

David Bate: **The memory of Photography**

by Bate, David(2010) The Memory of Photography, *Photographies*, 3: 2,243 - 257,

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17540763.2010.499609>

5 January 2015

In "The Memory of Photography" Bate defends photography from the prevalent negative image it had received by theoreticians with respect to human memory. Where others have deplored the fact that photographs distort memory in that "the image 'suppresses' human memory" (Bate, p. 250) by acting as a prosthetic memory, Bate finds a more positive role for the medium by linking it to the Freudian text on the 'Mystic Writing-Pad' (Freud, S. 1925) in which the distinction between "Natural Memory", as the normal human capacity of recollection and "Artificial Memory", the array of technical devices invented by humans to support their natural (mnemonic) ability to inscribe things in memory. (2)

Photography then becomes a device to help remembering, much as written notes are, or glasses are a device to see etc.

The real question remains, how the psychic apparatus is affected by the technical development like the invention of photography. Here again, Bate takes recourse to psychoanalytic theory, in this question by discussing J. Derrida's idea of the "archive" as the "prosthetics of the inside" (Bate, p. 245) and by showing that earlier thinkers, like philosophers Walter Benjamin and Siegfried Kracauer had already wondered about the influence of the medium of photography on the human mind and human memory.

Bate widens the outlook by opening up the question to liken photography to other "memory devices" like writing, images, objects, the theatre inscriptions etc. and showing that not only these, but institutions enabling "collective memory", as archives, libraries and museums have all influenced the human mind and intellectual make-up. Citing Jacques Le Goff's book *History and Memory* (a book I want to read shortly) Bate shows that cultural history is in fact a history of changes of the human mind - with its foremost example that the acquisition of reading skills changed a person's skill of memorizing. He shares Le Goff's view that photography revolutionised memory...

Having just read Barthes' *Camera Lucida* I found Bate's linking Proust's distinction between voluntary and involuntary to Barthes' *studium* and *punctum* an eye opener. The notion of involuntary reactions to a photograph is immediately comprehensible more so than I had gathered from the Barthes text. The fact that this immediate (involuntary) reaction can be analysed and lead to other, more hidden, often at first subconscious memories which, when unveiled, will deliver an explanation for the surprising reaction.

A key passage of the text is the conciliatory view Bate's formulates with regard to the relationship between memory and photograph:

"It can be said that photographic images do not destroy personal memories, but that they interact with them in very specific ways, which may not always be conscious. The binarism implied in the distinction between cultural memory and individual memory collapses as photography re-figures their relationship."

In summary we might say that the place of photography, in Bates' view, in relationship to memory, can be seen as a perceptual device evoking memories and/or emotional responses that act as mnemonic support or "screen memories", which can then be analysed to uncover the underlying memories.

I understand this paper in part to be a critique of Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida*, made explicit in the last sentence, in which he argues that "photographs demand analysis rather than hypnotic reverie".

The connection between the relationship memory and photography and Derrida's "Archive Fever" appear to lie in the question whether the human mind changes as technological development evolves.

Further answers to this question, especially concerning collective memory and photography may be gained by Jacques Le Goff's *History and Memory*, Bourdieu's *Photography, a Middle-brow Art* and Siegfried Kracauer's *History -*

(1) Freud, S. I Notiz über den 'Wunderblock', Internationale Zeitschrift für Psychoanalyse, Bd 10(1)1924, p. 1 - 4 / Gesammelte Werke Bd.13, p. 387 - 91

(2) Bate, D. 2010, p.244