

Peter Bennett | University of West London

GOING AWAY

A photographic representation of the coast as a remembered place of childhood experience



The metaphors of the process of photography, and the fluidity of the sea, work in parallel to produce a sense of transience echoing the fleeting imprint of an involuntary memory, ‘flashing up’ before dissolving away again

This paper presents a piece of practice-based photographic research called *Going Away* that explores the coast as a ‘remembered place’ based on my own childhood visits to the seaside. The work takes the form of wall-mounted prints, while existing also as a limited edition artist’s book. *Going Away* is fictional in that, although it depicts real places and real objects, it is not the same actual place experienced in childhood. Rather, it is a place that triggers notions of escape and imaginative departure into past time. The nineteen photographs that make up this body of work were taken along several distinct stretches of the Cumbrian coast. *Going Away*, although showing particular locations, suggests a more generic childhood memory of the seaside and the loss of those times.

A Place of Memory

The work uses photography to transform the coast into a place of memory, possessing a sense of latency, like a photograph emerging from a state of development or fading through overexposure to light. The metaphors of the process of photography, and the fluidity of the sea, work in parallel to produce a sense of transience echoing the fleeting imprint of an involuntary memory, ‘flashing up’ before dissolving away again. *Going Away* principally creates the sensation of faintly-glimpsed fragments of the past. The liminality of the coast as the border between land and sea is echoed by the liminality of the faded image, as the border between visibility and invisibility, remembering and forgetting, and the conscious and unconscious mind.

Inscription and the sea

The sea, as a surface, evades inscription and is therefore resistant to the marks of past time. Its constant motion and lack of fixity defy the locatedness of memory and erase the traces of what has been. The landscape depicted in *Going Away*, the border between land and sea, is a place where the action of the tides transforms the nature of what can be seen and thereby remembered. At low tide, the shoreline reveals vast uninhabitable spaces, inviting exploration on foot and the possibility of literally walking out to sea. The tranquil appearance unveiled by the sea’s absence belies the hidden quicksand and perilous tides ready to claim the lives of those who are lured too far from the safety of land. The dwellings that inhabit this edge of land appear like models against the infinite shifting expanse and sublime power of the sea. This duality of sea and land is culturally linked to wider notions of what is geographically fixed and boundless, knowable and unknowable, stable and unstable, located and placeless.

The scenes depicted reflect such notions of fixity and impermanence; a little shack nestles on the edge of land, looking out over the infinite unknowable vastness of sea and sky (Picture 1, left). A lighthouse stands alone, warning passing vessels in a landscape where the sea is now absent; the miniature houses huddling behind are rendered insignificant by the vast scale of the empty and featureless space (Picture 2, overleaf and right). A caravan, a symbol of recreational mobility and freedom, sits on a roadside verge beside the sea, a temporary dwelling left stranded



Picture 1:
Going Away #1



Going Away, while showing the appearance of a real place, aims to present a fiction about a place of memory. But the fiction that can be created with words is different from that possible through the use of photography



in a transient emptiness (Picture 3, overleaf left). Diminutive figures are seen walking out to sea with the faint outline of distant lands rising up out of the haze of the horizon line where land and sea appear to merge (Picture 4, overleaf right). The images depict a place far from the thrust of the city, where vast reflective spaces provide a backdrop upon which to project past memories and past dreams.

The materiality of the photographic process

The materiality of the photographic process forms a prominent motif in *Going Away*, the temporality of the photographic object echoing the ephemeral presence of the scene it portrays. The 'bleaching out' of the images and liminality of the spaces suggest a metaphorical association with the processes of fading and erasure of memory. To achieve this appearance, the 'time' of the image was extended by exposing it to too much light and allowing that excess of light to distort the tonal range, giving the images a washed-out bluish green hue. Thus light becomes both the creator and eventual destroyer of the image, the appearance of the prints alluding to the look of old photographs, which over time, undergo their own material transformations, bleached by the action of light and eroded by contaminants. The visible appearance they preserve slowly 'washed away'. The materiality of the photographic remnant, while prolonging the passing of memory, can be seen ultimately to echo the transience of the moment it displaces.

The bleaching out of memory

This process of bleaching out alludes to a form of instability of both the photograph and the scene it depicts. In *Going Away*, the places presented evoke the empty aftermath of events, as if returning many years later and projecting an imagined past onto what remains. It can be argued that the fleeting impressions implied by such images form a photographic equivalent of the instability of involuntary memory discussed by Henri Bergson, which he said 'flash[ed] out at intervals' (Bergson 2004: 101), momentarily revealing the past before

disappearing once more. This is memory experienced as photographs but also as place.

The action of the sea and exposure to light both act as agents in the bleaching out of memory. The discolouration of time presents itself in the washed-out hue of the images in *Going Away*. Like the muted hue often found in archaeological fragments, colour is used to evoke a sense of the fading of the vibrancy of memory.

The metaphor of the sea

The metaphor of the sea becomes a surface for the projection of the psyche. Land represents the knowable, while the sea is the unknowable; in Freud's view, looking out to sea is linked to a sense of 'eternity', with 'a feeling of something limitless, unbounded – as it were "oceanic"' (Freud, 2004: 1), while Barthes sees a clear division between land and sea, claiming that the sea has no semiotic message. Land and sea form a binary opposition between culture and nature, history and historical void: 'Here I am before the sea; it is true that it bears no message. But on the beach, what material for semiology!' (Barthes, 1993: 112). According to Messier and Batra, the denotational 'nothingness' that Barthes associates with the sea is because 'it bears no material manifestation of human passage or cultural history in contrast to the land' (Messier and Batra, 2010: 4).

Conclusion

Going Away, while showing the appearance of a real place, aims to present a fiction about a place of memory. But the fiction that can be created with words is different from that possible through the use of photography. The camera always presents what Barthes' terms 'noème' ('that-has-been') (Barthes, 2000: 96) and it is photography's literalness to the depiction of the subject in front of the lens that makes the use of metaphor and allegory so different compared to literature. There is always something specific about a photograph that binds it to the particular rather than the general. In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes

Picture 2:
Going Away #2



For photography to transcend the specificity of subject matter, it has to present the subject using an aesthetic and language that speaks not just of this one instance, this particular scene, but relates it to a wider sense of the concept to be conveyed

provides a detailed description of the 'Winter Garden Photograph' in words, but is not prepared to show the actual image:

I cannot reproduce the Winter Garden Photograph. It exists only for me. For you, it would be nothing but an indifferent picture, one of the thousand manifestations of the 'ordinary'; it cannot in any way constitute the visible object of science; it cannot establish an objectivity; in the positive sense of the term; at most it would interest your studium: period, clothes, photogeny; but in it, for you, no wound. (Barthes, 2000: 73)

In order for photography to transcend this specificity of subject matter, it has to present the subject using an aesthetic and language that speaks not just of this one instance, this particular scene, but relates it to a wider sense of the concept to be conveyed. Thus in Barthes' 'Winter Garden Photograph', the meanings he wishes to convey are only accessible to him; the nature of his memories and his sense of loss are not inherent in the photograph in a way that will be apparent to a wider audience. In dealing with memory, displacements can often occur; one thing is substituted for another in space and time, and there is often a lack of factual clarity about any 'true' nature of events that took place. *Going Away* thus becomes a displaced fiction formed through photography; it is an attempt to evoke something of the sensation of those times and places lost in childhood, reconstructed through the eyes of an adult.

nw

References

- Freud, S. (2004). *Civilization and its Discontents*. London: Penguin
- Barthes, R. (1993) *Mythologies*. London: Vintage
- Barthes, R. (2000) *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. London: Vintage
- Bergson, H. (2004) *Matter and Memory*. Mineola, N.Y: Dover Publications
- Messier, V. and Batra, N. (2010) *This Watery World: Humans and the Sea*. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars

About the author

Peter Bennett is Lecturer in Photography at the University of West London

Keywords

Practice-as-research, photography, memory, forgetting, place, seaside



Picture 3:
Going Away #4



Picture 4:
Going Away #16

