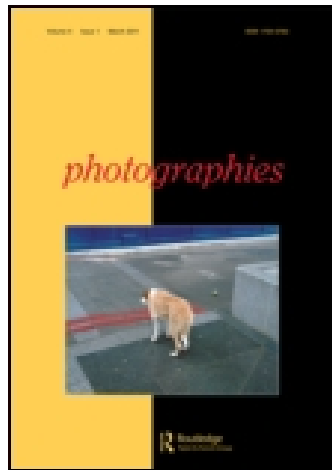


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## Photographies

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### The Memory of Photography

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## THE MEMORY OF PHOTOGRAPHY

*Photography is often linked to memory as an issue of its failure. While the question of what is missing or what cannot be seen in photographs emphasizes what might be called a negative relation to memory, this nevertheless obscures the productive role of photographic images within culture as mnemonic devices. This paper addresses the specific contribution that the invention of photography has made to the relation of memory and history. The consequences of photography on these domains are as important for photographers as they are for historians and critics.*

Some may detect in the title of this paper an ambiguity between the memory of *photography* as a technology that is “outmoded”, past its sell-by date, and photography as an “aide-memoire” machine to the human memory process of remembering. As “photography” mutates into its digital double (like a sister or brother) whose system operates in a different way and is still in the process of re-definition, what we thought photography was, is and will be remains in flux. Is this why interest in the archive and memory is so current? Or is it also to do with the multitude of archives, whether commercial like Getty and corporate institutions or state-owned collections, museums, public-lending libraries, private family attics, artists’ estates and so on, which is creating an unease about archives and potential memories? As embodied in the title of his little book *Archive Fever*, Jacques Derrida notes that an anxiety about memory always has an element of death or “destruction drive”, “of loss” at work in it (9).

Certainly, new photo-archiving software programmes like Aperture, i-Photo, i-View, and Lightroom have accelerated the issue of how to archive photographic images and what to do with them once deposited. If we see these new repositories as a type of “memory bank”, complemented by the many devices designed to provide inputs to them like camera phones (and, of course, the computers and hard disks that support them, which are types of archives in themselves), then we have to ask what relation do these instruments have to existing notions of memory and photography?

In domestic culture, photography conventionally has a place as a time machine, a device for remembering. What if this space is (one of many?) under threat, partly because digital databases and artefact-based archives offer different types of permanence, openness or accessibility? If this is so, it begs the question: what *did* photography do for memory and what contribution has photography made to the practice of memory in human culture? Has photography affected or changed the constitution of individual or collective memory, in what way, what are its effects, on whose memories, how and why? To address such questions I want to start somewhere else, so as to return to photography *differently*. I begin with the apparatus of memory itself. Consider this quote from Sigmund Freud:

If I distrust my memory – neurotics, as we know, do so to a remarkable extent, but normal people have every reason for doing so as well – I am able to supplement and guarantee its working by making a note in writing. In that case the surface upon which this note is preserved, the pocket-book or sheet of paper, is as it were a materialized portion of my *mnemic* apparatus, which I otherwise carry about with me invisibly. I have only to bear in mind the place where this “memory” has been deposited and I can then “reproduce” it at any time I like, with the certainty that it will have remained unaltered and so have escaped the possible distortions to which it might have been subjected in my actual memory.

(“The ‘Mystic Writing-pad’” 429)

In this opening passage of “The ‘Mystic Writing-pad’”, Freud draws a distinction between what classical culture called “Natural Memory”, as the normal human capacity of recollection, and “Artificial Memory”, the array of technical devices invented by humans to support their natural (*mnemic*) ability to inscribe things in memory.<sup>1</sup> While the capacity of individuals to remember and recall things varies enormously, it is true that the invention of devices to support and extend the human ability of remembering has meant that humans no longer have to carry everything around with them in their heads, or like the character in *Gulliver’s Travels* who has to carry actual objects on his back of the things he wishes to remember.

The historical invention of writing, for example, is a collective form of “artificial memory” to accumulate what has already been thought, said or done, thus leaving space for other fresh thinking. What strikes Freud about these artificial devices is how they are modelled on the human sensory functions they are designed to supplement. In “The ‘Mystic Writing-pad’” Freud remarks:

All the forms of auxiliary apparatus which we have invented for the improvement or intensification of our sensory functions are built on the same model as the sense organs themselves or portions of them: for instance, spectacles, photographic cameras, trumpets.

(430; the ear “trumpet” was used as a hearing aid)

Freud picks up this point and develops it in another essay – “Civilization and its Discontents” – published five years later, in 1930 (incidentally, published a year before Walter Benjamin’s well-known essay “A Short History of Photography”). Freud expands his earlier remarks above to encompass the wider motives of human technological invention:

With every tool man [*sic*] is perfecting his own organs, whether motor or sensory, or is removing the limits to their functioning. Motor power places gigantic forces at his disposal, which, like his muscles, he can employ in any direction; thanks to ships and aircraft neither water nor air can hinder his movements; by means of spectacles he corrects defects in the lens of his own eye; by means of the telescope he sees into the far distance and by means of the microscope he overcomes the limits of visibility set by the structure of his retina. *In the photographic camera he has created an instrument which retains the fleeting visual impressions, just as a gramophone disc retains*

the equally fleeting auditory ones; *both are at bottom materializations of the power he possessed of recollection, his memory.*

(“Civilization and its Discontents” 279; my emphasis)

If, like Freud, we count photography as one device among the long history of different techniques of “artificial” or “prosthetic” devices for the support of human *memory*, then the question it raises is what specific impact photography has had on human memory and the cultures that use it. The impact of technological devices on the human psyche is also one of the questions that Jacques Derrida asks in his little book *Archive Fever*. It is a question asked, somewhat rhetorically, about “the mind”, as Freud sought to describe it in his analogy between the psychic apparatus and the “mystic writing-pad”. Derrida’s question is about the changing status of the mind under technological development. He asks whether the mind

resists the evolution of archival technoscience or not. Is the psychic apparatus *better represented* or is it *affected differently* by all the technical mechanisms for archivization and for reproduction, for prostheses of so-called live memory, for simulacrum of living things which already are, and will increasingly be, more refined, complicated, powerful than the “mystic pad” . . .

(Derrida 15)

In parentheses, Derrida adds the technological examples he is thinking of: “(microcomputing, electronization, computerization, etc.)” (15). For Derrida, the way something is archived affects the inside, he argues:

Because if the upheavals in progress affected the very structures of the psychic apparatus, for example in their spatial architecture and in their economy of speed, in their spacing and of temporalization, it would be a question no longer of simple continuous progress in representation, in the *representative* value of the model, but rather of an entirely different logic.

(15)

In other words, the issue is whether these external technologies affect the inside mental space: the “archive” is what Derrida calls a “*prosthetics of the inside*” (19). It is an interesting thesis. Derrida wrote this in 1995 and he is not alone in questioning what impact technologies have on the psychological apparatus.

In the history of photography, the intimation of an earlier technological transformation of the psyche was already discussed in the 1930s, for example in Walter Benjamin or Siegfried Kracauer’s work. Benjamin’s work on the significance and impact of mechanical reproduction imaging technology on spectatorship is well known.<sup>2</sup> Kracauer’s work is less familiar, especially his posthumously published work on *History*, where he compares photography (and film) to the work of historiography: these practices all have historical narrative as a common denominator, he argues, which bonds their respective aims together (169–70).

Such instances of thinking about photography as memory also belong to a much longer history and theory of memory devices: instruments for collective cultural memory. It

is a fascinating history, involving different modes of inscription, writing, images, theatre, objects and “memory walks” in the mind, the “art of memory”. It is a history that once humans embark upon seems to set them on a path of problems of accumulation, as Freud notes in the “Mystic Writing-pad” essay, that demand perpetual solutions, even revolution.

### Collective memory

The French historian Jacques Le Goff notes in his book on *History and Memory* the vast array of programmes of cultural remembering that kings embarked upon by constituting “memory-institutions: archives, libraries, museums”, even in the second millennium before Christ (60). Writing and printing changed the intellectual attitude: skill in “memorizing” gave way to reading. In the modern period and since the eighteenth century, the invention of museums, civic libraries and public institutions has been developed as archives for memory. The Louvre museum, for instance, was opened in Paris in the mid-1700s and was expanded even further after the French Revolution of 1789. The French Revolutionaries also instituted the National Archives in 1790, democratic, accessible and aimed at the public. Once the French Revolution had occurred “commemorative dates” were established, which Le Goff reports were soon manipulated to “delete the massacres and executions of the Terror” from popular memory. The lesson here is that remembering also institutes a kind of forgetting.

In the United States, a programme of public libraries was started as early as 1731. In Britain, the Public Record Office was established in London in 1838 (Le Goff 88), which, of course, coincides with the invention of photography. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Le Goff argues

Commemoration finds new means: coins, medals, postage stamps multiply. From about the middle of the nineteenth century, a new wave of statuary, a new civilization of inscriptions (monuments, street signs, commemorative plaques on the houses of famous people) floods Europe.

(87)

This is a strange area, Le Goff says, “in which politics, sensibilities and folklore mingle . . .” (87). The nineteenth century issues in a whole new era of the industrialization of public memory as “commemoration”. The creation of a public sphere, mapped by museums, libraries, the academic discipline of history, the accumulation of collections of documents and archives are all something we should not take for granted as a massive cultural achievement.

Amongst this litany of inventions and the various cultural forms and storage of collective memory, Jacques Le Goff singles out two specific modern phenomena as especially significant for the process of modern collective memory. The first is the erection of public monuments “through which funerary commemoration reached new heights” (89). The second

is that of photography, which revolutionizes memory: it multiplies and democratized it, gives it a precision and a truth never before attained in visual memory, and makes it possible to preserve the memory of time and of chronological evolution.

(89)

Le Goff gives an example of why he thinks photography is so crucially important, drawing on the sociology of domestic photography in a lengthy quote from Pierre Bourdieu's *Un art moyen* (translated as *Photography: A Middle-brow Art*), the classic 1960s sociological work on the social use of photography by amateurs and family albums. It is a long quote, worth repeating here because it is important, relevant for a far wider argument about photography as memory device:

The portrait gallery has become democratic, and each family has in the person of its head, its official portrait-maker. To photograph one's children is to make oneself the historiographer of their childhood, and to create for them, as a sort of inheritance, the image of what they have been . . . The family album expresses the truth of social remembrance. Nothing is less like the artistic search for lost time than the showing of these family pictures, accompanied by commentaries – an initiation rite that families impose on all their new members. The images of the past arranged in chronological order, “the natural order” of social memory, arouse and transmit the remembrance of events worthy of preservation because the group sees a unifying factor in the monuments of its past unity, or what amounts to the same thing, because it derives from its past the confirmation of its present unity. That is why there is nothing more decent, more reassuring, or more edifying than a family album: all the particular adventures that enclose individual remembrance in the particularity of a secret are excluded from it, and the common past, or if one prefers, the lowest common denominator of the past, has the almost coquettish neatness of a frequently visited funeral monument.

(Bourdieu 53–54; Le Goff 89)

Of course, to state the obvious, and as many writers have argued since, the point of view of such family archives is not neutral. Jacques Le Goff himself notes: “The father is not always the official family portrait-maker. The mother often fills this role.” And he wonders: “Should we see in this a relic of the feminine function of the conservation of remembrance or, on the contrary, a conquest of the group memory by feminism?” (90). It may be added that today it is may be as likely to include the point of view of a son or daughter whose view of their parent family is recorded. This may even be in a non-orthodox manner, as for example in the case of the photographs by Richard Billingham of his own family or the “extended family” in Nan Goldin's work.<sup>3</sup> We may certainly be sceptical here about the kind of “truth” of such archives, about what they cover over, to use a vulgar Freudianism, their “repression”.

Yet, whether a *patri*-archive, *matri*-archive or *sibling*-archive, or even any “social” archive, such photography offers the family institution (the term “family” is used in a loose sense here to include “social networks”, friendship groups, etc.) a whole new reservoir for memories. In a positive sense, such an archive or databank of images enables specific social groups, perhaps hitherto unrepresented, to find an identity or identification

within a specific common visualized memory. Or we might note within the counter-histories that have emerged in oral history during the twentieth century, a “bottom-up” history, the stories of ordinary lives that are often accompanied by photographic images that were made for family albums or even by documentary photographers. Is it possible, for example, that what Pierre Bourdieu (and others) has said about family portraits and snapshots also applies to other social groups in that it helps any social groups adhere to, or at least recognize, “acquired characteristics”?

We might extend the example of Bourdieu’s mid-twentieth-century study of domestic family photography to the myriad types of other archives of photographs that have been accumulating ever since its invention. All those photographs produced by:

- the *state* (the police, military, government, local government, scientific and ethnographic archives);
- the *media* (newspapers, magazines, television, photography libraries, advertising photography, documentary archives);
- the *arts*, not only museums, galleries, and public collections but also the archives of individual or private archives (e.g. tourism, families, everyday life, collections by artists, and photographers);
- independent social groups (whether political, social, cultural or economic in formation) which all form collections as visual memories that often overlap or even conflict with public media archives.

If we follow Bourdieu’s argument about the memorial function of family photographs, are these also all archives that establish “the truth of social remembrance”, the “remembrance of events worthy of presentation”, a unifying factor, as monuments of and to the past?

One of the striking points that Jacques Derrida makes in *Archive Fever* is that an archive is not a question of the past, of “dealing with the past that might already be at our disposal or not at our disposal, an *archivable concept of the archive*”. Rather, “It is a question of the future, the question of the future itself, the question of a response, a promise and of a responsibility for tomorrow” (36). In this respect, it is clear that in the long history of human civilization, the ability to inscribe events, descriptions and traces is a site of social power: a means for some social groups to impose their will over others. The history of techniques of memory, of writing, images and from the rhetorical devices of the ancients (as “mnemotechnics”) to the Christianization of memory in the middle ages, to the later Renaissance theatre memory, down to the invention of photography are all, in their totality, products and procedures involved in this history. A history that now involves photography in historical struggles, through their very accumulation in archives and in the computer database is a means by which power is manifest.

Photographs are one of the most important technological inventions for Jacques Le Goff because photography is the machine that industrializes visual memory. The photographic image is not just another memory device, merely an apparatus of the police or a bureaucratic gaze, but a machine for what I would call a *meta-archive*. The photograph offers in itself as a meta-form. The photograph has a capacity to incorporate and absorb many other already existing visual memory devices within photographic re-presentation. From coins to theatres, from writing to monuments, the camera can record them all.

Indeed, this is one of the founding arguments about photography right from the moment of its original invention, that is, its capacity to store and reproduce other objects as a visual image. Consider, for example, the infamous remarks of Dominique François Arago's "Report" in 1839 on why the French state should buy the invention of photography from Louis Daguerre, where he says quite explicitly that if they had had photography in 1798 in the expedition to Egypt that "we would possess today faithful pictorial records of that which the learned world is forever deprived of . . ." (Arago 17). To understand this value of the photographic memory as meta-archive one might look no further in the history of photography than to the very first book of photographs by the author of the *Pencil of Nature*, William Henry Fox Talbot.

### Talbot's meta-archive

William Henry Fox Talbot, the inventor of the positive/negative photographic process, carefully chose photographs for his book *The Pencil of Nature* (1844–45) from dozens of potential plates. The book shows the specific capacity of photography to remember or to "memorize" things for us. He refers to objects being "copied", the photograph as an "inventory" or as a "mute testimony". In one picture is seen the base of a monument in construction, with billposters decorating the surrounding fence (see figure 1).

The monument is "Nelson's Column" in Trafalgar Square, London. We have to situate here the historical figure of Lord Horatio Nelson and his death, as Admiral of the British navy at the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805, as an important historical event.

In this one picture there is manifest the double phenomena proposed by Jacques Le Goff as transforming modern memory: the development of public space as literal memory sites the nineteenth-century craze for erecting monuments to the dead *and* the photograph itself as memory device. The photograph is a means to register the monument space. The memory of Nelson is, quite literally, being constructed and re-presented as a subject matter of Talbot's camera. Talbot, in his day, sees the capacity of photography to record this new monument with his invention, as well as the *already* old. In *The Pencil of Nature* he includes different photographs to demonstrate the variety of things that could be remembered: his old College at Oxford, his own house (anticipating the industry of coffee table picture books of stately homes and the lesser "estate agent" photographic industry). He also used his invention to make the seemingly taxonomic pictures of glasses, crockery sets and a section of his library books – all carefully arranged in his courtyard for photographic registration in daylight. Talbot, clumsy at drawing, a professional linguist and translator of classical texts, here already anticipates the future function for photography with his own photographs in his book. Of course, a book in itself, as Derrida notes, is also "another species of archive" (70). The argument can be extended to the photography book, which can also be archived by being "photo-graphed".

All this is only the beginning of the incursion of photography into serving memory. Talbot took over 5,000 pictures. If we multiply this number (as a very conservative estimate) by all the other millions of photographers and photographs around the globe since, it must be clear that the accumulation of photographic images in archives since then is absolutely staggering, astounding. The aggressive and voracious appetite of the





**FIGURE 1** "Nelson's Column under Construction, Trafalgar Square, London", April 1844.

photographic eye accelerates apace. The question then is what effect these "artificial memories" have on actual human memory?

### Prosthetic memory

The negative critique of prosthetic devices on memory is not new. In a 1974 essay/interview "Film and Popular Memory" Michel Foucault complained that popular memory was being obstructed, that "a whole number of apparatuses, have been set up ('popular literature, cheap books and the stuff that's taught in school as well') to obstruct the flow of this 'popular memory'" (91). Following Louis Althusser's work, Foucault argues that the effect of these (ideological) apparatuses has been "reprogramming popular memory, which existed but had no way of expressing itself. So people are shown not what they were, but what they must remember having been" (91). In my view, this pre-digital struggle is no different from the struggles over popular memory in the new so-called digital domain of the photographic image.

There is a kind of iconoclastic argument here, one that says the presence of these images "suppresses" human memory. In the accumulation of material visual images as

memory banks, the critique of their validity as singular truth increases. No doubt some of this scepticism about the truth-value of images in archives is quite justified. The literature on family photography already quoted, for example, tends to reinforce these ideas; that an archive is never actually accurate anyway, more like “partial truths”. Such notions re-emerge in public debates across the fields of practice already referred to above (the three “apparatuses” of state, media and arts) as realms of degrees of fiction or the “manipulation of facts”, in short, a public *ideology* of memory.

So how are these various archipelagos of photographic practices in public popular memory (including things like the family album) to be understood in terms of private or personal memories? What relation do such images, as memory devices have to actual human memory? Is it that these Artificial Memories create uncertainty *for* the human faculty of memory, simply because they are “memories” that we have not necessarily experienced, or were experienced in a different way? Is it that as the human faculty of memory internalizes photographic images we no longer trust our memory as our own?

Furthermore, not everyone remembers *visually*. As Freud, after Jean Charcot, pointed out, some people remember things as *auditifs* (through sounds), while others as *moteurs* (gestures and actions), rather than as *visuels* (through images). However, Freud does insist that childhood memories are primarily *visual* (“Childhood Memories and Screen Memories” 19). So how do we relate our capacity for natural memory to the function of photographs as “artificial memories”, internalized prosthetic devices for memory?

## Mnemonic-traces

As discussed above, Freud argues

All the forms of auxiliary apparatus which we have invented for the improvement or intensification of our sensory functions are built on the same model as the sense organs themselves or portions of them: for instance, spectacles, photographic cameras, trumpets.

(“The ‘Mystic Writing-pad’” 430)

Then he adds, these

devices to aid our memory seem particularly imperfect, since our mental apparatus accomplishes precisely what they cannot: it has an unlimited receptive capacity for new perceptions and nevertheless lays down permanent – even though not unalterable – memory-traces of them.

(430)

Freud then refers the reader to *The Interpretation of Dreams*, his classic work of 1900 (and the great inspiration in twentieth-century culture), where he says that this

unusual [unlimited receptive] capacity was to be divided between two different systems (or organs of the mental apparatus). According to this view, we possess a

system Pcpt.-Cs [perception-consciousness], which receives perceptions but retains no permanent trace of them, so that it can react like a clean sheet to every new perception; while the permanent traces of the excitations which have been received are preserved in “mnemic” systems lying behind the perceptual system.

(“The ‘Mystic Writing-pad’” 430)

The mnemic-traces are left in different systems, the conscious-preconscious and the unconscious. However, there are no memories, as such, in the unconscious (since it has no concept of time or reality, it is not a type of “historical record”), only mnemic inscriptions, mostly inaccessible, which is the trace “left by the memory”.<sup>4</sup>

Memory, in the everyday use of the word, is located in the preconscious: memory that we can recall at will (or after a bit of searching) and bring into consciousness. Thus, as *preconscious* memory, we can remember it, but at the same time it does not clog up consciousness itself, which would otherwise be overwhelmed by these existing memories. In other words, preconscious memory also means a “temporary forgetting” so that consciousness has space for the constant new receptions and experiences.

In this Freudian topography of memory, the preconscious-conscious space of memory is subject to what Freud calls “screen memories”. Screen memories are those fixed images from childhood that haunt each individual. In the essay “Childhood Memories and Screen Memories” from *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, the key work for what are popularly known as “Freudian slips”, Freud provides a clear and startling introduction to the paradoxes of childhood memories and infantile amnesia. Freud attests to the striking fact that

a person’s earliest childhood memories seem frequently to have preserved what is indifferent and unimportant, whereas (frequently though not universally) no trace is found in an adult’s memory of impressions dating from that time which are important, impressive and rich in affect.

(“Childhood Memories and Screen Memories” 83)

Since memory is “known to make a selection from among the impressions offered to it”, the emergence of “unimportant” memories over important ones is also significant. Then there is also the “puzzle” of the common experience of infantile amnesia. (After all, who remembers the trials of potty training, breast-feeding or that first pain of hunger, for example?) Freud was adamant that the phenomenon of infantile amnesia is not to be explained, for example, by the inadequacies of a child’s mind. Contemporary research shows that when people remember things from varies enormously, sometimes from six months old to six or seven, from only a few scenarios to many. In all such memories, Freud argued, “it is easy to establish that there is no guarantee of their accuracy” (87).

He continues:

Some of the mnemic images [inscriptions] are certainly falsified, incomplete or displaced in time and place. Any such statement by the subjects of the enquiry that their first recollection comes from about their second year is clearly not to be trusted. Moreover, motives can soon be discovered which make the distortion and

displacement of the experience intelligible, but which show at the same time that these mistakes in recollection cannot be caused simply by a treacherous memory. (87)

Just as other mental acts can be informed by Freudian “slips”, so too are memories subject to the same procedures, like mis-remembering. For example, when I initially thought of the photograph of Trafalgar Square by Talbot, I remembered it as being included in *The Pencil of Nature*, but it was not until I checked that I realized my error; it is not. Such “slips” of memory are all so common. Art has often exploited them, for example in surrealism, where it is used to destabilize the intellect about the status of “reality”.

Freud argues that these apparently insignificant memories from childhood, which usually stay with the individual throughout their lives as representations of the lost years of childhood, are actually *screens*, a displacement or shield from other significant memories. However, the screen memories are not to be dismissed (as false), but subject to *analytic enquiry* (in psychoanalysis at least). Freud argues that they in fact contain all of what was essential from that individual’s childhood. The critical challenge, he argues, is to extract from them the “essential thing” with which the memory trace is occupied that has been obscured by repression and distortion. What has been subject to distortion is not the childhood event itself (since this is no longer accessible), but the trace of it left behind. Temporally, for Freud, the childhood memory can be *retroactive*, that is, used to represent the thoughts and impressions of a later date (connected in some way to that original memory scene); or else the content of the screen memory has been “pushed ahead”, appears as later and is used to contain an earlier preceding experience. Freud also indicates a third type of screen memory where it is directly connected with what it screens, in a contemporary (contiguous) sense. In these temporal differences, the screen memory works in different ways, like the way that the manifest content of a dream is related to the latent thoughts that originated it. A childhood memory, then, for Freud, is not what it seems. As in a Freudian slip, where we may recall a name “wrongly”, these more permanent “memories” turn out to be based on a forgetting, the substitution of one memory for another or, indeed, one memory laid over another or embedded inside it. The work of screen memory has the purpose of having one memory within another one, which functions through repression (*resistance* to remembering) and *displacement*.

Neither true nor false, screen memories are still “psychical realities”, scenes attached to unconscious wishes and fantasies. As such they are more like fantasies *about* a childhood. Freud suggests that screen memories offer “a remarkable analogy with the childhood memories that a nation preserves in its store of legends and myths” (Freud, “Childhood Memories and Screen Memories” 88). Furthermore, fairy tales, he says, can “be made use of as screen memories in the same kind of way that empty shells are used as a home by the hermit crab. These fairy tales then become favourites, without the reason being known” (90, note 1).

In this way, I want to argue that a favourite photograph might also be an “empty shell” for the favourite story about childhood. The image is used as a space, a location for memory-traces. This is the lesson to be learnt at least from Roland Barthes’s *Camera Lucida*. But it is not an isolated example and there are several routes back to a discussion of photography here.

One route back to photography would be to link it to the distinction between voluntary and “involuntary memory”, as posited by Marcel Proust in his famous work *In Search of Lost Time*, a work that is clearly important in the work of Walter Benjamin and then Roland Barthes. The link is suppressed in the English translation of Roland Barthes’s *Camera Lucida*.<sup>5</sup> This point is important because Barthes’s concept of the *punctum* is related to Proust: Barthes’s *punctum* is like Proust’s “involuntary memory”. Whereas the *studium* is akin to voluntary memory (public or cultural associations can be consciously recalled), the *punctum* is an involuntary response to a photograph. No doubt we have all had experience of this, perhaps? It is where an image, almost at random, inexplicably makes us react and because of this it also surprises us. We look at it more, but it does not reveal what we “see in it”. It has an effect upon us *involuntarily*. If we follow an associative path for the image to our memory it can lead to other memories, even a suppressed memory and, with critical work, an essential repressed memory-trace.

I want to suggest that historical and canonical photographs can be treated with precisely this type of critical model for interpretation. Indeed, the analogy works well; elsewhere Freud writes that these screen memories appear as though they were preserved “spontaneously” (“Childhood Memories and Screen Memories” 284). As such, photographs may be considered in analogy with screen memories. As with human memory, we can no longer verify the original experience or sensation of the photograph, but the image provides a scene in which we may bring voluntary (*studium*) or involuntary (*punctum*) memories to bear upon it. Voluntary memory is like the work of history, but involuntary memory belongs to personal *affect*. These are both often interwoven in complex ways. To try to demonstrate this point I will return to Talbot’s photograph, the picture titled “Trafalgar Square”, 1844, which, as I indicated, turned out not to be in *The Pencil of Nature*.

From my own knowledge of Trafalgar Square, I can see that Talbot’s photograph is made looking from the south-west side towards the north-east corner. St Martin’s church, visible in the background of the image, still stands there today. It is also easy for me to recall (or find out) that historically the square is built to commemorate the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805 between the British and Napoleonic navy fleets. These were part of trade wars, essentially over colonial trade routes. The column shown in construction in the photograph, with hoardings around it, was the literal embodiment of Lord Nelson in a memorial. Nelson is being implanted in the popular memory of Britain as a spatial image. As with screen memories, the innocence of this view has something that I nevertheless find compelling, and is what induced me to refer to this picture for this essay. Indeed, there is something involuntary about the affect of this picture for me. With a little effort I can recall a quite obvious personal association as to why I find the image evocative of “something”. As a child I grew up near Portsmouth on the south coast of England. Portsmouth is a naval city where HMS *Victory*, Nelson’s flagship, still stands in the old Naval Dockyard. Thus, the story of Nelson and his death is long since familiar to me: Nelson was a figure in my own childhood. I had visited many times his old ship on which he lost his life and whose death spot was eagerly pointed out each time by the young sailors guiding our group around the ship. I can recall there and then the scene on the ship, as a child, reconstructing in my mind the battle scene at the “tragic spot” and moment where he was shot by a sniper. The photograph by Talbot of the Nelson monument base and square evokes, I suggest, a certain remembrance of this childhood scene “involuntarily”.

Having grown up with this “hero” I can imagine that the childhood scene, possibly already a screen memory too, underlies my interest in choosing this particular scene by Talbot as a visual example. Yet I have seen this photograph many times and not noted previously any specific interest in it. On reflection, I realize, a novel I read recently on a trip to Naples has rekindled this old memory (the death of Nelson), which has activated an involuntary interest in this photograph. The novel, by Susan Sontag, called *The Volcano Lover*, is a historical novel about Lady Hamilton with whom Nelson had a long affair. This book has triggered retroactively a personal memory via a photographic image.

No doubt there is much more to be said about this, but what strikes me now about the image *historically* (rather than personally) is the specific temporal disjunction between the death of Nelson (1805) and the actual construction of his monument much later in 1844. Today all this may be forgotten, but the site of “Trafalgar Square” still forms a central location in the image of London. As Le Goff argues, such commemorations bind social memory into a unity and the role of a photograph here also functions as a device for social memory. Historically, it was long after (almost four decades after) Nelson’s actual death that his monument was being erected. He is memorialized *retroactively*. The monument to the “memory” of Nelson as a national war hero is built up *long* after his actual death (in 1805). Only in 1844, when Talbot’s picture is made, is Nelson being situated at the centre of the capital city. Nelson is called up as a specific figure to embody the ghostly spirit of “Great Britain” (as an empire), imposing and dominating this public space of the city.

Ironically, amongst the jumble of posters seen in the foreground of the picture is one that orders “No bills to be posted”. Talbot chooses to show and juxtapose these unruly signs of popular culture beneath the monstrous monument in construction. Beyond the visual and spatial dynamics of the denoted image of a monument in construction is a set of conflictual connotations: the everyday entertainment interests of the population contrasted with the “imagined community” of the monument in a patriotism proposed by this Victorian nation-state. At the heart of Talbot’s image is not only a “record” of the retroactive remembering of Nelson, whose historical purpose is forming a national identity but also an interpretation of it. Talbot’s photograph memorizes a specific view of the monument, echoing some of the public criticism at the time, for example the complaints in the press about the “oversized” stature of the monument looming over the square. Talbot’s camera position highlights this, with St Martin’s church shrunk in scale and perspective against the national monument: an image of patriotic space over the religious place. My own associations with the photograph belong to a “personal” register, one whose original interest is displaced via the photograph. One association (a photograph of Trafalgar Square) acts as a container for another association (Nelson’s ship and my childhood). Thus, as “artificial memory” device a photograph intersects with a “natural memory” in complex ways. It can be said that photographic images do not destroy personal memories, but that they interact with them in very specific ways, which may not always be conscious. The binarism implied in the distinction between cultural memory and individual memory collapses as photography re-figures their relationship.

With photographs, memory is both fixed and fluid: social and personal. There is nothing neutral here. As sites of memory, photographic images (whether digital or analogue) offer not a view on history but, as mnemonic devices, are perceptual phenomena

upon which a historical representation may be constructed. Social memory is interfered with by photography precisely because of its affective and subjective status. So in the demand for an intellectual response to pictures or for the priority of their subjective affect, the concept of “screen memories” offers an alternative framework. As composite formations, photographs, like childhood memories, have a sharpness and innocence that belie meanings that have far more potential significance than is often attributed to them, which means that in terms of history and memory, photographs demand analysis rather than hypnotic reverie.

## Notes

- 1 The standard account of classical theories is Frances A. Yates, *The Art of Memory*. A useful contemporary survey of theories of memory is Anne Whitehead, *Memory*.
- 2 See Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” and “The Image of Proust” in *Illuminations*.
- 3 See Richard Billingham, *Ray’s a Laugh* (Zurich and New York: Scalo, 2000); Nan Goldin, *The Ballard of Sexual Dependency* (New York: Aperture, 1986).
- 4 I draw here on the work of the French psychoanalyst Jean Laplanche.
- 5 I say “suppressed” rather than repressed because repression implies non-access to it, whereas I only have to refer to the French editions *La Chambre claire* to find the references to Proust. There they are, printed in the margins of the text and in the bibliography, but all omitted from English editions (as, indeed, are the references to phenomenology and Jacques Lacan).

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