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**Article Title:** Memory and Photography in the Photo Albums of Virginia Woolf

**Year of publication:** 2005

**Citation:** Humm, M. (2005) 'Memory and Photography in the Photo Albums of Virginia Woolf', In: D. Fisher, A. Mays, S (eds.) Photography and Literature in the Twentieth Century, Cunningham, Cambridge Scholars Press, 2005 pp 42-51.

**Published version available from:** <http://www.c-s-p.org/Flyers/Photography-and-Literature-in-the-Twentieth-Century.htm>

**ISBN:** 1-904303-46-3

**Publisher statement:** (not stated)

**Information on how to cite items within roar@uel:**

<http://www.uel.ac.uk/roar/openaccess.htm#Citing>

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Memory and Photography: the Photo Albums of Virginia Woolf

"Your films came last night [...] Two beautiful packets of superfine celluloid. Films! A thousand thanks (as the French say) my dear Herbert for this munificent gift - I shall devote not a few to your remarkable face"- Virginia Woolf, age 15, letter to her brother Thoby, 1897.

From the age of fifteen, photographs framed Woolf's world. Virginia Woolf wrote about photography in her diaries, letters and essays, and used photographic terms descriptively in her fiction. Before her marriage, and then together with Leonard, Woolf took, developed and preserved photographs in albums.<sup>1</sup> Photography was a continuous part of the Woolfs' lives even if their photographic albums do not tell a coherent life story. The Frederick Koch collection in Harvard Theatre Library houses over one thousand photographs. Although Woolf states in her letters that "I keep a family album" (L6 169) in the singular and many entries in the albums are in her hand, it is impossible to establish, either from their several diaries and autobiographies, or from internal evidence in the albums, who 'authored' each album. The albums are formally constructed with many sequential and paired matching photographs of friends sitting in armchairs, in close up or medium shot, a striking example of the issue of finding or making 'significant form' that so intrigued Bloomsbury art critics. In many ways Woolf's album making mirrors her aesthetics. In Woolf's fiction a visual image is frequently more truth telling than a linear narrative. The albums likewise are composed in visual patterns rather than chronologically. The albums are crucial artefacts, encapsulating and emblematising Woolf's responses to the arts and to her life and friendships.

Photographs preserve relationships. Any album's sequencing of photographs creates meaning out of random events. In this respect albums are memories constructed in the present but, unlike memories, photographs

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arranged in albums have a connectedness independent from present time. Album photographs are their own visual story. The representation of an isolated moment in time means nothing. Meaning depends on how we connect moments. As Henri Bergson the philosopher argues, a memory only becomes 'actual' by "borrowing the body of some perception into which it slips"(Bergson 67). The principles of selection, montage and tableaux, are the skeleton of a story, a way of making aesthetic order out of our worlds, which becomes an aesthetic narrative of that world. Psychoanalytically speaking, albums are often a testimony to our unconscious pasts rather than the pasts we consciously choose to remember. In a classic and often cited essay 'A Short History of Photography', Walter Benjamin argues that photography, "makes aware for the first time the optical unconscious"(Benjamin 5). Similarly the Monk's House albums are Woolf's unconscious testimony to her childhood past.

Memories or the "presence without representation", Jean-Francois Lyotard calls "the stranger in the house"(Lyotard 16). Where, for Freud, the stranger is the scene of seduction perpetrated on the child, to Lyotard the stranger represents a more general individual incapacity to "represent and bind a certain something", something which "can introduce itself there without being introduced, and would exceed its powers"(17). For me, it is the 1892 photograph of Woolf's seated mother and father with Woolf in the background mounted as a significant frontispiece in Monk's House album 3 which "exceeds its powers" and shapes Woolf's albums. It is precisely for these reasons, I feel, that the albums are so unusually anti-chronological since the albums focus on the unrepresentable, on the immemorial, as Lyotard argues, "the immemorial is always 'present'"(20).

Woolf's male artistic contemporaries thought photographs visually undistinguished. Clive Bell dismissed photographs because "we expect a work of plastic art to have more in common with a piece of music than a coloured photograph"(Bell 349). Indeed Simon Watney argues that, throughout this period, photography "served in England to define negatively what art was

not"(Watney 20). Woolf herself frequently equates the `snapshot' with a limited eye. Writing to Vanessa Bell in Cassis, Woolf worries "What am I to say about you?" (Woolf eventually decided to refer to Bell and Fry's affair as "friendship"). "It's rather as if you had to paint a portrait using dozens of snapshots in the paint"(L6 285). Yet Woolf, as a photographer skilfully transformed friends and moments into artful tableaux and she was surrounded by female friends and family who were also energetic photographers. Lady Ottoline Morrell's photographs "come out so much better than the professionals"; Vita Sackville-West and Dora Carrington all exchanged photographs with Virginia(L3 46). Julian Bell's girlfriend Lettice Ramsey ran a professional photography agency, Ramsey and Muspratt.

The essence of photographs lies in the appeal of the experience or the event portrayed to a viewer. Woolf, like her sister and her great aunt the photographer Julia Margaret Cameron, frequently invited friends to share her reflections. The letters and diaries describe a constant exchange of photographs, in which photographs become a meeting-place, a conversation, *aide-mémoires*, and sometimes mechanisms of survival and enticement. At age 16, photographs were "the best present I can think of"(L1 497). Woolf invited friends to share their lives with her through photographs. She liked "very much" to have baby photographs "he's an interesting little boy" [Katherine Arnold-Forster's son Mark)(L2 495). After their deaths, photographs of friends were important memento mori. After the death of Jacques Raverat, the French painter, in 1924, Woolf needed photographs to continue her mental conversations. From Gwen Raverat, Woolf desperately wanted "a snapshot or any photograph of him? I go on making things up to tell him"(L3 172).

Woolf's albums are more enduringly invitational. Monk's House 5 (45 - 6) contains one of the Woolf's favourite `comfy chair' paired sequences of Dorothy Bussy sitting framed by the sharply angled attic roof, together with her daughter Janie. Magnification revealed that Dorothy was laughing at the very album in which the Bussy's would themselves appear. It is as if the

album's viewers share the album's narrative construction. Woolf's frequent use of invitational or rhetorical questions in her fiction is matched here by the albums' appeal to an active spectator. The album is being spectated in the act of memorializing, as if the Bussy's see themselves through the photographic gaze of another. Psychoanalytically speaking, one gains a sense of identity through recognition by another.

Perhaps for this reason Woolf believed that photographs could help her to survive those identity destroying moments of her own life - her incoherent illnesses. For example, writing to Margaret Llewelyn Davies in 1915, Woolf "wanted to say that all through that terrible time" [a week's attack of apparent insanity] "I thought of you, and wanted to look at a picture of you, but was afraid to ask!" (L2 60). Mutual image making would also create relationships. Woolf used photographs to entice Vita Sackville-West. Writing to "Mrs Nicolson" in 1923, Woolf asked Vita to visit in order "to look at my great aunt's photographs of Tennyson and other people" (L3 4). In short, photographs may be 'only an eye' but one that enabled Woolf to see more clearly.

Still, for all her enthusiasm as an amateur photographer, in her letters Woolf consistently condemns professional photography. Cecil Beaton ["I was so furious at being in Beaton's Book - I was never asked - never sat - never saw the horrid worm"] chose baroque settings far removed from Woolf's seriality (L5 238). Even being photographed by a woman photographer Gisele Freund, seemed to Woolf like "being hoisted about on top of a stick for everyone to stare at" yet Woolf happily changed her clothing for Freund as this composite reveals (L6 351).

The Woolfs' skilful intent is not constrained by the limitations of camera technology which it might be appropriate to consider. Until the acquisition, "with violent impetuosity" of a Zeiss camera costing £20 (or \$600 at current prices) in July 1931, from the size of the album prints the Woolfs probably relied on the popular 3A vest pocket Kodak which succeeded Virginia's Frena (L4 361). The inexpensive, light camera was particularly popular with

women. *The Photographic News* reported, in September 1905, that 'thousands of Birmingham girls are scattered about the holiday resorts of Britain this month, and a very large percentage of them are armed with cameras' (Coe and Gates 28). The modernity of the albums is striking and might owe much to Woolf's knowledge of modernism including Cézanne's painting series and Eisenstein and German cinema. The Woolfs' use of composite images, the recognition that the process of construction is part of the content of a constructed piece, synchronizes with other modernist developments in the 1920s and 1930s. Woolf's quadruple portraits of Ethel Smyth (Monk's House 3, 12) are a sequential series of 4 by 3 photographs probably taken with a 3A Vest Pocket Kodak from the size of the prints in which overlapping eye lines and seated positions carry an emotional charge. The albums also synchronize with cinema's new range of effects in the 1920s and 1930s.

Virginia's first diary describes her 1915 birthday treat "at a Picture Palace" as well as the attraction of regular movie going over political meetings. "I went to my Picture Palace, and L. to his Fabians; and he thought, on the whole, that his mind and spirit and body would have profited more by the pictures than by the Webbs" (D1 28). The Woolfs acknowledged the importance of cinema by publishing in the Hogarth Press a film text - Eric White's *Parnessus to Let: An Essay About Rhythm in Film* (1928). As Lyotard claims, cinematography is the prime condition of all narration. Woolf's own writings about cinema, more than most, have a keen-eyed modernist vision. 'The Cinema, Movies and Reality', first published in *Arts* in New York in 1926, explores new relationships between movement and repetition, emotions and spatial organizations (Humm 1997). Similarly the albums are not chronologically catalogued. The Woolfs do not construct ideal versions of their lives and friendships and both husband and wife are equally visible. There is no absent implied male photographer as in most albums since many photographs are evidently taken by Virginia.

The Woolfs photograph each other in similar poses in similar comfy chairs and similarly photograph friends in comfy chairs in multiple shots

taken on different days, sometimes in different years, but grouped together in the album. Some album pages have a real gravitas and impact. For example, a powerful sequence are the photographs of William Plomer, Vita Nicolson [Sackville-West] and Charles Siepmann united across time by the chair motif (31). Of course Julia Margaret Cameron carefully posed sitters and utilised chiaroscuro, the play of light and shadow. Yet Woolf's devotion to sequential and associative poses differs from Cameron's singular portraits. In Lacanian terms, Woolf's continual photographic repetitions would suggest the 'return' of a visual event which took place outside her contemporary frames. As Lacan suggests "the real is that which always comes back to the same place"(Lacan 42). Crucially Leslie Stephen explicitly memorializes the exact photograph which Virginia avidly highlights in the opening of Monk's House Album 3. "When I look at certain little photographs at one in which I am reading by her side at St. Ives with Virginia [...] I see as with my bodily eyes the love, the holy and tender love" (Stephen 58). It is the visual language of this particular photograph, what we might call its trauma fragments, which determines Woolf's own photographic constructions. There are similar quiet connections and discontinuities between the sisters' albums. Both Vanessa and Virginia are drawn to the maternal. Pregnant, Vanessa fantasizes to Virginia that "I shall see you every day and gaze at the most beautiful of Aunt Julia's photographs [that of their mother] incessantly"(Marler 67). Both shared a Bloomsbury party visit to a film of a caesarean operation. "Really it is quite the oddest entertainment I've ever been to [...] Leonard felt very ill" (361-2).

Whereas the Monk's House albums, in some respects, reveal Woolf to be an enthusiastic modernist, in other respects they are too repetitious, too obsessive to be catalogued simply as modernist. The page compositions and repeated use of particular objects - the armchairs and vertical flowers and bookcases - seem shaped as much by the psychic as by the formally aesthetic.

All photographs comprise a language and Woolf's language was maternal. "She has haunted me"(L3 374). Woolf wrote 'through' the maternal. "Here I am experimenting with the parent of all pens - the black J, *the pen*, as I used

to think it, along with other objects, as a child, because mother used it"(D1 208). Woolf frequently said about her mother "It is a psychological mystery why she should be: how a child could know about her; except that she has always haunted me" (L3 383). Julia Stephen's early death meant that, to Woolf, she became the fantasmatic mother, that is a mother who can exist only as an image, who can be seen or mirrored only in identifications and who might incite the visual imagination (of a photographer) into hallucinatory significations (Jacobus iii). In 'Moments of Being' Woolf describes how it was her mother's death, which "made me suddenly develop perception"(103).

This creation of self-identity through maternal memories is the key theme of the work of Bracha Lichtenberg-Ettinger. In *The Matrixial Gaze* and her many essays in *Differences* and elsewhere, Lichtenberg-Ettinger challenges Freud's specular account of Oedipal identity in favour of a matrixial source of identity. The matrixial corresponds, she suggests, to a new feminine symbolic discourse of the co-existence of the maternal 'I' and infant 'Not-I'. Artists, Lichtenberg-Ettinger claims, inscribe "traces of subjectivity" in cultural objects and by analyzing these 'inscriptions' it might be possible, she hopes, to "elaborate traces of an-other Real" (Lichtenberg-Ettinger 196). The albums are matrixial encounters giving meaning "to a real which might otherwise pass by unthinkable, unnoticed and unrecognized" (Lichtenberg-Ettinger 45). Similarly in Barthes's *Camera Lucida* memory and the mother are intimate in photography, and, as Bergson suggests every perception is already memory. "There comes a moment when the recollection thus brought down is capable of blending so well with the present perception that we cannot say where perception ends or where memory begins" (Bergson 106).

It could be argued that the Woolfs' favourite sequences are a form of the matrixial, in a chain of perceptions. As I have described, Monk's House 3 opens with an enlarged 6x7½ photograph of Julia Stephen immediately followed by the photograph of Julia, Leslie Stephen and Virginia at St. Ives in 1892.



The treasured 2\_x2<sup>2/8</sup> photograph, protectively mounted on buff card before insertion in the album, is made larger by the 4x2 card. Monk's House 3 also contains the largest number of 'comfy chair' photographs (40).

The details, or punctum, of this childhood photograph appear again and again in the Woolfs' photo sequences. The synchronic matching of the St. Ives and Monk's House furniture recalls Lichtenberg-Ettinger idea that the language of the matrixial is a symbolization of the maternal, childhood home. That is, Woolf constantly repeats or mirrors this matrixial transitional object in photo sequences focusing attention on chairs, bookcases and flowers as well as on the face of each sitter. In a chapter 'the Dead Mother' (which includes depressed and absent mothers) in *On Private Madness* André Green suggests that the "mirror identification" with the mother "is almost obligatory" (Green 159). The child is always "recollecting the traces of the trauma" of loss in "artistic creations" (151). Green argues that "the fantasy of the primal scene is of capital importance" because "the subject will be confronted with memory traces in relation to the dead mother" (159). The 1892 photograph of Virginia with her parents at St Ives is like a primal scene as if Virginia and Vanessa collude, as Green suggests, in "erotic and intense destabilization of the primal scene to the advantage of intense intellectual activity" (160).

Obviously it is impossible to say how conscious Woolf was of any of these themes but all photographs are retrospective memories. It is hardly surprising that all of Woolf's work is obsessed with visual memories. As Lyotard suggests "the time of writing does not pass. Every writing" [and we could include art] "worthy of its name wrestles with the Angel and, at best, comes out limping" (Lyotard 34). Julia Stephen was Woolf's Angel in the house and becomes her 'stranger in the house' in the album photographs. Woolf continually wrestled with a chain of reflecting memories in photographs which mirror a familial past. The photographs connected Woolf to the past, particularly to the matrixial. The photographs' repeated sequences, spatially organizing sitter, chair and flowers, are momentary memories of

the past. Her sister's paintings taught Woolf that representations can resist death, and like Vanessa's paintings, Woolf's albums are a palimpsest. "This strange painters world, in which mortality does not enter and psychology is held at bay" (Woolf 'Vanessa Bell' 173).

#### NOTES

1. Essays on Woolf and photography include among others, Duffy and Davis 'Demythologizing Facts and Photographs in *Three Guineas*', Wussow 'Virginia Woolf and the Problematic Nature of the Photographic Image' and 'Travesties of Excellence', Flesher, 'Picturing the Truth in Fiction', Gualtieri 'Three Guineas and the Photograph', Knowles 'A Community of Women Looking at Men', Schaffer, 'Posing Orlando'. Only Neverov 'Thinking Back Through Our Mothers' and Gillespie's richly detailed "'Her Kodak Pointed at His Head": Virginia Woolf and Photography' to date, describe Woolf's photo albums but both focus on Woolf's utilisation of photographic referents in her writing.

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