

Rosy Martin's Visual Art: Bridging Psycho-Therapeutic Theory and Understanding Family Life

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Abstract: This essay explores the application of re-enactment phototherapy, pioneered by Rosy Martin and Jo Spence, in addressing psychological trauma and its role in enhancing our understanding of family dynamics. Re-enactment photography is a therapeutic approach that involves revisiting past traumas and crafting new narratives to foster personal growth. It encompasses role-playing and photographic documentation, structured around four key stages: establishing safety and trust, integrating counseling into photography sessions, reviewing images, and engaging in discussions. These processes are lauded for their ability to externalize unexpressed emotions, promoting self-expression and identity reconstruction within a social context. Using Rosy Martin's family project, *Too Close to Home*, as a case study, this essay delves into how documenting one's childhood home can serve as a coping mechanism for dealing with loss and reconnecting with familial memories. The essay also examines the application of re-enactment phototherapy across diverse demographics, underscoring its profound impact on comprehending family dynamics and healing childhood traumas. Additionally, it draws parallels with Diana Markosian's *Santa Barbara*, highlighting their shared utilization of re-enactment to revisit their family's past and shedding light on the connections between phototherapy and trauma healing. In conclusion, re-enactment phototherapy emerges as a valuable tool for comprehending and healing family dynamics and childhood traumas. It offers a meaningful and constructive avenue for future research on trauma healing and identity exploration.

Keywords: Rosy Martin; Joe Spencer; Psycho-therapeutic theory; Re-enactment phototherapy; Family memories; Trauma healing

1. Introduction

In the mid-19th century, an English doctor and amateur photographer photographed his patients as clinical assistance in recognizing several diagnosed types of mental disease and is responsible for the earliest known use of photography in psychotherapy. He believed that pictures might be not only used to examine how mentally sick people seem, but that pictures of patients could alter their perceptions of themselves ^[4]. This was the early form of phototherapy. It was not until the late 1970s that phototherapy evolved into a formal spiritual discipline based on the art of photography and psychology, aiming to create positive changes in people's mental states through visual material^[3].

Since 1983, Rosy Martin and Jo Spence have been developing and practicing re-enactment phototherapy in the treatment of psychological trauma with remarkable results. The essay will start with an analysis of the practice and development of re-enactment phototherapy by Rosy Martin and Jo Spence, describe how Rosy Martin's family project applied and drew on this therapy to reconstruct memories of growing up in order to reconcile with traumas. Finally, connecting with Diana Markosian's photographic project *Santa Barbara* (2020) and Tarkovsky's film *Mirror* (1975)^{[8][9][20]}, the essay will analyze the function logic behind re-enactment phototherapy by using Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan's theories.

2. Definition of Re-enactment phototherapy

Rosy Martin (2009) stated that Re-enactment by revisiting the origin of a problem or an old trauma and creating a new ending^[21], a new option, or a new way of being visible, phototherapy aims to make

process, change, and transformation apparent; Counseling holds and controls this very strong intensity, which touches on dark, difficult, and profound stuff, at both the beginning and the finish.

Therefore basically, in re-enactment phototherapy, the exploration of personal history takes the form of staging past episodes of interacting with significant others, somewhat alike to psychodrama, but focusing more on visual aspects of role-taking, and recording the re-enactment photographically. It is a very open-ended system of communication, as well as a psychotherapeutic tool designed to explore memories and attempt to repair trauma through role play and interactive collaboration between therapist and participant ^[11]. The process of the therapy has four stages: establishing safety and trust, photographic session which starts with counseling, prints of counselling procedure and sharing and discussing prints. ^[12].

However, re-enactment is not an identical restoration of the past, but rather a 'remaking'/reconstruction, which is an 'internal permission-giving', where one can subjectively reconstruct memories and thus find a new way of perceiving and understanding the past in order to change the present mental state ^[10].

3. Literature review of re-enactment phototherapy

Rosy Martin and Jo Spence began to develop re-enactment phototherapy in 1983. And then continued complementing it through their practice with different groups: survivors of sexual abuse, female perpetrators, women, sexual minorities (1987-), and older women (2012-2016).

In their early practice of re-enactment phototherapy, Rosy and Jo used the therapy of their own personal experiences as a starting point to explore the traumas suffered by lesbians and feminists from working-class families in their family and social lives and the ways in which they can repair them.

From a childhood photograph, Rosy illustrated the compromise she made as a child from a working-class family to achieve the expectations of a class leap to an unfair social system. The girl in the photograph (Martin and Spence, 1994) is quiet and well-behaved^[15], presenting a typical image of a good student(see Figure 1), but the cost of being a 'good student' is too much time and energy spent struggling in an unfair education system, which gave rise to Rosy's anxiety about failure and questioning the so-called 'success stereotype'. As a lesbian, Rosy was also confused about the traditional appearance of women, but her repressive educational and family environment prevented her from dealing with the pain of this confusion. In front of the camera, Rosy put on the student uniforms shown in the photographs and, by moving with abandon, finally took them off to destroy the bondage and pain caused by the so-called 'ideal image'(see figure 2).



Figure 1: Minefield of Memory (1994) by Rosy Martin and Jo Spence



Figure 2: Rosy was taking off the uniform

Jo's trauma was rooted in the absence of her parents from family life during the post-war period when they were too busy working and exhausted, leaving her as the eldest daughter to take on the responsibility of caring for the family at an early age. The entrance of a child who should have enjoyed childhood into the dangerous and cruel world of adulthood was almost devastating to the child's psychological development. In addition, Jo's mother has breast cancer, and her fears that she will develop cancer are fuelled by her doubts about modern medicine and her flawed genetic heritage, which adds to her resentment and lack of understanding of her mother. No one can truly empathise with another person until they become someone, and the practice takes this approach by putting the child in the place of her parents and re-enacting her childhood experiences in front of the camera (see Figure 3), so that Jo came to understand the helplessness of her parents and the unintentional damage they had caused, and forgave herself for having turned away from them out of hatred ^[10].



Figure 3: Jo was in a phototherapy session on food, love, and control. She re-enacted the mother who fed her as an adolescent.

In the older women's project in Sheffield^[18], Rosy asked the participants to talk about their feelings as older women through images, encouraging them to show themselves in front of the camera in various forms (holding a sign and taking a selfie, acting as their childhood selves, dancing freely, etc.) and to document this bold and fresh experiment through images as a way of defying the popular stereotype of older women (see Figure 4); in addition, in front of the camera, which is a tool for recording the past, the participants naturally expressed their memories and thoughts, which had a significant effect on healing the trauma of their childhood or adolescence. The group work also had a significant impact on the

participants in this project, as it encouraged them to support each other and to be more authentic, thus making it easier to access deeper emotions and unspoken experiences. Overall, the project has helped older women to feel more confident about aging and to increase their self-acceptance, as well as to have a more peaceful understanding of trauma and memory.



Figure 4: The older women's project in Sheffield

The literature review section summarises re-enactment phototherapy practices that are more relevant to identity and family life. It is clear that re-enactment phototherapy has a significant positive effect on people's understanding of family life and the repair of traumatic memories from childhood.

A large part of Phototherapy's power comes from the ability of the photograph to be an object at the same time, an entity that carries memories of the past, reminding us of details long forgotten in time. The literal and symbolic statement of the photograph is a vehicle that, when explored, can also lead us closer to the truth^{[2][4]}. Our innermost emotional states and unconscious communications are given shape and order by a common photograph^{[6][24]}. Phototherapy helps to illustrate the 'unspeakable', to externalise people's inner world and to understand the motivation for their actions^{[13][22]}; Utilising images encourages more intricate linking procedures between the verbal and nonverbal systems^[7]. Through phototherapy, people are able to express their understanding of their own identity in the context of social discourse and have the opportunity to reconstruct social identities shaped by past experiences^[17].

Since phototherapy has reaped good results in the field of psychotherapy, Rosy has drawn on this theory in her own art projects, exploring memory, trauma and family life in a more rational way.

4. Mirror of Memory- Too close to home

After the death of her father, Rosy, who was suffering from bereavement, began to photograph the house she used to live in with her parents during her childhood. Taking as her starting point an exploration of the connection between memory and photography, she documents the objects and spaces in that house through images, as a way of finding the roots of family memories and exploring ways of facing ageing and loss.

'Too close to home is an inquiry into the texture of place and memory through the notions of absent presence. The work includes metaphors for the process of ageing. As my starting points I drew upon family myths and a detailed exploration of memories of a specific place. I am using photography and video to explore and isolate tiny details and fragments, so the audience only builds up a sense of the space over time. By pushing at the edge of legibility I enable the audience to project their own meanings upon the images, which symbolise and stand in for the continuity and discontinuity of change over time' [16].

Just like Rosy (2023) states that when viewing a family album, many people experience nostalgia and yearn to go 'home' to an idealized golden age when everyone was happy and the sun shone^[19]. But real family life was often a mixture of pain and joy. Rosy grew up in the early 20th century when working-class people were living on low incomes and benefits, or even without housing, due to the war and the Conservative Party's political stance; Class differences were largely reflected in the inequality of educational resources, and in 1944, the education act was introduced in the British Parliament to help more children get into the school, which aimed to help more children get into the school through free secondary education. In the 1950s, 80% of children from working-class families attended non-selective secondary schools which have a poor relation to selective grammar school, less than 10% of these children went on to formal grammar school while middle-class children have a 70%-80% chance of entering a language school. This suggests that access to higher education for children from different classes has never been equal^[23].

As previously mentioned, as the only daughter (and lesbian) in a working-class family, Rosy endured excessive emotional stress from an unfair educational system while dealing with the confusion of gender identity that came with growing up. In Rosy's early practice of re-enactment phototherapy, Rosy explores the repression and class shame of growing up as a lesbian in a poor, male-dominated working family by taking up the position of her parents to explore their own stories^[14](see Figure 5).



Figure 5: *The Site of Death; In Loving Memory of James John Martin by Rosy Martin.*

In *Too close to home*, Rosy changed from the poignancy and criticism of her previous work to a warmer perspective that recreates and reconstructs childhood memories. She photographed everything in the house: tables, chairs, closets, drawers, letters, mirrors, family photos, her mother sitting on the sofa, her trembling hands, and the glittering ring on her hand(see Figure 6).



Figure 6: Screenshots of *Too close to home*

These images are interwoven in the film as if they were copies of memories, stacked, repeated, and thus blurred. The project is a metaphor for the meaning of aging, showing the life history of small people and the pain they endure in the changing times. It reconstructs the field of memory through images and video, creating a dialogue with the father and his former self across time and space, exploring the meaning of pain, death and forgiveness for a family.

In Diana Markosian's project *Santa Barbara* (see Figure 7 and Figure 8), the artist built a theatre in front of the camera and restored her family's past through performance. She recruited a group of actors to play herself and her own family, reconstructing the story of her mother who left the Soviet Union with her and her brother to make a living in the United States in 1991 after the collapse of the economy. Through this re-enactment, she stripped herself of the story itself, witnessing her mother's life and her own as a bystander, trying to understand her mother's situation at the time and the sacrifices she made to provide a better material life for herself and her brother. Equipped with a psychological temperament and set against the backdrop of the Satir family therapy model, *Santa Barbara* sculpted the protagonist's family of origin with an adult perspective, coming to terms with family members and herself. This approach has something in common with Rosy Martin's re-enactment phototherapy, where the path is to reshape the story itself through the construction of characters and spaces in order to achieve the goal of healing family trauma.



Figure 7: Images from *Santa Barbara*



Figure 8: Shooting site of Santa Barbara

The ambiguity of memory prevents one from remembering the details of the past as clearly as looking in a mirror, it is a thin fog and too many traces are faded in the process. Memories are much like dreams in that they cannot be fully retold.

Part of the difficulty of giving an account of dreams is due to our having to translate these visual images into words. 'I could draw it' a dreamer often says to us, 'but I don't know how to say it.'^[1]

In re-enactment phototherapy, the camera's lens acts as a mirror, clearly 'repainting' the figurative reality presented to it, allowing one to reconstruct oneself in the gaze of the 'mirror'^[5], also sees the endless universe that nurtures childhood and homeland(see Figure 9).



Figure 9: Screenshots of Mirror

5. Conclusion

The essay explored the role of re-enactment phototherapy in the understanding of family life in the context of Rosy Martin's photography projects and analyses the philosophical and psychological logic of re-enactment phototherapy, which plays an important role in a deeper understanding of Rosy's work on family. However, due to space and subject matter constraints, Jo Spence (another founder of re-enactment phototherapy) is not fully researched in this essay but is only briefly introduced as a partner of Rosy. In addition, the essay did not explore much about the female gaze, feminism, and identity in Rosy's work. It is hoped that these unexplored areas will be explored in more depth in future research.

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