

16 Memories and Vision

CATHERINE BATES

For a sighted person, memory is strongly connected to vision and visual images. Even a memory triggered by a smell or sound tends to be a visual one. As a memory recedes over time, photographs can be used to refresh it, restructuring it in a particularly static, almost death-like way. A person who has died, for example, after time may be remembered more as their still visual image, captured in a photograph, than as the sum of their personality, actions, or essential human-ness. For people without vision, however, memory works in a different way. The transition from visual to non-visual memories can be traumatic, as shown in one recently-blind person's account of that change. The only way for a person without sight to refresh fading visual memories is by description, usually from a sighted person, and this re-structures their memories in a verbal rather than visual way, through community rather than in isolation. For born-blind people, or people who lost their sight very early in life, memory is entirely structured by the remaining four senses, and can offer an insight into a more embodied, more lifelike form of recollection than the paucity of the visual image constructed through photographs. This paper will argue that different forms of memory can deeply affect our experience as human beings, and that photographs are the least 'human' way of remembering people. Objects and dialogue remind us of people - ourselves and others - in a much more vital, life-like way. As there is surprisingly little in the literature on visual culture on how visual memories are formed, I will combine my personal observations on memories with those from my sources (which also eliminates the risk of misinterpreting how others might read images and objects).

Introduction

I have memories of myself and others. My memory of myself is fundamentally connected with my body, as my body (predominantly its external image) forms a large part of this memory, and memory is also located in the body. I can see all of the front of my body by looking at it, apart from my head from the neck up. "My body as given to me by sight is broken at the height of the shoulders and terminates in a tactile-muscular object. I am told that an object is visible for others in this lacuna in which my head is located" (Merleau-Ponty, 1963, p.213). To see what my head and back view looks like, and form my memory of myself, I rely on two sources: reflections (usually in mirrors) and photographs. This memory is updated and refreshed every time I see my image

reflected back to me. I also deny this image, however, and adapt it mentally to suit me better. As Rudofsky (1972) points out, we generally reject our appearance in mirrors and photographs, because it does not correspond to the image we have of ourselves (p.35).¹ Various reasons have been suggested for this discrepancy. Moss (Valle and King, 1978) suggests that photographs, which treat all parts of the body equally, differ from how we perceive our body internally with greater emphasis on hands, eyes and mouth, through which we relate to the world (pp.76-7). For Turner (Featherstone and Wernick, 1995) the young person we feel ourselves to be differs from the ageing person reflected back to us (p.250). In addition a flat visual image does not seem big enough to contain the sum of what we feel on the inside (physically and emotionally), how we behave and live, and the kind of person we believe we are.

My memories of others are similar to those of myself. They are also primarily visual, and revised and updated every time I see them. Old photographs of ourselves and others reveal how up-to-date these memories are. We have changed since, and our memories have been updated.² But in the same way as I reject reflections of myself as not 'like me', I reject visual images of others as not 'like them'. Proust (O'Donoghue, 1998) suggested that one of the measures of how well we know a person is how satisfied we are with our mental image of them, but in inverse proportion – the better we know them the more demands we make of the image we have of them. Their visual image alone can never capture the essence of a person as we know them, except in the case of celebrities, where the visual image is *all* we know of them.

Memories and Death

What happens when we can no longer refresh our memories of a person, for example after their death? My friend lost her sister suddenly just before Christmas. Shortly afterwards I noticed that she had placed a photograph of her sister on her mantelpiece, although she does not generally display photos. This photograph became a way of sustaining her memory of her sister in the absence of any other means (and of honouring that memory through its display). Elizabeth Edwards (Kwint et al., 1999) argues that photographs are a class of object formed specifically to remember. She writes that photographs infuse all levels of memory, and "their silences structure forgetting" (p.222). What is not in a photograph will not be remembered. Roland Barthes (1984) goes even further, arguing that photographs *block* memory - "Some friends were talking about their childhood memories; they had any number; but I, who had just been looking at my old photographs, had none left" (p.91).

My grandfather died fourteen years ago, and my visual memories of him are all memories of photographs, apart from two - one of his face bursting into laughter when we discovered him cheating at cards (this used to happen

regularly, which is why it is such a vivid memory), and another of his portrait which my mother painted for him before he died. This memory is tied in with my memory of my mother, and her painting too, which embeds it in a network of other memories. All my other visual memories of my grandfather are photographic - flat, static, and lifeless, lacking a real sense of his personality, actions, and relationships with me and others. Other memories are clearer - things he used to say, and particularly the objects in his house. I remember the red plastic tiles of his bathroom wall, and the toilet roll dispenser that was hinged so that the toilet paper always rested against the wall and became damp with condensation; the oven in which he hid his supply of chocolate bars, which we could see through the glass door; the necklace which he gave my grandmother before she died, which I now wear. My memories of these objects, of how they felt and smelled and even tasted, are far more evocative of my grandfather in life and in motion, of his affection for things and people, and of my interaction with him, than my fading memories of his visual appearance. In these memories I also find myself - my memories of him are also memories of me, more convincing than my visual memory of myself.

Objects as carriers of memory, particularly memories of relationships, have been the subject of a number of studies. Csikszentmihalyi's survey in Chicago in the 1970s asked what objects in their homes were special to people and why. By far the most common reason why people, particularly women, chose an object was because it conveyed memories, of either family members or friends. Furniture was the most popular category of object, for reasons such as "I just associate that chair with sitting in it with my babies", or "This chest was bought by my mother and father when they were married, about seventy years ago ... My mother painted it different colours, used it in the bedroom. When I got it my husband sanded it down to the natural wood ... I wouldn't part with it for anything. And I imagine the kids are going to want it, my daughter-in-law loves antiques" (Margolin and Buchanan, 1995, pp.120-1). Susan Pearce's similar study in Britain in the 1990s echoes Csikszentmihalyi's findings (Pearce, 1998). These people and the people they love have interacted with these objects, and with each other around or on these objects, so that the objects carry memories of lived, shared experiences.

Community and embodiedness are almost universal features of human existence. But memories constructed by photographs exclude both inter-subjectivity and the body. They represent the body, but it is frozen in time, what Bergson would describe as a spatial image rather than a temporal one (Game, 1991, p.93), cut off from the moments before and the moments after, from the rest of the distinctive gesture or action that recalls that person in their embodied existence. Inter-subjectivity is also excluded from visual memories, as we can call them to mind and contemplate them silently, cerebrally, alone. Objects are different - we reach out to touch them, often touching them in the same way and in the same place as the people they remind us of, a continuity

which we feel in our bodies. Objects (including photographs) also generate a desire for discussion, which creates a sense of community, unlike our private mental images. As Turner (Featherstone and Wernick, 1995) puts it, our memories depend not only on material evidence, such as objects, but “more importantly on recalling this past in present conversations” (p.253). Our memories of people, triggered by our bodily interaction with objects, are brought to life in conversation with others, reinforcing our corporeality and inter-subjectivity.

Memory and Blindness

People who are *not* in a position to generate a constant supply of visual memories, whether they have become blind or were blind from birth or early childhood, may be more aware of the richness of multi-sensory memory. John Hull’s autobiography, *Touching the Rock* (1991), is an account of his adaptation to blindness, and of his bridging the gap between visual and non-visual memories. For much of the book he mourns his gradual loss of his memory of himself, as he describes it, although it is only the loss of his *visual* memory that he is experiencing. But his “horror” of forgetting the visual image of his own face is linked with the feeling that he has lost his body, that it has become dematerialised, and that as a result he has lost his sense of self. He feels his face with his fingers to make sure it is still there (p.42). His memory of himself is so fundamentally visual that losing the visual part of it is equivalent to losing himself. As he starts to adjust to a new way of living and perceiving, however, this memory is restructured along less visual lines. “Instead of having an image of my body as being in what we call the ‘human’ form, I apprehend it now as these arrangements of sensitivities, a conscious space [becoming] one audio-tactile, 3-dimensional universe, within which and throughout the whole of which, lies my awareness” (p.100). This embodied memory of the self is far richer, I would argue, than my distanced, objectified, primarily visual one.

Hull’s memories of others undergo a similar transformation. Initially he wonders why it matters what people look like, especially now that he can no longer see them, but nevertheless asks for descriptions of any new acquaintance, especially female, from sighted friends, asking about the colour of her hair, whether she is pretty, and what she is wearing. “It makes a difference to the way I feel about a new female acquaintance if a colleague, having caught sight of her, remarks on her beauty or her plainness. There is a double irrationality in this. In the first place, my feelings should not be so dependent upon a woman’s appearance ... the second thing is that it is surely a deplorable lack of independence on my part to be so affected by a criterion which can be of no significance to me. What can it matter to me what sighted

men think of women, when I as a blind man must judge women by quite different means? Yet I do care what the sighted men think, and I do not seem able to throw off this prejudice” (p.17).

But he gradually moves into a different kind of memory. Instead of using faces as hooks to hang people’s identities on, he now uses names. And onto those hooks he hangs their voice, their handclasp, and most importantly, his shared experiences with them (p.73). The appearance of people becomes almost irrelevant, and he finds it disturbing to be given visual information unless he has asked for it (p.147). He and his wife have a child at this stage, and he remarks on the pleasure of holding him, the feel of his hand, foot, his hair growing, the movement of his head, the sound of his breathing changing when he goes to sleep, the feel of his whole body when he is propped up on his shoulder, and the clean smell of him (p.143). His memories of this child will be different from those of his previous children - less focused on the visual, and more rooted in bodily experience and interaction.

Towards the end of the book he ponders his new relationships with people and with objects. Having failed to recognise his wife in the street he feels despondently that people have become indistinguishable, like his record and book covers that he used to love so much. He feels that the status of a person or a loved object in his life has come unstuck. But he wonders “should I be taking more active steps to fill my life with objects that I can love, objects the loving of which lies in the feeling of them?” (p.152). This is a conclusion similar to that reached above in relation to sighted people, that objects are more potent vehicles for embodied, active memories of people than still visual images.

This also relates to the memories of born-blind, or very early-blind people, which are largely constructed with reference to objects rather than images, through tactile and kinaesthetic (or body movement) sensations, and by description. Sighted people, as has been shown, have difficulties in reconciling inner and outer images into a coherent memory of the self. The same is true for blind people, but for different reasons, one of which is the taboo on touching in society. Wimal Weerakkody (Hartley, 1986), who has no visual memory, explains the effects of prohibitions on touch: “the memory of the human body that I have and which I carry with me even now is not that of my own body. It is the body of my mother, on which I jumped and climbed and played havoc. I used to embrace it, and touch it and explore it - the one body I could explore at a certain age.” (p.16). This experience implies a memory of the self that is not only embodied, but also inter-subjective, relating to others. Other objects, such as sculptures, can also build up memories of bodies. I found in interviews with blind people in Museums that when handling a figurative work what they most often praised was the accuracy of details such as fingers, feet, and facial features (author’s interviews, 1997-9).

Description of one’s face also contributes to one’s memory of it, and is dependent on interaction. On a BBC radio programme called *The Face* (1998),

Peter White (blind) asked a policeman (sighted) to comment on the accuracy of his description of his own face:

It's a chubbyish face, I would say; small nose, almost a bit of a snub nose. Eyebrows - I've almost got to touch them to remember what they're like - but they don't meet; my mother was always telling me about the terrible things that you can deduce from people whose eyebrows meet in the middle - how am I doing?

How would you describe your eye shape?

I can do the colour more easily, funnily enough - I know they're quite blue - fairly protuberant ... they're not deep set, are they?

Well I would have said that they could be described as deep set; they're fairly small and tend to be narrow - on the sort of slittish side.

Oh! I've never been told that before!

Here White presents his memory of himself developed through interaction and discussion with other people (note the emphasis on eye colour). His account also emphasises the sympathy of that interaction - he hadn't been aware that his eyes were slitty, possibly because his friends did not want to hurt his feelings. His memory of himself also evokes the memory of his mother, who supplied some of the description.

The distinction already noted between the young person we feel ourselves to be and the older person in the mirror is also mentioned by White (1998) - although this discrepancy may be discovered more abruptly by blind people than those with sight, as they rely on occasional descriptions from others to update their self-image. Beatrice Reid and Joe Bollard, two people I interviewed, both had difficulty adjusting their self-image to include grey hair, which came as a particular shock to Joe: "My hair was sandy-brown - I assumed it was still sandy-brown. Someone said 'a grey-haired person like you', and I thought 'wait a minute!'" (author's interview, 1998). But as this discovery is made in interaction, the emotions felt at the time can also be shared, and resolved, unlike the sighted person who silently contemplates their image in the mirror.

Memories of others were similarly unaffected by age - Joe and John Hull (1991) both remarked that they had made no adjustment to their memories of their wives to allow for them getting older (p.14). In fact, Joe confessed to having no idea as to the colour of his wife's hair. He thought he might have asked her once but couldn't remember her answer. He didn't know the colour of her eyes either. These questions were of no interest to him - he felt that this was only the box, and inside the box was what mattered (author's interview, 1998). Which brings us back to the importance of objects as carriers of

memory, of ourselves and of others. These boxes or objects can take many forms, including those of bodies. These objects contain our memories of our embodied interaction with them, through physical contact, sounds, smells, tastes and sights, and the stories that grow up around them. We place our hands on them in the same way as the people they bring to mind did. And the people they recall are remembered by us for their actions, their personalities, their relationships with people and things. We remember them as alive and vital. The variety and richness of these memories make us, and the people we remember, far more human than those structured by the flatness, stillness, and deathliness of photographs and vision alone.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Joe Bollard, Christy McEvoy, Beatrice Reid and Audrey Tormey for their participation in a number of interviews during the course of my research.

Notes

1. We also reject our sound-image, most of us disliking the sound of our own voice on first hearing a recording of it. Are our internal smell-, taste-, and touch-impressions of ourselves equally different from how we are perceived externally?
2. Memories in different senses seem to be updated at different rates. I realised this when I cut my shoulder length hair quite short. It took me about three days to adjust my visual memory (I knew this had happened when I glanced in a mirror and didn't get a shock), about a week to get used to the feel of it - the lightness of my head, and running my fingers through much less hair. Three months later I changed shampoo, going back to one I had used for years, when my hair had been longer, and when I went to shampoo my hair, the shortness of it surprised me. Vivid tactile memories of long hair had been triggered by the memory of the smell of the shampoo.

References

- Barthes, Roland (1984) *Camera Lucida*, Trans. Richard Howard, London, Flamingo.
- Featherstone, M. and Wernick, A. (1995) *Images of Aging, Cultural Representations of Later Life*, London, Routledge.

- Game, Ann (1991) *Undoing the Social - Towards a Deconstructive Sociology*, Milton Keynes, Open University Press.
- Hartley, Eleanor (ed) (1986) *Art and Touch Education for Visually Handicapped People*, Leicester, University of Leicester Department of Adult Education.
- Hull, John M. (1991) *Touching the Rock - An Experience of Blindness*, London, Arrow.
- Kwint, Marius, Breward, Christopher and Aynsley, Jeremy (eds) (1999) *Material Memories*, Oxford, Berg.
- Margolin, Victor and Buchanan, Richard (1995) *The Idea of Design - a Design Issues Reader*, Cambridge, MIT Press.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (1963) *The Structure of Behavior*, Trans. A.L. Fisher, Boston, Beacon Press.
- O'Donoghue, Bernard (1998) Poetry reading, London, Victoria and Albert Museum, 18 April.
- Pearse, Susan (1998) Objects in the Contemporary Construction of Personal Culture: Perspectives Relating to Gender and Socio-Economic Class. *Museum Management and Curatorship*, 17 (3), 223-241.
- RNIB (1995) *Play it my Way - Learning Through Play with your Visually Impaired Child*, London.
- Rudofsky, Bernard (1972) *The Unfashionable Human Body*, London, Rupert Hart-Davis.
- Valle, Ronald S. and King, Mark (eds) (1978) *Existential-Phenomenological Alternatives for Psychology*, New York, Oxford University Press.
- White, Peter (1998) *The Face*. BBC Radio 4, 18 March.