

# Chapter 27

## The Memory of Others

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### ABSTRACT

*The focus of this chapter is orientated around two positions. The first articulates the relationship of photography to memory through making and exploring the claim that memory renders the “noumenal” mutability of photographic meaning. The second, connected, position considers memory not as a single homogenised process only linked to recall, but as neuroscience understands it, as something associated with predictive thought and perception. This chapter’s argument is that while memory’s predictive capacity creates models through which we meaningfully navigate life, memory may also act to shield us from lived experience. When thought through in this way, memory operates like a screen preventing access to the reality of both the present and the past. In short, memory helps to maintain a distance from actual experiences.*

### INTRODUCTION

*When an individual loses his memory, or has nothing to remember, they will not become a hoping person but remain a remembering one, that is a form of the unhappy man. Soren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or: A Fragment of Life* (2004, p.443)*

Photography’s relationship to memory has always interested and bothered me. Perhaps, it was not the relationship itself that I had a problem with but the way in which memories had always seemed fallible and changeable whereas photographs fixed things and kept the past as it was. If photographs meant something because they helped us remember, then why was it that memory did not seem to be consistent or reliable in the way that photographs appeared to be? The focus of this chapter is orientated around two lines of thought. The first articulates the relationship of photography to memory through making and exploring the claim that memory renders the “noumenal” mutability of photographic meaning. In other words, the fallible nature of memory shapes how photographic meaning is essentially changeable. The second position considers memory itself. For me, memory is not a single homogenised process only linked to recall, but as neuroscience understands it, it is something associated with predictive thought

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and perception (Seth, 2019). My argument, in relation to memory, is that while its predictive capacity creates models through which we meaningfully navigate life, memory may also act to shield us from lived experience. When thought through in this way, memory operates as if were a screen preventing access to the reality of both the present and the past. In short, memory helps to maintain a distance from actual experiences. Henri Bergson suggests something similar in *Matter and Memory* (1919) when he describes memory as a way to withdraw from the present moment (1919, p.94). And in *Childhood Memories and Screen Memories* (1981), Sigmund Freud identified how screen memories were a protective mechanism that “screened” traumatic childhood events.

By bringing these ways of thinking together, I hope to articulate something different about how photographs function. If memory really does keep lived experience at a distance and if photographs are understood to have an ontological connection to memory, then I claim that photographs do not show or record reality but, instead, they also shield us from it. I will conclude by reflecting on the vast number of photographs we are exposed to in the twenty-first century by suggesting that, while they may show us things we may not have seen or remind us of moments that have passed, the sheer number of images we are exposed to also has the unfortunate effect of creating a limit to the conceptual richness of thought. My argument is that by encountering more and more photographs our thinking becomes dominated by images and, as a result, the development of abstract, non-visual ideas is curtailed.

Critical to the points I make throughout this chapter is the idea of memory, not as an operation of thought relating predominantly to the past, but as an essential component of our experience of the present. This is not a new position within memory studies and it has been reflected on in the light of so-called “digital memories.” In her introduction to *Save As . . . Digital Memories* (2009), Joanna Garde-Hansen describes how past memory shapes the present. She states, ‘memory can occur only in the present and ever-new moments in which we retrieve aspects of our past’ (2009, p.2). This process of retrieval creates different and amended versions of our memories: in effect we remember differently. While we usually think of photographs as things that refer back to the objects they represent, if we associate memory with photography the link between the past is then infiltrated by our thoughts and perception. As I will argue, neuroscience suggests the way we *think* we experience the world is not necessarily *how* we experience the world. The seemingly paradoxical argument from neuroscience is that we predict how the world is in our minds and only then confirm this through a combination of sense data (sight, sound, smell, touch, etc.). Importantly, our predictions are structured by our memory, by the things we are able to recall but this recall happens in the present. What this means is we predict how the world is through real-time memory construction. In other words, we are not accessing memories that are already formatted we are recreating our memories as we go. Like many objects, photographs are linked to memory only in that we project onto them what we think we remember. The point of departure for me is how since much about photography resonates with memory, we tend to understand it through a narrative that links it with the past. But what if photography is an operation of memory itself? And what if it is also a way of screening us from the reality it depicts? The question we would then need to ask is not what is in these photographs that can be understood, but how is it that through photography we can see images at all? Addressing this question by rethinking memory and photography’s relationship is the aim of this chapter.

As always, there is one final point to reflect upon. I suggest memory’s most powerful function is not in how it presents a version of the past from which we can make generalised assumptions about the future, but in how it sets out a particular moment when the present was only one of many different possibilities. In this staging of the moment of potential futures, memory short-circuits the future we have chosen. In effect, there are always other possible memories: the memories of others. I suggest photography

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