

Potent Images: emergent practices and shifting attitudes towards photographs of the dead in Arnhem Land

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Abstract

Until recently, Yolngu (along with many other Australian Aboriginal groups) have insisted that photographs be hidden from sight, or even destroyed, upon the death of the subject. This is now dramatically changing. New kinds of practices—and shifting ontological understandings of power and dangers associated with photographic images—are emerging as Yolngu actively explore the rich possibilities that photographs offer to evoke, remind and ‘connect’ the living with those who have ‘passed away’. Such moments of mourning and memorialising enable a deepening ethnographic appreciation of the place of images and the senses in Yolngu lifeworlds.

John Berger observes that every photograph presents the viewer with a “shock of discontinuity”.² These material fragments of the past do more than freeze the flow of time—they puncture the present, confronting the viewer with the ‘abyss’ that lies between then and now. As Berger acknowledges, the shock of such an encounter is rarely consciously registered in our image saturated lives, unless, that is, the subject of the photograph is known to the viewer—and is either long-absent, or dead.

In these circumstances, photographic presence renders absence visible. Before your eyes, the brutal inevitability of loss fills the frame, no matter what the pose or background vista. The oscillations this generates—amplified, perhaps, by the very stillness of the image itself—shake things loose inside. The wrenching open of heart-mind unleashes a torrent of feelings, thoughts and memories.

In my culture we generally deal with this upset by turning away from these photos. We try to not look too long, to let go, move on. To do otherwise is to be maudlin, to become mired in grief. Instead, looking resolutely forward, we turn to images of the living. We keep photographs of our children, or, perhaps, our lovers, in our wallets, selecting images that can be glimpsed with pleasure in the course of a busy day, or pulled out and shown to admiring friends, even strangers, as occasions arise.

The Aboriginal people with whom I work, as an ethnographer and collaborative videomaker, have different kinds of relationships with images of the dead. This paper explores changing attitudes and shifting practices in relation to these potent images in a small settlement in Arnhem Land.

Shifting Attitudes

In the early 1990s, when I first visited the Yolngu community of Gapuwiyak in Australia's tropical north, there were clear and definite restrictions surrounding the display and viewing of images of the deceased. Repeatedly, I was told that when someone died, every photograph (and every film, video, and audio-recording) should be destroyed or wrapped up and placed securely out of sight.³ After a set period of time, as determined by the family, public viewing and display of these images would be once again permitted allowed.⁴

Clearly, Yolngu took the indexical relation between image and the imaged as a matter of serious ontological concern. Photographs of the recently deceased were treated as if they retained a lingering, and potentially malevolent, trace of the dead person. They had the power to physically impact on the living. Although the detrimental effects of viewing such images were only vaguely spelled out—"You might get sick", was the most direct answer I received—the message was emphatic. When someone dies photographic images and video, together with audio recording become *dhuyu*: they are restricted, charged with ancestral presence, *dangerous to look at*.⁵

Ten years on, things have changed dramatically. When someone dies one of the first things people want to do is to view photographs of that person. Even before the funeral, (and for months, even years, afterwards), photos are collected, copied and exchanged amongst the extended kin network. Apart from some of the elderly in the community who do not approve of this new practice, (and in such cases people are extremely careful keep all images out of their sight), men, women and children all seem to share a deep desire to have, to keep, to touch, to caress and most of all, to look, long and repeatedly, at images of the person who has 'passed away'.

At these times people are largely unconcerned about the technical quality of the image, or even the physical condition of the photo itself. Nor is the primary interest in the content of the picture, the lighting, the pose, the surroundings, or the identity of the photographer. Although these aspects can considerably enhance a viewer's appreciation of an image, by adding invisible layers of meaning and triggering a range of memories and associations, ultimately what matter in such moments is to get hold of any recognisable image of the person.

As time goes on, these photos are enlarged, framed and hung high on bedroom walls, out of the reach of dogs and toddlers. They're carefully kept in wallets and pockets, even cut out and taped to mobile phones. They're given as presents; they're pulled off the wall and packed for trips away; they're brought out and shared with visitors who look intensely, often sitting quietly at the edge of the social, until they've been moved to silent, salty tears.

No other type of photograph generates such interest and activity, except, to a lesser extent, images of family members living in another community and archival photographs from anthropological institutes. In these cases Yolngu also deliberately use photographs to ameliorate the distress of separation and to affirm ties, but never more so, as with the photos of the recently deceased.

‘New Generation’ Yolngu

So how to figure this apparent reversal in attitude? Have notions about the ‘magical’ effects of photography been completely swept aside by a modern pragmatism or ‘rationalism’?

It’s surely no coincidence that this change has happened at a time when digital technologies are providing unprecedented access to image reproduction in one of the most isolated settlements in the country. Up until recently, there were no opportunities for Yolngu to have their photographs developed or copied locally, they had to rely on non-Yolngu contacts to take photos or send reproductions. But these days there are computers, scanners, printers and laminators in the school, the council office, and in the homes of non-Yolngu staff, which allows (uneven) access to image reproductions.

Furthermore, in Gapuwiyak, as elsewhere, media technologies mediate the modern even as they mark it. When we discuss such matters, people make a clear distinction between themselves as ‘modern’ or ‘new generation Yolngu’ and the ‘old people’ whose concerns and fears in relation to photography are deemed ‘old fashioned’, ‘silly’ even, and are laughingly likened to ‘voodoo’ (as seen in movies).⁶

However, Yolngu versions of being modern are not necessarily the same as mine.⁷

Imprinted on the Heart

Unlike Berger who concludes that these images trigger trauma, the self-proclaimed ‘new generation Yolngu’ (which includes the middle-aged and younger) find these images to be a source of comfort and connection. This helps ‘to keep that dead fella close’, they say, always careful not to speak the name of the deceased, which remains strictly taboo, in the way photos used to be.

Comments like this suggest a lingering sense that the photograph contains a physical trace of the deceased. Even though they are no longer deemed to be dangerous, it seems that the invisible umbilicus (to use Barthes’ phrase) between image and imaged, which has given rise to questions about the ontological status of photographs for philosophers and Yolngu alike, has not been completely severed. The same people who describe such views the ‘old people’s’ views as ‘silly’ are equally likely to threaten to cut up photographs of loved ones in the heat of anger; or to worry about the effects of slightly trimming down a portrait in order to fit it into a frame; or to press a photo against the part of their body that corresponds to their kin relationship with the deceased. For example, a daughter might press a photo of her deceased mother to her stomach to show, invoke, enliven and affirm the *yothu-yindi* (mother child) relation.

However, the connections that Yolngu seek and value are also mediated through *the act of looking* itself. Cultural ways of seeing inflect their reaction to—and their experiences of—the visceral and affective jolt that such images generate.

Yolngu tell me that looking at the photos allows them to keep the deceased in their hearts. When they say this, they’re speaking as perceptual subjects who understand that the senses mediate between the outside and the inside. The act of looking extends the corporeal boundaries of the subject outwards to encompass the image and, by

extension, the imaged, in a sensuous embrace. In other words, in this kind of charged context, vision is haptic, intercorporeal and, ultimately, incorporative. The image enters the viewer through the portals of the eye, moving through a culturally recognized circuit, with predictably powerful effect. For as one woman explained to me, “When Yolngu see something it connects straight to the heart ...and after that to the head”. From this perspective, looking at these photos, long, deeply and repeatedly, can be understood as an act of, quite literally, imprinting the image of the deceased—and thence a trace of the deceased themselves—on the viewers’ heart.

As they describe the internal processes of feeling, remembering and imagining unleashed by the looking, Yolngu also emphasize how the recalling of shared moments affirms an enduring bond. This is more than keeping a *memory* strong—this is keeping the deceased themselves present by making themselves open to the invisible, underlying presence of the Ancestral. Yolngu use the rupturing effects of these photographs to look beyond the separations of the everyday, the apparent linearity of time, and the finality of death, they channel the flood of memories and associations into the work of reinforcing ties and refiguring relationships.

This kind of viewing can thus be recognized as a type of informal, but nonetheless ritualised labour which can be carried out on an everyday basis, outside of the ceremonial settings, power structures and gendered hierarchies of ritual. Like the more overt and easily recognisable ceremonial activities, this work of looking is a public and social process. Viewers are discretely watched over, comforted if necessary, the photos put away if it becomes too much. Just as in other kinds of ritual experience, the effects of this kind of looking are transformative and cumulative: feelings, images, patterns, knowledge are intentionally evoked and affirmed, sedimenting the subject in a richly textured and ever-deepening, lived relationship with the Ancestral through body, senses, memory and imagination.

Although at this stage the deceased is not yet totally assimilated into the Ancestral, they will, in time, be absorbed into this more amorphous category with the passing of generations and the inevitable fading of memory. Yet still their presence and the possibility of connection remains.

For the Future

It makes a particular kind of sense that this new practice has emerged at a time when the gaps between generations are widening, leading Yolngu themselves to reflect on questions of past and present, tradition and modernity, continuity and disjuncture, as their people die (too many, too young) from ‘modern’ lifestyles, poverty, powerlessness and despair.

Indeed, Yolngu also explicitly understand the easing of restrictions around these images to be an important gesture ‘for the future’. Photos are used to teach children to recognise their dead relatives even before they can speak. Parents say that this knowledge will enable the child to know this person when their spirit appears to them—something common for Yolngu children to experience. But it seems to me that there is even more to it than that. As time passes, these internalised images become part of a

lived and embodied Ancestral legacy—an intimate and internalised knowledge of the contours of the face, the shape of the body and other features are an important source of knowledge that will be assimilated into the ever-broadening and deepening knowledge of ‘inside’ or restricted clan-based knowledge. These photographs, and the careful, attentive, receptive kinds of looking they provoke and enable, will provide the means of recognising the imprint of the past in future generations, facilitating a visible, tangible, material source for affirming the Ancestral relations that are the source of Yolngu identity and knowledge.

Postscript: The boundaries of the visual?

This paper has been written as I begin a new phase of research. Although I’ve done my best to contain it, I’ve found the material spilling out the sides, pulling me in new directions, towards ideas I haven’t yet thought. I’m aware of the need to elaborate the large arguments I’ve too quickly moved through, and to substantiate and nuance my assertions by more fully locating the practices I describe within the broader imperatives, rhythms, and moods of life in Arnhem Land.

But for the context of this seminar, I hope that the suggestiveness of the things I have described—and the questions, associations and confusions that may arise—is enough to make my final point. For, although the power and productivities of vision—“through the eyes, straight to the heart, then to the mind”—may be a matter of common sense in Gapuwiyak, it is clear to me that I have to extend my analytic and experiential purview if I am to adequately apprehend anything approximating a ‘Yolngu point of view’.

Taking a cue from my Yolngu kin and media colleagues I need to attend more closely to movements from the outside to the inside—from the visible to the invisible—and back again. I have to deepen my appreciation of the constitutive play between sense, sensation, sensibility and culture. I have to think and feel into ideas about affect, synaesthesia, memory, imagination, media, technology and modernity. Most of all, I need to spend more time with Yolngu, attending ritual, watching TV, making videos, listening to music, telling stories, hunting, dancing and shopping.

Is this still visual anthropology? Maybe not at first glance, but the more I zoom in on questions of the visual and the camera’s potential to mediate intercultural understanding, the more I am convinced of the value of a long-term, sustained and ‘wide-angled’ approach to my subject.

NOTES

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² John Berger and Jean Mohr, 1995. *Another Way of Telling*. New York: Vintage, p. 87.

³ These restrictions generally last several years, depending on the person’s age and importance.

⁴ I have concentrated here on photographs because videos of deceased people are viewed far less often than photos which are compact, portable, material and *still*—a quality that many have suggested makes them a more potent kind of imagery for the work of memory (cf Sontag 1973,

Barthes 1981). The restricted audio recordings are generally of clan *manikay* (public songs). This specific case gives rise to a range of issues which I am unable to go into here.

⁵ During the 1990s public broadcasters began prefacing indigenous content with warnings that they the program may contain images of deceased people.

⁶ This shift is clearly marked linguistically. Whereas photographs were once referred to as *mali* or *wungali* (shadow, ghost), Yolngu now use the English terms photo or video.

⁷ This change is reportedly occurring across the country.