

Alnis Stakle

Domesticated Simulacra: The Dialectics of Power in Family Photographic Archives

Abstract

This article investigates the power dynamics present in family photographic archives from the Soviet Union, spanning from World War I to Stalin's death in 1953. An analysis of discovered family photographs, alongside additional artistic interventions, assesses how family photography serves as a multifaceted tool of ideological power, manifested through what appear to be impartial acts of domestic documentation. The study presents the concept of "domesticated simulacra" to clarify how family photographs gain authenticity through their role in home rituals while concealing collective trauma. By employing artistic research methods, the article illustrates how the tangible aspects of family photos influence individual and shared memory. Through the chemical modification of archival images and their integration with Soviet-era technical drawings, this research examines how family photos became venues where socio-political narratives were domesticated, challenged, and reproduced. The findings demonstrate that these personal

archives functioned as spaces for negotiating, sharing, and occasionally challenging power dynamics across generations. Ultimately, the study reveals that family photos are not merely vessels of personal memories but complex discursive spaces where ideological beliefs are asserted and contested. Particular analytical attention is given to how the apparent neutrality of domestic documentation systematically excludes traumatic collective experiences, substituting them with optimistic visual representations that foster a form of collective amnesia. This study reconceptualises forgetting not as passive loss but as a nuanced form of resistance – a strategic mnemonic mechanism through which individuals and communities navigate oppressive political systems and cultural hegemonies.

Key words

Artistic Research. Domesticated Simulacra. Family Photography. Photographic Materiality. Visual Ideology.

Introduction

Several years ago, I acquired a collection of family photographs from World War I until Stalin's death in 1953. This period in Soviet Union history was undoubtedly one of the gravest sociopolitical crises in world history. Millions suffered during wars and under the political repression of the Stalin era. Russia colonised neighbouring countries and enacted extensive measures to eliminate key members of society, confiscating businesses and properties, deporting undesirable individuals to labour and death camps in Siberia, and reshaping public spaces to embody Soviet ideological symbolism. However, family photographs from this period depict smiling individuals meticulously dressed in the fashions of the time. None of the tragedies of the era are apparent; instead, a radiant optimism is conveyed through the poses and expressions of the people captured in the images. Even photographs taken during Siberian exile reveal little more than the prevailing spirit of the time. They act as a translucent veil between the observer and the depicted era, softening and distorting any concerns and intuitions an observer may harbour regarding the collective experience of tragedies.

The domestication of visual memory through family photography represents a complex intersection where power relations, simulated reproduction, and memorial practices converge to shape

both individual and collective consciousness. Family albums transcend their conventional role as mere repositories of personal memory; instead, they function as sophisticated laboratories where broader sociopolitical narratives undergo processes of domestication, contestation, and reproduction. This article explores the transformation of photography from a potentially disruptive technology into an instrument of family documentation, examining how this domestication process fundamentally reconstitutes both private remembrance and collective memorialisation frameworks.

1 The Domestication of Authenticity

Domesticating photographic practice within familial contexts engenders a particular form of authenticity that validates and constructs idealised versions of family life, where the mechanical reproduction of moments becomes inseparable from the social performance of familial cohesion. This authenticity, ironically, stems not from the factual accuracy of documentaries but from the ritualistic elements of photography. In this context, staging, capturing, and preserving family moments foster a performative environment where social ideals and personal memories intertwine. Although they seem to capture genuine experiences, the images serve as intentionally crafted artefacts that reflect and reinforce prevailing social narratives related to family dynamics, class identity, and cultural

belonging, all while concealing the deeper tensions, conflicts, and power structures that shape these narratives.

While family photographs gain their perceived legitimacy from their intimate origins, this intimacy operates through intricate "performative structures" (Langford, 2001) that transform private memories into both personal and intimate social artefacts. These structures function as "potential history" (Azoulay, 2019), establishing a civil contract between the photographer, the subject being photographed, and the viewer. This contract enables and constrains representation possibilities, embedding images within broader historical processes – the domestication of authenticity functions through various frameworks illuminating its complex relationship with power and memory. Image archives reflect the past and the decisions made by different social groups and institutions regarding what to retain and remove from collective and private history. However, archives also "extend into the future" (Derrida, 1997, p. 30) determining which memories will be preserved and which will be obliterated. Consequently, family photographs reinforce the portrayal of institutional power dynamics that are particular to their historical context despite the apparent influence of subjectivity and unconscious choices in their selection and aesthetic arrangement. By understanding the private and collective principles involved in



Figure 1: May This Inanimate Likeness Remind You of My Living Self 001
Source: Stakle, 2025

creating image archives, we can grasp how the drive to authenticate family photographs contributes to broader historical construction and erasure processes through the interplay of human memory and photography as an index.

Photographing family life serves as a means of transmitting and reinforcing social norms across generations. The domestication of photographic practice occurs through the phenomenon of “familial looking” (Hirsch, 2012), where the very act of viewing entails complex “memory work” (Kuhn, 2002) that influences both individual and collective understanding of the past. Family photographs participate in broader processes of social memory formation, where personal narratives intersect with collective frameworks for comprehending “raw histories” (Edwards, 2012) in ways that reinforce

and sometimes challenge dominant historical narratives. Family photography and archives establish classification and recognition systems that reshape how families organise and comprehend their visual histories. This process aligns with photographic practices that unveil the subtle “operations of power” (Bourdieu, 1990) in shaping personal archives while also illustrating photography’s role in establishing and reinforcing “social norms” through seemingly “natural acts of documentation” (Sontag, 2002). The apparent naturalness of family photography conceals its function as an “apparatus of social control and normalisation” (Tagg, 1988, p. 7) whereby photographic technologies alter processes of remembering and oblivion through seemingly neutral methods of classification and organisation of family image archives.

The domestication process generates what could be termed domesticated simulacra-images that, while fundamentally constructed and mediated, embody the cultural and emotional cliché of seemingly private familial truths. This concept builds upon Baudrillard’s (1994) ideas of simulacra, emphasising how family photographs acquire misleading authenticity through their integration into domestic rituals and practices. In contemporary culture, the authentication of family photographs operates through “listening to images” (Campt, 2017) – practices that engage with visual archives and attend to their subtle, everyday forms of resistance and/or forgetting. Both unconscious and conscious manifestations of forgetting can be understood as strategic modes of resistance against sociopolitical constraints, where forgetting is a passive loss of memory and an active form of



Figure 2: May This Inanimate Likeness Remind You of My Living Self 002
Source: Stakle, 2025



Figure 3: May This Inanimate Likeness Remind You of My Living Self 003
Source: Stakle, 2025

agency. This mnemonic resistance operates via both intentional and unintentional memory suppression processes. It is a psychological and social mechanism that helps individuals and communities manoeuvre through oppressive political systems and cultural hegemonies. The interplay between remembering and forgetting appears as a space for possible liberation, where the selective process of constructing memories acts as a counter-hegemonic strategy that confronts prevailing historical narratives and power dynamics. This reconceptualisation of oblivion as resistance complicates traditional binary oppositions between memory and forgetting, suggesting instead a more nuanced understanding in which the boundaries between voluntary and involuntary forgetting become permeable. This fosters environments for different kinds of historical awareness and political action, where memory serves as a means of preservation and a dynamic negotiation between conflicting narratives and power dynamics.

2 The Materiality of Domesticated Memory

The physical nature of family photographs, as objects that can be held, organised, and preserved, dramatically increases their effectiveness as instruments of social memory and cultural transmission. This physical aspect of photographic memory strengthens the dynamic relationship between materials and social practices, which impacts how objects participate in processes of remembrance. Photographic objects serve not only as passive repositories of memory but also develop into complex configurations of objects, practices, and meanings that shape individual and collective identity and memory.

The tactile dimension of photographic memory contributes to “forget me not” (Batchen, 2004)

practices, serving as ritualised interactions with photographic objects that shape both personal and collective remembrance and forgetfulness. Sensory engagement with photographs creates a form of “material performance” (Edwards, 2012), where memory is not merely recalled but actively produced through physical interaction. This performative dimension becomes particularly significant as the “site of memory” (Nora, 1989) in the complex interplay between material artefacts and embodied practices in transmitting cultural memory. The materiality of family photographs functions as “objects of longing” (Stewart, 1993), where photographs are artefacts that materialise personal desires and social aspirations. The material deterioration of photographs, which often occurs in poorly preserved vernacular archives, adds additional

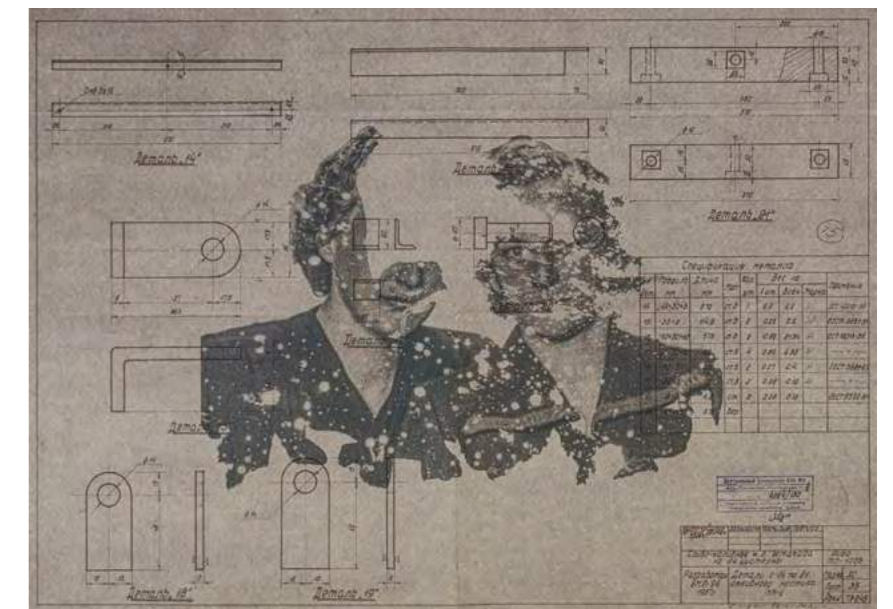


Figure 4: May This Inanimate Likeness Remind You of My Living Self 004
Source: Stakle, 2025



Figure 5: May This Inanimate Likeness Remind You of My Living Self 005
Source: Stakle, 2025

layers of meaning through “observed decay” (DeSilvey, 2006), transforming into the materiality of loss. The materiality of image archives as a sensory experience is founded on a layered understanding of how photographic objects operate across multiple registers of meaning and materiality.

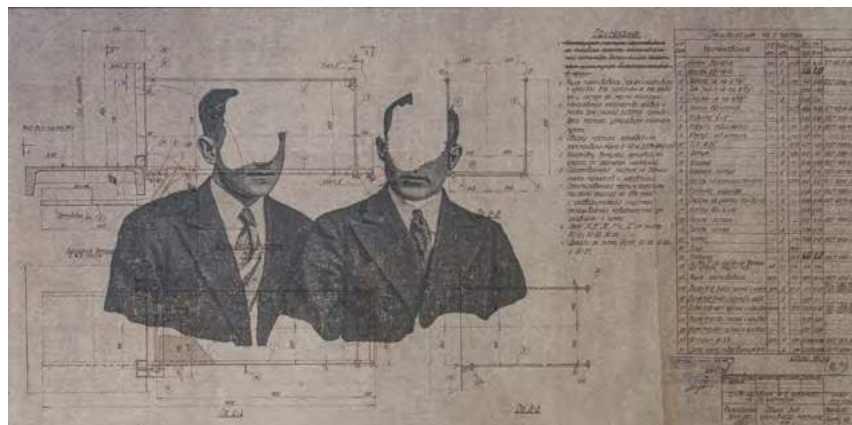


Figure 6: May This Inanimate Likeness Remind You of My Living Self 006
Source: Stakle, 2025

Family photographs, whether well-preserved or showing signs of wear, play a vital role in mediating the intricate interaction among personal memory, the emotional aspects of loss, and cultural transmission. As physical artefacts, these photographs and albums serve both as repositories for mnemonic preservation and as sites for memory transformation, where the visible signs of handling, spatial arrangement, and material decay become essential components of their semiotic capacity. This materiality fosters a distinctive experience of remembrance, giving rise to what may be described as an embodied archive – a fusion of tactile interaction, emotional response, and memory formation. The physical presence of family photographs is a repository of visual memory, which Schneider describes as “performing remains” (Schneider, 2011). They offer a concrete framework that helps generations understand their connection to personal and shared histories. This interaction

connects preservation and decay, constantly influencing how familial and cultural memories are shared and passed down. The materiality of these photographic objects functions as both medium and message in the intergenerational transmission of memory, where physical deterioration paradoxically enhances – not diminishes – their capacity for meaning-making.

Family photographs illustrate a nuanced politics of representation, functioning as a “disciplinary apparatus” (Foucault, 1975) that organises both bodies and spaces to depict and sustain power dynamics within a broader spatial context, transcending mere compositional choices. This context encompasses the social relations revealed through spatial practices and representations. In family photography, the domestic environment transforms into a “thirdspace” (Soja, 1996), merging reality with imagination, where visual representation reflects social relations. As spatial entities, family photographs enhance private space organisation (Stewart, 1993) through material and visual practices. The domestic environments selected for family portraits gain emotional and symbolic significance through their representation.

Family photographic archives reveal what one might call an “ecology of domesticated simulacra” – a complex system operating as a mechanism of ideological power through the neutral act of domestic documentation. While Baudrillard’s



Figure 7: May This Inanimate Likeness Remind You of My Living Self 007
Source: Stakle, 2025

(1994) classical theory of simulacra emphasises the dissolution of reference in an age of mass reproduction, family photography gains a seemingly authentic quality precisely through its decaying materiality, as well as the repetition of clichéd poses, gestures, grimaces, and period dress codes of the portrayed individuals. The consistency with which certain moments, poses, and arrangements reoccur across various family archives highlights the function of what might be described as domestic visual grammar.

Examining domesticated simulacra in family photography reveals complex theoretical and historical tensions, illuminating fundamental power and memory relations questions. Family images’ privacy and clear physical and conceptual distance from prevailing ideologies foster a visual

space for remembrance. This neutrality continually supports the idea that collective traumatic experiences have not occurred. Only portraits of smiling family members have endured, as their cheerful representations facilitate a detachment from both private and collective traumas, resulting in a bittersweet simulation of forgetting infused with optimism.

3 Method

My research methodology is grounded in artistic research practice, where the research process constitutes a synthesis of academic rigour and creative inquiry. This approach values intuitive decision-making and “tacit, experiential” knowledge (Borgdorff, 2012) as foundational elements for generating new epistemic frameworks. In contrast to conventional academic methodologies that emphasise textual documentation, artistic research methodologically integrates knowledge derived from and documented through diverse audiovisual media. Research questions emerge organically from artistic practice, thus circumventing the ‘predetermined’ theoretical constraints outlined by Smith and Dean (2009). The interplay of emotional resonance, aleatory elements, and media materiality guides the researcher through what Gray and Malins (2004) refer to as a “cyclic spiral model” of creation, reflection, and analytical discovery, where successive iterations build on previous findings to cultivate

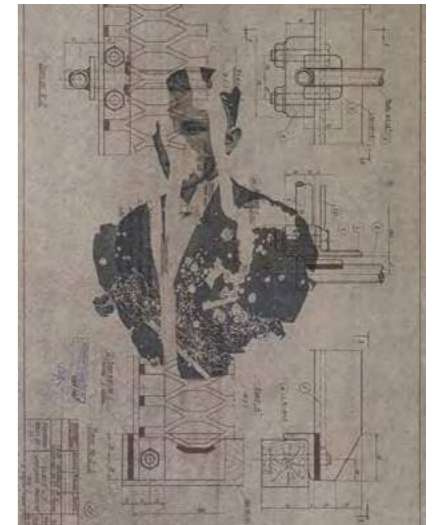


Figure 8: May This Inanimate Likeness Remind You of My Living Self 008
Source: Stakle, 2025

a nuanced understanding of the research inquiry. In artistic research, academic excellence is intertwined with meticulous artistic methods, creating a holistic context that locates research outcomes at the crossroads of practical, theoretical, and social aspects.

My research inquiry investigates methodologies for uncovering and critically examining the latent socio-political trauma embedded within family photographic archives produced in the former Soviet Union from World War I until Stalin’s death in 1953, utilising artistic means.

Several family photographs I found, which were taken during World War II, contained a poetic dedication in Russian on the reverse side of the images: “May This Inanimate Likeness Remind You of My Living Self.”

This dedication later became the title for a series of works aimed at deconstructing and reconstructing family photo archive images in various material forms to discursively engage with these images as evidence of private and collective oblivion. It is important to note that the poetic message of this dedication suggests, to some extent, a shared belief that photography can indexically register an individual and preserve certain qualities for the future through its materiality.

My artistic methodology is rooted in two theoretical and practical approaches. The primary focus centres on representing subject identity as a fundamental component of the visual syntax within family archive imagery. Recognisable figures in family photos generate deceptive connections to particular historical events and their related personal and shared stories, effectively forming what can be considered domesticated simulacra. Using artistic intervention, I chemically altered these archival images, irrevocably transforming both the recognisability of the subjects and environments depicted alongside the overall integrity of the images.

The secondary methodological approach involved appropriating technical drawings discovered in abandoned Soviet-era factories as printing bases. This technique facilitated the simultaneous juxtaposition and integration of the erasure of family archive subject identity with the entropic

materiality of technical drawings and Soviet-era engineering notation. This layering and contraposition of visual syntactic elements confront viewers with not only poetically elegiac motifs of temporal degradation but also with Soviet-era strategies of identity erasure and memory suppression, wherein the collectivised image and values of the socialist worker systematically replaced individual identity.

Conclusion

Delving into family photography as a space for power dynamics uncovers the complex processes through which personal and shared memories are created, maintained, and passed down through generations. Investigating the role of photography in everyday life reveals the nuanced dynamics of power that influence what we remember and the contexts in which these memories are formed. This underscores how family imagery serves as a significant source of prevalent ideologies and the spread of propaganda on a personal level. The analysis reveals several key findings:

Family photographs serve as familiar substitutes. Their sense of authenticity emerges not from factual representation but from their role in everyday household rituals and activities. While these images may portray authentic moments, they function as carefully curated artefacts that reinforce and obscure prevailing social narratives and institutional power structures.

The materiality of family photographs plays a crucial role in memory formation and transmission. The physical nature of these archives – their arrangement, deterioration, and tactile interaction – creates what we might call an “embodied archive” that shapes both personal and collective remembrance. This materiality paradoxically enhances their potential for meaning-making, even as they deteriorate. Family photography was a sophisticated ideological power mechanism during the Soviet-era. Domestic documentation’s apparent neutrality concealed its role in creating a visual environment of remembrance that systematically excluded traumatic collective experiences and replaced them with optimistic representations of family life.

The research methodology highlights the importance of artistic intervention in revealing latent socio-political trauma within family photographic archives. The broader implications of this research suggest that these archives function as crucial sites for understanding how power operates at the intersection of personal and collective memory. They illustrate a nuanced relationship between conformity and resistance, highlighting that forgetting is not just a passive loss, but can also serve as an active means of exercising agency against oppressive political systems.

The study reveals that family photographs function as personal memory vaults and complex contexts

in which sociopolitical narratives are shaped, challenged, and reproduced.

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Author

Asst. Prof. Dr. paed. Alnis Stakle, Dr. paed.
alnis.stakle@rsu.lv
ORCID-ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0962-0076>

Riga Stradiņš University
Faculty of Social Sciences
Kuldīgas Street 9c
Rīga, LV-1007, Latvia

Profile of the Author

Alnis Stakle (b. 1975, Latvia) is a Latvian photographer and educator of photography. He holds a Doctorate in Art Education from Daugavpils University. Stakle’s work critically examines the visual representation of collective and private trauma, loss, and memory while exploring the materiality of photography. By employing documentary and conceptual approaches, his works investigate how socio-political ideas can be expressed through fact and fiction and the relationship between collective and subjective experiences.

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