

Glances in the landscape: Photography and memory in the work of Guadalupe Gaona

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Abstract

This article is framed within the discussion about the ways in which aesthetic artefacts build up memories of traumatic social episodes. I will focus on one of the many photographic memories of the sons and daughters of the victims of the last Argentinean dictatorship. The book *Pozo de aire* [Well of Air] by Guadalupe Gaona (2009) presents old images of her family album – among which we find the only photograph of the author and her father – mixed together with her own photography and poetry. This combination of images and words allows her to find her father within the landscape and facilitate an impossible reunion with him.

Keywords: Argentinean photography; postmemory; post-dictatorship

What made me uneasy (...) was the idea that this cast-iron column, which with its scaly surface seemed almost to approach the nature of a living being, might remember me and was, if I may so put it, said Austerlitz, a witness to what I could no longer recollect for myself.
Austerlitz, W.G. Sebald

Families are at the core of culture transmission and identity building. They are the first sphere of which we form part, and it is through them that we build our subjectivity and also absorb and inherit silences, shame and secrets. Family photography plays a key role in the building of the identity of the group and each of its members. The albums form a visual narration from well-learned rituals which are reproduced into each family. On the one hand, they carry and simultaneously hide family secrets over time, linking private and intimate time to one that is historical. They are the evidence of the passing of time as a family. On the other hand, although visual memories of each family appear to be unique because they refer to moments shared only by a few, there is nothing more stereotyped than a photo album. Each photograph is regulated by standards that dictate angles, frames, events 'worth photographing', people photographed and, fundamentally, poses and gestures of the subjects (smiles, embraces, glances into the camera).¹ Family images – which offer diversity within stereotype – register, present and represent good family moments. According to Marianne Hirsch (1997), photographs are precisely located in the space of contradiction between the myth of the ideal family and the reality lived by them (they show what the family is expected to be and, simultaneously, that which the family is not). Following the same direction, family photographs are the place where

public and private/personal history intersect, right in between individual or group memories and social history. In this way, the album collaborates by establishing a common past, which is built and which is dynamic – we can add and remove photographs from the album.

However, there are occasions when history intrudes upon family life in an extreme way. What happens when family photos are used to expose a social breakdown? When they serve the purpose of, for example, evoking the absence of the *desaparecidos* of the last military dictatorship? Hirsch, in her analysis of photographs as visual narratives of the generations that came after the Holocaust, examines ‘the idea of “family” in contemporary discourse and its power to negotiate and mediate some of the traumatic shifts that have shaped postmodern mentalities, and to serve as an alibi for their violence’ (Hirsch 1997: 13). One of the tools that families have is photography, situated between social and personal memories. Our memory is not truly ‘ours’, nor are the photographs immediate representations of our past: by looking at them we ‘build’ a past and we also study the traces of possible different versions of that time gone by. Family photography mediates between family memory and postmemory, because of its ‘emotional power’ (Hirsch 1997).

In regard to the memories of the sons and daughters of the victims of the last Argentinean dictatorship, Beatriz Sarlo (2005) discusses and resignifies not only the traditional concept of ‘memory’ but also that of ‘postmemory’. She does so in an attempt to think about the memory of the generation which followed that of the witnesses and victims of genocide and other traumatic events. Sarlo discusses the concept of ‘post’ and maintains that it is simply a different memory, marked by a strong subjectivity. Moreover, she believes that the memories of the sons and daughters relate more to the private and to reconstruction than to that which is public. This concept of reconstruction sheds light on the photographic resources of the family members of the *desaparecidos* and the forms of memory they build. They are key to the processes of (re)construction of individual and collective identities in societies which emerge from periods of violence and trauma (Jelin 2002: 5). However, it is necessary to move further away from Sarlo’s idea that the memory of the second generation is at odds with the public realm. It is my belief that, on the contrary, these photographic memories mix together the public and private spheres, from the moment that they circulate within the public sphere images of an intimate world. The majority of these works thematize precisely this tension between public and private. They make evident that the horizon of each one of the family memories is constituted by the events of a collective traumatic past.

HIJOS (Sons and Daughters of the Enforced Disappeared Persons) emerged as a group in the Argentinean political arena in 1994. Since its early stages, its members have accompanied their political claims with photographs, something already done by Madres (Mothers of *desaparecidos*) and Abuelas (Grandmothers of sons and daughters of *desaparecidos*) since the dictatorship years (da Silva Catela 1999). However, from the movement’s very inception, the sons and daughters have added to their claims an expressive and aesthetic strength which characterizes their artistic productions. Through the use of photography, performances and visual arts they developed a new

way of claiming justice: more creative and artistic in their political claims if compared with previous methods of demonstrating. Their *escraches* (public condemnation of members of the dictatorship), for example, tend to have a festive spirit linked to theatrical representations, circus and carnival (Bonaldi 2006). The way they protest appears to be linked more to happiness and celebration than to melancholy or sadness. Ana Amado claims that the members of HIJOS 'belong to a generation that in current culture favours expressing itself visually' (Amado 2004: 49) and she adds that 'the family members of the victims of the genocidal dictatorship, in their public interventions, turn to creative forms of expression to combine the agitation and the denunciations with the intimate images of suffering and mourning' (Amado 2004: 43).

The so-called second generation builds its claims and its fictions with visual materials to expose the family absences. It is within these bodies of visual works that re-elaborate the painful past that we find photography, because the photographic image is a paradigmatic medium to evoke absence and absentees. The photographs of the sons and daughters are also placed in an ambiguous and rich sphere, between the public and the private, among that which is artistic and popular.

The photographs that I will analyse next reflect this ambiguity. Many possible meanings come to life when family photographs are exposed to the public. By leaving the family album and becoming part of another series, they reveal and simultaneously modify their original purpose. This movement denounces and exposes within the public realm a piece of the family order which existed before being disrupted by state violence (Longoni 2010).

In the 1970s, due to the cost of processing and developing materials, the middle class kept photography as a small luxury for special moments: weddings, birthdays and, especially, travels. Consequently, the images of holidays are a great legacy among the treasures of family photographs of those years. Some artists – sons and daughters of *desaparecidos* – have developed a body of work based on this sub-group of family photographs. With the intention of rebuilding the journeys of the missing father or mother, they search for their memory in the landscapes into which they had gazed before disappearing.

For example, there are two interesting bodies of work by artists who are children of *desaparecidos* and who also work with landscape. First, *El viaje de Papá* (2005) by Pedro Camilo Pérez del Cerro: hand-made photomontages that bring together photographs of places that the absent father visited with self-portraits of the son. Each photo is accompanied by a handwritten caption taken from fragments of letters that his aunt Magdalena wrote to the father, a month after he was killed by the military dictatorship. In this series, the son appears in the background, as a ghost, as a portrait on a wall, as another guest sitting at a table, as both main character and spectator. Each appearance of the son – in colour – on the black-and-white photographs of the father is, simultaneously, strange and natural, as is the resemblance of the father and son, of the same age. Secondly, in *Como miran tus ojos* (2007) María Soledad Nívoli tries to find her father within the landscapes of Patagonia, in the south of Argentina. These places had been photographed by him during a field trip years before being kidnapped (Blejmar and Fortuny 2011). Here, as in Gaona's work analysed above,

the images are not portraits of the father but represent his way of seeing the world around him, his glance. It is because of this that Nívoli tries to find her father by going to the same places and matching the framing of similar objects: a flower, a street, a mountain. Her photographs are a reunion of times, places and glances, wounded by the impossibility of the absence.

The book *Pozo de aire* [Well of Air] by Guadalupe Gaona (2009) presents old images from her family album – some taken before her father went missing in 1977 – alongside her pictures and poems. There are images of trees, family photographs, a lake, mountains, two children out of focus, a Renault 4R and its victorious driver, a big house, a girl on a boat holding her father's hand. There are also short texts in between the photographs, offering remembrances and vague anecdotes, in which the voices of a girl and a woman merge, among the sounds of the forest and water. The photographic/poetic landscapes that are part of this work generate uneasiness and empathy. From the first pages, Gaona draws the viewer/reader into the images through short poems that work as an elusive preface. The text makes explicit without explaining; it describes in passing, in an elliptical manner, that which is at the origin.

Con escaso equilibrio me paro en la proa del bote, mi papá en la isla, un conquistador en malla, me da la mano. Mi mamá corre a buscar la cámara. Clic. Esta es la única foto que voy a tener sola con mi papá.

El invierno llega más rápido de lo esperado y se lleva todo. El 21 de marzo de 1977 desaparece mi papá. Pero esa foto queda. Y muchas fueron las veces que revisé el cajón de la mesita de luz de mi mamá para mirarla. Es en la imagen que más confío. (Gaona 2009)²

[I stand in the bow of the boat with scant balance, my dad on the island, a conqueror in a swimming suit, gives me his hand. My mum runs to fetch the camera. Click. This is going to be the only picture I'm going to have of my dad and I alone. Winter arrives quicker than was expected – and takes everything. On 21 March 1977, my dad goes missing but that picture remains. And there were many times I went through my mother's sleeping table draw to look at it. It is the image I trust the most.]

This image/talisman is the only portrait of Gaona alone with her missing father. Taken during their holidays in Patagonia, not long before his disappearance, the photograph constitutes the heart and pillar of the entire book. There are other images besides this one. Those other images from the past show different holidays in the family home in Bariloche. They clearly belong to the family album, which plays a fundamental role in the identity conformation of the group and creates a visual narrative from learned rites, reproduced within each family. As was stated before, photo albums hold and hide, through time, family secrets, relating intimate and familiar time with history.

Mixed up among these old images, there are others: the ones that Gaona took many years after, as a woman and photographer, no longer a child, when she returned to the family holiday home. Apart from a few chromatic clues, such as the poses and the clothes, nothing in the book shows clearly which ones are old family photos and which are new. We can, however, guess. The ones taken recently mainly present empty landscapes, almost without any human presence: the figure of a lonely man in

the distance; a woman sitting on a wooden bench; some silhouettes by a window. They are sceneries of stillness and the uninhabited, which Gaona had explored in previous works (the series *Quieta* [Still], from 2007, about her grandmother's empty home). It is irrelevant, however, to distinguish which photos are new or old, as they can belong to any time. This dynamic allows us to have a feeling of what happened in between these two moments, when time got stuck. Gaona apprehends the subtle difference between the moments and highlights it with her collection of images.



Figure 1: Guadalupe Gaona – *Pozo de Aire*”

As the daughter of a *desaparecido* – and like other artists in her situation – her point of departure is a lack, a void: the absence of her father, the absence of photographs with her father. With her camera, then, she sets off to find what she does not have: photographs. In doing this – camera and album in hand – she goes in search of that past happiness, the ray of light of the past that always escapes her. In his fifth *Thesis on the Philosophy of History*, Walter Benjamin maintains that ‘the true picture of the past flits by. The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again’ (Benjamin 2007: 25). Gaona photographs to find and rebuild a little bit of that image of the boat, a little bit of that ray of light coming from an elusive happy moment. She searches for marks in the grass, traces of those holidays and those photos. Considering the theory of Benjamin, ‘to articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it “the way it really was”’ (Benjamin 2007: 25) but to take over a flash in its instantaneity. It is precisely in the always incomplete attempt to capture truth that we can place photography. The images of empty landscapes are, therefore, attempts to reinstate – time and time again – the backdrop where something occurred: lights coming from a clearing in the woods, some roses or daisies, the shiny surface of a lake, cloudy mountains.

Four images close the book. The last one is that of a clearing. Among clouds, mountains and trees, we see a patch of dry grass, a landscape emptied by men. Some pages before, one of the first poems anticipates this:

La familia que choca sus copas
y ríe a carcajadas apenas me arrulla.

Entre ellos y yo
hay un pozo de aire. (Gaona 2009)

[The family that crashes its glasses
and bursts out laughing barely cradles me.

In between them and me
there is a well of air.]

That last photograph could be the picture of the well of air [*pozo de aire*]: a gap that evokes and at the same time distances the experience of the self from the family memory. It is precisely this distance between Gaona and the others, between the current experience and the past that resists coming back, between her gaze and the external gazes, which makes this body of work so rich and risky. It is the events from the past – the tragedy that beats in her father’s gaze – that Gaona sees through the lens many years after. The anachronistic juxtaposition (Didi-Huberman 2008) of the images from the past and the present creates a third time that inhabits that particular space generated *between* the photographs. With regard to photography as a technique (one that, in Benjaminian terms, has definitely lost its aura), Gaona’s photographs subverts the concept and statute of original and copy, of past and present. This

ambiguity allows Gaona to avoid a melancholic view of the past, and at the same time constitutes the evidence of the richness of photography as a tool of memory.

If the photographs of her father which were used to create new photographs are not – or cannot be seen as – originals, then the ones that Gaona took herself – the ones from the present – cannot be defined as copies. What would they be copies of? Both create series, correspondences, dialogues in which no particular one is given a sacred, untouchable, irreproducible value. The photographs in this work are not mere objects of beautiful contemplation: the book is impeccable in its edition but does not have heavyweight paper or a black background. The pictures are printed full-bleed, completing each page, and the book itself fits in a bag, thanks to its diary size. In all its aspects, including the design, Gaona wants her book to be a familiar book (easy to carry, to flick through and to read, unlike most art books).

Together with the double seam of past and present presented by the photographs, the poems create a similar effect by searching in the images of the memory to rebuild a moment that elopes. By inserting them in between the photographs, Gaona is presenting lived moments alongside present perceptions of those moments. The use of family photographs is duplicated in the ‘family poems’. Are not poems, after all, images made out of words? Poetry works with images, a feature that in this body of work gives photographs and poems great empathy with each other.

Words highlight the contact between the two worlds, the past and the present, proposed by the photographs. Like them, written words are unable to reinstate a sense:

A sus espaldas una frase
está por salir de la luz.
Su boca polar
le dice algo.

Pero las palabras se pierden
entre los escasos dedos de una mujer.
Los ojos de ella
se las devuelven igual
que el eco.

Limpias de significado. (Gaona 2009)

[At her back a phrase
is about to come out of the light.
Her polar mouth
says something.

But words get lost
in between the scant fingers of another woman.
Her eyes
bring them back
as the echo would.

Clear of significance.]

That which the mouth wants to say, cannot be said. Words are born free of significance, like an echo. This impossibility denounces loss and trauma. Nevertheless, it is an impossibility that announces itself, perhaps in the blurred image of the two children, Gaona and her brother. The lack of focus of this image generates expectation over them, a tension that neither the photographs nor the poems completely develop.

Next to the photograph of the entrance to the woods which shows a barely noticeable path and burnt grass, this poem can be read:

Durante años.
Espera atrás de una línea amarilla.
Todavía no puede pasar.

Los ojos
vendados por el calor.
Una loca adentro.

Dos hijos.
Los sacude.
Suenan como cascabeles. (Gaona 2009)

[For years.
She waited behind a yellow line.
She can't cross yet.

The eyes
bandaged because of the heat.
A crazy woman inside.

Two children.
She shakes them.
They sound like jingle bells.]

The woods offer, in the image, an entrance which will not be broached, or at least that is what the poem anticipates. The space is transformed into an attractive yet forbidden landscape, somewhere one cannot return to. Next to a photograph of intertwined branches, Gaona places this poem:

El ruido
de una rama desprendiéndose.
Vuela por los aires
una cachetada.
Proviene de mi madre
y no del bosque. (Gaona 2009)

[The noise
of a branch falling off.
Flies in the air
a slap.
It comes from my mother
and not from the wood.]

The landscape-mother resonates here in the branch-slap. The voice speaking to us knows the sound and pain of that slap. Memories are presented in Gaona's poems through tactile and audible perceptions, as Proustian involuntary memories of that which has been lost. The poems begin to rebuild, together with the photographs, the missed and frightening landscapes of the holidays prior to the absence of the father. Both create a flow that immerses the reader in an indecisive come and go, from the present into the past.

Gaona gives new meaning to images of everyday life: snapshots of common life, from past days, when the moment of danger could not be anticipated. Using family photos she attempts to rebuild the picture missing in the album. The artist makes evident, through new photographs, the emptiness of the absence, the family breakdown and the emotional hole left by the disappearance of her father. She turns to the album as a reservoir of images, as the imperfect proof of a family's past happiness. She does not attempt to represent the horror of the *desaparecidos*. She is keen to show us her personal lack, the absence she feels in her life and within her family. Moreover, she exposes her patchy memories to move from a sphere that is familiar and personal, to one that is public. This photographic body of work seems to account for the 'socialization of absence', a characteristic trait of the sons and daughters of the *desaparecidos*. They are capable of building identity within the trauma: that place full of wounds that can be inhabited and also narrable (Gatti 2008: 113), although the narration might of course present cracks and gaps.

Gaona's decision to bring together two timeframes in the display of the images summons the strange apparition of a time that does not coincide exactly with the past or with the present. This new, third time, which is anachronistic, exposes the creases and the break-up of both familiar and collective history. The setting of two timeframes that merge speaks of estrangement, a constant distance, an impossible reunion of two gazes. While the more recent pictures attempt to recall elements from the old photographs, it is the totality of the series which documents the impossibility of achieving this. They expose the remoteness, the gaps, the hiatus between the one who sees and the object seen. At the same time that these images attempt to close that distance, they trouble us by showing it to us, by making evident the cracks which are opened up by the disappearance.

Observing this series it is not clear that it is a 'postmemory', but rather just a particular memory which has to do with a specific reconstruction, as Sarlo believes, and with anachronism. However, even when departing from the personal sphere and the family photographs, the work moves towards the public, from the very moment it is conceived and circulated in the format of an art book. Gaona's images become photographic memories of the dictatorship through the rebuilding of the lack and the fusion of two impossible times. They look for the gaze of the father within the landscape and the objects seen, with the gaze being the last physical attribute of the missing.³ Her work proposes regimes of truth linked to reconstruction, 'autofiction' (Arfuch 2008) and montage as aesthetic-political forms of building up memory.⁴ In the 'time in between' which separates past and present photographs, in that confusion, the new suspended time that is generated becomes the heart and soul of the series.

Necessarily impossible, this anachronistic view reassembles the loss from the little things that remain: a few photographs, the remainders of what once was. We find Gaona with her camera, following old traces, while producing new ones.

Notes

1. 'I had become aware that in photography, and particularly in amateur photography, the photographer no longer attempts to capture reality: he attempts to reproduce a pre-existing and culturally imposed image', Christian Boltanski (Van Alphen 1999: 47). For further study of the relationship between photography and family, see Bourdieu (1989) and Jonas (1996).
2. The book does not contain page numbers, hence no page numbers have been cited. All the English translations of the poems are by Valeria Meiller and Marina Mariasch, and have been taken from the appendix of Gaona's book (2009).
3. As Gaona's series allows a daughter to get closer to her father and rebuild her identity from his traces, the recorded voice of the missing father generates a similar effect in the play *Mi vida después* [My Life After] by Lola Arias, performed for the first time in 2009, the same year that Gaona's book was published. In the play, the voice is heard by the son and grandson of the *desaparecido*.
4. Walter Benjamin studied and analysed the subversive use of montage and collage in photography. For an excellent comparative analysis of the figures of montage and allegory in Benjamin, see García (2010).

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