

Building Character in a Photograph Album

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An art collection, perhaps especially a photography collection, documents the ongoing construction of the collector's self-portrait.

—Lucy Lippard, "Brought to Light" (131)

Every person who is really an artist desires to create inside of himself another, deeper, more interesting life than the one that actually surrounds him.

—Constantin Stanislavski, *An Actor Prepares* (47)

Photograph albums are sites where an individual, most often a female, collects photographs to document people and events she deems important to her life. Typically, the collected photographs are related to family, showing the constancy of members and events over the years and also alterations as she and her family change.¹ On the one hand, then, the album stabilizes her and the family identity by validating their past. It reaffirms memory and history in material form. As each new photograph is added, however, the album participates in the "never-ending process of making [and] remaking" the self and family (Kuhn, "Remembrance" 399). The changing circumstances of family life as experienced by its members and as evidenced in the minutiae of the displayed photographs influences what memories are restored and the meanings made each time the album is viewed.

Many scholars criticize family photograph albums for constructing an idealized life of happy individuals who "creat[e] images that real families cannot up-

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¹ In my essay, I focus on photograph albums as sites for documenting the construction of self within a family unit of some kind. Many scholars agree that the camera was "developed with the family in mind," and it, along with its by products, including the image and the album, "helped construct and perpetuate the ideology which links the notion of universal humanity to the idea of familiarity" (M. Hirsch 48). I loosely define family as a community or collective that or who grow and change together over time. Family is about being a part of something bigger than the self.

hold”—images that boast about wealth and possessions (M. Hirsch 7).² As seen from this perspective, a photograph of a child holding a red plastic hammer atop his new indoor slide on Christmas morning might represent a boy enacting corporate capitalism and spreading the word of material consumption from atop his new perch. The same critic might ask why the album does not include a photograph of the boy crying after having fallen from his slide or bored after he lost interest in it. Both did happen—I know because the boy is my brother, and although there are no photographs of these moments, I remember them when I view the photograph. When my mother views the photo, she focuses on the red hammer, recalling that for months my brother would not leave the house without it. My brother remembers the footed pajamas, and how difficult they were to put on and take off. A friend who does not know my family focused quickly on the porcelain Snoopy resting on a mantel in the background. It reminded her of watching Charlie Brown's Christmas Special when she was a child: soft snow, gentle jazz, and the tinkling drop of an ornament from a spindly tree. The photograph, like all photographs, remembers more than what is seen.

In this essay, I place the family photograph album in conversation with Constantin Stanislavski's actor training System, understanding that both practices are based in collecting memories, which contribute to making an identity or, in Stanislavski's terms, building a character.³ Both practices activate a system of conventions for collecting memories while they also inspire creative interplay. For instance, Stanislavski's System of exercises encourages students to call on their sense and emotion memories, which they adapt to the given circumstances of a text, particularly their appointed characters and their subtext. Likewise, for the performer (maker/viewer and subsequent viewers) of a family photograph album, the stimulating effect of sense and emotion memories plays a significant part in the selection of photographs she places and views in her album, while the traditions of album composition, such as chronology, determine what memories are saved and forgotten and how. In both Stanislavski's System and the family photograph album the subtext, that which cannot be seen, is of paramount importance.

Stanislavski's System is based on the precepts of spiritual realism and romanticism, which encourage actors to find their characters “naturally” by citing truth and “beauty” buried in the “subconscious.” The influence of these concepts on Stanislavski's System is the basis for my central argument. Spiritual realism

² Also See Tucker, Ott, and Buckler 2; and J. Hirsch 32.

³ In my essay, I refer to Stanislavski's actor training System as both Stanislavski's System and the System. I compare parts (not all) of the System to the process of making and sharing a family album. I chose Stanislavski's System rather than some other theatre-performance method because it highlights something about the process of making an album that other applications do not—making a family photograph album is about making or building a character or identity.

and romanticism provide me with perspectives that trouble scholarly claims that albums construct idealized views of family life, reducing family complexities to metonymic miniatures that ultimately result in the “social disease” of nostalgia (Stewart ix). While ideals, miniature realities, and nostalgia are at work in family photograph albums, I draw on the critical imperatives of romanticism and spiritual realism to argue for a shifting, generative, and critical understanding and enactment of these ideas. Lucy Lippard’s generative view of nostalgia as a desire to “return home” prompts me to return the making and functions of the album to the home and home maker, featuring rather than eliding her actions and purposes as fundamental to understanding the album in any comprehensive way (Lippard, *On the Beaten Track* 164). In comparing Stanislavski’s System for building a character to the album maker’s collecting, arranging, and sharing family photographs, I hope to show that photograph albums perform, that the images within these albums are active rather than static, that albums play a critical part in the maker’s creation and maintenance of identity and family, and that making an album is as much about what we cannot see as it is about what we can see.

First, I outline Stanislavski’s System, which leads me into a more detailed discussion of spiritual realism and romanticism. Connecting these theoretical movements to the photograph album, I then consider the basic steps of collecting, arranging, and sharing the album. Next, I compare the steps of constructing and contemplating an album to the particularities of Stanislavski’s System for building a character. I conclude the essay by discussing the main character of the album, the woman building her family, and how her act of building her identity and the identity of her family through the construction of a photograph album can be viewed generatively, as an act of goodness.

Stanislavski’s System, Spiritual Realism, and Romanticism

Stanislavski’s actor training System is a creative process for building a character that consists of “simple” exercises that all students of acting can learn and apply (Hapgood viii). Generally, the student selects and enacts certain actions, which then spark the imaginative subconscious—e.g., sense and emotion memories, thoughts and feelings—that she adjusts to the given circumstances of the text and specifically the character she will play.⁴ The aim is to build the character’s subtext, the things we cannot see or as Stanislavski articulates the “inner life of a human spirit,” and express it externally in “artistic form” (Stanislavski, *Actor Prepares* 17).⁵ Unlike system derivations, such as Lee Strasberg’s method, the

⁴ Here, I am deliberately drawing on the language of collecting, sharing, and arranging a photograph album, which I discuss in detail later in the essay.

⁵ In his texts, Stanislavski speaks through his first person narrator, the student Kostya, who often quotes the direct discourse of others and, when in scene with others, uses it

actor's aim is not to feel emotions as much as believe in the "acts" of the "imaginary person" she has created (Stanislavski, *Actor Prepares* 53).

Stanislavski articulated the System in three texts. The sequencing of the texts corresponds to the training a student underwent at the Moscow Art Theatre. *An Actor Prepares* covers the first year and teaches the actors how to stimulate their inner creative states using conscious techniques. The second year is documented in *Building a Character* and focuses on the external physical form without which "the inner pattern of your part" cannot be conveyed (Stanislavski, *Building a Character* 1). In *Creating a Role*, the third year is covered, in which actors learn to analyze and integrate the given circumstances of the text with the emerging character and his or her subtext. In the trilogy, Stanislavski uses an autobiographical approach tempered by a semi-fictional form where a first person narrator, a student by the name of Kostya, relates his actor training experience under the instruction of Tortsov.⁶

In light of my subsequent discussion regarding albums, we might understand that in his trilogy Stanislavski creates a plural identity, shifting between student and teacher in order to share what he has learned from his rite of passage from novice to expert as regards the art of acting. Along with content, the form implies a model that students can adapt to their training process, learning techniques to pass from novice to expert while also learning that the latter conjoins the characteristics of both. The model also highlights the importance of semi-fictionalizing personal experiences and memories so as to build a character who "creates emotion" in terms of external as well as internal factors, such as given text, other characters or individuals, and their subtexts. As with the making of an album, the "provisional author" of the system, Stanislavski as Kostya-Torstov, provides an experiential "scaffolding" that is to be detailed by the reader in his or her application.

Throughout my essay, I insert descriptive "photographs" and exercises within boxes like this one. My aims are to inform the various discussions I undertake by imitating and experimenting with how we make albums and build characters.

In *Building a Character* the stage manager Rakhmanov supplies the reader with a useful summary of the System when he asks the students to arrange banners on the wall (very much as one might arrange a collection of photographs)

himself. In my text, double quotation marks indicate the narrator or other characters using direct discourse whereas single quotation marks indicate Kostya speaking directly to the reader.

⁶ Kosta is short for Constantin. Translated to English, Tortsov means creator; a related Russian word is *chustov*, which means emotion.

to illustrate the relationship between the pieces and parts of the System.⁷ Across the bottom is “*An Actor Prepares*” while up top is a blank banner that implies the aim of the System, which is to gain “the loftiest region of all art—the subconscious” (300, 315). The banners between the base material practice and the ephemeral goal represent the systematic process, which begins with three foundational premises: “*The Subconscious via the Conscious*” as stimulated by “*Action*” and, between the two, the motto on which the “whole system is built,” an Alexander Pushkin quote that reads, “sincerity of emotions, verisimilitude of feelings in given circumstances, that is what our mind requires from the playwright” (300, 299). Above the three premises are two banners that read, “*Psycho Techniques*” and “*External Techniques*” (300), and above these a motivational “triumvirate” that applies to both, namely, “*Mind, Will, Feelings*” (301). According to Tortsov, an actor should have the will to use her mind to stir and express her feelings. Above the triumvirate are banners that articulate the specific techniques. Aligned with Psycho Technique, also known as the “*Inner Creative State*,” are banners that read, “*Imagination . . . Sense of Truth, Emotion Memory . . . Units and Objectives*,” and “*Logic and Coherence of Feelings*” among others (301, 302). External techniques or the “*External Creative State*” include “*Relaxation of Muscles*” and “*Expressive Body Training*” as well as “*Plasticity . . . Voice . . . Speech . . . Logic and Coherence of Physical Action . . . Discipline . . . and Sense of Ensemble*” (301, 302). Above the specific techniques and beneath the topmost (blank) banner is a pennant proclaiming, “*Over-All Creative State*” (302).

For Stanislavski, the foundation of the System was spiritual realism, a notion implied by the Pushkin motto “sincerity of emotions, verisimilitude of feelings in given circumstances, that is what our mind requires from the playwright” (*Actor Prepares* 299), which suggests that Stanislavski based his System on concepts of romanticism, humanism, and a trajectory of realism. Below, I use concrete examples to further unpack each and illuminate how all three influenced Stanislavski’s System.

Romanticism provided Alexander Pushkin with concepts and tools he could use to critique the destructive effects of industrialization and scientific rationalism as he saw them at work in his time. Rather than cite progress in the materiality of the machine and city, romanticists like Pushkin turned to what they understood as the fundamental laws and processes of Nature to find Truth. Associating raw Nature with the intuitive imagination, they believed that artists who accessed and represented the same in their art might redeem society. Art of a romantic nature placed raw nature in opposition to industrial culture, the imagination over materiality, and expressions of subjectivity or interiority as more important than external display. Embedded in romanticism are the basic tenets

⁷ All quotations in this paragraph are from *Building a Character*. The italicized words and phrases are italicized in the source text.

of humanism, namely, that there is a transcendent human nature common to all individuals, which connects everyone.

The influence of romanticist and humanist thought on Stanislavski's System is evident when Tortsov sums up the point and origin of System training:

Our type of creativeness is the conception and birth of a new being – the person in the part. It is a natural act similar to the birth of a human being. . . . In the creative process there is the father, the author of the play; the mother, the actor pregnant with the part; and the child, the role to be born. . . . If you analyse this process you will be convinced that laws regulate organic nature, whether . . . biologically or imaginatively. . . . You can go astray only if you do not understand that truth; if you do not have confidence in nature; if you try to think out 'new principles,' 'new bases,' 'new art.' (336; emphasis in original)

While Stanislavski envisions a new type of actor or creative artist, it is the actor's draw on ancient organic laws and processes, "Nature's laws," that will make her natural, creative, and truthful in her art. System specifics support this aim in that actors are to develop natural actions that stimulate their imaginative expression of the interior life of the character as compared to forcing emotions, which results in "mechanical acting" (*Actor Prepares* 25).

Stanislavski's trajectory of realism represents the essence of humankind, which is the individual's inner life, not his or her material surface or surroundings. The true art of realism is "spiritual realism," as Stanislavski termed it (quoted in Counsell 25). In order to express a real inner life, however, external as well as internal training is required. Due to the effects of modern life, "people . . . do not know how to make use of the physical apparatus with which nature has endowed us." While a "body with bulges" and spindly legs "do not matter in ordinary life . . . when we step on the stage many lesser physical shortcomings attract immediate attention" (*Building a Character* 36-37). Therefore, actors "must educate [their] bodies according to the laws of nature" (*Building a Character* 306). In addition to vigorous vocal and physical training, the expression of emotions requires discipline too. Tortsov argues:

A person in the midst of experiencing a poignant emotional drama is incapable of speaking of it coherently, for at such a time tears choke him. . . . But time . . . makes it possible for him to bear himself calmly in relation to past events. He can speak of them coherently, slowly, intelligibly and as he relates the story he remains relatively calm while those who listen weep.

Our art seeks to achieve this very result and requires that an actor experience the agony of his role, and weep his heart out at home or in rehearsals, that he then calm himself, get rid of every sentiment alien or obstructive to his part. He then comes out on the stage to convey to the audience in clear, pregnant, deeply felt, intelligible and eloquent terms what he has been through. (*Building a Character* 76-77)

According to Colin Counsell, the result of such discipline is a “system-atic” style of acting “characterized by smoothness, an absence of discord and disjunction” indicative of “a coherent self no matter what character is being portrayed” (32). Enabled further by a closed performance situation and techniques that tighten the actor’s focus, the actor’s communication of subtext is enhanced. In light of the politics of romanticism, the noted style implies a critique of the modern world and its notion of progress. Rather than dismiss the past in spontaneous shows of emotion, the style proffers a human being who reflects on past events slowly and intelligibly. The style implies that this is how we would behave *if* we acted in accordance with Nature. Seeming to dismiss the critical imperative of the concepts that inform Stanislavski’s System, critics draw on the same evidence to argue that the System creates a “neutral, ‘natural’ and nonpartisan” view of the world, “aligning itself with the state’s desire for a discord-free society” (Counsell 45, 51). The family photograph album has been viewed similarly, as creating an idealized life of happy individuals by means of a chronology of verisimilitude photographs that naturalize the ideals and their expressions as given truths. Due to the isolation of the little world, the album maker is able to fashion a “self-portrait” (Lippard, “Brought to Light” 131), a self genre (Elliot Oring quoted in Katriel and Farrell 1), a self story (Tucker, Ott, and Buckler 16) that, while in flux and plural, enacts the base praxis of capital ideology, namely, that of the alienated individual assuming to make the world in her terms by consuming and producing imagery that supports the same. This view of the photograph album bears scrutiny since it assumes that the maker is unaware of the ideal world she creates, that her ideal world is isolated and a-critical toward other realities, that her ideal world is static and discord free, and that her ideal world is indeed ideal to her.

The Photograph Album

Try this: walk through your living space and collect five visible items you treasure most. Ask a willing friend or partner to do the same in terms of what he or she treasures most about you or their relationship with you. Collect and arrange the items in a space that can accommodate all of the items aiming for an arrangement that pleases you both. Make yourselves a cool or hot drink, sit back, and tell or invent stories about the items and why you arranged them as you did. Consider if the items and arrangement tell a different story about you than they did in their found location. Reverse roles and do the exercise again.

Photograph albums “give voice” to and document personal and family memories and histories (Gerbrandt 11). Making an album is a creative hobby, often referred to as “scrapping,” that entails collecting and arranging photographs and other keepsakes in a photo-safe environment (Gerbrandt 7). The practice of placing keepsakes in a book dates back to the seventeenth century “common-place book” in which the educated elite recorded memories and impressions (Tucker, Ott, and Buckler 6). By the nineteenth century, friendship and autograph albums were used to collect everything from newspaper cuttings to locks of hair. Collecting photographs of family members, friends, and celebrities became a common practice in the mid-nineteenth century, and the photograph album joined the bible for display in the home of many middle class families (Vosmeier 210).

Charged as they are with the maintenance of the home, child rearing, and sustaining family ties, women typically create albums and scrapbooks. Tamar Katriel and Thomas Farrell interviewed many scrappers and discovered that the practice was passed down by a relative, usually a mother and almost always an influential female (3). When men do create albums, they tend to focus on a business or sport related topic, or they collect specific items, such as coins or stamps.

A young boy sits atop a small slide indoors. He wears red footed pajamas imprinted with a picture of Santa Claus. In one hand, he holds a red plastic hammer and a green thermos. He grips the edge of the slide with his other hand and, with a slight smile, looks down toward his anticipated destination.

Several people in motion and all smiles: the youth in the center wears sunglasses and a black cap and gown. He seems to be sweating and his lips are pursed as though he is saying something. To his left, a tan blonde grins in his direction. To his right, a woman laughs and “chatters” with her blurry right hand.

In baggy beach garb, a middle-aged couple smiles, lovingly hugging one another. Behind them is a marsh cast in a sunset of blues, greens, and pinks.

In black and white, an old woman sits on a tweed couch and reaches for a plate of cheesecake. Three lit candles rise clumsily from a glob of whip cream. With a faint and wrinkled smile, she looks at the photographer and prepares to blow out the candles.

Although all photograph albums are unique in specific content, there is a system that informs how people make albums. According to Katriel and Farrell, the general steps entail collecting photographs, selecting and then arranging them in an album, and contemplating or sharing the album (4-5).

Generally, in literature on photograph albums, scholars agree that the displayed content in albums consists of happy representations of people celebrating. As Susan Tucker, Katherine Ott, and Patricia P. Buckler claim, photograph albums “construct an idealized life” for memory preservation (2). It would seem however that culture and context (not to mention the idiosyncrasies of individuals and families) influence the content, arrangement, and sharing of albums and the construction of ideals. For instance, while taking photographs of a loved one on her deathbed is not appropriate in many current cultures, in the nineteenth century, portraits of the dead to celebrate memory and document genealogical traits were common (Davenport 79). Photograph memorials of deceased loved ones are not absent from our current culture since in many homes a portrait of the deceased is displayed prominently, on a mantel or wall. Photographs of the same person are interspersed throughout the family’s albums, reminding viewers of the subject’s life *and* death. Depending on their relationship, viewers recall the subject’s life and death differently. In other words, while the material image remains unchanged (wear and tear aside), the memories and histories it restores do not. In turn, ideals alter. The notion that albums construct an idealized life holds up, then, only if we view the album as a static object separate from those who make and view it. While this perspective helps us identify recurring content and form across albums, it does not address the agencies of the maker and viewer and, in turn, how their making of memories at the personal and family levels is fundamental to how albums function.

The ideal view of life constructed in family photograph albums typically consists of photographs that mark individual passage rites and secular and religious seasonal rituals.⁸ Many of these events are celebrated within a family unit

⁸ Passage rites, where the social status of the individual changes irrevocably, include events like birthdays, graduations, christenings, Bar Mitzvahs, and weddings. In the US,

and documented by family members, creating if not confirming a family identity of unity and camaraderie, often identified as the key theme of the quotidian album (J. Hirsch 32, Katriel and Farrell 6). As children pass into their teen and young adult years, they create their own albums, aiming to build a distinct identity for themselves that draws on traditions of displaying photographs in a bound book or defined space.⁹ While youths may focus on themselves and peers for a period of time, many albums show an integration of friends and family members and the family changing as people commit themselves to others.

Within the prevailing theme of family, the “conquest of the material world” is a frequent subtheme in albums (J. Hirsch 21). According to Julia Hirsch, family photographs document a family’s claim to status and territory by means of the material goods they collect and photograph. A boy atop his slide, a couple in front of their home, an elderly woman and her cake are all signs of conspicuous consumption that validate the financial prosperity of the family and mark it as an entity of the corporate structure (J. Hirsch 32). While such an interpretation is valid, we might make a similar claim of most artistic practices throughout time. Whatever the means, the display of the material body or items in material space makes a claim on space and implies that it, the means, the body, and items have exchange value. Such a view helps us understand the economic imperative of human survival and the economic performative at work in our expressions. However, it does not tell us much about the child, couple, or woman, and their memories about the slide, house, and birthday party. It does not tell us how the album, as a unique homemade item, counters the signs of corporate structure embedded in the content of the photos. It overlooks the making and displaying of the album, preferring it seems, to study it as a fixed object purely of materiality.

In addition to content, the formal quality of photographs plays a part in the photographs we collect and select to put in our albums. High quality shots are recommended because albums are sites where we collect representations of people and places we deem important (Gerbrandt 56). A clearly focused, vividly colored photograph of the subject—a verisimilitude rendering—is valued over those that make the subject look unfamiliar.¹⁰ The latter defamiliarize the subject and her material claims to truth by rendering her as a blur for instance or as a red-eyed alien. Nonetheless, low quality shots are found in albums precisely be-

seasonal rituals celebrated annually by cultural groups include the Judeo-Christian slate of holidays, New Year’s, Halloween, etc.

⁹ Currently, many young people create albums through social networking services like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, not only uploading personal photos but also collecting photographs and other imagery from public access sites.

¹⁰ Current photographic technologies help album makers act on the noted recommendation since most cameras are equipped with an auto-focus function, digital photos can be corrected easily, and makers can opt to delete photos they do not want.

cause the content of photos and the memories they evoke are more important than the quality of the composition. A bad photo of grandma blowing out her birthday candles becomes a good photo quickly when few photos of grandma exist.

With disposable camera in hand the five year old nephew of the groom documents the proceedings: a doorknob, the hem of Aunt Faye's dress, the drape of a tablecloth, the ceiling in the bathroom, the nose of the family dog, and beneath a table somebody's feet, dress shoes shoved to the side.

While, like content, the arrangement of photographs in an album is unique to the maker, certain conventions of arrangement prevail. Most albums are arranged chronologically and by theme.¹¹ Of course, photographs in a taxonomic album can be sequenced chronologically, and in an album arranged chronologically, themed sections are common too.

A chronology of photographs exacts a forward moving sequence or, as Allan Sekula in his Marxist critique of diachronic patterns contends, a sequence 'of production and acquisition' in that the movement forward is equated with progress as per the master narrative of capital (446). A chronological sequence also reflects how action is patterned in popular forms of expression, such as the stories we tell and hear, the realistic novels we read, and the dramas and comedies we see. The form also imitates the progressive pattern of action that marks our rites of passage from birth through old age, which is documented explicitly in the content of photograph albums. Granting that for album makers content is more important than de/constructing form, it makes sense that they might privilege chronology, because it is familiar, and if we connect it back to Stanislavski's spiritual realism as influenced by romanticism, because it abides by our perception and experience of Nature as forward moving.

Katriel and Farrell observe additional forms of "aesthetic organization" besides those of chronology and taxonomy. In contrast to a "linear [chronological, cause and effect] form of narrative," they find the "presentational arrangements of collage and metonymic assemblage" at work in scrapbooks and albums (2). A collage interweaves materials within a single frame, such as on an album page, or it creates the illusion of the same, as is the case with the recurrence of certain themes over the course of an album. A metonym is a figure of language, an action or image that bears a direct association to its referent, citing the whole in part or partially. It is an efficient, shorthand form of expression, well used in chronologies, lists, and captions. Most photographs are metonyms too, as are albums, because they refer directly to the subjects they depict, representing

¹¹ See Gerbrandt 46-48; and Sekula 446.

them in part. Katriel and Farrell work the two forms in tandem, observing that scrappers “‘patch’ together . . . a storied self . . . metonymically constructed out of the materials of ‘life’” (9, 11). On the album page, scrappers interweave scraps and captions that in their assembly create character—an invented and inventive self.¹² While some users of metonyms revel in their creative efficiency, oblivious to what they have left out, others acknowledge their partiality. They use their partial form to craft an expression about partiality, omission, loss, absence, or forgetting. If albums are viewed as fixed objects, most appear oblivious to their metonymic partiality, whereas if viewed as objects made by viewers through acts of remembering (that which we cannot see), they gain the potential to operate reflexively.

A lady I know has an album in her wallet, photographs and other scraps arranged in a tiny pile and tucked into a pocket behind her I.D. Faded and tattered around the edges: a fat cat with a pink toy, a skinny one stretching, a couple on their wedding day cutting a cake, a sticker for a museum, a tattoo of a panda, a fortune without a cookie.

Many album makers assign meaning to their photographs by captioning them with a title, date, comment, or story. In this way, album makers provide viewers with a historical context in which to situate the subjects shown in the photo and, for those viewers who know the subjects, with a memory prompt that helps them recall details. As captions accumulate in an album, they create a “verbal key or storyline” that for John Berger and Jean Mohr “impose a single verbal meaning upon appearances [photos] and thus . . . inhibit or deny their . . . language” (133). In their work with photos and photo displays, Berger and Mohr seek to retain the “ambiguous” nature of photographs rich with “multiple meanings” (133). To do so, they introduce their photo collections with oblique titles—e.g., “Marcel or the Right to Choose” and “If each time . . .”—and stories in which they reflect on their experiences making the collection (17, 131). In metonymic terms, the captions Berger and Mohr write do not explain the photos, thereby inscribing the photos as efficient truth claims that dismiss their partiality. Instead, they try to craft captions that activate “the photograph as a means of communication” *as* negotiation, imperfect and partial. Thereby, they

¹² Important to note, many scrapbook and photograph materials and albums are prefabricated, and there are a number of “how to” books, such as Gerbrandt’s, guiding scrappers and album makers in the construction and creation of albums. However, prefabrication and how to suggestions and examples do not subtract from the maker’s time consuming and meticulous act of sorting, selecting, and displaying scraps, photographs, and captions.

also try to restore “the social function of subjectivity” and memory to how we perceive and make our collective histories (100).

For as long as I can remember, my grandmother wore a gold charm bracelet on her arm. The charms were silhouettes of children’s heads, and each head was imprinted with the name and birth date of her children (my dad and his brother) and grandchildren (my cousins, my brother, and me). Mixed in with the golden heads were tiny locket that held photographs of each of us. I loved to climb onto my grandmother’s lap and play with her charms while she told me stories about the children she wore on her arm.

According to Katriel and Farrell, the third stage in making an album concerns the contemplation and sharing of it. This stage implies that albums fulfill certain functions, that an album maker creates an album with an audience in mind, and that there are times when the album is brought out and asked to perform for an audience, whether it be one’s self or others.

Many scholars agree that the main purpose of photograph albums is to preserve memories and histories for future viewers. While this view seems to indicate that the album is a completed product detached from the maker and viewer, scholars are quick to adjust the broad function so as to recognize the active part makers and viewers play. Gerbrandt, for instance, views the album as an heirloom that enables the maker to understand herself by remembering her ancestors (10). Kuhn strikes a similar note when she claims that an album “is a key moment in the making of ourselves” since it provides us with “roots in the past” that “reverberate . . . in the present” (*Family Secrets*, 2). Elliot Oring stresses an autobiographical function too, terming albums as a “genre of the self” (quoted in Katriel and Farrell 1). Tucker, Ott, and Buckler agree and also observe that an album jogs and recombines “the coordinates of time, space, location, voice, and memory” resulting in a shifting storybook of the self (16). As collected and arranged in an album, the photographs tell a story about identity that is in flux and plural. While Tucker, Ott, and Buckler focus on the plural self within the “idealized” world of the text, the coordinates they observe operate outside the text too, effecting changes in how viewers perceive the album and its ideals.

The understanding that an album alters due to changes in the audience and their perception over time is confirmed by Katriel and Farrell when they describe the album as “scaffolding” that the “provisional author” erects, thereby providing a basic framework that is detailed by future viewers and their “telling and re-tellings” (9). For Katriel and Farrell, the event of sharing the album and the different memories it excites is as important as the material item and the

maker's intent or aims.¹³ In sharing the album, the maker's individual memories become history, adapted and integrated into a collective account of what the photographs recall to mind, and just as the initial maker is a provisional author so too is each subsequent maker of the album.

The Album as System

Like the process stipulated in Stanislavski's System, the building of an album is a creative process that generates a creative state of mind. And, as I detail below, it entails a process and state of mind very like the one outlined by Stanislavski in that the photographs are actions that excite the viewer's imagination, including her sense and emotion memories. The actions are arranged in an album in terms of units and objectives that provide a logic and coherency of action and feeling as per the depicted subjects and themes of the album text. As in the System, while a viewer-performer of an album might concentrate on an individual character, due to the given circumstances of the text, the individual's actions refer and relate to an ensemble of other individuals or characters and the logic and coherency of their actions as well.

Try this: make a list of five emotions, such as sadness or joy. Look through your albums and select photos that for you express each emotion. What is it in each photo that excites the emotion for you? Put the photos aside and try another experiment. Randomly choose five photos from your collection. Identify an action in each photo, such as sitting or smiling. *Do* the action until a thought, feeling, or memory comes to mind. Compare the two processes. How are they similar? Different? Which process do you prefer? Why?

Similar to the album maker, Stanislavski's actor begins building a character by selecting and collecting actions. While rousing the "subconscious to creative work" so as to match one's inner life with that of the character is the aim of the System actor, realizing this goal is difficult because the "subconscious is inaccessible to our consciousness" (Stanislavski, *Actor Prepares* 15, 14). We can't control it, and if we try, we undermine it. Stanislavski recommends doing actions. An action may be actual or imagined, but it must be motivated by a concrete purpose. By doing conscious actions so as to meet conscious goals, subconscious memories and feelings will be aroused. I eat a biscuit because I am hungry, and the taste reminds me of making and eating my first biscuit in my

¹³ Also see Hirsch 5; and Kuhn, *Family Secrets* 5.

grandmother's kitchen (red laminate countertop and cushy vinyl chairs), and I am filled with love for my grandmother, fresh biscuits, quirky kitchen design, and the surprising capacity of the body-mind to re/store these images with little effort.

This foundational aspect of the System was influenced by the theories of Theodule Ribot and Ivan Pavlov. Ribot theorized that individuals "retain a subconscious record of [their] emotional experiences," which "are not stored in isolation" but rather are "associated with the physical and sensory circumstances that accompanied their first occurrence" (Counsell 28). I eat a biscuit. I envision my grandmother. I experience familial love. As Tortsov confirms, "'just as your visual memory can reconstruct an inner image of some forgotten thing, place or person, your emotion memory can bring back feelings'" (Stanislavski, *Actor Prepares* 182). Just as Pavlov's dogs were conditioned to salivate at the ring of a bell, I as an actor might express familial love unconsciously, by envisioning a biscuit, or seeing a photograph of one, for that matter.

Granting that we make and view albums to re/store memories, Stanislavski's technique for rousing the subconscious through action suggests how albums work. We make an album to celebrate specific acts and confirm to ourselves and to others that we are actors in the world. In this light, a major reason why women in large part make and maintain albums presents itself. Besides fulfilling gender expectations (e.g., nurturing family life), the making of the album confirms they (too) are actors in the world, in the past and in the making and viewing of an album that shows their acts and actions. The depiction of actors doing actions excites sense and emotion memories, thoughts and feelings in the maker and viewer without conscious effort. The arousal of the subconscious to consciousness helps them craft an understanding of themselves and others at the time the photos were taken and as they make or view the album, and this understanding alters as they and their circumstances change over time.

Understanding that in theory if not actuality arousing one's inner life of memories is not difficult, the challenge for the System actor is to adapt his or her inner life to "given circumstances" and then express the results on stage (Stanislavski, *Actor Prepares* 54). According to Tortsov, given circumstances consist of "the story of the play, its facts, events, epoch, time and place of action, conditions of life, the actors' and regisseur's interpretation, the mise-en scene, the production, the sets, the costumes, properties, lighting and sound effects" (*An Actor Prepares* 54). Just as one's own inner life is affected by multiple external contexts, so too should be that of the self-as-character. In this way, the character is historicized, inscribing and inscribed by the particularities of the situations in which she finds herself. Tortsov recommends then that the actor "direct all [her] attention to the given circumstances" since "they are always within reach" and infer if not state action possibilities (*An Actor Prepares* 55). To enable the actor's engagement of the given circumstances, Tortsov introduces the technique of *if*.

The subjunctive *if* allows the actor to ask what she would do if she were in a situation *like* that of the character. The resulting action and its arousal of feelings are generated and expressed “naturally” (Stanislavski, *Actor Prepares* 50). Unlike the System actor, an album maker or viewer does not have to adapt her inner life to that of a material character she expresses on a physical stage. Instead, and like the System actor, she builds a character influenced by the given circumstances of the photographs and their embedded codes, their arrangement in the album text, and the viewing event.

Try this: find a photograph of an interior setting. If there are people in the photograph, imagine they are not there. Take a careful look at the details of the setting and select one. What stories are embedded in the detail? What actions or other images does it suggest? Select a few more details and process them similarly. Then translate the stories, actions, and images you've collected to the making of a character. What sort of person emerges from the details?

Focusing specifically on the content of photographs demonstrates how they consist of visual signs or actions that quote their referents and back stories and also converge and interact with each other. As Berger and Mohr quoting Cézanne offer, the signs “interpenetrate each other” and “never cease to live” (113). Thereby, they create what Berger and Mohr call a “long quotation” (121) or Roland Barthes, via Lessing, a “pregnant moment” (73). For instance, a photograph of a child eating a biscuit sitting in a red vinyl chair at a kitchen table is loaded with actions that quote their referents and invisible backstories, which imply additional actions. Should the photo be placed next to one that depicts an elderly woman feeding the birds, the two photos garner yet more actions and stories from each other. Should we have personal knowledge of the child or woman, kitchen or birds, even more actions, stories, and memories arise. In other words, while the given circumstances of the photo place limitations on how we construct the child and ourselves in relation to her, within the limitations are multiple *what if?* possibilities. These possibilities may strike us or not, differently, each time we view the photo due to our current circumstances and their impact on us. For the same reasons, the System actor experiences a range of possibilities despite given limitations, as evidenced by the fact that no two Juliets or Romeos are rendered the same. Like photograph albums and those who make and view them, the play text and those who enact and audience them are filled with so many givens (as well as gaps) that ambiguities hence possibilities arise for building a character.

Try this: select a family album in which you figure prominently. As you look through the album, write down any events, actions, relationships, settings, clothing, objects, and physical poses that recur (at least three times) over the course of the album. Also note three or four anomalies you particularly like. In light of your current understanding of yourself, does the list of recurrences make sense to you? Do they define you accurately? How about the anomalies? Are they accurate? *Are* they anomalies in terms of your view of yourself? Do they make sense within the through line of recurrences or do they counter it somehow?

A given circumstance that System actors are asked to heed is a “Logic and Coherence of Physical Action” and “Feelings” as determined by the play text, the particular character, and his or her subtext. To determine the logic and coherence of action, Tortsov advises the actor divide the text into discrete units and objectives. The named objectives should address the fictive reality of the character, be truthful to the actor, analogous to the role, and articulated in terms of active verbs (Stanislavski, *Actor Prepares* 129-130). Further, the character-actor’s objectives should establish a logical and coherent “through line” of feeling and action that coheres with the through lines of the other character-actors in the production, all of which must cohere with the “super-objective” or “main theme” of the play (Stanislavski, *Actor Prepares* 296, 294).

In these terms and drawing on the observations of album scholars, the super-objective of the family photograph album is the preservation and celebration of family unity and camaraderie through which the maker ciphers her sense of self. This fundamental theme is upheld by the coherence of subthemes, such as the recurrence of rites and rituals. We see Grandma Alice celebrate her birthday, then brother Carlton his graduation, after which the family takes a summer vacation, followed by Uncle Rich celebrating his birthday, and then the family gathered round the table for Thanksgiving, then Christmas, then New Year’s. In most of the photographs, the subjects smile, implying a coherency of feeling as well as thematic action within and across the line of characters. The recurrence of subthemes creates a certain logic regarding family life, and the chronological sequencing of action bolsters the logic further since chronology is so common to us that its logic is a given.

To further clarify the action shown in each unit and thereby infer how it contributes to the through line of the text, album makers use captions. As with Stanislavski’s advice regarding naming objectives, the captions refer to the depicted characters in their space and time and are written with an eye toward truthfulness. Date, place, event, and the names of the characters predominate in these written metonyms while identifying character objectives in terms of active

verbs is not common. Of course, one might infer objectives based on the actions one sees. Understanding that emotions are “incapable of being grasped” while “images are . . . firmly fixed in our visual memories and can be recalled at will,” Tortsov recommends that actors create and imagine “an unbroken series of images, something like a moving picture” that visually activates the through line of units and objectives we have developed (Stanislavski, *Actor Prepares* 70, 69).

Mardi Gras in Eunice, February 2015

Liam, Lisa, Lucas and Gary

[All smiles, a male teenager, a woman, and two men stand on a country road waiting for the Mardi Gras parade to arrive. The teen holds a bright orange chicken. The others have plastic cups of beer.]

Liam Bought a Chicken to Chase

[A teen smiles looking down at a bright orange chicken.]

Liam and Jim Chasing Chickens

[In the distance revelers dressed in both street clothes and traditional Mardi Gras garb chase several loosed chickens.]

Mel, Lucas, and Lisa with a Mardi Gras

[A smiling couple watches as a masked man with a tall colorful hat and matching suit kneels before a woman. The woman, holding a fistful of colorful beads, grimaces at the man.]

Gretchen with her Favorite Koozie

[A woman smiles wildly and shows off her koozie from a bar and dance-hall “Fred’s Lounge.”]

Gretchen and Gary

[Dancing, a woman smiles as a man (clearly concentrating) twirls her.]

Liam, Lisa, and Mel

[A teen looks on while two women laugh, each manipulating the strings of an orange chicken puppet.]

In the above list of metonymic captions and photo descriptions, the characters demonstrate diversity within a logic and coherency of action and feeling as termed by the given circumstances of a Mardi Gras parade, all of which support

a main theme of familial unity and camaraderie. Such a tidy summary of the event and photographs is lacking, of course. As users of metonyms, makers of albums, and Stanislavski would agree, there is something more to the point of representing individuals and families (their actions and, for Stanislavski, inferred feelings) through structures of logic and coherence. For Stanislavski, the point was spiritual realism, and this brings me back to my central argument.

Ideals, Nostalgia, and a Generative View

I posit that the album maker, the main character of the photograph album, draws on trajectories of critical romanticism and spiritual realism to build a world that first and foremost is about what we cannot see. In building her photograph album, she tries to express what it means to her to build a family and thereby an aspect of herself. In this way, she counters the forces that would destroy her expression by making it an object solely of and about materiality, whether through positivist or capitalist claims.

If we grant that building and maintaining a family is an uncertain and imperfect activity, it seems to me the maker creates an album to confirm her activities as well as to express her thoughts regarding them—e.g., by means of the photographs and the making and sharing of the album. While some makers might conflate the representation and reality, the day-to-day ups and downs of family life prompt us to credit the maker with the same degree of reflexivity we grant ourselves as critics. In light of absent partners, financial woes, teen rebellions, or simply kids who hate biscuits, makers know perfectly well the album is a partial representation of family, and, in a sense, that's the point. The differences between the *what if?* representation and everyday reality protect while they imply the invisible ideal—i.e., the certain goodness of trying to build a family—the exact memories and meanings of which differ and change with each maker and viewer over time.

Try this: whether in albums or boxes (or stored somewhere in your computer) take your collection of photographs, put it in a large plastic bag (select all), and throw it away (hit delete and empty your trash).

In *On Longing*, Susan Stewart identifies the miniature as an imitative item of reduced scale where “life” is fit “inside the body” of the miniature “rather than the body inside the expansive temporality of life,” very like a metonym (40). Despite its partiality and due to its reduced scale, “the details of a miniature” concentrate our attention and magnify the importance of what we experience and express (Stewart 47). As a result, “the world of things can open itself up to re-

veal a secret life—indeed, to reveal a set of actions and hence narrativity and history outside the given field of perception” (Stewart 54). The miniature signals an other reality, a “daydream” reality as Stewart would have it, where we imagine “a stage on which we project, by means of association or intertextuality, a deliberately framed series of *actions*” (54; emphasis in original).

In light of Stewart’s thoughts, we might view stage performance as a miniature since life is made to fit inside the body of the stage, play, and actor, and thereby certain details are magnified so as to prompt the audience to take account of them. Stewart’s thoughts are especially relevant to Stanislavski’s aesthetic since, within a closed situation of a realistically rendered set, performers enact actions so as to stimulate and express the inner lives of their characters. The resulting style of “clear . . . intelligible and eloquent” reflection serves to concentrate attention on the characters and magnify what they infer about their inner lives (*Building a Character* 77). The desired aim of the miniaturization and magnification is to lift the actor and audience “out of the world of actuality into the realm of imagination,” effecting spiritual realism (*Actor Prepares* 49).

While Stewart appreciates the subjunctive potential of some miniature realities, she expresses caution toward photographs, understanding them as miniaturizing reality so as to assert truth claims in the given field of perception. As Stewart sees it, photographs create the illusion that what we see is “always there” guaranteeing “the presence of [the] absent other” (126). In the miniaturized world of the photograph album, “the past is constructed from a set of presently existing pieces” or photographs that again operate to conflate representation and actuality (145). One result is that the viewer may fall victim to the “social disease” of nostalgia (ix), which “creates a longing that of necessity is inauthentic because it does not take part in lived experience” (23). Stewart continues:

Nostalgia, like any form of narrative, is always ideological: the past it seeks has never existed except as narrative, and hence, always absent, that past continually threatens to reproduce itself as felt lack. . . . Longing for an impossibly pure context of lived experience . . . nostalgia wears a distinctly utopian face, a fact that turns toward a . . . past which has only ideological reality. (23)

Stewart’s view of the photographic miniature as nostalgic is reminiscent of Tucker, Ott, and Buckler’s view that photo albums “construct an idealized life” (2) and Julia Hirsch’s view that they perpetuate capital ideology (32). A similar summation is evident in Counsell’s view that Stanislavski’s System results in neutral, naturalized, and discord-free renderings of the world that support state aims (45, 51).

In *On the Beaten Track*, Lucy Lippard offers an alternative view of nostalgia, observing, “the word has acquired a . . . sentimental inauthenticity . . . distant from the original meaning,” that is, a desire to “return home” (153). Contrary to Stewart, Lippard understands that nostalgia is “part of . . . lived experience.” It

is “a seamless and positive part of life, a reminder of breadth and depth, a confirmation of continuity” (164). Similarly, Rachel Hall views nostalgia as a performative act of dialogue between one’s self and the photograph’s one views (350). Nostalgia emerges in the interaction between the viewer and the photograph as the former listens to the stories the photograph recalls (and forgets), stories embedded with beliefs that the viewer deems valuable or not depending on her circumstances. Unlike Stewart, both Lippard and Hall understand that remembering and telling stories is very much a part of lived experience and how we express it, that the beliefs a story or memory impart are never pure because they are never static, and that longing for these beliefs does not equate to a feeling of lack necessarily since one can activate the beliefs by adapting them to current circumstances.

Lippard’s reminder that nostalgia means “to return home” articulates a plural ideal I find helpful in expressing how family photograph albums perform in light of System aesthetics. Recalling that the practice of making and sharing a photograph album was developed in the domestic sphere of the nineteenth century and has been sustained largely by women, the practice is aligned with women’s work in the home. For this reason, the critical function of the album has been under-estimated—the lived experiences of women trying to build and maintain their families abstracted to theories that construct the domestic sphere as an isolated actuality. In turn, women, particularly middle class females, have been constructed as passive ideologues conditioned to service church and state by creating safe havens for rearing their children, “returning home” in Stewart’s sense of nostalgia.

While in broad social-historical terms there is some truth to the noted constructs, they dismiss the agencies of diverse women trying to build and maintain diverse families in diverse circumstances, and, as I see it, acknowledging the diversity of agencies is fundamental to understanding how the family photograph album works. The broadest statement I am willing to offer is that women make albums to confirm and express their attempts to build a family. Stanislavski’s aesthetic helps me understand their performances as critical responses to those who would displace their particular given circumstances to broad “givens” concerning the substance, structure, and spirit of family. As Berger and Mohr might observe, it is by means of their photograph albums that women restore “the social function of subjectivity,” treating it as neither a “private” act nor the act of “the individual consumer’s dream” (100). Rather they perform their subjective experience and understanding of returning home, drawing on common forms to make their expression accessible and confirming their belief that building a family is a certain act of goodness.



For Mom: Our Sons

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