life, pronouncing the revelatory vision of the Album that is fixed in the immediate, everyday surroundings of his home, family and friends. (Mulligan, 2002, p.151)

The photographs, specifically the use of masks, seem to be emblematic of Meatyard's acute awareness of the 'limits of existence' (Mulligan, 2002, p.151). Indeed, the very nature of posing for a photograph elicits an existential awareness, and to be photographed encapsulates a desire to be immortal somehow. Family photographs share this immortality, surviving death and decay and remaining exactly how they wish to be perceived by the photographer. This can be seen in the millions of existing family photographs, and is illustrated in this essay by the family photograph in fig.1 and 2. Death, then, can be argued to be an omnipresent spectre that pervades photographic expression. Barthes quantifies this in *Camera Lucida*, and Scalia (2002) further explores this idea:

Barthes suggests that we know a photograph through the intermediation of death (*Camera* 31). Barthes is not alone in this observation; Susan Sontag and André Bazin, among others, have written about the connections between the desire for photography as an invitation to a kind of immortality. (Scalia, B. 2020, p.97)

This idea seemingly supports Meatyard's unusual desire for immortality, however, we see it is on his own, unique terms. Scalia goes on:

"Barthes locates death in the photograph in the lack of a referent, the absence behind the image. However, while the photograph may infer a world or person that has passed, that world or person once existed in time, and the trace of that time, that existence, is a part of the fabric of the world of the present. So, in that way a photograph may also be an icon, or perform an iconic function. In this sense, the object, via the image, gives back to the subject; the inferred object returns meaning to the subject. However, in this case it is transformative of the subject as it affects the subject's perception of a reality beyond the visual image, and thus the photographic executes an iconic function". (Scalia, B. 2020, p.97)

Scalia's statement in relation to Meatyard is interesting as Meatyard's work makes this universal desire to be immortal more striking. The last sentence 'thus the photographic executes an iconic function' has a peculiar double meaning. It encapsulates the function of family photography as providing the viewer with a version of reality that is contained in our ideological expectations, whilst also presenting us with an overtly present existentialism, whilst also 'executing' or 'killing' such expectations. Meatyard's use of masks in this series presents the viewer with a conspicuous lack of referent - ubiquitous, ghostly apparitions that are at once everyman and anonymous. This anonymity replicating death in terms of the identities of those behind these grotesque masks.

Conclusion

In conclusion, family photographs provide us with a complex lens through which to view and create ideas of identity, community, and memory. Family photos are shaped and interpreted largely by predetermined social conventions and ideological frameworks, as critics like Hirsch and Barthes have explained. The contrast between formal and candid photography reflects larger cultural ideas, and Kodak's commercial vision had a significant impact on the genre in the United States in the middle of the 20th century.

Ralph Eugene Meatyard's artwork, on the other hand, represents a daring break from traditional family portraiture. Meatyard subverts conventional standards with his seminal work, *The Family Album of Lucybelle Crater* by using masks to question ideas of identification and recognition within the family. His mysterious images go beyond the ordinary and invites spectators into a world where the commonplace acquires new significance and the familiar takes on new dimensions.

The fundamental tensions between individuality and depersonalisation, reality and illusion, that underlie the photography medium are called into question by Meatyard's oeuvre. He challenges viewers to consider important issues of universality, selfhood, and mortality by disrupting the traditional family photography paradigms. This eventually forces us to reconsider how we perceive visual narrative and the enduring power of photographic pictures.

This essay highlights how photography can be a transforming tool for self-reflection and existential research by contrasting Meatyard's avant-garde vision with traditional conventions within photography. Meatyard's unconventional method forces us to examine the difficult to define photographic truth and the intricate relationship between identity and representation in the family setting. Family photography invites us to interact with the underlying inconsistencies and paradoxes that characterize our shared existence, and as we navigate its complexities, we are reminded of its ability to both reflect and influence our understanding of the human experience.

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Images

FIG 1 – American family photograph, Getty Images.

<https://www.gettyimages.co.uk/detail/news-photo/1950s-smiling-family-of-four-behind-picket-fence-in-news-photo/668676999?adppopup=true>

FIG 2 – American family photograph, Pinterest.

<https://www.pinterest.com/pin/327425835426258417/>

FIG 3 - Lucybelle Crater and Eastern man's friend Lucybelle Crater 1970-72

https://fraenkelgallery.com/portfolios/ralph-eugene-meatyard-lucybelle-crater#ralph-eugene-meatyard-lucybelle-crater_s-2

FIG 4 - Lucybelle Crater and her 46 year old husband Lucybelle Crater 1970-72

https://fraenkelgallery.com/portfolios/ralph-eugene-meatyard-lucybelle-crater#ralph-eugene-meatyard-lucybelle-crater_s-1