

# GIVING PAUSE

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## Abstract

Using my own photographic practice as an example, in this paper I propose to reflect on how the medium of photography, that has historically been associated with the representation of the real, can be employed to address personal and cultural memories. I want to explore how the artist's personal and cultural memory becomes interwoven with the live encounter with a particular landscape, and how this experience can operate within the process of making the work and also as part of the final artwork itself. Having grown up close to the Dutch border with Germany, adjacent to a large woodland, personal childhood memories have become located within specific woodland and borderland territory. Being of German nationality, these personal memories are not only interlinked with fairytale stories but by now are also informed by knowledge of atrocities committed by the Nazis in woodlands all over Europe, thereby exploring the relationship between **what is shown** and **what might only be suggested** in the photograph. Addressing the visible in the invisible, the photographed locations hint towards these scenes of criminality.

I am interested in how these different registers of meaning and memory are simultaneously present in my encounter with a landscape, and in exploring through what means photographic representation can attest to the memory or past of a landscape, as much as recording the moment in which it was taken. My current enquiry involves walking and wandering through woodlands in the UK, the memories of other woodlands and times accompanying me on my journey through a different place and time. The photographed woodland becomes a site for exploring how individual and collective memory have the capacity to affectively rupture the experience of the present, or how the memory of one landscape can affect the experience of another. How can photography reflect on the past experiences of childhood (as well as collective memory of place) whilst also recording the here and now?

## Introduction

This paper will explore the place of photographic practice, the process of making photographs in relation to its place of *Ursprung*, the place where it has been taken and how a process of *"telescoping of the past through the present"* (Benjamin, 2007, p.471) allows for a space of memories to be experienced. How does the place where the photograph has been taken influence the meaning and reading of the photographic content? Here the relationship between the subject and the author becomes of special relevance, as well as the relationship between a metaphorical and geographical place.

To some extent, this might appear a strange if not even banal relationship to focus upon. However, considering today's extensive use of digital photography, the need to be at the place where the photograph was taken is not of absolute necessity anymore and this relationship between author and place, having been there, has taken on a renewed relevance. Focusing mainly on the first part of making a photograph, the exposure of the film on site, great emphasis is given to

the role of the witness, the author as witness of what has been in front of the lens. The author/witness has been there, **I have seen most of this**. While Roland Barthes (1982) looked at photography from an observer's point of view, describing its *noeme* as the **it-has-been** and its power to lead towards what lies outside the photograph, that which hits, ruptures, strikes us as the *punctum*, this paper focuses on the photographer's experience of **having-been-there**. In this context what has been seen and what has not been seen, but only remembered, voluntarily as well as involuntarily (Benjamin, 1992) is of equal importance. (It is of course important to clarify that this part of the process has great influence on the later part, the developing of the film as well as the creation of the photographic print, including its tonal representation and finally its presentation to the audience. Also, as the photographer it is possibly necessary to go back, because the photograph does not resemble that which was believed to have been experienced while being on site.)



### **Time/Place**

The experience of being in a specific environment or place, physically as well as mentally – I am referring here to the idea of memories and how these shape our experiences of places – informs the content of the photographic images as well as the type of images that are to be taken. However, the interwovenness of experience with memories of past experiences does not only influence the perception of the place to be photographed at that moment in time, it has already shaped the expectations prior to encountering the place. This is not to say that events are following the modus of **clock-time**, which Bergson (1999, p.46) compared to a string of pearls – each moment as a self contained entity, complete in itself, separate from others –,

## CONTEMPHOTO '15

on the contrary. Since the present can only be experienced at the present time, and following Deleuze "*the former present finds itself 'represented' in the present one*" (2004, p.102), a formation of layers is created, going into depth in the shape of a vertical archeological proliferation, spreading sideways in all directions (Benjamin, 1999, p.576) rather than only following that of a horizontal line. Here time becomes space.



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With my preformed expectation and therefore somewhat already governed future experience I wonder through the woods, standing still in several places tarrying physically as well as mentally, while remaining at a distance to the subject. Walking through the woodlands I observe it in different ways. Following Yi-Fu Tuan, quoted by Christina Kraenzle:

*“Landscape is an ordering of reality from different angles. It is both a vertical view and a side view. [...] The vertical view is, as it were, objective and calculating. [...] The side view, in contrast, is personal, moral, aesthetic. [...] If the essential character of landscape is that it combines these two views (objective and subjective), it is clear that the combination can only take place in the mind’s eye.”* (2007, p.134)



However, I do not walk into the shrubbery and to a certain extent one could argue that the camera is used as a means of getting physically closer, as an extension of my body, while at the same time maintaining a safe distance. It serves almost as a protective apparatus, similar to what Sigmund Freud (1991, p.298) called the protective shield, *“the living vesicle with its receptive cortical layer”* which

*“functions as a special envelope or membrane resistant to stimuli. [...] the energies of the external world are able to pass into the next underlying layers [...] with only a fragment of their original intensity; and these layers can devote themselves, behind the protective shield, to the reception of the amounts of stimulus which have been allowed through it.”*

But the camera not only protects from what might affect me from the outside, it also functioned as a kind of protection from my memories, from what might be called, following Benjamin’s reading of Proust, *mémoire volontaire*: the memory

## CONTEMPHOTO '15

that affects us by giving us information about the past yet retaining no trace of it. According to Benjamin *“the past is somewhere beyond the reach of the intellect, and unmistakably present in some material object (or in the sensation which such an object arouses in us), though we have no idea which one it is.”* (1997, p.112)



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The distance remains and that is essential because it maintains the illusion and the imaginary space for the memories that have been collected, personal memories of the woodland as a place of safety and contentment, and which are in a constant process of transition due to the process of experiencing as well as being informed by knowledge of cultural and collective memories. I do not touch the trees, I do not reach out for them, as doing so would be falling short of the “*ultimate forbidden gesture*” as Jaqueline Lichtenstein calls it. She continues:

*“To keep the right distance, this point of unreality from which I can imagine that if I came close .... Plato was not mistaken when he said that the illusion of the shoes’ existence would dissipate if the child approached the painting. But the child knows this. He takes care not to come too close, not to dissipate his pleasures. He wants to marvel at the illusion, to keep his joy in its effects. The wish to undeceive him stems from a belief that he is deceived when in fact he stands at a distance only to draw out the pleasure – as he would at a spectacle.”* (1993, p.168)

It is clear that Plato refers to the illusionary power of a painting as well as the desire of the viewer to maintain that power. I would like to extend this particular sort of encounter with the place that is to be photographically represented and I therefore remain at a distance as the space between one point, the author, myself and that of the other, the subject, is the space where the illusion can evolve and partake its metaphorical journey with the help of the imagination. I remain at a distance not wanting to spoil my projectory relationship between what is there and what I think I remember – where I like to project myself into. It describes a form of longing, but this form of longing is not to be satisfied or fulfilled, it needs to remain. As Rebecca Solnit points out: “some things we have only as long as they remain lost – I would like to say at a distance – some things are not lost, only so long as they are distant.” (2005, p.41) Thus one could almost describe this process of photographing as a form of fetishisation – the never satisfied, the always returning. Here the illusion needs to remain in place, this is the necessity for the existence and being of the memory.







Verweilen

In David Lynch's film *Lost Highway* one of the main actors, Fred, is asked by two policemen if he owns a video camera and his answer that he does not, puzzles them. What confuses them even more, when asked why, is his reply that he likes to remember things in his own way, how he remembered them, not necessarily the way they happened. As the author, on the other hand, I wander into the woodland in order to experience the place and to record this experience through the use of photography thereby hoping to create a space for the viewers to engage with their own experiences and memories. The photographs resulting from this process are in an indexical relationship of what existed, of what was there, but they also stand in for something else.

As the photographer I go back to the site, I walk through the woodland, thinking and contemplating, I tarry, *verweile*. Staying in certain places for a while I am looking and letting my thoughts wonder off and meet others – I remember, consciously or not. The word *verweilen* is of interest as it contains the word while/a period of time as well as being within that period of time, remaining and spending time within this period – being in a place as well as time. Time is experienced in different ways, when bored time appears to pass very slowly and on other occasions it passes swiftly. Time is a unit as well as a point, it has the capacity to extend and contract, in any case it is a form of **duration where things happen within**. While being in the *here and now*, according to Deleuze

*“the past does not cause one present to pass without calling forth another, but itself neither passes nor comes forth. For this reason the past, far from being a dimension of time, is the synthesis of all time of which the present and the future*

*are only dimensions. We cannot say that it was. It no longer exists, it does not exist, but it insists, it consists, it is."*(2004, p.103)

Something similar could be argued in relation to the notion of place and time. While it is impossible to go back in time, as Solnit says: *"you can return to the scenes of a love, of a crime, of happiness, and of a fatal decision; the places are what remain, are what you can possess, are what is immortal."* (2005, p.117) A direct line can be drawn between the relationship of the author and the subject, the **Ursprung** or origin of memory in form of the author, which exists in a way only in the form of time. The subject is the physical index created and formed by what is in front of the lens the, the place.

### **Not the place**

In 2006 I was commissioned to photograph a project for the Goethe Institute in London, for which I returned to Germany and photographed in the woodlands where as a child I had spent a lot of time. It was a place of safety and of contemplation, very important to me. On my return I noticed that the place, which was so clear in my head had vanished. Geographically, the woodland was still there, but in no way did it resemble the woodland that I remembered. Areas of conifers appeared less dense and dark, the paths were more straight and less long, wider and lighter. No longer was it possible to lose oneself or hide in these woods. The Woodland itself had lost its mystifying and fairytale appearance. Arguably, it should be possible to create this atmosphere through photographic skills and through post-production, but this was not my intention. Instead I used the camera to record what I encountered and experienced and it did not resemble what I originally intended to create for this body of work. However, **my** woodland was found later along the M40 between Oxford and London, off junction six. Trying to locate a suitable woodland, I contacted the woodland trust and on describing what I was looking for two sites were recommended to me. One of them met my memories of the old woodland I remembered from my childhood. Theoretically, it would not have been necessary for me to return to Germany, it was however an interesting experience that demonstrated the close relationship between memory and place. It was important to realise that what I remembered did still exist, but not in the way and place where it used to be. This particular geographic place still exists but it did not meet with my memories of it. I had to make a decision, which was in hindsight almost instinctive while at the same time rather fundamental. The place as a fixed entity was not of importance, I did not let it lead the work or as Solnit would phrase it, possess me. According to her

*"the places in which any significant event occurred become embedded with some of that emotion, and so to recover the memory of the place is to recover the emotion, [...]. Thus place, which is always spoken of as though it only counts when you're present possess you in its absence, takes another life as a sense of place, a summoning in the imagination with all the atmospheric effect and association of a powerful emotion. The places inside matter as much as the ones outside. It is as though in the way places stay with you and that you long for them they become deities."* (2005, p.117)



For the work the geographical place, where those memories were originally formed and evolved from, had lost its relevance. Although it does still exist as such, as a factual entity, it is in the inside, my thoughts and memories where the place's relevance persists.

### **The photograph as place**

Moving now on to the produced object, the photographs taken at the place where those expectations were met, refer to personal memories not linked to that specific place, while at the same time being a document of a definite place, being indexically grounded. As mentioned before, these photographs stand in for something else, they represent and trigger memories, allow for a journey to be undertaken. They are not meant as proof or evidence of a certain circumstance or historical event. They are not to be understood as a form of document in the sense of a certain German photographic tradition anchored in the philosophy of positivism exercised by for example the photographers Bernd and Hilla Becher. But they have similarly to the photographic material used in W.G. Sebald's stories and histories a certain authority, they are there and they are of something that-has-been in front of the lens and to a certain extent been seen and witnessed by the author. But these photographs do not stand in for something, they do not explain or tell a story; they lack a clear message.

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The camera has the ability to record more than what might be seen through the lens, more than what can be recollected when being at the place that is to be photographed. Some of it might only be realized after the photograph has been taken and when the photograph is viewed and experienced. Following Benjamin

*“The beholder feels an irresistible urge to search [...] a picture for the tiny spark of contingency, of the here and now, with which reality has [...] seared the subject, to find the inconspicuous spot where in the immediacy of that long-forgotten moment the future nests so eloquently that we, looking back, may rediscover it. For it is another nature which speaks to the camera rather than to the eye: ‘other’ above all in the sense that a space informed by human consciousness gives way to a space informed by the unconscious.”* (1999, p.510)

The photograph according to Barthes, can take the viewer unaware and unprepared, it can pierce and hurt, evoke involuntary memories that brake down the protective shield. The lack of a clear narrative and message points to the fragmentary quality of the photograph, that fact that it has been taken away from its context, showing not only what is there, but referring even more so to what might have been visible to the left or its right. It alludes to what has been deliberately excluded from the photographic field thereby evoking recollections by the viewer, true or false, allowing for the imaginary to be brought to the photographic content, inviting individual readings. They are fictitious and indexically and the latter driving the observing mind because the subject must have been. When viewing the photographic material *“we are invited both to attend to and to imagine away the distinction between real and fictive.”* Although Michael Podro wrote this with regard

to paintings (1998, p.16), in this case I like to suggest that the photograph has taken on some of these specific qualities especially since it is a form of document, thereby emphasizing even more the overlap of fiction and index.



### **Borders**

In order to address a certain part of German history, a history that is collective as well as personal, I have chosen to photograph landscapes, focusing particularly on woodlands. Growing up on the Dutch/German border in a village adjacent to a British NATO base, I am part of the generation whose grandparents remained silent about their experiences and memories of WW2. W.G. Sebald describes this as a *“conspiracy of silence [that] still lasts. It is something which people in other countries can scarcely imagine. [...] It was just a taboo zone which you didn’t enter.”* (2007, p.44) Also adjacent to the village is a large woodland. Part of it was used by the NATO base for training purposes, most of it however formed the space between two national borders, referred to as ‘no-man’s land’; an undefined interspace belonging to neither nations.

Woodlands have historically been places of danger as well as safety.

They can be understood as a place where one can follow ones thoughts, as well as tarry, hover for a while, get lost, literally as well as metaphorically. However, this romantic and almost fairy-tale like idea of woodlands has by now been impregnated with the knowledge of the atrocities that have happened in woodlands all over the world, creating a more ambivalent space. Ones imagination is infiltrated by facts, facts are mixed with fiction. Being in the woodland allows for an initial escape, only to be caught up by ones own thoughts and imagination. The photographs

taken of those woodlands present a lot of detailed information about the trees and undergrowth represented but at the same time they provide very little with regard to their meaning. As suggested by Christina Kraenzel when writing about Sebald's use of photographs in his book *Rings of Saturn*,

*"these images – which offer little factual information about the time, location, or condition of their creation – are perhaps more compelling as depictions of a particular view of landscape, one which values landscape for its evocation of the intangibles, the mysteries of human existence that cannot easily be figured in language. Here the photographic medium is enhanced by its subject. Both function as 'incitements to reverie,' invitations to fantasy and projection by the observing mind."* (2007,p.142)

As part of this particular generation we were taught historical facts, but we also, and we continue to do so, experience silences as described by Sebald.

Through those images I aim to create a space for the viewer to engage with their own experiences and memories, for questions to be asked – many that will remain unanswerable, and others that might otherwise have been unspeakable. As pointed out by Kraenzle (2007, p.138) *"The invisible, Sebald reminds us, is often more compelling than the visible [...]. Every site is haunted by countless ghosts that lurk there in silence, to be evoked or not. These absences stimulate the imagination, encouraging the viewer to fill in the blank spaces in the landscape."*





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