

Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer, “Animating Absence: Photographs in Liquid Time”

7 April 2022

Marianne Hirsch, Professor of Comparative Literature and Gender Studies at Columbia University, and Leo Spitzer, K. T. Vernon Professor Emeritus of Cultural History at Dartmouth College, co-authors of *School Photos in Liquid Time*, have long collaborated on the study of memory and post memory of atrocities. Their keynote lecture, sponsored by the friends and family of Dr. Michael Hirsch in memory of his mother Lisl Hirsch, a Holocaust survivor and refugee from Vienna, was the opening event for the workshop, *Representing Absence: Refugees, Forced Migration, and Aftermath*. Photographs, according to Spitzer and Hirsch, are an important medium of family memory in the aftermath of displacement and forced migration that become “haunting reminders,” visual and tactile remnants that can bridge absences and discontinuities.

A central tenet in the field of memory studies is that we “create the past we need in the present.” In examining the messages that photographs transmit, Hirsch and Spitzer described how images can cross generations and geographical divides to mediate absence and presence, trauma and nostalgia. They wondered if it is possible to look at pictures of dead people without the retrospective knowledge that they are dead. Can we possibly look at photographs in the present, they asked, as well as in relation to the future that was yet possible at the time the subjects faced the camera? Can we reflect back on the event itself or even to the time before the shutter caught the image? Do images allow for contingency that leaves space for potential history – not just for what was, but for what might have been?

Drawing theoretical inspiration from various philosophers and scholars of photography, including Roland Barthes, Walter Benjamin, Ariella Aisha Azoulay, and Jeff Wahl, Spitzer and Hirsch argued that despite capturing a single moment in time, photographs and their meanings are not linear or static. Rather, they can be interpreted from different vantage points, including those of the photographed persons themselves, or even their descendants. Photographs can be viewed as still images, but also in terms of the events and purposes that occasioned them. According to this perspective, each new viewer of the photograph may see something that was not detected at the time of its creation. The concept of liquid time, according to Spitzer and Hirsch, postulates that photographs continue developing, their meaning expanding and changing every time someone looks at them in a different time and space.

In their demonstration of liquid time, Hirsch and Spitzer presented three photo-based post memorial art projects by contemporary artists Mirta Kupferminc, Silvina der Meguerditchian and Sarah Davidmann. Although very different, all three projects originate from a history of persecution. Drawing on archival images of Armenian and Jewish subjects before the genocide, the artists attempt to “unfix” these photographs from the moment they were taken in order to “find the spark of contingency” within them, where potential futures of the captured subjects might be found. In their manipulation of archival pre-atrocity photographs, these artists challenge viewers to find meanings beyond what is obviously visible in the captured image. Considering these projects, Hirsch and Spitzer contemplate the various possibilities of archival photographs as media of memory in relation to forced migration. They shared numerous examples from each

artist, such as animated school photographs, photographs developed using the artist's blood, and copies of photographs crocheted together into blankets.

Hirsch and Spitzer concluded by acknowledging that pre-atrocity photographs may be marked by violence and absence, but by looking at them from different vantage points, viewers can also “touch them from very different futures that they could not themselves foresee when they were facing the camera.”

Sandra Grudic