

Aleida Assmann, *Ghosts of the Past*

Paper for 'Remembering and Forgetting' Research Seminar

As if he had been loosened out of hell
To speak of Horrors
(Hamlet: II, 1, 74-85)

Part I: Conjuring up the ghosts of the past

Let me start with a rather simple distinction between spirits and ghosts. Spirits are conjured up, they are called up; ghosts intrude, they come without bidding, they haunt us.

How spirits are conjured up is described in an ironic way in a dialogue in Shakespeare's 1 Henry IV (III, I, 52 – 55), where Owen Glendower, the magician, boasts: „I can call spirits from the vasty deep.“ To which Hotspur dryly replies: „Why, so can I, or so can any man; But will they come when you do call for them?“¹

In Prospero Shakespeare created a character, who is indeed able to conjure up spirits and rule over them. His power is not limited to this world but is extended into the realm of the invisible, wielding cosmic forces.

Ghosts, on the other hand, represent something that returns from the past or the realm of the dead on its own will. This return is the symptom of a deep crisis; it is felt as a violent and threatening interruption of the present. Something that had been deemed overcome and gone reappears to announce some unfinished business that needs to be addressed. The paradigmatic case is of course the ghost of Hamlet's father appearing on the battlements of Elsinore castle or Banquo's ghost at the feast of King and Lady Macbeth. Shakespeare was clearly interested in both manifestations of invisible and uncanny beings, in spirits as well as ghosts.

Spirits and ghosts, if considered along the lines of the definitions just given, show a close similarity to two forms of remembering: conscious recall on the one hand and non-conscious, involuntary and even counter-voluntary summons on the other. In my paper, I will start from

¹ Aleida Assmann, "Spirits, Ghosts, Demons in Shakespeare and Milton", in: Andreas Höfele, Werner von Koppenfels (eds.), *Renaissance Go-Betweens. Cultural Exchange in: Early Modern Europe*, Berlin, New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2005, 200-213.

this hint and examine more closely the connection between spirits, ghosts and memory together with its contexts, media and mechanisms. In the second part of my paper I will focus on photography as a carrier of an unknown, uncanny, traumatic past that confront the present with something that refuses to simply vanish or disappear. Photos may present the challenge of a counter memory and offer the chance for time traveling and an encounter with the ghosts of the past.

There is an obvious connection between violence, trauma and 'ghosting'², a proof of which is the strong interest that arises in spirits and ghosts after wars and battles.³ Wherever there is a sudden and alarming rise in the population of the dead, the living who are bereft and traumatized by the loss of their friends and loved ones try to establish some form of contact across the borderline between the world of the living and the dead. After the Great War, many individuals tested their own spiritual powers or relied on persons who acted as a medium to establish some form of communication with family members that had recently fallen in battle. The American poet Hilda Doolittle (H.D.) for instance took an active part in such spiritistic sessions; her poetry is tinged with this metaphysical quality of reaching out to former epochs, very much in the manner of Aby Warburg who believed in mnemonic energy residing in objects or mnemonic waves that emanated from a distant past and could be received by those who were endowed with a seismographic sensibility. Occultism of one sort or another was very popular in post-war times.

Ruth Klüger: Still Alive. Exorcising the Dead

In her Holocaust memoir, Ruth Klüger refers to two family members that haunt her memory.⁴ Her father and her brother were murdered in the Holocaust, the circumstances, however, were lost together with the trace of both family members. Her own survival, her living on was tormented not so much by the thought that they had perished as by the uncertainty of the how and whereabouts of their death. "Without a grave, the work of mourning cannot come to an end", she writes. Only after many years later, in her research and reconstruction of the events, Klüger finally found out some details about the last transport of her family members. What makes their memory so troubling is not only the uncertainty about the circumstances of their death but also the fact that they could not take leave from one another in peace. Klüger

² Anne Fuchs

³ Diethard Sawicki, *Leben mit den Toten. Geisterglauben und die Entstehung des Spiritismus*, Paderborn 2002; Heike Behrend, „Geistmedien und Medien der Geister“, in: *Signale der Störung*, Erhard Schüttpelz und Albert Kümmler (Hrsg.), Köln. 2003.

⁴ Ruth Klüger, *Still Alive. A Holocaust Girlhood Remembered*, New York, Feminist Press, 2001.

describes how she is stuck with her last memories of her father which are tormenting, because they fixate a desperate and shameful moment. Memory for her is a trap and "a prison of sorts, too: you can't shake or alter the images engraved there." (34) She is therefore compelled to keep up a long and painful dialogue with her father that revolves around the trivial events of their last hours together. She continues to argue with his ghost. In this habitual situation of being haunted she deploys the only real power that she has at her disposition which is the power of words. "My father," she writes, "has become an unredeemed ghost. I wish I could write ghost stories." (34) Her problem is aggravated by the fact that as a Jewess she is not entitled to the ritual outfit with which male Jews are provided within the Jewish tradition. According to the patriarchal rules, the prayer for the dead, the Kaddish is not to be recited by a female voice. Klüger tells the joke of a Jew who in the presence of his two daughters says to his male dog 'You are the only one around who'll be able to say kaddish for me.'

"If it were different, if I could mourn my ghosts in some accepted public way, like saying kaddish for my father, I'd have a friendlier attitude towards this religion, which reduces its daughters to helpmates of men and circumscribes their spiritual life within the confines of domestic functions. Recipes for gefilte fish are no recipe for coping with the Holocaust." (30)

Klüger describes the memorial sites of the death camps as a kind of bargain that the living offer to the ghosts of the dead. "Violated taboos turn their victims into spirits, whom we offer a kind of home that they may haunt us at will." (64) She herself trusts much more in words than in places. In her use of verbal magic, Klüger shifts between the religious and the poetic. She is well versed and acquainted with the magic potential of language which she had already relied on during the painful hours on the Appellplatz and later in the concentration camp Groß Rosen where she composed poems to shield herself from the ultimate terror with the help of words, sounds, rhymes and meter.

"Es sind Kindergedichte, die in ihrer Regelmäßigkeit ein Gegengewicht zum Chaos stiften wollten, ein poetischer und therapeutischer Versuch, diesem sinnlosen und destruktiven Zirkus, in dem wir untergingen, ein sprachlich Ganzes, Gereimtes entgegenzuhalten; also eigentlich das älteste ästhetische Anliegen" (deutsche Ausgabe 125).

(These are poems of a child who made use of regular patterns to create a counterpoint against chaos – a poetical and therapeutic attempt to confront the abyss of destruction with rhyme and structure -which is perhaps the most archaic function of art.)

Klüger meditates elsewhere on the strong bond between aesthetics and magic, art and ritual in playful words, addressing her readers directly, inviting them to engage with her in an interactive process: “Remembering is a branch of witchcraft; its tool is incantation. To conjure up the dead you have to dangle the bait of the present before them, the flesh of the living, to coax them out of their inertia. (...) If I succeed, together with my readers (...) we could exchange magic formulas like favorite recipes and season to taste the marinade which the old stories and histories offer us, in as much comfort as our witches’ kitchen provides.” (69)

In this passage, the difference between ghosts and spirits as lined out in the beginning, is clearly blurred. The passive memory, the pain of being haunted is answered by an active enterprise, by a self-made ritual that tries to overcome the trauma and prepare a way for therapeutic healing.

Bert Hellinger : Addressing the dead in psychotherapy

In the 1990s a new form of therapy was invented that claimed to be able to objectify, to externalize, to address and even to change deeply concealed memories. This form of therapy which today is used all over the world, is called ‚Aufstellung‘, (the German word contains semantic elements of ‚putting up‘, ‚staging‘, ‚summoning‘ and ‚mobilizing‘). The concept goes back to Bert Hellinger.⁵ In a room filled with other therapists who witness the process, the client is asked to stage his family by picking individual persons from the audience. The stage on which this is performed is an externalization of the psyche and mirrors a family constellation that includes both living and dead members. It is amazing that the persons who are in this way drawn into the dynamics of a family totally unbeknownst to them claim unanimously that on Hellinger's stage they feel connected to a strange flow of emotion circulating through the constellated group.⁶ By staging the genealogical relations in space

⁵ Bert Hellinger, geb. 1925, hat keine anerkannte Ausbildung zum Psychotherapeuten absolviert. Er war katholischer Ordenspriester und hat zehn Jahre in Südafrika gearbeitet. Zu seiner Biographie vgl. http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bert_Hellinger

⁶ Ilse Korte: Hellingers Geisterstunde. Die unheimlichen Verbindungen von Familienstellen, Schamanismus und Exorzismus, connection Juli/August 2001

Als Beispiel für einen positiv Beeinfluften zitiere ich aus dem Geleitwort von Haim Dasberg zu Bert Hellingers Buch "Rachel weint um ihre Kinder", das 2003 im Herder Verlag erschienen ist:

“Zum ersten Mal begegnete ich Bert Hellinger während des Europäischen Kongresses über die Folgen von Traumata in Maastricht im Jahre 1997.

Ich hatte auf diesem Kongress eine Arbeitsgruppe angeboten im Namen von AMCHA, dem "Nationalen Israelischen Zentrum für die psychosoziale Betreuung von Überlebenden des Holocaust und ihrer Nachkommen". Vor mir saßen alte Menschen, die als Kinder den Holocaust überlebt hatten, und ich sah ihre nicht enden wollende Trauer und ihren im Alter sich immer häufiger zeigender Zusammenbruch. Ich fragte mich dabei: Kann ihre traumatische Vergangenheit noch aufgearbeitet werden und ist das überhaupt therapeutisch

they are not only rendered accessible to a more than individual perception but can also be modified. The client who is asked to interact with his or her family members feels him or herself involved in a field charged with relations and emotions. The therapist acts as a stage director who moves the positions of the members of the constellation while asking questions and uttering commands.

Hellinger is indebted to systemic therapy which he has transformed from a synchronous to a diachronic model.⁷ In this way he changed a fundamental basis of the therapeutic system which was based on the individual within his or her lifespan. He does not only reckon with mutual relations but also with unilinear impressions and pressures emanating from absent and dead family members which may or may not have been known to the client. Staging the constellation creates an imaginary space in which such forms of impact can be identified and answered by symbolic action and liturgic speech. At this point the therapist turns into a guru and the therapy assumes the form of a shamanistic séance or ritual ceremony.

We may detect an interesting parallel in the change of a therapeutic model on the one hand and the new literary genre of German family novels on the other. Like the family novels, the family staging comprises a transindividual timespan of three (and sometimes more) generations which are interlocked in an ‚interactive field‘. Family memories and family secrets are the ties with which this three generational complex is held together.⁸ Knowledge

möglich und wünschenswert?

Während ich über dieses Dilemma nachdachte, wurde meine Aufmerksamkeit auf etwas gelenkt, das im daneben liegenden Hörsaal vor sich ging. Bert Hellinger zeigte dort eine Familienaufstellung.

Ich trat ein. Zuerst kam mir das alles seltsam vor. Dann geriet ich ins staunen und war am Ende bewegt.

Seitdem war ich bei vielen Familienaufstellungen anwesend und habe ihre Wirkung an mir selbst erfahren. Sie eröffnen einen Zugang zu lange eingefrorenen Gefühlen, die nach dem Verlust der vielen Angehörigen im Holocaust sich zeigen und gelebt sein wollten, die aber zurückgehalten und verdrängt wurden. Hier konnten sie auftauen und erfahren werden. Die toten Angehörigen kamen wieder in den Blick und die Liebe zu ihnen und die Trauer um ihren Verlust wurden tief gefühlt.

In den Aufstellungen werden diese Gefühle geachtet und dürfen sich zeigen. Am Ende sind die Lebenden mit den Toten und deren Schicksal versöhnt. Sie können ihm zustimmen, wie es war, jetzt nach 50 und noch mehr Jahren, wie in diesem Buch bei den Opfern und den Überlebenden des Zweiten Weltkriegs dokumentiert.

⁷ Hellinger geht bei seiner Therapie von bestimmten Grundannahmen aus. Dazu gehören voraussetzende ‚Ordnungen der Liebe‘, die archaischen Charakter haben und als überzeitlich wirksam zu respektieren sind. Die Toten haben nach diesem Modell Gewalt über die Lebenden, ihre Biographien, ihr früher Tod, ihre Schuld wirft einen Schatten auf das Leben der Nachgeborenen, auch wenn sie von diesen Biographien wenig oder nichts wissen. In der Aufstellung muß eine nicht beachtete Rangordnung wiederhergestellt werden, die vor allem ausgestoßene Familienmitglieder oder ehemalige Partner anerkennt und wieder integriert. (Bert Hellinger, *Ordnungen der Liebe*, 6. Aufl., Heidelberg 2000.)

⁸ Hier bietet sich auch der Begriff des ‚wissenden Feldes‘ an, das Informationen in unkodierter Form, also prä- und nonverbal über eine gemeinsame ‚Atmosphäre‘ vermittelt.

and half-knowledge create strong bonds, and it is often what is transmitted only indirectly and often unconsciously that shapes the intra-familial relations across the generations.

The therapeutic model of family staging is thus based on a trans-individualist concept of identity that privileges long-term generational integration over separation and confrontation. Individuals do not thereby give up their sense of distinction, but they accept also family influences as part of their identity. This change from a concept of the individual based on autonomy to a more integrated view may have its cause in the posttraumatic historical situation. We have come to be directed not only to the future but also toward the past and have learned to listen to the voices of ghosts. We are not only of the present but also of the past, even if it reaches us only in mediated forms. This past is obviously not yet totally 'past' but still active within us in various unacknowledged ways. We cannot open ourselves to the future without having listened to the voices of the past and having appeased the claims of the ghosts.

Part II : Photographs and Ghosts

A photograph makes two distinct statements: 'This was once there' and 'this is no longer here'. Though both messages are clearly related, they refer to two rather different functions. The first one is the *documentary function* of providing accurate evidence of an otherwise inaccessible past. The second one is the *memorial function* of providing an affective material trace of something that is absent or lost. I am concerned here mainly with the second function in which a moment is rescued from time, transition and forgetting to be transformed into a lasting monument that remains the object of continued attention and meditation. In the theoretical writings on photography, its close relationship to death has been frequently emphasized. The moment of shooting the photo is itself conceived as a 'shock' that produces an effect of mortification: it mutes and fixates the vibrant and bustling life, it freezes a moment which is thereby rescued from time, simulating a form of eternity.⁹

Marianne Hirsch has opened up a new approach to the memorial function of photography by investigating the context of traumatic family memory. In her book *Family Frames*, she has focused on photographs as stand ins of dead family members, and in particular of those whose

⁹ Roland Barthes, *Die helle Kammer. Bemerkungen zur Photographie*
Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, New York 1977

death is shrouded in some kind of trauma. Such 'memory icons' assume the character of a fetish, which means that the object itself, which is often the last material trace of a violently lost life, becomes the last piece of evidence that this person had ever existed. In these cases, the memorial function re-affirms the documentary function. In her research on Hirsch on family photos as props of family memory, Hirsch is interested in the forms of transmission and tradition which prolong an embodied memory beyond the limits of experiential memory, extending it to the second generation that has no empirical knowledge of the persons involved. To emphasize the importance of family photos as 'transitional objects' or 'missing links' that connect family members across generations, she has coined the term 'postmemory'.

“In my reading, postmemory is distinguished from memory by generational distance and from history by deep personal connection. Postmemory is a powerful and very particular form of memory precisely because its connection to its object or source *is mediated not through recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation*. This is not to say that memory itself is unmediated, but that it is more directly connected to the past. Postmemory characterizes the experience of those who grew up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events that can be neither understood or recreated.”¹⁰

¹⁰ Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames. Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory*, Cambridge, Mass. Harvard UP 1997, 22. The photo that is framed in a family context has a memorial value for those who know or knew the represented person. This memorial value is extended unto the next generation that becomes part of the framed context and shares the identity and story of the person via family narratives. Post-memory refers to this extended form of memory that stretches from the first and second to a third generation – provided that the context of living communication be maintained. For the younger members of the family, such photographs assume a ghost-like character because they are known without ever having been encountered.

Hirsch refers to two photographs in Art Spiegelman's *Maus* that crack up the frame of his graphic novel: the photo of his brother Richieu and his mother. The photos represent dead family members whose absence is strongly felt. Richieu is the elder brother who got lost and died in the Holocaust at the age of 4, his mother who had survived the Holocaust committed suicide when he was 16 years old. These persons who met a violent end are strongly highlighted as unique individuals because they have the only real faces in the comic. To preserve their shape and features is part of a memorial function which, however, no longer works in the context of a published comic book. With the publication, the family frame is broken; we no longer know these relatives and their stories.

Post-memory refers to the extension of the memorial value of photographs within the living context of a family narrative. Outside this frame, the memorial value extinguishes. This is the transition from the representation of a person to a ghost to a pure picture. If the photo is the only relict of a family member who died a violent death, this material object gains the additional value of a sacred aura. In this case, the photo itself becomes the replacement of the missing person, it assumes a ghostly presence.

In their primary memorial use, photos act as external props for an embodied memory; in their secondary use, which Hirsch calls ‘postmemory’, the photo is not only an externalized memory but an object that is re-embodied through conscious and unconscious forms of transmission. It becomes therefore a medium of memory, a memento, not only for those who maintain an embodied memory of the past but also for those who have acquired this memory via narratives or mute gestures in a shared living context. I want to discuss Hirsch’s concept of postmemory further by looking at a recent German family novel.

H.-U. Treichel, Der Verlorene

The novel by Hans Ulrich Treichel, *Der Verlorene* (*The Lost One*), deals with the life of a German refugee family after the Second World War in the 1950s.¹¹ It is told from the point of view of a son born after the war whose brother got lost when the family was fleeing from Poland.¹² The novel begins with the description of a photo-album which shows a picture of the lost elder brother

Arnold war ganz vorn im Photoalbum, noch vor den Hochzeitsbildern der Eltern und den Porträts der Großeltern, während ich weit hinten im Photoalbum war. (7-8)

(Arnold was on the first page of the family photo album, even before the wedding pictures of my parents and the portraits of the grandparents, while my place was in the far back of the album.)

The younger brother is barely visible and if so only in fragments on the tiny snapshots in the other end of the album. The photo-album belongs to the material items that Anne Fuchs has classified as ‘memory icons’, rightly emphasizing their central importance in the recent family novels.¹³ In Treichel’s novel, this memory icon inverts the order of the real: the absent son is highlighted in the center where he has an overwhelming presence, while the present son is (almost) absent from the photos. This inverted relationship accurately represents the way in which both brothers figure in the family consciousness and memory; the lost one holds a central place in the familial mourning, affection and longing, while the one who is actually

¹¹ Hans-Ulrich Treichel, *Der Verlorene*, Frankfurt a M, Suhrkamp 1998.

¹² Im Chaos von Flucht und Vertreibung verlieren viele Kinder ihre Eltern und zahllose Familien werden auseinandergerissen. Nach Kriegsende sucht jeder vierte Deutsche seine Angehörigen. Die Heimatortskarteien der Kirchen sind eine wichtige Hilfe bei der Suche. Sie spezialisieren sich auf vermisste Zivilpersonen.

¹³ Anne Fuchs Aufsatz über Monika Maron usw

While the genre of father-literature is based on a polemical dialogue with the father, the father in the family novels is no longer a real presence. He is dying or has died and is no longer available as an addressee for aggressive arguments and disdainful invectives. The memory icons become the substitute of dead and absent family members through which a belated form of communication becomes possible.

there is disregarded, neglected and almost invisible. The photo assumes a presence in itself, it becomes an idol, a magnet, a family fetish, which deprives the younger brother of a life of his own, leaving him with a diminished or ghostly presence.

The meaning of 'loss' with regard to the brother changes throughout the novel; the first version in which the narrator learns from his mother about these circumstances is that little Arnold died of hunger on the flight; in the second version, he learns that the brother was passed on to another refugee woman to be saved in a moment of extreme danger. This extreme danger which is not really made explicit might have been rape and murder; the parents survived the extreme danger at the high price of having been separated from their infant. The missing brother who has been given away precariously, is undead, he assumes the presence of a ghost; his loss is charged with feelings of shame and guilt which are transferred onto the second son who is raised in an oppressive emotional milieu.

Wohl spürte ich sehr genau, dass ich mich schuldig fühlte und dass ich mich schämte, aber es war mir gänzlich unerklärlich, warum 17-18

(I had a very precise feeling of guilt and shame, without, however, knowing exactly why.)

The novel tells the story of the search of the lost sibling who might have been found – the parents are informed about a ‚Findelkind 2307‘ who corresponds to the details of moment and place of transmission, but an absurd bureaucracy prevents the family from achieving its possible reunification. The fitting together of the family members has to follow the stern rules of anthropological science which gives Treichel an opportunity to emphasize the absurd continuity of Nazi genetics into the post war period.

In the process of this search, the precious picture of Arnold has to be transformed into a document. It has to be extracted from the album, a task performed by the mother with great anxiety.

Arnolds Photo aus dem Photoalbum war das einzige, was überhaupt von ihm existierte. Die Mutter löste es schweren Herzens aus dem Album. Würde es verloren gehen, wäre der ganze Arnold verloren. 63-64

(Arnold's photo was the only thing that existed of him. The mother detached it from the album with a grieving heart. Would it be lost, the whole of Arnold would be lost.)

In this scene, the photo changes its status from a memory icon to documentary evidence, it travels from the realm of memory to that of facts. The material loss of this photo would

amount to the death of the lost son. As evidence of the past, it proves to be rather deficient; the professional photographer who had come from the larger town Gastynin to the little Polish village Radowiec to take a picture of the first born, was careless with respect of the genetic identity markers, such as the shape of the ears:

Schließlich sollte das Photo ja auch keine Vorlage für ein Gutachten werden, sondern eine Erinnerung an den ersten Geburtstag des Kindes. (69)

(The photo, of course, was not designed to become part of a scientific report but meant as a souvenir of the first birthday of a child.)

After many formulas filled out and requests handed in, after the exchange of letters and finally a throughgoing medical examination of the family members, the professional assessment of the case is negative. After the death of the father, the narrator recognizes that for his mother he is no longer an individual living person but a ghost through which she recognizes the absent members of her family:

wenn sie mich wahrnahm, dann war es, als erblickte sie in mir nicht mich, sondern jemand anderen. 139 Ich spürte, dass sie in mir etwas erblickte, was sie verloren hatte. Ich erinnerte sie an den Vater. Und ich erinnerte sie auch an Arnold. 140

As the family reunion cannot be effected, the mother decides to at least catch an incognito glimpse of the child that has been denied her. The novel ends with an anonymous meeting in which the mother who is stuck in the past, fails to recognize her former child in the grown-up boy. The son on the contrary - is struck by a shock of recognition; he is suddenly confronted with his doppelganger, his ghostly other.

Als ich durch die Schaufensterscheibe das Findelkind 2307 sah, erschrak ich und bemerkte sofort, dass Heinrich (his new name) aussah wie ich. Ich sah im Laden mein eigenes, nur um einige Jahre älteres Spiegelbild, das gerade dabei war, eine Kundin zu verabschieden. 174

As the mother, however, has no impulses of recognition, the family returns and the melancholy search for the lost son is broken up at the very moment when their paths have finally crossed. Memory and the present, ghosts of the past and reality, Treichel seems to suggest, just cannot come together.

Christian Boltanski: Photographs as Memento Mori

I have introduced two functions of photography: the documentary function and the memorial function. In the last part of my presentation, I want to turn from literary texts to real images and look at the work of an artist who uses photographs as his central artistic medium. I am speaking of Christian Boltanski who has introduced a third function of photography which we can call the 'memento mori function'.¹⁴ To introduce this function, I can once more invoke a passage from Treichel's novel in which he comments on photography. The narrator has an appointment in a photographer's studio because his photograph is also needed in the lengthy administrative process of search and identification. Before he enters, he lingers to look at the photos in the showcase outside of the studio.

Ich hatte den Schaukasten immer als eine Art Pranger empfunden, der die Menschen vor aller Welt bloßstellte. ... Ich wusste nicht, was sie eigentlich bloßstellte, denn ganz offensichtlich waren sie nicht entblößt, sondern auf das beste gekleidet und frisiert. Und doch sah ich, wie die Zeit an ihnen fraß, wie die Kinder älter wurden und das Ehepaar alt. Wenn ich in den Schaukasten mit den Photos blickte, dann begriff ich, dass die Menschen sterben mussten. Und nicht nur das: oft sah ich sie jetzt schon als Tote, sie waren zu Tode frisiert, zu Tode gekleidet, zu Tode photographiert. Ich wollte nicht in den Schaukasten. 65

(I had always conceived of the showcase as a kind of pillory that exposed people. I wasn't sure what was exposing them or exposed of them – because they were not naked but well dressed and groomed. Yet I saw how time was eating them away... When I looked at the photos in the show case, I understood that human beings had to die. But not only that: I saw them often as the future dead, they were groomed to death, dressed to death, photographed to death. I did not want to end up in the showcase.)

Boltanski does not seem to be concerned with the documentary status of photographs, nor does he really engage in anything like a memorial project. Instead of memorializing, he makes us sharply aware of the futility of collective and cultural memorial practices and institutions. He collects documents to record the life of an unknown family, he creates archives of empty boxes, he mounts photographs of hundreds of anonymous people on the walls of his exhibitions. The acts of remembering and documenting and archiving are meticulously brought to the fore, but what they expose is less the process of remembering than forgetting. Boltanski exposes the photographs as ghostly remnants and revenants, devoid of a cultural or familial frame of remembering which is the necessary prerequisite of both memory and postmemory.

Boltanski works primarily with photographs from the private sphere, whether amateur shots or studio prints, that belong to the category of private or family photographs. His obsessive interest focuses on human faces; each photo stands for an individual life. Within Western

¹⁴ Roland Barthes, *Die helle Kammer*, 80.

culture the photograph is celebrated as the central medium that constructs and transmits personal identity. For one and a half centuries, the portrait photograph has been deemed capable of capturing the essence of individuality: the human visage. Photography as a cultural practice has been concerned with rescuing the ephemeral individuality of humans from the clutches of death.

It is this myth that Boltanski explodes in his installations. He often reworks and enlarges the original photos in such a way that their documentary value gets lost; the persons are less and less recognizable. Nothingness shimmers through the amorphous black and white grains; faces that can neither be identified nor recognized are thereby transformed into ghostly apparitions. We have seen in the case of postmemory, that the »memorial dimension« of photographs depends on their being embedded in a socio-communicative frame. Without such a family frame, photos cease to be props of memory. When they turn up at flea markets after the dissolution of a household or an estate, they provide evidence for only one thing: that the family memory, which had once framed and supported these photographs, has been dissolved. In other words: the document becomes a monument of forgetting. Boltanski shows that material perseverance in itself cannot secure a memorial function of the photo.

Boltanski's artistic use and recycling of family and portrait photographs emphasizes the erosion both of their documentary and memorial functions. What he highlights instead is their memento mori function. In spite of some more grotesque and even clownesques aspects, Boltanski has described himself – very much like W.G. Sebald - as a thoroughly melancholy artist. Like Treichel's narrator, he sees those photographed as eaten away by time, as future dead. Where he exhibits the faces of those about to die as in the school photos of Jewish children and youngsters, he creates for them a highly elegiac atmosphere of mourning. Where he exhibits faces of people who have already died, such as the dead Swizz, he anonymizes them and presents the faces in their overwhelming multitude which undermines the cultural hopes and promises of an afterlife of the individual. Boltanski collects and stages photographs which have irreversibly fallen out of the frames of family memory and are recurring as ghosts, flooding the cultural memory.

According to Zygmunt Baumann, until recently, the project of culture was to transform the transient into the permanent. The conditions necessary for such transubstantiation seem to be on the demise, despite the ever-expanding capacity for storage. Baumann speaks of the

present as a »Liquid Modernity«, where the desire for stability and memory flow into nothingness. Boltanski has located his art on exactly this threshold. With each new installation he points towards the contradiction inherent in the cultural imperative to remember and to overcome death on the one hand and the reality of universal mortality and general oblivion on forgetfulness on the other.

“Es ist ein Wunder: der Augenblick, im Husch da. Im Husch vorüber, vorher ein Nichts, nachher ein Nichts, kommt doch als Gespenst wieder und stört die Ruhe eines späteren Augenblicks.” (It is a matter for wonder: the moment that is here and gone, that was nothing before and nothing after, returns like a spectre to trouble the quiet of a later moment.)¹⁵ This motto of Nietzsche sums up rather well the various forms of ‘ghosting’ which I have dealt with in my paper. We have investigated cases in which something returns from the past from the dead, from the forgotten, from the unconscious, to assume a ghostly presence and haunt the quiet of a later moment. The carriers of such uncanny forgotten or unforgettable moments of the past were not only mental images and memories but also material images in the shape of photographs. Ruth Klüger developed verbal magic to exorcise her ghosts while a new form of family therapy transcends the temporal timeframe of the individual and deploys post- or rather pre-modern forms of ritual to address and answer the claims of the ghosts. Photographs, especially in the context of ‘post-memory’, can assume a ghostly presence in themselves, be they fetishised as in Treichel’s novel or vacated and thinned out as in Boltanski’s installations.

¹⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das Leben*, in Karl Schlechta, *Werke in Drei Bänden*, Bd.1, München: Hanser 1962, 211.