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Memory and the Photograph: Similar But Not Synonymous
(A Semi Eidetic Synthesis of a Semester of Exploration)

Memory is not the same as recollection. Much of what we ascribe to be “memories” are actually recollections; to recall something can be seen as the act of accessing a memory, where memory is the information pertaining to instances, facts, or events which has been stored away in what many call their ‘memory bank’, which is more accurately described as the inter-workings and somewhat unknown confines of the brain (R. Richardson and E. Nys, class presentation, August 30, 2010). To make the distinction between memory and recollection is comparable to the adage of human error (R. Richardson and E. Nys, class presentation, August 30, 2010); for the way our memory banks distinguish how things happen is almost guaranteed to be inaccurate (Lilienfeld, Lynn, Ruscio, & Beyerstein, 2010, pp. 64-69).

Our memory banks can be compared to our financial banks in that the net dollar amount a bank professes to support is not materially present within the marble confines of the building. We may state that we recall all of our birthdays from the age of six onward, but without an image, story, or video to jog the account of birthdays passed it is impossible that a person could recall details and events accurately. Like your bank of choice, your memory dupes you on a daily basis (Lilienfeld, et al. p. 64 and p. 81).

The brain exchanges numerous events, and significant ones such as birthdays may have been deposited into long term memory accounts, but it is the *record* of their deposit that comes in the form of images, that allows for their access; much like it is the record of your account in the form of deposits, withdrawals, bank statements, and Credit or Debit Cards that allows you to access your funds at your bank of choice. There is no box in the back room of Wachovia that contains all \$3,067.86 of your savings account; that money is combined with everyone else’s who banks there and is made accessible to you upon request, just like the there is no box in your memory bank that has solely the memory of your sixth birthday. That memory, like your money, is combined with all other events and occurrences since that date and is now subject to your interpretation as you now recall it.

To start your savings account you deposited one hundred dollars with Wachovia with the assurance that you could gain access to these funds at a later date. That initial one hundred dollars that you deposited into your savings account has since been used by numerous other bank patrons, was divided and exchanged among other accounts and the paper bills you initially furnished to Wachovia you are not likely to ever touch again. You can gain access to the one hundred dollar denomination at any time but it will not be the *same* denomination that you initially furnished, the money you are furnished from there on out is a manifestation of the original, but not inherently the same.

Like money manifested by a bank teller, much of memory is manifestations of all instances and occurrences that have happened since the event you are attempting to ascertain. To get to the event you have to travel through the periphery of happenings that surround it (Proust 1913, 2004, pp. 47-48). To liken this to memory: you try and recall your ninth birthday, you think about what instances surrounded the year you turned nine years old, picture the house you *think* you lived in then, manifest an image of a cake decorated with nine yellow candles which you probably blew out with exuberant energy; and formulate an image where-in common themes are present and facts you think about frequently or are exposed to daily are prominent. None of the images evoked are concretely about the instance of your ninth birthday (Proust 1913, 2004, pp. 5-7), but rather are similar to your banking information in that they are means to the desired end—to remember. To gain access to your one hundred dollar deposit, you must travel through the required periphery of providing your identification and banking information to gain access to your funds, much like to gain access to your memories of early childhood you must travel through the chain of occurrences that have happened since.

Just as there are so many steps, which are also instances for alteration, in starting and accessing your banking information, there are also many instances for fallibility in recollection by virtue of shifts in neuron reception in the brain (Lehrer, 2007, pp. 83 -85). In the process of recollection to a memory, we inevitably alter the memory simply by virtue of the passing of time, and the knowledge gained since the instance of the memory, much like the addition of moneys to an account alters the net sum. By nature, the change in knowledge and the addition of subsequent occurrences changes the way you recall the memory (Locke, 1971, pp.21-31). All memories you believe you possess within the

confines of your brain are likely counterfeit (Lilienfeld, et al, 2010, p. 64), much like the net sum of all accounts of patrons within a bank are not physically contained within a banking institution; the money was at one point deposited by all of the patrons but it has not remained solely theirs and is not accessible at all times without request or provocation.

Another distinction: an image is not merely still-frame of pixels (Roe, class lecture, October 18, 2010; Marker, film). The aforementioned images of a cake with nine yellow candles that you blow out is more of what one would consider to be a movie clip than a still-frame; and the recollection of the house you lived in at the age of nine is more likely than not a moving picture of significant objects and rooms than a four-by-six-inch still frame in your mind's eye of your living room to exact detail. In the same way recollection is the means to memory, a photograph can be seen as the means to image progression and recollection. Arguably, no memory can exist without evoking an image (whether visual or sensory).

The psychology of memory and the art that leads to memory are quite different in their analysis and levity they place upon memory. Due to the fallibility of memory, some psychologists would say that memory is not important unless it pertains to survival (H. Lewis and M. Gallace, class presentation, November 1, 2010; Sacks, 1998, pp. 23-54). But the various lenses through which a psychologist may look at memory can change the importance of the aforementioned ninth birthday memory. For instance, if prompted by a friend to tell of the event of your ninth birthday, then the recollection and the telling would become a part of the social origins of reminiscing, and would according to scholars Fivush and Haden become an intricate part of your autobiographical memory (Nelson, 2003, pp. 29-30); yet while the memory of your ninth birthday is uniquely individual and the telling of the event is subject to purposeful alteration solely at your discretion, it also by virtue of prompting becomes public due to the direct involvement of those in the conversation regarding your birthday (Nelson, 2003, pp. 30-31).

Thus in the social context of reminiscing about memories, psychologists would argue that once the memory becomes important enough to enter a conversation, it becomes important enough to effect how the members of the conversation perceive you, how you perceive yourself, and thus becomes a part of your identity (Nelson, 2003, p. 29). Fivush and Haden go on to explore the memories of early childhood, such as the

aforementioned ninth birthday, as are influenced and altered by the primary care giver. Which is to say that the role of the primary care giver in a child's early life can effect his or her ability to accurately recollect, develop mentally, recognize their role, and even the development of language skills (Reese and Farrant, 2003, pp. 32-34). Thus memory in the view of psychology is integral to self-identity not only in a social context, but also in early childhood experiences as will come to affect personal development (McAdams, 2003, pp. 187-192).

Furthermore collective memory, or memory that transcends time, also renders remembrance important to a psychologist. An example would be the proverbial red-hot coil on the stove; whether one has personally experienced the third-degree-burn that would result from contact with the coil, he or she knows that will be the result (Coser, 1941, 1992, .p. 36). Memory to a psychologist is largely developmental, personal, and survival related; yet while the ostensible truth of the memory recalled (at any age) will always be subject to doubt in the view of a psychologist, since the focus is on the effect of the memory upon the individual, the veracity of the memory almost does not matter. The candles on your ninth birthday cake may have been yellow, they may have been blue, but in the long run the details oriented with the memory matter less than the effect the memory had upon you personally. If your favorite color at present is yellow and you recall that the birthday candles were yellow, then the memory as you recall it today can be said to have an effect on your identity, and life-story (McAdams, 2003, pp.187-201).

In the same way that a psychologist would analyze memory more as it pertains to effect and less with the verification of memory, the art of photography operates in much the same way. A photograph is physically a still image that captures an instance in time (B. Mauer, guest lecture, September 20, 2010), but while a photograph is an image, it is still one that can be manipulated (though not nearly to the degree that a mental image or memory can be). Most of the inaccuracies found in memory or image recollection are accidental or the result of knowledge past and present; where as a photograph while it can be distorted or aged, typically maintains the truth the image had at the initial capture. It is the interaction and effect that the photograph has on the audience that is of interest to the artist (D. Roe, class lecture, October 18, 2010).

However, just as it can be said that the imagery associated with memory recall is essential to the perception of the memory, the converse is also true of photographs. A photograph has far less impact unless a connection is established between the viewer and the image (Barthes, 1982). For instance, say your ninth birthday was a favorite birthday of yours: it was Barbie themed and the whole house was decked out in yellow tulle and satin bows, and it remains one of your favorite days in your life. If you were to encounter a found photograph of a small girl blowing out her birthday candles you would associate your own birthday experience with that picture (B. Mauer, guest lecture, September 20, 2010), in addition to other birthdays you may have had. Perhaps your tenth birthday was awful-- there was a clown and you peed your pants in utter terror. You could also associate that negative experience with the found photograph; so then you would have a range of emotions surrounding the image. This range of emotions surrounding a photograph is entirely personal and is typically not finite.

Roland Barthes in Camera Lucida explores the personal relation that seems inherent to the photograph. Barthes would refer to the obvious connection the ninth birthday scenario would have to the image of a child bowing out candles as the “studium”, the obvious symbolic meaning behind the image. While the symbolism of a child blowing out candles in the image appeals to a large audience of people who have ever had a birthday cake and candles, it is the individual experience (the peeing of the pants or the Barbie extravaganza) that renders the photograph personal and unique to your experience Barthes would refer to as the “punctum” of the photo. Both the studium and the punctum are up to the interpretation of the viewer, however the studium will contain the inherent visual elements of the picture that are instantly recognizable to any viewer with an experience related to the image. The punctum is distinguished by the highly personal experience drawn from the image, and the personal memory imagery that results from viewing the image.

Thus is the intent of art: to effect. Without an impact on the viewer, art cannot exist and would merely be reduced to paint on canvas, words emitted to an audience, or pixels on paper. Photographs also hold an importance to the preservation of memory; it is no small coincidence that camera flashes typically accompany the major events in our lives. Since the photograph cannot be altered, we use them to mark events in our lives,

which serve to remind us of the details of the event. In the same way memory influences the effect and importance of the photograph, photographs affect the remembrance and importance of personal and collective memories. “A photograph is not a memory. A memory is not a photograph” (J. Queen and D. Roe, class lecture, August 23, 2010).

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