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## CREATIVE AND CRIME SCENE PHOTOGRAPHY: STAGED PATRICIDE AND MATRICIDE AS SCREEN MEMORIES IN AIDA CHEHREHGOSHA'S *TO MOM, DAD AND MY TWO BROTHERS*

*Aida Chehrehgosha's award-winning photography series To Mom, Dad and My Two Brothers (2008) in which the artist controversially stages the death of her abusive mother and father is examined in this essay as exemplifying a form of screen memories — a conscious psychodynamic strategy, introduced by Sigmund Freud, employed here to both expose and heal traumatic experiences. Challenging the dominant views in trauma theory and psychoanalysis regarding the role of visuality vis-à-vis narrativization, I claim that in Chehrehgosha's series the visual works both to indicate the trauma as well as to point to its overdetermined, complex nature. Moreover, the photographs are revealed to be palimpsestic and hybrid in their implicit photographic gaze, blurring the line between scientific and aesthetic uses of photography, legal and artistic discourses, fundamentally questioning the experience of being a victim and a criminal. As such, the artwork is understood as a unique and complex photographic way to represent and address painful experiences and mixed affects — a palimpsestic approach to screening trauma.*

*[W]e find many instances of transgression, matricide, patricide and other crimes against the love of family and piety treated as the subject-matter of Greek art; but they are not here regarded simply as atrocities, or [. . .] as brought about by the inscrutability of a so-called fatality which imports the appearance of a necessary result. Rather, if such transgressions are committed by mankind and in part ordered and defended by the gods themselves, such actions are on every occasion presented to us from some point of view at least in a light which declares a certain justification truly arising out of the subject-matter itself.*

G.W.F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of Fine Art*

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Aida Chehrehgosha is a Swedish artist, born in Iran, who, according to Mara Lee Gerdén, has consistently “worked with the family trope, as well as with her own biological family” (2018, 165). Such subject matter is deeply rooted in the artist’s personal experiences since “she and her two brothers underwent constant abuse growing up. In her home, domestic violence was a standard procedure — her mom hit her and her brothers, and her father hit her mom. [...] She would look for the sources of this abuse, namely the precariousness of her parents and their vulnerability as newly immigrated Iranians” (Gerdén 2018, 166). Her investigation has continued not only being an artistic procedure but a therapeutic and epistemological one too of not simply bearing the wound but understanding and ultimately healing it through such examination. Chehrehgosha’s most highly acclaimed example thereof is the “prize-winning series of photographs entitled *To Mom, Dad and My Two Brothers* [2008], where Chehrehgosha staged the death of her parents” (Gerdén 2018, 168). Later, hybridizing art photography and crime documentaries, in *You’re the One’s to Blame* (2011), she continued investigating domestic violence by offering painstakingly staged domestic crimes, varying in explicitness. Then, in *I Can’t Stop Thinking* (2015), the photographer elliptically implies a family tragedy of losing an only child to crime. Why would one venture to make such an artistic choice to stage the death of one’s parents? The photographer explains the emotional complexity that this choice points to: “My upbringing consisted of abuse and constant fear . . . My anger was so immense, many times I wanted to see my dad dead. My anger towards my mom was just as strong, mostly when she hit me because of her own frustrated situation. I hated them so much. But it was a very complicated anger. I also loved them” (Chehrehgosha qtd. in Gerdén 2018, 168). Gerdén sees in these photographs the capturing of the ambivalence of an overwhelming hate mixed with a bond of familial love where “the affective impact of ‘mixed emotions’ dominates” (2018, 168). Yet this series is conceptually complex in other senses too.

Considering that this artwork implies, yet also eschews, narrativization, replacing real traumatic events with staged ones, it poses some deep, theoretical questions. What is its relation to reality? How is it representing/dealing with the trauma? How does it function as a psychic phenomenon? The use of narrative in representing as well as dealing with trauma is a well-established field of research. A landmark in the development of contemporary trauma theory was Cathy Caruth’s edited collection of essays *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (1995) which set the tone for the research to follow. Caruth’s view is that traumatic memory (as a recurrent image) functions by strongly defying narrative assimilation. While the current trauma theory is an interdisciplinary field, encompassing psychoanalysis, psychology, neurobiology, and even literary and media studies, much of it has its roots in Freudian psychoanalysis and psychologist Pierre Janet’s ideas who, much like Freud — and later Caruth, as Michelle Balaev shows, emphasize “the need to remember the past and narrativize the traumatic in order to integrate the event into what he calls ‘normal memory’” (2012, 5). For instance, two prominent present-day trauma researchers, Judith Herman and Bessel van der Kolk, both follow Janet’s approach by stressing “the need to re-create through narration the traumatic event in order to attempt to assimilate trauma into ‘normal memory’” (Balaev 2012, 7). And, as Christina Wald explains, such a line of thought is widespread as in “contemporary trauma theory,

the idea of the healing power of narrativization and intellectual processing of trauma [. . .] is still of paramount importance. Theorists and practitioners from the fields of neurology, psychotherapy, and psychoanalysis alike strongly advocate the integration of the traumatic event in the victim's consciousness via narrativization" (2007, 110–111).

In much of media studies research on trauma (see Meek 2010, 7), visibility is seen as symptomatic, indicating a trauma whereas its narrativization facilitates a healing. Ann Kaplan similarly sees "the visibility common to traumatic symptoms (flashbacks, hallucinations, dreams) and the ways in which visual media like cinema become the mechanisms through which a culture can unconsciously address its traumatic hauntings" (2005, 69), which indicates rupturing, traumatic experiences. Yet the healing power of visualization as comprising an alternative strategy to narrativization is an underexplored area. Chehrehgosha's series of photographs combines empiricist and aesthetic uses of photography in order to employ a specific psychodynamic strategy to deal with — not only expose — a childhood trauma and so reveals a fascinating palimpsest of attempting to overwrite one's experiences with a constructed memory image. To explain how such a complex procedure operates and what theoretical implications it has for understanding psychodynamic processes in relation to artistic and scientific photography, I first need to introduce two ideas — the Freudian psychoanalytic notion of screen memories and the empiricist treatment of visibility in crime scene photography — to later bring them together and triangulate them with Chehrehgosha's photographs. Subsequently, much of what I shall be arguing in the present essay directly opposes this visual-narrative dichotomy, accepted across a number of disciplines, and can be seen as developing as well as contributing to the field of trauma studies due to the essay's subject matter and its adopted psychoanalytical approach — a mainstay in trauma studies.

### **Screen memories: luminous visibility of a staged past**

A fascinating yet still underexplored concept that Sigmund Freud introduced in 1899 is "screen memory [. . .] which owes its value as a memory not to its own content but to the relation existing between that content and some other, that has been suppressed" (Freud 1962 [1962 [1899], 319; see also 1914 [1901], 1957 [1910], 63–137, 1955 [1917], 145–156). For Freud, in David L. Smith's summary, there are three types of such memories: "those in which a recollection from childhood 'screens' or conceals some event contemporary with it, those in which a later recollection stands for a memory of a childhood event, and those in which a childhood recollection represents a later concern" (2000, 7). As Smith observes (2000, 23), there is a controversial suggestion implicit in this proposition since Freud's famous seduction theory, according to which childhood traumas (mostly relating to sexuality) mark an individual's subject formation, is problematized. If retrogressive screen memories work by superimposing later psychic contents upon earlier childhood memories thusly reinventing them, then the whole process of trying to identify and bring to consciousness that traumatic content — the *modus operandi* of psychoanalysis — is put into serious question. Indeed, the entire relationship between the original image and its reproduction is inverted as, in terms of seduction theory, later psychic



contents reproduce the original trauma and, according to the retrograde screen memory thesis, later psychic contents impress themselves upon the earlier, initially quite unrelated, but later repurposed memories or imaginings; the reproduction masks itself by positing an original which is only a reproduction, a mirror image. While in psychoanalytic circles the concept has been relatively neglected in comparison to Freud's later formulations of his theory, as Eugene J. Mahon's investigation shows (2016, 63), there has been significant research done on screen memories by several psychoanalysts through the years.

Mahon notes that many accounts stress the luminous quality or what Freud initially named "the visual element" (1962 [1899], 308) of such memories: "The excessive luminosity of a single image that seems symbolic of the whole has often been noted in memories of trauma, as if fright grabs for a shred of light to witness the overwhelming event" (2016, 60). That is, the vivid and uncanny luminosity of the image that persists in the analysand's psyche is itself a trace, a symptomatic manifestation of something hidden by the image. Mahon subsequently extends Freud's definition: "A screen memory is a subjectively experienced memory fragment that makes a luminous display of itself in consciousness, the better to fulfill its unconscious motivation to conceal more than it reveals" (2016, 61). In his first account of his own screen memory, Freud mentions how it includes "a disproportionately prominent [visual] element [. . .] [while another seems] exaggerated in an almost hallucinatory fashion" (1962 [1899], 311), which, according to Mahon, "is emphasizing [. . .] that screen memories, like dreams, seem to stress the visual as opposed to the verbal" (2016, 66). Curiously, the fragmentary visuality, detached from any narrative context, becomes a sign of concealment, pointing to something other than itself as Freud (1962 [1899], 310) reveals how his own early childhood memory of snatching dandelions from a little girl "actually represents events of his adolescence [. . .] [where] the flowers of his childhood, described as ultra-clear, were really displacements of adolescent wishes about sexual deflowering, defensively transported back in time to a scene of relative innocence" (Mahon 2016, 66–67). Freud therefore arguably offers one of his most radical and significant insights into the retroactive workings of memory:

It may indeed be questioned whether we have any memories at all *from* our childhood: memories *relating to* our childhood may be all that we possess. Our childhood memories show us our earliest years not as they were, but as they appeared at the later periods when the memories were aroused. In these periods of arousal, the childhood memories did not, as people are accustomed to say, *emerge*; they were *formed* at that time. (Freud 1962 [1962 [1899], 321, emphasis in original)

Mahon therefore suggests that if "the screen memory does not emerge but is formed, then its formation must be the product of [screen] work — an unconscious labor comparable to dream work" (2016, 80). Namely, dream and screen memory images are the products of unconscious processes and as such are overdetermined by a number of factors. But whereas dream work uses

symbolism, displacement, and condensation to change latent dream wishes into disguised representations of themselves, screen work seems to use primary processes to displace the affective emphasis from significant memory content to much less significant imagistic content. It is as if *memory* in toto, not unlike *dream*, regresses from its elaborate thought content to a minimalist image of itself – thereby explaining, perhaps, the unusual luminosity of screen memories. (2016, 80, emphasis in original)

In other words, the affective glow and persistence of an image is an indicator of such a process of displacement and reduction, both hiding and pointing at what is hidden at the same time. Seen in this light, “screen memories formed in adolescence seem to reflect this duality: the conflicts of the first five years of life are incorporated anew into current adolescent iterations of themselves, like palimpsests of past and present, one era screening another even as it also represents it” (Mahon 2016, 81–82). Freud’s memory of a scene in which he snatches the yellow flowers from the girl comes to screen his adolescent desires, representing them retroactively, both being an expression of such desires and independent from them, this link being formed via associative processes at a much later period. Considering such complex matters of representation, a parallel immediately suggests itself, which relates to the double meaning of the word “screen” as both a cover and a window: How can we think of film and photography in terms of screening one’s past?

In *The Remembered Film* (2004), Victor Burgin uses “screen memories” to describe the function gained by certain remembered film/photography images, detached from their original contexts and associated with certain subjective experiences, i.e. as screen images that screen/cover one’s own psychic contents. After exploring this idea primarily using his own personal experiences, as Susannah Radstone elucidates, “Burgin concludes that the inner landscape within which fantasies are bound together with scenes and images spectated at the cinema constitutes the ‘location of cultural experience[,] [...] binding inner and outer worlds, ‘experience’ and ‘culture’” (2010, 337). According to Burgin, the enigmatic photograph of the woman in Chris Marker’s *La Jetée* (1962) should be best understood as an example of screen memory: “A bright figure upon the shadowy ground of other memories, this image has all the attributes of a screen memory [...] [which], brilliant and enigmatic, dissimulates another memory, thought, fantasy — one that has had to be repressed” (2004, 99). Namely, this image is presumably the only constant for the hero of the film, imbued with libidinal energy. Yet it functions as such only due to the present image that it screens (covers) from view because this “image of the woman’s face serves as a ‘moment of gentleness’ that distracts from, although it cannot conceal, a ‘moment of madness’”. The woman in the image [...] is indeed a ‘woman as image’. Alternately fully present and fully absent, like the object in the fort/da game, she is nothing other than that with which the man seeks to be (re)united” (2004, 99). Burgin’s reworking of Freud’s initial idea is the final link connecting the concept of screen memory to Chehreghosha’s photographs since Burgin’s explorations exemplify how actual, material film and photography images, not

only psychic ones, can become one's psychic contents, Freudian screen memories, and perform their screen work, as conceptualized by Mahon.

### **Empiricist gaze of crime scene photography**

But before applying the concept of screen memory to the photographs, another field of study needs to be briefly explained as it partakes in the screen memory work observable in these artworks. Crime scene photography is an extremely under-explored and undertheorized topic outside of its own discipline although its use has immense implications as far as art, technology, science, ethics, and the notion of photography as visible evidence are concerned. One may even say that theory of photography in humanities and study of crime scene photography have evolved to be two entirely distinct disciplines even if vital intersections do exist. According to Tim Thompson, for a long time "photography was perceived by some as a passive, non-interventionist, means of collecting scientific knowledge [...] and real-world details were precisely reproduced in a method that became predictable and automatic relative to other graphic arts" (2008, 173). And to this day, to qualify as admissible evidence, as Edward M. Robinson indicates, "the photograph must testify that the photograph is a fair and accurate photographic representation of what the witness saw. The probative value must not be outweighed by the prejudicial effect (gruesomeness or inflammatory effect)" (2010, 13). However, the boundary between art photography and crime scene photography is not unbreachable and Thompson rightly poses the following questions: "at what point does the camera lose its objectivity when its output shifts from documentary to creative art? How is it possible to tell, from the photographs produced, which of the two was the intention of the photographer? Indeed, can the same photograph fall into both camps" (2008, 175)? One can use the employment of certain techniques as well as the very subject matter as a point of distinction. Yet, the "aftermath of the crimes against humanity in Kosovo is a pertinent example of a region that has been photographed for both forensic and artistic purposes" (Thompson 2008, 175). Also, Chehreghosha's staged patricide and matricide photographs valorize the same problem. So, what appears to be the only marker of a certain boundary between art and science in this case is the context in which the photographs appear, which is far from being pre-determined or fixed.

Thompson refers to some recent attempts to see the common link between literary theory and crime scene evidence where: "each piece of evidence constitute[s] a conjunction which could be linked together to develop the story of the crime, in much the same way as a piece of literature uses conjunctions to link together sentences of a story. [...] [The] revealing of each forensic morsel force[s] the investigator to constantly reorient their position" (2008, 179), come up with new interpretations, which relates to the same hermeneutic process one faces when reading works of literature. Indeed, a professional crime scene photographer has to be concerned with telling a story through his/her photographs, which is evident from Robinson's description of such work since the "first decision is determining just what the primary subject should be [a single object, a small or large area]. The professional

knows that an image best tells its story when it is limited to just one idea with one primary subject. If more than a single subject is included in an image, the viewer may become confused about the intent of the photographer” (2010, 22). And here one notices a key specification of photographic storytelling: a photograph must not simply tell a story but be limited to one clear narrative line as multiple interpretations should be avoided since, for instance, “one of the purposes of an overall photograph is to show the crime scene in relation to the immediate area around it, which helps to acclimate the viewer to the general surroundings around a crime scene. The crime did not occur in a void. In this case, the photographer should [. . .] [help] grasp this relationship” (Robinson 2010, 22). Subsequently, one significant difference from creative visual storytelling is eschewing of ambiguity, which is prominent in all forms of art.

When doing crime scene photography, there are several rules to keep in mind. Firstly, one needs to fill the frame with one’s subject matter and exclude all unnecessary details: “If something is important enough to photograph, fill the frame with it. Follow this practice whether it is a single item of evidence or an entire crime scene. Too many times the primary subject can get lost in its background” (Robinson 2010, 24). Secondly, one should always aim to maximize the depth of field. This rule demarcates the separation of crime scene photography from art photography rather clearly as “Portrait photographers, for example, frequently want the background of their images to be out of focus to force the viewer of their images to concentrate on their models. Crime scene photographers, however, should usually strive to ensure everything in their images is in focus” (Robinson 2010, 37). Robinson’s given reason for this rule is that such artistic photographs may be contested at court because “if a substantial amount of the image is out of focus, it may not be a ‘fair and accurate representation of the scene.’ When crime scene photographers were at the crime scene, as they looked around it, each part of the scene was in focus” (2010, 37). Such photographs may show the prejudice of the photographer as to which details are important and when attempting to substitute a photograph for evidence of reality such assumptions should be avoided. And the final cardinal rule is keeping the film plane parallel since this angle is considered best for the primary subject and helps to avoid spatial distortions (Robinson 2010, 39). So, as can be seen from these cardinal rules of crime scene photography, the aim is to document the scene as it was, as accurately as it was seen through the eyes of the individuals at the scene, which distinguishes this type of photography from artistic uses thereof where the aim is an interpretation of the real.

Crime scene photographs have three distinct subtypes such as overall, mid-range and close-up photographs and they all have different functions as well as work together to convey a sense of the entire crime scene. As Robinson explains, “For the importance of any individual item of evidence to make sense to the viewer, it will be necessary for that item of evidence to be related to the crime scene. The crime scene itself, in turn, will need to be related to the general surroundings around the crime scene. In this way, the complete story of the crime in question is documented” (2010, 313). Usually, such photographs are taken from a natural perspective to avoid misrepresentations of reality — except for close-ups

since it would be impossible to get a proper view of many of the items without moving them or bending over. Overall photographs come first, followed by midrange photographs and then close-ups: “Overall photographs are concerned with documenting the crime scene, both indoors and outdoors. With midrange photographs, you now begin to document individual items of evidence. Before taking a series of close-up photographs of the evidence, you need to link the evidence to the crime scene. Close-up photographs will fill the frame with just the item of evidence and show various views of the evidence” (Robinson 2010, 329). Significantly, crime scene photographers learn seeing reality in different ways because one must be aware of not only visible but invisible evidence as well, i.e. evidence that may become visible only with the help of lighting outside of the visible range (infrared and ultraviolet light) and certain chemical agents such as luminol. One must also always be conscious of “the evidence [that] may be transitory or fragile, and it may not survive the packaging and transportation from the scene to the storage facility or property room. Additional close-up photography may be the only opportunity to document a newly found critical aspect of the evidence” (Robinson 2010, 340).

Photographing the human body at a crime scene — most relevant for my object of examination — is subject to the same primary rules. One starts with the overall photographs and after “the midrange photograph of a body, a complete body panorama series is photographed. This includes a series of photographs showing the body from all four sides. These are close-up photographs of the body, attempting to fill the frame with just the body, eliminating everything else” (Robinson 2010, 342). Additionally, a “full-face shot, for identification purposes, should also be part of a full body panorama series. It should also include a photograph from directly over the body” (Robinson 2010, 343). That is, one should indicate with one’s photographs a clear primary subject by eliminating everything unnecessary and distracting, optimizing visibility and avoiding any distortion. Of note is the implicit empiricist, scientific gaze these photographs should exude. When encountering such imagery, one tends to face strong affective responses such as terror, disgust, sympathy, sadness — one is often salvaging the personhood of the body in question. However, when taking such photographs, one is to take a purely investigative, detached, scientific perspective, completely void of the sympathetic response, treating the body as an object. If anything, such responses need to be overcome to properly do one’s job and document the crime scene as, for instance, “the post-mortem interval is frequently critical to the successful resolution of the incident. [One needs to document] all the clues to the postmortem interval. This may include the positioning of the body, if rigor mortis is not consistent with the body’s current position”, lividity and decomposition (Robinson 2010, 355). Such instructions clarify that documenting the body as evidence entails objectifying it and cleansing the image from any libidinal energy for the sake of telling a truthful story.

One may reasonably expect that such a scientific gaze is a relatively recent phenomenon, a skill acquired and perfected through the more than one hundred years of trial and error. Yet, as Lela Graybill convincingly shows in her examination of Alphonse Bertillon’s 19<sup>th</sup>-century photometric crime scene photography

technique, the objectification of the subject for the sake of it functioning as evidence was there at the early inception of using photography as evidence. Graybill instructively describes her own directed, sutured gaze when looking at one of such photographs, depicting a dead woman: “The clinical precision of the image is such that we examine the body with the same cold attention we give the inanimate objects around her. No familiar markers of suffering or emotion guide our viewing; instead, the scientific aesthetic of the image pushes us towards a forensic mode of study” (2019, 94). As a sidenote, I suggest that such a gaze, its push towards forensic observation, describes the effect of Chehreghosha’s photographs as well. Even though Bertillon’s technique is no longer used today by professional crime scene photographers, the same, only magnified, strive for a detached, scientific gaze and for what Allan Sekula once named “evidentiary promise” are inherent to it as such photography lays “claim to a new legalistic truth, the truth of an indexical rather than textual inventory” (1986, 6). While the textual is what obscures, distorts, subjectifies, and so veils the truth, the indexical reveals it, makes it self-evident, allows the image to become evidence. As Graybill explains, “Understanding crime scene photography as a form of evidence places it in the realm of empirical science, with the photograph archiving and preserving proof of misdeeds and functioning as an aid to the detective’s forensic pursuit of truth” (2019, 96), echoing trauma theory’s treatment of visibility as a symptom.

Such empiricism contrasted with another contemporaneous tendency. Amy Bell’s examination of England’s 20<sup>th</sup>-century crime scene photography shows that these photographs used “visual vocabulary indebted to contemporary aesthetic trends like film noir, documentary photography, and amateur photography” (2018, 53). However, Graybill also argues that even the French photographic empiricism was not free from theatrics as “despite the forensic orientation of Bertillon’s system, it nevertheless shared with British crime scene photography a theatrical aesthetic calibrated for emotional impact” (2019, 96). Namely, such photographs only “hide their performativity under the veil of scientific objectivity. [...] The Bertillon system transformed photographic images into vehicles of witness, attempting to move viewers from the space of investigation and uncertainty to the space of conviction” (2019, 97). I find Graybill’s argument extendable to present-day crime scene photography (and particularly relevant to the strategy employed in Chehreghosha’s photographs) since it exemplifies the same empiricist treatment of photographic reality. One may even ask whether the scientific objectivity that today’s crime scene photographs should exemplify, them being fair and accurate representations of a given crime scene, are not masking subjectivity behind objectivity — not in the sense of the photographer or investigators being biased, but in the sense that violent crimes, especially the signs of suffering a human body may show, are bound to evoke affective responses no matter how scientific the method of taking such photographs may be. What is more, such invocation of scientific objectivity may only serve to further validate and objectify such overwhelming affective responses, make us move “from the space of investigation and uncertainty to the space of conviction.”

## Screening trauma: between art and science

Striving to appear as clear, truthful, and scientific — recall, for instance, the need for crime scene photographs to tell a single story — coincides with the need for photography to be so indexical as to erase its indexicality and become the crime scene. Graybill observes that crime scene photographs are indexical in a double sense: “the corpse itself is already an index of what has transpired — a death, possibly a crime — which the photographer only belatedly and imperfectly records. The photograph of a dead body in a crime scene is, then, a re-presentation of the corpse’s own indexical relationship to the bygone criminal act. It is an index of an index, a palimpsest of the past” (2019, 100) — a palimpsest which seeks to erase its mediation so that the indexical cannot become textual. And this provoking idea returns the discussion to the object under investigation. Chehrehgosha’s way of dealing with her childhood trauma and the abuse she experienced from her parents is to stage their deaths in a manner visually reminiscent of crime scene photography, void of emotional engagement, as a factuality of two dead bodies lying on the ground. Such an artistic gesture is complex for many different reasons, one of the most fascinating of which is the creation of a similar palimpsest, which superimposes a scientific, detached, empiricist gaze upon a personal, subjective, emotionally engulfing experiences. Moreover, by shaping an image which is inherently an index of another index — a death and possibly a crime — which by its nature attempts to eliminate its own mediation and become indexical in a singular sense, the art photographer consciously fashions a screen memory in the psychoanalytical meaning, the function of which is to screen, to both hide and reveal, her childhood trauma. Visually alluding to crime scene photography thus only works to maximize this screening effect since this type of photography aims to expose the viewer to the pure factuality of the event, eschewing any subjective mediation.

But who is the criminal? And who is the person that the (imaginary) index of the dead body is pointing to? Is it the artist herself? Or her parents? What is the crime? The imagined and then staged murders? Or the actual childhood abuse experienced by the artist? As mentioned, crime scene photography is supposed to move us as investigators, judges, and jury — the gaze that such photographs align one with — “from the space of investigation and uncertainty to the space of conviction.” So, the very gesture of screening and this way replacing a traumatic experience with an (constructed) image that with its brutality and factuality is supposed to erase the original trauma only serves to reveal that trauma. Subsequently, the mixed emotions of love and hate for the parents result in a mixed sign: the photographs indicate the artist’s wish to heal the wound by killing the guilty parties as well as show the criminals as victims of the afflicted artist. Such intermingling and destabilizing of the boundary between criminal and victim — also reminiscent of the structure proposed in Freud’s paper “A Child Is Being Beaten” (1997 [1919]) — leads to another question: Do these images show crimes or justice? By clothing such strong subjective emotions in the empiricist objectivity inherent in crime scene photography, these photographs also distance the artist from her own experiences and force her to take the stance of a witness. As Graybill explains, a witness as a viewer both sees and testifies, confirming “that something happened. The witnessing gaze is passive



insofar as its value lies in its ability to register visual information with minimal alteration. The witnessing gaze is active, however, insofar as it is conscripted and placed in the service of a larger meaning” (2019, 116). I argue that Chehrehgosha’s photographs depicting her father and mother as potential murder victims aims to cross this aporetic vacillation between victim-criminal by moving one from the position of the victim/criminal to that of a witness.

If one investigates these photographs and their relation to crime scene photography conventions a little closer, one spots their hybridity in another interesting sense as well. All the photographs would seem to exemplify overall photographs that are taken from a distance and are supposed to show the view of the area and the location of the evidence within it. Overall photographs are taken in the beginning of the film roll, after the photo identifier detailing the case number, date, address, photographer, and the roll number of the film is taken (Robinson 2010, 307). One sees the difference from crime scene photography already as the photographs in this series are connected paradigmatically (multiple overall photographs, alternative stories), not syntagmatically (overall, midrange, and close-up photographs telling a single story). Moreover, while the depth of field is mostly maximized (except for two photographs — by a lake and at a construction site where the background is out of focus), the need to include only the necessary elements is not adhered to. Namely, all the images include too much of the surrounding area which does not additionally help to identify that area (the same effect could be achieved from a closer range); it only makes the bodies appear more distant and less clearly visible. In some photographs,



Fig. 1. “Mom among Straws”. © Aida Chehrehgosha.



the main evidence — the body — is not parallel to the film plane, which slightly distorts its proportions — another violation of conventions. As a result, if one investigates the images from the perspective of a professional crime scene photographer, one immediately recognizes that these are not professional crime scene photographs. But neither are these amateur photographs of a bystander stumbling upon a crime scene. The careful composition and centering of the primary subject matter in the middle of the frame so as to show the vastness of the indifferent, deserted surroundings to a lonesome deceased individual indicate conventions of creative photography. One encounters a hybrid photography, linking science and art, where crime scene photography is rendered as an artistic device.

Connecting the images paradigmatically prevents one from constructing a master narrative of the crime scene. Let us first examine and compare the three photographs showing the dead mother. “Mom among Straws” (Figure 1) exposes the body of the mother lying in the yellow straw field, smartly dressed in black pants, brown boots, and a white shirt, facing down. On her back one sees a blood stain, possibly indicating a gunshot wound. Of note is that this photograph is the only one in the entire series not dominated by brown, earthly, autumn tones. “Mom in Forest” (Figure 2) presents the mother, again in the center of the composition, lying on her back in a leafless, autumn forest. She is barefoot, wearing a white skirt and a polka-dot top, which is slightly exposing her belly; no injuries are visible from this angle. In “Mom Near Construction Building” (Figure 3) one encounters the mother lying on the ground surrounded by piles of metal pipes. She is on her back, with bare,



Fig. 2. “Mom in Forest”. © Aida Chehrehgosha.



Fig. 3. "Mom by Construction Site". © Aida Chehrehgosha.



Fig. 4. "Dad by Brick Wall". © Aida Chehrehgosha.





Fig. 5. "Dad in Gravel Pit". © Aida Chehrehgosha.



Fig. 6. "Dad by Water". © Aida Chehrehgosha.

dirty feet, wearing blue jeans and a white t-shirt — gender-neutral clothing obscures her gender. The mother's clothes are covered in dirt, indicating that the body has been moved. In the background, one sees an industrial building and leafless trees. One is introduced to the idea of a crime, of the murder of the artist's mother, but prohibited from entering the space of investigation and narrative (reconstruction). Rather, one is offered three alternative beginnings, alternative murders. Such a screening strategy indicates both the need for repetition, to murder the abusive parent (in an imaginary sense) again and again, which is a symptom of a trauma. Yet it also prohibits this imagined crime from fully being realized since one is never shown the multiple close-ups of the body which are the types of photographs that allow the viewer to face the full factuality of the murder and the brutality of the body's treatment, i.e. to go from a more abstract idea of a crime where the injuries are barely visible to perceiving the bodily reality of suffering and death.

Likewise, the three photographs of the father's murder work paradigmatically too. "Dad Near Brick Building" (Figure 4) offers one an image of the father lying on the pavement, body facing down, outside of a red brick building. His body is positioned between a big green door and a wall with two signs informing in Swedish that this is a loading place, which should not be used as a workplace — one gets a sense of a more defined location. The father is wearing a white t-shirt, grey jeans, and brown shoes and his face is turned towards the viewer, eyes eerily wide-open — it is hard to believe he is dead. No body injuries are visible. "Dad Near Gravel Pit" (Figure 5) shows the father on his back, eyes closed, wearing the same clothing, lying in the middle of a gravel pit. Again, no injuries. "Dad Near Water" (Figure 6) presents the scene of the father, this time wearing a long-sleeved white sweater and dark blue jeans without any shoes, lying on his back on a lakeshore. A few pieces of clothing are floating in the water — this is the only image to include additional pieces of evidence in the frame — but they are hard to identify and specify due to being out of focus. The father's sweater is slightly covered in dirt, yet no injuries are visible again and so, since the series of father murders does not show any injuries, one can conclude that the mother's photograph in the straw field is the one that implies the most violence. But one spots the same strategies being employed when treating the murder(s) of the father as well. The photographs show rather abstract, not clearly defined outside industrial or nature spaces, which locate the crime scenes outside of the domestic sphere. Curiously, such a choice — since the artist is the one staging these murders and choosing the crime locations — speaks of the need to repress, erase from memory the space of home (and of childhood abuse) and shift the crime onto the social context (work) and (human) nature.

Such emphasis on fragmentary visibility that does not fully extend into a syntagmatic chain of a narrative relates to the workings of screen memories since, as one shall recall, such memories exhibit visual fragmentation, which is opposed to narrative context. Screen memories displace affects from significant memories to less significant imagery, making such newly fashioned hybrid images (affects linked to a memory superimposed upon images unrelated to such affects) all the more eerily luminous — persistent and alluring for the individual afflicted by them. And in this sense, one can see such screen work taking place in Chehreghosha's

photographs because the photographer displaces the affects associated with the traumatic childhood experiences (significant memory contents) to a series of photographs depicting staged deaths of her parents responsible for that trauma (less significant imagistic contents). Even though the scenes are staged, they express real affects and so cannot be treated as psychically irrelevant — they function in a similar way to dream or (real/false) memory images. One can also speak of reduction, i.e. of reducing complex experiences to a single image (or series of images) “as if *memory* in toto, not unlike *dream*, [would regress] from its elaborate thought content to a minimalist image of itself — thereby explaining, perhaps, the unusual luminosity of screen memories” (Mahon 2016, 80, emphasis in original) since these photographs point to the artist’s mixed emotions without including any references to the specific childhood experiences and their real narrative context. Also, the images can be seen as luminous in this affective sense — the photographs use natural, not exceptionally luminous lighting — due to the powerful affects associated with them and due to the brutality of the imagery presented. That is, the matter-of-factness that the empiricism of crime scene photography entails, and which is alluded to in these images, serves to make them perceptually luminous, persistent in their affectivity.

But can one treat such a procedure as a healing strategy? One’s trauma, one’s wound is certainly exposed — to imagine, to wish one’s parents dead is torturous; to see them dead is even more so. Perhaps, herein lies the need to materialize that wish, to stage it — the artistic actualization of the idea abolishes the original idea through its terrifying factuality. Yet does such a visualization not exemplify the commonly held idea that fragmentary visibility is symptomatic of a trauma rather than providing its cure? As mentioned in the introduction, it is narrativization, “the talking cure”, that is supposed to alleviate that trauma manifesting itself through powerful, disturbing imagery. Customarily, the psychoanalytic process involves bringing to the analyst’s consciousness unconscious mechanisms at work, which is achieved through language, through discourse, through the textual. Does my analysis not support such a dichotomy? These photographs, as mentioned, eschew the syntagmatic and the narrative. However, in Chehreghosha’s photographs one faces a significant difference from screen memories uncovered during psychoanalysis: the photographs are not *unconsciously* formed screen memories. Such an artistic procedure marks a *conscious* choice to unmask screening strategies since these images function as a visual self-psychoanalysis. The artwork is fashioned to illuminate the childhood trauma and the mixed emotions resulting from it that govern the artist’s ability to relate to her mother and her father where the boundary between being wronged and being guilty is obscured. In line with what Mahon conceptualizes as screen work, the images do displace and condense affects and experiences, but the materialization of the artwork is itself a sign of unmasking, of an analytical process bringing to light and making perceptible the libidinal dynamics, complex familial bonds, specific to the reality of this family. And so, can one still treat a conscious artistic strategy as a primary process? While the creative process involves a conscious strategy, the impetus behind the shocking imagery — to both displace and expose the trauma — is related to primary processes, the intermingling of these two processes itself being a sign of trauma and its healing strategy — a case in need of further research.

One would also be amiss not to finally address the mythical Oedipal drama of killing one's parent (see Freud 2010 [2010 [1899]]), similarly tainted with a constant vacillation between loving and hating, being the guilty and the victim. Only in Chehreghosha's case, the duality and asymmetry of Oedipus/Electra complex (killing the parent of the same sex and desiring the love of the other) is dissolved: both parents are loved and hated, killed and resurrected only to be killed again so as to be affectively absolved of their misdeeds. In *To Mom, Dad and My Two Brothers*, motherhood and fatherhood are both thanatic and erotic forces — destroying and sustaining for the children. While the brothers do not appear in the photographs, the dedication implies that the healing strategy is intended for them as well — as shared screen memories. Such a representation is perhaps stemming from the fact that one abandons the family romance, the solipsistic mini-state of the family, the tyranny and utopia of Mom-and-Dad, and sees the nuclear family within the social context, made more problematic due to the nature of being an Iranian immigrant family in Sweden, of (not) belonging to the state of the Other where one's victimhood/guilt is no longer a simple but overdetermined phenomenon: the mythic institution of the Oracle of Delphi has, after all, played a significant part in the tragic fate of Oedipus. Returning to the significance of the allusion to crime scene photography, one can speak of another othering of the gaze: the subjective experiences (aestheticism, the individual) are filtered through the lens of scientific objectivity (empiricism, the state). Even the titles of the photographs indicate this hybridity as they always combine a personal, endearing term of “mom” or “dad” with impersonal, factual descriptions of the locations “among straws”, “in forest”, “near construction site”, “near brick building”, “near gravel pit”, and “near water”; the individual is subjected to indifferent anonymity. Namely, one's relation to the familial others is implied to be permeated by the relation to the Other(s). Whereas the trauma is visualized as unquestionable, a way to locate the unambiguously wronged and guilty parties is difficult.

## Conclusions: the future of artistic screen memories

In my essay, I aimed to investigate the aesthetic and epistemological function of staged patricide and matricide in Chehreghosha's photography series and understand whether, in line with such actions presented in ancient Greek art, as G.W.F. Hegel notes, the series are “presented to us from some point of view at least in a light which declares a certain justification truly arising out of the subject-matter itself” (2020, 203). Indeed, as I have argued, these photographs serve a semi-conscious screening function — perform screen work in the psychoanalytic sense — to expose and heal the trauma through bringing to light the complexity of recurrent traumatic childhood events. As such, the artwork alludes to the mixed emotions of love and hate, being at once the victim and the abuser, thus complicating the notion of guilt. Such othering and “expulsion” of traumatic experience happens primarily through the gravity of staged events, their ability to imprint upon one's psyche — via artistic and symbolic killing of the artist's parents instead of representing actual traumatic events — as well as through the hybridity of aesthetic/personal and empiricist/impersonal photographic gaze. Chehreghosha's photographs visually allude to crime scene photography and yet, if looked through the eyes of a professional crime scene photographer, one

notices the aestheticism in these photographs, which has no place in professional crime scene photography practice. Unlike what is commonly assumed in trauma theory literature and psychoanalytic studies, the visuality of this series does not simply expose the traumatic experience, work as an affective puncture à la Roland Barthes, as a symptom of a deep wound, which needs narrativization, its talking/writing cure — the visual itself has an epistemological, healing function. Chehrehgosha's photographs bring to consciousness unconscious mechanisms of traumatic memories and function as screen memories that are supposed to aid the artist in understanding the overdetermined nature of her parents' as well as her own emotions and actions — their shared guilt and innocence.

Regarding Chehrehgosha's photographs as screen memories is a challenging but promising new direction in further developing the concept originally introduced by Freud at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Its first incarnation as a constructed memory hiding an (later) experience and its associated affects which are both retroactively superimposed upon the newly fabricated, unrelated image was then developed by Burgin into an idea that certain film images and photographs that seem to be particularly luminous, attractive in their uncanny ability to fascinate one, serve a similar function — they too hide/expose individual psychic contents (unrelated to the original context in which such images appear) superimposed upon them by the subject in question. As Burgin's own self-analysis reveals, such mysterious fragments can expose something extremely enlightening as well as something entirely banal. Finally, as Chehrehgosha's artwork shows, one can also speak of a conscious, retro-active attempt to deal with a childhood trauma by creating a screen memory specifically intended to overwrite the real event, reduce its underlying complexity and narrative context to one particularly striking image (or a series of images in this case), yet retaining the affects associated with the real events and their aftermath. Even though such a reinterpretation of the concept shifts its understanding from an entirely unconscious to a semi-conscious strategy, one can still identify the same primary processes of displacement and reduction at work both in the real proposed cases of screen memories (such as Freud's own or the ones examined by Mahon) as well as in Chehrehgosha's photographs. Moreover, such an adjustment done to the psychoanalytic notion can unlock a rich potential for investigating visual artworks that relate to and screen trauma in unusual, sophisticated, and less direct, that is, not biographically specific or historiographic ways, freeing the idea of re-enactment from reproduction, reality from (visual) likeness.

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