

Shadows of the Past: The Power of Photography

By Ani Seppelin

As I scroll through my camera roll, I notice the many emotions that memories associated with the photos evoke. From the feeling of absolute thrill at Northeastern winning both the men and women's beanpot game, to the embarrassment of getting pushed into the lake on the day of my graduation, I have an image to encapsulate pretty much any emotion. Each photo in my camera roll serves as a memory, blasting me back to the past. However, when I scroll through my camera roll, these “core” photos don’t evoke the most out of me. The photos that get to me the most are the photos that are reminders of the complexity of our existence. The photos that challenge our perceptions and stir up memories that were once buried. These photos indicate what once was, but also what might still be. For me, it’s the photos that question absence. From the highs and lows to the beauty and pain, photos have the power to immortalize what is lost.

With a single snapshot, photos have the power to make anything permanent. However, some things aren’t meant to be permanent and this is where photos evoke absence. The absence of untying someone from a place, a feeling from a person, and the intangibility of reality. Highlighting what has changed over time can evoke great emotion. The relocation of what *was* home, what *was* love, and what *was* real constantly reminds us how life is twisting and turning, evolving like a winding river. But, with the addition of photos, this river gains dams, trapping memories and immortalizing the past.



The photo to the left may seem like nothing to most. To an ordinary person, it's a subtly artistic photo of clothes drying. However, to me, the image freezes the place it depicts in time. This town and what used to be a vibrant community have ceased to exist. Whatever buildings that still stand today are probably unoccupied. I took this photo because of its beauty. I was in awe of the clothes blowing in the wind and how each shadow danced across the volcanic brick walls, telling a story. Now, I am

immensely grateful for this image, as it allows me to travel back in my memories and visit Nargono-Karabakh again. Looking back at the photo now, its meaning has evolved. The absences from the image are now present. I see between the lines, both figuratively and literally. I see the clothesline spanning across the buildings, connecting one family to another. I see how each shirt represents a person – a mother, son, and grandchild – who no longer resides here. Despite this, the vacancy of each shirt still gives me a sense of hope. Hope that the clothes will be occupied once again. These clothes are not just inanimate objects; they hold reassurance of a resurgence of movement in a place that currently doesn't have any.

The absence between the buildings is even greater. What was once vibrant with life now remains empty. The echoes of voiceless Armenians bounce between the walls. The sounds of children playing are lost. However, through the silence of the long shadows and dark corners, murmurs of the past still lurk. The feeling of absence that a photograph can evoke reminds us of the delicacy of life. With the flash of a camera, things can disappear before our eyes. From the people we love vanishing, to the vibrance of a tulip slowly wilting away, all objects decay into nothingness. Photos allow us to capture our existence. Susan Sontag writes about this idea in her

book *On Photography*: “All photographs are memento mori. To take a photograph is to participate in another person's mortality, vulnerability, mutability” (Sontag 15). When looking back and reflecting on photos, we are reminded of how temporary life is, similar to memento mori: we will all die one day. Photos don't only capture a moment, but our entire existence. Each one reminds us that time is ticking away, bringing us closer to our demise. The absence within my photo of Nargono-Karabakh serves as a constant reminder to me of how temporary existence is. Nargono-Karabakh once existed, and now it doesn't. When I look at photos of Nargono-Karabakh, I am face to face with memento mori.

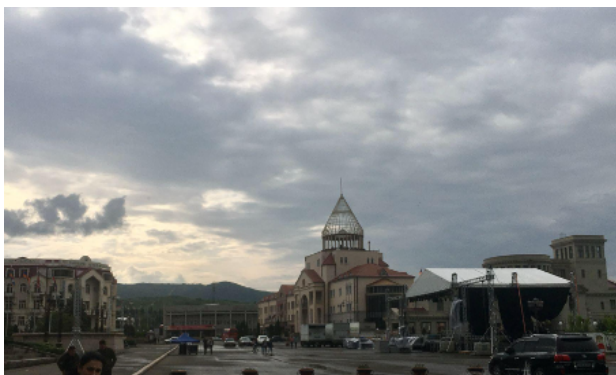
People take photos to document what is happening around them, but the unique part about this is that one can choose whether or not to look at a photo. The majority of people will snap a photo and then forget about it. The photograph gets lost in our camera roll among hundreds or thousands of others, never to be looked back at again. From animal extinction to conflicts, photographs provide visual evidence of what once existed and how life continues to evolve. Sometimes, however, photos fail to remind us, and the internal value of images fades away. Other implications such as natural disasters and cultural shifts outweigh the power of permanency. People sometimes choose to neglect the importance of photos, allowing history to repeat itself. When I look at the photo above, it brings Nargono-Karabakh back to existence. I relive walking through the courtyard, chasing chickens, and visiting my family. My resonance in this photo is similar to what Sontag says about how cameras offer a way to travel to another reality, one that is unattainable. “While an untold number of forms of biological and social life are being destroyed in a brief span of time, a device is available to record what is disappearing” (Sontag 16). The biggest desire of a camera is to capture memories to look back on, some intentional, some unintentional. With a single snapshot, anything can be immortalized. We

immortalize to preserve memories. Life flashes before our eyes. By taking images, we gain control, slow it down. The only way to travel back to what was in the past is through evoking that specific memory, and photos serve that purpose.

On the other hand, photographs also document what is physically lost such as physical locations and materialistic items. Humans naturally want to immortalize everything from fear of mortality. We believe that by taking an image of an object, it will not be forgotten. In the same way, we hope to not be forgotten. In reality, however, what makes something forgotten and not forgotten is not its immortalization through photographs, but an individual's memory.

Photographs only help evoke those memories and emotions. While I believe that people take too many photos, sometimes that random photo will evolve to have an immense meaning as our lives are constantly evolving. The photo above definitely did for me.

I took the photo of the clothes drying while waiting in the car for my uncle to get something from the convenience store. This quick snapshot that consists of one photo in my camera roll is now one of my biggest gems. Although there was intention behind taking this photo, it surfaced unintentional memories. It's always the unintentional photos that have the deepest meanings behind them. Unintentional photos offer a more truthful slice of time. They show who you really are.



The photos above are some of the other very few photos that I took in Nargono-Karabakh. For me, they bring a mixture of emotions. I experienced the joy of being in Nargono-Karabakh, where one of my favorite memories was created. I feel the serenity of staring at the stars over the mountains late at night. It felt as if each star was radiating a tranquil glow across the sky, hypnotizing me into the timelessness of life. But then I remember that stars are timeless, photos are timeless, but existence is not – and the pain resurfaces. Sontag comments on this: “A photograph is both a pseudo-presence and a token of absence” (Sontag 16). She explains how when looking at a photograph, typically one that is meaningful, we experience a sense of time-traveling to the past. By looking at a photo, one can relive the past, but we must remember that by looking at the past, the presence can be neglected. This is why the absence of photos can be dangerous. Just like what Sontag says, I try to focus on the pseudo-presence of these photos, the beauty of nature, although their absence and reality are greater. The pain of knowing that I will never stare at the stars here again – and that no Armenian will – leaves an uneasy feeling in my stomach. I am faced with the defeat of the exodus of Armenians where 80% of the population fled the territory, and then I am left face to face with the reality that Nargono-Karabakh no longer exists. As of January 1st, it became Azerbaijan. But just like the untold truths hidden in the photo, I choose to ignore this largely important fact. I think to myself that as long as I have photos of Nargono-Karabakh, it exists. So I live in the absence of this photo.

Our life's milestones seem to be measured through photos, and for this reason, photos are among one of our greatest treasures. The joy they bring evokes nostalgia surrounding those milestones and “reconnect” us with the special people in our lives to the extent that we feel the need to share old photos with others to reminisce about the past. Staring at these frozen moments in time can fuel one's imagination to unattainable thoughts, creating false hope. This idea

reminds me of Sontag's argument that "The sense of unattainable that can be evoked by photographs feeds directly into the erotic feelings of those for whom desirability is enhanced by distance" (Sontag 16). One of the sole reasons many take thousands of photographs is out of the fear that they will forget a memory. In a fraction of a second, we have the opportunity to immortalize any scene. However, immortalizing an image is a double-edged sword. For those who are longing, photos can both offer a sense of sorrow and sadness, or joy. Our "greatest" moments are always captured on camera. From a child's first walk to their graduation and wedding, photographs prove our existence through accomplishments. We hire professional photographers so that our memories can live on.

Parallel to this, immortalizing photographs brings up the idea that one can never step in the same river twice. This ancient metaphor illustrates that everything is constantly changing and that no moment can be experienced the same way, just like how the water in a river is constantly moving. A photo is a snapshot of a specific moment within a continuous stream of time. Life is ever changing: people come and go, relationships evolve. Photographs serve as a time capsule to travel back to that specific time when that certain emotion was evoked.

The act of taking photos highlights the beauty and significance in our lives. From the beauty of the sunset shining over rolling mountains in the distance to a child's first day of kindergarten, we can relive our most meaningful moments of not just ourselves, but of others. Even the not so good ones. Loss is often associated with pain, sadness, and grief. Loss is one of the lowest points in life, but it can also be beautiful. The resilience of healing is one of the rawest beauties of life, albeit an ugly one. The complexity of personal development and realizing that the stronger the emotions of loss are, the more beloved the core memories are, brings great depth to the human experience. It brings acceptance. More specifically, acceptance of *memento mori*.

Photographs allow us to come to terms with this truth. These frozen snapshots allow us to remember the deep richness of our lives, both the highs and the lows. They remind us of how temporary time is and how life inevitably changes. For me, the immortalization of photos is for the better. They may evoke a mixture of emotions, but they also allow us to remember what is lost. Some things are simply not meant to be forgotten. For me, I choose not to forget Nargono-Karabakh. My photos live as historical documentation of what Nargono-Karabakh used to be. How it was once one of my fondest memories and then, in the flicker of a snapshot, became my saddest.

Work cited:

Sontag, Susan. "In Plato's Cave." *On Photography*. New York, Picador, 2001