2-1-2014

A psychoanalytic exploration into the memory and aesthetics of everyday life: Photographs, recollections, and encounters with loss

Dimitrios Mellos
Graduate Center, City University of New York

How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!
Follow this and additional works at: http://academicworks.cuny.edu/gc_etds

Part of the Clinical Psychology Commons, Esthetics Commons, and the Modern Literature Commons

Recommended Citation
http://academicworks.cuny.edu/gc_etds/73

This Dissertation is brought to you by CUNY Academic Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in All Dissertations, Theses, and Capstone Projects (2014-Present) by an authorized administrator of CUNY Academic Works. For more information, please contact AcademicWorks@gc.cuny.edu.
A psychoanalytic exploration into the memory and aesthetics of everyday life: Photographs, recollections, and encounters with loss

By

Dimitrios Mellos

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Psychology in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

2014
The manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Psychology in satisfaction of the Dissertation requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

__________________________________________  ________________________________________
Date  Jeffrey Rosen, Ph.D.
      Chair of Examining Committee

__________________________________________
Date  Maureen O’Connor, Ph.D.
      Executive Officer

Lissa Weinstein, Ph.D.
Diana Diamond, Ph.D.
Steve Tuber, Ph.D.
Evelyne Ender, Ph.D.

Supervisory Committee

THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK
ABSTRACT

A Psychoanalytic Exploration into the Memory and Aesthetics of Everyday Life:
Photographs, Recollections, and Encounters with Loss

By
Dimitrios Mellos

Advisor: Professor Jeffrey Rosen

The project at hand explores some of the psychological functions of photography as both an everyday and an artistic cultural practice from a psychoanalytic perspective. It is proposed that, contrary to commonsensical opinion, photographs are not accurate depositories of memory, but rather function as a functional equivalent of screen memories, thus channeling the subject's memory in ways that are objectively distorted and distorting, but psychologically meaningful and important; moreover, they are a special kind of screen memory in that they are often created pre-emptively and are physically instantiated.

Additionally, it is suggested that, by dint of their materiality, photographs achieve a degree of autonomy from the purposes of their creators and viewers, with the result that they can also trigger unwanted and potentially traumatic recollections, along the lines of the Freudian notion of ‘deferred action’. Specifically, different ways in which photographs can enter into the experiencing and processing of loss are explored. It is
proposed that photographs can either facilitate normal mourning or impede it. They can be used to either disavow loss, to repetitively fixate on it in a sadomasochistic manner, or to facilitate the transition to an acceptance of loss and moving on. Parallels are drawn between these various uses of photographs and three types of physical/emotionally charged objects: fetishes, transitional objects, and what I term ‘masochistic objects’.

The paradox of the accrual of aesthetic value on certain photographs and not others is explored next. The attainment of aesthetic value is separated from the conscious intentions of the photographer, and is instead linked to certain underlying psychological parameters, primarily, the acceptance of the depressive position and of the separateness of the libidinal object, as well as the capacity to achieve a controlled surrender to primary-process functioning. These conceptualizations are illustrated by reference to specific photographs (taken by the author, who is also a recognized photographer), as well as through an analysis of several poems of the Greek poet Kiki Dimoula, in whose oeuvre photography is a prominent and recurrent theme.
Acknowledgements

I would like to thank all five members of my dissertation committee for their extremely careful and thorough engagement with my work, their support and encouragement, and their insightful and stimulating input, which was instrumental not just in shaping the work to its current form, but in inspiring me to continue and broaden my research on this topic in the future.

I am grateful to Professor Steve Tuber for very generously agreeing to come on board at a fairly late stage of the project. Professor Diana Diamond was kind enough to devote her time to my project even while being on sabbatical leave. Professor Evelyne Ender’s remarkably detailed reading of my work belied the fact that she also joined the committee later than other members, and I am particularly grateful to her for her inimitable way of being relentlessly challenging in the gentlest possible manner. Most importantly, I am extremely grateful to Professor Lissa Weinstein and Professor Jeffrey Rosen for seeing the potential in this topic long before I did. Without them, this dissertation would never have seen the light of day. Not least, Jeff, thank you for your patience, good humor, and persistence in putting up with my severe procrastinating tendencies.

Finally, I owe a huge debt of gratitude to my parents for their unfailing support throughout my graduate studies.
If by eternity is understood not endless temporal duration but timelessness, then he lives eternally who lives in the present.

Wittgenstein, *Tractatus, 6.4311*

– after which our separating selves become museums
filled with skillfully stuffed memories

e.e. cummings, *it is so long*
since my heart has been with yours

Memory,
what can I make of it now
that might please you—
this life, already wasted
and still strewn with
miracles?

Mary Ruefle, *Voyager*
Contents

Introduction 1

Chapter 1: On photography and memory
   I. Memory: Some basics 11
   II. Screen memories 30
   III. Photographs and memory, photographs as screen memories 42

Chapter 2: On photography and loss
   I. What remains: Nachträglichkeit 62
   II. What is lost: Mourning 75
   III. Using photographs to mourn, using photographs to not mourn 82

Chapter 3: Artistic creativity, aesthetic value, and photography
   I. Freud’s aesthetics and its limitations and potentialities 98
   II. Kleinian and post-Kleinian psychoanalytic aesthetics 110
   III. Photography as an art 134

Chapter 4: Screen memories gone sour: Photography in the poetry of Kiki Dimoula 152

Bibliography 177
List of illustrations

Figure 1: Portrait of my grandmother, circa 1993  p. 143

Figure 2: Prince St, NYC, 2010.  p. 145

Figure 3: W 49th St, NYC, 2010.  p. 147

Figure 4: Governor’s Island, NYC, 2013.  p. 148

Figure 5: Lower Broadway, NYC, 2009.  p. 150

All illustrations are by the author. All rights reserved.
A few years ago I had a sudden recollection. I cannot remember what exactly triggered it, but there it was: a long-forgotten memory of myself, aged around ten, wandering around the house, and taking pictures of various objects with an old Kodak Instamatic camera. All of a sudden I was transposed: I could literally feel what it was like tiptoeing around the rooms, looking at the light, lifting the camera, pressing the button. I could again feel the excitement and the wonder. This recollected image led me to remember how fond I was of that camera, and how one day, when my father came home from work with some gifts for me and my brother and asked us who wanted what, I immediately and without any hesitation had asked for the Instamatic, even though I had had no exposure to photography prior to that. I also remembered taking more pictures with that camera, on other occasions, in different parts of the house or the garden. Yet, these were more ‘cognitive’ memories: their content was more like information; it lacked the quality of lived experience. The one instance of using the camera that I could really revisit, as if I were reliving it, was that quiet afternoon.

And then it struck me; not so much as something I had forgotten, but as something I had not paid much attention to, as if it were not particularly unusual or puzzling: there was no film in the camera that day when I had been wandering around and taking pictures. I could distinctly remember how, far from dampening my enthusiasm, that fact had on the contrary fuelled it, as I could just photograph away with abandon, with no worries that I would run out of film, no need to ration my pictures. This absence of film was not always the case when I was using that Instamatic: indeed, there
are still the old faded rectangular pictures in albums at my parents’ house to prove it. And yet, it was this instance that had stuck with the intensity and vibrance of lived experience in my memory. It then occurred to me that perhaps this was not accidental; that perhaps the fact that on that particular occasion the photographic process had been pared down to even less than the bare essentials, had indeed become pure process, without a product, might have been the reason that experience (or the memory of it) had attained such intensity for me, and might be able to reveal something about the motivations and psychological rewards that enter into the process of taking pictures. In other words, thinking about this vivid memory helped me realize that, even though the two are usually closely intertwined, there is an important distinction to be made between photography as process and as product, and that these two aspects of photography may be serving distinct psychic functions, addressing distinct psychological needs of those in one or another way invested in the appreciation and enjoyment of this cultural activity.

Even though, following this early obsession with my Instamatic, and perhaps in the absence of much encouragement or support of this activity on the part of my family, my interest in photography gradually fell by the wayside during my childhood, it re-emerged many years later, and has now become a dominant preoccupation and passion in my life. Given all this, it should be readily apparent why I would have a strong personal investment in exploring the uses of photography from a psychoanalytic perspective, thus integrating two disciplines that deeply fascinate me. Nevertheless, it seems to me that an interest in this topic transcends the personal and idiosyncratic. We as a species have come to occupy a world immersed in photographic images – this is not just the case in western, developed societies, but, at times counterintuitively, is also a dominant cultural feature of
most developing nations, even in places, and among groups of people, one would assume hostile to photographic representations. Especially nowadays, still-image-making devices seem to be proliferating at an unprecedented pace; it is telling that it would be next to impossible to purchase a cell phone without a built-in camera. It seems clear that these technological developments speak to a general intense demand for the ability to privately create and consume photographs, over and above the institutionalized privileging of photographic images in various domains of our culture (e.g. advertising, news media, etc.). What intrigues me, then, is not only, or primarily, the psychological investment in photography of people for whom photography is a main interest or professional activity, but rather the more diffuse investment in photography of our culture as a whole, the conscious and unconscious psychological uses photographic images are being put to by the average person, and the pleasures afforded to them by photography. In some respects, this distinction seems to me to correspond to the one alluded to earlier, between photography as process and as product. What I aim to do in this dissertation, then, is to explore the psychoanalytic dimensions of both of these aspects of photography, even though also recognizing that there may be significant overlap between these two ways of relating to photographs – namely, the creation of photographic images, and their subsequent revisiting and appreciation.

An additional and equally important impetus for my undertaking was provided by another personal experience. After a painful breakup, I found myself troubled by all the

---

1 Dworzak (2003) has edited a collection of photos he came across and acquired from village photographers in rural Afghanistan, whose studios Taliban fighters habitually visited in order to pose and have their portraits taken, notwithstanding the Taliban’s ban on representational imagery as un-Islamic – a notorious example of the enforcement of which was their destruction of the giant Buddha statues in Bamiyan.
photos of my ex girlfriend that I had in my possession. I had cherished those photos, many of which were not just pictures of her, but, often, double self-portraits of us side by side. The photographs emanated from my past, my history with that person. They were, as a rule, photographs that evoked happy memories, from happy times together, as such photographs tend to be. And yet, now that that person was no longer in my life (and in fact in the wake of an unpleasant and not particularly amicable breakup), these same photographs had become much more problematic for me. Looking at them triggered a whole spectrum of emotions often at odds with each other, from fleeting pleasure and nostalgia, to sadness and regret, to anger and intense pain. The photographs were still the same, and yet they had also become something else than before; they had added on layers of meaning, had reversed polarity in their psychological valence, or kept oscillating, confusingly and frustratingly, between a positive and a negative one. I also oscillated between a rather masochistic urge to look at these photographs, and an avoidant stance, a temptation to never look at them again, in the interest of my peace of mind. However, there was never the slightest question of actually getting rid of them – throwing away what prints I had, or deleting the files from my computer. This would have been inconceivable for me, even though I am aware that that is precisely the reaction of some people finding themselves in a similar situation. Regardless of the particulars of one’s handling of this conundrum, though, what my predicament helped me realize was the deep entanglement of photographs in processes of grief and mourning, as well as the complicated temporality and emotional multi-dimensionality characterizing them.

In this dissertation, then, I set out to explore in some depth the relations people enter into, both with photographs as such, as well as with the activity of taking
photographs, utilizing a broad psychoanalytic theoretical framework. It was with nothing short of astonishment that I discovered, during the initial stages of my research, the almost absolute dearth of articles – let alone books – on photography in the psychoanalytic literature. This lacuna is all the more striking given the vast amount of psychoanalytic writing on other arts. My suspicion is that this lack may have something to do with the dual aspect of photography, as both an artistic practice but also an extremely widespread everyday activity; in other words, the fact that it is so omnipresent may in a way have rendered photography invisible as a cultural practice, much in the same manner that, under normal circumstances, we are not aware of the oxygen we breathe. In some sense, its very ubiquitousness may have inclined psychoanalytic theoreticians to take photography for granted. Thus, a point of departure for thinking about photography critically would entail problematizing this activity, taking a second look at it, as if we were naïve outsiders to a strange foreign culture, instead of taking it for granted and assuming that it is self-evident why we take photographs.

In undertaking this dissertation, then, part of my agenda was to lay the groundwork for a more comprehensive and systematic psychoanalytic approach to photography than has hitherto been available; ultimately, apart from whatever intellectual value it might have as such, this kind of theoretical framework could also generate

---

2 This having been said, psychoanalytic ideas and concepts have clearly informed the thinking of scholars such as Roland Barthes (1980) and Susan Sontag (1977), whose writings on photography have attained iconic status. Nevertheless, it is still remarkable that psychoanalysts themselves, as well as critics and scholars working within a mainly psychoanalytic theoretical framework, seem to have all but ignored photography. The handful of articles in the literature (Mühl, 1927; Fox, 1957; Colson, 1979) mostly approach photography from a narrow viewpoint of instinctual conflict, compromise formation, and the need for mastery, even though Colson also links photography to mourning processes.
empirical research on some of the hypotheses that will be proffered here, but also inform clinical practice, to the extent that people’s engagement with photography, in one way or another, is almost universal. Thus, not only does it seem to be the case, on the basis of anecdotal evidence, that some patients spontaneously bring photographs into the therapy space, but, possibly, therapists could also assume a more active role in encouraging patients to engage with personal photographs in the context of therapy, if the facts of the case indicate that such an engagement might facilitate the progress of treatment and the patient’s production of material and processing and resolution of conflicts. A solid and nuanced conceptual framework would allow such a therapeutic engagement with photography to be more informed, fine-tuned, and sophisticated than what seems to currently be the case in the fledgling field of photo therapy.

As already implied in my previous comments, there are three main axes or pivots to this dissertation: a discussion of photography as it relates to memory, of photography in connection with loss, and of artistic creativity and aesthetic value in regard to photography.

Chapter 1 is devoted to the interface of photography and memory. I begin my discussion with an overview of the academic literature on memory, in order to set the stage for a novel conceptualization of photographs as memorial devices. I present the case for a constructivist understanding of memory, as a process of putting memories together at the time of recall, in contrast to the obsolete conception of recollection as analogous to the retrieval of discrete, immutable files from a mental archive. The respective roles of memory traces and cues in this constructivist process of recollection are explored, as well as the puzzling tenaciousness of the belief in the permanence and
accuracy of memory traces, despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary. I then move on to the psychoanalytic understanding of memory, and specifically to a detailed exposition of the concept of screen memories. I focus not just on an explication of this concept per se, but also on an unresolved dialectic discernible in Freud’s thinking on this topic, which can be read as indicative of his own very ambivalent stance toward the notion of memory as constructed vs. a notion of memory as more straightforwardly linear, accurate, and truthful; subsequently in the chapter, I suggest that this ambivalence and uncertainty in regard to the accuracy of memory is something that most of us are troubled by, and enters into the unconscious motivations and specific ways in which we use photographs defensively. In the third section of Chapter 1, I propose a novel conceptualization of photographs in connection with memory: I endorse the commonsensical conception of photographs as memorial devices, but turn it on its head, so to speak, claiming that photographs can be construed as reified screen memory analogues, serving a functionally equivalent purpose in our psychic economy. Essentially, my claim is that, far from being safe depositories of accurate and permanent memories, photographs in fact distort and channel our memories in the service of psychic defense. Moreover, unlike screen memories themselves, photographs are often preemptively created with just such a defensive purpose in mind. I present several hypotheses as to what photographs may be screening against, including the full range and complexity of emotional experience, the fallibility of our memory, and the awareness of the embeddedness of our existence in time. In the context of this discussion, I present a case for conceptualizing photographs as providing an attenuated form of hallucinatory wish-fulfillment.
In Chapter 2, I discuss the implication of photographs in the negotiating of loss, that is, in processes of grief and mourning. I begin with an analysis of the Freudian notion of Nachträglichkeit (also known as deferred action, or, preferably, afterwardness), and the temporal dynamics of trauma; specifically, the way in which some piece of knowledge acquired at a later point in time can retroactively affect and alter the meaning and psychological valence of an earlier experience, thus rendering it traumatic after the fact. I proceed to suggest that photographs, insofar as they are objects with some kind of physical instantiation, attain a degree of autonomy from the human agents creating them and their conscious or unconscious intentions; one corollary of this is that they lend themselves to subsequent revisions of their meaning and significance according to the mechanism of deferred action. Such subsequent accruals of meaning can take a traumatic form, instigating a trauma after the fact, but, alternatively, can also lead to a reappraisal and belated assimilation of a reality that had been ignored, misperceived or disavowed in the past but can be revisited and integrated through photographs. In the next section of this chapter I discuss mourning, distinguishing between normal and pathological forms of mourning; the former are characterized by an ability to gradually accept loss and move on, while the latter are associated with psychic stasis, taking the form of either manic denial or unresolved melancholic grief. I then proceed to suggest that photographs can be used to either facilitate or to evade mourning: in processes of melancholic fixation, they function as sadomasochistic objects; when utilized as props for manic denial or disavowal of loss, they function as analogs to fetishes; while, in more favorable outcomes, they can function as transitional objects, fostering the acceptance and overcoming of loss, and, under certain circumstances, even sublimating grief into creativity. Thus, it becomes
apparent as a corollary to this discussion that it is not some essential, inherent nature of an object that determines the psychological uses that the object is being put to in one’s psychic economy.

In the next chapter, I proceed to shift the relative emphasis on the process of photographic creation, rather than on the subsequent uses of its products. The main question I attempt to address is that of aesthetic value; insofar as photography is both an artistic but also a widespread everyday cultural practice, and, moreover, to the extent that the operation of the apparatus of photography does not necessitate a high level of technical expertise, I suggest that it is fruitful to explore the possibility that what differentiates a photograph with aesthetic value from one lacking in such value may be the presence of certain psychological parameters in the photographer or, indeed, in both photographer and subject. I begin with an overview of Freud’s aesthetic theories, and conclude that, ultimately, Freud failed to pursue his most pertinent and promising insights about aesthetics and creativity; thus, a classical Freudian framework is deemed inadequate to tackle the issue of aesthetic value. I then proceed with a broad overview of post-Freudian theories of psychoanalytic aesthetics, focusing on the British school, and primarily on the work of Melanie Klein, Hanna Segal, Marion Milner and Adrian Stokes. In the final section of this chapter, I attempt to apply the insights of those theoreticians specifically to photography, something that, to my knowledge, has not been done before. I draw a link between the attainment of aesthetic value and a true reparative urge in the Kleinian sense, that is, an eschewing of omnipotent manic control in conjunction with a non-defensive acceptance of loss and emotional ambivalence, both on the part of the photographer, and, in the case of posed portraits, also on the part of the photographed
subjects. Thus, the issue of aesthetic value in photography is, in fact, shown to be closely connected to the themes addressed in the previous chapters, namely, the defensive utilization of photographs as screen memories, as well as the use of photographs to facilitate or evade mourning. I conclude this chapter with a brief discussion of some of my own photographs, for purposes of illustrating these points, but with no presumption of being able to either prove these hypotheses conclusively, or, indeed, of being able to attain anything approaching complete lucidity when it comes to the analysis of my own work.

Finally, in chapter 4, which forms a sort of coda to this dissertation, I again attempt to ground the conceptual analysis presented hitherto and give it some more concrete content, by applying some of the ideas put forth to an analysis of the work of Kiki Dimoula, a very major figure in contemporary Greek poetry. Dimoula’s work is very pertinent to my purposes, insofar as time, memory, loss, and our relation to photographs are all preeminent themes throughout her oeuvre. For the purposes of this final chapter, I carried out a translation of all relevant poems from scratch, as, after careful examination, I couldn’t avoid the conclusion that existing English translations are, to a lesser or greater extent, unsatisfactory and often unsound. Again, such an analysis of Dimoula’s poetry as I could offer is not put forth as in any way exhaustive, definitive, or demonstrable; rather, a reading of the poems just helps to bring into relief and make less abstract some of the theoretical ideas advanced in this dissertation.
I. Memory: some basics

Even though the pivot of my investigation of the connections between photography and memory will be the psychoanalytic theory of screen memories, a brief foray into the concept of memory in general will provide an orienting framework for my subsequent conceptualizations. And while memory is a faculty apparently possessed by many diverse species, the following discussion specifically pertains to human memory.

‘Memory’ is an umbrella concept, encompassing a wide set of diverse cognitive abilities (Schacter, 1996; Sutton, 2012); their common denominator could be said to be the influence of the past on the present and future, via the mediation of the human brain. Memory is the capacity to assemble information from past experience (including information that the individual acquired intentionally as well as a vast amount acquired without specifically intending to do so) and to use that information for present purposes, or, more generally, be influenced or affected (either consciously or non-consciously) by it in the present. The past can manifest itself in the present (in terms of one’s behavior and mental life in general) in various ways. Thus, I can say that I remember the face of my dead grandmother; the vacation I took when I was 18; I remember how to drive a car or add a sum; I remember the name of the President or the sequence of the letters in the alphabet; I remember to water my plants every week, and I remember what I had for lunch earlier today. It can even be said that I remember how to button my shirt or identify danger, even though I may not remember having ever initially learned to do so. The
above mundane examples should make evident both the diversity and the similarities between the various mental acts and capacities that we categorize under the concept of memory.

Let’s make this typology a little more explicit. One fundamental distinction that psychologists draw is that between declarative and non-declarative memory (Squire, 1994; Schacter, 1996; Sutton, 2012). Declarative memories can be accessed and articulated verbally, whereas non-declarative memories are preverbal or non-verbal. Another way of putting this is that declarative memories have the potential for being consciously recalled, whereas non-declarative memories may affect current behavior without the necessity of conscious awareness; this will become clearer in what follows.

Non-declarative memory is usually taken to be coextensive with procedural memory, the ability to learn certain motor or cognitive skills, and, more generally, to “know how to do things” (Schacter, 1996, p. 135); it covers a spectrum “from simpler forms of associative learning through to kinesthetic, skill, and sequence memory” (Sutton, 2012). It has to do with remembering how; for instance, how to ski or to play the piano or how to read. Typically, the skills in which procedural memory is implicated automatically give rise to the performance of actions, without conscious awareness; moreover, these skills are not mediated verbally and are in fact often very difficult to put into words. Even though, as mentioned, most psychologists equate non-declarative memory with procedural memory, Mancia (2007) intriguingly suggests that another aspect of non-declarative memory is “emotional and affective memory, where the brain stores its recollections of emotions arousing from affective experiences of the child’s earliest relations with the environment” (p. 32); these recollections are “formed in the
earliest, preverbal and presymbolic stages of life” (2007, p. 48), and are therefore forever beyond the reach of conscious awareness. In terms of the links between affective and procedural memory, it can also be pointed out that ‘knowing how to’ do something is closely coupled with ‘knowing whether’ it is pertinent or advisable to do or not do it, so by association the former type of knowledge is linked to affective memory.

The category of declarative memory encompasses two major subcategories: semantic and episodic memory (Tulving, 1972; Schacter, 1996). Semantic memory comprises remembering facts and conceptual information about the world (in the present or the past). In other words, it has to do with remembering that such-and-such is the case, for instance that Obama is the current President, that there are 24 hours in the day, or that Bach was a great 18th century German composer. Episodic memory, on the other hand, has to do with information specifically pertaining to the rememberer; it is uniquely personal in that it refers to experienced events and episodes from the rememberer’s life. It is important to note that episodic memory is always contextualized, in the sense that episodic memories are always embedded into a particular context, a particular moment (in the extended sense) of the rememberer’s history, that is, a particular time and place, whereas semantic memory is largely de-contextualized. Episodic memories are memories of incidents that the rememberer has experienced from a first-person perspective. Thus, remembering the date of my birth is a semantic, not an episodic, memory, even though it refers to my personal history – it is a piece of factual information, and it is independent of a personal context. But remembering where I was and what I was doing when I heard that Obama was elected as President is an episodic memory, despite also referring to a factual piece of information about the world, because it essentially entails a reference to myself.
as a participant in the recollected scene. The “subjective experience” (Schacter, 1996, p. 17) of the rememberer is the hallmark of episodic memory; crucially, the conviction that I (the rememberer) directly experienced the occurrence of the remembered episode that forms the content of the memory. As Tulving writes,

The particular state of consciousness that characterizes the experience of remembering includes the rememberer’s belief that the memory is a more or less true replica of the original event, even if only a fragmented and hazy one, as well as the belief that the event is part of his own past. Remembering, for the rememberer, is mental time travel, a sort of reliving of something that happened in the past. (1983, p. 127)

Indeed, the way in which we seem to be invested in their accuracy is a very significant feature of our episodic memories; in both semantic and episodic memories “we seek to track the truth” (Sutton, 2012; see also Poole, 2008), but we tend to be particularly distraught when the veracity or accuracy of our episodic memories is challenged; this is especially true of such episodes as are fraught with autobiographical/identity-forming significance.

An important dimension of episodic memories, especially for purposes of my subsequent discussion, is the point of view or vantage point from which the rememberer experiences the recollected scene. Specifically, one can either ‘see’ the recollected scene through one’s imaginary eyes, so to speak – that is, as if one was re-experiencing the scene as a participant in it, from one’s own unique perceptual perspective; or, alternatively, one can visualize the recollected scene as a detached observer, incorporating one’s own person as a physical object in the scene, as if one had become
disembodied and was seeing oneself in the context of one’s surroundings (Nigro & Neisser, 1983; Schacter, 1996). These two different modes of remembering episodes from one’s life are designated as ‘field’ and ‘observer’ memories, respectively. Significantly, Freud (1899a) anticipated this discovery by many decades; but more of this later.

What is immediately apparent from the existence of these two distinct modes of episodic remembering in people’s phenomenological awareness is the fact that, even in the case of recollections that carry a strong conviction of directly stemming from lived experience, some significant mental processing and reorganization is taking place, as it is obviously absurd that a person could have experienced the original episode giving rise to the memory from a disembodied perspective. It is thus clearly not the case that a memory is an exact replica of the original experience that it ostensibly points to.

Even more intriguingly, however, there are additional dimensions to the ‘field’ and ‘observer’ distinction. Thus, Nigro and Neisser (1983) found a correlation between the two types of episodic memory and the time distance separating the recollection from the original event; people tended to assume an observer perspective in memories referring to more distant past events, while they were more likely to assume the field perspective when the recollected events were more recent. Additionally, when research subjects were instructed to focus more on the feelings associated with each past episode, they were more likely to experience field memories; while when they were asked to focus on the objective circumstances of the past episode, they tended to produce observer memories. However, situations that objectively entailed a high degree of emotionality were “most likely to be recalled with an observer perspective” (Nigro & Neisser, 1983, p. 467);
presumably, as if *too much* emotion is hard to bear, and gives rise to a more detached mode of recollection. Another important point to note from this research is that many subjects claimed they could switch perspectives at will. In a related, more recent study, Robinson and Swanson (1993) set out to test whether the affective experience associated with episodic memories was impacted by such a switch in perspectives. They found that the affect reportedly experienced by rememberers decreased when there was a shift from a field to an observer perspective, but, interestingly, not vice-versa. Importantly, the decrease in affective experience reported following a shift from the field to the observer perspective did not just involve the affect rememberers experienced in the present, at the time of recollection, but also had to do with the intensity of affect they attributed to the original experience. In sum, these findings suggest that “a qualitative characteristic of personal memories – the perspective from which they are experienced – is apparently related to characteristics of the original event, to the individual's purpose in recalling that event, and to the reported recall interval” (Nigro & Neisser, 1983, p. 467). In other words, “The way you remember and event depends on your purposes and goals at the time that you attempt to recall it … the emotions that you attribute to the past may sometimes arise from the way in which you set out to retrieve a memory in the present” (Schacter, 1996, p. 22). The importance of this finding for my subsequent discussion will eventually become apparent; even though it has to be noted that the way Schacter expresses this point tends to imply an overvaluation of conscious intention, which, in my opinion, can be misleading.

Two other important distinctions are drawn in the memory literature: between implicit and explicit memory, and between ‘remembering’ and ‘knowing’ (Schacter,
Often the contrast between explicit and implicit memory is taken to be synonymous to that between declarative and non-declarative memory; however, it is more cogent to conceptualize certain (although not all) implicit memories as potentially accessible to conscious awareness and verbalization. Implicit memory designates situations where “people are influenced by a past experience without any awareness that they are remembering” (Schacter, 1996, p. 161). Clearly, procedural memory falls under this rubric, as well as Mancia’s (2007) conception of the non-repressed unconscious and emotional memory, not to mention episodic memories that may be repressed (and thus recoverable in principle, i.e. able to become explicit). Moreover, Schacter and his colleagues (McAndrews, Glisky, & Schacter, 1987; Schacter, 1996) demonstrated that semantic, conceptual knowledge can also be implicitly operative.

The contrast between ‘knowing’ and ‘remembering’ has to do with a qualitative difference in the conscious, subjective phenomenological experience of the rememberer (Tulving, 1985; Schacter, 1996). Thus, sometimes we have a clear and unequivocal sense of remembering something, an inner conviction that we are recalling something from our past; at other times, we experience a vague sense of familiarity regarding someone or something, without quite being able to put our finger on the past event(s) from which this sense of familiarity ostensibly stems. To take an example that probably everyone has experienced at some point, sometimes we see someone on the street or at some social gathering and we ‘know’ that we have met this person before, but cannot recall either who they are or the circumstances of our prior meeting. Very importantly, Schacter (1996), summarizing the relevant research, suggests that the “recall of visual information
about the physical setting or context of an event is crucial to having a ‘remember’ experience” (p. 23).

Let us now turn from these typological considerations to an examination of the actual process of memory. Schematically, we can describe three main components or stages comprising the overall cognitive process that we call memory: these are the encoding, storage, and retrieval of past experiences and information. Even though for purposes of exposition I will now attempt to briefly discuss each of these separately, their interconnections will also become apparent; indeed, the functioning of memory turns on the fluid articulation of all these sub-processes.

An important preliminary consideration is to note that, for memories to be genuine recollections of past events, it logically and conceptually follows that there must be a causal thread running from encoding to storage to retrieval (Martin & Deutscher, 1966); that is, the recollected memories causally depend on, and derive from, the remembered experiences. This, in turn, implies that there must be some kind of residue of the original experience that is left and stored in the rememberer’s brain, which provides the causal intermediary that bridges the temporal gap between the recollected experience and its recollection in the present. This is the idea of a memory trace: “Once we accept the causal model for memory we must also accept the existence of some sort of trace, or structural analogue of what was experienced” (Martin & Deutscher, 1966, p. 189).

This much seems straightforward. However, the question then becomes what exactly is the nature of these memory traces. The naïve, commonsensical conception that most people seem to endorse is that memory traces are “passive or literal recordings of reality” (Schacter, 1996, p. 5), that is, exact replicas of the original experiences that are
somehow stored in the brain intact, only to be pulled out one by one as needed. As the
great pioneer of memory studies Frederic Bartlett wrote (only to immediately afterwards
proceed to undermine and qualify this commonsensical conception),

From a general point of view it looks as if the simplest explanation available is to
suppose that when any specific event occurs some trace, or some group of traces,
is made and stored up in the organism or in the mind. Later, an immediate
stimulus re-excites the trace, or group of traces, and, provided a further
assumption is made to the effect that the trace somehow carries with it a temporal
sign, the re-excitement appears to be equivalent to recall. There is, of course, no
direct evidence for such traces, but the assumption at first sight seems to be a very
simple one, and so it has commonly been made. (1932, Chapter X, §1)

This conception has adopted different guises throughout history, in reference to the
technologies prevalent at each time. Thus, in the *Theatetus*, Plato (1997) suggests that
memory is like a wax tablet, onto which our perceptions and thoughts stamp impressions
of themselves, to remain there forever after. More recently, the mind has been commonly
compared to a warehouse or archive, where again memories are filed or stored away,
object-like. Computers have furnished yet another reiteration of this metaphor, with the
brain seen as analogous to a hard disc or some similar data-recording device. Last but
certainly not least, another intuitive, commonsensical conception sees memory as
analogous to a sound or video recording, storing away mental films and snapshots of the
rememberer’s experiences. Note that there are two important dimensions to all of these
conceptions: the idea that memory traces are accurate, exact replicas of experience, and
in a relationship of one-to-one correspondence to the experiences they derive from, as
well as the idea that memory traces, once imprinted on the mind, are permanent and unalterable, even if not always readily accessible at will.

Intuitively appealing and widespread as such a conception of memory traces may be, more recent advances in memory research indicate that it is flatly inaccurate. Psychologists, cognitive scientists, and researchers in other related disciplines have been converging toward a constructivist theory of memory, the idea that our memory stores our knowledge and experiences not wholesale but in bits and pieces, which are then recombined and altered in the course of recollection (Neisser, 1967; Tulving, 1983; Damasio, 1994; Schacter, 1996). That is, memory traces are now recognized to be much more dynamic and fluid entities than previously thought. Yet, false as the commonsensical conception of memory as a literal, accurate recording of reality stored in the brain may be, it is clear that some kind of change or transformation occurs in the brain when memory ensues from perception and experience. Memory traces, also known as engrams, are “the transient or enduring changes in our brains that result from encoding an experience” (Schacter 1996, p. 58); they are the neurological vehicle “that conserves the effects of experience across time” (Schacter, 1996, p. 57).

Before going into some of the neuroscience of memory, let’s see how findings from the psychological investigation of the processes of encoding and recall both point, from opposite directions, toward the dynamic and fluid character of engrams and a constructivist conception of memory.

By ‘encoding’ we designate “a procedure for transforming something a person sees, hears, thinks, or feels into a memory” (Schacter, 1996, p. 42), ‘memory’ here referring to the memory trace or traces stored in the brain, not a subsequently recollected
memory. Research has shown that not all encoding processes are created equal – it is not enough for something to just be perceived in order to be encoded in memory in the shape of a permanent engram. Note the word “transforming” in the above quotation: the way in which events are attended to and processed cognitively influences the way they are encoded and stored. Thus, when incoming information is attended to in a way that endows it with meaningful semantic associations, it tends to be recalled more accurately and for longer than if it was only attended to in a superficial and semantically shallow way (Craik & Lockhart, 1972; Lockhart & Craik, 1990); this effect is known as ‘depth of processing’. Another term for deep encoding is ‘elaborative encoding’: the gist of this concept is that by cognitively elaborating on incoming information by drawing semantic connections between it and other information that one already knows and remembers, the likelihood that the new information will also be consolidated in memory increases (Craik & Tulving, 1975; Schacter 1996). It is also interesting to note that the level of conscious, intentional effort one makes in storing something in memory does not by itself necessarily have any effect on the success of the encoding task, unless the intention to remember gives rise to elaborative encoding strategies (Hyde & Jenkins, 1973). Inversely, most memorable experiences that seem to be indelibly imprinted in memory and are effortlessly recalled were not initially attended to “with any particular intention to remember them” (Schacter, 1996, p. 45). Schacter suggests that “a kind of natural selection drives us. What we already know shapes what we select and encode; things that are meaningful to us spontaneously elicit the kind of elaborations that promote later recall” (1996, p. 45-6). And again: “We remember only what we have encoded, and what we encode depends on who we are – our past experiences, knowledge, and needs all have
a powerful influence on what we retain. This is one reason why two different people can sometimes have radically divergent recollections of the same event” (Schacter, 1996, p. 52).

At the other end of the memory process, what is it that enables encoded memory traces to be reactivated and re-emerge so as to give rise to experiences of recollection? After all, it would seem that at any given time there are innumerable memory traces lying dormant in our brains, which, under the right circumstances, are somehow retrieved and causally give rise to explicit memories; conversely, at any given moment we are consciously aware of just a small subset of the plethora of information and episodes that are presumably stored in our memory. Dormant memory traces are reawakened in response to some cue or other. Such retrieval cues can take many forms, but they are in one way or another associatively related to the original experience that is to be recalled. A cue can be part of the external world, part of one’s own mind, or even one’s overall current state of mind in general (more of this later). For instance, finding myself again in a city or house I had not visited in years may bring forth a host of memories about my last visit there, memories that I may even never have recalled before in all the intervening time. Or if, browsing through my books, I happen to come across a book that was given to me as a gift years ago, such an encounter might ensue in various memories about the person who gave me the book all that time ago, and even a vivid recollection of the circumstances and the exact moment when this gift was presented to me. The most famous example of all, of course, is the episode where, after a chance event when he tastes a madeleine dipped in tea, a torrent of memories of his childhood is released upon Proust’s narrator (Proust, 1913/2003). Alternatively, a cue can be provided by the
operations of one’s own mind. For instance, if, for whatever reason (this is irrelevant for purposes of exposition) I happen to think of the name of one of my classmates from elementary school, that single name can serve as a cue for me to recall the names of several others from my old class. And even one’s general state of mind can affect recall: for instance, if one was intoxicated during the encoding of an event, they may later on have trouble remembering what they encoded, but, counterintuitively, their recollection improves if they become inebriated again so as to approximate the state under which the original experience occurred – this is the concept of state-dependent retrieval (Eich, 1989; Eich, 1995; Schacter, 1996).

Thus, a subtle and complicated interplay takes place between the conditions of encoding and the conditions of recall, which may ensue in either successful recollection or a failure of explicit recall, depending on the presence of a good fit between memory traces and cues. In other words, even if an event was deeply, elaboratively encoded, it may still fail to rise to conscious recollection in the absence of the right cue(s); additionally, even if there is no shortage of cues connected to that event, accurate recollection may again fail if those cues are not closely related to the rememberer’s initial encoding. This is known as the encoding specificity principle: “Specific encoding operations performed on what is perceived determine what is stored, and what is stored determines what retrieval cues are effective in providing access to what is stored” (Tulving & Thomson, 1973, p. 369). This implies, as Schacter observes, that “superficially encoded events can be remembered more accurately than deeply encoded events when people are given retrieval cues that match exactly a shallow encoding”
(1996, p. 62). The importance of this point for my specific conceptualization of photographs as mnemonic devices will become apparent in the course of the discussion.

Yet retrieval cues are not mere triggers whose function is exhausted in simply reactivating a memory trace that was until that time lying dormant in the brain. The reactivated memory, the subjective phenomenological experience of recollection, is not identical to whatever engram(s) relating to a past event are stored in memory (Schacter, 1996). On the contrary, research findings indicate that what everyday language calls a memory is a composite product, “like a giant jigsaw puzzle” (Schacter, 1996, p. 87), put together out of memory traces, the properties of retrieval cues themselves, as well as other factors such as the rememberer’s current attitude, emotions, and goals (Loftus & Palmer, 1974; Schacter, 1996; Bartlett, 1932; Tulving, 1983). As Schacter writes, “the cue combines with the engram to yield a new, emergent entity – the recollective experience of the rememberer – that differs from either of its constituents” (1996, p. 70).

In other words, memory is an essentially constructive and combinatorial process. How is this process implemented in the neural machinery of the brain? Without getting into any detail, the basic mechanism postulated is that “memory involves biochemical-molecular and structural events at the junctions where neurons meet” (Mancia, 2007, p. 36), that is, a strengthening of the synaptic connections between neurons or even the creation of new synapses and thus new neural circuits in the brain (Kandel, Schwartz, & Jessell, 1994; Kandel 1999; Kandel 2001). However, any single event, especially when we’re talking about episodic memories, is comprised of myriad perceptual elements, across all the various sensory modalities (not to mention all the other mental elements present at the time of the initial experience, such as one’s emotions and thoughts). Thus,
there is no one engram corresponding to the encoding of a memory, but rather multiple bits and pieces of information stored around innumerable neural circuits in the brain (Schacter, 1996). How are these myriad scattered memory traces recombined at the time of recall, to reconstitute the remembered experience in the mind’s eye? Damasio (1989, 1994) has proposed that there are certain ‘convergence zones’ in the brain, which function as control centers for other neural circuits. These convergence zones contain what he calls ‘dispositional representations’: these are neural patterns that literally dispose other neural networks to be activated in such a way as to approximately reconstitute an encoded experience by recombining its constituent elements. Many researchers believe that the medial temporal region of the brain is the primary, most critical convergence zone, containing a kind of index pointing to the locations of memory traces across different cortical regions (Damasio, 1989, 1994; Schacter, 1996; Squire, 1987, 1992). Damasio writes: “What dispositional representations hold in store in their little commune of synapses is not a picture per se, but a means to reconstitute ‘a picture’” (1994, p. 102). Note the quotation marks around the word “picture” in this quote; Damasio explains that “[t]he brain does not file Polaroid pictures of people, objects, landscapes … these mental images are momentary constructions, attempts at replication of patterns that were once experienced, in which the probability of exact replication is low but the probability of substantial replication can be higher or lower, depending on the circumstances in which the images were learned and are being recalled” (1994, p. 100-1).

What do these findings on the neurobiological underpinnings of memory imply regarding the permanence of memory traces in the brain? Does the fact that the encoding of experience literally alters the physical structure of the brain’s neural circuits prove that
memories remain forever imprinted somewhere in that neural architecture? Undoubtedly, phenomenological experience as well as experimental data indicate that the ability to recall events as a rule decreases as a function of the passage of time (Loftus & Loftus, 1980; Schacter, 1996). However, that fact by itself does not necessarily prove that the engrams fade away or even dissipate altogether with time. It may be the case that engrams become harder and harder to retrieve as time passes because of interference with later events, a kind of cluttering of subsequently encoded engrams, so to speak; for example, it may be easy to remember what I had for lunch today, but it will be much harder to remember what I had for lunch a month ago, simply because so many other lunches have taken place in the meantime. Alternatively, proponents of the permanence of engrams also suggest that the increasing difficulty of retrieval as time passes may be simply due to a lack of appropriate retrieval cues, the operation of which is often serendipitous and subject to chance. After all, we saw earlier how the right, even if unlikely, cue, can often trigger vivid, detailed memories of events that seemed, up to that point, completely forgotten (recall the incident with Proust’s narrator and the madeleine dipped in tea). Such experiences, known to all of us, would indeed seem to suggest that our memories always remain stored in there somewhere, intact, even if not just the memories themselves, but the memory of these memories is outside our conscious awareness (by the term ‘memory of these memories’ I mean the sense that something ought to be remembered, even if currently it is not: for instance, if I try to recall who attended my birthday party last year, I have a sense that this is a piece of information that I did possess at some time – I have a memory of having had this memory in the past. It’s a different thing to, all of a sudden, remember an event from my distant past whose very
existence I had forgotten: for instance, to become aware of scenes from a birthday party when I was 10, the very occurrence of which I had forgotten during the intervening decades).

On the other hand, neurobiological research (Bailey & Chen, 1989; Kandel, 2006) with simple invertebrate organisms has demonstrated that the changes in neurons and synaptic connections that underlie simple forms of memory may in fact be reversible, and may become weakened or even “literally fade away over time” (Schacter, 1996, p. 78). Although it is not clear how these findings would translate to mammals, let alone humans, they do suggest the possibility that our memory traces, too, may fade away to the point of nonexistence with the passage of time. Schacter (1996) reasonably proposes a more nuanced, dialectical approach to this debate: it does not have to be either one or the other explanation, either that engrams disappear or that they always remain “fully intact” (1996, p. 78) albeit, for whatever reason, inaccessible. Rather, “we need to refine our ideas about why forgetting occurs. It seems likely that as time passes, interference from new experiences makes it progressively more difficult to find a retrieval cue that elicits an increasingly blurred engram” (1996, p. 79).

What is most interesting about this debate for my present purposes, however, is how skewed the distribution of opinions regarding the permanence of memory traces is, despite the fact that the available data are, at the present state of our knowledge, open to both of the possibilities described above, let alone to a more moderate, middle-ground position, like the one proposed by Schacter. Thus, Loftus and Loftus (1980) surveyed both psychologists and non-psychologists as to which of two theories of forgetting they espoused: whether, that is, they believed that every experience is permanently stored in
the mind and is potentially recoverable, or whether they thought that some of the contents of our memory may fade away and be eventually permanently lost. A stunning 84% of the respondents who had graduate training in psychology espoused the first hypothesis; 14% chose the second position, and only 2% gave some other answer. Out of the non-psychologists, a slightly smaller percentage (69%) chose the first option, 23% chose the other position, and 8% indicated some other choice (Loftus & Loftus, 1980, p. 410).

Given the fact that this hypothesis is in no way corroborated by the available neurobiological evidence, although “it can never be disproved on purely psychological grounds” (Schacter, 1996, p. 78), I would like to claim that this overwhelming preference for the idea that memories are forever preserved in the brain intact would seem to suggest that emotional factors are at work here, in other words, wishful thinking. There seems to be something comforting to the idea that our memories are forever stored safely in our brains, and this idea seems to be comforting even despite the demonstrable fact that, all too often, recollection fails. The belief in this hypothesized indestructibility and permanence of memory is reminiscent of a belief in an invincible deity, a permanent albeit invisible and intangible presence; a permanent presence, moreover, from whose vantage point our own lives are minutely and wholly visible. I will return to the implications of this point later.

Going back to the more measured idea that there is an interaction of variables, namely, that with the passage of time, not only may engrams fade and become “blurred” (Schacter, 1996, p. 79), but interference from accumulated new experience may simultaneously make it progressively harder to come up with the right retrieval cues, another important implication of such a state of affairs arises. As we saw earlier, a
recollected memory is in any case a composite construction, like a “giant jigsaw puzzle” put together from multiple elements; memory traces and cues play a prominent role among these elements. However, the relative contribution of the traces and the cues toward the end product varies. In fact, they would seem to vary in inverse ratio: the greater the contribution of the engrams, the smaller that of the cues, and vice-versa. This is similar to the Freudian concept of a ‘complemental series’ (Freud, 1916-17), which refers to an aetiological/causal continuum; any point along such a continuum corresponds to a particular mixture of contributing factors, and any such combination of causal factors can bring about a similar outcome. As far as memories are concerned, the inverse ratio between the relative contribution of engrams and cues toward an experience of recollection appears to be, among other things, a function of time (Schacter, 1996). Specifically, other things being equal, “when memory is probed soon after an event, the engram is a rich source of information and may even be the dominant contributor to recollective experience. Relatively little retrieval information is needed to elicit the appropriate engram, and the retrieval cue will play a more or less minor role in shaping the subjective experience of remembering” (Schacter, 1996, p. 79). On the other hand, other things being equal, this situation is gradually reversed as the event to be remembered becomes more and more distant in time. As the engram gradually becomes less salient, readily available, or accurately preserved, the properties of the retrieval cue(s) come to play a greater role in channeling the recollective experience and in the formation of the ‘memory’ that presents itself to conscious phenomenological awareness. “Because the engram is so impoverished, recollective experience may be determined
more heavily by salient properties of the cue, which itself has stored associations and meanings in memory” (Schacter, 1996, p. 80).

Keeping in mind these findings and concepts derived from psychological and neurobiological research on memory, it is now time to move on to the more specifically psychoanalytic theorizing about memory. The concept of screen memories will provide the cornerstone of the psychoanalytically-informed hypothesis that I propose in this chapter regarding the interface between photography and memory and the use of photographs as memorial devices.

II. Screen memories

It could cogently be claimed that the concept of memory is in many ways the central thread running through psychoanalytic theory as a whole, from the Studies on Hysteria and the famous dictum that “hysterics suffer mainly from reminiscences” (Freud & Breuer, 1895, p. 58) onwards; arguably, the operation and vicissitudes of memory is the common denominator not only across a spectrum of clinical as well as more everyday psychological phenomena, but also between Freud’s most abstract theoretical conceptualizations and such concrete phenomena. However, for my present purposes, I will focus specifically on the more narrow Freudian concept of screen memories. It will be seen that, in his development of this concept, Freud (1899a) presciently anticipated many of the findings and conceptualizations presented in the previous section. Despite its brevity, this seminal paper is manifestly dense and complicated; more than that, however, a close reading of this paper reveals a latent text, so to speak, over and above the ideas
explicitly put forth. This latent content of the paper, which can be reconstructed by a careful parsing of its rhetorical structure, is not only crucial to a fuller understanding of Freud’s ideas on memory, but will be seen to be particularly pertinent to a hypothesis I will present later regarding one of the functions of photographs as they relate to memory; it will be worth our while, therefore, to now engage in a detailed rather than a cursory reading of this one work.

Freud (1899a) begins his investigation of this concept by noting the apparent paradoxical discrepancy between the psychological importance of early childhood events and their long-term determining influence over a person’s life, character, and psychopathology (a thesis derived from his clinical work with neurotic patients), and, on the other hand, the well-known fact, familiar to anyone from personal experience, of the great paucity of consciously recalled memories dating from childhood. Not only are there very few, if any, accessible memories from the early years of one’s life, but they very often tend to be memories of apparently insignificant or trivial events. This, claims Freud, is counterintuitive, because later on in life, there tends to be “a direct relation between the psychic significance of an experience and its retention in the memory” (1899a, p. 303). There are two sides to this: not only do important events usually make a deep impression on us and are unlikely to be forgotten, but, conversely, insignificant events are, as a rule, forgotten very quickly. Current research indeed corroborates this idea, and in fact views this as an adaptive feature of our memory, in terms of the allocation of limited cognitive resources (Anderson & Schooler, 1991).

There is an additional paradox: not only are childhood memories usually concerned with apparently insignificant and trivial scenes and events, but, moreover,
these scattered islands of recollection in the ocean of childhood amnesia that have
remained accessible to conscious recall tend to be characterized by extreme precision,
clarity, detail and vividness; they are remembered “too clearly, one is inclined to say”
(Freud, 1899a, p. 305; Freud’s italics). Especially given the fact that even the memories
of significant events usually tend to become blurrier and less accurate with time, as we
saw in the previous section, their unusual phenomenological qualities make these
childhood memories all the more puzzling. Freud’s ingenious solution to this puzzle is to
hypothesize that the paradox is only apparent. He suggests that what may be happening is
that, despite its deceptive clarity and ostensible wholeness, such a memory is in fact
incomplete; moreover, it is precisely the parts of the scene that are consciously forgotten
that account for the remembered event’s emotional significance. In fact, in this
conception it is inaccurate to speak of the ‘forgotten’ parts of the memory scene; Freud
says that the elements of the experience that fall outside conscious recollection are
“omitted rather than forgotten” (1899a, p. 306; italics in the original). This is not a matter
of linguistic nitpicking, but goes to the aetiological heart of the matter, according to
Freud. Why should it be that “precisely what is important is suppressed and what is
indifferent retained” (1899a, p. 306)?

A psychoanalytic answer lies in the concepts of psychic conflict and compromise
formation. Freud postulates that something in the original experience or its memory is,
for reasons that can only be revealed through psychoanalysis and on a case-by-case basis,
“objectionable”, that is, in some way disturbing, traumatic, or incongruous with the self-
image the rememberer may want to maintain of themselves; nevertheless, objectionable
as it may be, the importance of such an experience is “a motive for seeking to remember
As a result, an intrapsychic conflict ensues, as this tendency to remember is countered and opposed by another tendency in the mind, a ‘resistance’. Neither of the two opposing forces is able to completely overwhelm and annihilate the other, and, consequently, a compromise is brought about: instead of the original mnemic image remaining accessible to conscious recollection, it becomes repressed and another mnemonic image is produced, which evades the objectionable aspects of the original experience but is, in one way or another, associatively connected with it. There is a displacement of the recollective experience from one memory image or scene to another, more innocuous one. In the simplest case, a selection is made among the constituent elements of the original experience (or rather, among the various memory traces stemming from that experience): some of them are retained, and some of them repressed. “It is a case of displacement on to something associated by continuity; or, looking at the process as a whole, a case of repression accompanied by the substitution of something in the neighborhood (whether in space or time)” (Freud, 1899a, p. 307-8). In other instances, a more complex constructive process is at work, where a recalled memory is put together out of memory traces not necessarily originating from the same experience or time/space frame as the original event that is being repressed; in fact, some of the constituent parts of these recollected memories may not be other memory traces at all, but instead originate in phantasy, in the rememberer’s present needs and unconscious wishes.

This process of displacement accounts for the paradoxical character of such memories, which Freud called ‘screen memories’ since they serve the function of covering up and hiding something from conscious awareness. Thus, the affective intensity associated with the repressed (aspects of the) memory is retained, but seems
incomprehensible and out of place as it is not justified by the manifest content of the memory that appears in recollection. Likewise with the sheer fact of the screen memory’s survival amidst the generalized amnesia of childhood: it seems puzzling just because we are consciously aware only of the manifest content, the screen, and not the underlying, repressed object of mnemonic intensity and fascination.

Another crucial feature of screen memories that Freud adduces is the reversal of perspectives that as a rule characterizes them. Thus, in the majority of these memories the rememberer sees himself from the vantage point of an outside observer, “as an object among other objects in the memory scene … with the knowledge that this child is himself” (1899a, p. 321). In other words, the remembering subject swaps the ‘field’ perspective, that would logically correspond to an accurate, unmediated recording of lived experience, for an ‘observer’ point of view. This feature also points to the constructivist character of these memories, the amount of cognitive processing and manipulation that has gone into their production. “[T]his contrast between the acting and the recollecting ego may be taken as evidence that the original impression has been worked over. It looks as though a memory-trace from childhood had here been translated back into a plastic and visual form at a later date – the date of the memory's arousal” (1899a, p. 321).

To illustrate these ideas Freud (1899a) then proceeds to analyze in depth one specific screen memory. I won’t go into the details of this screen memory and its analysis, but what is important to point out is the rhetorical device Freud employs to this purpose: even though it is now known (Bernfeld, 1946; Strachey, 1962; de Mijolla, 2005) that Freud used one of his own childhood memories, he ascribed it to an imaginary
interlocutor, a supposedly unofficial analysand, “a man of university education, aged thirty-eight” (1899a, p. 309). He then proceeds to describe the process of analyzing this memory in the form of a dialogue between himself and this supposed interlocutor. Ender (2005) ingeniously suggests that the reasons for the adoption of this device were not primarily stylistic or censorial, but profoundly methodological. She writes:

Given Freud’s characteristic frankness, it would be surprising if the recourse to a split personality had coyness as its cause. It is much more likely that the reason for the dialogic structure is methodological: a clean epistemological break between the scientist and the rememberer can only promote objectivity. In other words, Freud puts himself on the side so as not to hide from us an embarrassing personal fantasy (there are plenty of those in The Interpretation of Dreams), but to better see himself. He leaves the field in order to be, truly, the observer. … Indeed, like any other rememberer, Freud must have felt the split between the ‘I now’ and the ‘I then’, and in splitting his personality, he offers a vivid reminder that we all ultimately view the ‘film’ of our memories through the eyes of a self very different from the subject in the picture. (2005, p. 95)

But there is another, even more significant reason that may have motivated Freud, consciously or not, to adopt this dialogic device, and the relevance of this to my discussion will soon become evident. Specifically, Ender (2005; see also LaGuardia, 1982) insightfully remarks that in his investigation of screen memories Freud reveals himself as deeply torn between the logical implications of his own deconstructive approach to memory, and his wish to hold on to the idea that memories are not fictions, constructed after the fact in order to address the subject’s current psychological needs,
but that they retain some kernel of objective (as opposed to merely psychological) truth –
that they retain a direct connection to, and derivation from, lived experience, despite their
significantly worked-over character. In other words, in the construction of the argument
of his seminal 1899 paper, Freud is mirroring and repeating the very process he is
describing: he tries to dialectically meld two opposing tendencies into a compromise
formation and thus resolve his conflict. In the same breath that he uncovers the
“tendentious” (Freud, 1899a, p. 322) and essentially constructivist nature of memory, he
also strives to hold on to a belief in the permanence of memory traces and the existence
of a direct, unmediated (albeit limited and perhaps verifiable only through
psychoanalysis) channel to the past through recollection. The compromise he arrives at
could be described as the position of “a nostalgic realist” (Guillaumin, 1968; quoted in
Ender, 2005, p. 92). “The ‘nostalgist’ wants to believe that there is some reality to the
childhood scene that is being recounted; the realist knows that memories are just
constructions” (Ender, 2005, p. 95).

There is no neat one-to-one correspondence between each interlocutor and each
epistemological stance – instead, some interesting and revealing reversals take place.
This would seem to further point to Freud’s own ambivalence vis-à-vis a more ‘realist’
versus a more ‘nostalgic’ conception of memory. Thus, Freud’s initially naïve imaginary
interlocutor, who, to begin with, did not doubt the veracity of his own memory as a direct
trace and representation of the past, becomes increasingly skeptical after his screen
memory has been duly analyzed. As he says, “I have lost all faith in the genuineness of
the dandelion scene [some yellow dandelions play a prominent part in the screen memory
in question] … I cannot help concluding that what I am dealing with is something that
never happened at all but has been unjustifiably smuggled in among my childhood memories” (Freud, 1899a, p. 317-8). At this juncture a very interesting reversal takes place, and Freud, in his guise as the psychoanalyst in the dialogic pair, seems to feel he may have gone too far and gotten more than he bargained for; thus, he pulls back, almost alarmed:

I see that I must take up the defence of [the memory’s] genuineness. You are going too far. You have accepted my assertion that every suppressed phantasy of this kind tends to slip away into a childhood scene. But suppose now that this cannot occur unless there is a memory-trace the content of which offers the phantasy a point of contact – comes, as it were, halfway to meet it. … It is very possible that in the course of this process the childhood scene itself also undergoes changes; I regard it as certain that falsifications of memory may be brought about in this way too. … But the raw material was utilizable. If that had not been so, it would not have been possible for this particular memory, rather than any others, to make its way forward into consciousness. No such scene would have occurred to you as a childhood memory, or perhaps some other one would have – for you know how easily our ingenuity can build connecting bridges from any one point to any other. (1899a, p. 318)

As Ender (2005) notes, one of the arguments Freud adduces in favor of the idea that, at least some of the “raw materials” of the memory are genuine, directly derived from a past event, is the sheer phenomenological quality of certain elements in the memory as recollected in the present. These elements are sensorial, having to do with the color of the flowers and the taste of the bread that form part of the memory. These
sensorial qualities of these memory objects are not just present, but are quite acute, overwhelming even: as Freud’s imaginary interlocutor first narrates his childhood memory, he states that “[t]he yellow of the flowers is a disproportionately prominent element in the situation as a whole, and the nice taste of the bread seems to me exaggerated in an almost hallucinatory fashion” (1899a, p. 312). Here, then, Freud in his guise as the analyst in the dialogic pair, is latching precisely onto these intense sensorial qualities of these elements in the memory as proof of their being genuine memory traces, imprinted on the mind by a real past experience, by the external world. In his reversal and attempt to temper his newly-skeptical friend’s losing “all faith in the genuineness” of memory, he says: “In your case the childhood scene seems only to have had some of its lines engraved more deeply: think of the over-emphasis on the yellow and the exaggerated niceness of the bread” (1899a, p. 318). Thus, he is suggesting that the vivid, intense phenomenological quality of these elements is all-too-real to have been simply a product of the rememberer’s imagination. A real link to the past is retained. And yet (Ender, 2005), just a few pages earlier, Freud the analyst seemed to have been deriving precisely the opposite conclusion from the exact same phenomenological features of the memory: “The element on which you put most stress in your childhood scene was the fact of the country-made bread tasting so delicious. It seems clear that this idea, which amounted almost to a hallucination, corresponded to your phantasy of the comfortable life you would have led if you had stayed at home and married this girl” (1899a, p. 315).

Of course, strictly speaking, there is not necessarily a contradiction here. It may well be that the vivid sensorial quality of the memory points both toward its erstwhile derivation from an actual past sense impression, and its subsequent amplification as a
vehicle of phantasy. The significant point is that, in this aspect of his analysis as well, Freud reveals himself to be unable to resolve his conflict between embracing a ‘realistic’ or a ‘nostalgic’ position. Further, it may be that this ambiguity and ambivalence, this hovering between positions, does not say so much about Freud as an individual as it does about all of us as rememberers, and indeed about an essential doubt lying at the heart of the experience of remembering. Even today, with all the accumulated scientific advances that took place in over a century since Freud wrote on screen memories, it seems very hard to adopt a strictly ‘realistic’ position about the veracity and accuracy of memory, even when we ought to know better. Thus, of all people, the renowned neurologist Antonio Damasio writes: “[T]he denial that permanent pictures of anything can exist in the brain [as demonstrated by hard scientific research] must be reconciled with the sensation, which we all share, that we can conjure up, in our mind’s eye or ear, approximations of images we previously experienced. That these approximations are not accurate, or are less vivid than the images they are meant to reproduce, does not contradict this fact” (1994, p. 100; italics in the original). In other words, when it comes to adopting a ‘realist’ position on memory, we are like scientifically sophisticated travelers lost in the desert: we know that the shimmering oasis in the distance is almost certainly a mirage, but we cannot help being drawn towards it. I will return to this point when I come to the discussion of photographs in the next section.

This dialectical back-and-forth and the ambivalence it signifies continues up to the very end of Freud’s seminal paper, which ends on this ambiguous note, without coming to a resolution of the paradox of memory as both constructed and derived from external reality:
The falsified memory is the first that we become aware of: the raw material of memory-traces out of which it was forged remains unknown to us in its original form.

The recognition of this fact must diminish the distinction we have drawn between screen memories and other memories derived from our childhood. It may indeed be questioned whether we have any memories at all from our childhood: memories relating to our childhood may be all that we possess. Our childhood memories show us our earliest years not as they were but as they appeared at the later periods when the memories were aroused. In these periods of arousal, the childhood memories did not, as people are accustomed to say, emerge; they were formed at that time. And a number of motives, with no concern for historical accuracy, had a part in forming them, as well as in the selection of the memories themselves. (Freud, 1899a, p. 322; italics in the original)

Two more points are worth emphasizing before I bring this section to a close. There are various possible chronological combinations between a screen memory and the mental content that it is screening against. Thus, in his 1899 paper Freud dealt with an ostensible childhood memory whose manifest content was revealed, upon analysis, to be covering up certain repressed thoughts and wishes that first emerged later in the rememberer’s life, that is, after the time in which the manifest scene of the memory is set. Assuming that some of the building blocks of the screen memory were derived from real perceptual experiences, these raw materials were therefore used after the fact to defend against, and keep out of consciousness, some mental elements that postdated the recording of the memory traces. In other words, such a screen memory is, in a way, a
decoy defending against the future (taking the time of the production of the memory traces as the chronological baseline). Freud called such screen memories “retrogressive” (1899a, p. 320). Some time later, Freud (1901b) shifted his attention to the reverse situation, which he now assumed was “found perhaps still more frequently” (p. 44). In this case, the production of the raw materials (the memory traces) that go into constructing a screen memory in fact occurs later in time than the psychic content(s) that the screen memory, once constructed, is defending against. In other words, a more recent experience, in itself “indifferent” (1901b, p. 44), attains greater significance and intensity than would otherwise be warranted and becomes lodged in memory because it fortuitously happens to furnish the mind with a suitable decoy that diverts attention from some other, much more distressing, mental content of earlier origin: “it owes that privilege merely to its connection with an earlier experience which resistances prevent from being reproduced directly” (Freud, 1901b, p. 44). These are screen memories “that have pushed ahead or been displaced forward” (1901b, p. 44; Freud’s italics). Finally, there is the possibility that a screen memory “is connected with the impression that it screens not only by its content but also by contiguity in time: these are contemporary or contiguous screen memories” (1901b, p. 44; Freud’s italics). Nevertheless, it might be useful to keep in mind that, even though for purposes of exposition such a schematization may be useful, reality is usually more complicated and these categories may be intermingled. Often, “screen memories are found to draw their strength from … events which have happened both before and after their occurrence” (Greenacre, 1949, p. 73).

Last but definitely not least, Freud (1901b) postulates that childhood episodic memories (the prototype par excellence for screen memories in general) are marked by
their predominantly visual character. He compares such memories to “representations on the stage” (Freud, 1901b, p. 47), again inviting us to understand that they are not randomly put together, but that their construction is “defined by a narrative impulse that drives us toward an underlying story … A mnemonic scene, just like a good story, has a point” (Ender, 2005, p. 93). Freud (1901b) claims that memory can assume different modalities in later life, for instance that in certain rememberers the auditory modality may be privileged over the visual one; however, he insists that our earliest episodic memories are as a rule visual. Further, he draws an analogy between such memories and dreams: “we all dream predominantly in visual images” (1901b, p. 47). It would seem, then, that the visual modality is closely connected to the operations of the primary process (Freud, 1950a, 1900a, 1915e). In The Ego and the Id Freud returns to this point: “Thinking in pictures … stands nearer to unconscious processes than thinking in words” (1923b, p. 21). In the next section, I will, among other things, explore a possible implication of this idea in connection with the use of photographs as mnemonic devices.

III. Photographs and memory, photographs as screen memories

In the previous section we saw how screen memories, even if constructed out of components derived from actual lived experience, are essentially deceptive: their raison d’être is to facilitate selective forgetting in the guise of vivid and seemingly genuine remembering. In fact, the more genuine the fabric of the memory (in terms of its historical derivation), the better the deception: as Greenacre writes, with screen memories
we use “reality to cover reality. … This reminds one that a frank confession often deflects suspicion” (1949, p. 83).

It would not be too far-fetched to claim that we could paraphrase the above statement by saying that screen memories are “figments from the real world” (Szarkowski, 1984, title page). It might come as a surprise, then, to be told that this intriguing turn of phrase, by the art critic John Szarkowski, was not intended with memory (or even screen memories) in mind, but as a characterization of the work of the great American photographer Garry Winogrand – and, I would suggest, can be generalized from the case of Winogrand to serve as an apt and astute description of photography as such. In this section I will pursue this analogy between photographs and screen memories. My claim is that photographs can be seen to be the objectively reified functional equivalents of screen memories, and that their perusal serves similar purposes in our psychic economy.

Of course, commonsensical understanding already treats photographs as closely related to memory, as mementos and memorial objects (I am here primarily focusing on snapshots or portraits of family and friends, the genres of photography most people have a connection to on an everyday basis). Photographs continue to have a life long after the moment in which they are created. They are stored and cherished, and revisited again and again. People take pleasure not only in looking at them in solitude, but also, and perhaps primarily, in showing them to others, revisiting and sharing moments of their lives. The commonsensical presumption is that photographs are windows onto the past, accurate and truthful representations of some past moment in time. Thus, my aim here will be to deconstruct and undermine this naïve commonsensical conception, and to argue in favor
of the hypothesis that photographs are indeed memorial objects par excellence, but in a much less straightforward and innocuous way than commonly assumed.

A photograph is a special type of pictorial representation. Photographs are, as a rule, characterized by their realistic quality, that is, they seem to be accurate representations of the external world of vision: they depict people, objects, and situations in a way that seems true to life. However, verisimilitude is not the essential feature of photographic representation. There are paintings that are also extremely realistic in the way they depict the world – indeed, there is a type of painting that goes even beyond what is called ‘photorealism’, to achieve what is called a ‘hyperrealistic’ effect: such paintings appear to be more detailed, accurate, and faithful reproductions of external reality than even the most sharp and realistic photograph (Meisel, 1993, 2002; Taylor, 2009). Rather, what sets photographs apart from any other type of pictorial representation of the world and of the past is the mechanics of their production: a photograph is causally connected in a direct and almost immediate sense to something existing out there in the world. This is “the fundamental trait of the photographic medium: the physical objects themselves imprint their image by means of the optical and chemical action of light” (Arnheim, 1986, p. 108). This direct causal derivation of a photograph from the objects it depicts holds, in every essential, throughout the various specific mechanical instantiations of this process: it holds equally true when the light rays are hitting the sensor of a digital camera, as it did when they hit a 19th century emulsified glass photographic plate. Indeed, the word photography is derived from the Greek for ‘writing with light’. According to Bazin (1967),
Photography affects us like a phenomenon in nature, like a flower or a snowflake whose vegetable or earthly origins are an inseparable part of their beauty. This production by automatic means has radically affected our psychology of the image. The objective nature of photography confers on it a quality of credibility absent from all other picture-making. ... The photographic image is the object itself ... it shares, by virtue of the very process of its becoming, the being of the model of which it is the reproduction. (p. 241)

Barthes (1980) expresses the same idea when he writes, “in Photography I can never deny that the thing has been there. There is a superimposition here: of reality and of the past” (p. 76; italics in the original). And elsewhere, even more evocatively: “The photograph is literally an emanation of the referent ... A sort of umbilical cord links the body of the photographed thing to my gaze: light, though impalpable, is here a carnal medium, a skin I share with anyone who has been photographed” (1980, p. 80-1).

This is a very different process than what goes into the production of any other representational artifact. A painting or a novel, no matter how realistic in their representations or how extensively based on the real world in their origin, are mediated in an altogether different way in terms of their production. There are two sides to this: not only can a photograph be taken without the mediation of a human agent, just by the mechanical action of the camera, but, additionally, no photograph is possible unless the camera is directly receiving light waves from the external world. A painting can be painted directly from nature, or from the imagination. Not so with photographs – there is no such thing as a photograph derived purely from the imagination. And this is not a function of an image’s being representational or non-representational, such as abstract
painting. Even the most formally abstract, non-representational photograph depends, for its production, on the action of light waves on some photosensitive surface. Certainly, nowadays some artists are using computer software to create images that look like photographs but are not derived from the external world; but then my claim regarding such images would be that calling them photographs is a misnomer. Ontologically, they are something completely different: even if they look indistinguishable from photographs, they are a form of painting, as they are not derived from the action of light waves emanating from the external world.

The appearance of verisimilitude furnished by photographic representations, that is, the pictorial realism of photographs, and, even more importantly, our awareness of the mechanism of the derivation of photographic images from the light waves emanating from objects in the real world, in conjunction turn photographs into a very special kind of recall cue. A photograph is a cue that is also immediately, as opposed to indirectly, connected to the past experience that is the object of (the attempted) recollection. It is a very different process when the cue that triggers my recollection, or on which my recollection importantly depends, is for instance a friend’s comment, or something I happen to read, or some other thing indirectly connected to my past experience, and, on the other hand, when the recall cue itself immediately, causally originates from, and is part and parcel of, that very same past experience. Of course, this distinction could, in theory, be said to hold across all the sensory modalities. Still, I believe that the status of photographs as special recall cues remains unique, for at least two reasons. First, because of the interesting (albeit accidental) fact that we do not yet have the technology for taking ‘snapshots’ of smells or tastes, for example. Proust’s narrator came to once more taste the
madeleine dipped in tea by pure happenstance; this is very different from the process of intentionally deciding to take a photograph, and then revisiting that artifact at will at a later date. Indeed, there is another aspect of sensory experience and of the past that we are in a position to intentionally and accurately preserve through technological means, namely, sound. Nevertheless, and here I come to the second reason I alluded to, the visual modality seems to be the most privileged one for most people, the one that is a sine qua non of autobiographical memory (I can have odorless memories, but it would be much more rare to have ones without a visual component, even if the latter were triggered by a scent) – as it is also of conscious experience (at least most of the time). Recall Schacter’s statement to the effect that the “recall of visual information about the physical setting or context of an event is crucial to having a ‘remember’ experience” (1996, p. 23).

By dint of these qualities of the photographic medium, in commonsensical understanding photographs are treated as safe, permanent, reliable repositories of truthful memory. There is a strong temptation, when we are looking at a photograph, to feel that the cue and the past experience, the thing that memory is grasping after, are actually one and the same. It is as if the complemental series formed by engram and cue collapses into a single point; as if by looking at a photograph the rememberer immediately arrives at the memory, without having to expend any more effort, without a need for any more mental detours; as if there is no longer a need for retrieve (or construct) a visual image of the past in one’s mind, since it is already out there right in front of one’s eyes. Indeed, it might be more accurate to say that photographs don’t even really function as recall cues (insofar as a cue sets in motion a mediated process of memorial reconstruction), but rather activate recognition memory in a much more immediate manner. By looking at
photographs, therefore, recollection (as a strenuous process of reconstructing the past) is not only aided, but is perhaps transcended, short-circuited, bypassed altogether. In the commonsensical conception, the problem of recollecting the past no longer needs to be solved – it simply dissolves, thanks to technology.

What’s more, not only are photographs commonly treated as externalized memories, but they have in fact furnished our imagination with an intuitively appealing and tenacious metaphor for the actual process of remembering as it occurs in the mind: actual recollection is often compared to an internal slideshow in the mind’s eye. In the popular imagination, the notion of the permanence, veridicality, and objectivity of photographs and the permanence, veridicality, and objectivity of memory traces buttress and feed into each other. We already saw that this notion of the objectivity and permanence of memory is an illusion. My claim, then, is that commonsense understanding has got it backwards: we could indeed fruitfully compare memories with photographs, but only to the extent that photographs themselves are not the non-tendentious traces and straightforward representations of reality a naively realistic conception would have us believe; in other words, photographs are indeed props to memory, but in ways that significantly influence, direct, and distort it, far from simply providing it with a little nudge to just ‘refresh’ or reactivate it from its supposedly dormant state. Looking at photographs short-circuits the process of recollection; in the guise of providing a convenient shortcut to the accurate remembrance of the past, photographs in fact do just the opposite, distorting memory while at the same time giving rise to a strong but illusory phenomenological sense of safeguarding it.

The claim, then, is that photographs are the functional equivalent of screen
memories. It may be true that, under a certain description, the camera never lies; but, equally, it does not tell the whole truth: photographs are figments from the real world. I will now try to unpack this claim in a little more detail. On a first, superficial level, photographs share many phenomenological characteristics with screen memories, including their essentially visual character, their ability to vividly retain and call attention to small details of a larger scene, and their fixity.

More importantly, like screen memories, photographs both reveal and conceal something – and they conceal by revealing. In a sense, it is true that a photograph, as far as it goes, provides an almost unmediated, authentic, accurate record of the past (for the sake of simplification, this discussion is premised on the type of photograph that has not been digitally manipulated or altered by special effects, filters, distorting lenses, etc.). But a photograph is a piece of paper – it has four sides (the argument holds equally for a rectangle on a computer screen). A section of objective visual reality is certainly contained within the frame of that rectangle – and a much greater piece of reality is excluded. Additionally, not only is there a lot of space left out of the frame, but a lot of time as well. On average, a photograph captures a few thousandths to a few hundredths of a second – it depicts an extremely thin time slice of lived reality. Thus, even the most accurate, authentic photographs are extremely selective in what they show.

Still, such a descriptive analysis says nothing about the specific dynamics of the postulated tendentiousness of photographs. My hypothesis, then, is that photographs are not randomly or haphazardly selective in terms of what they show and what they don’t show, but that, in functioning as reified screen memories, they selectively preserve moments of life in a calculated and motivated way, in the service of defense. The
counterargument might be raised that, in dissecting screen memories, Freud (1899a) spoke of “objectionable … psychical element[s]” (p. 307) that the screen memory diverts attention from; their objectionable character arises from their connection to primitive, repudiated instinctual urges and phantasies, and their consequent incompatibility with the rememberer’s consciously espoused values or the self-conception he wants to maintain for himself. So the question obviously arises, what could possibly be so objectionable as regards the past experiences that I am claiming may be glossed over and replaced by their photographic residues? After all, here we are just talking about snapshots – and, presumably, the occasions that usually give rise to them do not as a rule have much to do with the instinctual and the forbidden.

Is that really so, however? I will briefly touch on two points: first, according to the psychoanalytic conception of mental functioning (Freud 1915c, 1915d; Laplanche & Pontalis, 1988), any conscious psychical element or experience can be a derivative of the primitive drives, and be associatively connected to unconscious phantasy. Second, even if we opt for a somewhat looser, more commonsensical reading of what may be objectionable, it becomes readily apparent that there’s quite a lot about the past (in fact, about life, which is always becoming the past all the time) that may be objectionable, at least in the sense that we’d rather it were somewhat different.

Thus, one hypothesis would be that we have a vested, albeit often unacknowledged, interest in glossing over the fact that life experiences are never one-dimensional, almost never unfold on a single emotional register: we usually have mixed feelings about things, and events and experiences very rarely don’t evoke some degree of ambivalence in us. In other words, one of the ways photographs can function as screen
memories is by defending against the conscious awareness of the full emotional spectrum associated with, and triggered by, the unfolding of our lives. To take a very trivial example, even the most ideal and idyllic holiday is unlikely to have been totally unalloyed, without a single moment of frustration, sadness, impatience, disagreement, fatigue, what have you. But, in the pictures, all these tend to disappear. People pose and say ‘cheese’. In the photographs, it’s all wide smiles and seemingly perfect happiness.

Or, to take a different aspect: research suggests that people tend to distort their recollections of past events so as to exaggerate their own significance in them, relegate a more important place or role to themselves than was actually the case (Schacter, 1996; Schacter, Coyle, Fischbach, Mesulam & Sullivan, 1995; Tulving & Craik, 2000). Likewise, photographs often put people on a pedestal, even if only by excluding others from within the virtual space of the frame. In this connection it is interesting to note how one of the most widespread genres of snapshot photography revolves around people standing in front of famous monuments or landscapes in order to be photographed. Here it becomes clear that what motivates the person being photographed is not even the preservation of their own past perceptual experiences in memory, in so far as this kind of snapshot is actually predicated on the abandonment and reversal of one’s point-of-view experience. The natural, ‘field’ point of view, is replaced by an ‘observer’ perspective. Recall that Freud (1899a) stressed this particular kind of reversal as one of the telltale features of screen memories. In the snapshots in question, then, it seems that this type of doctored recollection finds perfect expression, is even taken to an altogether different level. It’s not so much my surroundings that matter, but the fact that I was there. What I may have actually, even if unconsciously, felt – to hazard a guess, my insignificance and
transience vis-à-vis the Grand Canyon or the pyramids (or even vis-à-vis the myriad other tourists who were there having their picture taken), is disavowed and reversed. Narcissism triumphs.

It will be noted that the examples I have been adducing are quite simplistic. This is a deliberate choice – I am attempting to present a hypothesis in schematic form. A more in-depth exploration of this hypothesis would not be possible without a detailed analysis of specific photographs, and that, in turn, would also not easily get off the ground in a vacuum, i.e. without simultaneously analyzing in depth the people for whom those photographs carried some emotional and memorial significance. But, over and above those considerations, using simplistic examples is not altogether unrelated to my point in a more substantive way also: the point is precisely that photographs qua screen memories, as indeed actual screen memories themselves, are, more often than not, made of humble fabric: that constitutes part of their deceptiveness, but is also an immediate consequence of their derivation from the flow of everyday life. This is the point I want to emphasize: processes of tendentious memory distortion are not necessarily or primarily mobilized by momentous, extraordinary events – they constitute the everyday workings of memory.

On a first level, then, photographs can be viewed as screen memory-equivalents defending against the past: they selectively channel our attention and recollection, and replace a more multi-dimensional, ambivalent version of past reality with a more unequivocal, palatable one. But photographs as screen memories can also be seen as screening against psychical elements following their creation, not just ones coincidental with it or preceding it. They deflect our conscious awareness from the future as well, not
just from the past. There are at least two major aspects to this latter dimension of their utilization as screen memories, and it will be seen that this second dimension can operate independently of the first one, of photographs’ possible role in distorting the true emotional significance and complexity of experience.

First, recall Freud’s (1899a) own ambivalence and indecisiveness as to the logical implications of his own insights about the functioning of memory: as soon as he realized that his analysis of screen memories pointed to the tendentious and constructivist character of memory in general, he seemed uneasy with this conclusion and tried to retreat to a position that reaffirmed the veridicality and permanence of at least some memory traces. Likewise with the majority of psychologists questioned in the study by Loftus and Loftus (1980) already referenced earlier, or, indeed, with Damasio’s assertion that our knowledge that our memories are, at best, approximations, does not undermine our strong subjective conviction that “we can conjure up, in our mind’s eye or ear … images we previously experienced” (1994, p. 100). It seems that we find it emotionally very hard to accept the possibility that the past may be gone without leaving some permanent, accurate, accessible traces in our minds. Schacter writes: “The idea that there is a one-to-one correspondence between a bit of information stored away somewhere in our brain and the conscious experience of a memory that results from activating this bit of information is so intuitively compelling that it seems almost nonsensical to question it” (1996, p. 71). We know that this notion is false – indeed, one does not even have to be a neuroscientist to entertain doubts about it, as everyday experience furnishes us with ample instances where memory, simply, does not serve. Yet, such instances, instead of undermining the commonsensical engram theory of memory, on the contrary often seem
to lend it further conviction, the rationale being that these are instances where things don't work as they should, or as they optimally do. Instead of leading to a revision of the assumption that everything experienced is put in storage in the brain for good, instances of memory failure are as a rule attributed – to pursue the computer-storage metaphor of memory – to a software malfunction, not to deficits in the hardware: we tell ourselves that the memories are ‘in there’ somewhere, safely stored – it is just that our retrieval algorithms fail. In this conception, the fading of memory is a failure of recollection, not storage. It seems that there is something very containing and soothing to the idea that the past is not irrevocably lost, even if it appears to be so.

Photographs provide a perfect foil for this notion. Not only are they themselves permanent imagistic representations directly derived from past events (thus nurturing the reification of the metaphor of memory as consisting of permanent and accurate images stored in the brain), but they also seem to be all it takes for our own memories of the depicted events to be rekindled and emerge from the depths of the mind. Thus, looking at photographs fosters the assumption that, given the right cue, our memory traces are always there, to be retrieved wholesale. But even more so: that by means of this repetition, this revisiting of photographs, this ‘refreshing’ of our memory, our memories, or our ability to retrieve them, become stronger and are inoculated against the onslaught of the wearing-down effects of the passage of time. As I suggested earlier, this is an illusion. Looking at photographs short-circuits the process of recollection, the reconstruction of memories. What may conceivably really be going on is a process of covert substitution: whatever memory-traces may have been there to begin with, far from being strengthened, are gradually, inexorably, and imperceptibly being replaced by the
supposed recall cues ostensibly serving them – the photographic images themselves. After repeated viewings, we no longer remember the original moment depicted as much as we remember the photographs – and we even lose track of this substitution: the photographs and the moment of their derivation become conflated beyond recognition. My suggestion, then, is that one of the fundamental screening functions of photographs is to deflect our awareness and recognition of the impermanence and fallibility of our memory, and of the corrosive effects of time on its, even to begin with, fragile hold on the past.

There is a second major way in which photographs provide a screen for what follows the moment of their creation. When we look at photographs, by definition we are always looking at a moment in the past, forever frozen in time. It is always later when we are looking at a picture. A lot has intervened. The people in the photograph may have died, or be as lost to us as the dead. Or, less dramatically, our feelings may have changed; we may have grown colder towards each other. Or, simply, we, and they, may have aged – we are children no longer, or have grown old. (And even if none of the above has transpired, what is certain is that what’s in the picture is no longer here, or we’re no longer there: the party or the holiday is over, replaced once again by our usual everyday routine. Notice that this conception does not presuppose the defensive distortion of emotional experience: even if a photograph emanated from, and depicts, a true moment of unequivocal bliss, the hard fact remains that the moment is gone). But the picture doesn’t know that. In the picture the people we have known, and the relationships we have had, and the places we have been to, and our own face, will never change; they have achieved a kind of timeless limbo. Thus, by returning to old photographs we can
momentarily screen the present; or, under a different description (i.e. from the point of view of the moment when the pictures were taken), we screen the future.

All this may seem quite straightforward – once more, a case of replacing a more objectionable, unpleasant psychical element with a more palatable one. But it may be a little more complicated than that. When asked by his imaginary interlocutor why it is that phantasy usually picks a scene from childhood (as opposed to a later time) to disguise itself with, Freud (1899a), after suggesting that the supposed innocence of childhood offers a particularly good decoy for covering up repudiated instinctual impulses, also makes this additional, rather cryptic remark: “It seems, moreover, as though the recollection of the remote past is in itself facilitated by some pleasurable motive: *forsan et haec olim meminisse juvabit*” (p. 317). The Latin quotation is from Virgil’s *Aeneid* (book I, 203): ‘maybe someday you will rejoice to recall even this’. Even this: the passage is from a speech Aeneas delivers to his shipwrecked, “bloodied, battered, bruised and hungry” crew, after they wash up on the shores of Carthage following a terrible storm (Jenkins, 2001, commentary on *Aeneid* Book 1, Lines 195 to 207). And yet, he tells them that someday they may rejoice to recall even this disaster. The passage is often taken to be somewhat equivalent to a modern-day expression such as ‘someday we’ll look back on this and laugh’. But the implication of this latter phrase is that laughing with hindsight is connected to a feeling of triumph attendant upon overcoming adversity. Freud, however, seems to be emphasizing a different connotation of the passage, by using it as an illustration or epitome of the thought that “the recollection of the remote past is in itself facilitated by some pleasurable motive” (1899a, p. 317). The emphasis here seems to be on the idea that recollection *in and of itself* is a source of pleasure; indeed, that it is
in itself so satisfying that it can afford pleasure even if the content of the recollection is, as such, unpleasant.

Let’s see how we could begin to make some sense of this notion. One thing that seems clear is that Freud is talking of a situation where a mental image of the past is a source of pleasure. In the passage quoted above, Freud is discussing conscious recollection. There is another situation, however, where a very similar derivation of pleasure from a visual mental image of the past takes place. In Chapter VII of *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud (1900a) discusses the concepts of perceptual identity and thought identity. Perceptual identity is the goal and mode of operation of the primary process: once a satisfaction has been experienced in the past, the primary process endeavors to bring about the re-experiencing of the perception of the object associated with that experience of satisfaction. It achieves this aim by directly re-activating the memory of the experience of satisfaction. Here is how Freud describes this process:

[T]he reappearance of the perception is the fulfilment of the wish; and the shortest path to the fulfilment of the wish is a path leading direct from the excitation produced by the need to a complete cathexis of the perception. … Thus the aim of this first psychical activity was to produce a ‘perceptual identity’ – a repetition of the perception which was linked with the satisfaction of the need. (1900a, p. 566)

And elsewhere: “A current of this kind in the apparatus, starting from unpleasure and aiming at pleasure, we have termed a ‘wish’ … The first wishing seems to have been a hallucinatory cathecting of the memory of satisfaction” (Freud, 1900a, p. 598). Freud postulates that such a state of affairs could not realistically sustain itself, as a
hallucinatory, illusory satisfaction of a need, however pleasurable, could not possibly keep any organism alive for long. Therefore, another mental activity arises, better adapted to help the organism survive in the real world: the secondary process – in other words, thinking. The secondary process replaces perceptual identity with what Freud terms ‘thought identity’: it attempts to alter the actual external world, “by means of voluntary movement” (1900a, p. 599) so as to arrive “at a real perception of the object of satisfaction” (p. 599) instead of a hallucinatory one. In other words, thought (the secondary process) aims to enable the organism to once more come into contact with a real object that can truly satisfy its need, as it has done in past experience. Memory is its guide and touchstone in this quest, but this is a very different usage of memory than its hallucinatory re-activation. And yet, unrealistic and self-defeating as the primary process may be, “all the complicated thought-activity which is spun out from the mnemonic image to the moment at which the perceptual identity is established by the external world – all this activity of thought merely constitutes a roundabout path to wish-fulfilment which has been made necessary by experience. Thought is after all nothing but a substitute for a hallucinatory wish” (1900a, p. 566-7). The opposition between the primary and the secondary process corresponds exactly to that between the pleasure principle and the reality principle, in other words, the mode of functioning of the unconscious, on the one hand, and that of preconscious and conscious cognition on the other (Freud, 1900a; 1950a; 1915e; 1911b). In normal development, the secondary process replaces the primary process; thinking and action replace hallucinatory perceptual identity.

Nevertheless, there is one sphere of mental activity where hallucinatory wish-fulfilment is never given up. When we sleep, our unsatisfied and repressed wishes are the
instigators of dreaming: “a dream is the fulfilment of a wish” (Freud, 1900a, p. 121). It is important to note the exact phrasing of this famous statement. Freud does not just claim that dreams represent or express the fulfillment of unconscious wishes: he claims that they are wish-fulfilments. I take this to mean that the activation of the primary process as such, the regression to a mode of mental functioning based on the principle of perceptual identity, is in and of itself deeply satisfying (over and above the other reasons Freud adduces for the process – regardless of the content – of dreaming, such as the safeguarding of sleep).

Further, Freud (1900a) suggests that only “a wishful impulse of the strength proper to children” (p. 552) has the capacity to instigate dreaming; in adults, such wishful impulses carried over from childhood have become unconscious, and are the real engines of dream formation, albeit masked behind unsatisfied wishes of contemporary origin. What is most interesting for my present purposes, however, is the thought that follows this statement: Freud evokes an analogy between the diminution of the strength of wishes is later life, and a diminution in the production and intensity of visual imagery. He writes:

It seems to me … that, with the progressive control exercised upon our instinctual life by our thought-activity, we are more and more inclined to renounce as unprofitable the formation or retention of such intense wishes as children know. It is possible that there are individual differences in this respect, and that some people retain an infantile type of mental process longer than others, just as there are similar differences in regard to the diminution of visual imagery, which is so vivid in early years. (Freud, 1900a, p. 552)
Apart from the rule of the primary process (the principle of perceptual identity), another feature of unconscious mental processes is their timelessness: “The processes of the system Ucs. are timeless; i.e. they are not ordered temporally, are not altered by the passage of time; they have no reference to time at all. Reference to time is bound up, once again, with the work of the system Cs.” (Freud, 1915e, p. 187; Freud’s italics). Indeed, hallucinatory wish-fulfilment already points to this feature: perceptual identity is premised on the inability to distinguish between an initial perceptual impression and the reactivation of its mnemonic image. The image is equivalent to the actual object. My hypothesis, then, is that there is a deep and essential connection between the sense of timelessness and visual hallucinatory wish-fulfilment, and that it is this link that underlies the profound pleasurableness of remembering, even if the content of recollection is in itself indifferent or unpleasant. In other words: memory, at least vivid, imagistic memory, provides us with a species of hallucinatory wish-fulfilment, albeit a more attenuated one than in dreams. In this connection, recall the almost hallucinatory intensity of some of the perceptual elements (e.g., the yellow of the flowers) in the paradigmatic screen memory Freud analyzed in this 1899 paper. Vivid episodic memories, by presenting us with visual scenes, with “the mise-en-scène of desire” (Laplanche & Pontalis, 1988, p. 318) afford us not just “a pleasure connected to missing objects” (Ender, 2005, p. 100), but also, I would claim, the illusory satisfaction of transcending time. If that is so, another implication of this idea is that photographs, insofar as they function as screen memories, are inter alia obviating our awareness of the passage of time, of the embeddedness of our existence in time. This is the other aspect of their screening the future that I referred to earlier: by offering us “a perfect likeness of the past” (Freud, 1900a, p. 621) photographs enable us
to not only mentally travel through time and momentarily forget the time that elapsed since they were taken, but to forget the dimension of time *altogether* – they provide us with a temporary reprieve from the secondary process.

All in all, then, I have been making the case that, by virtue of their phenomenological characteristics in conjunction with their unique ontological status as direct traces of the real world, photographs are the functional equivalent of screen memories in our psychic economy. They offer us “precisely a way of experiencing both – the fascination for the memory content (for, say, yellow flowers, a smell of lilac, or a watery surface) and the fascination for the act of remembering” (Ender, 2005, p. 101). They function as screen memories on multiple levels: they can mask the time that preceded their creation and the time that followed; divert our attention from the full emotional complexity of relationships and events; deflect our awareness of the inexorable passage of time; and even put up a screen against the full recognition of the deficiencies and essential fragility of our own memory. In fact, they offer a perfect example of how the secondary process, by following “a roundabout path … altered the external world in such a way that it became possible to arrive at a real perception of the object of satisfaction” (Freud, 1900a, p. 599) – or at least a perception more objectively real than a full-fledged hallucination, even if the object of that perception is not the original object but its photographic likeness. For, unlike actual screen memories, photographs are created pre-emptively, before the fact. I want to claim that this unconscious defensive function enters into the process of staging and taking photographs in the first place, and that it goes a long way toward explaining the ever-expanding appeal of photography as a practice in everyday life. Photographs are screen memories made to order.
CHAPTER 2: ON PHOTOGRAPHY AND LOSS

I. What remains: Nachträglichkeit

In the previous chapter I made the case for considering photographs as reified screen-memory equivalents: objects created at least partially with the aim of manipulating and channeling autobiographical memory in the service of defense. However, in being memorial objects with some kind of physical instantiation in external reality, photographs also attain to a degree of autonomy from the human beings creating them and their conscious or unconscious intentions and purposes. Thus, over and above what I’ve been suggesting, photographs may also come to play a role in the unintentional and often unwanted remembrance of the past and rewriting of one’s personal history.

I specifically have in mind the fate of photographs depicting loved ones who are no longer with us – people lost to us through separation or death. Our beloved may be gone, but their photographic images remain. My claim is that these photographic representations, in the aftermath of loss and bereavement, acquire new meaning and intensity as visual stimuli, a whole new and conflictual psychological valence: in a retroactive way, looking at such pictures can trigger, in certain cases, potentially traumatic associative chain reactions, unexpected tectonic shifts in our carefully constructed personal narratives. Such photographs become problematic, impossible objects. No matter how you approach them, they cut; and yet, they may also exert a strange, morbid fascination. In any case, they pose a conundrum that almost everyone is
familiar with from personal experience: what is to be done with them? Keeping them or looking at them is hard; getting rid of them, even harder.

The problem posed by photographs in the wake of loss is essentially the problem of dealing with new knowledge that casts the past in a new light; it is the problem of revising our understanding and memory of the past, and the emotions hitherto associated with it, through the prism of what we know now but had no way of knowing earlier. (Subsequently, I will attempt to show how this is a problem essentially posed by all photographs, not just the ones depicting erstwhile loved ones that are, for whatever reason, gone, insofar as all photographs are monuments to the passage of time; however, approaching this from the angle of such pictures offers the advantage of making the exposition of the dynamics involved more straightforwardly apparent).

In a letter to Wilhelm Fliess dated December 6, 1896, Freud writes:

I am working on the assumption that our psychical mechanism has come about by a process of stratification: the material present in the shape of memory-traces is from time to time subjected to a rearrangement in accordance with fresh circumstances – is, as it were, transcribed. Thus what is essentially new in my theory is the thesis that memory is present not once but several times over… (Freud, 1954, p. 173)

This passage introduces the pivotal, albeit never clearly defined in the Freudian corpus, notion of Nachträglichkeit. This concept has traditionally been translated as deferred action in English, but as several commentators have pointed out (Laplanche & Pontalis, 1988; Thomä & Cheshire, 1991; Laplanche, 1976, 1999; Faimberg, 2005; Eickhoff, 2006), such a rendering is both distorting and limiting, selectively narrowing the concept
down to just one of its facets discernible in Freudian usage. Indeed, the passage in the
letter to Fliess quoted above seems to point in a different direction: whereas the term
‘deferred action’ suggests a temporal deferral, and hence a forward movement, a kind of
delayed effect of an actual past event, Freud’s letter of December 6 apparently focuses on
a movement in the opposite direction, from the present toward the past, in the sense of the
retroactive re-transcription of past memories in the light of present circumstances. In fact,
both of these senses are discernible in Freud’s usage of the term Nachträglichkeit across
various texts, from the letters to Fliess of the late 1890s to the Wolf-man case (Freud
1918b). As Thomä and Cheshire write, by collapsing all these various usages in the term
‘deferred action’ we are “running the risk of constructing a pseudo-concept in English
where there was either no common one, or indeed more than one, in the original” (1991,
p. 410). In order to retain this conceptual polysemy of the original German term,

Nachträglichkeit or afterwardness, then, refers to the revision or
reconceptualization of the past (as preserved in memory) so as “to fit in with fresh
experiences or with the attainment of a new stage of development” (Laplanche &
Pontalis, 1988, p. 111). Moreover, “[i]t implies a complex and reciprocal relationship
between a significant event and its later reinvestment with meaning, a reinvestment that
lends it a new psychic efficacy” (Laplanche, 2005, p. 377-8). It is because of this
“complex and reciprocal relationship” between past and present, what came before and
what comes afterwards, that the Freudian usage of Nachträglichkeit oscillates between
emphasizing a more deterministic, forward-moving understanding of the re-signification
of the past, and a more hermeneutical, retroactive conception of this process of re-
transcription. There is a dual emphasis: on the process of re-transcription itself, as well as on the openness and pliability of certain past experiences to being thus re-transcribed. As Laplanche and Pontalis explain, “[i]t is not lived experience in general that undergoes a deferred revision, but, specifically, whatever it has been impossible in the first instance to incorporate fully into a meaningful context. The traumatic event is the epitome of such unassimilated experience” (1988, p. 112). What makes an event traumatic, though?

Through various writings spanning more than two decades, from the *Project for a Scientific Psychology* to the analysis of the Wolf-man, Freud (Freud 1950a [1895]; Freud & Breuer 1895; Freud 1896c, 1900a, 1909b, 1918b) pursued a conception of trauma as biphasic, unfolding in two stages. The prototypical example of this conception is provided by Freud’s patient Emma, in the *Project* (Freud, 1950a). This young woman had developed agoraphobia and could not go into a store alone. This symptom emerged after an experience during which, around the age of twelve, she walked into a store and saw the two shop clerks laughing, at which point she “rushed out in some kind of fright” (Freud, 1954, p. 410; italics in the original). Analysis eventually revealed that this experience unconsciously aroused an earlier memory of having been sexually molested by a shopkeeper at the age of eight (that shopkeeper’s grin provided the associative link to the two laughing clerks, and thus reactivated the unconscious memory). Freud postulates that the initial experience had not been traumatic in itself, because at the time the little girl had lacked an adequate understanding of sexuality to comprehend what had happened to her; four years later, however, and with the advent of puberty, a retroactive understanding of that earlier event had rendered it traumatic and pathogenic. It may be doubted whether an experience of being fondled on the genitals was, as such, not
traumatic before the advent of puberty and greater sexual awareness; in fact, Freud’s own discovery of infantile sexuality a few years later (Freud, 1905d) would seem to invalidate the above reconstruction of events, which importantly turns on the assumption of sexual naiveté on the part of the 8-yr-old Emma. However, the essential point for my purposes here is the notion of “a memory exciting an affect which it had not excited as an experience” (1895b, p. 413). In this particular instance, this chain of events and the relative potency of memory over experience is attributed to the assumption that “in the meantime the changes produced by puberty had made possible a new understanding of what was remembered” (1895b, p. 413); by substituting ‘time’ or ‘loss’ for “puberty” in the above statement, we will begin to approach the conception of photographs as objects of afterwardness that I am driving at here. In short, conceptualizing photographs as loci of retroactive trauma is not dependent on the specifics of Freud’s seduction theory, but rather on the idea that “in a sense, the trauma is situated entirely in the play of ‘deceit’ producing a kind of seesaw effect between the two events. Neither of the two events in itself is traumatic” (Laplanche, 1976, p. 41; my emphasis). In other words, the locus of trauma is the incommensurability between the two events, the temporal disconnect between them, the “interplay … of ‘too early’ and ‘too late’” (Laplanche, 1976, p. 43). Elsewhere, Laplanche compares this process to the operation of “a time-bomb which is triggered off by something outside it” (1999, p. 265). This “critical later event” (Thomä & Cheshire, 1991, p. 415) that acts as a catalyst to trigger off the up-to-then dormant and only potentially explosive time-bomb is none other than the belated “access to a new level of meaning” (Laplanche & Pontalis, 1988, p. 112). But isn’t a time-bomb, by definition, a mechanism that is set in motion and then takes its course, with no need for
another subsequent trigger? Wouldn’t this conception suggest a purely linear, deterministic understanding of the state of affairs, an understanding, in fact, encapsulated by the forward-looking term ‘deferred action’, which, as you will recall, we dismissed as too one-dimensional? Note, however, that the idea of a time-bomb can easily be reconciled with the need for an additional, subsequent catalyst: describing the time-bomb as potentially explosive may be construed as meaning that, even though it will most likely detonate sooner or later, the particular moment this will happen is crucially dependent on when the subsequent outside catalyst arrives on the scene (and, in fact, it is also possible that the bomb may fizzle out and not detonate at all if such a catalyst never presents itself). In that sense, the second phase of the process, what comes afterward, is as crucial as the initial phase.

What do the two phases entail in the case of looking at photographs, what is the ‘before’ and what the ‘afterward’, that, in conjunction, give rise to a traumatic time-bomb? The making (or ‘taking’) of a photograph, by the very nature of the medium, presupposes presence: the presence of the loved ones whose image is captured and fixed. And, on another level, the presence of certain feelings, of an emotional bond, and a trust in the reciprocity and continuity of such feelings. But when we are looking at a photograph of a lost loved one, we cannot escape the “new level of meaning” (Laplanche & Pontalis, 1988, p. 112) provided by intervening events: a new level of meaning that functions as a kind of postscript to the photograph and the moment of its creation. We now know what we had no way of knowing then, when the photograph was taken: that this loved person would be gone, would not be part of our life forever; or, more accurately (assuming that we learn to expect loss from an early age, disavowal
notwithstanding), what we have no way of knowing in advance is not so much the fact of eventual loss, but rather the when and the how: that perhaps the loved person would stop loving us, or we them; that perhaps they would die before us. As Baer writes, “every photograph is radically exposed to a future unknown to its subjects” (2005, p. 7). Photographs are not just reminders of loss per se; even more significantly, they are reminders of our erstwhile (either willful or naïve) ignorance, our mistake in disavowing and trying to arrest the passage of time, trying to cling to the illusion that things last forever. This is the real sting of afterwardness when it comes to photographs.

Interestingly enough, Freud himself used precisely the metaphor of photography to describe trauma and the persistent effects of the past on the present; in *Moses and Monotheism*, he writes:

> It has long since become common knowledge that the experiences of a person’s first five years exercise a determining effect on his life, which nothing later can withstand. Much that deserves knowing might be said about the way in which these early impressions maintain themselves against any influences in more mature periods of life – but it would not be relevant here. It may, however, be less well known that the strongest compulsive influence arises from impressions which impinge upon a child at a time when we would have to regard his psychical apparatus as not yet completely receptive. The fact itself cannot be doubted; but it is so puzzling that we may make it more comprehensible by comparing it with a photographic exposure which can be developed after any interval of time and transformed into a picture. (1939, p. 125-6)
I want to focus on two salient points that can be discerned in the above passage. First, Freud is not speaking here of extraordinary, catastrophic events – and yet, the mechanism he describes is virtually identical to that according to which trauma operates, as we saw earlier. And, secondly, that he describes the young child’s psychic apparatus as “not completely receptive”. Indeed, it is precisely this characteristic of the young psyche that allows events to “impinge” on it, and to subsequently have the most far-reaching “compulsive influence”. In a way, what this means is that the young child’s psyche is all too receptive: but receptive in the wrong way, in the sense of being wide open, defenseless, unprepared and unable to adequately process and thus assimilate experience. The implication, again, is that it is not the nature of an experience per se that renders it traumatic, but the way it is received and apprehended. And, crucially, that is a matter of timing. As the important scholar of trauma Cathy Caruth writes, trauma is not defined “by the event itself – which may or may not be catastrophic, and may not traumatize everyone equally – nor can it be defined in terms of a distortion … but consists … in the structure of its experience of reception: the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it” (1995, p. 4; italics in the original).

In the passage from *Moses and Monotheism* quoted above, the suggestion is that an experience may remain unassimilated or not fully experienced because of the immaturity of the psychic apparatus at the time. My suggestion, when it comes to photographs, is that, as a rule, at the time of taking photographs people are also not “completely receptive” (Freud, 1939, p. 126) to what is occurring in the moment, although this lack of receptivity is not due to developmental immaturity. Rather, in the
case of photography this lack of receptivity unfolds on a double register: not just in the sense of not being attentive enough to the flow of experience (insofar as attention is diverted from spontaneous lived experience to the staging of a photograph), but also, and much more importantly, in the sense that, by consciously attending to one connotation of the memorializing function of photography, people tend to disavow the other implication of this term. When people take pictures, in most instances (I will qualify this statement in Chapter 3) their conscious agenda and conceptualization of what is transpiring has to do with the preservation of memories, the fantasied arresting of time, as described in Chapter 1. They thus tend to disavow the fact that memorialization is intimately connected with loss and death – therefore, that photography is Janus-faced: apart from being “an aide-mémoire, a form for preserving memory, it is [also] a memento mori” (Prosser, 2005, p. 1-2).

In a work of impressive scholarship, Baer (2005) analyzes “photography’s ability to confront the viewer with a moment that had the potential to be experienced but perhaps was not. In viewing such photographs we are witnessing a mechanically recorded instant that was not necessarily registered by the subject’s own consciousness” (p. 8); in that sense, “photography can provide special access to experiences that have remained unremembered yet cannot be forgotten” (Baer, 2005, p. 7). However, by focusing on photographs of the Holocaust and its traces, or the extensive photographic record of the cataleptic and other hysterical seizures of Charcot’s patients at the Salpêtrière, Baer’s analysis tends to over-emphasize the sheer overwhelming nature of the photographed event or moment that makes it psychically unassimilable at the time of its occurrence. I think it is more fruitful and ultimately far-reaching to re-direct the emphasis to the
traumatic potential of photographs in afterwardness that is not owing to the fact that the photographed moment was overwhelming or unthinkable as such, but to the fact that it becomes traumatic to contemplate in hindsight, in juxtaposition to the present – a present enwrapped in loss. Photographs enable the “appearance of a meaning that … although it concerns the past, did not exist there” (Baer, 2005, p. 12).

In his famous paper ‘Fear of breakdown’, Winnicott (1974) speaks of situations where the patient has no understanding or conscious recollection of a traumatic experience of “primitive agony” (1974, p. 105) that he underwent in the past, but instead projects it into the future in the form of a fear of a possible future breakdown. The tragic irony, then, is that the dreaded breakdown has already occurred. Winnicott suggests that even though this catastrophic breakdown was, from an objective point of view, experienced, on another level it does not constitute part of the subject’s experience because “it is not possible to remember something that has not yet happened, and this thing of the past has not happened yet because the patient was not there for it to happen to. The only way to ‘remember’ in this case is for the patient to experience this past thing for the first time in the present” (1974, p. 105). What Winnicott means when he says that the patient “was not there” for the experience to happen to is that, at the early stage of life that he is referring to, the ego is still too inchoate, too disconnected from a stable sense of self, to be able to fully own every experience that befalls it. By analogy, when looking at a photograph of a lost loved one, the viewer is also someone who, in a sense, was not there (even if he took the photograph, or is also depicted in it). He is both the same person who was related to the photograph’s subject back then, but also, in a crucial sense,
a very different person: a person bereaved, left behind; someone who used to see through a glass, darkly, but no longer.

And this brings me to the other main point of Winnicott’s 1974 paper: the reverse side of the situation of a non-experienced event that he is describing is, in fact, the possibility of belatedly experiencing it (experiencing it for what it was, instead of in the form of a fantasied fear of the future) and thus owning it in the present. This is another, very different aspect of afterwardness. Künstlicher (1994) describes a clinical situation where a patient is haunted (possessed, to paraphrase Caruth) by a “frozen picture” (1994, p. 102), similar to a screen memory – “a perceptual impression from a past course of events which, precisely because of its immutability, indicates something overwhelming” (Künstlicher, 1994, p. 102). However, he goes on to describe how in analysis (thus, in afterwardness) such “unassimilated impressions from the past [can be] transformed into something psychically manageable or into an experience” (1994, p. 102. Italics in the original). Likewise, Baer suggests that “bypassed memory and cognition … remain visible, phenomenologically, in the photographs” (2005, p. 15), and describes “photography’s ability to confront the viewer with a moment that had the potential to be experienced but perhaps was not. In viewing such photographs we are witnessing a mechanically recorded instant that was not necessarily registered by the subject’s own consciousness” (2005, p. 8). The essential afterwardness of photographs, then, is a double-edged sword: by the same token that photographs can instigate trauma after the fact, they can also be “a medium of a salvaging, preservation, and rescue of reality” (Baer, 2005, p. 24). In fact, photographs can rescue a previously disavowed reality precisely through confronting the subject with it: this confrontation can be, in one fell
swoop, both traumatic and redemptive. Thus, Prosser (2005), referencing Lacan (1981), describes how photography is uniquely positioned to effect a ‘return of the real’, and how the photographic “gaze returns the real overlooked by the more credulous and conscious vision of reality” (Prosser, 2005, p. 5). Poignantly, Prosser likens photography to the poetic form of the palinode, whose essence is the retraction or recantation of an earlier view now acknowledged to have been misguided; this is a painful process: “In palinodes the enlightenment is often coincident with trauma, our greatest insight ensuing from our greatest loss” (2005, p. 13-4). Likewise, “Photography makes real the loss. But then it makes possible the apprehension of this loss. This is my recovery. As offering insight into the inexorable loss that is life, photography captures a reality that we would otherwise not see, that we would choose not to see. It holds out the promise of a kind of enlightenment” (Prosser, 2005, p. 2).

Laplanche adds yet another parameter to the conceptualization of afterwardness by noting that what is missing from the Freudian conception of a past event that is later re-transcribed with new meaning is a greater emphasis on the fact that the past events in question always entail an interaction with another; therefore,

afterwardness is inconceivable without a model of translation: that is, it presupposes that something is proffered by the other, and this is then afterwards retranslated and reinterpreted. … [the] past cannot be a purely factual one, an unprocessed or raw ‘given’. It contains rather in an immanent fashion something that comes before – a message from the other. It is impossible therefore to put forward a purely hermeneutic position on this – that is to say, that everyone interprets their past according to their present – because the past already has
something deposited in it that demands to be deciphered, which is the message of
the other person (1999, p. 269).

This message is “enigmatic” (Laplanche, 1999, p. 269): it invites a potentially infinite
chain of projections and conjectures. According to Laplanche, this is part of the work of
mourning: “Mourning is hardly ever without the question: What would he be saying
now? What would he have said? hardly ever without regret or remorse for not having
been able to speak with the other enough, for not having heard what he had to say” (1999,
p. 258). Here, too, photographs are uniquely positioned to fan the flames of this process
of guessing and imagining, of trying to decipher the lost other’s enigmatic message:
“Photographs compel the imagination because they remain radically open-ended” (Baer,
2005, p. 24). Indeed, they add a new dimension to the regret posited above by Laplanche,
of “not having heard” what the loved person had to say: looking at old photographs, of
happier times, it is hard to avoid wondering whether there was something we missed,
something we did not see or understand at the time in the other person’s attitude, their
posture, their body language, or especially their gaze, still looking at us through all this
time and distance. This is especially true in the case of loss not due to death but, in
Akhtar’s felicitous turn of phrase, “other devastating forms of separation” (Akhtar, 2003,
p. 29). Is there a hint of what was to come in how our loved one was looking at us in that
photograph, a hint discernible only from the vantage point of hindsight? Is that a wistful,
knowing smile in the picture, an indication of their knowing something we did not know,
that we were too late to understand? Or does their smile only appear wistful in
afterwardness? Looking at photographs can open a Pandora’s box of second-guessing and
regret.
II. What is lost: Mourning

Mourning is the set of conscious and unconscious psychological processes set in motion by the loss of a loved one. Mourning processes may be instigated by either a loss due to the actual death of the loved person in question, or another irreversible separation, such as the termination of an important relationship, of someone having been “lost as an object of love” (Freud, 1917e, p. 245). Optimally, the end result of the process of mourning is the acceptance of the irrevocability of the loss and the concomitant achievement of detachment from the hitherto emotionally invested love object, so that the bereaved can go on with their lives and become once more capable of new emotional attachments. Experience demonstrates that the work of mourning is both painful and prolonged in the best of cases, and also that it can go awry in various ways, and turn into some pathological form of mourning. Subsequently, I will try to show how different outcomes of mourning result in different configurations in the mourning subject’s usage of, and relationship to, the photographs of their lost love object – indeed, how, perhaps, this may be a bi-directional process, that is, different uses of photographs may feed into and foster one or another of the possible ways of dealing with loss and resolving the process of mourning.

In the psychoanalytic canon, the fundamental text on mourning continues to be Freud’s pivotal paper *Mourning and Melancholia* (Freud, 1917e). However, antecedents of some of the ideas expressed in that work can also be glimpsed in the case history of Elizabeth von R. (Freud & Breuer, 1895), and, more extensively, in *Totem and Taboo* (Freud, 1913). It is of significance that Freud begins his 1917 paper by drawing a
methodological analogy between his attempt to analyze mourning and the analysis of dreams: he suggests that, just as dreams are ubiquitous, normal mental processes which, however, can offer fundamental insights into the workings of the human mind if they are not just taken for granted but are problematized and meticulously analyzed, so can mourning, another ubiquitous and normal aspect of the human condition, throw light on the unconscious workings of the mind and on pathological processes such as melancholia (which we would nowadays designate as severe depression). However, the analogy with dreams seems to go much deeper than the methodological level, even though Freud himself does not explicitly point this out. This will become clearer as we describe the work performed by mourning.

According to Freud (1917e), mourning entails very significant psychical work indeed, in so far as it consists in the arduous and gradual readjustment of the ego to a new reality, the reality of an external world in which the loved object has become permanently absent. This readjustment takes the form of the gradual withdrawal of libidinal investment from the lost loved object. The process of mourning is a strenuous, prolonged and piecemeal one, because this libidinal withdrawal is effected through an equally gradual and repetitive process of painful reality testing: each expectation of the object’s presence in the outside world, an erstwhile realistic, repeatedly corroborated expectation, is now met with a reality that disconfirms it; the ego must then gradually readjust its expectations, so that they again correspond to objective reality, the reality of a world “which has become poor and empty” (Freud 1917e, p. 246), as it no longer contains the longed-for loved object.
In an essential way, then, mourning is “the work of memory” (Laplanche, 1999, p. 245), “a work of recollection” (Freud & Breuer, 1895, p. 162). It pits memory against reality, the past against the present:

Each single one of the memories and situations of expectancy which demonstrate the libido’s attachment to the lost object is met by the verdict of reality that the object no longer exists; and the ego, confronted as it were with the question whether it shall share this fate, is persuaded by the sum of the narcissistic satisfactions it derives from being alive to sever its attachment to the object that has been abolished. (Freud, 1917e, p. 255)

However, this is easier said than done. Emotional attachments tend to be very tenacious: “people never willingly abandon a libidinal position, not even, indeed, when a substitute is already beckoning to them” (Freud, 1917e, p. 244). Thus, the initial reaction to a catastrophic bereavement or separation typically may very well be a denial of the reality of loss, paired with “a clinging to the object through the medium of a hallucinatory wishful psychosis” (Freud, 1917e, p. 244). This, then, is the other way in which mourning (at least in its initial stage) seems to be similar to dreaming. And, as will be recalled from Chapter 1, photographs can be seen as concretely providing an experience of ‘perceptual identity’ (Freud, 1900a), which is the hallmark of dreaming and of the primary process of hallucinatory wish fulfillment. Thus, as we will soon see in more detail, photographs are potentially ideally situated to buttress the denial of the reality of loss, in the service of obviating the pain and toil of mourning.

In fact, even in the case of a more successful outcome of the mourning process, it would seem that a profound withdrawal from reality (albeit not a persistent denial of it) is
necessary to pave the way for eventual reality-acceptance and moving on. Freud (1917e) describes the triad of “cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, inhibition of all activity” (p. 244), which forms a normal accompaniment to mourning. Again, the similarity to sleep and dreaming is pertinent:

Could it be that, as in dreams, withdrawal into mourning makes it possible to organize the world not on the basis of external perceptions, but on the basis of a subjectivity turned completely inward? Inasmuch as sleep is a prerequisite of mental recuperation, a chance to start again relying on one’s inner resources, it would seem reasonable to conclude that a kind of psychic restoration likewise occurs through mourning, with its deferment of all outside stimuli; that the loss of a cathected object requires a psychic reorganization so absorbing that it means confining all cathexis to the internal world. There are in fact few tasks more engrossing than taking stock of what will never again exist. (Jacobi, 2005, p. 1081)

Again, we will soon see how photographs can play a facilitating role in this process of temporarily, provisionally withdrawing from the exigencies of objective reality in order to eventually accept and address them more successfully.

Nevertheless, as already alluded, this delicate and demanding process of mourning often goes awry, or becomes even more complicated due to the presence of various additional emotional factors. This derailment of successful mourning can take several different forms. As mentioned, one possible outcome is that loss may give rise to an entrenched denial of the actuality of this loss (or, minimally, a denial of the real emotional impact of that loss). Another species of pathological mourning centers on
“obsessive self-reproaches” (Freud, 1913, p. 60), to the effect that the mourner “is overwhelmed by tormenting doubts … as to whether she may not herself have been responsible for the death of this cherished being through some act of carelessness or neglect” (1913, p. 60). Freud attributes this pathological process of mourning to emotional ambivalence; more specifically, to an unconscious sense of guilt derived from hostile feelings that the bereaved unconsciously harbored toward the deceased, feelings which, given the sway of the primary process and the omnipotence of thought in the unconscious, on some level are perceived as in fact having caused the loved person’s death. “In the view of unconscious thinking, a man who has died a natural death is a murdered man: evil wishes have killed him” (Freud, 1913, p. 62).

Significantly, Freud then goes on to discuss how the same emotional ambivalence and unconscious hostile feelings toward loved ones who happened to die give rise, in the case of a multitude of tribal cultures, to various taboos against the dead, the common denominator of which is a conception of the dead as transformed into vindictive, resentful demons that may come back to torment and destroy the living, especially those who were closest to them in life (Freud, 1913). Freud analyzes these fears as deriving from a mechanism of projection of the survivors’ unconscious hostility onto the dead themselves, in combination with the unconscious guilt and need for punishment felt by the bereaved precisely as a result of their unconscious emotional ambivalence. “The taboo upon the dead arises … from the contrast between conscious pain and unconscious satisfaction over the death that has occurred. Since such is the origin of the ghost’s resentment, it follows naturally that the survivors who have the most to fear will be those who were formally its nearest and dearest” (Freud, 1913, p. 61). For my purposes here,
what is of interest is how such an interaction of projection and guilt may play into the
deciphering of the presumed “enigmatic message” (Laplanche, 1999, p. 269) detected in
photographs of lost loved ones, whether the loss was due to death or another form of
separation.

A few years after Totem and Taboo, Freud further elaborated on processes of
pathological mourning stemming from emotional ambivalence in his seminal 1917 paper.
There, he sets out to establish the essential differences between normal mourning and the
condition then termed melancholia, which nowadays would most likely be diagnosed as
severe (reactive) depression. Outwardly, melancholia seems to be identical to mourning
in all its particulars, with one significant exception: the effect it has on the sufferer’s self-
regard. Thus, its defining characteristic is a process of self-reproach, of the self
apparently attacking itself. “The melancholic displays … an extraordinary diminution in
his self-regard, an impoverishment of his ego on a grand scale. In mourning it is the
world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia, it is the ego itself” (Freud,
1917, p. 246). In this, then, melancholia appears to be similar to the states of pathological
mourning described by Freud in Totem and Taboo. The added dimension here is that the
self-reproaches are not simply stemming from an unconscious sense of guilt because of
emotional ambivalence, but are then genuinely directed against the mourner’s own self –
rather, the melancholic’s self-reproaches entail a further reversal, in that they are masked
reproaches against the lost love object, which the subject has incorporated in a process of
identification. “The shadow of the object fell upon the ego, and the latter could
henceforth be judged … as if it were an object, the forsaken object” (Freud, 1917, p.
249). In other words, melancholia derives from a pathological internalized object
relationship, a situation in which what seemed to be a self-reflexive accusation is in fact a covert reproach against the loved object, which has so disappointed and hurt the bereaved by disappearing from his external world. Melancholia derives from “a mental constellation of revolt” (Freud, 1917, p. 248).

Finally, another important feature of melancholia is “its tendency to change round into mania” (Freud, 1917, p. 253). Non-psychogenic cases of bipolar disorder notwithstanding, Freud (1917) suggests that mania may be a manifestation of the regression of libidinal investment away from external objects and onto the self. Thus, he postulates an essential connection between mania and narcissism. According to this conception, the elation and self-aggrandizement that constitute the phenomenology of mania are predicated on the devaluation of the love object, and of emotional attachment in general. Indeed, melancholia is seen as gradually effecting precisely such a devaluation of the object, in terms of the psychical work underlying its surface appearance of devaluing the self: “each single struggle of ambivalence loosen[s] the fixation of the libido to the object by disparaging it, denigrating it and even as it were killing it” (1917, p. 257); this results to a situation where “the manic subject plainly demonstrates his liberation from the object which was the cause of his suffering” (1917, p. 255). Again, in the next section we will see in a little more detail how photographs may be utilized for this defensive purpose of divesting oneself from the pain associated with emotional attachment to a love object.
III. Using photographs to mourn, using photographs to not mourn

A conspicuous absence in the psychoanalytic theorizing about mourning that I have been summarizing in the previous section would concern the part played by material objects in the psychical negotiation and processing of loss. Most patently, physical objects play a significant role in the burial customs and rituals of virtually every culture; their functions in the context of mourning processes, however, are not restricted to that, but are arguably much more extensive and multi-faceted. Yet this lacuna in psychoanalytic theorizing is not limited just to the issue at hand. As Akhtar suggests, “from birth till death a human being is constantly involved with inanimate objects, many of which come to acquire profound psychological meanings for him” (2003, p. 1); nevertheless, and surprisingly, “psychoanalysis has paid inadequate attention to the constructive, sustaining, and symbolic significance of the inanimate surround in which the human mind evolves and functions” (2003, p. 1). In this section, then, I propose to explore in more detail the various roles that photographs can play in a person’s psychic economy when it comes to dealing with loss. My hypothesis is that photographs often become part of mourning, and indeed in a dialectical manner: they may facilitate the expression of different currents or possible channels that mourning processes can follow, but, additionally, their presence and availability may in itself add an important, psychically potent parameter to the overall dynamic, and thus foster, inhibit, or re-direct the particular course that mourning pursues, thereby also potentially influencing its eventual outcome. I will concern myself with three main paths that mourning may follow, in other words, three fundamental reactions to loss: pathological mourning that takes the
form of entrenched melancholia, manic denial of loss, and normal mourning that eventuates in the acceptance of loss and thus ultimately moving on. A by-product of my discussion will be the observation that one and the same object can be used in diametrically opposed ways, that is, can facilitate diametrically opposed psychological processes. This functional pliability of photographs provides a telling demonstration of the fact that it is not so much the inherent characteristics of any given material object as such, but rather the way that the object is employed that has a decisive influence on the role it may come to play in one’s psychic economy.

As we saw, mourning can be derailed from a healthier course and turn into melancholia when intense emotional ambivalence toward the lost loved person is present. Such ambivalence can be due to a combination of factors. These include the mourner’s own psychological constitution and characterological traits, the particulars of the history of the relationship with the love object, and, not least, the circumstances of the bereavement itself: was it due to death or separation? If the former, was the death sudden or long expected? Was it peaceful or violent? If the latter, was this separation inevitable, due to external circumstances, or did it have the character of an intentional abandonment? Did it register as a betrayal by the other person, or was it perhaps the subject himself or herself the one who initiated the separation? The possibilities are endless. But in any  

---

3 We can also conceive of a variant of the third possibility, a special sub-species of normal mourning, so to speak, the importance of which will become more apparent in the next chapter: this would be a kind of sublimation of mourning that goes on, that is not shed once a particular loss has been worked through. In other words, this is a stance that entails an affirmation of ‘the blues’, as it were, as a creative stance and expression, an attitude that not only acknowledges, but, in a manner of speaking, celebrates loss and transience as a measure of the meaningfulness of human encounters and libidinal investments, as suggested in Freud (1916). As in the case of the blues as a fountain of creation in music (not just limited to the homonymous genre), such a stance can also become a wellspring of photography as an art.
event, we saw that pathological mourning is characterized by a pathogenic internalization of the lost love object which, due to the presence of intense ambivalence and aggressive, hostile feelings, does not resolve itself into an ego-syntonic identification and integration of the good qualities of the lost object into the ego. Rather, the mental representation of the lost object functions as a semi-alien introject, and the mourner is caught up in the vicious circle of an internalized object relationship that consists of interminable attacks upon this disappointing, hated object, which are phenomenologically experienced as attacks against one’s own self (one’s self-regard, sense of well-being, etc.). It is also of the essence of pathological mourning that it relegates the mourner to a kind of limbo, a sort of psychic stasis, as opposed to normal mourning, whose course may be slow and painful but is eventually spent and overcome.

Photographs can become potent triggers or facilitators of the internal drama of melancholia. Volkan (1981, 1984) introduced the concept of ‘linking objects’ in relation to pathological forms of mourning. Even though Volkan only concerns himself with mourning due to actual death, I believe that this concept is equally, if not more so, applicable to other forms of loss as well. (Thus, even in the absence of the real death or loss of the object depicted, a photograph is always an emanation from, and a monument to, a moment forever lost). Volkan writes: “A linking object is something actually present in the environment that is psychologically contaminated with various aspects of the dead and the self … the significance of this object does not fade as it does in uncomplicated mourning. Rather, it increasingly commands attention with its aura of mystery, fascination, and terror” (1981, p. 101). Note how the linking object is not just associatively linked to the lost loved one, but is psychologically invested with aspects of
the self as well. Thus, it “functions as an external meeting ground for those representations that offer the illusion of reunion between the mourner and the deceased” (Volkan, 1984, p. 334). In other words, the linking object is an external reification of the internalized object relationship between mourner and mourned, and thus becomes an arena for the expression of the ambivalence characterizing that relationship. A material object can acquire this role if it was something the deceased was attached to and habitually used, if it was a gift from the deceased to the mourner, or an object that the bereaved happened to be handling at the exact moment when he learned the news of the loss (Volkan, 1981). Two additional categories of linking objects, however, are much more pertinent to our present purposes. Thus, another main sub-species of linking objects is comprised of “things through which the deceased had extended his senses – for example, a camera” (1984, p. 334). I would suggest that, much more than the mechanical apparatus (the camera itself), it is the tangible results of the operation of such an apparatus by the lost loved one, i.e. the photographs that he took (which, after all, are replicas of what he saw at the moment of taking the pictures) that can function as linking objects. Additionally, and predictably, “[s]ymbolic or realistic representations of the dead person’s appearance, such as a photograph” (Volkan, 1984, p. 334) form yet another type of linking object.

Both the photographs that the lost loved one took themselves, and photographs of them, can thus become fertile ground for the proliferation of phantasy and projections, purveyors of an infinitude of enigmatic messages from beyond. Indeed, by including an element of “terror” in the “aura” (Volkan, 1981, p. 101) surrounding linking objects, Volkan is hinting precisely at the fact that such objects become depositories of
unconscious hostile projective identifications, thus turning into a non-psychotic equivalent of Bion’s (1956, 1957) ‘bizarre objects’. In any case, my main point is that looking at photographs associated with the lost loved object can fuel the mourner’s ambivalent, tenacious attachment, and perpetuate the process of pathological mourning. By returning to the lost one’s photographs in a frame of mind where ambivalence is dominant, the mourner keeps revisiting the trauma of loss, and, more likely than not, even intensifying that trauma through his projections (projections steeped in feelings of betrayal, disappointment, and resentment). This way, looking at photographs can result in a perpetually open wound, a wound that won’t heal – indeed, a wound that is scratched open again every time it threatens to heal, in the manner of a pathological repetition compulsion (Freud, 1920), a trauma intentionally renewed again and again in afterwardness. Hence, I am tempted to suggest that, when recruited in the service of processes of pathological interminable mourning, photographs could be pertinently described as sadomasochistic objects.

On the other end of the spectrum from melancholia we encounter denial as another less than optimally healthy possible way of attempting to deal with loss. We saw how denial as a rule forms the initial reaction to bereavement and normal processes of mourning; however, in pathological outcomes denial can become prolonged and entrenched. Moreover, denial as a way of dealing with loss can assume the more straightforward aspect of denying the reality of the loss itself, or the subtler form of denying the real magnitude of the lost loved one’s emotional significance for the bereaved. With this in mind, and despite appearances, there may in fact be significant underlying connecting threads between melancholia and the entrenched denial of loss. In
the previous section we saw how Freud (1917) proposed that the oft-observed reversal of melancholia into mania may be the more or less sudden outward manifestation of a much more prolonged underlying process, namely, the gradual chipping away of the value of the lost love object by the constant attacks and denigrations the ambivalent ego engages in against it.

Melanie Klein (1935, 1940) significantly expanded upon these ideas. In fact, she postulated that manic defenses against dependence can operate at any time, not just in the wake of actual loss – that is, a manic denial of the importance of the depended-upon loved object can also operate pre-emptively: “Its torturous and perilous dependence on its loved objects drives the ego to find freedom” (1935, p. 161). A primary means of achieving this illusory sense of freedom from dependence takes the form of the disparagement of the goodness and value of the loved object, and consequently of its importance for the subject. This disparagement is not just directed against the actual loved object, but toward its internal representation as well. The ego “attempt[s] to detach itself from an object without at the same time renouncing it” (Klein, 1935, p. 162; italics mine); “[i]t succeeds in this compromise by denying the importance of its good objects” (1935, p. 162; italics in the original). We will presently examine in more detail the implications of the fact that the compromise consists, in effect, in simultaneously, and paradoxically, both renouncing and not renouncing the good loved object. Another important aspect of the manic defense against dependence, in the Kleinian conception, is the endeavor to control the love object in phantasy, through the employment of the “sense of omnipotence” (Klein, 1935, p. 162) that holds sway there. The purpose of this phantasied omnipotent control of the object is twofold: to reverse the situation of
dependence upon the object, but also to be able to undo the aggressive attacks that have been directed against the object in phantasy, that is, to make ‘reparation’. Klein writes: “[T]he objects were killed but, since the subject was omnipotent, he supposed he could also immediately call them to life again. One of my patients spoke of this process as ‘keeping them in suspended animation’” (1935, p. 162. Italics mine).

The above turn of phrase would also serve as an apposite description of photographic representations. Photographs are literally devices for freezing the flow of motion that we normally perceive in our lived experience. But the connection of photographs to the kind of psychic suspended animation that Klein’s patient was describing runs much deeper than that. I want to suggest that photographs can be utilized in the service of manic defense, for purposes of evading the full recognition of loss and the concomitant pain of mourning. Their being put to such use makes them closely related to fetishes, as I will now attempt to show.

Strictly speaking, the concept of a fetish relates to the sphere of sexuality. In this sense, a fetish is “an inherently non-sexual object” (Lussier, 2005, p. 582) which, paradoxically, in the case of certain men becomes an essential precondition for achieving and maintaining potency and/or for obtaining pleasure from sexual relations with women. An example would be a man’s need for the woman to be wearing high heels during the sexual act, in the absence of which it is impossible for him to achieve or maintain an erection. According to Freud (1927e), the compulsive reliance of the fetishist on the fetish as a precondition for sexual satisfaction is to be explained on the basis of psychic defense, the alleviation of intolerable anxiety that the fetish affords; specifically, the alleviation of castration anxiety. Freud claims that the fixation on the fetish develops in
that instance in childhood when a male child becomes aware of the anatomical differences between the sexes, namely, the fact that women do not possess a penis (as young boys initially naively assume on the basis of overgeneralizing from their own anatomy). This new perception of the absence of a penis in women is extremely alarming, because it opens up the possibility that the little boy's own penis might be taken away and become lost. Freud claims that the possibility of such a threat to bodily integrity can be so unbearably terrifying that the only way some individuals can deal with it is to disavow the perception that led to it in the first place. “The creation of the fetish was due to an intention to destroy the evidence for the possibility of castration, so that fear of castration could be avoided” (Freud, 1938, p. 203). The fetish, then, is a material object which is in some manner associatively connected to the terrifying perception of the real female genitalia, but at the same time comes to stand for the otherwise absent, fantasized female penis, and thus alleviates the terror triggered by the absence of a penis in females in objective reality. It is important to note that this defensive manoeuver does not consist in an absolute denial of a piece of reality; this differentiates it from psychosis. Rather, what happens is that the fixation on the fetish facilitates a paradoxical parallel acknowledgment and denial of a piece of objective reality – this “divided attitude” (Freud, 1927, p. 156) is the essence of both fetishism and disavowal. The fetishist “has retained [a] belief, but he has also given it up” (Freud, 1927, p. 154).

It can be seen that in his theory of fetishism Freud is revealing a more widely applicable template about one possible way of psychologically negotiating the real and imagined terrors of the world, over and above the specific content he gives to this template in this instance. That is, the sexual fetish may be a talisman against the
recognition of the absence of a penis in females, but the fetishistic defense may also come to the rescue of other cherished possessions, other libidinally invested objects. In fact, Freud himself was quick to point this out. In *An Outline of Psychoanalysis*, he writes: “disavowals of this kind occur very often and not only with fetishists; and whenever we are in a position to study them they turn out to be half-measures, incomplete attempts at detachment from reality. The disavowal is always supplemented by an acknowledgment” (1938, p. 204). Even in the 1927 paper on fetishism itself, Freud clearly indicated the applicability of the concept to the non-sexual sphere. Thus, referring to emotional investments in abstract ideas and specifically the political sphere, he writes: “In later life a man may perhaps experience a similar panic when the cry goes up that Throne and Altar are in danger, and similar illogical consequences will ensue” (1927, p. 153). And, more pertinently for our present focus, he also refers to the case of two young men both of whom had lost their father at a young age, and yet “had failed to take cognizance of the death” (1927, p. 155), without, however, developing a psychosis. Rather, “a piece of reality which was undoubtedly important had been disavowed by the ego, just as the unwelcome fact of women’s castration is disavowed in fetishists. … It was only one current in their mental life that had not recognized their father’s death; there was another current which took full account of that fact. The attitude which fitted in with the wish and the attitude which fitted in with reality existed side by side” (1927, p. 156).

Freud (1927) concludes his paper on fetishism by referring to certain fetishes that are particularly subtle and ingenious compromise-formations, in that they are “doubly derived from contrary ideas” (1927, p. 157), condensing both the acknowledgment and the disavowal of reality in their very construction and their specific characteristics; this
makes them “especially durable” (1927, p. 157). Photographs are interesting objects in this regard. In their very essence, they instantiate presence and absence at one and the same time, regardless of the additional consideration of whether the person(s) depicted in a photograph are still alive (or still part of our lives) or not. By dint of the mechanics of the photographic process and the ontology of photographic images, photographic representations are always both in the past tense but also very much present. The people and scenes preserved in photographs are both here (as images) and not here. In a sense, photographs are always populated by ghosts. This paradoxical character of photographic representation acquires an additional layer of signification and poignancy when the loved ones populating our photographs are not simply absent for the moment, while we are contemplating their photographic traces, but are, for one reason or another, forever gone.

What I want to suggest is that, by dint of their paradoxical nature, photographs are particularly well-suited for being employed as fetishistic objects, in order to disavow the fact and/or the pain of loss and bereavement and evade the cost of emotional attachment. In more extreme cases, looking at photographs in this way may facilitate the disavowal of actual bereavement or other traumatic loss. Much more commonly, however, I want to claim that our culture’s constantly intensifying dependence on interminably proliferating photographic images can also be seen as a manic defense against dependence and loss, albeit of a milder form. Recall how, according to Klein (1935), omnipotent control of the love object is one important aspect of the manic defense. Photographs of our loved ones, especially in this age of portable electronic devices (which replaced the photographs tucked in wallets) are always readily available, and always at our behest – literally at our fingertips. Thanks to the availability of photographs, we can summon hallucinatory wish-
fulfillment through perceptual identity (Freud, 1900a) at will. Photographs can thus furnish us with an illusory sense of control over our love objects, thus reversing our sense of dependence on them, and affording us an unconscious feeling of narcissistic triumph over them (Freud, 1917; Klein, 1940). Moreover, photographs as fetishes can also foster the disavowal of another kind of loss (as I already hinted in Chapter 1, while discussing the function of photographs as screen memories): namely, the loss of past moments, the reality of the constant, inexorable passage of time, the trickling away of our lives. Thus, fetishes and screen memories can, in an important regard, be viewed as functionally equivalent, in that they both can be seen as facilitating disavowal by using an aspect of external reality to conceal another, more disturbing and painful aspect.

There is another class of material object that is closely related to the fetish, and yet also ultimately very different in its psychic functions. I am referring to the concept of the ‘transitional object’, which we owe to Winnicott (1953, 1971). The transitional object is the infant’s “first possession” (Winnicott, 1953, p. 89), the first halfway station in the developmental journey from primary symbiosis and undifferentiation between self and other, to the achievement of a true object relationship. Prototypically, the transitional object can be something like a soft blanket or soft toy, but all sorts of things can serve as transitional objects. However, this is not to say that the materiality of the object is not important – on the contrary: “the point of it is not its symbolic value so much as its actuality” (Winnicott, 1953, p. 91-2. Italics mine). And yet, its very materiality is what enables it to occupy the no-man’s-land between reality and imagination: “It comes from without from our point of view, but not so from the point of view of the baby. Neither does it come from within; it is not an hallucination” (1953, p. 91. Italics mine). Initially,
the transitional object is employed by infants (beginning anywhere between the ages of 4 and 12 months) in order to negotiate and bridge the gap between a world where all that exists is part of the self, and one in which there is the growing realization that there are objects external to the self and not subject to its wishes; most crucially, the realization that the mother is a separate and independent entity, and not a creation of the infant’s omnipotent imagination. Thus, the transitional object assists the infant in making the transition from psychic reality to becoming aware of, and accepting, objective, external reality as well; it “gives room for the process of becoming able to accept difference and similarity” (Winnicott, 1953, p. 92).

What is crucial in this conception is that the transitional object somehow spans various supposedly incompatible and mutually exclusive existential and logical categories, such as ‘subjective’ and ‘objective’, ‘reality’ and ‘illusion’, ‘internal’ and ‘external’. In relating to the transitional object, dichotomies such as the above do not even come into question; adult, Aristotelian logic is suspended, and paradox is tolerated instead of resolved. Indeed, paradox is of the essence of the transitional object.

Winnicott theorizes that, even though the original transitional object of childhood is eventually given up (once it serves its purpose, the need for it just evaporates), the value of the suspension of strict dichotomies that it affords is never superseded; indeed, the capacity to temporarily indulge in illusion, the ability to suspend disbelief (to paraphrase Coleridge) is essential for a full human life. The specific transitional object of infancy may be given up, but its legacy remains, in the form of other ‘transitional phenomena’, in the form of “the intense experiencing that belongs to the arts and to religion and to imaginative living” (1953, p. 97). Such transitional phenomena provide
some of our most satisfying and meaningful experiences throughout life because “[i]t is assumed here that the task of reality-acceptance is never completed, that no human being is free from the strain of relating inner and outer reality, and that relief from this strain is provided by an intermediate area of experience which is not challenged” (1953, p. 96). Transitional objects and phenomena exist in, and make possible, “an intermediate area of experiencing, to which inner reality and external life both contribute. It is an area which is not challenged, because no claim is made on its behalf except that it shall exist as a resting-place for the individual engaged in the perpetual human task of keeping inner and outer reality separate yet inter-related” (1953, p. 90; italics in the original).

The transitional object, then, is “a bridge between that which is comfortably familiar and whatever is disturbingly unfamiliar” (Greenacre, 1969, p. 145); like every bridge, its purpose is to facilitate movement and then to be left behind. Winnicott postulates that, in order for there to be a place for a transitional object in the developing infant’s psychic economy, a very subtle, repeated dialectic between illusion and disillusionment is necessary. If the mother is not ‘good enough’, sensitively attuned and available to meet the infant’s need at the moment it arises, as if by magic, then the capacity for illusion is stymied, and along with it the ability to use an object in a transitional way. However, it is equally important for the mother to be able to gradually frustrate and disillusion the baby, because “incomplete adaptation to need makes objects real … exact adaptation resembles magic, and the object that behaves perfectly becomes no better than an hallucination” (Winnicott, 1953, p. 94). If the dialectic between illusion and disillusionment unfolds in an adequate manner, separation and weaning becomes possible, in the sense that it can be experienced and accepted and not be a catastrophic,
unthinkable occurrence. “The mere termination of breast feeding is not a weaning” (Winnicott, 1953, p. 96).

And this brings us to photographs again. Over and above the difficulty of reconciling oneself to separation and individuation in childhood, transience (the loss of our love objects as well as the passage of time, the loss of our own past moments) remains a challenge throughout life, never ceasing to stretch and test our capacity for reality-acceptance. My claim is that, subsequent to the stage of the initial transitional object of childhood, photographs become prime candidates for objects able to instigate transitional experiences in later life, to assist us in recapturing the ‘potential space’ in which we can indulge in paradox and illusion without getting irrevocably lost in it. As already discussed, photographs are paradoxical objects in their very essence, encapsulating absence and presence, materiality and hallucinatory wish-fulfillment simultaneously. Like the transitional object of childhood, a photograph is a very tangible part of external reality that also embodies internal, mental states, is a vessel for desire and phantasy. In the critic John Szarkowski’s extremely apt phrase quoted earlier, photographs are “figments from the real world”. My suggestion, then, is that photographs, if used in a transitional manner, can facilitate healthy mourning, the acceptance of loss and transience. They can do this, paradoxically, by offering a temporary respite from loss, by furnishing us with the experience of recapturing, and reconnecting with, our lost objects (as well as with lost time and our lost past selves) in a potential space of illusion. While contemplating a photograph, we can momentarily feel that our loved one it depicts is still with us, across time and distance or the even more
unbridgeable gap of death – or that *we ourselves* can fleetingly be transported back to the objectively irrevocably lost moment portrayed in the photograph.

But then what differentiates this purported use of photographs from the fetishistic usage I was describing earlier? Indeed, various authors, including Winnicott himself, have described what seems to be a very great overlap between the conceptualization of the fetish and the transitional object (Wulff, 1946; Winnicott, 1953; Greenacre, 1969, 1970). Winnicott offers a hint toward answering this question when he writes that “*some abrogation of omnipotence* is a feature [of the transitional object] from the start” (1953, p. 91; my italics). As we saw, the fetishistic *use* of an object is predicated on an intense narcissistic need for omnipotent control and manipulation of the object; it would seem, then, that this is one essential difference from the transitional use of the object. Winnicott (1953) aptly expresses this distinction by differentiating between an *illusion*, facilitated by the transitional object, and a *delusion*, which is sustained by the fetish. Photographs are particularly well-suited for illustrating how this distinction really stems from the use the object is put to, from the psychic position from which the use of the object emanates, and not from the object’s material or perceptual qualities per se.

Crucially, then, using photographs as transitional objects facilitates mourning as well as the eventual overcoming of mourning, instead of either manically evading it or masochistically getting stuck in it.⁴ When looking at photographs in a transitional

---

⁴ Over and above this transitional usage of photographs in the service of healthy mourning and moving beyond loss, photography as a creative activity can also become a door toward transitional experience in a more permanent, ongoing manner. Inasmuch as loss is an abiding undercurrent of life (minimally, in the sense of the constant passage of time), one possible existential stance is to face this fact head-on and indeed embrace it, and, far from becoming dispirited by it, rather sublimate mourning into an affirmation of life and of our libidinal attachments, despite their transience, as alluded to earlier in
manner, on some level we know perfectly well that we have aged, or that so-and-so is forever gone; or simply that the past is past – that we will never re-enter the same river. We take momentary respite from harsh reality, but we don’t disavow it in the same absolute and omnipotent manner as happens in fetishism, nor do we allow ourselves to be crushed by it and by our own resentment as happens in melancholia.

reference to ‘the blues’; this musical genre is a paradigmatic case in point of how grief and sadness can be channeled into creativity and indeed a celebration (of sorts) of loss. Freud, in *On Transience*, one of his most lyrical pieces, which recounts a conversation of his with a poet who was claiming that the transitory nature of beauty renders it useless and annuls whatever joy it can afford us, writes:

I could not see my way to dispute the transience of all things, nor could I insist upon an exception in favour of what is beautiful and perfect. But I did dispute the pessimistic poet’s view that the transience of what is beautiful involves any loss in its worth.

On the contrary, an increase! Transience value is scarcity value in time. Limitation in the possibility of an enjoyment raises the value of the enjoyment. (1916, p. 305).
CHAPTER 3: ARTISTIC CREATIVITY, AESTHETIC VALUE, AND PHOTOGRAPHY

I. Freud’s aesthetics and its limitations and potentialities

In the foregoing discussion I have been focusing on photography as an everyday cultural practice, and on photographs as artifacts that are part of the fabric of ordinary life of most people in the world we live in. I have been making the case that photographs are a special kind of artifact that attracts highly charged emotional investments and comes to occupy an all-important place in most people’s psychic economy, becoming a locus and catalyst for the construction of personal narratives and the negotiation of transience and loss. However, photography is also an artistic practice. Certain photographs are deemed by our culture to be part of the institution of art, as distinguished from simple everyday ‘snapshots’. What makes this juxtaposition even more interesting is the fact that photography as a process generally does not entail or presuppose a high level of technical expertise, especially given the great leaps in technology in recent years. Not everyone can play a musical instrument, at least until one has undergone years of training and practice, but everyone can take a picture. Minimally, all that is needed is to be sighted and to push a button. In that sense, the medium of photography is similar to the medium of language: almost everyone possesses it, but few manage to use it in a way that gives rise to poetry. The flip side of this is that, just like with language, as in the case of ‘found poetry’, what endows a photograph with aesthetic value and elevates it to the status of art is not necessarily a function of the photographer’s intent or conscious assumption of the role of
artistic creator. Photographs created with the intention of being works of art may be
demed to have failed in this ambition, while some photographs that were created with no
avowed aesthetic aspirations in mind may, nevertheless, strike us as objects of aesthetic
value. In this chapter, then, I will attempt to begin addressing the question of those
parameters the presence or absence of which may elevate a photograph from the status of
a mere ordinary snapshot to that of an object with aesthetic significance, or, alternatively,
may render a photograph, albeit created with artistic intent and technical expertise,
worthless as a genuine work of art.

I will begin my exposition with a brief review of the tenor of Freud’s forays into
aesthetics, in order to set the frame and indicate how the approach he pursued was,
ultimately, very inadequate to tackle the essential problems of art, but also how he gave
expression to a fundamental insight that set the stage for subsequent developments in
psychoanalytic aesthetics, even though it did not significantly inform his own writings on
art. The pivotal text in psychoanalytic art criticism as practiced by Freud is his essay on
Leonardo da Vinci (Freud, 1910). In this text, Freud sets out to analyze a number of
works by Leonardo in terms of their content, and, in conjunction with biographical and
autobiographical material regarding the artist and especially his childhood, derive certain
conclusions as to what factors in the artist’s psychological makeup and conflicts found
indirect expression by means of his art. Freud calls this approach “pathography” (Freud,
1910, p. 130), by analogy with biography, the significant difference being that, in Freud’s
view, biographers “devote their energies to a task of idealization” (1910, p. 130), whereas
the psychoanalytic pathographer aims for truth, the reality of his subject’s personality
development and emotional struggles. In other words, in this approach art and its
products are no more than grist for the psychoanalytic mill, something like “a privileged form of neurosis” (Glover, 2009, p. 3). Artworks become material for analysis in the same way as dreams or symptoms or fantasies; “Freud’s exclusive concern [is] with what a work of art says” (Wollheim, 1965, p. xi; my italics).

There are two major shortcomings to such an approach. Even in terms of the more modest goal of simply utilizing works of art in order to corroborate or illustrate psychoanalytic hypotheses (“Pathography does not in the least aim at making the great man’s achievements intelligible”, Freud (1910, p. 130) writes), there is the difficulty that “the method would seem to presuppose that we have access to material which in the very nature of things we are unlikely to possess, or at any rate to possess to the requisite degree” (Wollheim, 1965, p. x). And this does not only concern the objective facts of an artist’s life and history; even if a complete and reliable record of these was available, psychoanalysis has taught us that what is psychologically significant is not so much the facts of a person’s life per se, but “how he felt these facts: the fantasies under which he subsumed them and through which they impinged upon him” (Wollheim, 1965, p. x). Thus, pathography can, at best, be an interesting intellectual exercise; at worst, not much more than wild analysis. As E.H. Gombrich writes, “[s]uch attempts as have been made … to tiptoe across the chasm of centuries on a fragile rope made of stray information can never be more than a jeu d’esprit, even if the performance is as dazzling as Freud’s Leonardo” (1963, p. 31). To his credit, Freud himself did not lose sight of this limitation; in a letter to the painter Hermann Struck, he described the Leonardo essay as “half a novelistic fiction” (quoted in Gombrich, 1966, p. 33).
A second, and much more serious, objection to the pathographic approach to art is that, essentially, it does not concern itself with genuine aesthetic problems at all. Specifically, as Richard Wollheim pithily puts it, it “seems to leave the work of art *qua* work of art curiously untouched” (1965, p. x). For, if the emphasis is solely on the work’s psychological content, in terms of its giving expression to the artist’s conflicts, fixations, etc. in the manner of a compromise-formation, then the question is begged as to why these aspects of the artist’s psychology find expression in his creative work instead of simply in his symptoms and dreams, as is the case with ordinary people, and, moreover, what it is that makes the artwork meaningful and valuable not just to its creator, as a vehicle of his drives and fantasies, but to other people as well. Wollheim writes:

> [A]s we have seen, it is an implication of Freud’s own writings that art has a great deal in common with other human activities some of whose products may charm or gratify the mind, even to a high degree, but none of which goes by the name of art. The question therefore arises, Has psycho-analysis anything of interest to say about what is not common to works of art and these other objects? What are those modifications which content of a kind that might otherwise be found unacceptable necessarily undergoes in the course of earning what is society’s highest approbation? What is it for something, which might in other circumstances trickle out into play or fantasy, to be incorporated into art? (1965, p. xii)

Herbert Read gave voice to the same quibble (as specifically applied to literature) when he stated, in his Ernest Jones Lecture before the British Psycho-analytical Society, that “psychology is concerned with the *processes* of mental activity, literary criticism with the *product*. The psychologist analyses the product only to arrive at the process; art
is, from this point of view, as significant as any other expression of mentality. But of no more significance: its significance does not correspond to its value as literature” (1951, p. 73). And indeed, there is no better illustration of this point than Freud’s own paper on creative writers (Freud 1908e), an essay notorious for the fact that the literary examples that Freud adduces are generally of very low literary quality, of the type of pulp romances. Moreover, in this essay Freud presents a picture of the creative writer as a neurotic daydreamer who has trouble adjusting to reality, and of literature as a means of vicariously obtaining the imaginary fulfillment of forbidden wishes through partaking of the fantasies of the writer. He presented a virtually identical picture of the artist in subsequent writings (Freud 1911b, 1916-17): someone essentially maladjusted and neurotic, who, however, by means of his art manages to find a circuitous way back to reality and the objective fulfillment of his fantasies, upon achieving success as an artist.

But how does the artist manage to translate his private fantasies into public success and recognition? This is all the more puzzling given that Freud postulates that other people’s fantasies normally “repel us or at least leave us cold” (1908e, p. 153). Freud’s answer to this question contains, in embryonic form, the kernel of subsequent developments in the psychoanalytic theory of art that, as I will try to show, engaged more directly with the fundamental questions at the heart of aesthetics. Freud writes:

How the writer accomplishes this is his innermost secret; the essential *ars poetica* lies in the technique of overcoming the feeling of repulsion in us which is undoubtedly connected with the barriers that rise between each single ego and the others. We can guess two of the methods used by this technique. The writer softens the character of his egoistic daydreams by altering and disguising it, and
he bribes us by the purely formal – that is, aesthetic – yield of pleasure which he offers us in the presentation of his phantasies. We give the name of an *incentive bonus*, or a *fore-pleasure*, to a yield of pleasure such as this, which is offered to us so as to make possible the release of still greater pleasure arising from deeper psychical sources. In my opinion, all the aesthetic pleasure which a creative writer affords us has the character of a fore-pleasure of this kind, and our actual enjoyment of an imaginative work proceeds from a liberation of tensions in our minds. (Freud, 1908e, p. 153; italics in the original)

Here Freud is finally acknowledging the quintessential, distinguishing mark of art, namely, its formal aspects, the formal values it entails. As Wollheim writes, “Form in effect embraces all the specifically artistic features that can be predicated of works of art” (1965, p. xiii); these are the features of the artwork “that do not have a particular story to tell us” (1965, p. xiv). Still, Freud’s acknowledgment of the formal qualities of art seems here rather half-hearted. He still seems to be implying that the formal aspect of the artwork is “merely a bait to catch the poor fish” (Read, 1951, p. 76), by relegating the enjoyment of form to the sphere of mere fore-pleasure. “So we are back … to a therapeutic theory of art” (Read, 1951, p. 76), the conception of art as no more than a kind of cathartic therapy for the instinctual renunciations and frustrations imposed on us by civilization. From the point of view of art historians and philosophers of art such as Read and Gombrich, this completely misses the point.

Nevertheless, such a reading may be giving Freud too little credit. After all, he was repeatedly the first to admit that his approach had a very specific focus, and “can do nothing toward elucidating the nature of the artistic gift, nor can it explain the means by
which the artist works – artistic technique” (Freud, 1925, p. 65). Moreover, even his protestations to this effect may have erred a little on the side of modesty – he may have had a slightly greater inkling of the workings of form than he himself readily acknowledged. In a paper on ‘Freud’s Aesthetics’, Gombrich (1966) details Freud’s conservative taste in art and his aversion, indeed his “uncompromising hostility” (1966, p. 33) to modern movements in art, especially in the visual arts. He modified his stance somewhat near the end of his life, shortly after his move to London, after his friend Stefan Zweig managed to persuade him to be introduced to Salvador Dali. His note to Zweig following this meeting, dated July 20th, 1938, is very illuminating:

I can really thank you for the introduction which yesterday’s visitor brought me. For up to then I was inclined to consider the Surrealists who appeared to have chosen me as their patron saint, pure lunatics or let us say 95 per cent, as with ‘pure’ alcohol. The young Spaniard with his patently sincere and fanatic eyes and his undeniable technical mastery has suggested to me a different appreciation. …

Yet, as a critic, one might still be entitled to say that the concept of art resisted an extension beyond the point where the quantitative proportion between unconscious material and preconscious elaboration is not kept within a certain limit. (Freud, quoted in Gombrich, 1966, p. 34-5; my italics)

The thoughts expressed here by Freud are revealing on multiple counts. For one, it becomes apparent that he in fact did not espouse a naïve, crude romantic view of art as pure expression, the uninhibited and unprocessed outpouring of the artist’s unconscious drives into his artwork. His misguided aversion to Expressionism and Surrealism seems to have been based on precisely such a misconception on his part as to what these
movements were engaged in. Dali’s “undeniable technical mastery” seems to have made him realize his erstwhile error in assuming that modern art was nothing more than pure primitive expression, pure content at the expense of form. And not only does Freud suggest here that for him “there was no artistic value in the primary process as such” (Gombrich, 1966, p. 35), but he gives a clear and specific indication of his conception of the dynamic interplay between content and form in the work of art, or rather, in any work worthy of the name of art. He states that only in so far as a fine balance between the unconscious material (content) and its preconscious elaboration (form) is maintained will a work of art ensue. As Gombrich (1966) points out, this formula very closely mirrors Freud’s model of the workings of the joke. According to that model, the essence of the mental constructions we recognize as jokes is that “a preconscious thought is given over for a moment to unconscious revision” (Freud, 1905, p. 166; Freud’s italics). What the unconscious revision in question contributes to the end-product is not its content but its distinctive form, “the dream-like condensation of meaning characteristic of … the primary process” (Gombrich, 1966, p. 35). We should not be confused by Freud’s apparent reversal in speaking of “preconscious elaboration” in the one instance, and “unconscious revision” in the other. The underlying idea is the same: that some mental content, which could theoretically be expressed in propositional form if it became conscious as such, instead undergoes a distinctive formal transformation by being filtered through the workings of the primary process, namely condensation and displacement. Several commentators, beginning with Ernst Kris (Kris, 1952; Gombrich, 1966; Wollheim, 1970) have indeed pointed to this model as epitomizing an alternative current of thought in Freud’s understanding of art, and indeed one that successfully focuses on
the essential problems of aesthetics, as opposed to the pathographic approach that seems somewhat irrelevant or parasitical to art as such. Freud himself, despite not pursuing this approach further, was apparently aware of its potential; in his essay ‘On the history of the psycho-analytic movement’ (1914), he writes: “The first example of an application of the analytic mode of thought to the problems of aesthetics was contained in my book on jokes. Everything beyond this is still awaiting workers, who may expect a particularly rich harvest in this field” (1914, p. 36-7).

In this conception, then, what is essential to a work of art (as indeed to a joke) are the specific formal transformations that some mental content undergoes thanks to the workings of the primary process. The content as such, if expressed in propositional form, may be not only objectionable or unpalatable, but, more pertinently for our present discussion, uninteresting or boring. Thus, for instance, the underlying content of jokes is shown to be replete with aggressive or vulgar sexual impulses and ideas (Freud 1905c). If expressed as such, these ideas might cause shock and embarrassment, not laughter. However, in the guise of a joke, that is, under a particular formal aspect capitalizing on the transformations effected by the primary process, the same content enjoys a very different reception. This is how Gombrich describes the primary process and its application to jokes:

It is a process in which the impressions and experiences of our waking life are mixed and churned in unpredictable permutations and combinations. In the dream no less than in insanity the dynamism of this vortex overwhelms our waking thought, the reality principle of the ego. In the joke the ego merely makes use of this mechanism in order to invest an idea with a peculiar charm. A thought which
it would perhaps be rude or indecorous to utter plain is dipped as it were into the magic spring of the primary process, as one can dip a flower or a twig into the calcine waters of Karlsbad where they emerge transformed into something rich and strange. (1966, p. 35)

One important implication of Freud’s postulated necessity for keeping “the quantitative proportion” between content and its formal elaboration through the filter of the primary process “within a certain limit” is that a fine balance between these two factors needs to be achieved and maintained for either a joke or a work of art to succeed. For instance, in the case of a punning joke, “[i]f the idea were smothered in a welter of punning the result would be more like gibberish than like a joke; if the pun were poor the idea would not be good enough to compensate for this lack of structure” (Gombrich, 1966, p. 35). I will subsequently elaborate further on the application of this principle to works of art.

Gombrich calls attention to two additional features of this model that are of fundamental importance for any adequate aesthetics, “two supreme virtues which must recommend it to the historian and critic of art. It explains the relevance both of the medium and its mastery; two vital elements which are sometimes neglected in less circumspect applications of psycho-analytic ideas to art” (1966, p. 35). By speaking of the relevance of the medium, Gombrich means that the possibilities and limitations of the medium of expression to a large extent determine or delimit the content that can find expression through the given medium. “It is often the wrapping that determines the content” (Gombrich, 1966, p. 36). For instance, in the case of jokes, “[p]uns are not made; they are discovered in the language, and what the primary process does … is really to facilitate this discovery by its rapid shuttling of associations” (1966, p. 35; my italics).
We will subsequently see how this idea of accidental discovery is particularly pertinent to photography as a medium. However, this process of discovering the possibilities of the medium is far from completely random or a matter of chance. This is where the element of mastering the medium comes into the picture. In his book on jokes, Freud discusses the child’s pleasure in experimenting with the use of words in a playful way (1905, p. 125), a playful experimentation that leads to gradual mastery of the language. Gombrich suggests that those who have cultivated this playful mastery of the medium of language are much more likely to discover “such accidents of sound and meaning as make up the perfect pun” (1966, p. 36). The point, then, is that a successful work of art, like a successful pun, presupposes a very high degree of adjustment to, and mastery of, an aspect of objective reality, the reality of the medium. Gombrich suggests that this current of thought in Freud’s aesthetics has been largely overlooked. He writes: “It is the denial of such realities which Freud dismissed as ‘lunatic’. Far from looking in the world of art only for its unconscious content of biological drives and childhood memories he insisted on that degree of adjustment to reality that alone turns a dream into a work of art” (1966, p. 36). This, then, might be the beginning of an answer to Wollheim’s challenge as to whether psychoanalysis has “anything of interest to say about what is not common to works of art” (1965, p. xii; my italics) and other phenomena such as dreams or symptoms.

In what seems to me a particularly apt metaphor, Gombrich designates the naïve conception of art as pure expression as “centrifugal”, in contrast to which he calls the conception in which the content of the artwork is shaped and channeled by the medium “centripetal” (1966, p. 36). He writes:
The artist who thus experiments and plays – who looks for discoveries in language if he is a writer or a poet, in visual shapes if he is a painter – will no doubt select in that preconscious process of which Freud speaks the structures *that will greet him as meaningful in terms of his mind and conflicts. But it is his art that informs his mind, not his mind that breaks through in his art*. Just as the temptations of a pun may sometimes bring out an aggressive thought that would otherwise have remained unexpressed, so the structural possibilities [of the artist’s medium] may sometimes bring out a mood or an experience that would have remained dormant in the artist *but for this visual suggestion*. (1966, p. 38; my italics)

Again, I will soon attempt to show how this model of the creative process is particularly apt when it comes to describing photography as an art, especially certain specific genres of photography.

Even though Gombrich has been arguing for a conception of art in which the independent existence of the medium, not only in its inherent features but also in terms of its institutional history, is emphasized, this conception still leaves room for the contribution of the artist’s individual history and motivation, especially in terms of the channeling of personal history into the desire to engage in the artistic creative process as such. “What may be connected with [the artist’s] history and disposition is not the mastery itself but the *will to obtain mastery*, the interest in what can be done with language [or any other artistic medium], the enjoyment of the game” (1966, p. 40; my italics). In the next section, we will see how this idea gained layers of further meaning as it was developed by psychoanalytic aestheticians informed by the Kleinian paradigm.
II. Kleinian and post-Kleinian psychoanalytic aesthetics

What constitutes significant artistic form is an important theme in aesthetics, but not the only important theme. Indeed, an adequate aesthetics comprises several distinct albeit often overlapping themes, minimally, the nature of creativity (both the creative process and the creative impulse), the question of aesthetic value and of the nature of beauty, and the nature of the aesthetic encounter (in other words, the nature and significance of the aesthetic experience from the point of view of the spectator). As we saw briefly above, despite his profound insight as to the importance of form and its dependence on the utilization of primary-process modes of thinking, in his own writings on art Freud tended to focus purely on content, and to pathologize artists and treat art and the creative impulse as analogous to a symptom, by “asserting an estrangement of the poet from the real world, seeing the artist as never disengaged from the pleasure principle, imprisoned in his perpetual immaturity” (Gosso, 2004, p. xviii). As opposed to this view, there developed, especially within British psychoanalysis, following the tectonic shifts brought about in psychoanalytic theory by Melanie Klein’s contributions, a much more “positive vision of the artistic event” (Gosso, 2004, p. xix). In this section I will briefly summarize some of these ideas, focusing especially on the work of Hanna Segal, Marion Milner, and Adrian Stokes. I will start with a brief overview of some of the major themes and tenets of Kleinian theory, as these are intimately and organically connected with the developments in psychoanalytic aesthetics I will describe later. I need to stress that, of necessity, the following overview will have to be extremely schematic...
and oversimplified, as doing justice to the nuances and complexity of Kleinian theory is completely beyond the scope of the present text.

A pivotal concept in Klein’s revision of psychoanalytic theory is that of unconscious phantasy. This differs from the Freudian notion of fantasy as something that contrasts with a sense of reality. For, in Kleinian theory, unconscious phantasies are, so to speak, the basso continuo of mentality; they “underlie every mental process, and accompany all mental activity. They are the mental representation of those somatic events which comprise the instincts, and are physical sensations interpreted as relationships with objects that cause those sensations” (Hinshelwood, 1989, p. 32). “There is no impulse, no instinctual urge or response, which is not experienced as unconscious phantasy” (Isaacs, 1948, p. 81). A corollary of this notion is that phantasy in the Kleinian sense does not occur in opposition to, or alternately than, the objective perception of reality, but rather always underlies and colors perception, and is in turn modified by it. As Susan Isaacs writes in her seminal paper on phantasy, “[i]t is not merely that they ‘blend and interweave’; their relationship is something less adventitious than this. On our view, reality-thinking cannot operate without concurrent and supporting unconscious phantasies. E.g. we continue to ‘take things in’ with out ears, to ‘devour’ with our eyes … throughout life. These conscious metaphors represent unconscious psychic reality” (1948, p. 94; italics in the original). The examples used in the above quote also suggest the very corporeal nature of phantasy. Phantasies have their source in, and derive their content from, the concrete realities of the body, its characteristics and processes. Moreover, “[t]he earliest phantasies are experienced in
sensations; later, they take the form of plastic images and dramatic representations” (Isaacs, 1948, p. 96).

Closely connected to this concept of phantasy is the notion of an inner world, a world of internal objects. Insofar as every instinctual aim has an object, and since, as we saw above, unconscious phantasy always accompanies the activity of the drives as their psychic representative, if follows that the operation of phantasy gives rise to an inner world populated by multiple objects, corresponding to a multitude of instinctual aims and phantasied relations to objects according to those instinctual aims. As Klein writes,

The inner world consists of innumerable objects taken into the ego, corresponding partly to the multitude of varying aspects, good and bad, in which the parents (and other people) appeared to the child’s unconscious mind throughout various stages of his development. Further, they also represent all the real people who are continually becoming internalized in a variety of situations provided by the multitude of ever-changing external experiences as well as phantasied ones. In addition, all these objects are in the inner world in an infinitely complex relation both with each other and with the self. (1940, p. 362-3)

An internal object is not exactly a mental representation; rather, it is experienced as “a concrete object physically located internal to the ego (body) which has its own motives and intentions towards the ego and to other objects” (Hinshelwood, 1989, p. 68). Gradually, there can be development in the experiencing of objects, from this very concrete, sensation-based stage to the mental representation of objects and their relations, and finally to their symbolic representation in words or other symbols (Money-Kyrle, 1968).
Melanie Klein’s work extended the concept of symbolization very significantly and widely. Insofar as every activity, mental or physical, is accompanied and informed by unconscious phantasy, it follows that actions can have symbolic meaning as much as words or mental structures such as dreams. Additionally, Klein (1923, 1929a, 1929b, 1930, 1931) postulates that symbolization works in the manner of an infinite chain, which is set and kept in motion by both libidinal and aggressive currents, on the basis of the mechanisms of identification and displacement. Very schematically, the chain of symbolization is set in motion when the ego displaces its libidinal interest from its initial objects to others, in order to evade psychological conflict. But soon the new, originally conflict-free relationships with the substitute objects (symbols) also become tainted with ambivalence and thus fraught, and yet other symbolic substitutes have to be sought for. Thus, in Kleinian theory anxiety and guilt because of aggressive feelings are the “prime movers to symbol formation” (Segal, 1991, p. 33). Moreover, symbolism itself is the cornerstone and fountainehead of all intellectual development: “symbolism is the foundation of all sublimation and of every talent, since it is by way of symbolic equation that things, activities and interests become the subject of libidinal phantasies” (Klein, 1930, p. 220). The profound implication of this idea is that, far from being opposed to the sense of reality because of its origins in phantasy, symbolism is in fact “the basis of the subject’s relation to the outside world and to reality in general” (Klein, 1930, p. 221).

The final major concepts of Kleinian theory that I would like to briefly touch upon preliminary to discussing Kleinian aesthetics is that of the two positions, paranoid-schizoid and depressive, and of part-objects and whole objects (Klein, 1935, 1940, 1946). As opposed to a conception of development in terms of stages or phases, Klein used the
term ‘position’ to indicate that, even though historically in the subject’s ontogenetic development the paranoid-schizoid position precedes the depressive one, thereafter both of them remain potentially active throughout life, and in fact it is to be expected that every person will continue experiencing oscillations between these two positions at varying frequencies, depending on life circumstances, individual psychological makeup, etc. The positions refer to overall states of mind, constellations of object-relations, desires, defense mechanisms and anxieties, each of which can also be seen as associated with different sets of values. The paranoid-schizoid position describes a state of mind in which the ego keeps its objects (internal and external) and its own instinctual urges separate, on the basis of whether they are experienced as good or bad. In other words, in this position the ego actively splits itself and its objects, in order to keep what is experienced as good completely separate from what is experienced as bad, and to keep positive libidinal urges completely separate from aggressive urges. The corollary of splitting is idealization. From an external, objective point of view, the infant’s primary object (e.g. the mother) is neither completely good (meaning, able to provide perfect and constant gratification of the infant’s needs), nor completely bad. She is both gratifying and frustrating, depending on the moment. However, in the paranoid-schizoid position the infant keeps these different aspects of the unitary external object completely apart, and experiences the object as two distinct part-objects, depending on whether it gratifies or frustrates; “from the infant’s point of view, the part is all there is to the object” (Hinshelwood, 1989, p. 379). The notion of the part-object also has a perceptual dimension: it postulates that, before the perceptual apparatus matures enough to allow more integrated and sophisticated perceptions, the external object is not experienced as a
whole person, a whole body, but rather in a fragmentary manner; for instance, the focus of perception and instinctual investment is not the whole mother, but her breast, which is perceived as a self-contained entity (and in fact as two distinct entities, as a bad breast and a good breast, depending on whether the infant feels satiated and instinctually gratified, or hungry and frustrated).

One major reason that the infant splits the good aspects of the object from the bad ones, and experiences them as two separate objects, is in order to deflect its own aggression and hatred, which is experienced as terrifyingly destructive, and to protect the idealized good object from it. The concomitant of this state of affairs, however, is that all of its aggression is projected into the bad part-object, which comes to assume a really terrifying persecutory aspect. Accordingly, the ego experiences intense persecutory anxiety and fear of annihilation.

Gradually, due to both perceptual but also emotional maturation, the two split-off aspects of the objects are gradually brought together, and finally experienced as one whole object, with both good and bad qualities. This is the attainment of the depressive position, and it brings new challenges and anxieties in its wake. That is because the ego now realizes that the erstwhile demonized bad object was, in fact, none other than the idealized good object; ambivalence, the presence of conflicting emotions toward the same object, becomes a psychological reality. This realization does not only give rise to regret and guilt about the damage that the ego’s hatred and aggression is feared to have inflicted on the loved object (when it was not recognized as such), but also to intense concern about the whole object’s well-being, “an intense feeling of responsibility as well as an exquisite sorrow” (Hinshelwood, 1989, p. 141). These feelings are directed both toward
the external object as well as its internal counterpart. Not only the object but also the self (which contains the inner world of objects) is felt to have been damaged, perhaps irrevocably. Depressive guilt and anxiety can at times be intolerable, and lead to a regressive flight back into the paranoid-schizoid position. More favorably, however, they give rise to a wish to try and restore the damaged objects as well as the self. This is the urge to make reparation (Klein, 1940), and we will presently see how it is a concept that plays a major role in Kleinian aesthetics.

Melanie Klein herself, in an early paper, linked creativity to the attainment of the depressive position and the urge to make reparation, and not only in the case of adult artists but also the creative activities of children: “In the analyses of children, when the representation of destructive wishes is succeeded by an expression of reactive tendencies, we constantly find that drawing and painting are used as means to restore people” (1929b, p. 218). Hanna Segal is the primary representative within the Kleinian school of this conception of art as reparation. In a seminal paper (Segal, 1952) she set out specifically to remedy the situation I described in the previous section, namely the fact that, up to that point, psychoanalytic writings on aesthetics “dealt with points of psychological interest but not with the central problem of aesthetics, which is: what constitutes good art” (1952, p. 385). Segal attempts to connect the answer to that question with identifying those specific factors in the psychology of the artist that will enable him to produce good, instead of failed, art.

Segal suggests that “[t]he task of the artist lies in the creation of a world of his own … Even when he believes himself to be a complete realist and sets himself the task of faithfully reproducing the external world, he, in fact, only uses elements of the existing
external world to create with them a reality of his own” (1952, p. 388). (The relevance of this idea to photography hardly needs to be elucidated). Drawing on the many self-reflective passages on the creative process in Proust’s masterpiece *In Search of Lost Time* (Proust, 2003), she proposes that this compulsion to create stems from the artist’s “need to recover his lost past” (Segal, 1952, p. 388). In that sense, the artist’s creation is actually a re-creation. It presupposes loss, not only in its objective aspect, but, crucially, the psychic acknowledgment of loss, and the concomitant experiencing of mourning. It is important to remember that, in Kleinian theory, loss never refers only to actual transience in the external world; “mourning in grown-up life is a reliving of the early depressive anxieties; not only is the present object in the external world felt to be lost, but also the early objects, the parents; and they are lost as internal objects as well as in the external world” (Segal, 1952, p. 390). The picture is further complicated by the fact that, in phantasy, the loss of the object is experienced as having also been the fault of the self, the result of one’s own aggressive and destructive impulses. Moreover, the attainment of the depressive position signifies another kind of loss – the realization of the whole object’s autonomy and independent existence, its radical alterity from the self:

Where, earlier, impulses and parts of the infant’s self were projected into the object with the result that a false picture of it was formed, that his own impulses were denied, and that there was often a lack of differentiation between the self and the external object; in the depressive phase, a sense of inner reality is developed and in its wake a sense of outer reality as well. (Segal, 1952, p. 386)

Given all these challenges, it should come as no surprise that the attainment of the depressive position is never complete or irreversible, and, even when effected
successfully, it is certainly a very taxing achievement. Depressive anxieties are often so unbearable that attempts are made to obviate them by means other than genuine mourning and reparation; or, to put this slightly differently, reparation can take different forms, some of them more genuine than others: for instance, it can become mechanistic and obsessional, or, alternatively, assume a manic character, which carries a note of omnipotent triumph over the object (Klein, 1940). Segal enriches the conception of art as reparation by associating different ways of attempting to make reparation with qualitatively different aesthetic outcomes. Thus, in the event that reparation is not genuine but rather masks a manic denial of loss, it can give rise to “a constant make-believe that all was well with the world” (Segal, 1952, p. 391); translated into art, this can produce an “effect of superficiality and prettiness” (Segal, 1952, p. 391).

Implied in the above quotation is a contrast between mere “prettiness” and true beauty. However, Segal does not equate aesthetic value solely with beauty either. She writes: “[I]f beautiful is used as synonymous with aesthetically satisfying, then its contradictory is not ‘ugly’, but unaesthetic, or indifferent, or dull. … [M]y contention is that ‘ugly’ is a most important and necessary component of a satisfying aesthetic experience” (1952, p. 401). She suggests that, in terms of form, the main elements of the beautiful are “the whole, the complete, and the rhythmical” (1952, p. 401); but if so, “these elements of ‘beauty’ are in themselves insufficient. If they were enough then we would find it most satisfactory to contemplate a circle” (1952, p. 402). And again: “[S]oulless imitations of beauty, ‘pretty’ creations are also whole and rhythmical; yet they fail to stir and rouse nothing but boredom” (1952, p. 403). Segal goes on to suggest, taking her cue from tragedy, that perhaps the element of ugliness is contributed by the
content, “the complete ruin and destruction” (1952, p. 402), while the beautiful is given by the tragedy’s form, “the formal modes of speech, the unities of time, place and action, the strictness and rigidity of the rules” (1952, p. 400). But then her example of the circle above would seem to belie, or rather to complicate and qualify, this scheme. Because, presumably, even in the case of a purely abstract work of visual art, a more complicated form than just a simple, albeit perfect, circle, is more aesthetically satisfying. In that case, then, it would seem that it is not the content of the work that may be contributing the necessary element of ugliness, but some of its formal characteristics as opposed to others.

An additional dimension to this interplay between ugliness and beauty in the work of art is provided by Segal’s suggestion that, on one level, it is commensurate with the interplay between Eros and the death instinct. “Re-stated in terms of the instincts, ugliness – destruction – is the expression of the death instinct; beauty – the desire to unite into rhythms and wholes – is that of the life instinct. The achievement of the artist is in giving the fullest expression to the conflict and the union between those two” (1952, p. 404). I will be returning to this point, and to that of the postulated interplay between ugliness and beauty in terms of form alone, regardless of content, when I discuss the work of Adrian Stokes.

Two more aspects of Segal’s theory are of paramount importance. First, she explicitly addresses and questions the notion that the artist is somehow maladjusted or neurotic, or rather, she qualifies this notion in a very significant way: “[The artist] is often neurotic and in many situations may show a complete lack of objectivity, but in two respects, at least, he shows an extremely high reality sense. One is in relation to his own internal reality, and the other in relation to the material of his art” (1952, p. 397). As far
as the awareness of internal reality is concerned, we already saw how, in this conception, successful art is predicated on the unflinching embracing of the depressive position, with the heightened awareness of phantasy and of one’s own instinctual impulses that this entails. In contrast to that, the neurotic “splits off, represses, denies, or acts out his phantasy” (Segal, 1952, p. 397); and, we may add, so does the pseudo-artist who produces just glib or ‘pretty’ art. Moreover, in terms of the use of his medium, the manipulation of material in the external world, the true artist in a way surrenders to the possibilities and limitations of his medium, and allows it to direct and channel his efforts; he accepts and embraces the alterity of his material, as he does that of his objects. This respect for the medium presupposes but then also fosters an acute reality assessment of its nature and qualities. The neurotic and the pseudo-artist “uses his material in a magic way” (Segal, 1952, p. 397), that is, in a manic and omnipotent way – we might say that he works against his medium, and not with it.

Finally, to conclude my brief summary of Segal’s aesthetics, a word on the aesthetic encounter, the audience’s experience of the work of art. Assuming that the artist “does work similar to the work of mourning in that he internally re-creates a harmonious world which is projected into his work of art” (Segal, 1952, p. 400), what is it that makes the public derive satisfaction from the contemplation or experiencing of that work? Segal suggests that the satisfaction of the aesthetic encounter stems from a double identification: “with the work of art as a whole and with the whole internal world of the artist as represented by his work” (1952, p. 399). Through its formal properties, the work of art proves to the audience that the attainment of the depressive position, of the achievement of harmony our of chaos, is psychically possible; and thereby, the audience
also unconsciously identifies not just with the finished work, but with the process of its creation: “this kind of unconscious reliving of the creator’s state of mind is the foundation of all aesthetic pleasure” (1952, p. 399). Segal makes a point of distinguishing aesthetic pleasure as such, from other “incidental” (1952, p. 398) pleasures derived from works of art, for instance, on the basis of idiosyncratic identifications with particular characters or situations (reminiscent of the identifications described by Freud in ‘Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming’), or from “sentimental interests originating in memories and associations” (Segal, 1952, p. 399). This last point will be seen to be very relevant to the distinction between the emotional charge and impact of photographs as mementos or memorial objects, and their value as aesthetic objects in their own right (although, as mentioned earlier, these two aspects are not necessarily mutually exclusive).

We already briefly touched upon the importance that symbol-formation is endowed with in Kleinian theory, where it becomes commensurable with all sublimatory processes and all intellectual development. Segal reaffirms this, and specifically links symbol-formation to the depressive position: “[S]ymbol formation is the outcome of a loss, it is a creative act involving the pain and the whole work of mourning. If psychic reality is experienced and differentiated from external reality, the symbol is differentiated from the object; it is felt to be created by the self and can be freely used by the self. … [T]he creation of symbols, the symbolic elaboration of a theme, are the very essence of art” (1952, p. 397). However, this is an optimal state of affairs; symbol formation can also go awry, and never achieve this level of differentiation. When that happens, we are no longer in the realm of symbolic representation, but rather in the psychotic domain of symbolic equation (Segal, 1957, 1978, 1991). While true symbolism denotes an
acceptance of the separateness of the object, that is, the symbol is recognized as representing the object, symbolic equation denies separateness: the symbol and its object or source are confused, the symbol becomes psychically identical to the original object rather than standing for it. Segal considers this state of affairs problematic, indeed counter to the ability to sublimate and symbolize in an aesthetically meaningful way.

Marion Milner, even though also working within the Kleinian tradition, introduced a very different view of symbolization as it relates to artistic creation and the aesthetic experience. Milner does not deny the role of artistic creation in processes of reparation, but suggests that it takes too much for granted, as it were; thus, she directs her attention “on the earlier problem of establishing object relationships at all, rather than on the restoration of the injured object once it is established” (Milner, 1952, p. 97). As opposed to Segal’s negative valuation of symbolic equation, Milner suggests that the ability “to discover identity in difference” (1952, p. 83) is developmentally fundamental as an organizational principle of experience, and is the basis of the ability to generalize, without which sophisticated cognition and scientific progress would be impossible; it can thus be viewed as “a regression in order to take a step forward” (1952, p. 84). More pertinently to our purposes, she calls attention to how the ability to discover identity in difference echoes Wordsworth’s statement to the effect that “to find the familiar in the unfamiliar … is the whole of the poet’s business” (Milner, 1952, p. 85).

Thus, Milner, herself a painter, tries to reframe the concept of aesthetic experience in such a way as to find a positive place for the role of illusion and fusion in it. She remarks on the importance of the frame in creating a space for illusion, both in visual art and in psychoanalysis, in terms of the analytic frame. She writes: “And in
psycho-analysis it is the existence of this frame that makes possible the full development of that creative illusion that analysts call the transference. Also the central idea underlying psycho-analytic technique is that it is by means of this illusion that a better adaptation to the world outside is ultimately developed” (1952, p. 86; my italics).

Milner’s work very often echoes, or indeed anticipates, Winnicott, in an almost uncanny way. In fact, in her seminal 1952 paper, she takes her cue for many of the ideas she proposes regarding art from the play sessions in the analysis of a quite disturbed young boy. She describes a situation “in which he could have a different kind of relation to external reality, by means of the toys; he could do what he liked with them, and yet they were outside him. … [They were] a pliable medium, external to himself, but not insisting on their own separate objective existence” (1952, p. 91; my italics). The applicability of this to the various artistic media should be obvious. Like toys, they also have an existence in objective external reality and yet are also sufficiently pliable (both materially and psychologically) to be able to “be made to take the shape of one’s phantasies” (Milner, 1952, p. 99).

Why is this of any use, though? Once more reminiscent of Winnicott, Milner suggests that experiences of fusion and illusion are a precondition for the development of object relationships, and that immersion in a self-created reality prepares the ground for the acceptance of the external, objective one; indeed, if this space of illusion is too prematurely interfered with, external reality and its exigencies may be ostensibly recognized and accepted, but “necessity becomes a cage rather than something to be co-operated with for the freeing of further powers” (1952, p. 101). Art, then, both for creator and audience, provides access to these early experiences of benign fusion throughout life;
it “provides a method, in adult life, for reproducing states that are part of everyday experience in healthy infancy” (1952, p. 97; my italics); incidentally, so does psychoanalysis. Milner reminds us of an evocative term for the “temporary loss of sense of self, a temporary giving up of the discriminating ego” (Milner, 1952, p. 97) that characterizes aesthetic experience: it can be described as *ecstasy* (literally, stepping outside of oneself, in the original Greek). She also suggests that, even though symbol-formation has been viewed in the psychoanalytic literature as an attempt to either find substitutes for the child’s original objects or part-objects, or for parts of the child’s own body and organs, these two views may be combined into the idea that “the primary ‘object’ that the infant seeks to find again is a fusion of self and object, it is mouth and breast felt as fused into one” (1952, p. 87). We will further explore the implications of this notion in the aesthetics of Adrian Stokes.

In a subsequent important paper, Milner (1956) expanded her aesthetic theory further. Analyzing the work of William Blake for self-reflective metaphors about the creative process itself, she comes to the conclusion that creativity “depends on giving equal validity to a state of mind which is attentive and receptive to what is happening (symbolized by the female), equally with the state that tries to force what happens into a preconceived idea or pattern” (1956, p. 206). Put differently, creativity depends on a dynamic equilibrium and interplay between, essentially, the primary and secondary processes, or, in different terms, the conscious, logical mode of thought that differentiates between opposites, and that mode of thinking that “involves an undoing of that split into subject and object which is the basis of our logical thinking” (1956, p. 196); in Segal’s terms, this would be described as a creative dialectic between symbolic equation and
symbolic representation. The creative process also involves a dialectical interplay between the content of unconscious thought processes and their form. Milner adds the very important point that the engagement with the artistic medium, as a part of external reality, is crucial for achieving a creative equilibrium between these elements: “it is by this struggle with the material that the conscious mind disciplines the chaotic forces in the creative depths” (1956, p. 206); but, paradoxically, it can only achieve this discipline in art only if it is able to accept, channel, and utilize the mode of thought of the unconscious, that is, the primary process. Such a controlled, “deliberate reversion” to the primary process gives rise to anxiety, “not only because of getting nearer to forbidden wishes, but just because the depth mind’s way of working seems like chaos to the surface mind” (Milner, 1956, p. 211). It is part of the artist’s task to face and withstand this anxiety.

Milner, following Ehrenzweig (1953), suggests that “the two phases of the mind’s oscillation” (1956, p. 209) correspond to the Apollonian and Dionysian elements that Nietzsche (1872/1994) introduced in his analysis of tragedy. Further, she links these elements to the Freudian duality between Eros and Thanatos. However, she gives this notion an interesting twist by proposing that “Freudians, at least some of them, say that the so-called death instinct aims at self-destruction; but they do not, as a rule, go on to say that this self-destruction is perhaps a distorted, because frustrated, form of that self-surrender which is inherent in the creative process” (1956, p. 209; my italics).

Very much like Gombrich (cf. the previous section), Milner gives its due not only to the primary process, but to the artistic medium as well. “[T]he measure of genius in the arts is linked up with the extent to which the artist does succeed in co-operating with his
unconscious mind by means of his medium” (1956, p. 215). Moreover, it is important to note that she stresses both poles of the dialectic between symbolic equation and symbolic representation, fusion and separateness: as much as the first poles of these pairs are crucial in order for creativity to get off the ground, it is equally important that, out of this process, a new, shared reality emerges. “[W]hat is most important about this thing we call a work of art, that is admittedly a symbol, is not the original primary unconscious wish or wishes that it symbolizes but the fact that a new thing has been created. A new bit of the outside world, which is not the original primary object of the wish, has been made interesting and significant” (1956, p. 214).

We saw how Hanna Segal emphasizes the reparative aspect of art, and thus the whole-object relationship that the work of art symbolizes, while Marion Milner makes a case for the positive aspects of illusion and fusion, which are characteristic dimensions of part-object relationships. Segal would consider the sense of fusion with the work of art, the ‘oceanic’ feeling of being immersed and lost in it, as more of a sign of an attempt to manically evade a genuine and wholehearted experiencing of the depressive position. The critic Adrian Stokes, who was no psychoanalyst but was closely associated with the Kleinian school, integrates these differing conceptions in an ingenious way in his own complicated and subtle aesthetic theory (Stokes, 1952, 1961, 1963, 1965). Stokes was primarily interested in form in art, not content, but attempted to demonstrate how form itself has a latent content, in that it evokes specific types and constellations of object-relationship.

Instead of choosing one position in the debate between the conception of art as reparation and art as illusion and fusion, Stokes acknowledges that the aesthetic
encounter is in its essence characterized by both of these dimensions and gives rise to both of these experiences in the spectator (and the artist himself, insofar as “the dividing line between spectator and artist” should not be construed as “separating persons [but] rather … roles” (Wollheim, 1965, p. xvii)). The work of art strikes us as a supremely self-sufficient and self-contained object, and yet, at the same time, it envelops us – we can get ‘lost’ into it in contemplation; it is “self-subsistent yet communicative” (Stokes, 1965, p. 7). Recall Segal’s emphasis on how the artist creates a world of his own: this implies the radical self-sufficiency of this alternate universe, but also the fact that we can enter this new world and become immersed in it. Stokes, in his very characteristic idiosyncratic and lyrical style, describes it thus: “Thus, a good poem has the closed air of an entity, of something compact that makes a dent, but its poetry is a contagion that spreads and spreads. We can always discover from aesthetic experience that sense of homogeneity or fusion combined, in differing proportions, with the sense of object-otherness” (1952, p. 407). Elsewhere he writes: “The great work of art is surrounded by silence. It remains palpably ‘out there’, yet none the less enwraps us; we do not so much absorb as become ourselves absorbed” (1961, p. 20). He adds that thanks to this combination of “the sense of fusion with the sense of object-otherness … we might say that art is an emblem of the state of being in love” (1952, p. 407), in that the latter state is characterized by both “infantile introjections and reparative attitudes” (1952, p. 407). And, like the state of being in love and encountering the beloved, art facilitates the experience, in the artist when he encounters his medium as well as in the spectator when he encounters the finished work of art, of “some freshness of vision, some ability to meet, as if for the first time, the phenomenal world and the emotion it carries” (1952, p. 407).
Similarly to the other theorists we discussed, Stokes emphasizes the importance of the medium and of the artist’s intense attachment to it, the extent to which he cathects it and is engrossed by it. “In a sense the work of art is not a new enactment but re-affirmation of a pre-existing entity. This entity is allowed once more a full and separate life: it is restored” (1952, p. 408). We will later see how this idea is connected to the way Stokes conceptualizes the distinction between carving and modelling as ways of molding the artist’s material.

Stokes, referencing Thomas Mann, suggests that the categories of ‘goodness’ and ‘badness’ are more pertinent to the evaluation of a work of art than the categories of ‘beauty’ or ‘ugliness’ (recall Segal’s conception of the necessity of an element of ugliness for a successful work of art). He then points out that the concept of ‘good’ has “two shades of meaning … the excellent or loved and the beneficent” (1952, p. 409). Ingeniously, he then goes on to link these two aspects of goodness to two different imagos or schemas of object-relating, “in virtue of which Form embraces the artist’s subject matter” (1952, p. 410): these two overarching organizing imagos are “the sensation of one-ness with the satisfying breast no less than the acceptance of the whole mother as a separate person” (1952, p. 411). These two imagos constitute the primitive, latent content of form, and, according to Stokes, constitute the frame that enables form to contain even the most “dire … subject-matter” (1952, p. 409); in other words, it is these integrative imagos that enable art to become such an effective vehicle for the drive to reparation. Moreover, the contrast between form and content could also be couched in terms of a contrast between the more intellectual and the more sensuous qualities of the artwork: “While communicating an intellectual content, art revivifies the impact of
sensuous impressions under the aegis as well of the all-embracing sensations of early infancy” (1952, p. 412).

However, does such an “amalgam” (Stokes, 1952, p. 415) make conceptual and psychological sense? “How can it be that the homogeneity associated with idealization (the inexhaustible breast), is harnessed by the work of art to an acute sense of otherness and of actuality?” (1952, p. 414). Even more starkly, and plainly trying to reconcile his position with that of Hanna Segal by addressing an implicit criticism he can foresee, Stokes asks: “What, then, is to be made of oceanic feeling or merging with the breast as a constant initiator of the Form in art? It testifies, surely, to a manic element?” (1952, p. 414). Stokes posits what is, to my mind, an ingenious dialectical solution to this conundrum, suggesting, in effect, that the combination of these two apparently contradictory imagos or “prototypical experiences” (1952, p. 414) in the work of art leads to a higher synthesis and a transcendence, to a product that is qualitatively different from the sum of its parts:

The second basic imago of Form, the emphasis it brings upon full object-relationship, possesses *a temperate power over the first unity*, the blissful merging with the breast: it provides aesthetic experience with a definition that would be disturbing to mere ecstasy, brings to art a second principle of unification; so that the one is wide, the other crisp. It seems to me, then, that in relation to depressive states, the *aesthetic position* perhaps deserves a category of its own, between the predominant manic defence and a normal outcome; a position, however, not without relevance to an analysis of integration, since it uncovers a more creative
role than usual for the manic defence mechanism: one that is potentially non-
stultifying. (1952, p. 416; my italics)

Implicit in this conception of the work of art is an explanation of the strong
fascination art exerts on us, both as spectators and, as the case may be, creators. By
embodying and epitomizing this complicated constellation of object-relations, the work
of art mirrors, as it were, those processes, and such mirroring furnishes us with
satisfaction and the containment of anxieties on the basis of identificatory mechanisms.
In embodying the prototypical good object in both its part-object and whole-object
aspects, the work of art not just represents but in fact fosters the transition from reliance
on the idealized breast to a relationship with a good whole independent object. And such
a relationship is the basis for the integration of the ego itself – a whole ego is the other
side of the attainment of the depressive position and of relating to whole objects (Klein,
1935); or, as Stokes puts it more poetically, “[o]ur own stability walks hand in hand with
the stability of objects” (1961, p. 43).

Similarly, if, in a work of art, one of the objects re-defined, renewed, and found
by the artist is, at root, himself, nevertheless the model for self-subsistence has
been the other person or thing: or, at least, the one cannot be distinguished
without its reflections from the other. We may suspect that the work of art
constantly symbolizes such percipience, just as it symbolizes the restoration of
truly self-sufficient objects to which have accrued, all the same, propensities of
the inexhaustible breast. (Stokes, 1952, p. 419)

In terms of the language of symbolism, we could say that the successful work of art
offers symbolic equation and symbolic representation at one and the same time. Recall
Milner’s idea of the ecstasy afforded by the aesthetic experience: ecstasy is in fact a term derived from mysticism, or visionary experience (Stokes, 1961). In what way then does aesthetic experience differ from the latter? Precisely in the fact that it achieves a fine and subtle equilibrium between the experiences of fusion and separateness, unlike mystical experiences which are ones of pure fusion and loss of self:

All masterpieces are transfiguring if we mean by this last word that we are taken up into them. They differ in their effect from visionary objects in that they also symbolize an unchanging object-outwardness or sufficiency and an adult integration of the ego. If such are the terms used, art will be defined as a symbolic reduction of experience whereby primitive ego mechanisms, that appear also in visionary experience, reinforce adult perceptions and the adult need to reconstruct a whole and self-sufficient object; an activity, then, whereby an element of symbolic equivalence reinforces true symbolism. (Stokes, 1961, p. 43; my italics)

Stokes also suggests that, even when we view works of art “predominantly in the light of their self-sufficiency as restored, whole objects” (1965, p. 19), their standing for a part-object relationship with the breast gives rise to “a sense of nurture” (1965, p. 19) that we derive from their contemplation, regardless of their more manifest content. Gombrich, too, called attention to “oral gratification as a genetic model for aesthetic pleasure” (1963, p. 39), even though his frame of orientation was solidly Freudian, not Kleinian.

What is most interesting about his discussion is the analogy he makes between art and cookery, and especially his suggestion that, as in cookery, so in art “too much of a good thing is repellent” (1963, p. 39). Drawing examples from academic painting, pictures that
are somehow *too* perfect, *too* pretty, *too* idealized, he notes how “we tend to find such things syrupy, saccharined, cloying. … They describe by synaesthetic metaphor our reaction to a surfeit of oral gratifications” (1963, pp. 38-9). As in Stokes, too much regression by itself, with no counterbalancing force, makes for art that fails as art; it will be recalled that Segal made a similar point, speaking of art that is too glib and pretty because it evades, rather than honestly acknowledging and contemplating, the full implications of destructiveness and loss in the depressive position.

Regarding the aspect of art as reparation, Stokes raises the important point of the significance of aggression as it relates to the creative process itself, over and above the phantasied aggressions that artistic creativity may be attempting to address. That is, he suggests that artistic reparation is dependent, it seems to me, upon initial attack. I believe that in the creation of art there exists a preliminary element of acting out of aggression, an acting out that accompanies reparative transformation, by which inequalities, tension and distortions, for instance, are integrated, are made to ‘work’. … A painter, then, to be so, must be capable of perpetrating defacement; though it be defacement in order to add, create, transform, restore, the attack is defacement none the less. (1965, p. 23-4)

Pertinent to this is the distinction between the carving and modelling modes of molding the artistic material, which Stokes had first discussed in his early work (Stokes, 1932, 1934). Very schematically, these terms denote very different attitudes of the artist toward his material; even though the terms originally refer to sculpture, Stokes extended their application to artistic creation in general. The carving relation to the material
denotes an attitude of greater respect for the material’s self-subsistence, its inherent characteristics, its physiognomy, so to speak. The carver follows the material’s lead in trying to mold it so as to bring out what is already contained in it in embryonic form. The modelling attitude, on the other hand, denotes a much more active, possessive attitude toward the material, which the modeler omnipotently shapes at will. In a sense, then, carving is linked to a mode of relating to whole objects, while modelling to part-object relationships. In his later work, Stokes emphasized the co-existence of both of these modes in most works of art, in varying proportions; both of them are deemed necessary for truly successful artistic creation. For there is a loose correspondence between these two modes of dealing with the material, and the processes of attack and reparation involved in artistic creation. Thus,

if attack be reduced below a certain minimum, art, creativeness, ceases; equally, if sensibility over the fact of attack is entirely lulled, denied. … [An artist] cannot be a good artist unless at one time he reckoned painfully with the conflicting emotions that underlie his transformations of material, the aggression, the power, the control, as well as the belief in his own goodness and reparative aim. The exercise of power alone never makes art. (Stokes, 1965, p. 25; italics in the original)

Finally, I would like to mention that, over and above the two overarching imagos that every successful art object incorporates, according to Stokes, the specific formal qualities and organization of every work of art may also be seen as depicting specific constellations of object relationship between the ego and its objects, or between various inner objects: “the deployment of formal attributes becomes a vivid language, that is to
say, symbols of objects, of relationships to objects and of processes enwrapping objects, inner as well as outer” (Stokes, 1965, p. 26). And elsewhere:

[P]ictorial composition induces images of inner processes as we follow delineated rhythms, movements, directions with their counter-directions, contrasts or affinities of shape with their attendant voids, as well as the often precarious balancing of masses. Predominant accents do not achieve settlement without the help of other, and perhaps contrary, references: hence the immanent vitality, and a variety of possible approaches in analyzing a composition. (Stokes, 1965, p. 20)

In the next section, I will begin applying some of the concepts and ideas summarized here to photography as an artistic process, as well as to the analysis of several specific individual photographs.

III. Photography as an art

I will conclude this chapter with a brief attempt to apply some of the foregoing concepts specifically to photography, with the aim of beginning to address the question of what some of the factors may be that endow a photograph with aesthetic value and significance. In so far as I happen to be a practicing photographer myself, I will utilize some of my own photographs to illustrate some of the points I will be making. I realize that it could be argued that, as the creator of these photos, I may be lacking the emotional distance and objectivity required in order to assess and discuss them fruitfully; nevertheless, the opposite could also be argued, namely, that my unusual position as both a photographer and someone who is theorizing about photography in fact gives me a
privileged vantage point from which to attempt to analyze my own photographs. And, in fact, there is a very illustrious precedent for such utilization of one’s own productions for purposes of psychoanalytic exploration; this is precisely what Freud did with his own dreams and parapraxes. I will begin with some general points, and then proceed to the discussion of a few specific photographs. My discussion in this section will at times be meditative in character: I will hazard ideas that may not be easy to empirically corroborate in a strict sense; but this may be inevitable in any discussion in the domain of aesthetics.

The exceptional pertinence of the idea of creativity as reparation (Segal, 1952) to photography hardly needs further elucidation. Nevertheless, we may need to further unpack and refine our understanding of photographic reparation if it is to become a criterion of photographic aesthetics. As already discussed in previous chapters, photography by definition, by the very nature of its operation, always preserves something of the past. So, on an initial reading, it might appear that a reparative aim is always present when a photograph is taken. Indeed, capturing and preserving their memories and the visage of their loved ones and of themselves is, self-evidently, the explicit, avowed purpose of people who take everyday snapshots. However, it is equally evident that this aim does not automatically endow the snapshots in question with aesthetic value. So what is to be made of this apparent paradox?

Certainly, the parameter of talent may be a factor playing a role here, and may indeed be an irreducible factor (although I will presently suggest that even talent may be partly reducible, or at least dependent for its unhindered operation, on some other psychological parameter(s)). Leaving that issue aside for a moment, though, another
factor that may be operative here may be the exact nature of the reparative aim. It will be recalled from Chapter 2 that a seemingly reparative attitude is often tinged with a manic element, so that, albeit apparently aimed at atoning for and repairing loss, in fact it covertly and subtly denies the very reality of loss (and the subject’s phantasied and/or real implication in it). We encountered a parallel to this in Segal’s suggestion (1952) that the pseudo-artist, who just produces glib, prettified art, similarly evades a real engagement with the depressive position. I think Stokes’ distinction between the carving and modelling modes of approaching and molding the artistic medium is pertinent here. Thus, a more manically-tinged pseudo-reparative attitude would be more likely to give rise to a modelling approach, that is, to a more omnipotent handling and manipulation of the material. This may be more obvious in the case of photography that is produced with artistic intent and is technically immaculate, but is somehow empty and leaves one cold, or at least does not engage the viewer on a deep emotional level. Certain types of garden-variety studio photography come to mind, as well as the work of renowned photographers such as (other names could easily be substituted for these) Helmut Newton, Robert Mapplethorpe, Annie Leibovitz, and even someone as revered as Ansel Adams. However, I would claim that a similar mechanism is at work in the production of most everyday snapshots, but is harder to detect because of the confounding factor of lack of technical expertise. In other words, the fact that a photographer lacks the expertise to enable him to omnipotently manipulate his material in terms of photographic technique (for instance, in terms of lighting, composition, staging, etc.) should not blind us to the realization that omnipotent manic manipulation may take many forms, and does not presuppose technical expertise (even though it may be fostered and even disguised by the
latter). Thus, the amateur photographer who insists that his subject(s) pose in a rigid static way and ‘say cheese’ in order to be photographed is in fact engaging in as extreme a form of omnipotent modelling as the studio photographer who produces glittery, impressive yet soulless studio portraits.

Implicit in the above statement is a distinction that is worth spelling out more explicitly: the photographer’s medium is not the camera (and other equipment), but rather the external world in its visual aspect. The camera is just the photographer’s tool, much as the chisel is the sculptor’s. Thus, when I am speaking of the omnipotent manipulation of the material, I am referring to what the photographer does with his subject(s), the people and/or objects in the external world that he photographs. Technical expertise may facilitate such manipulation, but in no way does it necessarily imply it; and, to repeat the point, neither does omnipotent manipulation of the photographic material presuppose expertise in the use of the photographic tool. Thus, to return to the issue of talent: on a superficial level, talent may refer to a facility with the use of the photographic tool. In that sense, an insufficient working-through of the depressive position, in other words, a reliance on omnipotent and manic defenses, in fact interferes with the employment of such talent, or, more accurately, may usurp and thus spoil or pervert it. On a secondary level, then, it may be more fruitful to understand talent as the conjunction of a keen visual sense, facility with the use of the artistic tool, and an ability to engage with the medium (the world) non-defensively, on a deep psychological level. Additionally, even the above-mentioned factor of a keen visual sense may be interfered with by the operation of defenses, or, to put it differently, a keen visual sense may be partly dependent on the relative lack of defensiveness.
In so far as the photographer’s medium is the external world, or, more accurately, whatever in the world is visible, it follows that, according to the conception I have been arguing for, aesthetic value in photographs is correlated with an openness and receptiveness toward the external world as encountered, as opposed to an emphasis on molding and manipulating the world in order to photograph it. Schematically, a probably necessary albeit not sufficient condition for a snapshot’s attaining aesthetic value is that it be spontaneous, that the subject(s) not be asked to pose and artificially smile. This should not be construed to imply that I think that all posed photographs by definition lack aesthetic value, by dint of being posed – quite the contrary. In fact, I would like to suggest that in the earlier days of photography, when the mechanical and chemical nature of the equipment then used necessitated the sitter to not only pose but indeed to maintain that pose for a number of seconds or even minutes, a much greater percentage of portraits attained aesthetic value than nowadays. I have no way of proving this claim at present; nevertheless, the rationale behind it would be that, in earlier times, having one’s portrait taken was serious business: it was not an occasion for forcing a fake smile onto one’s face. An awareness of transience, of the weight of time, seems to be imprinted on the features and gaze of sitters in those old portraits. Such emotional depth may of course be present in posed photographs made at any time; I am focusing my discussion on early photographic portraiture precisely to emphasize the fact that, even though most of those portraits were taken by run-of-the-mill unknown commercial photographers, not recognized great artists, they nevertheless often attain a high degree of aesthetic value, which might be attributable to a mutual acceptance of the depressive position on the part of both photographer and sitter. In other words, not only did those photographers not try
to impose a fake cheerfulness on their sitters, but the subjects of the photographs themselves were also not interested in presenting such a fake façade to the world. It goes without saying, of course, that in earlier times as well, there was a fair share of photographs that were posed in a stilted, emotionally inauthentic way – even though people may not, as a rule, have tried to create a fake impression of cheerfulness back then, they may often have tried to project an overly serious or self-important persona, for instance. But, generally speaking, it seems that both photographers and photographed subjects tended to engage with the photographic process in a more emotionally authentic way in earlier times.

The photographic genre that primarily epitomizes my conception of aesthetically meritorious photography as predicated on a controlled surrender to the medium (the world), however, is not portraiture but documentary photography, and, within that wider tradition, especially the sub-genre known as street photography. This refers to photography that occurs in public spaces (primarily but not necessarily outdoors), and that has no particular subject. It is not about newsworthy or important events or people, but about the quotidian, the mundane, the unnoticed fabric of everyday life. Importantly, this genre of photography also has no other function than an aesthetic one, unlike more commercial genres (such as fashion or advertising photography), but also unlike the other great sub-species of documentary photography, namely, photojournalism.

Parenthetically, photojournalistic photography may face the further obstacle in terms of accruing aesthetic significance that, by dint of its subject matter, it may as a rule be less likely to achieve the golden balance between form and content described by Gombrich (1966). Its content may often be too intense or overwhelming to allow room
for aesthetic form, even when significant form is there in the composition of the picture.

In fact, the presence of aesthetically significant formal characteristics often raises criticisms toward photojournalism, as in the condemnation of what is sometimes referred to as ‘poverty porn’, for example. In other words, it often feels offensive that a photographer would present subject matter such as the misery of others, or natural disasters, or scenes from war, in a manner that is formally beautiful. Form there may be, but it is overwhelmed and overtaken by content.

This obstacle is not present in the case of street photography. If anything, the reverse difficulty may need to be overcome, namely, transcending the subject matter in such a way as to make an interesting work of art out of content that is essentially unremarkable and commonplace. The case of found poetry, earlier alluded to, is very pertinent here, as is Gombrich’s great insight that puns “are discovered in the language” (1966, p. 35). Likewise, the street photographer’s art consists, to a large extent, in allowing himself to surrender and be immersed in the external world so that he achieves a great degree of attunement to the flow of life around him, and yet be alert and detached enough at the same time to not be just enwrapped and lost in an experience of merging with his surroundings. This kind of photography is not predicated on creation, but on discovery: the recognition of visual configurations and relationships in the external world, that, albeit accidental and encountered by chance, resonate with the photographer’s own “mind and conflicts” (Gombrich, 1966, p. 38), and, potentially, with those of his audience as well (in fact, such an expansion of meaningfulness from the self to other people would be the litmus test of the transformation of one’s own resonant
themes and conflicts into something that can be incorporated into the history and institution of art).

In Stokes’ terminology, street photography is much closer to the carving mode: it is not about manipulating and creating a reality (as in stage-setting a studio portrait, for instance), but all about creating a photograph out of what happens to be there, what the world gives. Certainly, as Stokes himself came to realize, neither of the two modes of shaping one’s medium ever comes unalloyed; recall also his insight that an element of aggression, attack, and even “defacement” (1965, p. 24) is always involved in, and even presupposed by, every creative endeavor. Thus, even a photographer primarily operating in the carving mode still enforces himself upon his medium (the world) to an extent; minimally, he slices up his visual field, and imposes a frame, four arbitrary sides, on the photograph.

Suggested in this delicate balance between the carving and the modeling stance is also the idea of a parallel fine balance between fusion and separation, ecstasy and detachment. It will be recalled that this dimension of creativity and the aesthetic experience was emphasized both by Marion Milner and Adrian Stokes. This dialectic is particularly apt in the case of documentary/street photography, where it is absolutely essential for the photographer to be in a state of constant, very heightened awareness of the flow of life around him, a very heightened empathy (even to the extent of anticipating the next movement or gesture or position in space of the people in his environment and their relative configurations in space), and yet must also maintain the presence of mind and awareness of his own boundaries and position in space necessitated by a kind of photography where acting extremely fast, and good timing, are of the absolute essence; a
kind of photography in which a difference of a few hundredths of a second in when one presses the shutter, or a few centimeters this way or that in where one positions oneself in space or how one composes the frame, can make or break a photograph. As Stokes described, the work of art (and, during the unfolding of the creative process itself, the emergent, inchoate work, the artistic medium, which in the case of photography is the visible world) envelops us, we become enwrapped in it; and yet, in order for a work of art to emerge out of this fusion (rather than a mystical solipsistic experience), detachment, the awareness of the separateness and self-sufficiency of the external object, is equally essential. Thus, describing his experience of photographing, the great street photographer Garry Winogrand is quoted as saying “The way I would put it is that I get totally out of myself. It’s the closest I come to not existing, I think, which is the best – which is to me attractive” (Szarkowski, 1988, p. 34). And yet, Winogrand’s photographs are anything but the products of someone who does not exist, in their razor-sharp alertness and perceptiveness, their sensitivity and their often sarcastic humor, their exquisite timing. For what it’s worth, I can also vouch for experiencing a similar state when I am photographing, especially when it is a ‘good day’ and I have managed to enter ‘the zone’ (I am using this rather unfortunate yet evocative term for lack of a better one), this peculiar state of being and of experiencing the world and its flow, a state characterized by both intense immersion and, simultaneously, detachment.

To conclude this section, I will now utilize some of my own photographs to illustrate some of the points touched upon above. First, a formal portrait (Figure 1):
This is a picture of my late grandmother, and one of the first good photographs I took, when I was starting out in photography. She was already very old at the time, in her late nineties, and died a few years later. I was extremely fond of my grandmother. I took many photos of her, painfully aware of the fact that she was getting very old and would not be around forever. I have many photos of my grandmother’s face. And yet, this photograph is the best portrait of her I have, even though it does not really answer to the dictionary definition of a portrait. I have other pictures of her that are very moving, very touching in the way she smiles or looks straight at the camera wistfully. Perhaps those photographs would be experienced as touching by others as well, people who never knew my grandmother; perhaps even more so than this somewhat cryptic picture, because of
their more obvious sentimentality. But, even though those other portraits may be easy to like and even to be moved by, I would claim that it is their wearing their sentimentality on their sleeve that renders them less successful as art. I would claim that sentimentality is, on some level, a gloss on true depressive anxiety and real mourning. Additionally, by not showing my grandmother’s face, this photograph can potentially resonate more with any viewer, as it is more open to their projecting their own memories of similar figures onto it. It requires more work from the viewer, and provides a space for them to channel their own creativity in the process of aesthetic appreciation. By the way, one could claim, not inaccurately, that this rather unusual portrait is predicated on a decapitation of sorts – recall Stokes’ statement that reparation is dependent “upon initial attack” (1965, p. 23).

The other element of this photograph that I find interesting is how my grandmother’s body and hands seem to emerge from (or recede into) the surrounding darkness. My guess would be that, on a primary-process level, this formal element may be evocative not only of the notion of transience, but also of the very dialectic between fusion and separation, between the loosening of boundaries and the emergence of a self-sufficient object, which is, according to the theoreticians we have been discussing, of the essence of the aesthetic experience. I believe it also evokes the carving modality of artistic creation, the emergence of an aesthetic object out of the raw material that, although seemingly undifferentiated, nevertheless already contained the finished object in embryonic, inchoate form.

Next, consider this photograph (Figure 2):
The element of someone emerging from the darkness is also present in this picture. It is indeed a recurrent theme in my photography. Over and above that, however, I think this photograph is also illustrative of Stokes’ idea that the formal and compositional elements of a work can also depict and evoke inner processes and constellations of object-relationship. Thus, it might not be too far-fetched to imagine that this photograph owes its power, to a large extent, to the tensions (and perhaps the attainment of a dynamic equilibrium) evoked by the configuration of the two arrows pointing in opposite directions, the woman being caught exactly in the middle between these two arrows, and the red disembodied forbidding hand in the upper right. My claim, then, is that such a configuration of formal compositional elements triggers and evokes, on a deep layer of
the mind, a sense of inner conflict, perhaps a sense of disorientation or irresolution. The woman’s somewhat indecipherable, enigmatic expression would seem to add to this sense of confusion or hesitancy. Ultimately, however, a sense of resolution of conflict may also be evoked by this photograph: the arrow pointing left is more luminous, and in that sense mirrors the woman’s lit face; there may be a forbidding red hand in the picture, but she has turned her back on it and seems to be striding forward. I would claim, then, that this sense of a delicate balance between fixation and the eventual resolution of conflict that is triggered by this photograph is one of the elements that confer aesthetic value on it.

Incidentally, such a depiction of inner processes as I am claiming this photograph evokes could conceivably also be readily represented in a more staged, conceptual photograph. However, the essential difference would be that in such a conceptual work the evocation of such a state of affairs would originate in (or be primarily mediated by) the secondary process, not the primary one; it would be a matter of illustrating a concept in an intellectualized manner. It is not within the scope of the present discussion to address the issue of conceptual art; still, I’d like to claim in passing that the peculiar indifference and coldness often evoked (at least evoked in me) by conceptual art, even conceptual art of a high caliber, stems from this, the fact that it is art mediated primarily by the secondary process. Conversely, this is the great appeal of street photography for me: the fact that it is ideally suited for the unfolding of the kind of creative process where the artistic medium meets the artist’s unconscious halfway, so to speak, and, in a serendipitous way, occasionally provides him with “the structures that will greet him as meaningful in terms of his mind and conflicts” (Gombrich, 1966, p. 38).

Another such serendipitous photograph (Figure 3):
This photograph demonstrates even more clearly than the previous one the importance of the element of chance in street photography. We could hypothesize that part of the appeal of this picture stems from the Janus-like juxtaposition of the two male heads in the center of the photograph, which is not only formally interesting, but presumably triggers associations and imagos related to themes of identity, identificatory processes, the occasional fluidity of boundaries between people, inter-generational dynamics, etc. And we could also hypothesize that such themes are unconsciously poignant for most people, the photographer included. But, importantly, it was precisely the chance occurrence of this element in the visual field, this accidental discovery in the photographer’s medium (the visual world) that triggered the taking of this photograph. I did not go about looking
for an image that would illustrate or express my interest in processes of identification or object relations; it just happened to come along. Additionally, this would presumably have been a much less artistically successful photograph if the host of more minor characters surrounding the central ones were absent, or indeed if they were not all positioned in such places in the frame that give the picture balance and complexity, a sense of suspended animation and dynamic equilibrium. More so than in other art forms, the medium imposes itself on the end product in an all-important way in this kind of photography; street photography is a co-creation of the photographer and the world.

Figure 4: Governor’s Island, NYC, 2013. Photograph by the author.
The same holds for this photograph (Figure 4). It is the serendipitous contrast between the general tenor of the surrounding scene (and the smiling face of the woman on the right), and the little boy’s scream and his tortured expression that lend this photograph emotional force. The photograph functions as a work of art because it manages to contain these conflicting emotions and integrate them in a unified whole; in Stokes’ words, it is “a whole and self-sufficient object” (1961, p. 43). The fact that this object can thus contain conflicting and perhaps intense emotions, not least the little boy’s obvious, albeit transitory, agony, is, I claim, soothing and containing for the viewer as well. We have all been that screaming child. And yet, here we are now. The agony was survived. The photograph is a reminder of that fact (as is all artistic creation, of course, but often in a less explicit way – this photograph, on the other hand, conveys that message on two different levels; qua art, and also in terms of its more specific manifest content).

But formal elements also play a very significant role in suggesting or enhancing such an emotional contrast. Thus, the blue balloon at the center of the picture is not only important in terms of its content (we know that balloons denote festive occasions and, supposedly, evoke feelings of happiness), but also in a purely geometrical formal sense: notice how the lower curvature of the balloon perfectly follows the curvature in the white dress of a woman hidden by the balloon, and how the upper edge of the balloon is aligned almost perfectly with the straight line of the roof of the black vehicle in the background, as in a tangent. My suggestion is that these purely formal elements, in their geometrical elegance, evoke feeling-states: form becomes content.

Finally, this photograph (Figure 5):
Again, serendipity is of paramount importance here. Notice how the little girl’s facial expression almost perfectly mirrors that of the woman on the right. These people are not connected in any way in life, and yet they are linked in the photograph, for this one photographed instant. They become a reflection of each other. Milner’s (1952) concept of ‘identity in difference’ comes to mind. The woman in the poster, in between the other two, adds an element of triangulation to the composition (in terms of form, and thus, we could claim following Stokes, also on an unconscious, object-relational level).

I usually don’t care much for written language in photographs, because I feel that words written in a language the viewer speaks may be unduly manipulative of his or her understanding of the artwork, either intentionally (as in more conceptually-driven work),
or inadvertently. Ideally, a photograph should be able to function on a purely visual, non-linguistic register. Nevertheless, in the kind of photography I have been espousing, in which surrender to the external world (to what is given) is essential, sometimes it is just unavoidable that some written signage happens to be there, as is the case in this picture. Inevitably, each viewer will have their own associations triggered by such linguistic cues, especially by an emotionally charged word, as the word “TRAUMA” in this photograph. But the presence of this word was not important to me when I took this photograph, at least on a conscious level; if anything, I wished it were not there: I don’t aspire to crudely manhandling the understanding and reactions of viewers of my work, and, even more importantly, I was worried that it might divert attention from what, to me, were the more interesting elements in the picture. Nevertheless, after the fact, indeed after quite some time, I discovered an unexpected association latent in that word, which pleased me greatly. It occurred to me that, in German, ‘Traum’ means ‘dream’; this seemed very fitting, given my understanding of art in general, and photography in particular, as closely linked to the dreamwork.\(^5\)

\(^5\) Without meaning to subtract from the poetic significance of this association in the least, nevertheless on second thought it occurs to me that perhaps I have been protesting too much, so to speak, regarding the supposed lack of significance of the prominent word ‘TRAUMA’ to me when taking this photo. Indeed, given the manner in which personal photographs have indeed at times functioned as quite traumatic stimuli for me, as alluded to in the Introduction, it may well be that the presence of this word in the frame, far from being an unavoidable nuisance, may have in fact played a not insignificant unconscious or preconscious role in my being intrigued by this scene and choosing to take this photograph in the first place.
Apart from my brief comments on some specific photographs in the previous chapter, this discussion has been conducted on a conceptual, theoretical plane throughout. It is one of the aims of this dissertation to set a theoretical framework that may eventually generate empirical research and psychoanalytic case studies tackling the hypotheses that have been proffered here on a purely conceptual basis. Until that time comes, and in order to put some flesh on the theoretical bones hitherto presented, I will in this chapter attempt a brief literary case study of sorts. I will attempt to illustrate some of the points made in the previous chapters through a reading of several poems by the great contemporary Greek poet Kiki Dimoula (pronounced Kikí Dee-moo-láh). As many commentators have observed (Margellos, 2012; Lesser, 2012), and as is amply evident even after a cursory survey of her oeuvre, time, loss, and memory are the overarching motifs of Dimoula’s poetry; it should come as no surprise, then, that she often reaches out to photography as a theme epitomizing those preoccupations. Within the confines of this chapter I will of necessity limit myself to a mostly superficial analysis of her work, focusing only on some of the poems where she explicitly makes reference to photographs. In fact, in some of these poems, one’s relation to photographs is the central theme, even to the extent of furnishing the poem with its title. Dimoula’s work is very pertinent to my present purpose, not only insofar as it instantiates and illustrates some aspects of the uses of photographs that I have been talking about, but even more so on a meta level, inasmuch as Dimoula has herself deeply thought through the place of
photography in our lives in relation to loss, our ways of negotiating grief, and memory. In a 2011 interview, the poet stated: “I love photographs, because they give flesh to shadows. And this prevents them from disintegrating and disappearing right away” (quoted in Dimoula, 2012, p. xix).

A few biographical markers may be useful before we get to the poems. Dimoula was born in 1931, and met her future husband, Athos Dimoulas (also a poet), in 1945, when she was 14; he was 10 years her senior. They were married nine years later, in 1954, and stayed together until Athos’ death in 1985. This event proved momentous and devastating: “His death cut off my arms and legs, rendered me useless, made me too scared to go out, to meet people. I never got over this interruption of our coexistence”, Dimoula is quoted as saying (Dimoula, 2012, p. 316-7). And, again, nine years after her husband’s death: “This grief will not subside. Precisely because the loss is so great, it manages, little by little, to resemble existence. And I don’t mean those ghosts born out of memories. No. It’s something like a methodical effort, on the part of the deceased, to live on. For his own sake” (Dimoula, 2012, p. 317). Significantly, Dimoula has been dedicating all of her poetry collections following her husband’s death to him, usually with the self-aware and perhaps ironic turn of phrase “To Athos, again”. Nevertheless, her obsessive thematic preoccupation with memory, transience, and loss, predated this trauma in her life. We can thus assume that she was keenly attuned to these aspects of the human condition even before her own personal history endowed them with added and painful poignancy.

At this juncture, it would be useful to note a pronounced parallel between, on the one hand, Dimoula’s obsession with photographs (both in her own personal life, as
attested by her statement quoted earlier, and, thematically, in her poetic oeuvre) and her apparently unresolvable grief about her husband’s death, and, on the other hand, Roland Barthes’ (1980) own very personal preoccupation with photography, which was, in his case, intimately linked to his immense grief over the death of his beloved mother. Barthes began writing *Camera Lucida* (1980), which was to be his final book published during his lifetime, soon after his mother’s death, and the book can readily be construed as both an attempt to bind and express his grief, and as a reflection on the role of photographs in such a process; or, more accurately, a reflection on the double-edged function of photographs, as poignant reminders of loss (even before the fact), but also as talismanic links to the lost love object, affording the bereaved a kind of “umbilical cord” (1980, p. 81) to the object of his love, and thus making possible a kind of transcendence of objective reality, a “photographic ecstasy” (1980, p. 117; italics in the original).

Another point of connection between Dimoula and Barthes that will soon become more apparent has to do with Barthes’ concept of the *punctum*: “A photograph’s punctum is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)” (1980, p. 27). This can be a formal element, a detail in the composition or subject matter of the photograph that grabs the viewer’s attention and becomes a locus of emotional significance; over and above that, however, Barthes suggests that there is another latent punctum inherent in every photograph, having to do with the very nature of the medium, the ontology of the photographic process (cf. Chapter 1, section III): every photograph, in its essence, is an evocation of what-has-been, an assertion that ‘that has been’ (but is no longer, either due to physical death, or the metaphorical death that is the passage of time).

“This new *punctum*, which is no longer of form but of intensity, is Time, the lacerating
emphasis of the *noeme* ("that-has-been"), its pure representation. … 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” (1980, p. 96; italics in the original).

Coming back to Dimoula: even though memory was almost from the very beginning the main thread running through her poetry, there are just a few scattered specific references to photographs in her first three published collections. A 1963 poem⁶ poignantly titled *Career*, from her third collection, concludes with the following lines:

> Now
> From the far edge of a nostalgia
> I receive word of you:
> You’ve ended up frequenting
> Some old photograph of yours
> Excelling in its papery intensity.

Already in this early poem we can detect the beginnings of what will later become a main trope of Dimoula’s treatment of photographs as objects almost acquiring a life of their own, and endowing the people depicted in them with a kind of second life, furnishing them with a new lease of life of sorts, in an uncanny parallel photographic universe. The

---

⁶ All translations of the poems are mine. Dimoula’s work, although translated in many languages, was until recently largely unavailable in English translation. A volume of her selected poetry was published by Yale last year (Dimoula, 2012), but, sadly, in my estimation the translations provided there are largely unsatisfactory and often misunderstanding of the nuances of the originals.
narrator’s ambivalence is obvious: she seems to be experiencing some kind of almost masochistic bittersweet enjoyment in prolonging the connection with the lost loved one via his photographic image, and yet there is also a barely covert accusation, in her sarcastically describing him as having “ended up” frequenting the photograph, and “excelling” in his residence there. The photographic prolongation of memory comes with a sting. In another poem titled *Counterpassage*, from 1971, we encounter the following image, epitomizing the idea that photographs come to life through the rememberer’s care for the past – an essentially reparative act:

It seems you often water the walls with reverie
So that photographs bloom here and there.

Less charitably, though, we could also read these lines as rather signifying an inability to mourn, an unwillingness to let go of the past, leading to what I previously described as a sort of fetishization of photographs, a talismanic use of them in the service of a retreat from reality (the reality of loss and the passage of time), what the poet describes as a “reverie”. This could be a kind of pathological psychic retreat. According to Steiner (1993), a psychic retreat is a very entrenched defensive structure that is geared toward enabling the subject to avoid the anxieties and pain associated with the paranoid-schizoid and depressive positions, by retreating into an imaginary space of illusory self-sufficiency predicated on the disavowal of reality. The paramount function of the psychic retreat is to evade the awareness of separateness. However, “[t]he relief provided by the retreat is achieved at the cost of isolation, stagnation, and withdrawal” (Steiner, 1993, p. 2). The
danger with getting lost in such photographic reverie, then (compare this with Barthes’ ‘photographic ecstasy’), is that one may become stuck in it and unable to move on: as Barthes remarks, “when [a photograph] is painful, nothing in it can transform grief into mourning” (1980, p. 90). The lost love object just won’t let go (meaning, of course, that one won’t let go of the love object; but such blurring of boundaries and merging of subject and object is of the essence of the internalized pathological object relationships at the core of a psychic retreat). And, in fact, in *Light by heart*, a later poem from 1988, a very similar image of photographs has taken on a much more patently sinister aspect:

Peeping Toms your photographs all around
Top executives in the thriving corporation of walls

The persecutory quality is here unmistakable – the tables are turned and the photographs are taking on a life of their own, almost turning into bizarre objects (Bion, 1956, 1957). These are material objects that have become suffused, in phantasy, with split-off aspects of the subject’s mind and personality. Moreover, bizarre objects are steeped in aggression, both in the sense that the parts of the personality that the subject attempts to disavow and get rid of tend to be uncomfortably aggressive ones, and, additionally, because the very process of projectively identifying with and taking over an external object as a vehicle for parts of oneself is felt to be a very aggressive act as such, and thus evokes feelings of persecutory guilt and the fear of retaliation. Such a reversal and merging of roles finds a perfect illustration here. Even though it is, by definition, the bereaved who cannot stop looking at the photographs of the loved one, here it is the lost
person’s photographs who have turned into intrusive “Peeping Toms”. Additionally, through this poetic, evocative image Dimoula illustrates the autonomization of photographs from both their subjects and viewers in a very poignant way. Crucially, photographs are material objects that can go on being independently of human intentions, as discussed in Chapter 2. They thus readily lend themselves to potentially occupying this psychological no-man’s-land between subject and depicted object.

The earlier poem (Counterpassage) comes from Dimoula’s 1971 collection The Little of the World. It was at this juncture that photography really turned into a major theme of her poetry, to the extent that several poems in that collection (even down to their titles) are in their entirety devoted to the place of photography in connection with one’s relation to the past and one’s retrospective conception of oneself and the course of one’s life. Thus, the following poem, titled Photograph 1948:

It looks as if I’m holding a flower.
That’s odd.
It seems a garden
Once crossed my life.

In my other hand
I’m holding a stone.
Gracefully and defiantly.
No inkling
That I’m being forewarned of changes,
That I’m afforded a foretaste of defenses.
It seems ignorance
Once crossed my life.

I’m smiling.
The arc of the smile,
The concavity of that mood,
Resembles a well-flexed bow,
All set.
It seems a target
Once crossed my life.
And a presumption of victory.

The gaze steeped
In original sin:
Tasting
The forbidden fruit of expectation.
It seems faith
Once crossed my life.

My shadow, a mere play of the sun.
It’s wearing a costume of hesitation.
It hasn’t yet had the time to become
A comrade or informer.
It seems sufficiency
Once crossed my life.

You are nowhere to be seen.
Yet, since there’s a precipice in the landscape,
Since I’m standing on its edge
Holding a flower
And smiling,
you can’t be too far off.
It seems life
Once crossed my life.

Here, an old photograph retroactively (i.e., with the hindsight afforded by the knowledge of later life events) acquires new meanings, and is imbued with an almost prophetic aura, the knowingness of afterwardness (cf. Chapter 2). In one fell swoop, Dimoula seems to be both acknowledging the defensive uses photographs can be put to, our need to use them as screens to foster illusion and disavowal, while also deconstructing that temptation in an almost clinical manner. What seems to me most striking is the reversal through which the photograph, from being a vehicle of illusion, is itself made to become the vantage point from which a life can be surveyed in its wide scope and thus imbued with new layers of meaning; in afterwardness, the photograph becomes the vehicle for the return of the real. The photograph becomes a window through which one can travel
through time, telescoping the sequence of one’s life’s events and linking them in such a way as to construct a meaningful, albeit bitter, narrative. Intriguingly, Dimoula chooses a posed portrait as her photographic example in this poem. The narrator’s younger self is standing somewhere in nature, holding a flower and a stone, and smiling. It is not clear if her gaze is directed at the camera or elsewhere, but it is expectant, optimistic. Indeed, as we saw in chapter 1, posed portraits are especially transparent examples of the defensive use of photographs as narcissistic props and screen memories. Nevertheless, with hindsight such a photograph can also afford a very poignant foil for the knowledge acquired subsequent to the staging and taking of the photograph. This lends an air of almost bittersweet irony to such an image, as if the narrator is telling herself ‘ah, little did I know…’. The mood of the poem is consistently that of loss, the loss of certainties and illusions; in other words, disillusionment. And yet, the wisdom of afterwardness notwithstanding, in the last two lines the narrator seems to be reaffirming the importance of illusions, the value of naiveté: “It seems life / Once crossed my life”. As if disillusionment is somehow equivalent to death, or, at best, an afterlife of sorts. On an alternative reading, though, what these lines suggest might be that part of the essence of life is precisely this movement from illusion to disillusionment, by definition always occurring when it’s too late.

This difficulty in unequivocally deciphering or deciding the meaning of a life, and of a photograph, is beautifully conveyed in the last stanza of a poem poignantly entitled *Montage* (with the straightforward subtitle *Photograph*):

*But you’re at the rudder.*
Is it a boat’s implement
Or your life’s?
Is the boat yours,
Or stolen?
Is the courage yours,
Or the photograph’s?
Are you steering or being steered?
Was there a rudder to begin with,
Or did the photographer engage in some montage
And the unsteerable
Acquired a rudder,
Just like our peasant grandfathers found themselves
In framed pictures
Wearing ties?

The choice of the image of the boat and rudder is an especially apt one, given the entrenched and almost universal metaphor of life as a journey (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). In suspecting some photomontage that might have resulted in the surreptitious imposition of just this particular image in the original photograph, the narrator here is suggesting that what lies at the core of the defensive, white-washing use of photographs is the temptation to retroactively superimpose an illusory sense of teleology, purpose, and meaning to our lives, which are nevertheless essentially “unsteerable”, their courses beyond our control, and, at best, only knowable after the fact. Again, it is formal posed photographic portraits
that provide Dimoula with a perfect analogy for the process of illusion-making here. Interestingly, she is juxtaposing a specific photograph (of a person supposedly steering a boat) with other pictures, those of peasants, decades back, who had their picture taken in clothing that had nothing to do with the realities of their everyday existence. The lesson is that photographic representations can be tendentious and misleading; in any case, they are not innocent. In some cases they wear their tendentiousness on their sleeve, so to speak, but Dimoula seems to be suggesting that photographic legerdemain may be much more pernicious the less obvious it is; in fact, that every photograph, even a seemingly ‘candid’, un-staged one, is ripe with ambiguity and potential deception.

And here’s the poem giving Dimoula’s 1971 book its title:

*The little of the world*

*(photograph of a hand)*

Here, you’ve avoided the hassle

Of existing again

And your hand is alone

In the photograph’s rectangular night.

Like a resurrection it’s tearing the paper universe

Alone and ascending,

Like a *suddenly*

Annulling the Little of the world.

Where does it think it’s going, in a four by four sky?
But suffocating dimensions contain
The seed of miracles.

I turn the photograph,
Because the prolonged use of miracles
Can prove addictive.
Here it looks like a hand
Torn from a dancer’s body
As he was crying Hey!,
Because the soul was intent on turning one way
While the body only managed to carry out a different turn.
A counterpoised rhythm, breaking
The melody
As well as the limbs.

I turn the photograph.
A hand walking down
The quiet, narrow September
Of many mute truths.

Here, the hand that engraved
An Au revoir
On mankind’s first stone.
A wish that only comes true if planted
On photographic soil.

With a tiny motion
The hand changes yet again
Its promises of hovering.
Now, it’s indistinguishable from an upward caress
Stroking a memory’s distant hair.

Ah, what use does it have for all these likenesses
In just this one world?

I let the photograph fall.
And your hand remains
An upturned palm
Toward some palm-reader cloud
Deciphering it:
It doesn’t see any link between me and your hand
No partnership when it comes to heavy loads.
We’ll never share the burden of lifting
A casket
Or a flower.
Here, the photographed hand of the lost loved one has attained a further level of autonomy; not only is it going-on-being in the parallel universe of the photograph, but it has also achieved independence from the rest of the body, it exists “alone in the photograph’s rectangular night”, while the hand’s owner has avoided “the hassle / Of existing again”. The photographed hand, a Barthesian punctum, thus becomes even more conducive to the narrator’s flights of fancy, the rewriting of history in fantasy; it truly seems to exist in a potential space (“suffocating dimensions contain / The seed of miracles”). (In this connection, cf. also the discussion in Chapter 3 of objects emerging from the darkness in a photograph, as exemplified by the photograph of my grandmother). This illusion of the transcendence of non-being can be exhilarating and redemptive; it temporarily annuls “the Little of the world”. But Dimoula is not one to readily give in to easy and false consolations; the need to engage in this imaginative annulment of death and transience goes hand in hand with a bittersweet awareness of the limitations of such an escape, in a kind of dialectical back-and-forth, a pained dance running through the poem. Thus, she cautions (herself as much as the reader) that “the prolonged use of miracles / Can prove addictive”; recall the earlier discussion of the perils of taking refuge in a psychic retreat. And she knows that an Au revoir “only comes true if planted / On photographic soil” (the metaphor of photographs as plants recurs again and again in her work). Indeed, quite literally, it is only through photographs that we can see again what-has-been, exactly the way it was; Barthes describes the photograph as “a temporal hallucination” (1980, p. 115). And then, eventually, the photograph is allowed to fall to earth, along with the narrator from her brief imaginative flight. A crash landing is inevitable: a photographed hand is no good for carrying any real
weight; the only sharing of burdens possible can only occur in reality, and such an outcome was not meant to be for the narrator and the owner of the photographed hand. But again, such a realization is only possible in afterwardness, with the help of the knowledge and experience gained in the interim.

A dialogue between past and present, photographed time and real time, as well as the process of the post hoc impregnation of a photograph with meaning that can only have an extra-photographic source is also evident in the following stanza from a poem titled *Unexpectations*:

I’ve received no news of you.

Your photograph stationary.

You stare as if you’re on your way
you smile as if you’re not.

Dried flowers on the side
incessantly repeating for you

their intemperate name *sempervivum*

*sempervivum* – everlasting, everlasting

lest you forget what you’re not.

Here, the narrator is, seemingly illogically, complaining to the obviously deceased photographic subject that she has received no news from them; the objective fact of death is hard to reconcile with the evidential, hallucinatory force of the photographic representation’s continued existence. Barthes writes that a photograph is “like the
ectoplasm of ‘what-had-been’: neither image nor reality, a new being, really: a reality one can no longer touch” (1980, p. 87). This gives rise to an uncanny state of affairs, an astonishing, irresolvable aporia: the photograph is “stationary”, “everlasting”, and yet the depicted person, although right there in front of the narrator’s eyes, is not. The subject of the photograph seems himself caught in this paradox, not quite knowing what to do: “You stare as if you’re on your way / You smile as if you’re not”. The ironic juxtaposition of the everlastingness of the photograph and the ephemerality of what is depicted in it is doubled in the contrast between that person and the sempervivum flowers, in a twist characteristic of Dimoula’s mordant humor. Yet even the flowers, despite their name, have only survived in the photograph.

This theme is further elaborated in a relatively long poem ingeniously entitled Passe-Partout (a passe-partout, of course, is not just the cardboard border used for mounting a photograph, but also a kind of master key that opens all doors):

I open the photograph’s windows
to air it. It’s been shut up for a while now
like many summer-house pasts.

You’re on the balcony. In your old favorite
position; erect; you’re wearing the earthly colored
tight-fitting costume of flat surfaces: a tiled
roof the pine’s puffy jacket,
patched up in-between with sea
in the spots where the branches got torn
while playing with strong winds.
The orchards are at high tide
they’re up to the telegraph poles
and lemons dangle from the wires
unripe festive bulbs.

You’re lowering the sun-flag.
You’re rolling up the awning, crushing
canvas flowers. Impatiently you rotate
the motion as if there’s a scarcity of shadow.

So far the photograph is behaving rationally.

Until I appear, a crazy newcomer
to the picture; as if by plastic removal.

Though I was beside you all along
co-owner of tide and orchards
seated just behind you
in my very cosy pliant smile
it now looks
as if I’ve just been added to the photo.

With my present face, gaze dark,

long, its tail dragging on the balcony

as if it’s me that the official darkness had invited.

Breathless I stretch as if wanting

to move you away from the awning

so you won’t have even more of this shadow quarry

fall on you.

You’re sunless enough already.

How did the photograph get updated.

How did real time enter paper time.

With what familiarity did torment

speak to the apathy of inanimates.

Maybe those inanimates are something deeper.

Could they be some previous lives of animates

that at the first painful opportunity

suffer a relapse?

In the first stanza, a photograph is ingeniously compared to a place of habitation, but one visited only periodically: a summer house. It takes on new life with every new visit. Then, the figure of the beloved one depicted in the photograph is described as conflated with his surroundings, the physical and natural world. There is a sense of
almost dizzying confusion and disorientation, on both the visual and the emotional plane: architectural elements, tree branches, the sea and the sky merge with and clothe the man on the balcony, while even among themselves physical objects merge in bizarre ways: “The orchards are at high tide / … / and lemons dangle from the wires”. And yet the narrator, surprisingly, states that up to this point “the photograph is behaving rationally”; because the worst is yet to come: a much more radical confusion and disorientation, not just of a spatial but of a temporal order. The narrator, as if going through the looking glass, comes to inhabit the photographic space in her present incarnation, and, crucially, equipped with her present knowledge, the knowledge of events subsequent to this photograph. Frantically, she is trying to shelter the man in the picture from the awning’s shadow, knowing, as he does not, that he has now joined a different realm of shadows (“You’re sunless enough already”). The poem closes with another mordant, ingenious remark about temporality, the transience of animates which is made all the more poignant by the senseless endurance of the inanimate world (including photographs).

I will conclude this chapter with two poems that seem to me to be taking Dimoula’s philosophical engagement with photography to exquisite heights. The first of these, from 1988, is entitled Substitute:

They are scattering,
The great rallies of tears.
Memory and the present are running for cover
To escape their lucidity.
Every now and then a gunshot

Sorrow is firing now from that conspicuous trench

Now from a more obscure one.

It’s a stratagem, to give the impression
Reinforcements are on the way.

Let it surrender.

Your photograph has almost prevailed.
It has spread out wherever it found a civilian area
A decimated sense eager for calm.
It flutters on the mountaintops of gazes
Not like some sluggish melancholy custom
But as a brave slanderer of your loss.
Day by day it convinces that nothing has changed
That you were always like this, made of paper
A photograph from birth when I met you
That thus I loved you always, a vagrant
Being content to roam
From picture to likeness
And back from your likeness to your picture.

Memory and the present must take cover
From their lucidity.
Every now and then a gunshot faintly
Sorrow is testifying on your behalf
let it surrender.

The only reliable witness to our having lived
Is our absence.

Here Dimoula is depicting the inner conflict between memory and oblivion (under a different description, between memory and screen-memory) as a battlefield of trenches. The pull of the temptation to disavow the present (which includes a real memory of the past, i.e. of loss) is too strong. (“Memory and the present are running for cover / To escape their lucidity”). Sorrow, which is coextensive with lucidity, seems too much to bear. The photographic universe expands voraciously, displacing reality and painful emotions such as sorrow and the acceptance of loss. (“Your photograph has almost prevailed … as a brave slanderer of your loss”). The oblivion of illusion is too sweet, too alluring. In this, the photograph, the hallucinatory, fetishistic substitute for real presence, can be a powerful ally. Gradually and imperceptibly, the narrator almost comes to believe that the lost loved one was always nothing but a photographic representation: “made of paper / A photograph from birth when I met you”. And yet, again at the last minute Dimoula exposes this for a charade, and asserts that the presence of the photographic specter is just the flip side of a very real and irrevocable absence.

Finally, another poem from 1988 that seems to me to beautifully illustrate both the idea of photographs as screen memories, and the notion of photographs as living
things, undergoing developments and transformations in parallel with the course of our lives:

Zero star cognac

The prattle of tears is all to no avail.
When disorder speaks order must remain silent
- loss is very experienced indeed.
Now we must stand by the side of
What’s futile.
So that memory can little by little recover its eloquence
So it may offer fine advice on longevity
To whatever’s dead.

Let’s stand by the side of this little
Photograph
still in the prime of its future:
young people embracing somewhat unavailingly
before an anonymously merry beach.
Is this Nafplio Euboea Skopelos?
But then again
Wasn’t everywhere by the sea back then?
Here Dimoula dismisses “the prattle of tears” as pointless, perhaps suggesting that getting lost in sorrow is not a sufficient reaction to loss (cf. how she juxtaposes loss, describing it as “very experienced”, to the “prattle” of tears, a characterization with unmistakable connotations of immaturity and foolishness). She firmly proposes to “stand by the side of / What’s futile”, not out of naiveté, but in fact in full knowledge of the futility of the endeavor, of the photographic resurrection of the dead and reclaiming of the past. The equation of photographic presence with such inevitable, necessary futility, is further made clear by the repetition of the phrase “stand by the side of”, applied to both the notion of “what’s futile” and to “this little photograph”. The pliable and multi-layered temporality of photographs is ingeniously expressed by describing an old photograph as being “still in the prime of its future”: a lot of life has happened since the photograph was taken, all of it imbuing the photograph with layer upon layer of nachträglich meaning, like a palimpsest. The photograph is naïve, blandly idyllic: it does not matter where it was taken – it’s a moot point, because, after all, back then all was sea and shore, beautiful and carefree (and even if it did matter, it seems that the narrator is unable to remember the location: once again, a photographic memory, the memory of a photograph, has displaced and replaced the memory of the real time and place from which the photograph in fact emanated). But then this pronouncement is made tongue-in-cheek; Dimoula is, as always, ready to call the photographic screen memory’s bluff, to painfully remind herself, and her audience, that this is a futile exercise: life (and death) finally have the last word.

This seems to me to be the genius of Dimoula when it comes to her treatment of photography: her ability to engage in this seemingly effortless and almost imperceptible elision between the use of photographs as props for illusion, and their potential to become
true memorials, vehicles (albeit often inadvertent ones) for memory, mourning, and pulling the threads of a life together.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


