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LOOKING BACK: A EXAMINATION OF FAMILY ARCHIVES

by

JAMES E. BENTLEY

Under the Direction of Constance Thalken

ABSTRACT

With digital technology now dominating the film and photography industry, analog resources are becoming scarce. Simultaneously, memories preserved through personal family archives are in danger of deterioration. Time, heat and storage cause film to decay and memory of their contents fades with time as well. In *Looking Back*, the existence of my familial history is exhumed and examined while being digital preserved and collectively engaged by family members. Reflecting upon the massive accumulation of my family archives makes it seem as if there is no end to my family archives. However, as is expressed in *Looking Back*, the further I try and bring conclusive memories to the surface, the more impossible it proves to be able to do so.

INDEX WORDS: Film, Video, Installation, Split-screen, Memory, Preservation

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May 2011

DEDICATION

I dedicate this to my Grandmother, Betty Bentley, for her openness to my camera and myself. Last, I devote this to the memory of my Bopa - you are still missed.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my thesis committee for their guidance and support. I would also like to thank Sheldon Schiffer, Will Fenn, Phillip Webb, Phoebe Brown and Calvin Burgamy for their technical assistance. Lastly, I thank my family for supporting my artistic ambitions.

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INTRODUCTION

How much does a person know about their family's past? From the day I was born, a camera has been positioned on me at every event in my life. I have always found this practice to be normal, just as I thought the large collections of photographs, videos, letters, journals and clothing stored in various locations throughout my parents' home was customary. This is how my family preserves its history. In the process of creating *Looking Back*, this family documentation has been examined as far back in time as the records reach. The process has revealed that multiple points of view exist with many issues linked to the history of my family. And in spite of all the records of events, time itself has contributed to altering my family's ability to precisely recollect many of the details that were once well known.

In *Remembering Our Childhood*, Karl Sabbagh refers to Cambridge University Professor Frederic Bartlett who, during the First World War, was the first to conduct experiments with memory retention. In a rather simple experiment, Bartlett would have his subjects read a passage two times and then carry on with their regular activities. However, after certain lengths of time he would approach the students and ask them to retell the story. The longer the period of time from the initial reading, the less accurate the retelling would be. In addition he also discovered that the longer the period of time from the telling and retelling, the more the story was inaccurately reconstructed.

In *Looking Back*, the accuracy of the recollected stories is addressed through documented interactions of individuals while viewing the visual archives. This accuracy is further analyzed not only with the distance of time, but also with age: the age of the person in the original event, and age of the individual when recollecting.¹

Although in the process of creating *Looking Back* time is spent converting analog family records into digital copies, therefore preserving what memory remains from them, the larger concern is the inevitable reality that we all eventually will be entirely forgotten to time (Figure 1). Furthermore, the work exposes an inherited trait of collecting family documentation and my personal struggle to analyze the extensive amount that exists.



Figure 1: Film Still 1 – From *Keeping Barbara*: Grandma Holding Barbara’s Grave Photograph

EVOLUTION AND INFLUENCES

The evolution of *Looking Back* and two prequel videos, which are all mostly centered on the familial influences on my views, occurred in an unexpected and confusing way. My previous body of work primarily focused on socio-cultural issues related to politics, race, sexuality, religion, and standards of beauty. At the time of making, I never fully understood why I was so interested in these topics, though as a working middle-class male in our society I felt as if it was my responsibility to explore the significance of these topics. It wasn’t until I began a project on

the economic crash in 2008 that I was asked a crucial question that led me to this recent body of work.

While gathering hardship stories of others and presenting them in critiques, I was asked why I cared about these issues. I had never been asked this before with any of my projects, and it suddenly became personal to me. At the time, my father and brother-in-law had both been laid-off and I had many friends who had recently graduated and could not find jobs. The impact of these personal stories, and especially my father's, weighed on my conscience. This resulted in the video *James III* (Figure 2), where the story is told of my father's low-income background and how he worked his way to become the first in his family of seven siblings to go to college. *James III* also addresses my inheritance of his name and the expectations associated with it. Eventually I understood that the focus of my work was, for the first time, about myself. While this remains an awkward feeling for me, it has provided clarity about the formation of my personal identity.

Other family stories conveyed through video then followed, such as *Keeping Barbara*, which recounts my aunt's childhood death as told through my grandmother (Figures 1 & 3). My interest in the subject of death and the process of forgetting increased. A concern began to germinate about themes of death, including war and genocide, and the reality of how quickly a person can be forgotten after their passing. Then one day towards the end of completing *Keeping Barbara* my grandfather (James I) had a stroke. Having been married for sixty-one years, I witnessed my grandmother break down in my arms as she made me promise not to leave her alone. My grandfather survived and once again I had clarity. While shooting *Keeping Barbara*, his presence was always there and his fragile health had become more apparent. The man I had been named after, and who was known for his physical strength, was deteriorating and my consciousness of the subject of death grew.

One day my mother asked why I wasn't interested in her side of the family. I had no answer at the time, but I later realized why after being introduced to Michelle Citron's film *Daughter Rite*. In her film Citron analyzes her family footage and the way in which it incorrectly represents the reality of their relationships. Citron points out that the material was all recorded from her father's point of view, which inaccurately portrays a perfect family. Her discussions about the fact that we live in a patriarchal society provided me with the answer to my mother's question.² Although I also feel that being named after my grandfather has had a particular impact, the context for it is still patriarchal.

This led me into the direction of what now has become *Looking Back*. Therefore, it is a split screen triptych of my matriarchal and patriarchal influences, with myself in the center. In addition, I consciously realized (but subconsciously have always known) that the distinct difference between these two families was the driving factor in my previous work involving socio-cultural topics. The differences of opinion regarding these topics on both sides of my family directly fuel my desire to explore and understand the multiple perspectives in controversial subject matter.



Figure 2: Film Still 2 – From *JAMES III: The Night Before Christmas*

PORTALS OF PERSPECTIVE

In addition to my matriarchal and patriarchal influences, choosing to use three channels in *Looking Back* was also an evolution from my previous video *Keeping Barbara*. In *Keeping Barbara* (Figure 3) the focus on a past event, the death of a daughter, and a current reality, her mother still keeping every item of her daughter's within arm's reach of her bed, links the past to the present with a two-channel presentation. When first conceiving *Looking Back*, I knew connecting the past to present was critical. This was achieved visually by placing the current footage in the center and linking the two outer archival projections to the narrator, which displayed footage of my mother's family on the right and my father's on the left.

All three channels are not displayed simultaneously until the end, though two do interact throughout the piece. Two significant reasons for this is that three projections at once can be

visually overwhelming, and because precise attention can be more effectively directed at key points. Only once in *Looking Back* do three or more simultaneous channels occur, but this is done to convey a sense of being overwhelmed.

The three channels are designed with slow fades in and out and selectively applied longer durations of fading to emphasize when a recollection of an event is missing information or is poorly reconstructed in recollection. An example is in the scene of the narrator searching through the contents of a box containing an array of items, which allows the viewer to focus on the issue of the amount of materials versus the contents of the box.



Figure 3: Film Still 3 – From *Keeping Barbara*: Barbara’s Poker Playing Pennies

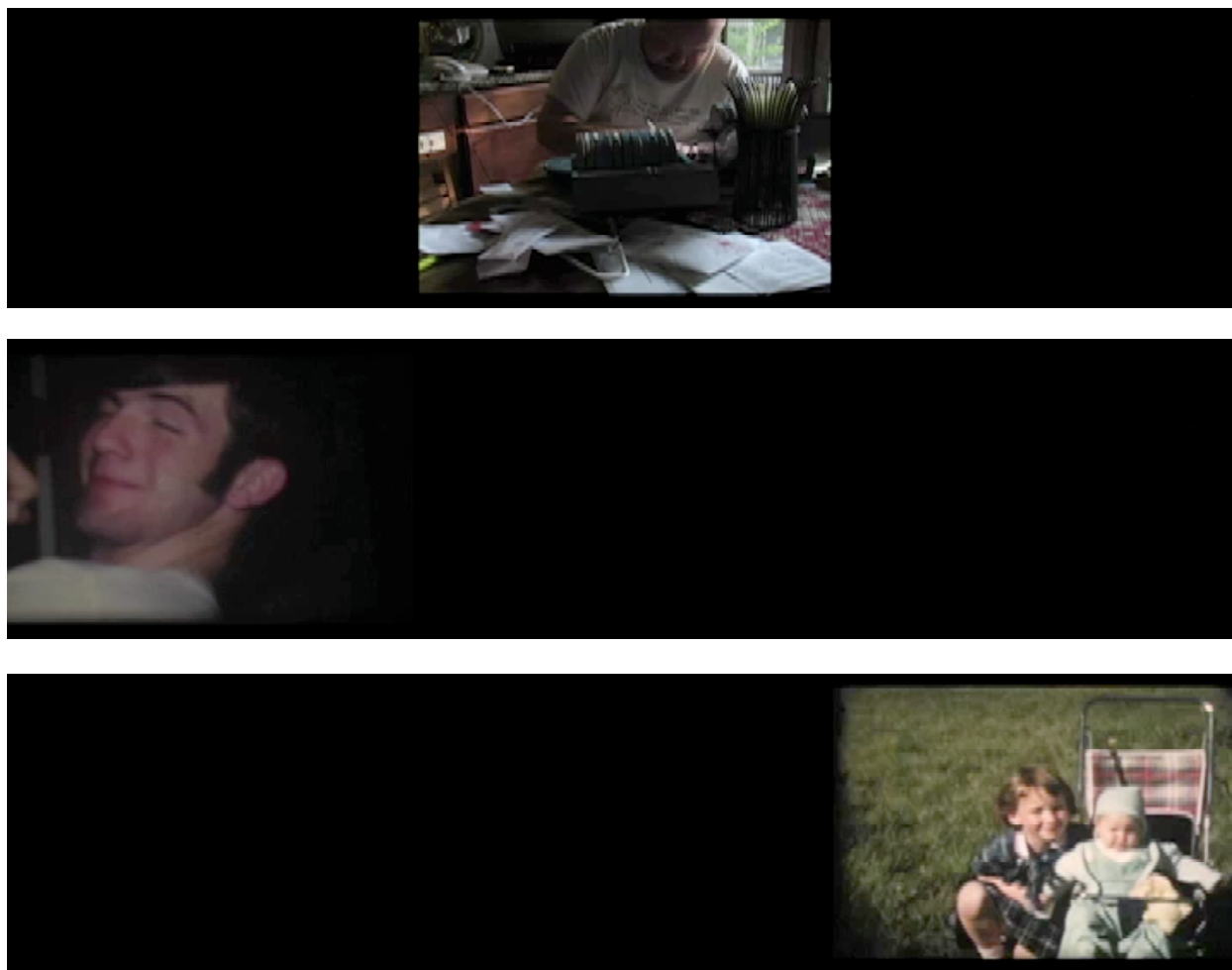


Figure 4: Film Stills 4, 5 and 6 – From *Looking Back: Triptych*

COLLABORATIVE MEMORY

When having family members recollect specific details of events, unexpected difficulties often arose. When interviewing family members who were involved in the same event, their opinions and attitudes were more freely expressed when together and their recollections seem to be more accurate. Collectively recalling the events allowed for one to fill in the gaps that another may have forgotten. This also assisted when age affected memory. An older family member, maybe a teenager at the time, would remember an event better than, say, a four or five year old would and when interviewing them in the present, the older family member would recollect better than the younger member.

While aging could play a significant role on recollection in terms of the distance of time from the event (as discussed earlier), it also can factor into the brain's ability to maintain memory. In *Remembering and Forgetting*, Edmund Blair Bolles points out:

“All memory depends on active movement up through its levels, and action demands physical energy. As people grow older and have less energy, moving up the staircase may become more and more like climbing a real flight of stairs. They can do it, but it takes longer and the temptation to stop at a lower level grows more enticing.”³

One can never be certain how accurately facts are remembered, but the mix of individual as well as collective recollection proved to be the best strategy in reconstructing my family history. However, as it plays out in *Looking Back*, the act of forgetting also fueled my interest in the past.

AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Although time and memory are the key themes in *Looking Back*, another aspect is the massive accumulation of information and how it has aided in defining my character. As previously discussed, the matriarchal and patriarchal influences of my family have been essential to my work in the past. However, these influences contribute much further to my ethics as an individual as their sources emerge throughout the making of the video.

“In the absence of significant disruption we remember many things from our past. However, autobiographical memory is selective. We tend to remember events that place us in a good light, support our

current self-image, or promote ongoing activities. And we try to forget – with varying success – memories of experiences that undermine the current self, contradict our beliefs, plans, and goals, and increase anxiety or other negative emotions.”⁴

My mother attests that I have always been considered to be very compassionate. Some men may find this as a weakness, although I have grown to embrace this influence from my mother’s side as my better half. Her sense of what makes a family is derived from her and her sister’s experience of being adopted,

Looking Back reveals that my mother’s parents birthed a child that died at only a week old. Her father, my grandfather nicknamed Bopa, was immediately sent to France to fight in World War II. So he and my grandmother, Nana, mourned the loss of their infant child while separated and alone. Once Bopa returned from the war, they decided to adopt. Though my mother now knows the location of her birth information, being that her father recently passed away and released it, she does not want to know any further details of her natural parents. She believes because her mother and father did not want her, they are not her parents. As a result, she fully embraced becoming a mother herself and was very compassionate in raising her children. This side of my family is well educated and cultured (her parents went to U.C. Berkeley), and they travelled around the States. They also lived in Chicago, Kansas, San Francisco, and eventually moved to Atlanta where she met my father in high school.

This knowledge of my past is what I believe drives my passion and thirst for universal knowledge. In *Looking Back* the class difference between my parents is conveyed through the footage chosen from her family archives. Their tailored clothing and the nice dresses that the two daughters are wearing, as well as the locations of the footage, suggest that their finances were

well established. The tone of my voice in the narration is calming and effeminate in force, tying my character to this important side to my family and the compassionate traits I have inherited from it.

Conversely, my father came from a large family of seven siblings with its roots from Birmingham, Alabama where he was born. The ‘Bentley Boys’, as James, Sr. and his five brothers were referred to, were known as a rough bunch of boys. It is rumored that if they were seen walking down the sidewalk, others would cross the street in order to not cross their path. My grandfather was a Navy sailor and a bare-knuckle boxer. He was twenty-one when he married my grandmother, who was sixteen. Many stories abound that leave me speechless, but the most important trait that I have from this side is my work ethic.

“Always give a person more than they expect” is what James Sr. would always tell my father. My father passed those words to me and I have always tried to live up to them. The family survived from a chain of laundry cleaners they owned and operated and eventually moved to Atlanta where they continued with the business. Everyone in the family worked at the cleaners and my father’s knowledge of downtown Atlanta from his delivery routes is spectacular. They had saved enough money in order to send their oldest son, my father, to college. Unfortunately, his younger sister was diagnosed with cancer and later die and any extra family money was spent on her hospital bills. However, since not going to college was unacceptable, my father worked three jobs to pay his own way.

Many stories can be told of how this work ethic has played out in my life and, thus, has helped me to succeed. One particular story that I do not recollect since I was rather young but has been told to me is a job my father offered me. I was told that I would get a nickel for every pinecone that I collected from the yard at our house. Hours later my father came to check on me

only to discover that I had gathered them from the front, back and side yards. I had dug them from the dirt and even from the neighbor's yards. In the end, he paid me around fifty dollars and said he should have specified a limit but was a man of his word.

A telling clip alludes to this masculinity in the opening *Looking Back* with James II and then James I flexing their muscles to the camera. However, the aggression in this clip is slowed down in order to express my reaction to what inheriting their name means to me. This is my masculine side, though softened by my compassion from my feminine side.

AMASSED MEMORIES

The most difficult challenge in creating *Looking Back* was to keep the story simple. As witnessed in the video, the amount of film footage, photographs and journals is immense. At first, this created confusion in locating a particular story to tell. However, this struggle itself became a main theme in the piece. Completely uncovering all of the information of the past becomes an impossible task, yet the viewer is taken along the journey in an attempt to do so. While the desire to authenticate all of the information is apparent, the massive amount of materials eventually conveys the impossibility to do so.

INEVITABILITY OF FORGETTING

It is known that photographs can be doctored through both analog and digital processes, and that this can result in false interpretations of images in the media. However, can un-doctored photographs still be falsely interpreted? A psychotherapeutic technique is commonly used to help patients recall previous traumatic events by showing them images that may trigger these subdued memories from their past. In 2004 a study was conducted to test the possibility of the effect of

real photographs on creating false memories. The subjects in the experiment were asked to recall three school experiences.

“Two of the experiences were real, and one was false; the false event described the subject putting Slime (the goopy green children’s toy) into the teacher’s desk drawer. All the subjects read a description of each event, and half also saw their real class photo to “help” them remember. While slightly fewer than half of the description-only subjects developed mental images of the Slime story or full memories, over 70% of the photo subjects did. These results show that even true photos can lead people to remember false events.”⁵

Looking Back explores my attempt to extract information from the collective memory of multiple participants when placed together. However, with the reality that assumptions can be formed when memory lacks, the legitimacy of those recollections still has the possible existence of false memories. At times I would find new information that I thought I could use in the piece, but would then find through others that recollections differed. These discoveries forced me to confront the unreliability of memories and, hence, the occasional instability of my own family history.

CONCLUSION

I went through many film projectors that saw their last days with me, but ironically the only one that still works is the oldest of the bunch, and the one that my Bopa maintained in

perfect condition. These old films, photographs and journals are only a distant peer into my familial past. However, the reality that they present me with is that my history will only be preserved as well as those who know it, and may plan on doing so. As a result, *Looking Back* operates as not only a personal family piece but also as a commentary on the inevitability of being forgotten by those that follow you.

ENDNOTES

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