“The mirror with a memory”
Placing photography in memory studies

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Introduction

A commonsensical way of relating photography to memory is one that assumes that photographs in some way “preserve” or “capture” memories for posterity. A photograph album with the inscription “Treasured Memories” on the cover, or a Kodak ad promoting the camera “as a means of keeping green the Christmas memories” (Paster 1992: 138), are perhaps the most quotidian instantiations of this assumption. But the same equation can be found in academic texts as well. Thus, in their classical study of the significance of objects in US homes, Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981: 67) summarize the significance of photographs as personal possessions by saying that, “obviously, photographs are the prime vehicles for preserving the memory of one’s close relations.”

And yet, while it is hard to deny that much vernacular photographic practice is motivated by a desire to capture a moment to be remembered, this intuitive equation between photography and memory is not a reflection of anything that is inherent or inevitable to the act of photography, but is rather itself a product of a particular history. Exploring this history is one of the tasks of this chapter. A second, equally important task is to move beyond the simple memory-photography equation to explore the range of complex entanglements photographs, both as images and as material objects, have with the lived experience of the past. What is at stake here is not necessarily deconstructing the tentative link between remembering and photographic images, but rather questioning the static notions of memory and photography on which commonsensical assumptions of this link so frequently rest.

This chapter covers a range of approaches that do not, at present, constitute a coherent field. Explorations that touch on photography as a medium of memory occur, indeed, in a range of disciplines. Scholars in visual and media studies, art history, communications, literature, anthropology, sociology and history all have an interest in how photographic visual representations both inflect and inform remembering, but they often explore this question with the tools distinct to their disciplines, and in ways that seek to contribute to distinctively disciplinary conversations. The notions of memory that these studies draw on also range widely, from the more encompassing category of cultural memory that embraces all forms of objectivized archival preservation,¹ to the more narrowly defined and necessarily subjective
sense of historical consciousness which presupposes the existence of the perceiving and feeling subject. Another important divide concerns the point of entry, because the layer of works engaging with memory in photography theory does not always acknowledge the range of works engaging with photographs in memory studies.

Still, despite the internal heterogeneity of the discussion that occurs around memory in, through, and of photography, some recurrent concerns emerge. One such concern pertains to issues of medium specificity (i.e., the indexical relationship assumed to exist between the photograph and its referent), and its relevance for the significance a photograph can be claimed to have for memory. Another has to do with the processes of mediation that occur on the level of photograph (as an aspect of the world is translated into a two-dimensional image), on the level of memory (as lived experience gets packaged and processed for posterity), and on the level of their interaction (as individual memories inform perceptions of an image, while an image informs, and indeed sometimes shapes, relevant memories of the period). Indeed, examining approaches to photography and memory over time allows us not only to gain insights into these questions, but also to see how both memory and photography are entwined with issues of truth, subjectivity, technology, and practices of mediation that themselves change over time.

**Photography and memory: histories of a relationship**

The link between a photograph and an act of remembrance was heralded in the first decades of photography’s history by Oliver Wendell Holmes, who famously dubbed the photograph a “mirror with a memory” (1859). It is notable that Holmes’s formulation construed memory as a property of the physical photograph itself. However, the metaphor of photograph-as-memory offered a range of expressive possibilities that were rapidly utilized. Indeed, some of the early daguerreotypes feature individuals displaying or contemplating daguerreotypes of their loved ones in an act of performed remembrance, where the image plays the role of memory itself that the sitter “holds onto.” The daguerreotypes in this case work not as externalized memory of what the camera has seen, but rather as a metaphor of the cherished memories that remain in the minds of the living.

Yet, as perceptively noted by Geoffrey Batchen, the material culture of early personal photography, in which images of the deceased or distant relatives and friends are so often accompanied by admonitions to “remember and not forget” as well as material remains, such as an individual’s lock of hair, testify to a persistent anxiety and fear of being forgotten, rather than a comfortable taken-for-granted assumption that a photograph ensures lasting personal memory. In Batchen’s own words, the photographs he probes represent “not their subjects, but rather the specter of an impossible desire: the desire to remember, and to be remembered” (2004: 98).

This anxiety over the photographs’ capacity to preserve memories is part and parcel of a more general anxiety over memory that marked the intellectual climate of the 19th and early 20th century. This is a point made compellingly by Batchen (2004: 94–96, passim), as well as Jeffrey Olick, who observed that “it is by now well documented that the nineteenth century experienced something of a memory crisis [Terdiman 1993; Kern 1986]. And it is also the case that the new technologies of photography were, if not caused by that crisis, at least associated with it” (2014: 22). Central to this memory crisis was an acute awareness of the irreversible flow of time, and a corresponding preoccupation with preserving and accurately representing the past—a project to which the new technology of photography was mobilized.
to contribute. While this may seem a natural move to the contemporary reader, it is worth noting that it came at the expense of imagining photography in alternative ways: as a field of aesthetic expression modeled on painting, as pictorialist photographers have sought to define it, or as a performative medium that is “less … an instrument for pinning down the ‘real’ than a means to generate imaginative worlds,” as Karen Strassler characterizes the spirit of postcolonial photography in her study of photography and national modernity in Java (2010: 147).

Arguably, this preoccupation with the accurate rendering of the past in both memory and photography has informed the habits of thought not only in the late 19th century, but up to the present day. Indeed, as Olick points out, lay understanding of both memory and photography imagines them as static: memories (and photographs) are either accurate (and thus “correct”) or inaccurate (and thus “flawed,” or “distorted”). What these imaginings overlook is the possibility that both remembering and photographs are inherently dynamic, “a process, not a thing” (Olick and Robbins 1998: 122), and that as such they are best explored not as imperfect approximations of a remote original, but as creative processes in their own right, in their production, circulation and reception.

A telling case of the deepening investment into photographs as the “anchors” of the ever-failing memory is offered by the history of Kodak advertising traced by James Paster (1992) and Nancy Martha West (2000). The original promise of photography (as contrasted, for example, with daguerreotype technology) has been its ability to freeze movement. Correspondingly,
the two pitches made by the advertisers when the Kodak Brownie camera was first introduced to the public in 1888 were the ease of the camera’s operation (thus the slogan “You press the button, we do the rest”) and the instantaneity of the resulting snapshot that enabled arresting motion. It was not until the early 20th century that the idea of stopping movement translated into the notion of stopping time and preserving the memory of past events for posterity. By the 1950s, Paster notes, “the snapshot was presented almost exclusively as a means of dealing with the inexorable passage of time,” as exemplified in such slogans as “Snapshots remember—when you forget/Snapshots help your heart remember,” and “Count on today’s Kodak cameras and Kodak film to make any moment extra special—a memory to live over and over again” (Paster 1992: 138-139). In an era of anxiety over memory, the snapshot here is offered as an insurance against memory’s inherent failings, and an antidote to the passage of time (see Figure 23.2).

While Kodak advertisements positioned photographs as conduits of personal memory, a range of other institutions placed photographic technology front and center in the task of constituting cultural and collective memories. In the now–classical discussion of the archival practices of two key 19th century figures, Alphonse Bertillon and Francis Galton, Allan Sekula (1989) underscored the role photography played as a way of measuring, regulating and knowing human beings. Notably, Sekula underscored that photographs had originally been deemed insufficient for providing a comprehensive record of an individual, and were thus supplemented by a range of standardized verbal descriptors. Yet the authority that eventually accrued to the institution of the archive could not but inflect the power of photography itself, enhancing its evidentiary appeal and status as both a carrier and a building block of cultural memory.

How stable is the presumed connection between memory and photography in the digital era, when the production of photographic images speeds up exponentially, and any pretense for a natural relationship between the object before the camera and the resulting pattern of pixels in a computer file is tenuous at best? Some scholars suggest that the cultural role of personal photography is changing rapidly in the sense that it moves away from the implicit equation between photography and memory. Photographs increasingly circulate digitally as means of communication about the present, rather than forms of referencing the past, momentos rather than mementos, in José van Dijck’s (2007) felicitous phrasing. Perhaps the most dramatic instantiation of these changing cultural expectations for photography is the photo messaging application Snapchat which offers its users an opportunity to exchange photographs that are programmed to disappear within seconds of their viewing. Snapchat (with its icon featuring a cartoon ghost) thus highlights the fleeting nature of images, not their promise of permanence, and frames photography as a way of staying in touch in the current moment, rather than freezing and preserving a record of a moment gone by (see Figure 23.3).

These shifts in everyday uses of photography are paralleled by the increased emphasis on manipulability of the images that circulate publicly. The postmodern writing on simulacra and simulations that lament the “weakening of historicity” and loss of the referent have been around for decades (Jameson 1984; Baudrillard 1995), and the more recent commentary translates these concerns into the language of popular culture. For example, Adatto (2008) suggests that “the age of the photo-op” has made manipulation and staging of images the default cultural expectations of the present moment. This has obvious repercussions for the presumed connection between photography and memory, for the new mindset asserts that, to cite Linda Williams: “What was once a ‘mirror with a memory’ can now only reflect another mirror” (1993:10).

Yet there are reasons to believe that the realist expectations, and the cultural investments into photography as a medium of memory are still very much with us. For one, the ease and
Figure 23.2  Kodak ad from Life magazine, December 18, 1950. Unknown author
Source: Published with permission from Eastman Kodak Company.

The look of a child on Christmas is more precious than any gift—keep it!

Snapshots remember—when you forget

Each Christmas brings new joy and wonder in a growing family. Each calls for its own snapshot record—outdoors by daylight, indoors by “flash.” With your camera ready, and two or three extra rolls of Kodak Film on hand, you can “fill a book” with memories of Christmas, 1950.

Eastman Kodak Company, Rochester 4, N. Y.

The gift that’s so “right” for so many—a Kodak camera
speed with which digital images circulate often enhance, rather than undermine, the problematic expectation that photographs guarantee an accurate visual record of the past. This is the point made by Errol Morris (2011), who uses the example of Abu Ghraib photographs to demonstrate the ease with which questionable inferences about the past are made and naturalized by recourse to seemingly unambiguous photographic evidence. Morris, whose own commitments are very much on the realist side (what he questions is not the desire to make evidentiary use of photography, but the temptation to make wrong inferences), nonetheless is concerned not with the public’s embrace of floating signifiers but, on the contrary, with its overinvestment in photography as means of accessing the lived reality of the past.

Domestic uses of digital photography also suggest that there is at least as much continuity as discontinuity in the ways people construe and communicate their past through the digital medium (Pauwels 2002). While technology may have made it easier to edit out a family member or to enhance the lushness of greenery in the background of a travel photograph, these types of manipulation are not significantly different from the enhancements of reality analog photographs had allowed. In this sense, the cultural uses of digital photography in what W.J.T. Mitchell (1992) has dubbed a “post-photographic era” are as preoccupied with the creation and consumption of “desired pasts” (Pauwels 2002) and thus with the capture and making of memories as their analog precursors had been.

How photography matters

What the cursory review above makes clear is that the customary link drawn between memory and photography has long historical and cultural roots, and that the precise articulations of
this link have been reflective of the technological and cultural developments of a particular moment. But it also gives an indication of why this taken-for-granted link is fundamentally problematic. This is why much critical writing on photography has been engaged in questioning and qualifying the commonsensical assumption that photographs are (perfect) containers of (perfect) memories by pointing out that, in David Campany’s words, “the photograph can be an aid to memory, but it can also become an obstacle that blocks access to the understanding of the past” (2003: 124). These works take seriously the mediated nature of both memory and photography, inquiring into the specific mechanisms and logics that made photographs resonate historically. Although a number of trends emerge in this large, interdisciplinary body of work, the discussion below will focus on two strands that transcend disciplinary boundaries and persist throughout different eras and technologies.

These strands are largely parallel to the distinction proposed by anthropologist Karen Strassler (2010) for the field of photography theory writ large. Broadly characterizing two polar extremes in approaches to photography, Strassler contrasted those she called “technological essentialists” with those she described as “social constructionists.” While the former, she suggested, seek to “identify a singular, transcultural ‘essence’ of photography,” the latter “refuse altogether the notion of photography as a ‘medium,’” and “dissolve it entirely into its myriad social, institutional, and ideological contexts” (2010: 19). The poles she identifies are admittedly ideal types, and in Strassler’s discussion they do not automatically entail any assumptions regarding photography’s relationship to processes of social remembering. But they do turn one’s attention to the much-discussed topic of medium specificity in photography in a way that applies directly to the literature on remembrance and commemoration. Indeed, much like with writing on photography more generally, sources that discuss the way in which photography bears on memory tend to fall on a continuum. On the one hand, you have those texts that take up the question of photography’s coherence as a medium, suggesting that the irreducible historicity is inscribed in this practice by definition, and exploring the way this historicity bears on the memory discourses and mnemonic practices it gives rise to. Applying Strassler’s distinction to the corpus of texts that pertain directly to memory, it is easy to identify as “essentialist” the writings of Siegfried Kracauer and Roland Barthes, among others. These works focus on various properties of photography, most notably on the indexicality of the photographic image, as well as on photographs as physical objects, exploring how these properties translate into a specific way of relating to the past. The term essentialist applies here insofar as this inquiry aims to locate photography’s resonance for memory in its essence as a medium. On the other hand, there are those works and authors that concentrate on the uses images receive as they are put to support or counter particular mnemonic projects, but these uses are derived from, and explained by, not something inherent to photography as a medium, but rather a constellation of social and cultural factors external to it (be it the particular group carriers, media environment, or the arenas on which the particular mnemonic battle may be playing out). This tradition, best exemplified by works of John Tagg and Elizabeth Edwards, suggests that there is no essence to photography itself, and that its relevance to memory is entangled in a variety of institutional practices and embedded in spaces, archives, and albums. Departing slightly from Strassler, I will call this emphasis contextualist, to emphasize that its interest in the uses and ends of photography looks first and foremost to the social and cultural contexts of its production and circulation. While this remains a simplified distinction, something of a necessary evil, it is nonetheless a useful way to organize a discussion of a messy and heterogeneous area of inquiry. Still, it is worth remembering that most generative contemporary writers on memory and photography fall somewhere in-between these two poles.
The essence of the medium

The authors who take seriously the specificity of photography as a medium tend to emphasize several of its features as particularly relevant. Key among these is the “quasi-automatic nature of photographic depiction” characteristic of photography that seems to bring the viewer “closer” to the indexical trace of the subject of the image (Roth 2009: 87). Or, as put somewhat differently by John Berger, “the material relation between the image and what it represents (between the marks on the printing paper and the tree these marks represent) is an immediate and unconstructed one. And it is indeed like a trace” (2002: 51, italics in the original). Unlike a painting, which entails a process of transformation as the painter selectively interprets what to render and how, the camera registers indiscriminately everything in front of the lens, making the image appear as “message without a code” (Barthes 1977: 36), something “directly stenciled off the real” (Sontag 1977: 154).3

However, the indexicality of the photographic image does not, in itself, guarantee photography a privileged status in regards to memory. In the case of one early commentator on photography and history, Siegfried Kracauer, this skepticism is rooted in his insistence on the distinctly selective nature of memory, which Kracauer contrasted with the mechanical completeness of the photographic image. A photograph, to Kracauer, was always something both more and less than historical perception: something richer on details, but thinner on meaning:

Photography grasps what is given as a spatial (or temporal) continuum; memory images retain what is given only insofar as it has significance. Since what is significant is not reducible to either merely spatial or merely temporal terms, memory images are at odds with photographic representation. From the latter’s perspective, memory images appear to be fragments—but only because photography does not encompass the meaning to which they refer and in relation to which they cease to be fragments. Similarly, from the perspective of memory, photography appears as a jumble that consists partly of garbage. (2004[1927]: 60)

It is thus not despite but because of the indexical nature of a photographic image that the memory analogy fails. A related view is expressed in the writing of perhaps the most eloquent commentator on photography, French theorist Roland Barthes, who stipulates in Camera Lucida (1982) that the poignancy of a photograph, its ability to stir and cause pain, are rooted not in the photograph’s bringing the past to life (“nothing Proustian in a photograph,” he insists), but rather in the image’s ability to confront the viewer with the realization that what she sees no longer exists. Throughout Camera Lucida, Barthes strives to formulate the elusive “essence” of photography and develop an argument and a method for the act of looking at it. Using documentary, photojournalism and personal photographs as examples, he introduces two terms, studium and punctum, to articulate how photographs work on the viewer. The studium refers to what could be glossed as the “informational content” of the photograph; something that could serve as evidence for a historian, but that fails to stir the viewer emotionally. Punctum, in contrast, is the detail or element in the image that breaks the studium and “pricks” the viewer. On a certain level, the punctum is always personal; the examples that Barthes gives refer him through a chain of associations to his own family photographs or prior viewing experiences.4 On another level, though, what unfailingly “pricks” a viewer in any photograph is the awareness of the inexorable flow of time and the fact that the moment an image references is always, already gone. This is the “that-has-been” aspect of the photograph.
that makes every image, Barthes insists, an image that anticipates the sitter’s (and the viewer’s own) death.

Building on Barthes’s insights, Ulrich Baer (2002) suggests that photography has affinity not with memory, but with trauma. Baer juxtaposes the historical time of narration and continuity (something akin to Barthes’s studium) to the discrete, explosive temporality of extraordinary isolated events. It is the latter, he argues, that describes the nature of photography. This makes the medium uniquely fitted to encapsulate the experience of trauma that, like photography, has a character of momentary sudden disruption that resists narrative elaboration. In a way, trauma and photography have the same structure:

The startling effect (and affect) of many photographs, then, results not only from their adherence to conventions of realism and codes of authenticity… It comes as well from photography’s ability to confront the viewer with a moment that had the potential to be experienced but perhaps was not. In viewing such photographs we are witnessing a mechanically recorded instant that was not necessarily registered by the subject’s own consciousness.

(2002: 8)

The possibility of delayed and unintentional effects in photography was one that was articulated years before both Barthes and Baer by German literary critic and philosopher Walter Benjamin. In his essay “A short history of photography,” originally published in 1931, Benjamin writes about the peculiar temporality of photography. Photography, says Benjamin, by arresting a moment offers an opportunity to inspect it with the hindsight knowledge of the future that this moment led to, “to find the imperceptible point at which, in the immediacy of that long-past moment, the future so persuasively inserts itself that, looking back, we may discover it” (1972: 7). Benjamin dubbed this layer of perception “optical unconscious” and considered photography a medium uniquely suited to reveal it. While Benjamin does not address memory directly, this notion of the “optical unconscious” is certainly relevant to the historical resonance of photographs (Paschalidis 2003). It is indeed such miniature details, unregistered by the camera’s subjects at the moment of the photograph’s taking, that may eventually loom large in the minds of those who encounter the image, at times producing the kind of trauma effect explored by Baer, while at others offering multiple opportunities of reading images against the grain. It is this propensity of the photographic image that makes photographs, in the eyes of Christopher Pinney (2013), less likely to conclusively Orientalize its subjects. The implications of Benjamin’s observation for memory are obvious. Oral historians who draw on photographs in the course of interviewing, note that:

Narratives woven around photographs are not merely additions to the stories told in “traditional” oral history interviews. Rather, they often run counter to what we could call “master life stories”—the life stories we feel comfortable telling ourselves and others. Memories evoked by photographs are not simply memories in addition to those recalled through narrating. These are often repressed or suppressed—rather than simply “forgotten”—memories that undermine and contradict personal “master memories” as often as they enhance or nuance them.

(Freund and Thomson 2011: 5)

The images’ propensity to give rise to suppressed (one may say, counter-) memories complicates and enriches the notion of photography as a trigger of remembering by introducing questions of what, how and to what ends one remembers through photography.
While the scholars interrogating the essential features of analog photography thus take seriously the peculiar temporality of the photographic image, which arrests one moment in a flow of time to offer it up to scrutiny and reflection, as well as the indissoluble relationship that exists in a photograph between the trace and its referent, they emphasize the ways in which these relationships can complicate, rather than ensure, remembering. Their discussion also brings to light the complexity of the process of remembering itself—a process that functions, as Paul Connerton (1989) has long argued, both on the level of the narrative and that of the body and affect. Indeed, different aspects of photography are relevant for these different kinds of remembering.

Narrative memory, the kind that can be transmitted verbally, requires a strategy of emplotment (White 1978), which locates the isolated instance referenced in a photograph in a longer synthetic narrative. It is closer to Barthes’s notion of the studium in that it calls for a process of narrative meaning-making on behalf of the viewer. This is the process of meaning-making that John Berger refers to when he says that “an instance photographed can only acquire meaning insofar as the viewer can read into it a duration beyond itself. When we find a photograph meaningful, we are lending it a past and a future” (Berger 2002: 49). The process of locating a photograph on a temporal continuum (placing a high school graduation portrait onto the plotline of someone’s romantic development, as opposed to a plotline of their educational attainment or social status) is only one of many operations required to lend an image meaning. It is also true that a photograph, despite its irresistible individuality (referencing a unique moment in the life of an individual person) also lends itself to serving as representative of a particular period, condition or a group. As Zeynep Gürsel observes, “[e]ach body in a photograph is highly singular and indexed to a particular individual, and yet many of the bodies in news images … circulate as stand-ins for large numbers of bodies sharing the same condition—bodies that are metonyms for body politics” (2014: 67). While Gürsel speaks specifically about news photography, the mental operation that enables one to look at a yellowed image from a family album and then make an observation about “the 60s” is not substantively different. In fact, this is exactly how Sarkisova and Shevchenko (2014) observed teenage Russians make generalizations about their parents and grandparents’ lives under socialism (and by extension, the nature of the socialist project itself) in their study of the afterlife of Soviet family photography. In this case, too, the instantaneity and indexicality of the photograph gave rise to fanciful memorial constructions that went well beyond the instances referenced by the image.

But perhaps a more powerful and confounding aspect of photography is the way it works on the level of emotion and affect—the level referenced by Barthes’s punctum. As Ernst Gombrich noted (for all visual images, not just photographs), “the visual image is supreme in its capacity for arousal, … its use for expressive purpose is problematic, and … unaided it altogether lacks the possibility of matching the statement function of language” (1996: 42). Indeed, one would be remiss not to acknowledge the significant differences between photographs and, say, the narrative arts taken up in some detail by Ann Rigney elsewhere in this volume. While narration allows a coherent, more or less controlled marshalling of evidence in support of a particular point, a photographic image offers an infinite range of material details co-present at a particular scene, and thus a much broader range of possible interpretations (a range that the captions to the image usually seek to delimit and restrict). At the same time, the effectiveness of a photograph in conjuring a sense that the events and people they reference “really existed” is unmatched, and so is its emotional appeal. As such, a photograph’s ability to stir affect is considerable. This is because photographic images, as Marianne Hirsch points out (drawing on Georges Didi-Huberman), are simultaneously indexical and symbolic.
Because of their indexical relation with the referent, they authenticate the past’s existence and provide tangible evidence of the factual reality of their subject (this is Barthes’s “that-has-been” element). But at the same time, photographs allow for projection and approximation, and their fragmentariness and two-dimensionality make them, as Hirsch points out, “especially open to narrative elaboration and embroidery and to symbolization” (2008: 117). In other words, photographs not only expose the viewers to the emotional states experienced by the people on the image (although they do that as well—insofar as these states are perceptible). They also invite the viewers’ own emotional projections and identifications, grounding and legitimating them at the same time in the indexical status of the image. This is an argument that is very much at the heart of Margaret Olin’s work (2002), whose primary interest is in investigating the photographs’ ability to touch the viewer, but the relevance of this observation to memory is especially closely explored by Hirsch in her seminal work on postmemory. Hirsch defines postmemory as a “structure of inter- and trans-generational transmission of traumatic knowledge and experience” (2008: 106, italics in the original). Her original interest was with the way in which memory of the Holocaust affects not only the children and grandchildren of Holocaust survivors, but also more broadly those in the second and third generation who “grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own related stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events that can be neither understood nor recreated” (1997: 22). Photography for Hirsch is one of the ways in which the members of these later generations inhabit and, in a way, appropriate the trauma of their parents and grandparents by developing complex emotional identifications and attachments to, and through, the image. The power and emotional appeal of such photographs is considerable, even as they remain flawed and problematic as historical documents. In fact, in her later, collaborative work with Leo Spitzer, Hirsch outlines just how little substance can be gleaned from an image that grips one so powerfully, and proposes to think of photographs as “points of memory” (yet again recalling Barthes’s notion of the punctum as the detail that “pricks” the viewer). This recognition both of the photographs’ limitations and of their role as providers of “affective visceral connection to the past” (which itself partially derives from their limitations as historical document) shifts emphasis from narrative to affective register of memory, all the while remaining rooted in photography’s nature as a medium (Hirsch and Spitzer 2006).

Photographic contexts and memory

While the theorists outlined above may disagree about the exact relationship between photography and memory, they all pursue this question through an examination of the photographic medium itself, its ontology, mechanics and specificity. In contrast, a different group of scholars concentrates on the distinct institutions and circuits through which photographs circulate as keys to their memorial significance (or lack thereof). This approach was pioneered and most compellingly articulated by John Tagg, who famously argued that “the power [photography] wields is never its own” (1993: 64). Rather, it rests on the range of institutions that historically have relied on photography and, in the process, gave it the evidentiary and rhetorical appeal that it continues to exert. These institutions, for Tagg, are first and foremost the police, the asylum, the newspaper and the archive (the list could be continued), and thus the very history of photography devolves into distinct, although interconnected, strands (hence the multiple plurals in the subtitle of Tagg’s book: Essays on Photographies and Histories).

From the standpoint of this approach, there is no essence to photography, and thus no essential way in which it is naturally aligned (or, to the contrary, inimical) to memory. What
matters is the way photographs are used, the power relations in which they are embedded, the channels through which they circulate, and the publics involved in negotiating their meanings; all these may or may not have mnemonic relevance.

Unsurprisingly, much work in this tradition is carried out by anthropologists. For example, Christopher Pinney (1997) has been deeply influential in turning the analytic attention of visual scholars to the historical and cultural contexts of photography. In his introduction to the co-edited volume *Photography’s Other Histories* (2003), Pinney points out that photography is a “globally disseminated and locally appropriated medium” that is practiced differently in different social and historic settings. The turn to postcolonial and colonial uses of photography by local populations that this influential collection exemplified and catalyzed is informed by the understanding that photographic practices can be understood only in their social, cultural and institutional contexts. Scholars working in this tradition (e.g., Morris 2009, Strassler 2010) examined the impact of local image ecologies, cultures of memory, visual traditions, and cultural and social legacies on production and uses of photographic images around the world (oftentimes discovering that memorialization occupies a relatively lesser place in the spectrum of local expectations for photography than it does in the industrialized West, as can be seen in MacDougall [2006] and Pinney [2003]).

Other authors have scrutinized a further range of contexts that have a clear bearing on the culture and processes of remembrance. Among them are the museum (Edwards 2001, Thomas 1998), the archive (Sekula 1989), the media (Gürsel 2010, 2014; Tota 2014; Zelizer 1992, 1998), the photo album (Bourdieu 1990; Langford 2001, 2006; Chalfen 1987, 1991) and, more recently, social media (van Dijck 2007). Pioneering work on the intersection between journalistic photography and social memory is done by the communications scholar Barbie Zelizer. Zelizer’s earliest work (1992) was on the role of the media in the shaping of America’s collective memory of the Kennedy assassination, but if this work concentrated on the framing and meaning-making done through narrative, her second book, *Remembering to Forget: Holocaust Memory through the Camera’s Eye* (1998), addressed the place of photography in shaping public memory head on. In a recent volume, *About to Die* (2010), Zelizer examines the changing public response to news images featuring individuals right before the moment of their death, noting that the increasing sense of discomfort with these images may reflect a changing set of expectations from news photography, and an evolving relationship between the journalists and their readers/viewers.

While Zelizer construes photography as fundamentally constitutive of public memory (see also Tota 2014, Hariman and Lucaites 2007), David Bate (2010) emphasizes photography’s “negative relation to memory.” Bate speaks in particular of public or collective memories in which artificial mediated memories embodied in photo collections, archives, and monuments are often at odds with popular memories. The former, in Bate’s apt terminology, are taken to represent nothing but “a public ideology of memory,” that which ought to be remembered (but not necessarily what was).5 This possibility is fleshed out by Strassler (2010), who follows the institutional context traversed by photographs of student protests in Indonesia, in the course of which images, originally fueled by the photographers’ desire to bear witness, become incorporated into a sanitized narrative of state modernization that treats them as undifferentiated instances of student self-expression throughout Indonesian history, thus depriving them of their critical political edge.

While the variety of institutional and situational contexts in which photographs are examined in this tradition is too great to describe in detail here, the common denominator that unites these studies has to be underscored. It is described by Elizabeth Edwards as the “relational approach to photographs”—an approach that stresses “spaces of relationship onto
which entries are placed.” This approach is “intrinsically anti-essentialist, because those relationships are made up of multiple intersections of intention, process and action” and as such it “allows the re-viewing and re-appropriation” of the images under study in the course of their production and circulation (2006: 31). This inherent openness to the contexts in which images are consumed pre-supposes that they change their meaning as they traverse through different institutional and social domains, and thus opens the possibility that they continuously create, rather than reflect or support existing memory discourses. In other words, in contrast to the essentialist approach, a contextualist one tends to attribute simultaneously less and more power to the photograph. Indeed, from a strictly contextualist perspective, photography as a medium has no ontological essence, and thus no independent agency in how it encapsulates or communicates the past; everything depends on its uses, and in that sense, it is determined by rather than determining its circumstances. At the same time, images appear more powerful in the sense that they are perceived not only to encapsulate, in however imperfect form, the presence of the past, but also to actively shape the notions of that past in their viewers, enabling particular interpretations while making others less likely.

Still, the opposition between the two approaches should not be overdrawn. Many writers on photography discussed above balance their work attention to the spaces of relationships into which images are projected with a sensitive and subtle understanding of photography’s specificity as a medium. Zelizer’s *About to Die* (2010) is exemplary in this regard, in the sense that her interest in journalistic and media practices goes hand in hand with a discussion of the peculiar subjunctive mood fostered by journalistic photographs that so often pause on the threshold of a tragedy, prompting the viewer to ask, “what if” the reported events ended safely against all odds. Similarly, Pinney’s attention to indigenous uses of photography does not negate, but rather builds on a nuanced understanding of the photographic medium and its “optical unconscious” (2013).

Adding to this effort to integrate the relational context and the medium specificity of photography, Elizabeth Edwards and her colleagues (2004, see also Kuhn and McAllister 2006) look beyond the two-dimensional frame of the photograph as a visual object, noting that the images’ power and appeal also come from their materiality and their physical existence, as well as histories in specific sites. These works demonstrate that close attention to the phenomenology of the image does not detract from, but rather enhances analysis of their movements through institutional and social contexts.

## Conclusion

Insights obtained by the scrutiny of photography as a technology of memory have a great potential to illuminate not only the stakes in the struggles over cultural and communicative memory in particular historical cases but also the nature and logics of social memory itself. These studies tend to pay close attention to photography’s coherence as a medium, and highlight the coexistence and interdependence of narrative and affective levels through which the processes of remembering work. They undermine the simple-minded equation between memory and photography and urge us to inquire into the historical, cultural and social roots of this perception. At the same time, these studies posit that in more complex and contradictory ways, photographs do matter for memory: both are mediated, inherently unstable in their meaning, embedded in other institutions and processes, and put in service of different groups of social actors.

The reverse is true as well. The processual approach currently taking hold in the study of social memory (looking at the practices of articulation, negotiation and contestation as key aspects of social remembering, and at memories themselves as inherently situational and never
firmly fixed) can be fruitfully applied to photographs. This destabilizes the photographic image, whether by highlighting the instability in the interpretations it inspires or by inquiring into the afterlife of iconic images and into the professional routines and choices that produce them. Indeed, the very strands of essentialism and contextualism that characterize scholarship on photography can be traced in social memory studies as well; both are similarly preoccupied with the degree to which the meaning of the past is inherent in the event itself or is to be located in the framing and meaning-making done retrospectively. In this way, too, there are important intellectual dividends inherent in thinking about memory and photography together.

In order to better understand the complexity of this synergistic and processual relationship, scholars continue to ask questions. What can image politics reveal about memory politics and vice versa? What kinds of exchanges, transactions, and/or contestations happen around the making and circulation of photographs and why? What are the historical, generational, corporeal, institutional, and professional logics behind image flows, and how do they matter for the historical imagination these images foster? How do the images socialize their viewers into particular ways of seeing their families, communities, nations and their past? How do the properties of photographic images—their indexical relationship to the referent, their status as “certificates of presence” (Barthes 1982: 87, see also Roth 2009), as well as the photographs’ “traversal of intimate and public domains” (Strassler 2010: 4)—augment their symbolic power and efficacy as tools of memory work, and how does all of this change in the digital era? What is the impact of advancing technologies and their increasing speed on our notions of the past itself? Because photographs commonly accompany historical accounts—from History Channel documentaries to family scrapbooks—we should continue to interrogate the mechanisms and practices that lend them meaning and efficacy, as well as the collective narratives they enable. A photograph might not represent a perfectly fossilized memory in the end, but photographs continue to matter as wonderfully complex and deeply felt tools of communication, commemoration and communion.

Notes

1 On cultural memory, see Rigney in this volume.
2 The Obama administration’s decision not to release the images of the killed Osama bin Laden is significant in this regard as a manifestation of a new self-awareness about the doubts that can be cast on the truth value of images. This is a radical reversal of the prior image politics of the War on Terror, as examined by Gürsel (2014).
3 For a discussion that takes issue with the assumption of indexicality as a core property of photography, see Elkins (2006).
4 In a remarkable article, Margaret Olin makes a compelling case that many of Barthes’s identifications are in fact semi-intentional misidentifications, concluding that “the most significant indexical power of the photograph may … lie not in the relation between the photograph and its subject but in the relation between the photograph and its beholder”—power that enables the latter to build relationships and communicate, identify and feel communion with the people the images refer her to (2002: 114; see also 2012).
5 Bate cites Foucault’s critique of the media for showing people “not what they were, but what they must remember having been,” but the opposition is just as close in spirit to Pierre Nora (1989).

References

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