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Essay 2

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Nostalgic Photography

Nostalgia is in. There’s always some reboot or sequel of an older movie in theaters. Today’s fashion is composed of a lot of “retro/vintage” styles. Even major companies are using nostalgia as a tool in their marketing campaigns. People feel nostalgia, because the thing they feel nostalgic for is gone. It’s in the past and can’t be duplicated, at least not exactly. Thanks to the invention of the camera, we now have a way to capture a single moment in time and carry it with us in form of a photograph. Susan Sontag said it best in “On Photography,” that “photographs actively promote nostalgia” (538). The two photographs I took, “Stack of Books at the Bloomingdale Library” and “Monkey Bars in Central Park,” act as good examples of this as the subject of the photos are things usually associated with childhood. They’re also good examples of how a photo’s effectiveness in promoting nostalgia can sometimes be heavily dependent on the viewer.

Both photos have a similar theme. They’re pictures of things a lot of people are familiar with from childhood. “Stack of Books at the Library” has a stack of five children’s picture books on top of a shelf. The spines of the books are in focus, and in the background, there are other bookshelves out of focus. “Monkey Bars in Central Park” has a perspective view of the bottom of green and red monkey bars. In the background is a tree that’s almost perfectly centered between the beams of the monkey bars. The feeling of nostalgia I get when I look at these photos is a feeling a lot of other people will probably feel. General things, like a playground and a library, are universal elements of childhood. The use of universal elements is how companies are able to use nostalgia as a marketing tool, despite everyone having a different childhood.

A reason why I chose these photos is because the elements of the photographs, I feel, add to the theme. The perspective at which “Monkey Bars in Central Park” is taken is from a lower angle evoking a sense of smallness just like when you’re young everything feels a lot bigger than you. It turns the monkey bars into this looming, intimidating structure or, for the more adventurous children, a thrilling challenge.  Another element is the centered tree in the background. The way the parallel bars get smaller as they go off into the distance ending in in the tree at the end, allude to the passage of time and aging.

“Stack of Books at the Bloomingdale Library” does a similar thing using depth of field, however, it adds to the punctum. I really enjoy reading and when I was younger books made me really excited. I would completely space out from the world when I read, an idea I feel is mirrored in the blurring of the background and focus of the foreground, the stack of books. Another thing is the books themselves. Their published dates range from 1989 to 2014, and a lot of them are books I read when I was young. This is where we can start to see how a photo’s effectiveness at promoting nostalgia is dependent on the viewer.

Sontag says, “photographs give people...possession of a past that is unreal”, and given our inability to travel through time, that means photographs hold power (533). A limiting factor on that power, however, is the level to which the viewer can relate to the photograph. Previously, I spoke about specific details in “Stack of Books at the Bloomingdale Library” and how those details made me nostalgic. Someone who, for example, hated libraries or never really enjoyed reading is not going to have the same reaction I do when I look at that picture. This is to be expected since the punctum of a photo is individualistic.

Barthes says, “the photograph mechanically repeats what could never be repeated existentially,” and I truly believe that this is concept is the driving force as to why photography encourages nostalgia (4). When we look at a photo of something from our past (or related to our past) we are reminded that we can’t travel back in time and swing on those same monkey bars or read those books for the first time. One could consider taking a picture of a childhood event, as giving that moment immortality (Sontag 535). Nostalgia offers comfort and familiarity that helps us cope with our own mortality, and photography is the easiest/most accessible medium to do that.

Works Cited

Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography.* Translated by Richard Howard, 1980, Hill and Wang, 2010.

Sontag, Susan. “On Photography.” Susan Sontag: Essays of the 1960s & 70s, edited by David Rieff, The Library of America, 2013, pp 531-39. openlab.citytech.cuny.edu/scanlan-english-1101-d333-spring2018/files/2018/03/Sontag-On-Photography.pdf. Accessed 22 May 2018.