

**DECONSTRUCTING AND RESTORING PHOTOGRAPHY AS AN  
EMBODIMENT OF MEMORY**

by

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## Declaration

I declare that *Deconstructing and restoring photography as an embodiment of memory* is my own work and that all the sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.

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Irene Naude

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Date

## **Abstract**

### **Title**

*“Deconstructing and restoring photography as an embodiment of memory”*

### **Abstract**

This dissertation considers whether photography as a language translates a transient moment into an embodied image. This is considered to be a mimesis of the moment as an aid for memory. By following a dialectic approach I posit a thesis based on the common sense perception of photography which states that photography is an artefactual mimesis aiding memory. After reflecting on Plato’s concept of writing as a *pharmakon* and Jacques Derrida’s deconstruction theory I establish an antithesis which proclaims that a photograph aids memory but also leads to the illusion of remembering past experiences. The synthesis is then presented which resolves the opposing ideas. This component argues that a photograph is a mimetic device that aids memory by presenting embodied fragmented reflections of time which can be used to create new meanings and memories. The dissertation concludes with a discussion that supports and integrates this argument with visual research.

### **List of Key Terms:**

Artefact, *Aufhebung*, Bodilyness, Correspondence, Deconstruction, Différance, Embodied consciousness, Hegel, Language, Memory, Mimesis, *Pharmakon*, Plato, Photography, Poison, Post-structuralism, *Punctum*, Remedy, Structuralism, Translation.

## Table of contents

<b>Acknowledgements</b>	<b>ii</b>
<b>List of illustrations</b>	<b>iii</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
Endnotes: Introduction	10
<b>Chapter One: The magic of photography</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>1.1 Introduction</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>1.2 The photograph as medium for mimesis</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>1.3 The captivating qualities of photography</b>	<b>19</b>
1.3.1 The “unmediatedness” or objectivity of photography	19
1.3.2 The reproducibility and multiplicity of photography	20
1.3.3 The accessibility of photography	21
1.3.4 The photograph as documentation	21
<b>1.4 Conclusion</b>	<b>23</b>
Endnotes: Chapter One	24
<b>Chapter Two: Deconstructing photography as accurate mimesis</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>2.1 Introduction</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>2.2 Saussure and structuralism</b>	<b>26</b>
<b>2.3 Derrida and post-structuralism</b>	<b>29</b>
<b>2.4 Plato’s view on writing as mimesis</b>	<b>32</b>
<b>2.6 Translation and photography</b>	<b>36</b>
<b>2.7 Deconstructing the thesis of Chapter One</b>	<b>38</b>
<b>2.8 Conclusion</b>	<b>42</b>
Endnotes: Chapter Two	43
<b>Chapter Three: Photography and the creation of new meaning</b>	<b>45</b>
<b>3.1 Introduction</b>	<b>45</b>
<b>3.2 A reinterpretation of photography</b>	<b>46</b>
<b>3.2.1 Photography as power: Susan Sontag</b>	<b>47</b>
3.2.2 Diverging opinions on photography: Burgin, Quan and Bazin	49
3.2.3 Photography as embodiment: Arnold Berleant	51
<b>3.2.4 The affective power of photography: Roland Barthes</b>	<b>54</b>
<b>3.3 Conclusion</b>	<b>57</b>
Endnotes: Chapter Three	59
<b>Chapter Four: The metaphoric movement between theory and art in the creation of new meaning</b>	<b>60</b>
<b>4.1 Introduction</b>	<b>60</b>
<b>4.2 Phantom limb</b>	<b>61</b>
4.2.1 Pinhole singularity	61
4.2.2 Prosthetic cameras	64
4.2.3 Animation	65
4.2.4 Cross Section	67
4.2.5 Poison or remedy	68
<b>4.3 Rosângela Rennó</b>	<b>69</b>
<b>4.4 Idris Khan</b>	<b>72</b>
<b>4.5 Conclusion</b>	<b>78</b>
Endnotes: Chapter Four	80
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>81</b>
<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>88</b>

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The magic of photography has always fascinated me. This dissertation afforded me the opportunity to explore the different facets of photography as a mimetic device to embody memories. I hope that this study contributes to the reader's understanding and appreciation of the different dimensions of photography.

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## List of illustrations

- Figure 1** Nicéphore Niépce. *View from the window at Le Gras* (1826). Gelatin silver print and watercolour reproduction, 20,3 x 25,4 cm. Helmut Gernsheim and Kodak Research Laboratory, England. (Illustration: Frizot 1998:21, Data: Harry Ransom Centre: University of Texas, Austin. Available at: <http://www.hrc.utexas.edu/exhibitions/permanent/wfp/> (accessed on 2008-11-04). **15**
- Figure 2** Louis-Jacques M. N. Daguerre. *View from Boulevard du Temple* (1839). Daguerreotype photograph, 21.59 x 16.51 cm. Stadtmuseum, Munich. (Illustration: Frizot 1998a:28). **16**
- Figure 3** William Fox Talbot. *The Ladder* (1843). Calotype photograph, 15.2 x 20.3 cm. (Plate XIV of Pencil of Nature. (Illustration: Frizot 1998a:62). **18**
- Figure 4** Irene Naudé. *Pinhole Hand 1* (2006). Pinhole photography, contact print, 5,5 x 20 cm. Private Collection. **62**
- Figure 5** Irene Naudé. *Pinhole Hand 2* (2006). Pinhole photography, contact print, 5,5 x 20 cm. Private Collection. **62**
- Figure 6** Irene Naudé. *Untitled* (2006). Pinhole photograph on glass with silver emulsion, 40 x 40 cm. Private Collection. **63**
- Figure 7** Irene Naudé. *Untitled* (2006). Pinhole photograph on glass with silver emulsion, 40 x 40 cm each. Private Collection. **64**
- Figure 8** Irene Naudé. *Phantom Limb* (2007). Installation: mixed media. Private Collection. **65**
- Figure 9** Irene Naudé. *Phantom Limb* (2007). Installation: mixed media. Private Collection. **65**
- Figure 10** Irene Naudé. *Cross Section 2* (2007). Mixed media, 100 x 150 cm. Private Collection. **67**
- Figure 11** Irene Naudé. *Homeopathy* (2007). Mixed media, 300 x 30 cm. Private Collection. **68**

- Figure 12** Rosângela Rennó. *Experiência de Cinema* (2004). 21 minutes of image projected on intermittent smoke curtain, in loop, dimension variable. Collection Tate Modern, London, Fundação Sorigue, Lleida, Museo de Arte Contemporâneo de Castilla y León, León, Culturgest, Lisbon. (Illustration: Demos 2007: 218) **70**
- Figure 13** Rosângela Rennó. *Little Balls* (2003). Rosângela Rennó, part of Galería's digital mural series, Pervasive Forces: Globalization, Private Identities and the Public Sphere. (Illustration available at: <http://www.galeriadelaraza.org/eng/exhibits/archive/exhibits.php?op%20view&id=897&media=info&year=2003> (accessed on 2007-08-22)). **71**
- Figure 14** Idris Khan. *every... page of the Holy Koran* (2004). Lambda digital C- print mounted on aluminium, 136 x 170 cm. Victoria Miro Gallery. (Illustration available at: [www.tate.org.uk/tateetc/issue8/images/erasure](http://www.tate.org.uk/tateetc/issue8/images/erasure), (accessed on 2007-08-18)). **73**
- Figure 15** Idris Khan. Detail from every... page from Roland Barthes' Camera Lucida. (2003). Lamda print on aluminium, 372 x 192 - 22k. Victoria Miro Gallery. (Illustration available at: [www.tate.org.uk/tateetc/issue8/images/erasure](http://www.tate.org.uk/tateetc/issue8/images/erasure) (accessed on 2007-08-22)). **74**
- Figure 16** Idris Khan. *Rising Series... After Eadweard Muybridge 'Human and Animal Locomotion'* (2005). Platinum prints, 40 x 50 cm. Victoria Miro Gallery. (Illustration available at: <http://www.artnet.com/artwork/424672911/759/rising-series-after-eadweard-muybridge-human-and-animal-locomotion.html> (accessed on 2008-10-09)). **76**
- Figure 17** Idris Khan. *Every ... Bernd and Hilla Becher Gable Side Houses* (2004). Lamda print on aluminium, 203.2 x 65.1 cm. Saathci Gallery collection. (Illustration: Demos 2007:142) **77**
- Figure 18** Idris Khan. *Every ... Bernd and Hilla Becher Spherical Type Gasholders* (2004). Lamda print on aluminium, 203.2 x 165.1 cm. Saathci Gallery collection. (Illustration: Demos 2007:142) **77**

**Figure 19** Idris Khan. *Every ... Bernd and Hilla Becher Prison Type Gasholders* (2004). Lamda print on aluminium, 203.2 x 165.1 cm. Saatchi Gallery collection.  
(Illustration: Demos 2007:142)

**77**



## Introduction

The remembrance of past experiences often creates a sense of meaning in our frantically paced lives. A scent can momentarily transport us back to a childhood incident; a song can recall a romantic awakening and a photograph can create nostalgia for someone or something from our past.

For the purpose of this dissertation I categorise three manifestations of memory. In the first place, artefactual memories are embodied by crafted objects, such as the memory evoked by a portrait painting. Two of the most commonly known artefacts in this first category are the written word and, more importantly in this instance, photographs. The second category includes those memories which are perceived to be in and of the mind, thereby alluding to the higher cognitive form of memory which is usually applied in the acquisition of knowledge. An example of this form of memory is functional during an academic exercise. Lastly, intuitive memory is generally stimulated by the embodied consciousness in which one's senses stimulate recollections for example when a specific scent acts as a reminder of someone from the past.

A photograph is a two-dimensional image of a moment which has been exposed onto a surface through the photographic process. The photograph is unique since it is a physical artefact reflecting a moment that has passed, while simultaneously acting as a visual stimulus for recollecting past experiences while in the present. This has led to the historical notion of photography as the documentation of memories. The concept of recalling memories according to this view can be compared to being in a dark room with a flashlight. The light illuminates specific objects while simultaneously denying illumination to the rest of the space as it moves from item to item. Similarly, a photograph documents a specific subject that has been exposed to light, which is then processed to create an embodied object. Traditionally, the photographic artefact bears witness

to a moment in the past or to someone's existence, which in a sense immortalises the subject of the photograph. The photograph is generally understood as the authentic embodiment of memory or the "true" depiction of a specific moment in time.

An integral part of this study focuses on the notion that a camera functions as a prosthetic for the eye, in that it has the capability to capture slices of time through light. These slices of time can then be processed to create images as references to time passed. The images themselves are compared to the concept of a phantom limb creating a pain in the absence of what was and is no longer. This notion of prosthesis is integrated in the theoretical as well as practical component of this study.

The legitimacy of a photograph as an authentic embodiment of memory is questionable. Firstly, how close to reality is the graphic semblance or artefact? Does it present an unmediated copy of the specific single moment? In the second place, to what extent does the tangible object capture the temporal and evoke an authentic memory? The concern here is whether a translation from a transient moment to a permanent artefact related to that moment is possible. Thirdly, how successful are photographers in reflecting the world of their subjects as if the image is an accurate description of that reality? In this regard, it is necessary to consider that what the photographers prefer not to photograph may have just as much significance as that which they choose to photograph.

These questions problematise the obvious and uncomplicated understanding of photography which assumes that a photograph is a faithful copy of the moment photographed, that it is an artefact directly corresponding to or the miming of experiences from the past. For instance, the choices the photographer makes during the process of capturing an image of someone may result in an image that differs from the expectations of the subject. In another instance, inanimate objects can be

transformed by the photographer by using various lenses, lighting and other devices.

The alleged authenticity of the moment as captured by the photographer functions in the absence of the photographer and the moment. A photograph thus functions in the absence of both of these components. Therefore a photograph can only capture aspects of the moment or the present, but the image exists in the absence of that moment, thereby potentially creating new mediated meanings. This is expanded upon in Chapter Three.

As mentioned earlier, memories are frequently evoked by and through one's senses. These sensory stimuli are often ineffable and prediscursive, being composed of visual, auditory, olfactory, taste and tactile sensations. In this manner, the body is an inextricable part of all forms of memory. It can be argued that this inter-relationship between the physical and the abstract is often lost in the disembodied, technology-infused reality of contemporary society. One of the theorists who challenges the new technological simulation in virtual space, including photography, is the French philosopher Jean Baudrillard.<sup>1</sup> He regards the absence of the embodied reality, the simulacra as found in virtual space, as a fundamental difficulty in keeping track of the original. According to Baudrillard (1994), the original gets lost during the process of multiplicity and reproduction, thereby creating a "reality" of copies with a lack of reference to the original. This aspect of the simulacrum can be seen as a deconstructive as well as a reconstructive manifestation of photography, as I will indicate later in the document. However, the main aim of this study is to rewrite the tangible body back into photography by creating a new approach in the understanding of the medium.

The reason for choosing this topic lies in the current shift towards a disembodied and dematerialised reality due mainly to technology and the

cyber-reality that has infused contemporary experience. I discuss this aspect of what is “real” in Chapter Three. One aim of this dissertation, in conjunction with the practical component, is to contribute, through photography, to a rethinking of the historical concept of the authentic embodiment of reality.

The research strategy involves a theoretical exposition exploring the roles of memory and the body in photography, which complements my artworks in *Phantom Limb*<sup>2</sup> that explore this aspect visually. By using a bodily, tactile process during the photographic development of the images, along with bodily prosthetics as subject matter, I aim to achieve a consistency of thought between the two components. This relationship is discussed in Chapter Four.

The broad theoretical approach that I use throughout the dissertation is revisionist by nature. According to John Netti (1973:263), there is no final definition of revisionism since its conceptualisation relies on the context wherein it is found. The challenge is that, in post-structuralist terms, the context itself is constantly changing or being deferred. In other words, revisionism includes attempting to read a text in the original context, then adjusting the context of the text and thus revising its meaning. This alleged meaning of a text is not something that can be pinned down since contexts are never saturated. Provisionally stated this means that in post-structural terms contexts are in a constant fluctuation of meaning. Therefore, to read a text in its original context often requires an altering of the context from where the text originated. This reconstruction of a text’s framework is never entirely possible since meaning and history are not stable but are in a continual state of flux. Jay Stevenson (2005:276) defines the practice of deconstruction as “an unravelling of the text’s meaning, signifying that that which has been put forward in the text has been based on assumptions which are not necessarily true.” This presents the notion that presence<sup>3</sup> “is

one of these false assumptions. It is the idea that the meaning of words is limited by the intentions of the speaker or writer” (Stevenson 2005:276).

In this dissertation I revise a selection of Plato’s texts where he introduces the concept of the *pharmakon* in the dialogue *Phaedrus*. I also consider Jacques Derrida’s<sup>4</sup> *Dissemination* in which he deconstructs Plato’s *pharmakon*. In *Camera Lucida: reflections on photography*, Roland Barthes<sup>5</sup> introduces the concept of the *punctum* of a photograph as a prediscursive, that is, a bodily reading of photography. These three texts underpin and rationalise the premise of this dissertation.

The structure of this dissertation is based on the classical Hegelian dialectic that comprises of a thesis, an antithesis and a synthesis of the first two components. Stevenson (2005:191) succinctly describes this dialectic process as a “historical process through which ideas are developed in relation to their opposites. An idea, or *thesis*, takes shape in relation to its opposite, or *antithesis*. Eventually the interaction of the thesis and antithesis leads to a resolution, known as the *synthesis*.” However, this dissertation has a post-structuralist approach where the synthesis is not reached by resolving elements from the thesis and the anti-thesis, but a synthesis is reached through the tension that arises between the opposing elements which leads to the creation of new meaning. The chapters of this dissertation correspond to the chronology of the dialectic approach, where Chapter One sets the thesis, Chapter Two the antithesis and Chapter Three the synthesis. Thus the working method and the structure of the dissertation run parallel.

The first component of the dialectic, comprising the first chapter, centres on what I term the “uncomplicated perception of photography”. This view is closely related to society’s general perception of art and photography as an uncomplicated mirroring of reality. This mimetic perception forms the thesis of the dialectic and is discussed in relation to the historical

development of photography. Relevant to this study are the thoughts that evolved around photography pertaining to memory. The first chapter therefore concentrates on the artefactual value of photography to document events. This documentation, prior to the advent of photography, was performed by painters and sketch artists who produced representational pictures to record events and individuals.

In Chapter Two, the antithesis of the above mentioned thesis is developed, which challenges the notion that photography is a straight forward mirroring of reality or an accurate mimetic device. I approach this chapter by revising selected theories of philosophers and theorists who have examined this subject. Plato's concept of writing as a *pharmakon* for memory as well as Derrida's deconstruction of Plato's thought both support my premise in this chapter.

The first philosopher I revisit is Plato and his concept of the *pharmakon*. The *pharmakon* refers to Plato's argument concerning writing as mimesis for the spoken word. In short, Plato sees writing as either a remedy or a poison for memory. For the purpose of the dissertation I draw parallels between Plato's theorising on writing as artefact and photography as artefact. The reason for this comparison is based on the assumption that photography is a form of writing, as both are artefacts for memory. Therefore, similar to the conclusion in Plato's theorising about the function of writing, photography too can be a poison or a remedy for memory.

Next, I reflect on Derrida's thoughts regarding this subject. I continue to follow the broad revisionist approach by reviewing academic theories regarding the correlation between signs and reality. In particular, I discuss the post-structural understanding of signs. The motivation for introducing a post-structural idiom into this dissertation is to create a setting for comparing photography to language. Provisionally stated, Derrida is of the opinion that signs mainly refer to other signs in the sign system. This

proposal implies that meaning is not fixed but is in constant flux since signs always defer meaning and carry traces of previous connections. The manner in which signs are employed is an indication of how reality is perceived. The obvious perception of photography as the embodiment of mimesis is deconstructed through the insights of post-structural theories of language. The argument is that signs, such as language, photographs and art in general, do not refer to a reality outside the system of signs but attain meaning through the “referential character of identity” to the system itself (Rivkin 1998b:25). Mimesis can thus be regarded as a mediated reality. This perception is a radical reinterpretation of the concept of mimesis. In a sense everything becomes a copy of a copy; a mimesis of mimesis.

In this second chapter I lastly discuss hierarchical binary opposites. Binary opposites refer to *vis-à-vis* terms, such as dark versus light, as the method for drawing distinctions and creating meaning. However, Derrida points out that in such pairs one term is often hierarchically elected to a privileged status (Johnson 1981:viii). Through deconstruction Derrida reverses this priority given to one term and thereby brings about a new, infinite process of the reversing of status. This results in a new understanding of opposing elements and their meaning, which in turn refers to photography as a vehicle for objective versus subjective mimesis.

Chapter Two thus represents the antithesis of the thesis that is discussed in Chapter One. In Chapter Three, I use the differences between these two opposing perceptions regarding photography in order to create a synthesis. This synthesis as mentioned previously deviates from the classical Hegelian dialectic reasoning. In this post-structural dialectic the synthesis is based on implementing the tension between the opposing opinions to create new meanings in the understanding of photography as “mimetic device”. If the thesis is that art and photography can be perceived to be a straight forward mirroring or mimetic correspondence of reality and

the antithesis is the deconstruction of this perception of photography, then the synthesis would be an exploration of the specific nature of the mimetic value of photography. This can be interpreted negatively and positively. The negative sense lies in the assumption that we will never be able to close the process of interpretation. On the positive side, this interpretation points to the possibilities for the never-ending creation of new meaning.

This endless creation of new meaning is considered in the third Chapter. I consider Susan Sontag's<sup>6</sup> opinion that photography is an appropriation of the subject. For the purpose of this study, Sontag's opinion can be seen as a first step in seeing photography as the creation of new meaning. This is followed by a discussion of other opinions regarding the role of photography as "mimetic" device. I also consider Andre Bazin's<sup>7</sup> view that photography is a form of embalment of the present moment, saving it from disintegration and nothingness. I introduce the discussion on Bazin to create a temporary respite from the chaos generated by the dialectic of post-structuralism. By referring to the embalming effect of photography, Bazin allows one to create an alternative framework for the understanding of a photograph, even if this framework is temporal and subject to deconstruction and therefore having no fixed meaning.

This bodilyness in the meaning of photography creates an introduction to the discussion of photography where I refer to Barthes, Arnold Berleant<sup>8</sup> and Georg Hegel<sup>9</sup> whose opinions introduce the body back into the understanding of mimesis, which leads onto the premise of this study. I unpack this new approach by reflecting on the work of Barthes. Barthes (1981:27) coined the concept *punctum* to describe the emotive reading of a photograph. His opinion, as well as the opinion of Berleant regarding the embodied consciousness evoked through the aesthetic experience of photography, is discussed in conjunction with Hegel's *Aufhebung* concept. According to my interpretation, Hegel's theory creates the understanding of a metaphor as based on the concept in which the meaning of words



transforms from being bodily to abstract, conceptual and sometimes prediscursive. Memories are experienced rather than cognised. The synthesis that this discussion arrives at is that photography presents a metaphor for memory.

Chapter Four discusses the visual component of this dissertation. This exposition explains how the aim of re-writing the body into the artistic landscape through photography is visually underpinned and supported in my own work. In this chapter I also refer to selected artists' works, including Rosângela Rennó and Idris Khan. My aim is to align myself with the broader trend of restoring the human body in art making and theory. The significance of this research lies in the goal to return the physical body into the creation and interpretation of meaning within the art landscape through the medium of photography.

In terms of literature consulted, the text that introduces the concept of the *pharmakon* is Plato's dialogue, *Phaedrus and the seventh and eight letters* (Plato 1973). For a commentary on this work and the *pharmakon* I refer to *Dissemination* (1981) by Jacques Derrida as well as *Plato, Derrida and writing* (1988) by Jasper Neel. For information on structuralist and post-structuralist theories my main sources are *Art and the meaning of life* (1986), by Johan Degenaar, as well as *Literary theory: an anthology* by July Rivkin and Michael Ryan (1998). On the subject of translation my primary source is the article by Lauren G Leighton, Translation as a derived art, in *The translation studies reader* (2004).

Barthes contributed significantly to photography as a way of capturing memories. His book, *Camera Lucida: reflections on photography* (1982), is central to the section on memory and the implication it has for the reading of photographs. In addition, I refer to Michael Fried's article, Barthes' *punctum* (2005), which offers a critique of Barthes' publication. My main source in my research on other artists' work is *Vitamin ph: new*

*perspectives in photography* (2006) by TJ Demos, as well as various journals and articles on the internet.

In this dissertation the reader can expect a brief discussion of the three manifestations of memory that I identified above: artefactual memory, which is stimulated by a crafted objects, higher cognitive memory, which is usually associated with academic cognisance, as well as sensory or intuitive memory, which normally is stimulated by one or all of the senses, often leading to prediscursive or ineffable emotions. In conjunction with these deliberations I also consider the manner in which these different manifestations of memory relate to the interpretation of photographs as keepers of memories.

Additionally, I examine the implications stemming from the interpretation of photography as a form of language. The aim is to explain the role of the body as a conductor of memory, which is held in dynamic tension with the actual bodily elements that are embedded in the medium of photography. Furthermore, I explore how these elements contribute to the creation of new meanings and memories. In this regard, Wolfram Schmidgen (2005:79) refers to Regenia Gagnier and Isobel Armstrong, who suggested that “the aesthetic is best understood when it is situated, according to its original meaning, at the centre of ‘sensuous human activity and the quality of daily life’”. By returning to the body in the process of capturing, through the processing and portraying of “human activity and daily life”, photography can be reintroduced as a medium that writes the body back into the art landscape.

**Endnotes: Introduction**

1. Baudrillard (1929-2007), seen as the French authority of postmodern theory, is critical of contemporary society, culture and thought (Kellner 2007:1).
2. The practical counterpart of this discussion is titled *Phantom Limb*, an exhibition held from 4 to 22 August 2007 in the Fried Contemporary Art Gallery and Studio, Pretoria. The exhibition consisted of pinhole photographs printed on emulsified glass panes and prosthetic limbs posing as cameras. The concept of the work is based on photography as a *pharmakon* for memory. Please refer to the catalogue of this exhibition for more information.

3. The problem of “presence” or of the external world “arises from Descartes to Husserl and Searle who believe that all our activity is mediated by internal representations, for then we can ask if our intentional contents correspond to reality, that is, as Searle puts it, if their conditions of satisfaction are met. But if, in everyday *Daseining*, coping takes place without intentional content, the question of the satisfaction of intentional states cannot be raised” (Dreyfus 1991:249).
4. Derrida (1930-2004) was a French philosopher who became a prominent postmodern thinker. His work has been heralded as the most significant in contemporary thinking. Derrida has been associated with deconstruction theory (Collins and Mayblin 2005:3).
5. Barthes (1915 -1980) was a French literary and social critic. His work on semiotics extended over many fields (Liukkonen 2008).
6. Sontag was a prolific writer and has written four novels and seven non-fiction works, among them, *On Photography*, which won the National Book Critics (Preface for *On photography*, 1979).
7. Bazin is cofounder of the influential film journal *Cahiers du cinéma* and considered by many to be the father of film criticism. His writings have laid the foundation for many film theories and treatises.
8. Berleant is a professor (emeritus) of philosophy at Long Island University. He is also an active composer and pianist ([www.auraff.com/berleant/](http://www.auraff.com/berleant/)).
9. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831) devoted his life to academic pursuits where he attempted to elaborate a comprehensive and systematic ontology from a “logical” starting point (Redding 2006).

# Chapter One: The magic of photography

## 1.1 Introduction

Since its inception in the nineteenth century photography has been ascribed with several intriguing characteristics. It was hailed as a magical invention and as nature's way of reproducing herself (Trachtenberg 1980:13). The photographic process has been deciphered as imitating the essence of the object photographed (Navab 2001). These early perceptions are based on the concept of mimesis which is generally understood as referring to the realistic reproduction of an object through artistic means. The mimetic value of photography forms the central focus of this chapter.

This chapter also focuses on the artefactual role of photography as a mimetic medium. An artefact is commonly understood to be an object made or modified according to cultural conditions. In this context, "artefact" as a definition of a photograph refers to the literal meaning of the word when divided into its two constituent parts. "Arte" refers to the aesthetic creative construction and "fact" indicates the relation to being true and real. The photograph can therefore be understood as a tangible object for memory based on the existence of actual events as portrayed in the image. In the general Introduction I explained that I am following a dialectical approach. This chapter comprises the thesis of the dialectic, namely that photography is an artefactual mimesis of memory.

A great deal of the excitement around the invention of photography arose because it was understood as an accessible mechanical process for replacing the arduous mimetic aspect of much art.<sup>1</sup> Prior to the invention of photography the creation of mimetic pictures depended on realistic painting techniques which could produce a corresponding copy of a subject. According to Alan Trachtenberg (1980:ix):

The earliest terms of discussion of the photograph were terms used in regard to any picture. The difference seemed to lie only in the making with infinitely greater speed and accuracy of the same kind of image – as far as verisimilitude was concerned – that painters and printmakers wished to achieve: an image of “reality”.

Photography, as a mimetic technique, was widely accepted as being seemingly exact, as an easier method for correspondence than other mimetic mediums. Furthermore, it was capable of multiplicity and as documentation or proof of the existence of the subject. In order to unpack the concept of photography it is elucidatory to start with an explanation of the photographic process. To conceive of photography as an embodied artefact of memory requires a basic understanding of the processes which use light as a means of illustrating the world in images. By capturing light that is translated by the camera and the subsequent developing processes, an image can be created that visually imitates the moment in the form of a photograph. The first section of this chapter briefly examines the processes, the historical development of the invention of photography and the reactions it evoked in society.

## **1.2 The photograph as medium for mimesis**

If mimesis can be defined as “the imitation or representation of aspects of the sensible world, especially human actions, in literature and art”,<sup>2</sup> it would be difficult to write about photography as a mimetic process without referring to other art media. To mid-nineteenth century observers, the paper-based monochrome photographs were perceived as documents akin to engravings, lithographs and drawings. The word *photography* is derived from combining the words *photo*, which refers to light, and *graph*, which alludes to mark making. In other words, a photograph is the result of a process where light is used to create marks. Similarly, conventional writing is mark making by using an implement to scratch symbols onto a surface. Both the light harnessed by the camera, which is photography’s tool, and graphic implements, such as pens and pencils, leave traces.

The prototype camera used to capture light is known as the *camera obscura*, or translated, “dark chamber”. To manufacture a *camera obscura* the interior of a box is painted black and a small hole is made on one side. Objects that face the hole on the exterior of the box emit or reflect light through the small hole onto the opposite interior wall of the box, creating an upside down image.<sup>3</sup> To correct the image a mirror is installed at a certain angle inside the box. This optical device was used by early Renaissance artists to trace images which were projected, thus ensuring accurate perspective. The camera as it is known today developed from the concept of the *camera obscura*.

The basic mechanism of a camera, whether it is analogue or digital, operates in the same way and can be compared to that of the eye. A rudimentary summary of this comparison starts with light entering the pupil which is a retractable opening. The pupil regulates the amount of light that enters the eye, which is projected onto the retina on the rear wall of the eye. The pupil of the eye is also covered by a lens that aids in focusing the image. Additionally, through chemical processes an image is created in the brain which allows us to see the objects, in the spectrum of light, that are in front of the pupil of the eye. The same principle occurs in the camera which also has a lens that focuses the image. The amount of light that reaches the film is regulated by the aperture and the shutter speed. The bigger the aperture the faster the shutter speed is and vice versa. The aperture or lens opening consists of thin metal leaves that overlap each other, arranged in such a manner to create a round opening which is adaptable in size. This aperture is found in the middle of the lens. The shutter speed refers to the time the shutter is left open. When light enters the camera it is transfixed on the light sensitive film which is a kind of mechanical retina.



**Figure 1. Nicéphore Niépce, *View from window at Le Gras* (1826).**

The limitation of the *camera obscura* was that the image projected onto the interior wall of the box could not be fixed, resulting in a fading image when the light source diminished. In 1826 Nicéphore Niépce overcame this problem when he developed a technique<sup>4</sup> of fixing a virtual image onto a light sensitised medium in his first photograph, *View from a window at Le Gras* (1826, Figure 1).<sup>5</sup> Initially, photographic images were indistinct, leading Niépce to collaborate with Louis-Jacques Mandé Daguerre,<sup>6</sup> among others, in the pursuit of a perfect image.

Shortly after Niépce's death the collaborative efforts culminated in the daguerreotype photographic process<sup>7</sup> which was publicly proclaimed in August 1839, at the Institute de France (Frizot b 1998:23). Aphrodite Navab (2001) quotes from *La Gazette de France*, 1839, in which it was declared that photography was such a significant invention that it "upset all scientific theories on light and optics and it will revolutionize the art of drawing". The new invention was heralded to have such abilities to the

extent that the public, as well as the inventors themselves, believed that the daguerreotype was, as Graham Clarke<sup>8</sup> states, “a fixed and everlasting impress which ... can be taken away from the presence of the objects” (Navab 2001).



**Figure 2. Louis-Jacques Mandé Daguerre, *View of the Boulevard du Temple* (1839).**

The exactness of the invention was enthusiastically received. Among others, the physician Samuel F B Morse, who invented the electrical telegraph, was intrigued by the fine detail of the image. Michel Frizot (1998b:28) quotes Morse’s statement regarding Daguerre’s *View of the Boulevard du Temple* (1839, Figure 2) as follows: “You cannot imagine how exquisite is the fine detail portrayed. No painting or engraving could ever hope to touch it”. What most intrigued Morse was that when he inspected the image through a hand-lens, “each letter became perfectly and clearly visible, and it was the same thing for the tiny cracks on the walls of the buildings or the pavements of the streets” (Frizot 1998b:28). Due to the



long exposure time, moving objects left no impression which left the scene desolate except for a still figure whose boots were being cleaned.

Others also received the invention of photography with incredulity. The chemist Joseph Gay-Lussac describes it as “showing the creations of God in facsimile, of a perfection equal to Nature herself” (Rice 1998:48). This sense of veneration of photography was also championed by Edgar Allan Poe, who “believed the photograph to be both absolute and supreme perfection, even claiming the photograph to be more true and perfect than the object photographed” (Navab 2001). Poe’s article in the *Alexander’s Weekly Messenger* of 1840 explicates his positive evaluation of the mimetic power in photography (Navab 2001):

All language must fall short of conveying any just idea of the truth. ... Perhaps if we imagined the distinctiveness with which an object is reflected in a positively perfect mirror, we come as near the reality as by any other means ...  
[P]hotography discloses a more absolute truth, a more perfect identity of aspect with the thing represented. The variations of shade and the gradations of both linear and aerial perspective are those of truth itself in the [supremacy] of its perfection.

This perception, shared by many during the formative years of photography, indicates the role that photography played and still continues to play as a “perfect” mimetic tool for artefactual memory. However, the magic of the earlier photographic processes had their limitations. Daguerreotype images were not reproducible, thereby restricting the process to a single image. In addition, long exposure times created technical problems.

Simultaneous to Daguerre announcing his scientific breakthrough, William Henry Fox Talbot revealed the calotype photograph, an example of which is seen in *The Ladder* (1843, Figure 3). Talbot had discovered the phenomenon of the latent image in photography. According to Leggat (2006), this development in the photographic process was significant since

it drastically reduced the exposure time, making it an easier process. In this form a paper negative is created which can be used to make contact prints and could be stored and developed at a later stage. This separation of the exposure and the physical appearance of the negative image created the basis for all subsequent development in photography (Frizot 1998b:31).



**Figure 3. William Henry Fox Talbot, *The Ladder* (1843).**

The calotype photographs were not as clear as the daguerreotype images which were printed on polished silver plates. The decline of the daguerreotype photographic process was mainly due to its complex technical processes and singular image result. Although Daguerre's invention was commended by many, the mathematical precision of the process was often referred to as an invention that should be executed by mechanical engineers (Starl 1998:33). Both the calotype and daguerreotype processes proved not to be commercially viable. However,

new developments in photography continued to introduce “easier” and more commercially viable techniques.

### **1.3 The captivating qualities of photography**

#### **1.3.1 The “unmediatedness” or objectivity of photography**

Despite the demise of their inventions, Talbot and Daguerre mutually considered photography to be an unmediated invention capable of harnessing the creative potential of light and of immortalising nature. The camera was conceived as an objective instrument which captures the image, to which the photographer does not contribute except to open and close the shutter. As Tony Godfrey (1998:303) states, “the naïve view that underlies much early photography ... was that the camera was an opinion-less copying device”. It was believed that an accurate, unmediated mimesis is epitomised in photography.

Traditionally, art was generally assumed to essentially be a means for naturalistic representation. However, painting and other media had limitations since the process to create an image is extensive and only a single image can be produced at a time. As Ernst Gombrich (1977:30) explains in terms of traditional naturalistic painting, “the artist, too can only transcribe what he sees; he can only translate it into the terms of his medium”. Traditional naturalistic paintings, irrespective of excellent technical faculty, remain overtly mediated by the artist’s touch. The physicality of paintings, the tactility and smell of the canvas and paint, augments this perception. Additionally, the artist’s bias toward the subject is intrinsic to all paintings, further contributing to the mediatedness of traditional art.<sup>9</sup> Compared to these so-called limitations, the photographic image was considered to be an objective rendering of a subject due to the mechanical, seemingly unmediated device used to create the image.

The traditional perspective of photography, stating that it is an objective mimetic technique employed to induce an unfiltered view of memories, was paramount to its historical reception. Photography offered a chance to reach the utopian belief that people could be free to “have their own lives [and memories] rather than the lives that society has given them second hand [through the mediation in traditional art]” (Godfrey 1998:63).

### **1.3.2 The reproducibility and multiplicity of photography**

The seemingly inexplicably perfect reproducible ability of photography captivated society. Photographs were perceived to be transcriptions of nature and people. Daguerre said that photography, with specific reference to his invention, the daguerreotype photograph, “is not merely an instrument which serves to draw Nature; on the contrary it is a chemical and physical process which gives her power to reproduce herself” (Trachtenberg 1980:13).

Photography came to be referred to as “the pencil of nature” and was said to transcript the objects it rendered. Mary Price (1994:9)<sup>10</sup> explains that:

... if one thinks of that straight line from object through lens to photograph, with indexical correlation, ... the idea of transcription can be kept, and it will correspond to fact. In this manner, the perception that photography was a more accurate mimetic vehicle than traditional artistic techniques was solidified.

As the deficiencies of the early photographic processes were addressed through the development of subsequent techniques, the image quality improved and photography became more accessible. In 1850 an Englishman, Scott Archer, began experimenting with sensitising glass plates, which made the photographic process consumer friendly. These transparent, sensitised glass plates, in conjunction with the use of sodium thiosulphate as fixing agent, formed the foundation for conventional photography as it is used today. The glass plates later made way for celluloid negatives. The main goal of technical research in that era was to

reduce exposure times and to create multi-exposure possibilities that were affordable and easy to manage.<sup>11</sup> The possibility of multiple images made the use of photography even more appealing.

### **1.3.3 The accessibility of photography**

Part of the allure of photography was that nature could be miniaturised by means of a mechanical invention. The mechanically produced picture had perfect perspective and range of tonalities, a feat difficult to achieve in realistic painting which depended on the technical ability of the artist. Photography as a mimetic artefact proved to be much easier to achieve in comparison to the other traditional representational methods. This contributed to the significance photography had and still has in society.

Indeed, photography was seen to be a miracle. As opposed to the laborious efforts of other traditional mimetic devices, as an invention photography allows us to make copies of everything we see. It is fast, accurate and largely automatic, a powerful and easy way of disseminating information. According to the editors of *Time-Life Books* (1971:12) “[n]o medium of expression has appealed so immediately to so many people, nor has any medium but spoken language been so universally used”.

Photography can also be pursued at different levels; as a mimetic device photography is accessible and easy to use for the day to day capturing of memories to advanced technical applications each offering its own reward.

### **1.3.4 The photograph as documentation**

The factual basis of the artefact is significant if a photograph is described as an artefact. A characteristic that contributed to the impact of photography was that the photographic image is a representation of something that “really” exists or existed at the time of exposure. *Time-Life Books* (1971:12) describes photography as a magic act: “a little black box that can trap people and wild animals, strange places and well-loved ones,

and bring them all back home”. To put it differently the perception of photography was and to some extent still is that a photograph can document a scene and preserve the moment. The argument is that although a painting can conceivably be very realistic, a photograph represents an occurrence that happened therefore makes it more “real” than any painting. In comparison, a painting does not necessarily need to be a reproduction of an existing object.

Because modern photography is capable of instantaneously producing multiple images from one negative, it provides a transparent version of reality also capable of multiplicity. As a result, this new invention shapes the way we represent and see things. This leads to an interesting perspective of photography as advocated by Kendall Walton (2005:78),<sup>12</sup> who states that photography is a visual aid since “it gave us a new way of seeing”. With this statement Walton does not imply that photography supplements our vision by providing duplicates or reproductions of objects, or substitutes or surrogates for them. Rather, he alludes to the phenomenon that our visual perceptions are changed and challenged in novel ways.

Walton (2005:80) returns to André Bazin’s collapse of the identity between the object and its photograph after reaching the conclusion that Bazin’s “claim might derive from failure to recognize that we can be seeing both the photograph and the object: *What we see are photographs, but we do see the photographed objects; so the photographs and objects must be somehow identical*”. In other words, seeing something as it is or looking at a photograph thereof are merely different ways of seeing. Walton (2005:77) disagrees with Bazin’s opinion regarding the “deeper gap between photographs and pictures of other kinds”. According to Walton (2005:77), Bazin and others claim that the photograph is a vehicle for identical mimesis of the object photographed. Bazin’s belief is grounded in the mechanical origin of photographs which is independent of the

appearance of the resulting image. Although this assumption of Bazin's and like-minded theorists is problematic when interpreted literally, it could be an indication of what makes photography so different from painting.

#### **1.4 Conclusion**

This chapter comprises the thesis of the dialectic, namely that photography is an artefactual mimesis aiding memory. The implementation of the word "artefact" was established and an understanding of the word "mimesis" was developed. Initially a brief explanation of the photographic process was included to assist the reader in the understanding of the medium of photography. The central premise of this chapter was based on the early response to the invention of photography. The discussion of photography's historical development also contributed to the general perceptions of its characteristics as a "mimetic" device.

In order to analyze the early response to the invention of photography I identified four qualities of photography that contributed to these first perspectives. Traditional art as the pre-eminent mimetic vehicle had been ousted by photography due to its qualities of seeming exactness and objectivity creating a perception that as a "mimetic" device photography is unmediated as well as being capable of multiplicity. Another characteristic of photography that I defined in this chapter was that it is accessible and relatively easier to attain than the traditional forms of mimesis for creating a mimetic image for memory. In addition, the prevalent perception was that a photograph seemed to be proof of the actual event thus documenting the object or person photographed.

This discussion led to the constructing of a thesis where photography as "mimetic" device corresponds to the subject, mirroring its reality. In other words, the thesis revolved around the notion that photography was considered to be a perfect artefactual mimetic method to document and aid the remembrance of events and people. However, these early

perceptions were based on half-truths leading to mistaken assumptions concerning photography as mimetic medium. Many of these partially true perceptions persist in contemporary opinions regarding photography, which is why the next chapter aims to deconstruct these ideas and thus unpack the antithesis of the dialectic.

#### Endnotes: Chapter One

1. It needs to be pointed out from the outset that a large portion of art was never about straight forward mimesis. This issue is explored in the following chapters.
2. From dictionary.reference.com, sv. "mimesis".
3. How light is refracted by shining through a hole is not relevant to this discussion and will not be elaborated upon. See Horder (1971) for more information on this subject.
4. A detailed description of the process Niépce used in taking this photograph can be found in Jeffrey (1999). To see the original print in its original frame, see <http://www.hrc.utexas.edu/exhibitions/permanent/wfp/> (accessed on 2008-11-04).
5. According to the *Sunday Times* (11 May 2008:11), the history of photography might have to be rewritten. The ochre coloured image of a leaf on light sensitive paper may be the first photograph, dated about 1805. This "photograph" has been attributed to Henry Fox Talbot, the father of photography. The article refers to Larry Schaaf, an authority on Talbot, who denies the photograph as being the work of Talbot and rather attributes it to Thomas Wedgwood, the son of Josiah Wedgwood, founder of the china dynasty. In this case, it would result in the image being even older. The image is, however, currently credited at Sotheby's as "Photographer Unknown". For more information on this photogenic drawing refer to <http://antiques-collectibles-auction-news.com/tag/quillan-leaf/>, accessed on 2008-08-18. The image is available at <http://images.google.co.za/images?hl=en&q=thomas%20wedgwood&um=1&ie=UTF-8&sa=N&tab=wi>, accessed on 2008-08-18.
6. Daguerre (1787-1851) was one of the founders of photography. He joined forces with Niépce (1765-1833) and after Niépce's death he continued to refine their findings, perfecting Niépce's technique.
7. The daguerreotype is a direct-positive process (which is the process where a negative is not required and only one print can be made, also used in Polaroid photography), which requires expert care and technical facility, resulting in a highly detailed image.
8. Clarke is a photographer based in Edinburgh with twenty five years' experience and is the author of *The Photograph*, 1997. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
9. I do not consider the traditional art form of sculpture in this discussion as it falls outside the scope of this dissertation.
10. Price is the author of *The photograph: a strange, confined space* (1994). In this "dense, subtle, provocative book [Price] considers the question of how photographs *mean* in relation to the uses made of them" (<http://www.sup.org/book>).
11. Initially an image could be reproduced by using transparent negatives of glass or celluloid. However, due to digitisation technology images are reproduced in many different ways and on many different surfaces increasing the reproducibility of an image even more.
12. Kendall L Walton (1939 - ) is a professor of philosophy at the University of Michigan.



## Chapter Two: Deconstructing photography as accurate mimesis

### 2.1 Introduction

In Chapter One, I established that photography was traditionally regarded as a mimetic artefact assisting in the recollection of memories. This perception continues to hold sway in contemporary society. The intention of this second chapter is to deconstruct these opinions. This entails an analysis of the above mentioned thesis to the point where the assumptions on which the initial perceptions are based are proven to be false. Simultaneously, I follow a revisionist approach and therefore selected traditional and contemporary texts are researched in support of my argument. My method in this dissertation is to analyse photography as a form of writing since both “translate” an aspect of reality into another form. The proposition that photography is a form of writing can also be derived from the literal meaning of “photography”, which means to write with light.

I start the chapter with a general introduction to the key issues of structural and post-structural theory on language, which leads onto a discussion on Derrida’s view of writing and language. This is followed by an analysis of Derrida’s deconstruction theory. Consequently, true to a revisionist approach I examine the Greek philosopher Plato and his idea regarding the role of writing as “mimetic” device which acts as a *pharmakon* for memory. Plato’s problematises writing as a “mimetic” device, describing it as an *illusion* of memory and therefore of wisdom. I follow the analysis of Plato’s perception regarding writing with a deconstruction of his theory.

The photographic process and the process of translation is thoroughly discussed and compared. The discussion on translation explains the limitations in understanding photography as an exact translation from a temporal moment to a graphic, permanent image. The chapter then concludes by using the above mentioned information to deconstruct the four elements that contributed to photography’s traditional perception as

discussed in the previous chapter, creating an antithesis for the dialectic. I now turn to a brief discussion of structural and post-structural tenets.

## **2.2 Saussure and structuralism**

As a theory, structuralism evolved near the beginning of the twentieth century with the post-structuralist theory developing from it. These theories are based on the language turn in philosophy, which, according to Johan Degenaar<sup>1</sup> (1987:3) represents a shift from a paradigm of direct perception to a paradigm of language. Degenaar (1987:3) writes that to “take perception as basis of understanding is to assume that the mind has an immediate access to the world. To take language as basis of understanding is to assume that our relationship with the world is mediated”. He also explains that “structuralism means the science of structures as preconditions of understanding – the paradigm for structure as a system of relationships being the linguistic model introduced by Ferdinand de Saussure”<sup>2</sup> (Degenaar 1986:57).

Structuralists propose that we use language as a system of signs to establish understanding and to find meaning in our world. As Derrida (1976:158) states, “there is nothing outside the text”. Therefore, language cannot be used to “unlock” true meaning that exists beforehand and independent of language. Rather, as Terence Hawkes (1978:160) describes it, the function of language is focused on “how we articulate our world to determine how we arrive at what we call reality”.

Saussure proposed the theory that our knowledge of the world is shaped and conditioned by the language which represents it. He denied the common sense belief that a natural link exists between word and object. Saussure also believed that it is not individual words that give meaning to language but rather the relationships between the words that create meaning. According to Saussure (1986:148), there are no “ready-made ideas” before words. Saussure (1986:167) also states that “in language

there are only differences. Even more important [is that] a difference generally implies positive terms between which the differences are set up; but in language there are only differences *without positive terms*". Hereby Saussure confirms the theory that language does not refer to a pre-existent reality, but that language creates reality. In other words, language does not provide a "window" to reality but rather constructs reality through the play of differences.

In his analysis of language as a system of signs and the manner in which it operates, Saussure describes signs as having two components. The first element is the signifier which can be regarded as the sensory, visual or acoustic component. We hear the sound of a spoken word and we see the marks of the written word. The other component is the signified, which refers to the meaning or concept pointed to by the sensory element. According to Saussure, the relationship between the signified and the signifier is arbitrary (Appignanesi 2001:59). In other words, there is nothing specific in a particular word that causes it to mean the object it refers to. This perception changed the study of linguistics.

Yet, each part of the sign is dependent on the other. They are as inseparable as the recto and verso of a leaf of paper. Saussure uses this metaphor of a leaf of paper to illustrate the concept of differences (Collins and Mayblin 2005:63-65). Should the leaf of paper be cut into different shapes, each shape can be identified by its difference from the other shapes. These underlying differences attribute a certain value in the system of shapes, to each individual piece's shape. Moreover, the front and back of the paper are cut simultaneously, implying that the signifier and the signified define each other's shapes and thus each other's meaning. Saussure believes that the different parts of language are significant, not necessarily because they refer to things outside the system of language, but because they relate to each other "within" the system. It is this inter-relationship that creates meaning. So, Saussure himself

deconstructs his own distinction between signifier and signified. Saussure (1986:162) compares the function of language to a chain: "Language is a system of interdependent terms in which the value of each term results solely from the simultaneous presence of the others." To Saussure linguistic signs refer only to other linguistic signs within the system and it is the play of differences that infer meanings.

Saussure tried to create stability in the cohesive underlying structure of language by distinguishing between "langue" and "parole" in language. Although he believes that there is no natural connection between the signifier and the signified he tried to set up stability in the conventional understanding of this relationship. Thus he distinguishes between "Langue" which refers to the ideal language structure as set by convention and "parole" which indicates the individual use of language which can be measured against "langue" for competence (Saussure 1986:142).

Before Saussurian structuralism, linguists searched for meaning in the historical origins of language. Saussure was instrumental in forwarding the contention that "it no longer made as much sense to talk about the historical development of words and their meanings or about the origins of words ... [L]ooking at how words change over time does not tell us anything about how language works" (Stevenson 2005:261). Yet, in his analysis of language, Saussure also draws a distinction between a historical and an ahistorical approach to the study of language. This is the second measure that Saussure implements to create stability in the study of linguistics. He identifies these as diachronic and synchronic approaches to linguistics (Norris 1991:25).

A synchronic approach is "one that treats language as a network of structural relations existing at a given point in time" (Norris 1991:25). In other words, a synchronic approach is ahistoric and does not rely on an origin to determine meaning. In contrast, a diachronic approach to finding

meaning is based on “historical research and speculation which had dominated nineteenth-century linguistics” (Norris 1991:25). The latter approach is based on studying the development of language through time. Saussure believes that diachronic changes become incorporated in the synchronic system without the language system losing its structure. In other words, the system of language adjusts while keeping the structure stable (Stevenson 2005:262). This difference in opinion concerning the stability of language resulted in the separation of the post-structuralists from the structuralists.

### **2.3 Derrida and post-structuralism**

Saussure defines difference as “the identity of a sign as constituted by its differences from other signs” (Rivkin 1998:258). In other words, the system of language, grammar, syntax and history is the mechanism of difference. Meaning is not possible outside this system. Derrida adopts this idea of Saussure’s but adapts it by changing it from “difference” to a combination of *différance* and deferral. According to Rivkin (1998:258):

[T]he presence of an object of conscious perception or of a thought in the mind is shaped by its difference from other objects and thoughts. This simultaneous movement of temporal deferment and spatial difference, both ongoing processes that constitute being, are what Derrida means by “*différance*.” Ideas and things are like signs in language; there are no identities, only differences.

This is in contrast to traditional assumptions in philosophy that were based on the conscious presence of ideas and thinking that exists independent of language.

Degenaar (1987:5) explains how Derrida implemented the word he created through his complex approach to language: “[D]ifférance ... means ‘difference-differing-deferring’.” Degenaar (1987:5) continues his exposition of the three different aspects contained in the word “*différance*”:

[A] 'passive' difference which has already been made and is available on the subject; an act of differing which produces difference as it succeeds in situating signs differently; an act of deferring which refers to the provisionality of distinctions and to the fact that the use of language entails the interminable interrelationship of signs.

The “passive” aspect refers to the conventional understanding that has been ascribed to a word. On the other hand, the “differing” quality of the term points to the continual play and instability of language, which is capable of creating new meanings and casting old meanings aside. The “deferring” component of “difference” relates to the provisionality of meaning, where a final meaning can never be attained. This deferring quality also bears witness of the traces that Derrida refers to where aspects of the past form part of the present meaning. In this manner, a historical dimension is included in Derrida’s approach to language, something which Saussure tried to abolish.

Différance also means that for an idea to be present it has to depend on something other than itself because it is incomplete in itself. Therefore the idea needs a supplement, from which it differs and from which it refers or to which it relates. Derrida refers to this phenomenon as the “supplement at the origin” (Rivkin 1998:258). By this he means that if one tries to grasp the presence of something one encounters a “différance [and] not something substantial” (Rivkin 1998:258). There is no original presence, according to Derrida, but rather a “supplementary relationship between terms” (Rivkin 1998:159).

This lack of original presence expressed by language is addressed specifically by Derrida through his deconstruction method of critique. Deconstruction has become an influential interpretive activity, “where a piece of writing is taken apart to show how, in spite of itself, it fails to produce the consistent, reliable sense it aims at” (Stevenson 2006:275). Additionally, this analytical tool can be described as “the practice of

unravelling meaning from written language to show how what's written is put together out of assumptions that can't be true" (Stevenson 2006:276).

Traditional thought considers that the relation between language and truth or reality is unproblematic. This is referred to as the correspondence view of language. Derrida's practice of deconstruction aims to undo the ideas that are contained in Western metaphysical thought (Norris 1991:19). According to the deconstructive approach, truth will always be incomplete. Rivkin (1998:261) states that Derrida has been central to the shift in the philosophical dialogue to a place where the world can be seen as an unsaturated reality. According to Rivkin (1998:261), reality for Derrida is:

... a field of contingency, not natural order, that the identities of truth that philosophy takes for granted are unstable, that the truthful orders of value we live by may be rhetorical acts of linguistic meaning-making, rather than representations of pre-existing truth, that the substance of thought and of reality conceals insubstantial processes that constitute them.

In other words, the continual deferral of meaning as a result of the instability of language gives rise to constantly changing reality, generated by the traces of the past, the present and future, creating new meaning. Derrida perceived the role of history in language as traces of the past that are found in the present meaning. Jasper Neel (1988:150) explains: "the trace is Derrida's name for what is never there. No element in any signifying system 'can function as a sign without referring to another element which itself is not present'. Each element, in fact, is constituted by the trace within it of the elements from which it differs".

This continual creation of new meaning through language is also relevant to a later section of this chapter where I discuss another element found in language which also determines the creation of new meanings, namely translation. However, a revisionistic rereading of Plato and his view on language and its mimetic value follows.

#### 2.4 Plato's view on writing as mimesis

Plato, the Greek philosopher, employed stories in dialogue form to explain the concepts of his philosophy. The *Phaedrus* (written approximately 370 BC) combines the dialogue format with an Egyptian myth to explicate Plato's argument concerning his perception of writing. The *Phaedrus* is based on a fictional conversation between two historical characters, Phaedrus and Socrates. This writing typifies the Platonic style in which characters represent differing points of view. The protagonist in the dialogue is Socrates,<sup>3</sup> Plato's tutor. Superficially, the storyline of the *Phaedrus* can be described as the "jovial banter between two men" about love, sophistry and writing (Neel 1988:11). Sophist is the Greek word for *expert*. In Plato's time these experts used philosophical rhetoric, based on the concept that there are no natural rules for all human behaviour, to benefit themselves (Stevenson 2005:43). However, sophistry,<sup>4</sup> in the context of the dialogue, is significant because it is the argument that seeks to represent the truth but it does not. In this manner, Plato alludes by allegory to writing as not representing the truth though it purports to do so.

Plato comments on a central issue in Greek philosophical thought, namely the nature of wisdom, by adding writing to his favoured themes in the *Phaedrus*.<sup>5</sup> In keeping with rhetorical practices of the time, he illustrates his argument with parables, myths, wordplay and a range of rhetorical devices often used in Greek literary texts.

The Egyptian myth in the *Phaedrus* has two central characters, Theuth (also known as Thoth), the Egyptian God of death, invention and magic, and Thamus (also known as Ammon-Ra), the King of Egypt who is also the king of the Gods. According to the plot, the God of death invents writing, thereby establishing an association which is meant to discredit the invention. Plato (1973: section 276) saw writing as "a kind of shadow" in opposition to the living world of knowledge which has a soul. He highlights



the lifelessness of the written word by pointing out that “the [M]oon-[G]od of death himself invented the tool of the myth of Theuth” (Chan 2000).

Theuth, the inventor of man’s arts, presents writing among other arts to Thamus as a tool to enhance the Egyptians’ remembrance and wit. He offers writing as a “remedy” to the King of Egypt by declaring, “Here is an accomplishment, my lord the king, which will improve both the wisdom and the memory of the Egyptians. I have discovered a sure receipt<sup>6</sup> for memory and wisdom” (Plato 1973: section 274). Furthermore, Plato scripts Thamus as the bestower of value, who is to judge the validity of writing as a *pharmakon*, as a tool for the enhancement of memory. The God-King rejects writing as a *pharmakon* for memory, which Theuth has offered him, by saying (Plato 1973: section 275a-b):

What you have discovered is a receipt for recollection, not for memory. And as for wisdom, your pupils will have the reputation for it without the reality: they will receive a quantity of information without proper instruction, and in consequence be thought very knowledgeable when they are for the most part quite ignorant. And because they are filled with conceit of wisdom instead of real wisdom they will be a burden to society.

Thamus refers to the poisonous qualities of the *pharmakon* since it only induces an *illusion* of increased knowledge and wisdom rather than the actual manifestation of these qualities. The worthlessness Plato ascribes to writing as an aid for memory can be deduced from this myth. According to him, to have true wisdom is not to have knowledge about things as we see them because they are only copies of the ideal type, the Form. Plato’s work is embedded in his Theory of Ideas or Forms in which idealised forms exist in a transcendental realm that can be awakened and remembered through philosophical illumination. The representation of the Idea of writing or of anything else must necessarily be secondary to the primary Form or Idea.<sup>7</sup>

Writing, as a representation of what wisdom really is, or as a copy of knowledge, “might [accordingly] fairly be called a shadow” of the truth (Plato 1973: section 276). It is in this sense that writing is not a good “medicine” against the “illness” of ignorance or the “conceit of wisdom” (Plato 1973:275 a-b). This concept can likewise be applied to a photograph when it is defined as an image drawn with the pencil of nature. If we consider the photograph to be a true likeness of the subject, we fall into the same trap as a person who regards writing to be the aid for true wisdom. Plato’s dialogue thus discredits the general perception of photography, identified in the previous chapter as an objective, realistic, mimetic aid for recollection. Rather, Plato would see the invention of photography as inferior with regard to capturing truth that lies deeper than that which presents itself on the surface.

If it is true that consciousness can be enhanced, increased or expanded by the reminder which the photograph affords, then the photograph is similar to what writing was for Plato – it acts as a *reminder* of something larger and more significant than itself. For Plato, the aid for memory constrains rather than transmits true knowledge, relating to what he said about writing as a *pharmakon* for memory. Memory is the *sine qua non* for wisdom.<sup>8</sup> According to Plato, if one cannot memorise what is spoken then one has to use writing perforce which leads to an *illusion* of wisdom.

It follows that the structuralists did not share Plato’s concept regarding the independent existence of a meaningful Idea. In Plato’s formulation, the spoken language is a secondary correspondence to the Idea and writing is a secondary correspondence to the spoken language, making writing a copy of a copy of a copy.

According to Barbara Johnson<sup>9</sup> (1981:xxiv), Socrates’ condemnation of writing (being a copy of speech) and of speech (as a shadow of the Idea) has been taken at face value over the centuries. This has introduced the

notion that “Platonism” can “indeed be seen as another name for the history of strongly stressed metaphysical binarity. What Derrida does in his reading of Plato is to unfold those dimensions of Plato’s *text* that work against the grain of (Plato’s own) Platonism” (Johnson 1981:xxiv).

Platonism as understood through the ages is based on the concept of binary oppositions, in which meaning is found in an opposing element. Western thought, including “everyday” thought and language, is structured around dichotomies or polarities where one element is privileged and marginalises the other. Through deconstruction Derrida de-centres or subverts the primary term so that the secondary term is on equal ground. Derrida deconstructs and thereby challenges Platonic binarity which then leads us to reconsider the stability of the Western metaphysical tradition based on Plato’s philosophy.

In this deconstructive exercise, Derrida uses Plato’s concept of *pharmakon* to establish his critique of hierarchical binary opposites. The *pharmakon* has primarily been misinterpreted because of the “gaps” that were created during the process of translation from the Greek. Although the original Greek word has numerous diverse meanings, the “correct” interpretation led to a limited translation and thus to a fixed understanding of the word. According to Johnson (1981:xxiv):

It can be said that everything in Derrida’s discussion of the *Phaedrus* hinges on the translation of a single word: the word *pharmakon*, which in Greek can mean *both* “remedy” *and* “poison.” In referring to writing as a *pharmakon*, Plato is thus not making a simple value judgment. Yet translators, by choosing to render the word sometimes by “remedy” and sometimes by “poison”, have consistently *decided* what in Plato remains undecidable, and thus influenced the course of the entire history of “Platonism”.

The word *pharmakon*, with its manifold meanings, relates to that space between binary opposites, it is not one or the other but it bears its own opposition within itself. The understanding of the concept *pharmakon*,

according to Derrida (1981:125), “lies in the way in which, having no stable essence, no ‘proper’ characteristics, it is not, in any sense (metaphysical, physical, chemical, alchemical) of the word *substance*. ... It is rather the prior medium in which differentiation in general is produced”. It acts, then, not only as a link between “two supposedly opposite elements, but also as a subversive device which erases the distinction between the two elements. It bridges and assumes both their identities simultaneously” (Mohan 1997).

To consider the word and concept *pharmakon* from Derrida's post-structuralist perspective is to understand it as a word that has no specific meaning. Rather, it has many meanings, being subject to continual change depending on the context. Photography as a *pharmakon* for memory would indicate that a photograph has no fixed meaning but is in continual flux depending on the context. If a photograph contains some mimetic truth, but also always suppresses other aspects of the situation, then achieving total wisdom of the past moment is an illusion.

## **2.6 Translation and photography**

The section that follows deals with translation and the problems that accompanies this process, which is relevant because photography can be seen as a form of translation. In the discussion on the deconstruction of Plato's concept of the *pharmakon*, I referred to the “gaps” that appear during the translation process. In this next section I explain this concept thoroughly.

The process of translation can be described as the decoding of the meaning of a text in its original language and the subsequent recoding of that meaning into a text in another language. Translation is a significant contributor to the dissemination of information. Lauren Leighton (1990:446) describes the translation of texts from one language to another as “a version, rendering, adaptation, imitation, paraphrase, parody,

transposition, transformation, performance, dialogue, dialectic, synthesis, interpretation and reinterpretation, exegesis, and of course traduction.”

The difficulty with translation is that language does not only consist of synonyms and syntax, but also of idioms and metaphors, creating connoted meanings that are culturally bound and lead to semiotic inconsistencies when translated directly. After each translation, something of the original is lost and something is added. According to Walter Benjamin<sup>10</sup> (2004:19):

[T]he transfer can never be total ... there is an element that goes beyond transmittal of subject matter, this element does not lend itself to translation. Unlike the words of the original, it is not translatable, because the relationship between content and language is quite different in the original and the translation.

In translation a certain amount of freedom has to be permitted in order to create a new text that still bears a similar message, presented in the new language. It is therefore inevitable that certain analogical differences will occur which should not, however, interfere with the original message. Translation between two languages often creates a bridging of content, but adequately pinning down and capturing the original verbatim is impossible. An example of this is the translation of Plato's text I discussed in the previous section in which the new text is supplemented with the voice of the translator through the allowances. Vinay and Darbelnet (2004:93) reach the conclusion that a translation is an equivalent but is not a copy of the original, “since it is the situation that has been translated, rather than the actual grammar structure”.

According to post-structuralism, comprehensive translation can never be achieved since language is not a stable entity that has a set and saturated meaning. There is a continuous play in the meaning of language. If words only named things in the real world, translation would be exact. However,

words create the real world and mostly refer to other words in a network-like fashion, making precise translation impossible.

Furthermore, words and language are used to translate and articulate prediscursive or ineffable feelings and thoughts into a communication medium. To *write* words is to translate sounds into graphic symbols that have an artefactual quality, thereby adding visual characteristics to the audible features of speech. In a similar manner, a photograph is a translation of light into a graphic image which is generally perceived to be an exact rendition of the reflected light. However, as indicated above, a translation cannot be an exact copy of the source language, or, in this case, of the reflected light, since the mediums (or languages) are different. The incongruity arises because a photograph is a translation from a temporal moment in time into a graphic semblance of that moment. Certain elements of light and the totality of the temporal experience cannot be transcribed. Rather, an image that is similar to and communicates something about the situation is translated from the moment. The capturing of light and its transference into a graphic, tangible image through the process of photography can therefore be regarded as a form of translation, which, as argued, can never be exact.

Derrida argues that contexts themselves are not fully knowable. Or, put differently, “[m]eaning is context bound, but no context is saturated” (Derrida 1990:165). In other words, the meaning of a word relies on its use in a context. Similarly, although a photograph contains some mimetic truth, it also always conceals other aspects and other contexts simultaneously.

## **2.7 Deconstructing the thesis of Chapter One**

Through the discussion up to this point it can be seen that photography can be seen as a form of writing since both transcribe temporal moments into graphic images through a process of translation. The thesis in Chapter One, was that photography is an artefactual mimesis of memory. To

unpack this perception I identified four qualities that captivated society and contributed to the success of photography. As “mimetic” device, photography was seemingly an exact unmediated copy of the temporal moment. Another quality of photography that contributed to its popularity is its capability of multiplicity and reproducibility. In addition, photography was comparatively a more accessible method of creating a mimetic image as opposed to the other traditional “mimetic” devices. Finally, a photograph was perceived to be a proof or document of the existence of the subject photographed. These four issues are now briefly addressed from a deconstructionist perspective.

One of the central tasks of this dissertation is to analyse the understanding of photography as a mimetic device for memory. To interpret a photographic image as a precise copy of a moment passed would imply an *unmediated* translation process. Moreover, it suggests the existence of an exact correspondence between the moment captured and the photograph. As noted above, according to post-structural theory such a correspondence does not exist and an exact translation is not possible. The deferral of meaning through mediation, translation and context contributes to a questioning of the so-called correspondence properties of a photograph. At most, a photograph can possess traces of the temporal moment captured. The mediation of the photographer as well as the photographic process amounts to a non-corresponding representation of the subject photographed, where even the original is already an interpretation. In this regard I refer to the photographer’s selection of composition, framing, focus, angle and other elements.

The ease of photographic *reproduction*, traditionally seen as a positive quality of photography, substitutes the authenticity of a moment for a plurality of copies. Critics of postmodern visual culture describe simulation to have “created a situation where signs have been emptied of any active content and instead refer only to themselves or their base mechanics,

making representation something elliptical and self-referential” (Heim 1998:35). A simulacra or mimetic image can be defined as “a copy of a copy whose relation to the model [original] has become so attenuated that it [can] no longer properly be said to be a copy” (Massumi 1987). This echoes Plato’s concept of an image or writing where he describes mimesis as a copy of a copy of a copy, so far removed from the Idea that it creates only an *illusion* of wisdom. Since mimetic copies are also forms of translation, the multiplicity capability removes the authenticity of the photographic image. As Benjamin (2005:74) explains: “[b]y making many reproductions it substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence”. The multiplicity of images becomes the referent for representation. As Jean Baudrillard (1994:6) claims, representation rather masks the “absence of a profound reality” than affirms the existence of an original. In other words, representation is motivated more by the technological technique to create a hyperreality that is more perfect than the original, which results in the loss of the original in the process.

Baudrillard (2001:1) sees the photographic image as an apophasis when he describes an inherent absence of reality in the photograph in which “the writing of light ... serves as the medium for this elision of meaning and this quasi-experimental revelation”. The photograph is nothing other than a simulacrum which, according to Baudrillard (1988:166), is “never that which conceals the truth – it is the truth which conceals that there is none”. If, as Baudrillard suggests, the time is imminent and the role of photography is to be a “mirror which briefly captures this imaginary line of the world”, then a photograph is as ungraspable as an image in a mirror. This multiplicity of photography feeds the insatiable consumer desire, with a visual hyperreality far removed from the “real”, irrespective of the loss of authenticity due to this mass production.

The third point in the thesis regarding the qualities of photography refers to the accessibility of photography as a “mimetic” device. The easy handling



and affordability of photography has contributed to the popularity and universal distribution of the medium. However, the endless multiplication of captured moments has created a world built up of simulacra with the original being lost in the process. The capturing or framing of moments of time becomes more important than the actual living of the moment.

A photograph was also seen as a documentative proof of what was photographed. However, to hold to this would deny the mediatedness and the role of the photographer. The moment can be staged, cropped and retouched. With contemporary digital technology the image can be altered to create something other than the temporal moment allegedly captured. Once again, traces of the original moment do exist in the image but a true correspondence is impossible. Furthermore, the interpretation of the context of the temporal moment is in constant flux. According to deconstruction, a saturated context is indefinable since it is modified with each interpretation. Therefore, no complete historical closure or reading of a photograph is possible.

The central focus of this chapter was to develop an antithesis for the thesis in Chapter One. The antithesis is that photography is not an artefactual mimesis of memory but is rather a reflection of the past. This form of memory involves the higher cognitive manifestation of memory. Furthermore, the meaning of a photograph of a captured moment is in constant flux as in "différance". The photographer makes "choices", such as when *this* and not *that* is presented, as in "difference". Also, no direct translation is possible since there are always gaps where information is lost, resulting in an impossibility of exact correspondence. In addition, a photograph is not a proof of the existence of the subject since the image is so far removed from the original through multiplicity and technological advances that the signs have become empty and self-referential.

## 2.8 Conclusion

In this chapter I reviewed relevant literature and developed an antithesis in the dialectic within this dissertation. I introduced the discussion with an overview of structuralist and post-structuralist thinking, which formed the theoretical underpinning for a deconstruction of the notion that photography is an accurate mimetic artefact for memory. I also highlighted the structuralists' view that language creates our reality. In addition I indicated that the reason for the parting of post-structuralists from structuralist thought was based on the difference of opinion concerning the stability of language.

I then discussed Jacques Derrida's deconstruction theory with application to his reading of Plato's concept of writing as a *pharmakon* for memory. According to Plato, writing leads to an illusion of wisdom and therefore can be seen as a remedy or poison. I related this discussion to photography and explained how photography can be perceived as a form of writing. The implication is that, when Plato's theory is applied, it can be seen that a photograph is not a direct copy of the moment that it captures. To believe otherwise would be to hold to the *illusion* of being able to recollect the original experience in all of its nuances. This deduction served as the initial step in the deconstruction of the thesis of Chapter One.

A discussion of the process of translation and how it relates to photography followed. In this section I defined translation and noted some of the restrictions that could possibly arise during the process of translation. According to deconstruction, it can be seen that a photograph differs intertextually from both other photographs and reality in order to create meaning. This meaning is in continual flux and always awaits further deconstruction. The implication is that a photograph can not be a presentation or exact copy of a conscious moment because the interpretation will differ since such interpretations are constructed from unsaturated contexts.

Finally, the central tenet of this chapter explained the failure of an exact presentation of photography. The methodology of deconstruction demonstrated that the photograph possesses ambiguity and therefore cannot be described as a mimesis capable of mirroring an objective, true copy of the object photographed. In other words, photographs are mediated re-presentations of past experiences. Furthermore, the manifestation of memory needed to discern between the continually changing contexts and meaning of an image is the higher cognitive form of memory, since the recollection and relating of information is needed. The antithesis, as part of the dialectic of this dissertation as a whole, recognises that a photograph does aid memory but it does not have the final authority for recollecting experiences. Rather, it leads to the illusion of remembering.

The focus of the next chapter is the development of a post-structural synthesis where tension between these opposing views are used to create a new way of understanding a photograph as mimesis.

#### **Endnotes: Chapter Two**

1. The Beeld newspaper (15 March 2005:15) refers to Degenaar, professor of philosophy, as the Socrates of Stellenbosch. He is also known as one of the most respected and influential philosophers in South Africa. He lectured at Stellenbosch University for 42 years and was Professor of Political Philosophy until his retirement in 1991 ([www.stellenboschwriters.com](http://www.stellenboschwriters.com)).
2. Saussure (1857-1913), a Swiss linguist, was one of the founders of modern linguistics and established the structural study of language (Stevenson 2005:259).
3. To our knowledge, Socrates did not record any of his philosophical views. However, Plato, his student, frequently voiced his own ideas by using Socrates as the protagonist in his dialogues, a technique he often used in his writing. In the text of the Phaedrus, the “dead voice of Socrates replaces the living voice of Plato ... [where] the replacement itself has been appropriated, for the Socrates we hear is the Platonic Socrates created after Socrates’ death ... [Here] Plato replaces Plato ... [But p]erhaps Plato’s most brilliant insight was to realise how difficult disputing his texts would be if he removed himself from them by taking on the role of recording secretary for the martyred, authoritatively dead Socrates” (Neel 1988:8-9).
4. Richard Tarnas (1991:27-28) makes the following observations regarding sophists, who were “itinerant professional teachers, secular humanists of a liberal spirit who offered both intellectual instruction and guidance for success in practical affairs .... The general tenor of their thought was marked by rationalism

and naturalism... [According to sophists] man was the measure of all things ... [And t]ruth was relative, not absolute, and differed from culture to culture, from person to person, and from situation to situation... The ultimate value of any belief or opinion could be judged only by its practical utility in serving an individual's needs in life".

5. The meaning of "love" is another key theme in Plato's works and is extensively discussed in the *Symposium* (360 BC).
6. The text consulted translates the word pharmakon as "receipt" (Plato 1973: section 274).
7. Ted Honderich (1995:288) makes the point that Form could be translated as species in Plato's theory about "sorts, kinds and types". The main point about his theory, though, is that "the type exists independently of whether or not there are things of that type" (Honderich 1995:288).
8. The form of memory that is relevant here is the higher cognitive memory.
9. Johnson, who translated Derrida's *Dissemination* into English, also wrote the Translator's introduction, from which this quote was obtained.
10. Benjamin (1892-1940) was a professional literary critic and essayist. Trachtenberg (1980:199) notes that, "In 1931 Benjamin published a short history of photography in *Literarische Welt*, in which he examines people's varied attitudes toward the medium, from its invention to his own time, and investigates the changing influence that photography and the more traditional art media had on one another over time".

## Chapter Three: Photography and the creation of new meaning

### 3.1 Introduction

In the general Introduction I categorised memory into three manifestations. The first manifestation I identified was artefactual memory in which the recollection of memories is stimulated by crafted objects, such as photographs, that act as reminders of a given experience or person. However, as I will argue in this chapter, a photograph can be seen to *create* memories. Moreover, through the continual process of interpretation and re-interpretation, the photograph often carries more "memorial weight" than the actual *remembered* event. The second manifestation of memory I identified was the higher cognitive memory which refers to the remembering of information to expand one's knowledge on a given subject, such as that involved in academic situations. The third manifestation of memory is the sensory or intuitive memory, in which the senses stimulate remembrance of situations and experiences. Diane Ackerman (1996:xvii) succinctly explains memory evoked through the senses when she says that "[t]he senses feed shards of information to the brain like microscopic pieces of a jigsaw puzzle". Ackerman (1996:5) adds, "One scent can be unexpected, momentary, and fleeting yet conjure up a childhood summer beside a lake". This last category of memory encompasses bodily elements that contribute to the keeping or recollection of memories.

The thesis established in Chapter One, assumes that photographs are unmediated presentations of temporal moments captured through the "magical" processes of photography. In contrast, the antithesis claims that a photograph is a re-presentation of a moment, an ambiguous illusion of the moment. The discussion in the previous chapter of the different ways in which the meaning of a photograph is mediated dispels the myth of the photograph as true correspondence. The assumption that a photograph is a window to an un-mediated view of the "reality" captured in an image is

shown to be based on the dated mimetic paradigm. Since both of these points of view, of the thesis and antithesis, are only partially true, the aim of this chapter is to employ principles from both these perceptions. This leads to my argument that the aesthetic experience of photography functions as an embodied artefact for the creation of new meanings.

### **3.2 A reinterpretation of photography**

At this point in the discussion a significant paradigm shift has taken place. It involves the shift from considering whether a photograph is “true” to deliberating whether it is “meaningful”. It is an adjustment from discerning whether a photograph *represents* the subject to contemplating the possibility of whether a photograph creates new meanings. It is a repositioning from thinking according to the conditions of correspondence to thinking in terms of creation. The shift furthermore includes the change from acquiescing to the provisos of consciousness to thinking in terms of the body. It is a displacement from adhering to the stipulations of order and stability to thinking in terms of play. It is the transference from thinking in terms of immediacy to thinking in terms of mediation. Lastly, the shift involves the abandonment of the assumption that contexts can be saturated to the realisation that they cannot be.

To accomplish this shift in cognition I consider Sontag’s appropriation theory regarding photography as the first step in exploring the potential of photographs to create new meaning. This is followed by looking at other theorists including Bazin and Berleant. In particular, I relate Berleant’s concept of the embodied consciousness experience when viewing photographs to Hegel’s *Aufhebung* concept in which Hegel explains the metaphoric interplay that words acquire in language. This theory highlights the importance of the body during communication. Lastly, Barthes’ *punctum* concept is analysed, with specific emphasis on the responsibility that lies with each individual to create provisional meaning for themselves through photography. These discussions contribute to the development of

a reinterpretation of the meaning of photography, which is that it induces the creation of endless new meanings in remembering.

### **3.2.1 Photography as power: Susan Sontag**

Photographs redefine what we see by translating the world into captured moments and offering us the opportunity to see images in the absence of the actual moment photographed. In this manner we gain knowledge independent of experience, thereby redefining our reality. However, Sontag (1979:156) claims that “photographic exploration and duplication of the world fragments continuities and feeds the pieces into an interminable dossier, thereby providing possibilities of *control* that could not even be dreamed of under earlier systems of recording information: writing” (my italics). Her antagonistic point of view relates to Plato’s fear of writing as a *pharmakon* for memory.

For Sontag the instrument used for collecting information is the camera. Due to the limitations of the human eye a camera can be seen as a supplement. Sontag sees this form of supplementation as a negative attribute or, for the sake of the argument, as a poison. Sontag (1979:3-4) describes photographs as “experience captured, and the camera ... [as] the ideal arm of consciousness in its acquisitive mood”. Sontag (1979:8) explains the expansion of photography as a social rite and equates it to sex and dancing, as something that is practiced by many people. Sontag (1979:8) does not regard photography as an art form but rather as a tool of power or appropriation. Sontag (1979:9) argues that photographs “give people an imaginary possession of a past that is unreal; they also help people to take possession of a space in which they are insecure”.

According to this view, the camera is a convenient device to capture and appropriate experience. She identifies photography as a means of taking surrogate possession of someone or something cherished in the form of a visual copy of that person or object.<sup>1</sup> For Sontag (1979:155), this capturing is evidence of the appropriation or violation of the subject. It is pertinent in

this regard that the expression “to take photographs” implies the taking of something from someone, thus emphasising the idea of possession.

Pursuing this logic of violation by the camera, Sontag imagines the camera as a prosthetic for a body part, namely the phallus. According to her, the camera is a flimsy variant of the phallus, but one that is widely employed. In support of her contention Sontag (1979:14) cites the diction that accompanies the use of a camera which emphasises its potential as a predatory weapon. For instance, the terms “loading” a film, “aiming” at the subject, “taking” a photograph and “shooting” a film all carry references to weapons. The camera does not kill but it does violate. For Sontag (1979:14), “this ominous metaphor seems to be all bluff like a man’s fantasy of having a gun, knife or tool between his legs”. Furthermore, for Sontag (1979:14), the violation of the subject lies in its objectification as something that “can be symbolically possessed”. In this sense, photography is a soft murder of the subject who is appropriated under the misconception of being photographed for a memento of their existence.

In her book, *Regarding the pain of others* (2003), Sontag revisits some of her ideas recorded in *On photography* (1979). Her main concern in the later publication is not primarily about appropriation through photography as a form of metaphysical aggression against the world. Rather, her new concern focuses on photography’s function as an informer of situations with specific reference to war contexts. For Sontag, photography as a mimetic device for memory initially seemed to be the poison that Plato referred to in his concept of writing as a *pharmakon*. Yet, in some instances, photography simultaneously becomes a remedy, thereby relating to the continual flux of meaning in language and photography as language as posited by the post-structuralists.

As mentioned previously, I use Sontag’s views as the first step in seeing photography as the creation of new meaning. Although she initially is



antagonistic towards photography, one of her contributions is that she highlights that photographs are not neutral in the manner that memory is captured, but are in fact selective devices of power that create either positive or negative new realities. To develop the premise of multiple realities further it needs to be acknowledged that photography does not have an “essence” as such, but that it can be many things to different people at different times. This can be seen as the non-correspondence to an essence that makes photography creative. Philosopher Paul Cilliers (1990:3) describes this as “the effect of play, and not determined by relationships. Instead of pinning it down, the interactive nature of the sign allows meaning to proliferate, to be excessive”. This viewpoint becomes more relevant in the descriptions of the following perceptions regarding photography.

### **3.2.2 Diverging opinions on photography: Burgin, Quan and Bazin**

Although photography may be a form of appropriation to Sontag, Victor Burgin<sup>2</sup> (1982:2) sees photography as a positive means of gathering and dispersing valuable information. Burgin (1982:2) describes photography as “a practice of signification” and, in keeping with ideas prevalent during the 1980’s, uses linguistics and semiotics to construct the meaning of photographs. However, Burgin (1982:2) adds that “[a]lthough semiotics is necessary to the proposed theory, it is not (nor would it ever claim to be) sufficient to account for the complex articulations of the moments of institution, text, distribution and consumption of photography”. The insufficient nature of semiotics therefore cannot frame the meaning of a photograph. Burgin (1982:2) also notes that the “emphasis on ‘signification’ derives from the fact that the primary feature of photography, considered as an omnipresence in everyday social life, is its contribution to the production and dissemination of *meaning*”. If the photograph produces and disseminates meaning and simultaneously points to an absence, then the commodity in question is a slippery one with no fixed meaning, thereby opening up the opportunity for the creation of new meaning.

Another point of view is represented by Roy Quan<sup>3</sup> who questions the general use and understanding of photography. He agrees with Sontag's notion that photography is a way of attempting control, but considers that the control is positively directed at "reality" rather than the subject. Quan (1979:4) believes that by photographing the transient event or object, "we have somehow achieved control and mastery over the phenomenon; that we have somehow given life to it, given form to the amorphous; that we have captured the fleeting, and that we have somehow stopped the process of death". As a consumer commodity, the photograph is an objectified experience which has content, definition and gives "meaning, and thereby fullness to an otherwise empty existence" (Quan 1979:4). In contrast to Sontag who sees photography as a poison, Quan considers photography to be a remedy.

Andre Bazin's<sup>4</sup> (1967:237) theory relates to that of Quan's in that he believes photography to be the capturing of a moment, freeing the subjects from their destiny by an impassive mechanical process. Bazin (1967:237) understands photography to be a means of defending its subjects from the continuum of time. This kind of photography is also a form of appropriation, yet it is an appropriation against time and degeneration. In this sense, photography can be perceived as a form of embalment or as a means of an embodied documentation of our existence and experiences. For Bazin (1967:242), photography "does not create eternity [but] it embalms ... time [and in so doing rescues] it simply from its proper corruption".

As I mentioned in the Introduction to this study, Bazin's theory of the embalming function of photography creates a respite from the chaos of the continual fluctuation of meaning. To use photography as a witness to universal experiences is a *pharmakon* in the sense of a cure, since the pain of mortality is shared by all humans. His ideas relate to the traditions

of the ancient Egyptians who saw the preservation of the physical body as a protection against death, whereas modern image makers have implemented art or visual images of ourselves as proof of our continued existence.

This reference to death is echoed by Sontag (1979:15) who considers that “all photographs are *memento mori*. To take a photograph is to participate in another person’s (or thing’s) mortality, vulnerability, mutability. Precisely by slicing out this moment and freezing it, all photographs testify to time’s relentless melt”. Sontag (1979:69) also considers that, “Photographs state the innocence, the vulnerability of lives heading towards their own destruction, and this link between photography and death haunts all photographs of people”. Although this perception of Sontag’s can be interpreted as a deconstructive view of photography, I use her opinion here since it refers to the creation of new meanings of photography even if it is not a reconstructive attitude.

Bazin’s thoughts regarding photography as embalming incorporate the concept of embodiment in understanding photography, which in turn leads to the work of Berleant.

### **3.2.3 Photography as embodiment: Arnold Berleant**

Instead of merely interpreting artefactual photographic memory as a “correct” representation or mimesis, it can be understood as a creative, sensory and bodily presentation. This encompasses the bodily realities of the senses, emotions and cognitive consciousness. According to Berleant (2003), aesthetic experience has been described by other writers as a distinctive sort of consciousness. This perception is “however inadequate and distorted, for there is no consciousness without body, no disembodied consciousness” (Berleant 2003). In other words, the body is active in any sensory or intellectual activity, including aesthetic appreciation.

Berleant (2003) considers the meaning of the word “embodiment” to literally be derived from “‘in’ [and] ‘body’”. Two meanings are useful here: [Firstly] to put into a body; to invest or clothe (spirit) with a body, [and secondly] to cause to become part of a body; to unite into a body”.

Berleant (2003) elaborates on these points by explaining that the first notion would be when “the aura of physical presence is embedded in the art work”. This form of embodiment is best explained through the art of music and poetry in which the sense of hearing is the primary sense that interacts with the performance.<sup>5</sup> The second connotation that the word “embody” conveys is “the active presence of the human body in the appreciative experience” (Berleant 2003). It is this latter concept that is relevant to the aesthetics of photography. As a vessel our body facilitates our consciousness of our environment, cognitive thought processes and aesthetic experiences. When aesthetics is an embodied experience, we involve our minds as well as our senses. Berleant (2003) describes the aesthetic body concisely:

We can think of the aesthetic body, then, as culturally shaped, entwined, and embedded in a complex network of relations, each of which has a distinctive character and dynamic. Race, class, gender and geography are lived through bodily forms and structures. These structures of cultural, sexual, racial and social differences are embedded in lived bodies.

The body is visually stimulated by a photograph to recollect experiences in the absence of the experience. Simultaneously, the reading of a photograph is aided by all of the senses which contribute to this recollection, by recalling sights, sounds, feelings, taste and smells. Often these recollections are also accompanied by emotions. Thus a photograph creates new memories which are mediated by our current context and by traces of the past. A photograph is a document, an extraction as well as an abstraction of that moment and, in its absence, creates new meaning for that moment.

In this context Berleant refers to a bodily language which is understood as a prediscursive bodily experience. His opinion relates to the philosopher Georg Hegel's (1975:404) notion of *Aufhebung* which Hegel explains as follows:

[E]very language already contains a mass of metaphors. They arise from the fact that a word which originally signifies only something sensuous is carried over in the spiritual sphere... [where] gradually the metaphorical element in the use of such a word disappears and by custom the word changes from a metaphorical expression, because, owing to readiness to grasp in the image only meaning, image and meaning are no longer distinguished and the image directly affords only the abstract meaning itself instead of a concrete picture.

To state it differently, *Aufhebung* refers to the interplay between the body and a new reality which culminates in a new understanding of the word. Although Hegel did not refer to photography in his concept of *Aufhebung*, his ideas of embodiment in meaning relate to Berleant's theory of embodied consciousness. For example, the concept of *taste* has through time transformed in meaning from the literal to *tasteful*, a figurative meaning applied to being discerning. In application to my research, photography can be considered as the interplay between the subjects of the photograph and a new reality which culminates in a fresh memory.

Hegel distinguished a type of linguistic change which refers to the altering of meaning through the movement from a bodily to an abstract connotation. According to Hegel's theory the original sense of the word is perceived to be literal or "close" to the body. Through time, the meaning transforms to become abstract and intangible, losing the initial, denoted meaning in the process. This interplay of words and meaning can be related to photography as a mode of language. In this visual language the interaction between the embodied moments and their meanings can create new abstracted or mediated meanings. As Yves Michaud (1998:736) states, a photographic image is "an abstracted form of the continuity of life and events". Just as the word with close ties to the body

can transform into a meaning that seems clear and undisputed, the bodily photograph can transform into meaning that seems obligatory. However, each new so-called clear meaning or interpretation is subject to a continual process of re-interpretation. This is a process in which the bodiliness of the "original" word or photograph can be reactualised into a new meaning.

### **3.2.4 The affective power of photography: Roland Barthes**

Early in his career, Barthes wrote an essay titled *The photographic message* (1977c) in which he describes the "photographic paradox" which consists of two elements. The first component is the *denotative* quality of a photograph which seeks to imitate the world. Consider Barthes' (1977c:17) statement, "[c]ertainly the image is not reality but at least it is perfect *analogon* and it is exactly this analogical perfection which, to common sense, defines the photograph, a photograph is a message without a code". The second element is the *connotative* aspect, or a meaning comprised by social and cultural elements (Barthes 1977c:17).

Later, Barthes elaborates on these two aspects in his book *Camera Lucida* (1982), although he defines them slightly differently. In the latter work, Barthes refers to the *studium*<sup>6</sup> and the *punctum*<sup>7</sup> of a photograph. The *studium*, or informational value of a photograph represents the denotative qualities overlaid with cultural connotations, whereas the *punctum* (derived from the word pierce), or personal interpretation of a photograph, refers to the subjective connotative qualities that disrupt its general cultural *studium*. According to Barthes (1982:28) the photograph is endowed with "functions, which are for the Photographer so many alibis. These functions are: to inform, represent, to surprise, to cause, to signify, to provoke desire. And I the *Spectator* I recognize them with more or less pleasure: I invest them with my *studium* (which is never my delight or pain)."

In contrast, the *punctum* is the element in the photograph that “rises from the scene, shoots out like an arrow, and pierces me” (Barthes 1982:26). Barthes (1982:42) explains the sensation of the *punctum* as, when viewing a photograph, “a ‘detail’ attracts [him]. [He] feel[s] that its mere presence changes [his] reading that [he is] looking at a new photograph, marked in [his] eyes with a higher value. This ‘detail’ is the *punctum*”. Consequently, the *punctum* can be understood as a subjective, personal, embodied conscious involvement with the photograph. This embodied consciousness involves the sensory, emotive and cognitive aspects in the interpretation of a photograph.

According to Price (1994:9), Barthes believed that some photographs are imbued with meaning which emanates from them. For Barthes, some photographs have that quality that produces a subjective personal experience which is different for each viewer but which has the ability to communicate more than the image alone does. This quality is the ability to answer to a certain need to create a new meaning as a remedy for memory.

For instance, Barthes and his mother had a very close relationship. After her death he turned to photographs of her to find confirmation of her existence. Barthes recalls that after the death of his mother he tried to remember her as she really was and not as the posed person that he saw in the collection of photographs that he was paging through. His need for remembering his mother “as she really was” is reminiscent of Bazin’s conception of photography as a means of embalming visual images of ourselves as proof of our continued existence. Barthes found a photograph of his mother as a little girl in *Winter Garden* in which, as he studied it, he “at last rediscovered [his] mother”. The photograph contained for him the “essence”, the “impossible science of the unique being” of his mother. What intrigued him most was that a “particular circumstance, so abstract in relation to an image, was nonetheless present in the face

revealed in the photograph” (Barthes 1982:69). This is what he refers to as the *punctum*.

John Tagg (Price 1994:9) comments that for Barthes, this photograph is the “confirmation of an existence; the mark of a presence; the repossession of his mother’s body”. However, according to Fried (2005:553), the *punctum* is that element found in a select few photographs that has the ability to “carry within it a kind of ontological guarantee that it was not intended to be [antitheatrical] *by the photographer*”. For Barthes, it is not the photographer that captures this particular embodiment of the subject but it is rather an element devoid of intention from the part of the photographer. The appropriation of the subject by the photographer is not present in Barthes’ understanding of photography in the same way that it is for Sontag.

In his pursuit to understand this subjective and bodily conscious interpretation of photography Barthes (1982:18-19) explains:

I decided to take as a guide for my new analysis the attraction I felt for certain photographs. Of this attraction, at least, I was certain. What to call it? Fascination? No, this photograph which I pick out and which I love has nothing in common with the shining point which sways before your eyes and makes your head swim; what it produces in me is the very opposite of hebetude; something more like an internal agitation, an excitement, a certain labor too, the pressure of the unspeakable that wants to be spoken.

The ineffable element Barthes refers to is the gap that is created by the correspondence on the one hand and fissures in this correspondence on the other. In my estimation it is this aspect that makes photographs open-ended, rendering them as both a remedy and a poison for memory, thus making the interpretation of photographs creative. The interpretation is subjective since each link is related to a personal response to the photographed image. According to post-structuralism “the personal” is also decentred and labile, leaving the understanding even more open-ended. It



is this realisation of the individual connection which causes an agitation in Barthes' terms. He feels it should not be spoken of because there is something of the same character as that which created awe in the ancients or, in nineteenth-century terminology, the awe one feels in the presence of the numinous. Thus the photograph which produces these prediscursive feelings is an opening into that which cannot be recovered, producing the ache or the nostalgia for the unrecoverable. The awful certainty of mortality is in that apprehension. Barthes (1981:91) describes a paradoxical situation of the role of photographs and memory:

The photograph does not call up the past (nothing Proustian in a photograph). The effect it produces upon me is not to restore what has been abolished (by time, by distance) but to attest that what I see has indeed existed ... not only is the photograph never, in essence, a memory .... but it actually blocks memory, [it] quickly becomes counter-memory.

Although the personal experience of the *punctum* of a photograph cannot be the result of the intention of the photographer, the photographer contributes to the mediation of photography (Barthes 1982:47). The translation of reality into photography creates gaps which can be filled by individuals without the assistance of the photographer and his or her carefully selected composition. As noted previously, Barthes implies that a photograph does not preserve memory. Rather, it contradicts the initial memory and creates new memories. The failure of meaning as correspondence places the responsibility on each individual to create meaning for themselves, as in the case of Barthes' *punctum*. However this meaning is not ontologically determined but rather subject to provisional meaning.

### **3.3 Conclusion**

The object of this chapter was to follow the dialectic approach and use the tension that exists between the two opposing perceptions of photography found in the preceding two chapters to create a post-structural synthesised

reading of photography. I started with an analysis of Sontag's opinion of photography which is seemingly negative yet which still refers to the concept of new meaning in photography. This was followed by other opinions regarding the covert meanings of photography. In particular, I considered Berleant's description of the active bodily participation of awareness as embodied consciousness.

To clarify this new perspective I discussed Hegel's *Aufhebung* concept, which describes the conversion from basic or literal language that relates directly to the body to conceptual, abstract meaning that is detached from the body. If applied to photography as "mimetic" device it can be said that the image's apparent meaning has been transformed through a metaphoric movement into an abstracted meaning. The discussion then continued with an analysis of Barthes' concept of the *punctum*.

For these reasons, photography can not be interpreted as an objective presentation of a moment passed nor as a document that is merely a mediated illusion of that moment. Instead, the diverging opinions that are explored in this chapter contribute to the fundamental premise of this chapter, which is that photography is a means of creating new memories from the traces of the past that photographs provide. Burgin contributes to this concept by explaining a photograph as a means of disseminating a "slippery" meaning in the absence of the referent, which opens the opportunity for the creation of fresh meanings. Just as a linguistic sign generates meaning by reference to another sign in the system of signs, a photograph generates meaning that is in constant flux due to its ever-changing contexts and interpreters. In other words, a photograph is a mimetic device that aids memory by presenting embodied, fragmented reflections of time which can be used to create new memories. This paradigm shift that has been developed throughout this study thus far can be described as a fresh reinterpretation of understanding photography as a generator of new meanings.

In the next chapter I discuss my practical work created to visually support the premise of this dissertation. I also consider selected works by other artists.

**Endnotes: Chapter Three**

1. Although not strictly relevant here, the colonial subject's experience of the "violence of photography" can tie in with Sontag's view of the appropriative power of photography.
2. Burgin is a practising photographer as well as a teacher of photography.
3. Quan (1979:9) is an art education doctoral student at Stanford University, Stanford, California.
4. Bazin is a world renowned film critic and film theorist ([www.unofficialbaziniantrib.com/](http://www.unofficialbaziniantrib.com/)).
5. For a comprehensive discussion on this subject consult Berleant (2003).
6. Barthes (1982:26) identifies the word as follows: "I believe the word exists in Latin: it is *studium* which doesn't mean, at least not immediately, "study," but application to a thing, taste for someone, a kind of general, enthusiastic commitment, of course, but without special acuity".
7. According to Barthes (1982:27) the word *punctum* describes the "element that will break (or puncture) the *studium* ... This second element [which] will disturb the *studium* I shall therefore call *punctum*; for *punctum* is also: sting, speck, cut, little hole – and also a cast of dice. A *punctum* is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)".

## Chapter Four: The metaphoric movement between theory and art in the creation of new meaning

### 4.1 Introduction

In this chapter I discuss the visual component of my research as a practical support for the theoretical discourse of the first three chapters. In Chapter Three, a particular resolution was proposed regarding the perception of photography as a mimetic aid for memory. A revision of various theorists' concepts concerning the subject led to the synthesis between the thesis and antithesis as explained in Chapter One and Chapter Two respectively. This culminated in the understanding that the photograph can be seen as the embodiment of a moment portrayed in the photograph in which the past is both present and absent. But, as Derrida (1981:26) argues, a pristine "presence" is impossible. It is in this context that a photograph can transform the meaning of the image into memories that are new, yet which still bear traces of the original embodied image.

In this chapter I intend to research the above mentioned synthesis proposal further by analyzing my own visual work, as well as that of other artists. The title of the exhibition that formed the visual counterpart to this dissertation, *Phantom Limb*, indicates that the underlying theme of the works refers to the absence-presence of a stimulus, being the photograph, as an aid for memory. The term "phantom limb" refers to the phenomenon when an amputated limb is experienced as still being present. This same ambiguity can be said to exist in photography. This "absent presence" resonates with what Plato referred to as a *pharmakon* in his description of writing as a representation of knowledge. By application, photography as a type of language can be seen as a representation of absent times and experiences. The exhibition participates in this dialogue relating to bodies and enigmatic experience through photography, while appealing to the ambiguity in the understanding of photography as a *pharmakon* for memory.

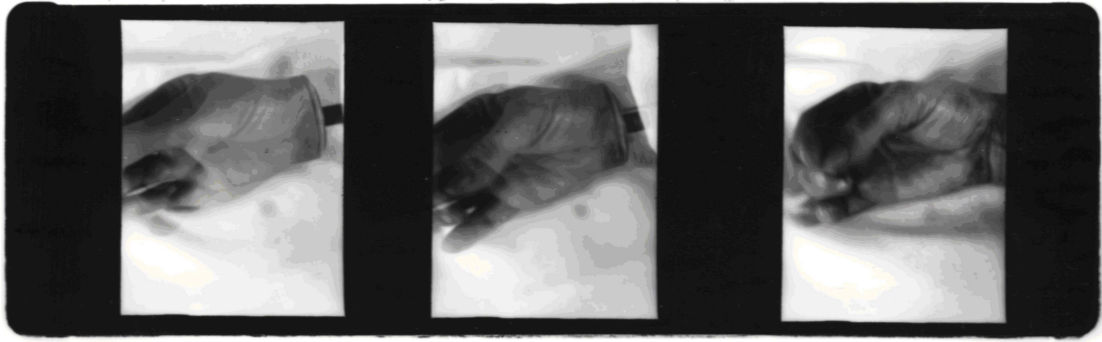
By approaching the camera as prosthesis, as something which aims to capture and create substitutes for direct experience, I pose questions about how human bodies and artefactual bodies are linked to memory. An embodied photograph becomes a strange phenomenon if one considers that seeing is simply a fleeting but delayed recollection of what the eye registers at a given moment. In other words, the question becomes whether this captured reality could be a means for memory recollection if a photograph recollects fragments or splinters of time. Consequently, this leads to questioning whether a photograph is a cure for memory or something that warps and poisons recollections. I argue that photography as a *pharmakon* for memory is not merely a medicament to cure nor is it a poison. Rather, it is both elements simultaneously.

Recent approaches to photography as an artistic medium refute the historical conception of photography as a vehicle for either recording or possession. It is through the establishment of “anticipatory memory or a future representation, by which photography reveals coming virtual realities”, that new meanings are created, thus shifting away from accepted expectations of the medium (Demos 2006:10). I now turn to a discussion of my works as the corollary of the theoretical discourse.

## **4.2 Phantom limb**

### **4.2.1 Pinhole singularity**

The practical component of my study involves photography as a form of language and I reflect on the analogy between a camera and human prostheses. I use pinhole photography, an archaic precursor to modern photography, in works such as *Pinhole hand 1* (2006, Figure 4) and *Pinhole hand 2* (2006, Figure 5). By doing this I set up an analogy between my revisiting of Plato’s concept of writing in the theory and the revisiting of the archaic medium of pinhole photography.



**Figure 4. Irene Naudé, *Pinhole hand 1* (2006).**

The pinhole camera, known as the “first camera”,<sup>1</sup> consists of an airtight container painted black on the inside with a small hole in one side. Light shines through the small hole of the camera which inverts the facing image and fixes it on the rear wall of the box. This image is then captured by sensitised paper or film and, through chemical processes, an image is created that corresponds to the original input. Thus the camera fixes a slice of time in a graphic semblance or artefact, thereby preserving or embalming the instant.



**Figure 5. Irene Naudé, *Pinhole Hand 2* (2006).**

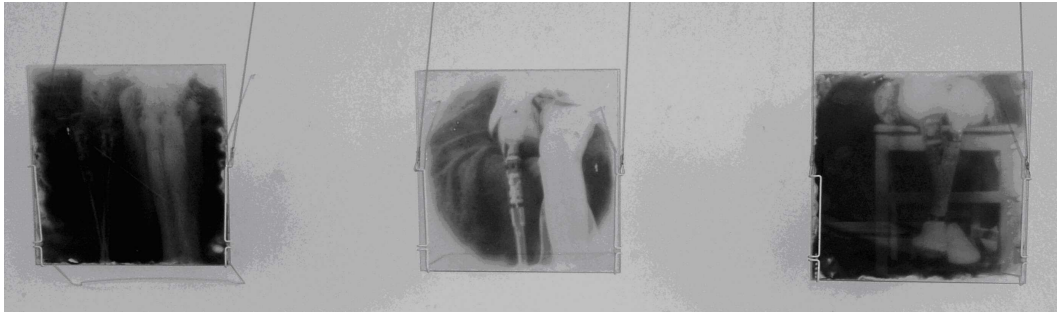
Working with pinhole photography points to the many variables that influence the ways we perceive what we see. The pinhole camera requires particular exposure specifications due to the variables, such as the different times of day and weather fluctuation. The process of printing on sensitised emulsion applied to glass adds another element of unpredictability. Each batch of emulsion has a unique sensitivity and

consistency which affects the clarity of the pinhole images printed onto the glass panes.



**Figure 6. Irene Naudé, *Untitled* (2006).**

Due to these contingencies, each image is irreproducible and inimitable. The understanding of light and the process involved in writing with light is a prerequisite in reading these variables correctly in order to create an image with this form of camera. The end result, in keeping with post-structuralism, bears merely the traces of the original moment.



**Figure 7. Irene Naudé, *Untitled* (2006).**

In my works, such as *Untitled* (2006, Figure 6 and Figure 7), I made prints on glass panes to simulate the technique used in the nineteenth century. I used old prosthetic limbs as subject matter which relate to the mediated process of photography. The long exposure time, bodily interference during this time and the artefactual image of a prosthetic by using a prosthesis, or camera, refer to the interrelatedness of the process and the mediated nature of our perceptions.

#### **4.2.2 Prosthetic cameras**

In the installation *Phantom Limb* (2007, Figure 8 and Figure 9) I constructed cameras out of prostheses that have been used by individuals who have either died or who have moved on to using more advanced forms of prostheses. These synthetic limbs are mounted onto camera tripods and are linked via closed circuit surveillance cameras to a monitor where the viewer can see themselves from the perspective of the “phantom limb” cameras.

These works relate to the camera as a biased prosthetic in the hands of its operator, the photographer.<sup>2</sup> The almost voyeuristic sensibility of this work refers to Sontag’s view that the characteristic of the medium of photography is one of hostile appropriation. This acquisition bias that Sontag sees in photography can also allude to internalised readings influenced by the subjectivity of the photographer and the viewer of a photograph.





**Figure 8. Irene Naudé, Phantom Limb (2007).**



**Figure 9. Irene Naudé, Phantom Limb (2007).**

The works, as well as the element of using prosthetics as cameras, allude to the continual interplay and exchange that transpires when we perceive the world around us. The process can be described as the ingesting and digesting of our environment and the people around us. The process functions as an allegory for the manner in which we “read” each other from within the confines and safety of our own bodies.

#### **4.2.3 Animation**

In *Pinhole-animation* (2006)<sup>3</sup> I used layering to comment on the mediation in photography. I arranged digitised photographs in a sequence of frames in a timeline to create a stuttering movement that is reminiscent of the work of Eadweard Muybridge.<sup>4</sup> During the 1880’s Muybridge’s motion studies were composed by applying fast-shutter speeds to break action into moment-by-moment increments. In this way movement was fragmented. Using Muybridge’s techniques I digitally photographed the interaction between human legs and prosthetic limbs during a walking and dancing sequence. The animation of the photographic images are not

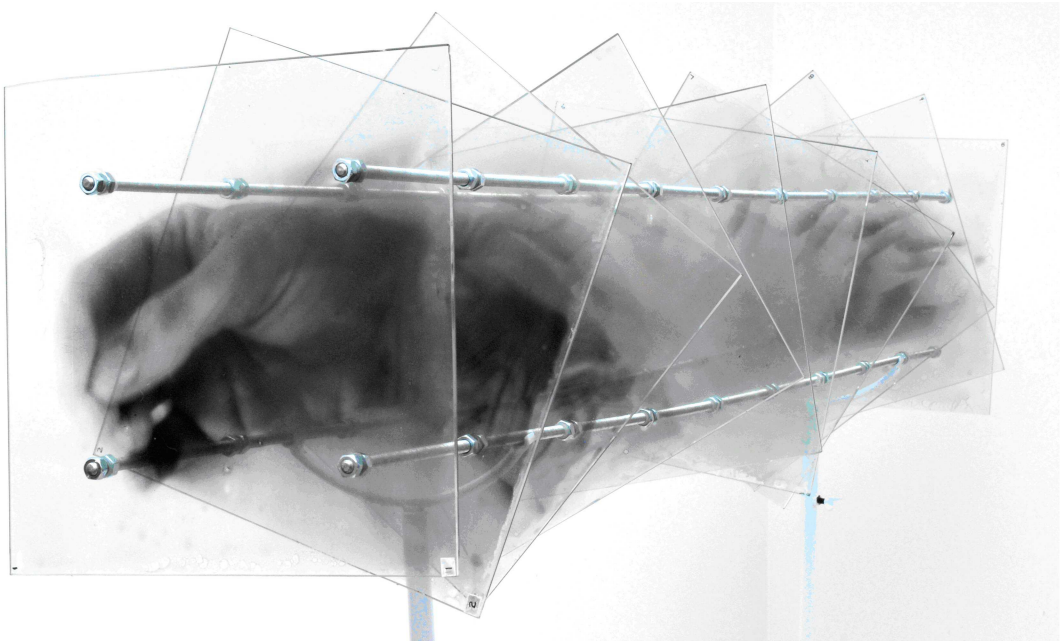
fluent and this causes a discontinuous translation of movements joined together to create a sequence relating to the unreality of the situation. The sequence is programmed to repeat and increase speed with each repetition.

This piece reflects on one of the paradoxes that is contained within photography as a form of translation. It can also be viewed as simulacrum photography in light of Baudrillard's (1988:166) theory which says that the simulacrum exposes that there is no truth rather than concealing a truth. As mentioned in Chapter Two, the translation between two languages creates a bridging of content but, after post-structural insight, it is considered to be impossible to pin down and capture the original meaning. Therefore, just as in texts, a comprehensive understanding of the captured moment is prevented by the ambiguity of the photographic images. The image can only stand in as a reminder, a void that remains.

The animation also alludes to the relationship between humans and machines or technology. The work reflects on how the body supports the prosthetics to move, but as the pace increases, the identity of the supporter becomes undecided. Moreover, when the pace reaches its highest level both elements merge and become one pulsating mass in which the elements are indistinguishable from one another, thereby commenting on the Westernised confluence of society and technology in the present day. This is reminiscent of Baudrillard's (1994:6) statement that the simulacrum leads to the loss of "profound reality". The animation also refers to Derrida's deconstruction of the *pharmakon* and the dismantling of hierarchies within binary opposites in which two supposedly opposite elements are put onto an equal ground to erase the distinction between them. Both constituents, in both the binary relationship and in the animation, bridge and assume both identities simultaneously (Mohan 1997).

#### 4.2.4 Cross Section

This series of photographic prints consists of images on layered glass panes, simulating light moving through a small aperture as seen in *Cross Section 2* (2007, Figure 10). When light passes through a small aperture an image is formed. However, because light travels in straight lines the image on the rear wall of the camera, where the light sensitive medium is situated, is inverted.



**Figure 10. Irene Naudé, *Cross Section 2* (2007).**

The images of *Cross Section 2* (2007, Figure 10) rotate 180 degrees from the front though to the farthest image. However, in the progression from one image to the next, clarity begins to fade, reaching a point in the centre of the work where the image is barely discernible. From that point the image clarity increases again, but with the difference that the image has transformed into that of a prosthetic hand. This process signifies *différence* in meaning during the process of photography. As noted in Chapter Two, this refers to the phenomena in which presence can not be grasped (Rivkin 1998:258).

By reproducing the mechanics of the camera in this way, the reality of photography is shown as a form of mediation where staggered images become nodes in time. However, the combined effect does not provide clarity and instead produces an intangible superimposition of imprints capturing forms, creating a fragmented “reality”.

#### 4.2.5 Poison or remedy

In *Homeopathy* (2007, Figure 11) I applied photographs of labels to laboratory bottles. The labels of various poisonous as well as medicinal substances are simulations created by using light-sensitive emulsion.



**Figure 11. Irene Naudé, *Homeopathy* (2007).**

During the processes of photography light sensitive emulsion is prepared using toxic ingredients which release vapours, causing side effects detrimental to one’s health. Additionally, the photo developing procedure involves the use of volatile solutions in a dark enclosed space, which also creates a harmful, poisonous space. The irony is reflected in the poisonous space where the embodied artefacts of past moments as remedies for memory are produced.

Up to this point I have engaged with selected examples from the exhibition *Phantom Limb* to examine visual support for the preceding theory. I now turn to the work of two other artists, Rosângela Rennó<sup>5</sup> and Idris Khan,<sup>6</sup>

who also visually contribute to the above mentioned synthesis proposal. Even though the works of Rennó and Khan are digitised images, their concepts correspond with my own.

### **4.3 Rosângela Rennó**

Rosângela Rennó's approach can be perceived as the embodiment of deferred meaning through photography as a mimesis for memory. In *Experiência de Cinema* (2004, Figure 12) Rennó creates a medium consisting of a "curtain" of fog onto which her photographs are projected. This piece induces a rethinking of the image in ways that go beyond the image itself when we view photographs as memories. What we see in the image sets off a train of associations to fill in the gaps, which is possible through our "embodied consciousness" stimulated by our senses.

In *Experiência de Cinema* (2004, Figure 12)<sup>7</sup> the body of the image is mercurial, suggesting the temporality and unsaturatedness of meaning in moments and memories. The volatility of the body onto which the images are projected challenges the alleged qualities of the embodied artefact, the photograph, as an objective, accurate mimetic device which is a documentation of proof. Sustained interaction from the viewer is required in order to relate with the images of captured memories since the image is as flimsy and intangible as the fog that it is projected onto.

The fog, reminiscent of a veil, is "often associated with mystery; in its double status as perceptible yet almost nonexistent phenomena, it suggests evanescence or absence" (Alonso 2006:218). Rennó uses the medium of photography to visually embody her concepts. At times she provides a "body" for the images by "printing [or projecting] them on unusual supports – metal, vinyl or smoke". The effect is that of "addressing the fleeting nature of memories and the methods and images that attempt to record them ... [where] the actual fog [as body for these photographs]

evokes the alluring enigma and magic of a phantasmagoria” ([www.e-flux.com/displayshow](http://www.e-flux.com/displayshow)).

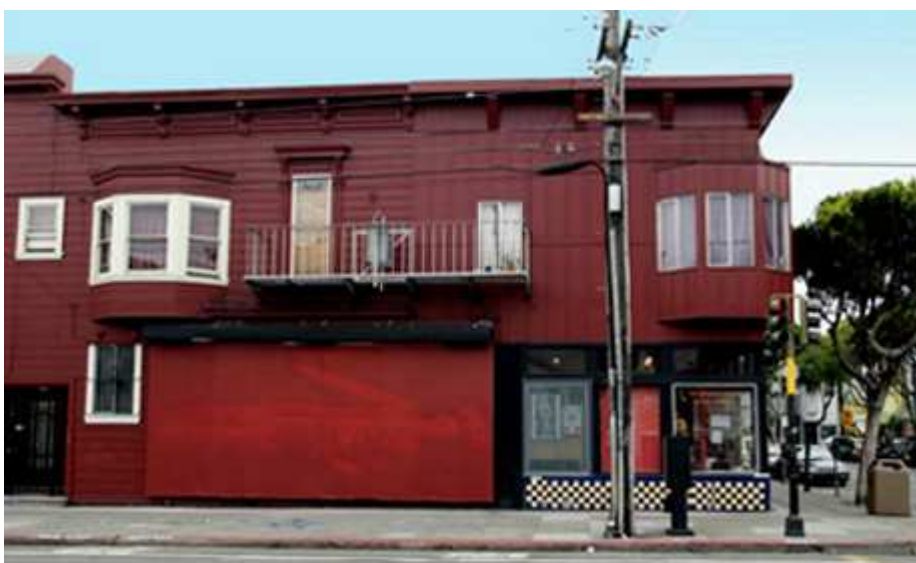


**Figure 12. Rosângela Rennó, Experiência de Cinema (2004).**

As a *pharmakon*, photography’s ambiguity distorts our vision and takes us into the imaginary world of altered perceptions, similar to the fog medium that Rennó employs. At the same time, the sense of exclusion, a longing to possess or touch what is gone, invisible and impalpable, is strongly suggested by the atmospheric context. Nostalgia arises because what is clearly visible as the image exhibited is only a figment. This concept also relates to my own work in the *Untitled* series (2007, Figure 6 and Figure 7). The glass panes I use as a support for the images are transparent and create an image that extends beyond what one sees. While Rennó uses family photographs as her theme, I use the translation between prosthetics and actual limbs as subject matter. Furthermore, the interaction between the members of a family relates to the interaction between body parts.

Photographs continually change, creating new memories from a moment passed, especially when the viewer was not present when the moment was captured. It is this futility and mutability that is manifested in this work by Rennó. Her work also comments on the transferral of meaning through cultural and societal influences. Alonso (2006:218) remarks that she focuses on “the past as not being so much a temporal fact as a cultural one; an old photograph may embody a present conflict and show it in a new light”.

In *Little Balls* (2003, Figure 13), commissioned in the months preceding the war in Iraq,<sup>8</sup> Rennó clouds the viewer’s perspective on the appropriated images. She collected photographs of men and boys dressed in military uniforms from different sources such as flea markets, family albums and archives from countries all over the world. These photographs are not usually viewed as art nor are they regarded as valuable. She enlarged the image to more than life-size and added a deep red colour. The intense red saturation of the photograph alludes to the blood of war. Rennó rotates the image from the normal vertical position, where the subject is either sitting or standing, to a position where the subject is presented horizontally, signifying termination, dormancy and death.



**Figure 13. Rosângela Rennó, *Little Balls* (2003).**

In this work Rennó challenges the propaganda of the political leaders during this time by magnifying these images representing the horrors of war. It has been said that this work “is timely at present, when the glorification and support for the ‘coalition’ troupes through official portraits in the media have erased the devastating realities of the war in Iraq” (<http://www.galeriadelaraza.org>) The use of found photographs increases the poignancy of the images since it universalises the phenomenon of war and its atrocities.

I now consider Khan’s works in relation to layering and multiplicity, elements that are evident in my work.

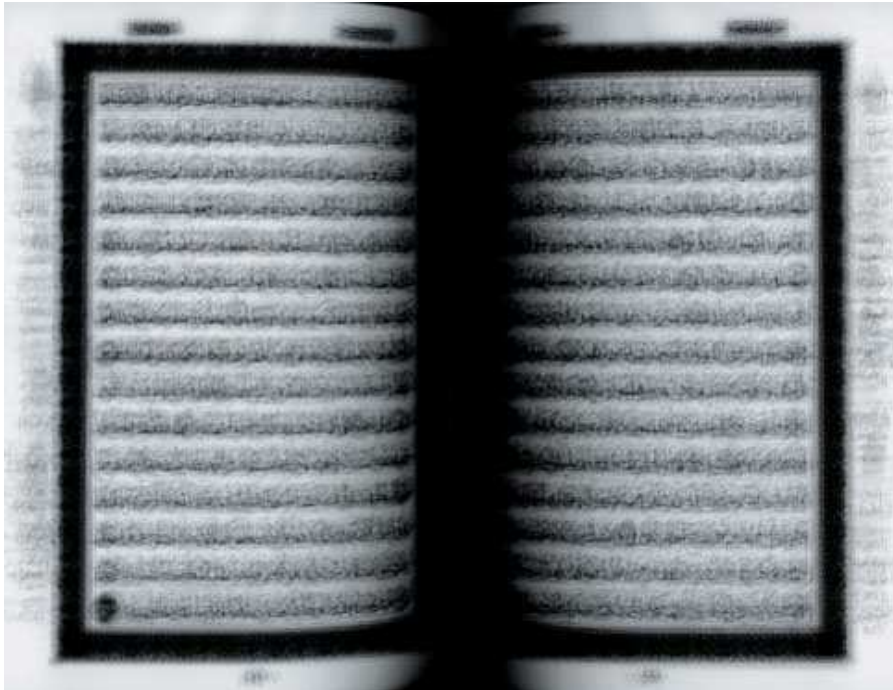
#### **4.4 Idris Khan**

Central to *Cross section 2* (2007, Figure 10) and Idris Khan’s *every... page of the Holy Koran* (2004, Figure 14), is the issue of how society and culture influence what we see. In his work Khan refers to his Islamic background and to the current conflicts between the large powers of the West and East.

In his photographs Khan photographed each page of the Koran. He then superimposed each page on top of the previous one to create one image of the entire Koran’s content. This becomes a visually loaded image in which layering is particularly significant. The image becomes a complex revelation of an extended history in its ornate texture. One of the underlying meanings contained in the work is based on the rationale that “[s]ince a significant part of the population believes that the complexities of the world can be resolved by this one book, there is certain logic in taking things a stage further and reducing the book to a single manifestation of itself” (Dyer 2006). Khan creates a matrix where the sacred text overwrites itself until a blur of meaningless symbols appear and the vertical groove



dividing the pages become a deep, dark void, where “[f]ixed meaning dissolves in a blazing grey drizzle” (Dyer 2006).



**Figure 14. Idris Khan, *every... page of the Holy Koran* (2004).**

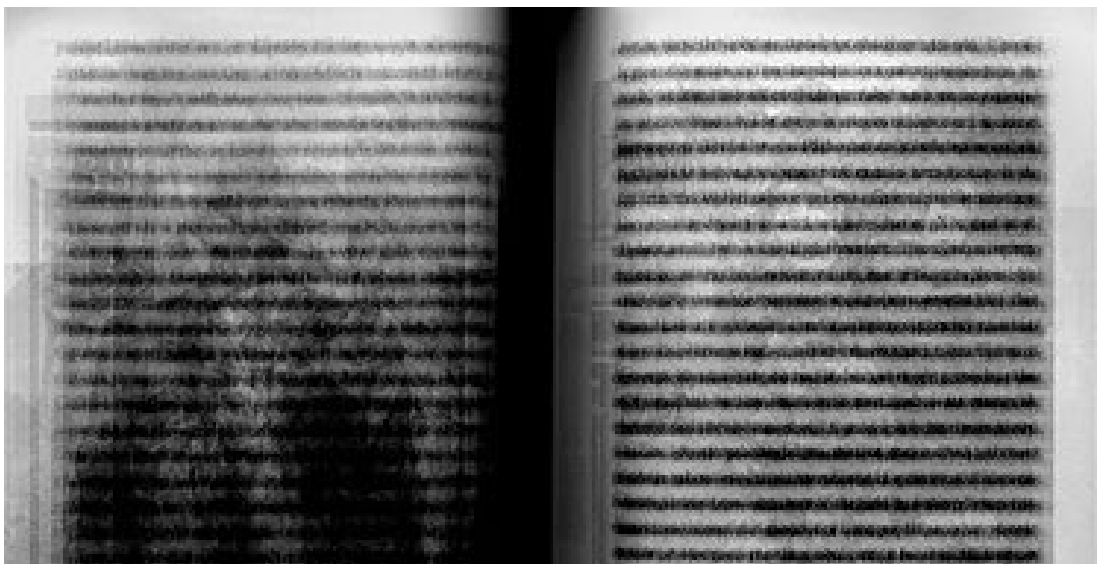
The multiple layering of the same image in Khan’s work relates to Walter Benjamin’s (2005:75) observation of the need of the masses “to bring things closer, spatially and humanly, which is just as ardent as their bent toward overcoming uniqueness of every reality by accepting its reproduction. Everyday the urge grows stronger to get hold of an object at very close range by way of its likeness, its reproduction”. But despite the residue of something visible, it is in fact something invisible which is portrayed. Like a memory which continually changes and simultaneously seems to be true of the thing remembered, his images prompt the viewer to take stock of the incomprehensible. The innumerable layers are strata of reminiscence, recollection and accumulation. The viewer is puzzled when faced with the sacred text which should be the clearest guides for religious Muslims. According to Dillon (2006), Khan does not translate the image into clear directives. Instead, his act of translation from the image to

understanding creates a void. It falls into the central dark chasm in the image where the binding curves away.

In other layered images of texts Khan pays homage to both Barthes and Sontag, such as in *Inclusive vision... from Roland Barthes' Camera Lucida* (2003, Figure 15). Khan considers these books to have profoundly shaped the way the medium of photography is regarded. As a means of paying homage to them, Khan decided to photograph (<http://arts.guardian.co.uk>):<sup>9</sup>

... every page of the book and then digitally combine them in a single, composite image. The result of this homage to - and essay on - *Camera Lucida* (English edition) is a beautiful palimpsest:<sup>10</sup> a series of blurred stripes of type in which the occasional word can be deciphered and one of the images reproduced by Barthes.

Khan used the same technique with Susan Sontag's book *On Photography* "but the density of information is such that Sontag's elegant formulations add up to, and are reduced to, a humming, unreadable distillation" (<http://arts.guardian.co.uk>).



**Figure 15. Idris Khan, *Inclusive vision*. Detail from *Every page ... from Roland Barthes' Camera Lucida* (2003).**

The images Khan allows to emerge are a kind of history of photography's

development. This history relates to the laboriously copied and preserved manuscripts of medieval times, which contain the accumulated wisdom and writings of antiquity, occasionally revealing something erased. As such, the ancient and contemporary texts form a palimpsest which can not be read clearly. This idea relates to Derrida's view of contexts that are unsaturated and continually shifting in meaning. Thus a reality is generated that cannot be clearly read due to the constant deferral of meaning created by the traces of the past that are found in present meaning. In the same manner, the erased marks due to Khan's process contribute to the layered, inexplicable image that "always defers the closure of final meaning" (Neel 1988:150).

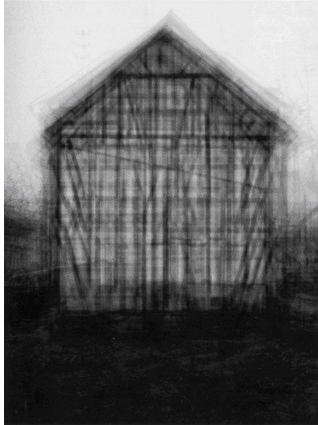
In another series, Khan returns to scientific experimentation with photography, using Muybridge's methodology to describe movement. In *Rising Series... After Eadweard Muybridge 'Human and Animal Locomotion'* (2005, Figure 16) Khan attempts to explain a metaphoric movement between theory and art in the creation of new meaning. The movement is the shift from scientific analysis to artistic participation. Khan re-interprets Muybridge's study "and imparts a pictorial aesthetic to the choreographed movements of the human subjects. His images of humans seemingly suspended, apparition-like, evoke the Victorian fascination with spiritualism and the metaphysical possibilities of photography" (Lewis 2006).

For this piece he uses images from Muybridge's sequential motion studies to create a layered image. This work embodies the common sense perception of photography as described in Chapter One, by making the sequence of movement visible through the layering of the images, similar to the single images of Muybridge's work, yet it also denies "realness" by being layered and transparent.

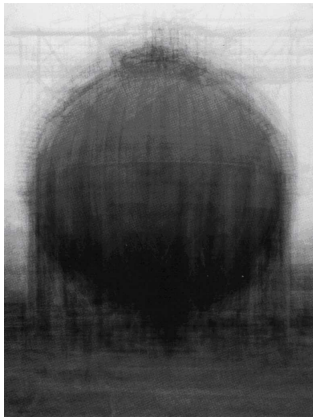


**Figure 16. Idris Khan, *Rising Series... After Eadweard Muybridge 'Human and Animal Locomotion'* (2005).**

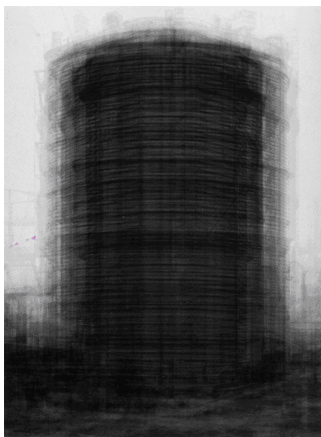
For his series *Bernd and Hilla Becher* (2004, Figure 17, Figure 18 and Figure 19), Khan appropriates a sequence of photographs from photographers Bernd and Hilla Becher. In these works, Khan takes multiplicity and returns it to singularity. Yet “the repetition remains so evident that Khan’s work sits ambiguously between recovering the strength of a unique and iconic image, and letting whatever original meaning there was be either obscured or drained away” (Green 2007:142). In this series, illustrated in *every... Bernd and Hilla Becher Gable Side Houses* (2004, Figure 17), *every... Bernd and Hilla Becher Spherical Type Gasholders* (2004, Figure 18) and *every... Bernd and Hilla Becher Prison Type Gasholders* (2004, Figure 19), he copies photographs of influential photographers known for their rigorous methodology.



**Figure 17. Idris Khan, *Every ... Bernd and Hilla Becher Gable Side Houses* (2004).**



**Figure 18. Idris Khan, *Every ... Bernd and Hilla Becher Spherical Type Gas holders* (2004).**



**Figure 19. Idris Khan, *Every ... Bernd and Hilla Becher Prison Type Gas holders* (2004).**

The photographs he uses include an inventory of architectural building types. Among these are technologically important buildings such as gas towers and other pointers to the role of technology in our society. The photographs are stylistically stark and neutral, giving the impression that no mediation is involved. The images' appearance implies that they are a straight translation of reality through a photographic medium.

Khan repeats the process of appropriating these photographs and layering or superimposing them on top of one another to create one image. In an article by Dyer (2006), Khan's appropriation and layering of the images are described as "transforming their photographs into a fuzzy, vibrating mass, more like a smudged charcoal drawing of a shivering iron jelly than a photograph". Despite the fact that Khan digitally scans and superimposes the photographic images that he appropriates, the final image is reminiscent of the look of pinhole photography. This is because pinhole photographs are often fuzzy, black and white images that do not have distinctive borders.

By appropriating existing images, Khan "appears to have internalised the postmodern idea that all images are copies with no originals" (Green 2006:142). Yet, despite his appropriation of existing images, his new "photograph" has a unique quality that denotes "the energy of things, their strange and idiosyncratic power" (Green 2006:142). Moreover, the intervention of the photographer is evident in these works. In this regard I refer to the animation *Phantom Limb* (2007) which consists of the layering of images in a similar manner to Khan's work and becomes a "fuzzy vibrating mass". In my video piece the images of the prosthesis and body merge to become indistinguishable as separate entities.

#### **4.5 Conclusion**

The intention of this chapter was to visually research the theories of Chapter One to Chapter Three by discussing my art work in my exhibition

*Phantom Limb*. To this end, several works by Rennó and Khan were also considered. The absence-presence of photography is the underlying theme of *Phantom Limb*, in which the analogy between photographic technologies and human prostheses was investigated. The central tenet is that photographs are not snapshots that match up to human vision but enable a way of seeing, pointing to a kind of “prosthetic vision”. In the images and installation pieces I demonstrated how photographic imaging can supplement and yet distort human seeing in unexpected and provocative ways.

I discussed the manner in which Rennó’s work focuses on making the photographic image and its underlying themes perceptible by using different supports for her images. In doing so she indicates the possibility of new meanings for the photographs she uses. According to Alonso (2006:218), the underlying theme of Rennó’s work is appropriation which is why she rearticulates and analyses large bodies of photographs. This also explains why she changes and manipulates their settings to coerce the viewer to “see” more than the common sense perception of a photograph. In other words, she opens up a variety of possible meanings of photography. On the other hand, Khan layers his images, returning multiplicity to singularity. This creates an ambiguous reading of the image and also reflects on the new meanings underlying photographs. This layering is a reflection of Derrida’s deferral of meaning and the creation of layered traces in meaning.

The works of *Phantom Limb* as well as those of Rennó’s and Khan’s create an interaction between the theory and the artefactual works of art that can be evaluated through Hegel’s concept as briefly noted in Chapter Three. Hegel’s concept of *Aufhebung* refers to the interplay between the body and a new reality which culminates in a new understanding of a word. To reiterate, Hegel distinguished a type of linguistic change which refers to the altering of meaning through the movement from a bodily to an

abstract connotation. In the same way it can be said that the works of art discussed *Aufhebung* into new meaning and, conversely, the postulation of theories *Aufhebung* into concrete bodily reality through works of art.

**Endnotes: Chapter Four**

1. The pinhole camera functions in the same manner as the camera obscura. It is however much smaller and easier to relocate. According to Mary Bellis (2007) Alhazen (Ibn Al-Haytham), an authority on optics in the Middle Ages who lived around 1000 AD on the Gregorian calendar, invented the pinhole camera. He also explained why the image captured by the apparatus was upside down. Around 1600, Della Porta reinvented the pinhole camera. Apparently he was the first European to publish any information on the pinhole camera and is sometimes incorrectly credited with the invention (Bells 2007).
2. I employed this same concept in a previous work for which I placed sensitised paper in my mouth and used my lips as the shutter. My body acted as the prosthetic for my eyes by embodying moments in images which served as documentation of my experience of the world around me.
3. For visuals of this work please refer to the enclosed DVD of the catalogue of the exhibition *Phantom Limb*.
4. Muybridge (1830-1904) was an English born American photographer known for capturing movement in photographic movement sequences with multiple cameras ([www.http://americanhistory.si.edu/muybridge/](http://americanhistory.si.edu/muybridge/)).
5. Rennó's work has been exhibited internationally at exhibitions at the Venice Biennial, the Museum of Contemporary Art of Los Angeles, Centro Reina Sofia, Madrid and others.
6. Khan is an artist/photographer born in Birmingham 1978. He graduated with an MA in Fine Art from the Royal college of Art in 2003 ([www.galeriadelaraza.org/eng/exhibits/archive/exhibits](http://www.galeriadelaraza.org/eng/exhibits/archive/exhibits)).
7. Exhibited at the Contemporary Museum, Honolulu *Phantasmagoria: Spectres of Absence*, 1 September – 25 November 2007.
8. This formed part of the San Franciscan Galería de la Raza's digital mural series *Pervasive Forces: Globalization, Private Identities and the Public Sphere?* held from 15 April 2003 to 14 June 2003, available at [www.galeriadelaraza.org](http://www.galeriadelaraza.org).
9. The reader should note that this image can also be created by using analogue photography. The layering of the images can be achieved by layering the negative images together and then exposing them. The process will, however, be very time consuming and costly and will not contribute to the concept as such. However, the concept of layering coincides with my work even though the process is different.
10. Palimpsest refers to "a piece of writing material or manuscript on which later writing has been written over the effaced original writing" (*The Concise Oxford Dictionary of current English*. 1996. Sv "palimpsest").



## Conclusion

The premise of this dissertation and its accompanying visual component, *Phantom Limb*, centres on the potential of photography as a mimetic device for memory. In the Introduction to this study, I employed the metaphor of a flashlight in a dark space illuminating objects in the surrounding darkness for the traditional perception of photography. In retrospect, this perception reflects a superficial view of photography. In the chapters that followed, key arguments were discussed which, when applied, prove this metaphor to be inadequate in an intellectual context. It is now more reasonable to contend that although the flashlight selects certain objects from the “darkness” for illumination, the traces of the unilluminated areas contribute to the mediated as well as prediscursive text, context and meaning of the photograph.

Throughout the dissertation the extent to which the photograph acts as a *pharmakon* for memory was taken into account. Throughout the dissertation the three questions I posited in the introduction formed the impetus for this research. The questions were concerned with, firstly, the proximity between a graphic semblance or artefact and reality; in the second place, whether photography can be regarded as an unmediated copy of the moment; and, lastly, the possibility of and extent to which photography captures the temporal memory. I propose in this conclusion that a photograph is a mediated semblance of the temporal moment that is not an exact mirroring of the specific moment. Instead, the photograph bears traces of the moment captured which are able to aid memory as well as to create new meanings.

In order to obtain clarity, I followed a dialectical argument, which involved constructing a thesis in Chapter One, exploring the antithesis in Chapter Two and proposing a reinterpretation as a post-structural synthesis in Chapter Three. In support of my argument I referred, amongst other

theorists, to Plato's concept of writing as a *pharmakon*, to Derrida's deconstruction and to Barthes' concept of the *punctum* of a photograph. In Chapter Four, I continued to research this theoretical argument with a discussion of my visual work as well as that of two other artists.

The thesis constructed in Chapter One states that photography is an accurate artefactual mimetic correspondence to aid memory. This perception relates to artefactual memory as embodied by crafted objects, such as a photograph. I highlighted how photography was initially experienced with awe, at how nature could "magically" reproduce herself through an image. Frizot (1998d:243) explains that "photographers discovered in about 1880 that with the snapshot a world of unsuspected forms suddenly opened up to them". To understand photography as an artefactual mimetic device I briefly defined four aspects that contribute to this superficial perception of photography. Photography was seen, firstly, as an accurate unmediated mimetic device. Secondly, photography was considered able to reproduce temporal moments and capable of multiplicity. In the third place, photography was more accessible and easier to use than traditional mimetic devices. Lastly, photography was seen as documentary proof of the existence of the subject. These facets were influential in photography's early reception and are still generally pervasive today. These assumptions of the "truthfulness" of photography as mimesis are however only partially true as I indicated in the chapter that followed.

In Chapter Two, I deconstructed the thesis. I started by introducing structuralism and post-structuralism, noting that the structuralists viewed language as the creator of our reality. I argued that whereas the structuralists attempt to imbue language with stability, the post-structuralists believe in the difference and arbitrary character of language which leads to an acknowledgement of the mediatedness of meaning. After a consideration of Derrida's deconstruction theory together with other

selected aspects, I contended that photography can be perceived as a form of writing. This argument supported the movement of relating photography to Plato's concept of writing as a *pharmakon* for memory. This was achieved by reflecting on the *Phaedrus*, the dialogue in which Plato introduced the concept of the *pharmakon*. As I noted in Chapter Two, for Plato, writing leads to an *illusion* of wisdom and memory. This concept, when applied to the language of photography, allowed me to argue that the assumption that a photograph is a direct copy of a temporal moment is misplaced. Otherwise, if this assumption that a photograph is an unmediated copy of the moment were true, then all the nuances of the original moment would be presented in a photograph. This is, however, impossible. Instead, the idea of photography as "mimetic" device leads to an *illusion* of capturing the moment as the "reality".

This was followed by a brief consideration of the process of translation and how it relates to the process of photography. After considering the restrictions of the process of photography it could be deduced that the meanings of photographs are in a continual state of flux, similar to that of language. The post-structural implication is that although a photograph bears witness to a conscious moment it cannot be understood to be an exact copy of that moment, since the meaning is continually changing.

Consequently the thesis posited in Chapter One was dismantled which proved that its founding assumptions are ungrounded. Therefore, in line with current views on language, it can be deduced that as a language photography is ambiguous and without fixed meanings. Thus, when considered as a "mimetic" device, photography should be regarded as a mediated representation of past moments. Furthermore, although photography does aid memory, it does not have the final authority for recollecting experiences. This reading of photography is related to the higher cognitive form of memory, since this interpretation discerns that an image possesses continually changing contexts and meanings. Thus the

antithesis, consisting of a deconstruction of understanding photography as an accurate mimesis, can be viewed negatively and positively. In the negative sense, is the acknowledgement that it is impossible to close the process of interpretation. On the positive side, the antithesis opens the possibility for the never-ending creation of new meaning.

The central focus of Chapter Three was to reconstruct the concept of photography as a *pharmakon* for memory by arguing that although both the thesis and the antithesis contain some truth, both are inadequate. Moreover, a combination of aspects of both positions is more illuminating when considering the mimetic aspect of photography. I introduced the discussion by reflecting on Sontag's seemingly negative opinion of photography as an appropriation of the subject. I highlighted that Sontag later revised her antagonistic stance and acquiesced to the notion that photography is a means for the dissemination of information. I referred to Sontag's work because even though photography is an appropriation according to her, her opinion does introduce the notion that a photograph creates new meaning.

Subsequently, I continued to explore the function of photography as creator of meaning in the ideas of other theorists. Burgin (1982:2) highlights the function of photography as a diffuser of information in his reference to photography as "a practice of signification". For Quan, the meaning of photography lies in the attempt to control time and the attribution of meaning to our lives. Bazin's opinion is similar to that of Quan's since he perceives photography to be a form of embalment, a preservation of a moment against the degeneration of time. Quan's and Bazin's perceptions frame moments so as to create meaning by creating a temporary structure in the continuous flux of meaning in the post-structural paradigm. These structures are also subject to deconstruction and thus have no fixed meaning.

The discussion then reflected on the role that the personal embodied experience of a photograph plays in the creation of new meaning through a consideration of Berleant's concept of embodied consciousness. According to Berleant (2003), an interpretation would be "distorted and inadequate" without embodied consciousness. This was followed by a brief discussion of Hegel's *Aufhebung* concept in which he refers to an altering of language by the movement from a bodily to an abstract meaning. Through time, the meaning of words transform to become abstract and intangible, losing the initial meaning in the process. This opens the possibility for the bodilyness of the subject in the image to be reactualised to create new meanings, which indicates a movement from prediscursive to discursive meaning. As Schmidgen (2005:81) proposes, to "reembody the aesthetic we need to recognize the indissoluble link between the aesthetic and the sensual". This relates to the notion of Berleant's embodied consciousness, where cognitive as well as sensory experiences integrate to equip the viewer to reembody the aesthetic experience.

The revisionist and dialectic methodology presented in this dissertation provides an opportunity to reflect on different views of photography by moving between different ideas. However, the dialectic presented in this dissertation is unlike a classical dialectic approach where a synthesis is reached by resolving the components found in the thesis and antithesis. In a postmodern frame of reference a dialectic approach implies the creation of new meaning since the aspects defined in the thesis and antithesis are not adequate to create a comprehensive understanding of the meaning of photography. Therefore a combination of these elements has been the focus of this dissertation to show that photography creates new meaning through an altered form of mimesis and in this way aids memory. This post-structural synthesis reads that a photograph is a mimetic device that aids memory by preserving embodied, fragmented reflections of time which can be used to create new meanings and memories. This results in a new,

broader perspective of photography and thus contributes to a fresh understanding of the medium as a mimetic device.

The final chapter considered specific examples from the visual component of this research, my exhibition *Phantom Limb*, as well as selected works by Rennó and Khan. I discussed two of the central themes in my work, the role of the camera as prosthesis and the absence-presence quality of a photograph. These themes can be seen in the subject matter of my photographs, in which the prosthetic limb's presence supplements the body in the absence of the original limb. The process of the photographs in my works literally point to this seeming contradiction when I work with poisonous substances to present embodied images of what is absent. In this manner, the poison and the remedy are present in both instances simultaneously.

The absence made visible is also a central concept of Rennó's works where she uses different supports for her photographs in order to present the unsaid. In contrast, Khan's works present single images created from multiple images. In these works he illustrates that attempts to capture the whole truth leads to an unreadable image. This correlates with Derrida's concept of the mediated meaning, which Khan then embodied in an image. The works that I discussed in Chapter Four are open-ended and efforts to dictate specific meanings would lead to the collapse of the layered meanings of the works.

In this dissertation I have uncovered the tip of the iceberg with regard to the relationship between memory and mimetic devices, especially where photography is concerned. Taken further, this relationship could interact to create a better understanding of photography as an embodied mimetic device and of its role as a *pharmakon* for memory.

My understanding of photography after venturing into this study has changed considerably. Photography as mimetic device has more possibilities to create new meanings than what is generally believed. As an artist, this has introduced countless options by using traces of the past to create new meaning. I hope the reader has found reading this dissertation as well as the visual component insightful and that this study can contribute to an enhanced understanding of photography as a mimetic device that embodies memories by creating new meanings.

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