

FELICITY COLMAN

the power of
memory

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Locating Memory: Photographic Acts

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Memory is something that brings itself to cultural attention at moments of change, of disjuncture, of fear or loss, and also at times of longing, or achievement, of pleasure and love. As a neurological process that results in an affective range of emotions, from joy to sadness, memory is a powerful force for the growth and dispersal of communities. As a cultural process, the singular realms of the physiologies of memory are managed—tacitly and directly—to provide a system accessible for other participants interested in accessing this temporally metered force. However, cultural management is inextricably tied to political strategy at all levels of governance, so the practices of exhuming and examining the material remnants of bio-communally produced memory through specific cultural markers does not so much provide a history of what memory is, as result in the situation of an often rhetorical practice of a very complex dimension. Can memory be used for reasons other than rhetorical comfort or rhetorical pain? (*I recognise my genetic heritage in this or that image/ we are a nation of sportsmen/ you remind me of better times*). Can cultural memories be engaged as anything but consensual communal laws? (*Ghosts of the civil dead/ this monument is for the dead explorers/ this is a sacred site*). Whose memory is it that cultures draw upon for elements of their material functionality?

The essays collected in this volume go a long way toward addressing such difficult questions, first, by locating the situation of photographic documents in communities, and second, by exploring (with various degrees of success) the (often rhetorical) cultural placement of ‘memory’

within and by those sites. Ten chapters and an introductory chapter by the co-editors, Annette Kuhn and Kirsten Emiko McAllister, offer a breadth of methodologies with which to critically examine the degrees of rhetorical opacity of memory that photography of all types produces. Photography forms an invaluable part of material culture, necessary for the proper psychological functioning of societal groups. As such, this volume can be considered alongside other recent revisionist accounts of the material importance of art forms of all types as cultural records for people, such as Robert Bevan's *The Destruction of Memory: Architecture at War* or Toby Haggith and Joanna Newman (eds), *Holocaust and the Moving Image: Representations in Film and Television since 1933*.¹ At this present time of the culturally extreme poles of poverty and wealth, militarised instability and economic largesse, the scholarship of these books provides a crucial benchmark for research and thinking. The present world-ranging conflicts of economically fuelled ethnic violence are illuminated by these complex accounts of the past; that is, as it is viewed by the present day. And the past is overfull with memories. For the volume under review, *Locating Memory*, I found it difficult to read more than a single chapter at any one sitting, due to the dense and psychologically taxing nature of the material. Memories are difficult things to deal with.

Locating Memory was developed from a symposium (of the same title) held at the Institute for Cultural Research at Lancaster University in the UK, where co-editor Annette Kuhn was Professor of Film Studies. Professor Kuhn has

brought a particular methodology of 'memory work' into visual and screen studies through her work, including the books *Family Secrets: Acts of Memory and Imagination* and *An Everyday Magic: Cinema and Cultural Memory*.² In these works, Professor Kuhn highlights the larger, cultural-historical implications for an individual or vernacular 'memory' condition and recording process. This important work is reflected through the choices of contributions made for *Locating Memory*. In particular, the discursive style of each of the chapters highlights the value of attention to oral histories. Standard academic word-dress tends to iron out class, gender and genetic specific discursive tones, and because the situation of the artefact is here regarded with equal importance to the form of cultural memory it encapsulates, the discursive tone of each author provides a critical aesthetic wedge with which to engage in the diverse materials of each chapter. There is a decisive political bite to most of the writing, as handling of *memory* is necessarily fraught with politically determined subjective qualities, which today, more so than ever, are determined under the commodifying gaze of representation.

What is *memory* anyway? Some subjective marker of a particular temporal site? If the notion of memory is primarily concerned with the idea of a retrieval of something, the mental faculty of recollection, then where exactly is it that *memory* resides? The book is organised into three sections to address this problem: identity, dislocation, reframing. In questioning the *location* of memory then, via these three expansive *and* intensive sites and non-sites, the

authors in this collection of essays all commence their search for memory in specific places. They look at the history behind singular photographs made famous by the mechanisms of media's manipulative repetitious histories, photo albums, museum deposits, specific exhibitions and artworks by artists in specific locations artworks. What quickly emerges is that text, images and sounds are not the sites where memory resides, locked down into some safe hold for the convenient retrieval of the authorial owners or genetic heirs. Rather, it is *place* which reconfigures the material object, and, in doing so, can affix what is otherwise ephemeral material to any cultural history eager to build an evidentially based history for itself. But as the authors of the volume demonstrate, any knowledge of the past is firmly filtered through the conceptual abilities of the present.

These abilities extend beyond those of the type discussed in Frances A. Yates's great book on *The Art of Memory*, which has always been a touchstone for the arena of memory study.³ For example, in his chapter 'The Space Between: Photography and the Time of Forgetting in the Work of Willie Doherty', Andrew Quick describes his encounter with the work of Irish artist Willie Doherty in a show of 'British' art in one of Britain's last, great colonial cities—Sydney, Australia (a place indeed, where the banknotes 'were washable but could not be folded' [155]). Just as Yates's work reminds us of the centrality for classical thinking of the mnemonically sited method for recollection through the physical attachment of things to places, Quick points out how even with a

reflexive awareness of the complex issues of representation, the experience of the situation of one's physical prowess of critical viewing (such as the guided viewing of art in a museum spaces) accordingly stimulates the control mechanisms of that very animation of intellect (in this case, being at the site of a decidedly colonialist simulacrum of European signifiers of 'culture'). Quick reminds himself of Bataille's discussion of the museum as a mirror site, reflective of whatever conceptual person one wants to see. Quick writes, 'Of course, I was mistaken in thinking that this space could offer me some sort of stability, a place in which I might order myself, put myself back together, a place to properly *be*; since, as Bataille indicates, the very practices of mirroring are themselves as much founded upon excess, 'the ecstasy', as creating it'. (156) Quick's essay draws our attention to the problems of the construction of a national identity based upon memories that have been transported and transposed.

This is also a question that other authors take up, such as Kirsten Emiko McAllister's chapter, 'A Story of Escape', which examines the legacy of the internment during World War II in Canada of people of Japanese ethnic origin (with similar practices happening over the world—in the United States and in Australia for example). McAllister grapples with the racist national history that decreed parts of her family be incarcerated in camps for four of the war years and that is also in governance of her present day self. Although for this task of an emotionally taxing retrieval, she tells us she has partaken only of a 'watery coffee from the local 7-Eleven' (83), McAllister carefully looks through

photographic albums held in the Canadian National Archive and Museum and describes the material details of many of the photographic portraits of families we know are now perhaps dispersed, or dead. Like many of the essays in the volume, the Barthesian prick of chronos is never far away. Notwithstanding that many of the essays are undoubtedly motivated by quests for individual memory for their authors, they remain bound to their professional reflexivity. Perception of the dimensions of evidential reality, of the consciousness of 'your real self' and that of others engages the aesthetics of memory as a temporal strategy. Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer's chapter, 'There Was Never a Camp Here', engages this transformative aesthetic in their search for the forgotten cemetery of Transnistria in Romania, pieced together through the memory sites of film, woodcuts and drawings, literature. It is the authors themselves who take photographs to 'perform' and record the site as a locatable memory, enabled as a 'memorial site' through the activity of photography. (152)

Extending the complementarity the individual searches for in terms of the reasons for locating memory, larger events that dominate collective cultural memories are also addressed in terms of their functionality. Patrick Hagopian's chapter on 'Vietnam War Photography as a Locus of Memory' examines a number of the most commonly circulated images of war, including: Nick Ut's photograph of Kim Phuc running naked down a highway after a napalm strike in 1972; Ron Haerberle's 1969 snap of a terrified huddle of women and children civilians seconds before they were murdered at My Lai;

Malcolm Browne's photograph of the immolation of the Buddhist monk, Thich Quang Duc in 1963; Eddie Adams's capture of General Loan's execution of a Viet Cong suspect in 1968. Hagopian retrieves the historical situation of the actual occasions on which these photographs were made, citing the political circumstances, as well as the photographers' reasons for being non-interventionary witnesses to incredible conditions of violence. Hagopian usefully asks a number of questions concerning media involvement with the release and circulation of images of such events during wartime. Hagopian reminds us that like the images of abuse at the prison on Abu Ghraib that were released in 2004 (although the prison was built in 1960, and Amnesty International reports describe the severity and extent of the execution of political prisoners held there, particularly in the 1980s and 1990s), war atrocities proliferate but it is often not until images of these events are circulated that forms of intervention take place.

There are many further chapters worth investigating in this volume, delivering as it does a specific methodological clout for the study of memory and its mutations over time which result in national deliriums, amnesias and all types of cultural disorders.

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1. Robert Bevan, *The Destruction of Memory: Architecture at War*, Reaktion Books, London, 2006; Toby Haggith and Joanna Newman (eds), *Holocaust and the Moving Image: Representations in Film and Television since 1933*, Wallflower Press, London, 2005.
2. Annette Kuhn, *Family Secrets: Acts of Memory and Imagination*, Verso, London, 2002 and *An Everyday Magic: Cinema and Cultural Memory*, I.B. Tauris, London, 2002.
3. Frances Amelia Yates, *The Art of Memory*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1969.