

# Photoliterary Memoryscape of Tomas Espedal: *Mitt privatliv* (2014) – a Starting Point in a Journey to One's Past

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*Abstract:* Photography is inextricably coupled with temporal conditions. It is rooted in the past while concurrently referring to the recipient's present and future. This article sheds light on the connection between photography, literature, and memory in Tomas Espedal's photo book *Mitt privatliv* (2014; *My private life*). The central perspective of this paper is devoted to the link between the lyrical subject's autobiographical memory and the individual memory of the reader. My goal is to analyze how the reader finds their point of view while confronted with the lyrical subject's memoryscape from aesthetic, anthropological, and cognitive perspectives. Firstly, I discuss the form of Espedal's *Mitt privatliv* and the book's potential liberatic character. Secondly, in reference to François Soulages and John Berger, I show how the correlation between texts and photography affects memory functioning in a photobook. Finally, I focus on the mechanisms of autobiographical memory, or, more precisely, how the subject's and recipient's memories relate to the book's physicality, structure, and the interplay between the word and photography. Looking through the lenses of Paul Ricœur, Aleida Assmann, and the social-communicative functions of memory, it turns out that *Mitt privatliv* is not just a created and closed story of a single subject; it is a story that stimulates the reader's memory and thus impacts their understanding and constitution of their "self" in both individual and collective contexts.

## Introduction

Visual culture is one of the defining concepts of our times (Bal 2003). Its study is not limited to images or media but extends to everyday practices of seeing and showing (Mitchell 2002, 170). The society we live in

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is both exhibitionistic and voyeuristic, we share meanings through images, and images can only be interpreted because we are ready for them as recipients (Sztompka 2012, 13–4). Behind the image is an author who provides its meaning; whose goal is either expressive (inducing a particular experience) or communicative. The reader, however, discovers the meaning in the act of interpretation. Nowadays, image – especially photography – is inseparable from our everyday life. Nevertheless, from its very beginning, photography posed a perceptual challenge. As pointed out by Susan Sontag (2005, 94–5), it both objectifies and subjectifies the world, serves documentary, entertainment, and aesthetic functions, is a memory medium, and a vital element of the new hybrid photo-texts.<sup>1</sup> Approaching the latter type of work is challenging as we cannot always determine which of the two – the text or the image – is dominant. It is also not always necessary; after nearly two hundred years of literature’s hegemonic role over photography, the position of photography has significantly strengthened. Photography often incorporates word, creating an equal relationship between the two mediums.

Tomas Espedal’s *Mitt privatliv* (2014; *My private life*), without a doubt, fits into this category because it is not only an example of the word and photography’s coexistence in a single work but also a genre experiment. The book resembles a photo album or – more precisely – a photobook.<sup>2</sup> The author himself plays a double role of writer and photographer. Moreover, as suggested by the title, Espedal is balancing a fine line between the intimate and the public. This dualistic approach to sharing private life is expressed in statements such as these: “Fotografiet sier: du eier ingenting. // Fotografiet sier: Det finnes ikke noe privatliv” [The photograph says: you own nothing. // The photograph says: There is no private life] (Espedal 2014, 129). From a sociocultural perspective, it is difficult to disagree with the author – making images public is only the beginning, especially for images that are the source of knowledge about our everyday life. Publicizing initiates interaction, in which images become part of the social system. Notice, that contemporary life makes sense when shared and experienced with others (Bogunia-Borowska 2012, 81–2). The following quotes from Espedal’s book, in this context,

- 1 For more on new literary and photographic forms, see Marta Koszowy (2014).
- 2 *Mitt privatliv* is also labeled as a photonovel, photobook, and photopoetry (Rustad 2017a, 104–6). Hans K. R. Rustad himself labels texts that accompany photographs as poems. I agree with him, which is why instead of speaking about the narrator of *Mitt privatliv* I use the term “lyrical subject.”

sound quite paradoxical: “Fotografiet sier: Det har vært, sånn var det, det er over”) [The photograph says: It has been, it was like that, it is over] and “Fotografiet viser alltid begynnelsen til noe nytt” [The photograph always shows the beginning of something new] (2014, 128, 130). The former suggests the work is a closed, finished history, plausibly inaccessible to anyone outside. In other words, the book-album held in the passive reader’s hands is just a very intimate and aesthetically attractive (auto) biography, more or less (re)created life story. The latter quote, however, indicates the work is open, both in terms of the lyrical subject’s situation, form, and in its openness to the reader.

Given the fact that already the title, which contains the word “life,” refers to one’s past and that the book consists of photographs – intuitively understood as a material imprint of the past – it is a quite obvious choice to take a closer look at the mnemonic character of *Mitt privatliv*. The question is to what degree the recipient, the reader, can become a part of the lyrical subject’s memoryscape and to what extent another person’s past can impact our comprehension of the past. In this paper, I would like to discuss how the subject’s autobiographical memory can be linked to the individual memory of the reader and, if there is a connection between these two, how such highly personal and private phenomena work in a larger context. By larger context, I mean reading Espedal’s project from aesthetic, anthropological, and cognitive perspectives. I take his book is an example, a starting point for understanding how an active reader, burdened with his memory, finds him/herself in such a space. To do so, I need to examine three levels of *Mitt privatliv* as a whole: the book, its content, and its structure alongside the book’s genre. The second step in getting closer to the mechanism of memory is to explain the correlation between photography and text, and their connection to temporality or, more precisely, to the past. The penultimate section is devoted to the mechanisms of autobiographical memory from psychological, philosophical, and aesthetic perspectives. In it, I show how autobiographical aspects of the subject’s and recipient’s memory relate to the book’s physicality, structure, and the interplay between the word and photography are identified. I dedicated the last section to more general remarks and reflections about the universal nature of Espedal’s project.

Besides, I refer to both – the author and the lyrical subject – consciously, following Hans Kristian R. Rustad, who pointed out that while it is hard to deny *Mitt privatliv* has autobiographical aspects, Espedal’s surname does not appear in the book (Rustad 2017a, 106–8). Identifying

the subject with the author is secondary. I am more interested in the universal mechanisms of the memory space in such works as *Mitt privatliv* and the prospects for individual usage of someone's photos and accompanying paratexts to inspire self-reflection in the recipient is the primary focus. This context is also distinct from Rustad's, who focused on the book's structure, autobiographical context, and the correlations between text and photographs.

### **About *Mitt privatliv* and its mnemonic potential**

The relationship between literature and photography has been present in theoretical reflection since the very invention of the latter. For decades, the word dominated this relationship and viewed photography as a motive, figure, or metaphor. Currently, each element has an autonomous status, and the linkage between them is balanced. More and more often literature incorporates a photographic medium, while photography incorporates the word or larger text fragments.<sup>3</sup> This vast and constantly growing potential of coexistence forces researchers to seek new theoretical tools. For instance, we can use general categories like intersemioticity, intermediality, or transmediality. Among aesthetic theories, the photo-textuality approach seems especially accurate. Unni Langås – referring to Alex Hughes and Andrea Noble (2003), and Marius Wulfsberg (2007) – notices that literature can incorporate photography, but it can also incorporate the idea of photography. Both refer to different sign systems and communication methods, and their combination emphasizes added value. Such a phototextual juxtaposition can be based on associations carried by each medium, as well as on the complex whole of their motives and approaches to time (Langås 2016, 99–100). Rustad, in comparison, narrows down his reflection to the relationship between poetry and photography, known as photopoetics. Discussing how the two correlate, he divides photopoetic poetry into photographic ekphrasis, photolyric, and photographic lyric (2017b, 25–32).<sup>4</sup>

3 For a concise discussion on the association between literature and photography, see Mats Jansson (2020, 9–13), and for a detailed examination, see François Brunet (2009). The latter describes the development of both media from the perspective of photography and photographers, which brings a new quality to historical discussions, previously focused on the literary medium (Koszowy 2013, 11–13).

4 He also uses these concepts in his analysis of *Mitt privatliv*.

As I already mentioned, it is difficult to say what genre *Mitt privatliv* represents. From the point of view of this article, I lean to identify Espedal's book as a literary instance of a "photobook" and a family album. I explore this in more detail in Section 3, in which I describe the interplay between photography, text, and the past.

But first, let us focus on the book's visual aspects and the nonlinearity with which the piece of the author/subject's history is presented. The book comprises of 122 analogue color and black-and-white photographs (snapshots) of family, friends, places, and objects, all captured with an element of privacy. Photographs are accompanied by captions and additional texts, which Rustad calls aphorisms and *langdikt* [long poems], with a philosophical and self-referential tinge aimed primarily at visual perception (2017a, 104–6). Among depicted family members are the author's father and children – Amalie and Henriette, the daughter of author's deceased ex-wife, Agnete. Among the objects and buildings are the apartment, house, *hytte* [cabin], and hotel rooms in which the author/subject stayed during his travels to Spain, Italy, Greece, and Germany. In one of the photographs, we can see the back of the ex-girlfriend Silje alongside objects and places associated with her. The variation of motives is large through everyday activities, workplaces, growing children, travels, death, and passing. This indicates the intimacy and emotional load behind the snapshots and words, but also universalism – *Mitt privatliv* shows life and its aspects that many readers can relate to through their own experience.

Another important element is time. It is directly related to the snapshots' captions and indirectly to the aphorisms and philosophy-rich reflections of the subject. The subject's history is not presented in a linear fashion. While all photographs have accompanying information about the depicted places and persons, many lack timestamps. Often, if there are timestamps, their succession is not consecutive. Various kinds of anachronies, e.g., ellipsis, force us to seek different orders, and other kinds of connections between photographs. It appears most photographs are connected through motifs and themes. For instance, the photographs of the house in Ask, in which the subject spent the best years of his life but which never became his permanent home: on one page we see the house as it was in 2006 – inhabited, and on the other we see the same house abandoned in 2011 (Espedal 2014, 38–9). Such a structure gives us an important clue about the mnemonic potential of *Mitt privatliv* – we are dealing with the past that is immortalized in

photographs, with snapshots full of memories that provoke the subject to deepen his reflection, a reflection that is made available to readers via notes accompanying the photographs. Those snapshots depict pieces torn from the subject's life. Even if, to some extent, depicted situations are stylized (e.g., photographs of desks), this fragmentary nature of the photographs corresponds well with the fragmentary nature of memory. The subject reassembles these captured memories into a new, non-linear narrative of the life that passed, thus challenging the recipient to navigate a rather unpredictable ground of the author's/subject's biography.

### *Mitt privatliv as an (liberatic) experience?*

We have to add more to our understanding of *Mitt privatliv* as a literary photobook/a family album, to avoid omitting the meaning behind its peculiar edition. The visual layer of Espedal's book is directly related to its structure and content. Viewing the book as a whole, taking all of its materiality into account (the layout of the text, font and color decisions, the fabric of the book), brings to mind the concept of *liberature* or rather – of the book's *liberatic character*.<sup>5</sup> The idea of liberature was formulated by the Polish creator and theoretician, Zenon Fajfer in 1999. Its main idea rests on the fact that the physicality of a book is meaning-creating: the shape, volume, cover, materials used, typography, illustration arrangement, all of these factors contribute to the meaning conveyed by the book.

The concept of liberature can be understood as an interpretative guideline or – as noted by Wojciech Kalaga – “an umbrella term that merges the meaning of the Latin *liber* as *free* with that of a *book*: it thus connotes both creative freedom and the sense of the book as a material object in the message (but also *liber* as artistic *scales* – ‘writing as weighing of letters’)” (2010, 9). Liberature considers text in its totality (Kalaga 2010, 15). The status of the visuality and semantics of the language is made equal. This opens new reception and interpretation possibilities – a person reading is no longer just an external observer, as “the reader of liberature, to a greater or lesser degree, becomes an interactive and aleatory recipient” (Kalaga 2010, 19). In the most comprehensive English publication

<sup>5</sup> By viewing *Mitt privatliv* through the lenses of liberature, I follow Marta Koszowy, who advises such an approach in the context of photoliterary works (2014, 262).

devoted to liberature, Katarzyna Bazarnik explains that Fajfer viewed the book as “a space to be traversed; a space that offers the reader the opportunity to choose an individual textual path” (2016, 45). To include images, photos, varied typography, and paratexts in work is to place them in “a multimodal information system that is activated by the reader in a non-trivial effort to maintain order during reading” (2016, 163).<sup>6</sup>

How the reader experiences Espedal’s book depends on their attentiveness to meanings emerging from the interplay between the book’s content and physicality. The book has an unusual size (28x21.5cm) and a thought-out graphic structure. The cover itself indicates the minimalist nature of the edition – the title at the top is on a gray background, with a clearly palpable texture and a color photograph in a white frame below. The author’s name is at the bottom, in the same font as the title. The photography – also used inside the book (Espedal 2014, 50) – contrasts with the rest of the space, kept in a consistent color tone. The central place of the photograph is occupied by a desk, on which we find an abundance of items: books, magazines, CDs, glasses, empty cups, stationery, a typewriter, and Espedal’s lamp, once belonging to his mother. The photograph gives an impression of being stylized as the desk appears ordered, but upon a closer look, surprising details are noticed. Books to the right and in the center are in disarray. The scissors and the adhesive tape lie near a notebook resembling a photo album roughly A4 sized – with a color photograph taped onto a dark cover. The book also includes this photograph (Espedal 2014, 78). Such a type of self-referential metafiction resembles the visual technique of *mise en abyme*, indicating possible meaningful depth in the structural layer and content. The photo album is a recurring motif in *Mitt privatliv*, a point to which I return in the third section.

The title and author’s name are repeated on the second page, with black font on a white background placed within the top and bottom margins. The rest is empty space. It builds a tension of expectation, encouraging the reader to fill the space with their imaginings. The first page, on the other hand, is left-aligned, with vertically-oriented text

<sup>6</sup> Because of the difficulty in answering just how encompassing is the category of liberature, the unclear criteria that a particular book has to meet to be considered an instance of liberature, I prefer to speak about books’ *liberatic character*. In this sense, a book can be more or less liberatic, depending on specific aspects of its text’s totality. This approach to liberatic interpretation was recently argued for and popularized by Agnieszka Przybyszewska (2015, 13).

and enjambed lines. The central part of the book, per page, consists of a single photograph at the top and two horizontally oriented texts at the bottom. Text is placed in two columns. The left includes the author's ruminations and the right comprises the photograph's caption. Due to the layout and small font size (in comparison to the photographs), the white, empty background consumes a lot of space. This invisible semantic space could – from the liberatic point of view – be filled by the reader, similar to the Norwegian *punktroman* [punctual novel] (see Zańko 2015). The central part of the book is closed with a final page of vertically arranged text and enjambed lines. These opening and closing pages are the beginning and the culmination of a story, which starts with the subject's first camera and parents, mainly the mother who created family albums in her free time. The subject admits that he learned photography and writing the way she did. She manually cropped – cut off fragments of – photographs: "Hun klippet // og limte og sydde; hun klippe tog sydde sammen en verden som så ut // slik hun ville at verden skulle se ut (...)" [She cut // and glued and sewed; she cut and stitched together a world that looked // the way she wanted the world to look] (Espedal 2014, 9).

The antepenultimate page contains an apparent ending, with information about the subject's attitude towards the camera he used to take photographs for the book and about the camera model itself, as well as a more general reflection on the nature of photography (Espedal 2014, 133). On the second to last page are a monochrome self-portrait from 1999 and a caption, while the final page includes vertically oriented details about sources of quotes, a dedication to his mother, Else Marie Espedal, and a thank you note to everyone he photographed. Two things stand out here. First, the structure is circular: the self-portrait's date coincides with the date of the first photograph in the book of the subject's daughter. This detail is especially significant as not all photographs have dates, and their arrangement in the book is not entirely chronological with numerous anachronies. Disrupting the chronology of presented events and persons, and intertwining photographs of situations and people with photographs of subject's workplace is likely to surprise the recipient, who is accustomed to reading continuous stories rather than coherent but fragmentary narratives. Because of the liberatic character of the work, the way the content is organized suggests that the author deliberately allows for a kind of unconstructed reading. The reader can freely choose where to start or end their reading – all they have to do



is to give new meanings to artistic content included in the book.<sup>7</sup> The only explicit order is marked by the first and the last (self)portrait of the subject.

Another important interpretative clue is the wholistic – in liberatic terms, *total* – outlook on the layout of the text and photographs. Columned texts match the horizontal orientation of the remaining fragments in a way that resembles a frame. This quadrangle is missing its top edge, which indicates *Mitt privatliv* actually pretends to be an open work – open to new meanings and, perhaps, to different ways readers can continue the story. The back cover is crucial for this perspective which includes the only horizontal text at the top of the whole book besides the title on the front page. The surprising part here is the handwriting on the back cover, as most of the remaining texts are typed with a very consistent font, the only difference noted in the smaller font used for captions. Along with the usage of the photograph on the cover and the photograph in it, such artistic choices arise from the subject's motivation. As he explains on page 116, he takes photographs to find solitude and silence that he can then translate into words.<sup>8</sup> On the one hand, such a structure makes the work metafictional, multilayered whole; on the other, it invites the reader to come back, stop at key fragments, reflect on the meanings behind words and images, and try to decipher the author's/subject's code. This type of activity, just like interacting with the complexity of *Mitt privatliv's* visual-textual structure, resembles Fajfer's *travestiation of space* and emphasizes the individual character of the reader's every interaction with the book. The subject's words "it is over", then, are in fact inviting the reader to enter this space, both through the experience of the book's physicality as well as its photo-literary content, from which the reader – as I will argue later – can draw

7 We will see later how this freedom is funded by the psychology of reading. On a related note, Sontag seems skeptical about photographs in book, album-like, format: "Still, the book is not a wholly satisfactory scheme for putting groups of photographs into general circulation. The sequence in which the photographs are to be looked at is proposed by order of pages, but nothing holds readers to the recommended order or indicates the amount of time to be spent on each photograph" (2005, 3). Nevertheless, such a lack of reading scheme can be an advantage from the perspective of liberature.

8 Such a message is consistent in yet another sense. Photographs of desks and tables with typewriters and handwritten pages show that the author/subject creates literature, as they include references to titles of Espedal's books.

on the subject's experiences, despite their seemingly closed, highly private nature.

### **Photography and text as the way to one's memory**

When considering links between photography, text, memory, and reception, one should not ignore the importance of photographs' contents and the genre of the work, but closely examine the photographs. They are snapshots, instances of amateur photography, with a quite straightforward visual style. Their intimate social function typically results from the fact that "the subject generally has considerable personal or emotional significance for the photographer, and the photographer maintains this emotional emphasis on the subject by circulating the image within a distinctly private, often familial sphere of consumption" (Zuromskis 2009, 53). This is suggested by the title of the book, as snapshots are by definition, for private use at home, among relatives. It is interpretatively useful, then, to consider *Mitt privatliv* as both a literary photobook and a family album. The term "photobook" draws attention to the literary aspect of Espedal's project and the term "family album" points us to snapshots' intimate, private use. As noted by Jorun Larsen, photo album practice does not impose any strict limits, despite the tradition and culture behind the photo album idea being stable across decades. When we create an album, we can write our history how we want (2021, 27). This is the case with Espedal – by breaking linearity and selecting a particular set of photographs, he creates a variant of the subject's story.

When it comes to family albums, not just albums themselves, but already their creation is a way of understanding and acknowledging time as well as oneself in and through time. It is an opportunity to provide order to our existence, create connections, tell stories, and embed oneself into a greater context (Sandbye 2015, 40–1). Both this broader context and the already mentioned process of making photographs public (itself a part of the communication act) show the social dimension of album-making. Espedal's intimate photographs and notes have become part of this communicative chain, not simply as an aesthetically pleasing record of someone's past. As pointed out by Mette Sandbye: "We need to be aware of the importance of considering the emotional aspects of family photography, its function as a social tool, the personal creation of identity, culture, and history, as well as the more

sociological and ideological aspects of the material” (2014, 15). And while the very type of photography used in *Mitt privatliv* classifies the book into an ordinary<sup>9</sup> – not to say, cliché – discourse (see L. Berger 2011), it has a highly individual, personified character.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, the album – understood as an art of living – can be used for reflection as a sincere, anecdotal collection of lived lives and a source for communication (Larsen 2021, 27).

What is the role of text in Espedal’s album? Words, narratives, or any other form of the story place photographs in context, allowing the memory to be activated (Lien and Nielssen 2021, 44–5). This rather intuitive need for contextualization is present, among others, in Walter Benjamin’s writings. For Benjamin, the writing of history does not rely on linear storytelling, as history does not split into smaller stories. The writing of history relies on images. In his remarks about photography, he also emphasizes that photography requires “Beschriftung” [inscriptions] (Benjamin 1999, 527). It can show details that would be ignored otherwise. Photographs show the experienced world – in new ways, and the literalization of photography makes this new way comprehensible (Rustad 2017b, 20–1; Grøtta 2012). John Berger emphasizes in *About Looking*: “Yet, unlike memory, photographs do not in themselves preserve meaning. They offer appearances – with all the credibility and gravity we normally lend to appearances – prised away from their meaning” (J. Berger 2011, 55). By itself, photography cannot explain anything, but it can be an inexhaustible invitation for thinking, speculating, and fantasizing (Sontag 2005, 17). Even though they are originally two separate beings, the word and photography can enrich each other. When they meet in a single work, they open new possibilities and creative space – the book (Soulages 2012, 317).

François Soulages’ observations about the aesthetics of photography, its infinite potential, and its openness to other artforms, fit perfectly with Espedal’s *Mitt privatliv*. In *Esthétique de la photographie* (1998), Soulages asks about the status of photography as art and considers it a mixture, as

- 9 When we think about snapshots today, we usually refer to digital photographs disseminated using social media (see Sandbye 2015). Espedal, however, focuses on tradition, on analog photography.
- 10 The handwriting on the back cover, while without the company of any photograph, not only provides specific meaning to our looking at the book because, as noted by Ágnes Berezcz: “[handwritten notes], like signatures, also authenticate the half-empty image and function as devices of personalization” (2010, 160).

it combines irreversibility with being incomplete. This is not about the reproduction. It is the openness resulting from photography's materiality (e.g., the possibility of working with the negative or of showing a photograph to other people) that leads to incompleteness and allows for hybridization (2012, 157–9). What then happens when photography and literature are combined? Soulages refers to the concept of photoliterature, i.e., the work of art not as a sum of photography and literature but as their child – something independent, with its own laws and principles. There is also a special kind of photoliterature: when the photographer and the writer are the same person. Soulages gives an example of Duane Michals, artist photographer who combines photography with writing and literature, and calls himself a writer (2012, 308–9). Tomas Espedal is just like Michals – “jeg er en forfatter som fotograferer” [I am a writer that takes pictures] (2014, 18). Photography comes to the rescue when the subject lacks words to describe reality.

The meaning-giving process does not end with the writer-photographer. Soulages refers to John Berger and Roland Barthes when he states the moment captured in photography gains its meaning because *the viewer* can read it in a period exceeding this moment. Believing photography creates meaning is ascribing the past and future to it. A key point to remember here is that the meaning is never given once and for all (Soulages 2012, 306–8). In Soulages' view, photography is something infinite, both materially (the process of developing photographs) and ontologically (the not-finished place). We have to also remember that since the twentieth century, photography – especially album and documentary photography – has served as a visual equivalent of everyday-life memory (Michalowska 2014). As noted by Astrid Erll, photography as a memory medium constructs versions of, rather than reflects, past reality. Photography is essentially non-narrative. This function results from the aforementioned contextualization/literalization or, in her words, narrative contextualization (2011, 135). And while the photograph itself has no memory, without the photograph there would be no remembrance of the captured scene (J. Assmann 2011, 233–4). Considering *Mitt privatliv* a literary photobook and therefore at the same time something private and part of a social communicative act, we see that the photographs require verbal contextualization in order to fulfil their memory-forming role. How can this remembrance arise? How can it be understood, interpreted, and become a part of a larger memory process of both the subject and the recipient?

**Between the subject, photography, and the reader –  
mechanisms of autobiographical memory in *Mitt privatliv***

This temporal aspect brings us closer to the problem of memory in *Mitt privatliv*, with a particular emphasis on the reader's role. As argued in photo album theories, photography becomes a tool for building individual and collective biography (Szczypiorska-Mutor 2016, 129). To extract individual (auto)biographical memory, I will combine psychological, philosophical, and aesthetic approaches to mechanisms controlling the memory.

While memory is linked to temporality, it is not continuous; it is fragmentary and depends on multiple factors. Just as a photograph captures a particular moment in time, a remembrance refers to a particular fragment of reality. A remembrance can later be expanded to a broader, more coherent context. Annette Kuhn writes, “memories evoked by a photo do not simply spring out of the image itself, but are generated in an intertext of discourses that shift between past and present, spectator and image, and between all these and cultural contexts, historical moments. In all this the image figures largely as a trace, a clue: necessary, but not sufficient, to the activity of meaning-making; always signaling somewhere else. Cultural theory tells us there is little that is really personal or private about either family photographs or the memories they evoke: they can mean only culturally” (2003, 397). The photograph, thus, is a catalyst that can move from the individual to the collective, socially and culturally determined level.

Deeper understanding of memory workings in *Mitt privatlit*, begins at the individual level. Regardless of whether we identify the book's lyrical subject with the author, the texts in the book clearly have an I-oriented perspective, since their author is the photographer, creating an (auto)biographical memory. Generally speaking, in *Mitt privatliv* construction processes and experiences undergo (re)interpretation. I understand the biography is a description of life or its fragments, an interpretation of individual's fate, and the autobiography as a special type of biography (Każmierska, Czapliński, and Julkowska 2014). Both relate to individual and collective memory, an idea to which I will return later. The way it is created is key, as this creation relates to how memory is activated. Autobiographical memory depends on two basic psychological systems of long-term memory, famously studied by Endel Tulving (1972), namely the episodic (memory of events in our life) and the semantic memory (our conceptual knowledge about the world). Biographical

elements obviously play a central role in autobiographical memory, but not the only one. Photographs in *Mitt privatliv*, although devoid of memory, interact with the memory of the subject. They provoke and release the subject's memories transforming him into *homo memoriens* (Rydz 2010, 397). Such memory triggering would not be possible without investment in photographs and other artifacts (J. Assmann 2011, 233). In a sense, the creation of a photo album, an attempt to organize and describe captured moments, i.e., a re-confrontation, may be characterized as *anámñēsis*. The latter concept has been used in various contexts throughout the centuries (see Jarzyna and Kuczyńska-Koschany 2014), but here I understand it in the Aristotelian fashion. *Anámñēsis* is a conscious act resulting from human effort of recollection, a personal rediscovering process that happens per *homo memoriens'* will, and their need to keep something or someone in their memory and be able to recall images of those things or persons in the future (Dessingué 2010, 10–1). *Anámñēsis* in the Aristotelian sense resembles Aleida Assmann's idea of "Ich-Gedächtnis" [I-memory], a verbal, declarative and active kind of autobiographical memory (2006, 119–24). To recall the past with I-memory one must appeal to language and reason (Hirsch 2012, 211).

The opposite of *anámñēsis* is *mnēmē*. It is an involuntary, passive, and usually unexpected sensation arising from having contact with a stimulus. Such type of memory is related to what is hidden in our consciousness, which is why it can affect us anywhere and at any time. Almost any stimuli can cause *mnēmē*: places, written words, photographs, but also sounds, smells, or inputs from other senses. Mnemic remembrance, then, is a simple associative evocation, a kind that is close to the imagination (Jarzyna and Kuczyńska-Koschany 2014). Bodily response to *mnēmē* is not only passive but also affective. To experience *mnēmē* is to feel something, with no additional effort needed. Affects impact all cognitive processes, from perception, reasoning, and decision-making, all the way up to how we view and interact with other agents (Hirsch 2012, 211–2; Nader 2014). They provide basic emotional coloring to our conscious experiences, which is crucial for consolidating memory traces, allowing for remembering events as either positive or negative (see also Erlil 2011, 86–87). *Mnēmē*, then, roughly responds to what Assmann calls "mich-Gedächtnis" [me-memory], expressed as "to be reminded of something." This is opposite to the I-memory mentioned above, which expresses "to remember something" (2006, 119–24; J. Assmann 2011, 233).

How do we relate both functions of autobiographical memory to *Mitt privatliv*? Considering the relationship between anámñēsis and mnēmē, Paul Ricœur emphasizes the role that temporal distance plays in the act of remembering (*mnēmoneuein*). Simple memory (*mnēmē*) arises as an affect, while anamnesis is an active search. The elapse of time (*prin khronisthēnai*) between the initial impression and its return allows *mnēmoneuein* to take place (Ricœur 2012, 31). Therefore, as Espedal's photographer-writer looks for photographs for his album, he is suddenly confronted with a stimulus. Mnemic memories – both positive (birth, meetings with friends, travels) and negative (mourning for the loss of a loved one) – transform into a state of active recollecting, anamnesis. I consider the latter the most essential form of individual memory in *Mitt privatliv*. Selecting and reflecting, *homo memoriens* sorts his memories or recollections. The passage of time is not just about touching the past and the present, but also about the creative act itself, e.g., arranging photographs in a specific order. Moreover, this is a verbal activity, since when the work of memory is finished, it results in texts accompanying the photographs.

These mechanisms also relate to the act of reception (reading *Mitt privatliv*). Taking into account the dual nature of (auto)biographical memory, the subject responds to two needs. He locates himself in space (Kaźmierska, Czaplinski, and Julkowska 2014) and updates his own sense of self – his identity. In this case it is crucial to consider research on the psychology of reading. Already in the late 1980s, Uffe Seilman and Steen F. Larsen (1989) pointed towards the role of memories generated while reading a literary text. Their research indicates that the reader takes on an active role – their memory is mobilized and they are personally involved in the text, i.e., the phenomenon of personal resonance takes place (see Andringa 2004). The recipient – more or less consciously – seeks similarities between what they read and their “self,” the context of their lives and proximate culture (see Kuzmičová & Bálint 2019). We can call this seeking a self-referencing process. Both personal resonance and self-referencing are impacted by a readers' emotions (Miall 2011). These effects indicate that what one reads directly influences how one experiences one's past and present. The psychological aspects of reading, and thus the possibility of activating one's own autobiographical memory, emphasize the individual character of traversing over *Mitt privatliv* in the liberatic sense. Lyrical subject's notes (aphoristic comments mentioned earlier) will broaden the context of understanding the depicted situations on any page we open. For instance, if we stop at a photo of a

family member, we perceive it and/or read the note, and begin to empathize with the subject, his joy, and pain after losing a loved one, and at the same time, we recall our own experiences and memories. The same applies to holidays, journeys, and family meetings shown in the book. The reader is hit with a stimulus and starts to recall their past. This work of memory often results in details that may come to mind in the form of a mix of feelings, images, and sensations (Conway 2001, 9563–4). This is how we actually fill in the “open” spaces in *Mitt privatliv*, enriching them with our own life stories. Additionally, we can also choose to open only those pages of the book which we associate with good, emotionally positive moments and by doing so reinforce specific fragments of the narrative of our life.

Rüdiger Pohl stresses that the social-communicative functions of autobiographical memory contribute to creation and maintenance of social relationships, as well as acts of self-disclosure or empathy (2010, 80). We are what we remember but also the things remembered depend on individual “self-definitions,” i.e., who each person considers themselves to be and how we understand our own life. The (auto)biographical memory or, in this case, telling stories about one’s experiences with photographs and loose verbal narration, allow for the subject’s experiences to gain both subjective and objective sense as well as meaning that the subject can communicate (Marszałek 2014). Thus, the reader is written in an memorative act of communication. We give life meaning by (re)interpreting its course, adjusting past events to our knowledge and cultural conventions. And while the individual memory works selectively and is conditioned by the social dimension, when we look at memory as an act in the social communication system, we can see that it can transform itself into an exchange of narratives about the past. This is how a common, intergenerational discourse becomes possible. In such discourse it is easy to confuse the difference between what our experience was and about what we told. The role of Espedal’s book reader refers also to the purely cultural dimension of biography – the reader is doubly involved in someone else’s biography. First, the reader is curious about another’s life and, second, the biography can be a warning or an example to follow in their own life. The private sphere has the potential to transform the biography into a public role model story.

Espedal’s photographer-writer and the reader determine their identity by belonging to a particular community. Although sociologically and psychologically it is understandable, they both look for what is unchanging.



Living is a process. And even though *Mitt privatliv* breaks with a linear representation of life's stages and the intimate character of the work – together with the poetic reflection accompanying photographs – are a challenge to contextualization and interpretation, Espedal expresses multiple universal truths about human existence. At the same time, we should not forget that mechanisms of individual autobiographical memory are reflected in the reader's activity. The difference is that for the reader, the focus is on *mnēmē*. Our contact with someone else's memories (verbalized or depicted in photographs), through experiencing the book, works like a memory catalyst. The act of remembering can take place only if we relate experiences of others to our own. When we read and put the book away, we reflect on what we read, what the subject experienced and what we remember about our own experiences. Bern Stiegler said that the photographs collected in an album serve as means for both close and distant journeys, journeys deep into not only one's history but also the ones we haven't seen for ourselves (2009, 22). Memory is not just an issue regarding our "neurobiological equipment," but also an interaction with the social and physical world (J. Assmann 2011, 233).

### Concluding remarks

Does the photography really express "it is over," as claimed by the lyrical subject in *Mitt privatliv* (Espedal 2014, 130)? Perhaps a different idea presented in Espedal's book is more accurate, namely that photography always depicts the beginning of something new. According to John Berger, memory works radially, i.e., "with an enormous number of associations all leading to the same event" (2011, 64). He views context as the unfolding, ascribing narration to what was before. Evoking Bertolt Brecht's poetry, Berger argues that the photographer's capacity to (re)create context is a possibility of experiencing *the now* on many levels. This *now* comes from "previously" and merges into "afterwards" (J. Berger 2011, 65). It is the creation of the radial context system around a photograph that allows one to view this photograph from, among other things, a personal, everyday, and historical perspective at the same time. And there are obvious reasons for thinking so, e.g., publishing a book filled with private snapshots means moving them into the public sphere. The very act of creating a photo album means much more than sharing individual memories with loved ones as it is closely related to complex cultural and sociological issues.

Espedal's book, understood as a complex but closed whole, would be sufficient research material. However, my goal was to shift attention from the space of the work to the recipient. The aesthetic, anthropological, and cognitive theories explored often complement and depend on each other, which allowed me to look at *Mitt privatliv* as an example of in-depth reflection on the role of the reader and the reception process. For this reason, many comments are universal in nature and can be used to analyze projects similar to Espedal's. First, by presenting Espedal's book, its structure and its visual layer, I have shown that his literary photobook/family album has a liberatic character. This perspective highlights how thought-out the *Mitt privatliv* project is while also exposing the possibility of experiencing its physicality and content.

Moreover, this possibility is tied to the interplay between the autobiographical memory of the subject and the reader. While seemingly closed, the concept (photo) album surprises the reader with its own non-linear way of depicting life, where the subject's comments lend a uniquely reflective perspective, contextualizing what the photograph by itself will not convey but what is necessary for the reader to decipher further meanings. On the other hand, utilizing perspectives of Soulages and Berger, it turns out that *Mitt privatliv* is an open work, bearing traces of the past in such a way that it stimulates individual (auto)biographical memory of the photographer-writer, but also of the reader. Notably, the contextualization of photography plays an important role; however, its recognizable character embedded within the common social creation of photo albums is only a starting point for telling further unknown stories.

Additionally, the spatial arrangement of the work indicates the need to fill in the blanks, the need that is visible especially at the level of the recipient's autobiographical memory. The reader is not only active in the process of deciphering meanings hidden in the visual and textual layers, but also, their activity stems from the psychology of interacting with the literary work. The main communicative axis in this contact is formed by the life experiences of the reader, cultural and social contexts of their lives, and empathetic responses shaped by their autobiographical memories.

While memory has a dual – active and passive – character, for both the author and the reader, the mechanisms of remembering, reminiscing, and recalling are repetitive. Sometimes consciously, other times through contact with a stimulus, we use it every day. We extract images of once emotionally significant situations, events, and people from our memory. The repetitiveness of these activities does not impose limits

by only looking at what was and is now. The repetitiveness is a kind of opening or – as Stiegler expressed – a journey directed into the future. In order to be close to one’s emotions, one has to lead an involved, un-detached, life. Thus, communication between the sender and the recipient does not only transcend the intimate, individual dimension. *Mitt privatliv* is a process initiated by the author that the reader can continue because both the author and the reader possess autobiographical memory and – considering the identity-forming character of this type of memory – both strive to share personal experiences (*memory sharing*), reveal something about themselves, and hope that others strive to do the same. As Rüdiger Pohl points out, some consider autobiographical memory to be the factor that made us humans (2010, 80). As long as the reader remains reflective and active, their life can be meaningful and not consist of “blind experiences” (Margalit 2002, 134). After all, “it is not only the poet but his reader who is subject to the obligation to ‘make it new’” (Frye 2020, 346).

Finally, it is hard to disagree with one of the most paradoxical aspects of photography, also pointed out by Rustad (2017a, 116), and which is based on the sense of distance: thanks to photography, one is able to remember what is seen, but simultaneously one forgets it (see Espedal 2014, 92). The same applies to writing because without forgetting, one cannot write about “barndom og erindring, om gate og adresser, om familie og om kjærlighet” [childhood and recollection, about streets and addresses, about family and about love] (Espedal 2014, 92). This is how autobiographical memory works – an encounter with a more or less random stimuli starts the process of recalling and recollecting past fragments of our life. Sometimes we want to create a larger story of ourselves but always this recollecting of some particular event from the past results “in a sense of the self in the past” (Conway 2001, 9564).

In his book, Tomas Espedal crosses the border between the private and the shared. Referring again to Kuhn’s words, photographs, especially personal and family ones, can only “mean” culturally. Even if, as Soulages suggested, photography comes to the rescue when the author lacks words to describe reality (or vice versa), Espedal actually seems to confirm Julia Hartwig’s<sup>11</sup> observation that “Poeci umieją rozmawiać

11 Julia Hartwig (1921–2017) was a Polish writer, poet and translator. She was a sister of one of the most prominent Polish photographers, Edward Hartwig (1909–2003).

ze zdjęciami. Potrafią wyrazić uczucia, które budzą w nas te pochwycone przez obiektyw zapisy przeszłości, świadczące o przebytych czasie i niewystygłej pamięci” [Poets know how to talk to photographs. They can express the feelings aroused by those records of the captured past, feelings which testify to the time passed and uninterrupted memory] (2007, 10). Those feelings, emotions, and the urge to recollect the past and shape the “self” in the present applies to every single human being.

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