

Does Using Postmemory for Holocaust Rememberence Work?

Skylar McVicar

Dr. Denham

HUM 104

1 May 2020

Photography is an essential avenue for remembering and communicating the Holocaust to future generations. The abundance of available photography from ghettos and concentration camps helps educate the public using primary sources; however, there is a significant disconnect between the people enduring the suffering in the photos and current onlookers. Susan Sontag and Marianne Hirsch explore how multiple generations can connect with Holocaust photography and how postmemory of the Holocaust will either pacify or ignite viewers. Does postmemory of the Holocaust through war photography prevent horrific events like the Holocaust from occurring again?

As Susan Sontag highlights in her “Regarding the Pain of Others,”¹ war photography is a powerful and mighty way to communicate stories, further an agenda, or pay respects to a subject. But, it also comes with its complications. People and governments can use photographs for multiple purposes and can use captions to spin the images in a certain way. Photographs can be used as a “call for peace. A cry for revenge... [or] bemused awareness”(Sontag, 13) of terrible images that can either numb people or impassion people. When there are so many of these gruesome images distributed, people often “feel obligated to look”(Sontag, 95) at the disgusting images, yet so few people internalize the photos and ruminate on their importance. Thus, these impactful images often only result in an “initial spark”(Sontag, 103) instead of a continual desire to help. Looking at an image of a person dying or dead is to look at a person “forever about to be murdered, forever wronged”(Sontag, 61), so it demands a certain level of respect and courtesy. The living “don’t get it. We truly can’t imagine what it was like”(Sontag, 125) for the dead

¹ Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, (New York, NY: Picador, 2003).

people in their suffering. Even though onlookers do not personally know this person and cannot relate to his/her suffering, these images are impactful because they force us to think about unfamiliar situations. Many disturbing images innately communicate the message: “Don’t forget”(Sontag, 115). However, Sontag emphasizes the importance of thinking about images rather than merely remembering them. While remembering a horrifyingly surreal image may be the start, philosophizing about it and using those thoughts to generate directed and purposeful action is the only way to begin righting the wrongs of the past.

Marianne Hirsch is a Columbia University professor whose research focuses on the transmission of memories of violence across generations.² Throughout her works, Hirsch communicates heavily with Sontag using Sontag’s research to guide and influence Hirsch’s perspective on postmemory, the study of how a second generation remembers and interprets traumas of the previous generation. By connecting us with previous generations, postmemory has the opportunity to reliably read “the striking fact of [photography] repetition” as well as the glorified “images themselves.”³ Postmemory connects the second generation to the first through stories and images so powerful it creates a new memory in the second generation. The first generation’s memory is survivor memory, an account of what happened through firsthand experience. Contrastly, postmemory of the second generation is based on “representation, projection, and creation” of the past in the context of current happenings.⁴ One shortcoming of postmemory is its reliance on familial connection. However, even this can be rectified by sharing similar stories and images with peers and other willing listeners. Because postmemory provides

² Marianne Hirsch, "Surviving Images: Holocaust Photographs and the Work of Postmemory", (*The Yale Journal of Criticism* 14, no. 1 (2001): 5-37).

³ Hirsch, "Surviving Images: Holocaust Photographs and the Work of Postmemory", 8

⁴ Hirsch, "Surviving Images: Holocaust Photographs and the Work of Postmemory", 9

an emotional connection to traumatic events, it is a useful tool to have when hoping to prevent similar atrocities from happening again.

Hirsch begins her writing about Holocaust photography by saying the images can insight a “realization of death, inconceivable violence, [and] incomprehensible evil” so powerful that the viewer’s “world will never again be whole.”⁵ A person not prepared to face the emotional drain of examining traumatic Holocaust photos might choose to shy away from them. For instance, Figure 1 was taken clandestinely by a prisoner in Auschwitz. Just imagining the fear and anger the victim/photographer was experiencing while watching his/her fellow Jews being wrongfully executed is almost too much to handle. Probably because of this destructive factor associated with horrific war images, Holocaust historical understanding has been incredibly neglected.⁶ These images can act as a deterrent instead of a way to encourage historical study and remembrance. When studying postmemory, it is incredibly important to acknowledge the role that Holocaust photography plays in communicating with future generations.⁷ Since images are an effective way to share stories, one must have the necessary knowledge of the context of the image to factually remember the event depicted. Moreover, the viewer must show a certain level of respect when encountering images of traumatic events, such as the iconic image of a bulldozer shoveling hundreds of bodies into a mass grave in Auschwitz-Birkenau (see Figure 2). In this case, Hirsch fears the “specific context of these images has certainly been lost in their incessant reproduction”⁸ as the images become symbols and representations of the camp but they do not fully encompass the camp in its essence. If a person is aiming to gain a true understanding of the

⁵ Hirsch, "Surviving Images: Holocaust Photographs and the Work of Postmemory", 6

⁶ Hirsch, "Surviving Images: Holocaust Photographs and the Work of Postmemory", 8

⁷ Hirsch, "Surviving Images: Holocaust Photographs and the Work of Postmemory", 9

⁸ Hirsch, "Surviving Images: Holocaust Photographs and the Work of Postmemory", 16

acts captured by the image, they seek a truthful account of the event. Once this is accomplished, the person may sympathize with the victims and become encouraged to educate others about the past. Unfortunately, this dedication to the truth is lacking. Additionally, the same disturbing images are repeatedly circulated as a comprehensive representation of the Holocaust without any proper explanations, thus limiting our historical understanding of the event.⁹ Perhaps the most infamous and widely recognised image of concentration camps is the picture of the gates of Auschwitz (see Figure 3). Simply identifying these ominous gates can give viewers a false sense of accomplishment and acknowledgement but prevents them from learning the meaning behind the gates because they are separated from personal accounts. Along with understanding the context of the photographs, another important aspect when engaging with Holocaust photography is the context of the situation in which a person is viewing the images. The “contextual use of these images” can affect their reception and representation.¹⁰ Viewing images with a Holocaust survivor will certainly affect a person differently than flippantly scrolling past an image on a social media platform. It is the current generation’s responsibility to past victims and to future society to understand these horrors and to engage in a quest for accurate postmemory in order to prevent them from happening again.

In another essay on postmemory, Hirsch contemplates the intricacies of the transmission of postmemory and how photography is a useful tool in creating postmemory. Photography is a unique medium that can be used to transmit “events that remain unimaginable”(108) to modern audiences.¹¹ Hirsch suggests it is easier for family members of victims to connect with Holocaust

⁹ Hirsch, "Surviving Images: Holocaust Photographs and the Work of Postmemory", 8

¹⁰ Hirsch, "Surviving Images: Holocaust Photographs and the Work of Postmemory", 8

¹¹ Marianne Hirsch, “The Generation of Postmemory”, (*Poetics Today* 1 March 2008; 29), 103–128.

images because familial connection can “diminish distance, bridge separation, and facilitate identification and affiliation.”¹² Photography, accompanied with personal accounts associated with the image, offers “access to the event itself” by adding a visual component to storytelling.¹³ Furthermore, stories recalled by a mother often resonate with the next generation more than a father’s story. Because maternal images are often circulated due to the connection of children with maternal figures, these maternal images can function to “blur and relativize the truth and reference” of the image rather than authenticate and validate it.¹⁴ While this type of familially transmitted postmemory is important, it can create a narrative bias as well as limit the effect of a photograph on a person who does not have a personal connection to the event. Including sensitive photographs as a way to transmit postmemory can overly “personalize and individualize” the trauma potentially risking a biased account of the event.¹⁵ People without a familial connection to learn from rely on the second generation of victims and/or perpetrators for information. If these accounts are blurred because of an intense personal connection, then a dangerous false narrative can occur. Thus, a balance is needed when transmitting and creating postmemory. For these other people, photographs are used as symbols and representations of what was depicted behind the lens without an emotional connection to the photography.¹⁶ However, circulating carefully selected images can create a fabricated historical record as symbolic images shape “our conception of the event and its transmission.”¹⁷ With this new generation of postmemory so reliant on familial connection and photography, people can either

¹² Hirsch, “The Generation of Postmemory”, 116

¹³ Hirsch, “The Generation of Postmemory”, 107

¹⁴ Hirsch, “The Generation of Postmemory”, 121

¹⁵ Hirsch, “The Generation of Postmemory”, 121

¹⁶ Hirsch, “The Generation of Postmemory”, 115

¹⁷ Hirsch, “The Generation of Postmemory”, 116

live an uniformed life or have the unique opportunity to communicate the horrors of the past and inform the public about history. Despite the limitations of postmemory transmission through photography, Hirsch believes that the postmemory potential from familial connection outweighs any challenges.

Although Sontag and Hirsch may be hopeful in their conclusion that photography will generally be used as a way to insight change, I am not so optimistic. The second generation can either use Holocaust photography to apply the past to present times or as a way to subtly pay respects and ignore the implications it has on the future. When it comes to Holocaust photography, it is essential for wartime and concentration camp images to be circulated, discussed, internalized, and remembered. But, I worry the pain and suffering in the images may prove too gruesome to be taken seriously. Unlike Hirsch's belief that "compulsive and traumatic repetition connects the second generation to the first", I feel as though people are commonly intimidated by these images and will ignore them if overexposed.¹⁸ Additionally, it is easy for people to interpret images incorrectly if they do not have a deep enough background knowledge of the Holocaust. Often, people without a personal connection will lack an intense curiosity about the images and believe the first story they hear without questioning sources. For example, students could automatically take their professor's rhetoric about the Holocaust as true because of the classroom context, but the professor could be wrong, thus distributing erroneous information. As a result of this apathy and disinterest, a false narrative can be created because of a misinterpretation of images which contributes to an incorrect postmemory account of the Holocaust. As Hirsch pointed out in her research, familial connection to an image can increase

¹⁸ Hirsch, "Surviving Images: Holocaust Photographs and the Work of Postmemory", 8

the emotional connection to the image creating a bias when relaying the stories of the images. By spreading a slanted recollection to people without these immediate ties, an incorrect record of history could result. Sontag and Hirsch both address evidence that the overwhelming nature of Holocaust photography can cause viewers to become passive toward these images resulting in simply remembering and not thinking. Because of strong stories and personal accounts provided by family, the majority of people who do not have a living connection to the Holocaust will not be able to sympathise as thoroughly. While it is important to utilize familial connection when possible, it limits the reach a photo can have, entrapping the rest of the population in ignorance. For people without familial connections to the tragedies of the Holocaust, it can be easier to ignore the past and have a greater sense of apathy because people feel disconnected and overwhelmed.

Because of the desensitization toward war images due to overexposure, gruesome images may have the ability to incite anger instead of preventing it. If the purpose of circulating these horrific and difficult images is to encourage people to prevent a similar event from occurring in the future, we may need to think again. In a modern study on violent video games, Yao, a Chinese psychologist, discovered “VVGE [violent video games exposure] was positively associated with moral disengagement, disinhibition, and the four aggressive traits (physical aggression, verbal aggression, anger, and hostility).”¹⁹ Since video games are a common and popular medium depicting graphic images, participants become indifferent toward the portrayed images and eager to personally engage in the terrorizing acts displayed in the game. Along with

¹⁹ Mengyun Yao, “Violent Video Games Exposure and Aggression: The Role of Moral Disengagement, Anger, Hostility, and Disinhibition”, (*Aggressive Behavior* 45, no. 6 (2019): 662-70), 662.

influencing participants to act aggressively, these violent images also “decrease empathic feelings and helping behaviors” among players.²⁰ Thus, publicizing Holocaust images may even have the reverse effect on viewers. Though the intention is to distribute so viewers will prevent similar events from repeating, the effect may be just the opposite.

Assessing the effectiveness of postmemory in relation to Holocaust remembrance is an important question. While Sontag and Hirsch introduce several positives associated with postmemory, both Yao and I spot flaws in their arguments. Remembering and honoring the lives lost in the Holocaust can help us prevent future horrors, but doing so through postmemory raises various issues that could weaken emotional connection and harm good intentions.

²⁰ Mengyun Yao, “Violent Video Games Exposure and Aggression”, 663

Figure 1



Cremation of corpses at Auschwitz-Birkenau. This photograph was taken clandestinely by prisoners in the Sonderkommando. Poland, summer 1944. Provided by USHMM Photo Archives

21

²¹ “CREMATION OF CORPSES AT AUSCHWITZ-BIRKENAU.”

Figure 2



A British soldier clears corpses with a bulldozer in Bergen-Belsen concentration camp. Provided by USHMM Photo Archives²²

²² “A British soldier clears corpses with a bulldozer in Bergen-Belsen concentration camp.”

Figure 3



View of the entrance to the main camp of Auschwitz (Auschwitz I). The gate bears the motto "Arbeit Macht Frei" (Work makes one free). Provided by USHMM Photo Archives²³

²³ "View of the entrance to the main camp of Auschwitz"

Bibliography

- “A British soldier clears corpses with a bulldozer in Bergen-Belsen concentration camp.” United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. Accessed April 2, 2020. <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/pa7352>
- “CREMATION OF CORPSES AT AUSCHWITZ-BIRKENAU.” United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. Accessed April 1, 2020. <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/photo/cremation-of-corpses-at-auschwitz-birkenau>.
- Hirsch, Marianne. "Surviving Images: Holocaust Photographs and the Work of Postmemory." *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 14, no. 1 (2001): 5-37. doi:10.1353/yale.2001.0008.
- Hirsch, Marianne. "The Generation of Postmemory". *Poetics Today* 1 March 2008; 29 (1): 103–128. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1215/03335372-2007-019>
- Sontag, Susan. *Regarding the Pain of Others*. New York, NY: Picador, 2003.
- “View of the entrance to the main camp of Auschwitz (Auschwitz I). The gate bears the motto "Arbeit Macht Frei" (Work makes one free).” United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. Accessed April 2, 2020. <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/pa1067785>
- Yao, Mengyun, Yuhong Zhou, Jiayu Li, and Xuemei Gao. “Violent Video Games Exposure and Aggression: The Role of Moral Disengagement, Anger, Hostility, and Disinhibition.” *Aggressive Behavior* 45, no. 6 (2019): 662–70. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ab.21860>.