On Present and Absent Photographs

as the Silent Heroes of Synthetic and Social Memories

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ABSTRACT

In my practice I work with established and emerging photographic technologies to investigate their capacities and limitations to generate proximity to particular histories. In my case – an episode in WWII relevant to my family history. In doing so, I depart from a documentary / photojournalism practice, as in working on long form documentary projects as well as feature assignments for publications such as the New York Times and National Geographic, that was caught up by the advent of generative AI. This emerging technology raised the question whether what was generally flagged as the risks of deep fakes could be flipped into a potential. In this presentation, I describe both the vantage point in terms of content, and the most significant steps that followed from one another to arrive at a research methodology that expands both photography practice and collaboration with non-human intelligence for historical investigations.

To address this general concern, I work with and through the following questions. How could working with past, present day, and emerging medium specificities of photographic technologies give presence to archival voids? To what extent does exploration of the intersection of synthetic memory and visualization of conflict and memories thereof provide a novel form of fiction capable of disrupting stable historical narratives? How then, these memories can be engaging to photographic practitioners, developers of image making technology and those whose history is addressed to provide means for a multi-modal and multi-vocal methodology of knowledge production.

"Silent Hero", the central case study of this presentation, is a visual research and an investigation into the voids in family history caused by the silence of my grandfather about his time in the Second World War where he lost his brother. This project spans many chapters consisting of many mediums, methods and technologies used in the making of visual components. However, this presentation addresses those methods and technologies that are urgent in terms of current discourse, ranging from the distribution of archival materials, to the emergence of generative AI. The focus point of this presentation is to delineate the affordances and pitfalls of these technologies when it comes to memorialization and historical silences.

In my experience of working with archival regimes of the 20th century, while working on Silent Hero, I identify the unreliable nature of archives when mediating particular types of memories. In what can be called the new industrial revolution, with the emergence of AI and data that shapes the additional knowledge regime of the 21st century, I argue that the problems of previous knowledge regimes, specifically colonial practices, are embedded in the development of the new systems, namely positivist strategies of scaling, exploitation of labor, perpetuation of bias and extractivism.

I explore the creative opportunities and navigate around previously mentioned and newly found pitfalls, I seek to arrive at a different kind of image, an image liberated from agenda and persuasion devoid of its

iconic and indexical qualities. To do this, I enlist Generative Adversarial Neural Networks. By training my own system on images from WWII to generate new images, I argue that synthetic images that immature GAN produces are, while undeniably destructive, create a novel type of fiction that can disrupt stable historical narratives.

In conclusion, I evaluate the impact execution of this project where I disseminate ideas central to my visual research by contributing to various speaking engagements focusing on the following audiences: photography community, visual education settings, developers of technology and those whose history is addressed in my work. I explore the process of generating new interpretations by altering existing technological codes and then re-introducing synthetic images back into the past by way of presenting them to the subjects of the original photographs, which has created a prompt for reimagining a future past with more than just the one inevitable and ultimate outcome of historical catastrophe.

In summary, this presentation, the visual research project Silent Hero and my practice at large are an invitation to a methodology of multi-modal and multi-vocal strategy to be used for historical investigations and contribute to visual education discourse around creative potentials of emerging technologies.