

Art Therapy Online: ATOL

Narrative, Photographs and the Experience of Memory

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Abstract: Themes relating to time, space, absence and loss are explored through narrative and image with particular reference to D.W. Winnicott's concept of intermediate space and Roland Barthes' writings on photography.

Keywords: narrative inquiry, space, absence, memory, punctum

Introduction

I am moved by fancies that are curled

Around these images, and cling:

The notion of some infinitely gentle

Infinitely suffering thing.

(T.S.Eliot (1920) Preludes).

This paper proposes a series of connections between space, time, presence and absence and loss as expressed through art. While all of these themes form part of an aesthetic vocabulary common to all the arts as expressed in a multitude of forms, which we recognize and which resonate with us as evocations of our lived, remembered or perhaps longed for experience, the emphasis in this paper is on photography; as a testament to time past.

In performance art, drama and dance, physical spatiality is used to express human emotion and relationship and to intimate how we want to be with others and how we are with ourselves (Jennings, 1994). In architecture and in the physicality of our social arrangements it is intimately connected to power;

invoking awe or suggesting intimacy (Foucault, 1965; Markus, 1993). Negative and positive space are amongst the basic elements of composition in painting; positive space is the space occupied by the subject while negative space is the space that is not the subject but which, importantly, defines the subject.

In its relationship to time, space assumes an existential quality. The music therapist James Robertson (2008) draws our attention to this when he refers to the sensitive balance between sound and silence in music suggesting that it is often an enlightening process to note, in listening to recordings of improvisations, that what we considered to be a prolonged silence in the moment of interaction was perhaps no longer than a few seconds; silence creates a space which makes sound significant (Robertson, 2008).

We recognize and relate to these representations in the arts because they are experienced within a space which Donald Winnicott (1971) referred to as the third area, the area of illusion or transitional space; a condensation of his ideas of potential space and transitional phenomena. Positioned between inner subjective reality and the objective outside world, this transitional space opens up in infancy, when the child first comes to realize that his mother is not merely an extension of himself and that the absent mother will return. It is a space inhabited by transitional phenomena, the first 'me' and 'not-me' object, which facilitates the transition from the omnipotence of the tiny baby for whom external objects have not yet separated out, to the capacity to relate to 'objectively perceived' objects (Winnicott, 1971).

This 'object' might be a rag, a small blanket, favourite doll or teddy bear but it may be a song, the edge of a curtain, the mother herself, an image in the mind. Its fate is to be gradually cathected, invested with emotional or mental energy and then in the course of the ensuing years to become not so much forgotten as relegated to limbo (Young, 1994). In health the transitional object does not 'go inside' nor does the feeling about it necessarily undergo repression. It is not forgotten and it is not mourned. It loses meaning, and this is because the transitional phenomena have become diffused, have become spread out over the whole intermediate territory between 'inner psychic reality'

and ‘the external world as perceived by two persons in common’, that is to say, over the whole cultural field (Winnicott, 1975).

This overlapping space, neither subject nor object but some of both, describes the intermediate area of human experience between inner reality and the outside world. But in its sense of not ‘either/or’ but ‘both/and’, it occurs to me that it is also a concept reminiscent of Hudson’s (1977) notion of the composite nature of rationality in which it is suggested that the rational enterprise is a dialectical process; two things, and not one, in tension. The space between shares this composite quality in that it bridges and allows us to tolerate the tension between external and internal realities. Winnicott (1971) suggests that, while we are never free of this tension, relief may be found in this area of intermediate experience which is directly related and in continuity with the child who is ‘lost’ in play and maintained throughout the life cycle in the intense experiences which belong to the imaginative life, to the arts and to religion and to creative scientific work (Winnicott, 1971, p. 15).

It departs from theories which attribute to the individual a rich inner world at the expense of an acknowledgement of the outer world and challenges traditional epistemologies where one is taught to think of a line between subject and object (Martín Baró, 1996). Rather it proposes a territory with a permeable boundary where a constant traffic moves in both directions; as in dialectical thinking which involves the combining of opposing or contradictory ideas (thesis and antithesis) to create new ideas (synthesis).

It is here in this intermediate territory that we experience the art object as more than the sum of its parts, where the dance and the dancer are one and the same, and where the expressive arts may have the potential to facilitate and enable both creative growth and understanding of self and other. No one expresses this better than Yeats who amongst schoolchildren reflected upon the passing of time, our relationship to it, and presents a vision of beauty based on totality.

*‘O Chestnut tree, great rooted blossomer,
Are you the leaf, the blossom, or the bole?
O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,
How can we know the dancer from the dance?’
(Yeats, Amongst Schoolchildren, 1928)*

As Conway (1992) observes, for Yeats, no part of the human experience can be privileged over another. Aesthetics do not depend upon separation or distance. The whole is always more than the sum of its parts. An aesthetic ideal for art and for everyday life rises out of totality: the ability to see things in relation to one another, not as separate or self-sufficient (Conway, 1992). Art is always about something even if it is absent. As Adorno notes, 'As long as the perception of art is confined to art, the work of art is not adequately perceived, the inner composition of a work calls for an external referent which is not part of art, yet mediated by it' (Adorno, 1984, p. 478).

Absence and Presence

I am interested in absence; absence as an external referent and how it is mediated through the image and explored through the narratives that refer to the image. In choosing a photograph of an art object and personal photograph as exemplars I explore by implication the distance between myself and the original object.

The visual spaces, with which I am concerned evoke absence and, paradoxically, suggest the presence of absence. Sorkin (2008) acknowledges this paradox when she responds to the artist Zoe Leonard's statement about her work *Strange Fruit* (1993-8) to which I refer throughout this paper. When Leonard says, 'The fruit is very, very silent', I believe she means that it both comes from a place of absence and also creates one (Sorkin, 2008). It is, as the curator Matthew Shaul (2009) puts it, an example of when an implied absence works to confirm a suggested presence.

Zoe Leonard's work touches on the inter-related themes of space and time and the representation of absence. Begun in 1993, *Strange Fruit* is a continual series of installations composed of over 300 fruit skins that have been stitched and ornamented with colourful wires, thread, zippers, and buttons (Hochfield, 2002).



Strange Fruit, Zoe Leonard (1993-8)

Photograph: Arnd Wedemeyer, 28th September 2003.

Leonard describes its evolution as a work of mourning after the death of a friend ... as '*a way to sew myself back up*' (Leonard, 1998). Her account of the process of this mourning work recalls Winnicott's description of the child 'lost in play'; that satisfactory human activity which, whether it is called work or play, aims, consciously or unconsciously, at the achievement of harmony between the individual and his environment (Winnicott, 1945).

'I didn't even realize I was making art when I started doing them. I had just come back from India and was impressed with how each scrap of paper, each bit of wire was used to its maximum, to the very end of its possible useful life. . . . One morning I'd eaten these two oranges, and I just didn't want to throw the peels away, so absentmindedly I sewed them back up' (Leonard cited in Temkin, 1998).

Temkin (1998) suggests that Leonard's claim that she didn't realize she was making art when she began stitching the fruit typifies the rhetoric of 20th-century art which has sought to erase boundaries between art and life. Eventually the work seemed to Leonard to be art, and she continued working on it in New York and, later, during two years, in a remote part of Alaska, where she mainly relied on fruit being mailed to her. The work was exhibited for the first time in 1995 in her apartment and later in 1997 at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Miami and at the Kunsthalle in Basel.

Of the activity of making the work Leonard has stated:

'This act of fixing something broken, repairing the skin of something after the fruit of it is gone, strikes me as both pathetic and beautiful. At any rate it is intensely human' (Leonard, 1998).

In 1998 the work was acquired by the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Leonard, who had previously rejected proposals to conserve the work, developed concerns about it having a specific space devoted to it; being shown continuously and showing it as it disintegrated. An agreement was eventually reached whereby the piece would be exhibited for limited periods of time which seemed in the spirit of the work's sense of marking time.

As Massey (1999) demonstrates, space, difference and interconnections between differences are necessary for time to exist. Time does not somehow 'bootstrap itself into existence' Massey (1999). The result is that there can never be separate spatial or temporal imaginaries; there can only be space-time imaginaries. The movements we make in space produce time (Pugh, 2007).

Strange Fruit began as a means of consolation for the artist after the death of a friend, but now presents a wide range of possible readings. As a meditation on loss and mortality, it elicits associations to the traditional Dutch still-life paintings known as 'Vanitas' which show objects that suggest the passing of time, such as a flickering candle or a wilting flower, and invite the viewer to contemplate the brevity of life and the vanity of worldly possessions. Unlike a painting, however, Leonard's Strange Fruit is itself intended to be transitory, and will deteriorate and eventually disappear over time. This process will be documented through photography, which as Barthes (1980) has explained creates an illusion of '*what is*', when '*what was*' or '*what has ceased to be*', would be a more accurate description.

What the photographer captures as she depresses the shutter is a moment already gone by the time she releases it. Instead of making reality solid, we are reminded that it is transient. The photograph is a witness, but a witness of something that is no more (Barthes, 1979). As such it is according to Sontag (1977) 'not only an image (as a painting is an image), an interpretation of the real; it is also a trace, something directly stencilled off the real, like a footprint or a death mask' (Sontag, 1977, p.154).

Early in the same year Barthes, in a radio interview, expressed a not dissimilar thought.

'In the final analysis, what I really find fascinating about photographs, and they do fascinate me, is something that probably has to do with death. Perhaps it's an interest that is tinged with necrophilia, to be honest, a fascination with what has died but is represented as wanting to be alive' (Barthes, 1977, in Calvert 1995, p.220).

But is there not also a trace in the photograph of the eye of the first beholder, the photographer, since what he does is dependent upon what he (the first beholder) perceives as he confronts what he does (Gombrich, 1977).

Memory and Forgetting

In thinking about memory and forgetting I begin with the memory of a photograph.

Nothing was posed and nothing was planned. It was taken twenty years ago by someone I loved, of someone I love and as such is a trace of a moment long past. The *Operator* (the photographer who perceived the optical image) is dead and the *Spectrum* (his target, the referent) is no longer a child. In the role of *Spectator* I (the viewer) occupy the *Operator's* position; he has framed my viewing space. My eye is pressed up against his lens and time is collapsed. Located where he once was, in relation to the referent, I cannot say that I am seeing what he saw... (if so much of what we see is determined by what we know) ... however much I want ...or try to.

A boy looks out from the photograph. He is squinting slightly in the sunlight. There are two small indentations on his brow. He is looking at the *Operator* who was there and is no longer there. (*What did they see in each other's eyes?*) It is ordinary, the sort of photograph we all have in our albums. Its appeal, therefore, can only be to someone personally involved with its subject, someone for whom it reveals the *'that-which has-been'* ('ce qui a ete'). Alternatively called the *noeme* or *eidos* this 'thing', which is for Barthes (1980) the essence of photography, is essentially what differentiates photographs from other images. The boy is the necessarily real thing *'that has-been'* placed before the lens, without which there would be no photograph.

Barthes reiterates this throughout *Camera Lucida*.

In photography I can never deny that the thing has been there'. And again, 'The photograph is literally an emanation of the referent'. In this sense, 'every photograph is a certificate of presence' (Barthes, 1981).

But 'presence,' in this instance, goes hand in hand with death. 'What the photograph reproduces to infinity has occurred only once: the photograph mechanically repeats what could never be repeated existentially' (Barthes, 1981, p.31). As soon as the click of the shutter has occurred, what is photographed no longer exists; the subject is transformed into object. When we look at a photograph of ourselves or of others, we are really looking at the return of the Dead (Perloff, 1997, p.32).

'All photographs are memento mori. To take a photograph is to participate in another person's (or thing's) mortality, vulnerability, mutability. Precisely by slicing out this moment and freezing it, all photographs testify to time's relentless melt' (Sontag, 1977, p.15.)

Barthes' mother had died in October 1977 and *Camera Lucida* is bound up with his grief over her death as is revealed by the recent publication of *Mourning Diary* (2009), (a series of 330 assembled notes, originally written on index card-sized slips of paper) begun the day after his mother's death.

In *Camera Lucida* he reflects on what has come to be known as the Winter Garden photograph.

'In front of the photograph of my mother as a child, I tell myself: she is going to die: I shudder, like Winnicott's psychotic patient, over a catastrophe which has already occurred. Whether or not the subject is already dead, every photograph is this catastrophe. This punctum, more or less blurred beneath the abundance and the disparity of contemporary photographs, is vividly legible in historical photographs: there is always a defeat of Time in them: that which is dead and that which is going to die' (Barthes, 1979.p.96).

What is this punctum that Barthes refers to?

In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes (1980) explains two sets of meaning in a photograph; the *studium* and the *punctum*. He describes his interest in the *studium*, whether received as political testimony or enjoyed as good historical

scenes, as matter of grasping the photographer's intention, of entering into harmony with him, of approving or disapproving of him but also to trying to understand him.

'The studium is that very wide field of unconcerned desire, of various interest, of inconsequential taste: I like / I don't like. The studium is of the order of liking, not of loving; it mobilizes a half desire, a demi-volition; it is the same sort of vague, slippery, irresponsible interest one takes in the people, the entertainments, the books, the clothes one finds 'all right.' To recognize the studium is inevitably to encounter the photographer's intentions, to enter into harmony with [them]' (Barthes, 1979, pp.26-7).

Thus the *studium* is a kind of *education* trying to bring forward the point of view, the idea and the context of the photograph(er); basically an intellectual discipline whose outcome springs from the capacity for understanding held by the spectator (Skjaerven, 2008).

This second element, the '*punctum*, breaks (or punctuates) the *studium*.

This time it is not I who seek it out (as I invest the field of the studium with my sovereign consciousness) It is this element (the punctum) which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me (Barthes, 1979, 24-26)

As Armatage (2003) notes Barthes wrote of the *punctum* as a point of identification (memory, nostalgia) in connection to a detail of the photograph that situates the emotional connection in relation to time and affect. His choice of terminology was metaphorical in relation to the photograph, for the moment he describes strikes to the heart or point of the recollection that the photograph insinuates (Armatage, 2003).

'A Latin word exists to designate this wound, this prick, this mark made by a pointed instrument: the word suits me all the better in that it also refers to the notion of punctuation, and because the photographs I am speaking of are in effect punctuated, sometimes even speckled with these sensitive points; precisely, these marks, these wounds are so many points. This second element which will disturb the studium I shall therefore call punctum; for punctum is also: sting, speck, cut, little hole - and also a cast of the dice. A

photograph's punctum is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)' (Barthes, 1979, pp.26-27).

In thinking about the punctum I return to the memory of the absent photograph of the frowning boy and to another earlier photograph of the same boy as a tiny new born baby; also frowning; neither of which are represented here.

What is here is the boy with a bicycle; older and not frowning (Figure: 2).



Figure 2: Boy and Bicycle

This later photograph refers to those earlier photographs but also (as my eye traces the line of the cheek) to a photograph which I once saw of a man who I never met, who died a long time ago in another country. From my intense looking a narrative emerges. Here, drawing on my own history with this photograph in particular, and with viewing in general, I, the viewer combine personal contemplation with themes that broadly encompass universal concerns amongst which is loss. Here, memory infuses the landscape of the photograph, intricately combining the personal and the universal (Housen, 2007).

The detail which points to the recollection that this photo insinuates is perhaps (I am not sure) the line of his tilted cheek. It refers to the photograph of the boy squinting slightly in the sunlight with the two small indentations on his brow and that in turn points to the earlier image of a frowning baby. Neither of these details are present here in this photograph.. Here the boy's eyes are averted and the light has smoothed his brow and here I am in error. If I follow Barthes phenomenological method I must stay with 'the thing in itself' ...**this** photograph... and bracket (*epoché*) all other references.¹ Looking again I find a grubby print on the window frame but it does not move me (I merely imagine it as related to fixing the bicycle). The *punctum* has to be there (a visible detail) and I am moved by '*what is not there*'; the presence of '*not thereness*'. I return to the text and the texts about the text to discover that the *punctum*, although originally introduced as a 'detail' is recast as 'time' in the second section of *Camera Lucida* (Furuhata, 2006). For me the *punctum* is the passing of time as represented by his smooth brow. For you (the viewer), according to Barthes, it can be only one of the thousand manifestations of the 'ordinary' (Barthes, 1981, p.73).

Punctuation and Parenthesis

The *punctum* also has an etymological link to punctuation which inevitably ties photography to language itself, to the domain of words and writing (Barthes, 1982, p.49). As Taminiaux (2009) notes punctuation implies the possibility of a break between sentences, of a pause that enables language to find its own rhythm. It suggests the integration of silence within the text, an end, conclusion or a suspension of the flow of words (Taminiaux, 2009, p. 110). However, unlike the *punctum* which is unintentional, punctuation is intentional; these commas, semi-colons and full stops did not creep into my text; I placed them there.

Nevertheless, although intentional it was perhaps not entirely conscious for as Tang (2008) points out, to recollect or to remember, is an act of punctuating experience in the past and it is the past with which much of this text is

¹ Barthes describes his approach to photography in *Camera Lucida* as "a vague, casual, even cynical phenomenology," (Barthes, R. 1980, p.20) In *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (1980), trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981)

concerned. Memory, she argues, can be seen as the recollection of punctuated experiences.

'To remember, or to recollect a certain instance of the past is to point to a certain moment, to emphasize, accentuate, to interrupt with time, and to put a "period" to a particular moment in the past' (Tang, 2008, p.13).

These thoughts lead me to consider Barthes' (1975) 'theory' of so-called '*fragmentality*', where he suggests that one can achieve *jouissance* (enjoyment) or play not directly by the content or the structure but only by the abrasions, fragments and gaps in the text. This corresponds to a distinction between *texte lisible* and *texte scriptible*, translated respectively as 'readerly' and 'writerly' texts. The *plaisir* (pleasure) of the text corresponds to the readerly text, which does not challenge the reader's position as a subject, that is, as a being that has subjective experiences, subjective consciousness or a relationship with another entity (or 'object'). The 'writerly' text however, provides *jouissance* (enjoyment); explodes literary codes and allows the reader to break out of his or her subject position.

The reader of a 'readerly' text is largely passive, but the person who engages with a 'writerly' text has to make an active effort. Hawkes (1977) sums this up as literature which may be divided into that which gives the reader a role, a function, a contribution to make, and that which renders the reader idle or redundant, 'left with no more than the poor freedom either to accept or reject the text' and which thereby reduces him to that apt but impotent symbol of the bourgeois world, an inert consumer to the author's role as producer (Hawkes, 1977, p.114). Whereas '*readerly texts*' can only be read in the sense of being 'submitted to', '*writerly texts*' invite us self-consciously to read, to 'join in' and be aware of the interrelationship of the writing and reading, which offers us the joys of co-operation and co-authorship.

It seems to me that the abrasions, fragments and gaps which invite *jouissance* (enjoyment) or play in a text are also there in the photograph. The interrelationship of '*writerly*' writing and the '*joining in*' of reading which Barthes (1975) describes may be helpful in thinking about the interrelationship of image and narrative. In proposing this I take Barthes (1977) proposition that the narratives of the world are without number and include the fixed or moving

image and Gadamer's (1975) assertion that interpretation is much more than the discovery of the artist's original intent; understanding is never exclusively concentrated on the artist, but rather concerns a 'fusion' of the artist's horizon of experience and that of the spectator (Barthes, 1977, p.79; Von Braebussche, 2006, p. 50).

In one sense the image (and most obviously the photograph) once completed has occurred in the past, albeit the immediate past, but it may also reveal 'many possible pasts' (Holland, 1991). On each and every occasion it is viewed, including its first viewing by its creator, the past itself will be reconstructed and thus there are many pasts contained within it as 'a consequence of the shifting position of the self' (Harrison, 2002).

For the viewer, 'new understandings can arise in the interrogation (not necessarily in an active way) of any image'; including those images the viewer has created (Harrison, 2002).

'As with memory, photographs, function to anchor ourselves with the past, but they are essentially, as Krauceur (1993) has described it, accumulations of 'scraps'. The photograph is a reference to past associations, and they go beyond what is in that representation. It is under or beyond the photograph that the person's story lies buried'. (Harrison, 2002, p. 104)

However, such 'scraps' or fragments allow for a construction or reconstruction of narratives; a piecing together or re-ordering of these 'momentary appearances' (Harrison, 2002). But the 'the very ambiguity and malleability of photographs, their resistance to definitive explanations, allows us to devise alternative narratives' for as Blaikie (2010) puts it, photography allows an image to be endlessly reproduced and distributed so that almost from the moment of its being taken a picture can be separated from its origin and reproduced in any number of contexts (Blaikie, 2010, p.191).

This isolation or 'lifting out of the photograph from social relations and local contexts of interaction and their recombination across indefinite and infinite tracts of time-space has been referred to as an example of the disembedding or dislocating processes of late modernity (Berger and Mohr (1982); Giddens (1990); Arvanitakis (2010). Berger (1992) argues that the photograph can be 'rescued' from this isolation by narrative, referring to 'a way of seeing which

requires a reassembling of the contexts of experience in which the photograph is embedded, the continuity from which it was taken'; (Berger and Mohr, 1982, p. 107). For Berger (1992) this context is constructed by narrative (together with other photographs) for as Harrison notes 'what is absent must be conjured up' (Harrison, 2002, p.104).

Looking at the Zoe Leonard's orange and the boy and wondering about their juxtaposition in this text I conjure up the absent; although it feels as if it has simply (and without effort) come to me.

The photographer of the remembered image of the boy squinting in the sunlight was a painter. He never saw the older boy with the bicycle as he was already absent by then. This same painter painted a woman planting a little orange tree. I saw the painting propped up against a wall on top of a piano. Then years, perhaps three years, after he died I visited his grave; there was (and still is) an orange tree there, sculpted in relief, on his headstone.

These memories lie under and beyond these photographs. They are my memories but I am not the photographer.

In conclusion, I return to Gadamer's assertion that interpretation is more than the discovery or reconstruction of the artist's original intent; understanding is never exclusively concentrated on the artist, but rather concerns a 'fusion' of the artist's horizon of experience and that of the spectator; the artist's original intuition or interpretation being only the beginning of a long chain (Gadamer, 1975, p.273). Not either/or but both/and; past and present, present and absent.

The cat subsiding down a basement

Leaves a catlessness behind it.

(Muriel Spark (1951) from the poem 'Elementary')

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