

Vesna Petreska (Macedonia)

FAMILY PHOTOGRAPHY AND NARATION*

Abstract: For visual documents that occur within the family or are related to an individual's life, which also show exceptional moments during the flow of time of a family, or this concerns the rites of passage (wedding, childbirth, baptism, children's birthdays, death, etc.), it is being considered that that type of matter represents the ideal picture of a person or his family. But, in regards to the research of photography, we will take into consideration its communication aspect. The emphasis is placed on the experience gained during my own field researches, when the subject of interest were the rites of the family cycle, especially the wedding, but also the rites of baptism, childbirth, when these moment were told to me numerous times with the help of photography. The glorious relationship that existed between the photo and the opportunity it offered for making a photo-story was especially emphasized when the narrators carefully took out their preserved photographs. The fast development of photography is characterized with the emergence of the family photo-albums, which were originally classified following the history of life, following the themes of the main phases of a life cycle. In this context, we might mention family albums with pictures of new-borns, christening, weddings, etc.

Keywords: family photography, wedding, rituals, field researches, narration.

In the investigation I have tried to stress the narration in the consideration of the family photographs, primarily in the ones where the rituality was represented, which means that the rituals at family events are taken into consideration. These include the rituals at the birth and childhood – baptism, children's birthdays and wedding rituals. The rituals of the family life are important even in contemporary times.

In ethnological researches it may be concluded that the visualization is used with the discovery of the first photographic techniques, so the first images made for the Ethnological and Anthropological Researches originated in 1844, and by the 90-years of 19th century the Ethnological and Anthropological expeditions had started with film recording (Гавриловић 1996: 118, 129¹).

In Macedonia, the visual recording of everyday events and ritual life starts with the advent of the photographic camera and later with the camera, towards the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century. The first visual documents of culture and generally

* This paper resulted as a continuation on a paper "Family memory and photography" with which I participated at the Conference "Cultural memory", in organisation on the Centre for Culture and Cultural Studies from Skopje, which had taken place from 5-7.09.2013 year in Skopje.

¹ Quoted by: Y. Haulend Rau. (1972): "Tehnička pomagala u antropologiji: istorijski pregled, Fotografija", in: *Antropologija danas*, Beograd, 747-748.

of life in Macedonia were made by people who had nothing to do with ethnology. In this sense, the Yanaki and Milton Manaki brothers made the first visual documents on film about Macedonia and the Balkans in 1905. Their first film was about their 114-year old grandmother Despina, weaving on a spinning wheel with other spinners (Боцев 2006). In the "Manaki" book, the analyst of Macedonian film, I. Stardelov separates 42 titles recorded by the Manaki Brothers (Stardelov 2003: 75, 106). From the titles of the films it can be concluded that in their cinematographic (film) activity, the Manaki Brothers showed special interest in ethnological topics such as folk customs and everyday life (Stardelov 2003: 90, 91). Their films witness customs and events since the beginning of the 20th century and represent valuable visual documents of ethnological studies of material, spiritual and social culture, especially the one of the Macedonians and the Vlachs. They show male and female dances, games, festivities, city and village weddings, nomadic migrations, funerals, parades, fairs and markets (Боцев 2006: manuscript).

With the establishment of the Ethnological Museum of Macedonia in 1946, the ethnologists started creating visual documentation, and in the beginning of the 1950s, they have included films into the film production of documentaries dealing with ethnological topics (Боцев 2006: manuscript). Since its establishment in 1950s, the Institute of Folklore can bring out its rich archival photo-documentation. Certainly, there are other contributing institutions in Macedonia. We can mention the involvement of the Macedonian Ethnological Society in the organization of the ethnological documentaries.

Since the appearance of the visual documentation there were numerous controversies whether it represents a primary or a secondary source of study, its meaning depending whether it appears in the process of research or it originated as a source independently from the research itself, further, controversies about its subjectivity or objectivity, etc. (Гавриловић 1996; Наумовић 1988: 113-123; Collier and Collier 1986). Recent researches of ethnologists of photography in the Yugoslavian region that also encompassed Macedonia, mostly dealt with recording elements of material culture and certain customs from the annual life cycle. But their scope of interest mainly focused on noting the shapes (overall or certain details); the photography served as a document, while the function and especially the communication aspect of the recorded occurrences were neglected (Гавриловић 1996: 119; Belaj 2006: 53-54). The emphasis of the research is on this particular communication moment whose existence is pointed out by international researchers of visual ethnology / anthropology (Collier and Collier 1986; Ruby 1975), however they believe that little attention is dedicated to it. Thus for example, the anthropologist J. Ruby is of the opinion that the film (and here I would also add the photography) must be seen as a communication medium with the possibility to transfer anthropological knowledge and understanding in a parallel way, which is as significant as the written word (Ruby 1975: 105).

The communication aspect of photography can be examined in many manners, on its non-verbal level, for example development of photography which reflects the time the photo was taken, the system of values that was dominant in a certain culture; thus accordingly it is a valuable source for getting to know other cultures, but also taking into account the verbal level, for example the return or amplification of memory, and its possibility to narrate a story, or in other words the possibility to make photo-stories of events important for the family.

Visual documents that occur within the family or are related to an individual's life show exceptional moments during the flow of time of a family (Гавриловић 1996: 120). Previous researchers of family photography known to me (Roland Barthes, Erving Goffman, Milivoj Vodopija, Melanija Belaj), mainly agree that whether this concerns rites of passage (wedding, childbirth, baptism, children's birthdays, death, etc.) or photos from holidays and touristic travels, that type of matter represents an ideal picture of the family certified by its specific iconography (Гавриловић 1996: 120²; Belaj 2006: 53-69; Belaj 2010: 303-316), or this is about the myth of the ideal family³ (Belaj 2010: 303). The portraits of certain persons, regardless of whether the pictures were taken at an earlier century or from the invention of photography, they are part of the family documentation that fits the idealistic experience of oneself and his family or the myth of the ideal family (Belaj 2010: 303-316), and their purpose is not to leave a real picture of the person or the family in the picture for the society and future generations, but the photograph is to present the full splendour in accordance with socially accepted ideal of success and beauty (Гавриловић 1996: 120). With this we can agree. But, the fact is that communication aspect of researching photography holds numerous possibilities for analyses, for example, we can analyse the development of photography, i.e. the precise determination of certain periods in the development of photography gives us the key for its use in the investigation of the general spirit of time in the period when it occurred, the attitudes of their creators and the persons shown on them with which their value is increased (Гавриловић 1996: 130). This is contribution to the research investigating photography in terms of language and it points out that the photographs are texts written in notions that may be called a photographic discourse. That photographic discourse is as any other discourse, a "photographic text". Viewing of a photograph with understanding is reading it, i.e. placing the photograph in the context of the beholder, his reality. That is why the "intertextuality" of the photograph lies on a complex network of meanings dependent on culture and society (Belaj 2010: 306).

In this research I would not address the communication aspect in the connection with the development of photography in Macedonia and the system of values that was dominant in a certain time period.⁴ My interest will be oriented towards the narration, which is offered by photography, in first line - the family photography. I take into consideration the experience gained during my own field researches, when the subject of interest was researching the wedding, baptisms, different family events, kinship relations, when part of the informants, had taken out their own photographs. That means that in these researches, the photographs were not my subject of interest, but returning to the field materials from the time distance and looking at some photographs, memories of the

² Quoted acc.: M. Vodopija, "Obiteljski album" in: *Glasnik slovenskoga etnološkega društva* 2, Ljubljana, 25-26.

³ The phrase "myth of the family" was used by Antonio Ferreira, for description of the well-integrated structure on beliefs, which divide the members of the family. But, some authors consider the phrase "myth of the family" a synonym about erroneous belief or delusion, which includes distorted reality of a family (Marković 2012: 194).

⁴ About communication aspect in the connection with the development of photography and the system of values, see more: Petreska, Vesna 2014: "Family memory and photography", in: *Cultural memory*, vol. 1, Skopje, 17-25.

interviews with the informants rushed back and I recall when they took out their family photographs and started their narratives. With this I touch the question of the subjective approach, for which there is not often a positive opinion, and it is qualified as "bragging" and a sign of "a bad taste" (Lozica 2006: 254), "narcissism" or that this kind of analysing one's own fields is not scientific work (Marković 2012: 40; 109), but in this case, I accept the thoughts of Clifford Geertz and George Marcus, for "numerous meanings", "partial truths" or "contradictory truths" (Гриц 2007: 28-29; Čapo-Žmegac; Gulin-Zrnić & Pavel-Šantek; 2006: 34⁵).

In this sense the Collier authors emphasize that photography and here I would also add the other visual recordings (e.g. a video recording) help the researchers in their investigation and they fully use them in their expertise, and on the other hand they are tools for sharpening the informants' memory. Since photographs are mutually studied by researchers (whether ethnologists, anthropologists or folklorists) and informants, the informants are facilitated from the sense of being a subject to questioning. The photographs enable them to share their stories spontaneously. This often helps the flow of information on people, places, process and creations (artefacts) (Collier and Collier 1986: 105-106). In regard to the narration of the photograph, the attention is placed onto the types of viewing outside and in (side) the photograph; for example, the view of the camera and the focus on the event, the looks on the people in the photo or the look of people looking at an object in the photo, as well as the appearance of the one being photographed. It is interesting to compare the types of looks with the narrative manners in the narrative analysis of a text. This means that two or more persons can see the same thing in a completely different way. (Collier and Collier 1986: 9). It is also interesting to research the narration of a certain photograph by various members of an individual family in regard to their different degree of knowledge (Belaj 2010: 308). In this context we can also mention the network of looks (views) or the "familial gaze" - that is the same type of looks, or views that are transmitted through generations with which all members of an individual family are mutually connected regardless of the fact whether they lived in the same time and space. The storytelling of the common past (even of those events we do not remember) makes a frame for every person in the family where he can understand and integrate common events and experiences in his own life's stories. The most part of the later interpretations on certain events, in fact are re-interpretations in an authentic way in which they were experienced and memorized in the context of that family. Because the family is often the first social surrounding where we learn to interpret our own experience (Marković 2012: 114). This is about the category of kinship in reading the photograph between family members that is rooted in a peculiar social and cultural context, and it is composed of small, local, individual views and it always imposes on the family views and places the family in the frames of a socially accepted picture of the family as part of the society (Belaj 2010: 308-309⁶).

⁵ Quoted acc.: Geertz, Clifford 1973: "Thick description: toward an interpretive theory of culture" in: *The Interpretation of Cultures*. C. Geertz, New York: Basic Books, 3-30; Clifford, James & George Marcus, ed. 1986: *Writing Culture. The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

⁶ Quoted according to: Hirsch, Marianne 1997: *Family Frames – Photography, Narrative and Post memory*. Cambridge, Massachusetts Harvard University Press.

Roland Barthes accentuates the artistic nature of the visual medium and its quintessential ideological function, (in earlier works "The Photographic message" "Rhetoric of the Image", in *Image Music Text*, 1977, London, 204), referring to photojournalism and commercial photography as messages without a code. However, in his later work "*Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*" - "Svijetla komora. Bilješka o fotografiji", Zagreb, Izdanja Antibarbarus, 2003, Barthes places a special emphasis on the intimate subject of reflection and examines photography as a juxtaposition of two different experiences - that of a subject that acts as a spectator, and that of a subject that is being observed – spectrum (Belaj 2010: 305).

Accepting Barthes' consideration and terminology,⁷ where he observes photography from experience of a subject who is observed – a spectrum and a subject who watches – a spectator, in this case I will refer more to my personal experience, which I had with the informers, when they were subjects who watch – spectators. According to R. Barthes, from the perspective of a spectator, photography works in two ways: as a stadium and as a punctum. The understanding of the stadium of photography comes from the knowledge adopted from culture and society. In the stadium we recognize the intentions of the photographer. The stadium of photography does not imply feelings, does not accept emotions, does not hurt and it does not shocks as a punctum. But, punctum is the thing in a photograph that especially touches and it is not possible to interpret it in relation to socially established conventions connected with the medium of photography. Barthes compares the punctum with a sting, a small hole, and a stain. That means that punctum always implies emotions, which then necessary condition perception, understanding, regardless of whether it is a public or private, i.e. family photograph (Belaj 2010: 305). According to this, stadium is what the photographs tell us, for example, photographs speak about value systems in a certain culture (Petreska 2014: 20-22) while we can associate punctum with the emotions provoked by a photograph and we can connect to it by refreshing our memory and by making a narration.

Starting from a position of a punctum, and applying the theory of presentation of E. Goffman, it is considered that every individual is trying to make a better impression of himself. According to the author, when the individual introduces himself to others, in its appearance he shows officially accepted social values, even more than he usually makes in everyday situations, which means that with the appearance he represents himself in idealized fashion (Belaj 2006: 57-58⁸). M. Vodopija thinking is on the same wavelength and he believes that the mechanism of pose that appears as an expression of the human need to act out a socially desirable and idealized picture of himself in front of himself and the others is characteristic for many moments in life connected with photography (Belaj 2006: 57⁹). I have personally experienced these moments in my field researches of traditional

⁷ R. Barthes's book "Svijetla komora. Bilješka o fotografiji", Zagreb, Izdanja Antibarbarus, 2003, it was not accessible for me thus I quoted according to: Belaj. Melanija (2010): "Obiteljska fotografija. Između mita o idealnoj obitelji i proživljene stvarnosti" in: *Mitski zbornik*, Ed. Suzana Marjanić i Ines Prica, Zagreb, 303-316.

⁸ Quoted according to: Goffman, Erving (2000): *Kako se predstavljamo u svakodnevnom životu*. Geopolitika, Beograd.

⁹ Quoted according to: Vodopija, Milivoj 1976: "Obiteljski album", in: *Glasnik slovenskega etnološkoga društva* 16 (2), 25-26.

weddings, but also in other segments of my field researches, when family insisted to show itself in a better light. We can accept that in the initial stage of a presentation, a person who talks about his family and at the display of photos he/she almost always uses the so-called Coffman's defensive processes, because he/she wants to present him/herself and his/her family well and adequately, i.e. moderately (Belaj 2006: 67). The defensive processes can be recognized in the choice of the shown photos as well as with hiding some photos. I have personally experienced this, while asking numerous questions so they describe the process of the wedding and the replies to be very concise. But when the informants wanted to picture this very important event for them – the marriage of their children, getting grandchildren, or when I personally asked for a wedding photo or a photo of their family, then, they started to take out photos. They did their selection of "the most representative" photographs according to them, and then, the conversation gained another dimension, i.e. the informants started to make their photo-story. The informants were excited when re-telling the wedding they prepared for their children and if they happened to have a thematically ordered photo-album from the wedding, which is being considered a classification of the history of life, following the themes of the main phases of a life cycle, then they easily described the process of the wedding. This also happened when I researched life stories and kinship relations – upon looking at the family or a person, it kind of triggered their memory and they talked easily, but in most cases they insisted events and persons to be presented well, i.e. in socially desirable picture in a spirit of time. This can be connected with the emotions triggered by the photographs which then they necessarily condition perception and understanding (Belaj 2010: 305), and most often the story of a photograph and its interpretation, is told by the narrator according to his perception of what he remembers or what he wants to remember. It is being considered that the "memorized self" can also be called a 'forgotten self', because only a small part of the memorized became a part of retention (autobiographical retention) and it is often temporarily, when it can be forgotten (Marković 2012: 322). That is why I think that a photograph / photographs significantly refresh the memory of people (here I can add - the thing they want to remember), especially if a highly valued theme is a subject of study, such as the life cycle, and then I gained the impression that it was easier for them to remember the events. It can be said that the family memory is above all history, a way in which a man raises his past more or less consciously (Belaj 2010: 311). Or it can be said that making a history for the family from the parts of life stories of their ancestors (especially distant) is a valid obligation to remember individuals and generations, not only out of necessity from narration and preservation in retention, but also, because we are "obliged" to keep continuity with the past of our own family (Marković 2012: 326).

The keeping of the photographs and emotional relations of their owners also speaks of their remarkable meaning. In a number of cases, the photographs were carefully preserved and placed in a box and additionally wrapped. It is sufficient for me to remember the gestures of taking out the photo box, which can be interpreted as being valuable and significant and they will have the opportunity to share it with me. Aside from this I may mention the photographs of their children and grandchildren placed on chest of drawers as a decoration of which they are proud. Very often, especially in the rural environments where most of the old people are left, the photographs are their only communication with their descendants moved in the cities and at the same time they serve as a communicational bridge of return to their past. This is another possibility for

narration that is offered by photography and that we cannot forget; that is, the narration made by the individuals alone in their meditative silence.

My own field researches, when the photography would be given to me as a testimony of events, confirmed previous researches of photography, especially the family one that it possesses a possibility for narration, i.e. it has a possibility for making a photo-story for important events of the family. It is true that the photo-stories tell the “ideal picture“ of a family and from those ideal pictures or moments, the members of the family build myths that encompass stories creating one personal mythical past. In fact, the myth of an ideal family is created through memory and it visually survives through the family photograph (Belaj 2010: 312). However, starting from the position of subjects who watch photographs (spectators), in which the photograph works in two ways: as a stadium and as a punctum, and here the punctum represents a subject of interest (according to Roland, Barthes), where the emotional side comes upfront, then it is normal for the photographs to provoke emotions, conditioned from the perception and understanding of the subjects, and the thing that is said is always the one that we want to remember. The opinion of P. Bourdieu that in the life of the family the photograph acts as an instrument of integration of the group in the sense that it took over the family role and enlivened the family life. Accordingly, the family photograph may be understood as a ritual of a domestic cult of a family in which the family is both the subject and the object. It immobilizes trains of family life, so although it appears to note only individual moments of family history, it actually perpetuates family myths (Belaj 2010: 303¹⁰; Belaj 2006: 54).

References:

- Боцев, Владимир (2000): *Визуелна етнологија на македонските цусици села во обредно време на слави* (master work, manuscript) defended at the PMF - the Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology in Skopje, mentor, prof. PhD. Aneta Svetieva.
- Гавриловић, Љиљана (1996): ”Визуелни извори у етнoлошким истраживањима“, in: *Гласник Етнoграфској музеја*, Београд, бр. 60, 115-134.
- Гирц, Клифорд (2007): *Толкување на културније. Ообрани есеи*. Магор, Скопје.
- Наумовић, Слободан (1988) ”Питање визуелне грађе у етнологији“ in: *Етнoлошке свеске*, IX, Beograd, 113-123.
- Старделов, И. (2003): *Манаки*. Скопје.
- Belaj, Melanija (2006): ”Obiteljska fotografija – analiza i interpretacija u okviru teorije predstavljanja Ervinga Goffmana“, in: *Etnološka tribina*, 29, 53-69.
- Belaj, Melanija (2010): ”Obiteljska fotografija. Između mita o idealnoj obitelji i proživljene stvarnosti“, in: Suzana Marjanić i Ines Prica, Ed. *Mitski zbornik*. Institut za etnologiju i folkloristiku, Biblioteka Nova Etnografija, Zagreb, 303-316.

¹⁰ Quoted acc: Bourdieu, Pierre 1999. ”The Social Dimension of Photography“, in: *Visual culture. The Reader*. (Ed.) Jessica London: Sage Publications, 162-163.

- Collier John, JR and Malcolm Collier (1986): *Visual Anthropology: Photography as a Research Method*. University of New Mexico Press, Previously published by Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1967, Used from:
<http://books-google.mk/books?Id=fDn8CrH8gRoC&pg=PA256&lpg=p1256&dg=Collier+John,+JR+and+Malcolm+Collier,+Visual+Anthropology&source=bl&ots>
- Čapo-Žmegac, Jasna; Gulin-Zrnić, Valentina & Pavel Šantek, Goran (2006): "Etnologija bliskoga: Poetika i politika suvremenih terenskih istraživanja", in: *Etnologija bliskoga: Poetika i politika suvremenih terenskih istraživanja*. Ed. Jasna Čapo-Žmegac, Valentina Gulin-Zrnić, i Goran Pavel Šantek. Institut za etnologiju i folkloristiku, Biblioteka Nova Etnografija, Zagreb, 7-52.
- Lozica, Ivan (2006): "Tekstom o terenu", in: *Etnologija bliskoga: Poetika i politika suvremenih terenskih istraživanja*. Ed. Jasna Čapo-Žmegac, Valentina Gulin-Zrnić, i Goran Pavel Šantek. Institut za etnologiju i folkloristiku, Biblioteka Nova Etnografija, Zagreb, 237-260.
- Marković, Jelena (2012): *Pričanja od djetinstvu. Život priča u svakodnevnoj komunikaciji*. Biblioteka Nova Etnografija. Institut za etnologiju i folkloristiku, Zagreb.
- Petreska, Vesna (2014): "Family memory and photography", in: *Cultural memory*, vol. 1, Skopje, 17-25.
- Ruby, Jay (1975): Is an Ethnographic Film a Filmic Ethnography, *Studies in the anthropology of Visual Communication*, Vol. 2, No. 2, Fall, 105. <http://astro.temple.edu/~ruby/ruby/is.html>.