

Remembering the Present - Photography, History and Memory

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Project Summary

This thesis will explore ideas of history, memory and time from an autoethnographic perspective, and thus will use the position of 'I' throughout. It will be an exploration into my personal and previously unexplored memory, in addition to the use of history within art and photography in general, whilst also trying to unearth its relevance within my own practice.

This thesis will create a poetic relationship between reflective diaristic writings and academic research, illuminating connections between differing writing styles. These differences will be clearly demarcated through indented and bold Ariel font. My intention is to create a piece of written work that reflects my erratic and arbitrary thoughts, giving an insight into the complexity of my emotions and memories that remain entwined.

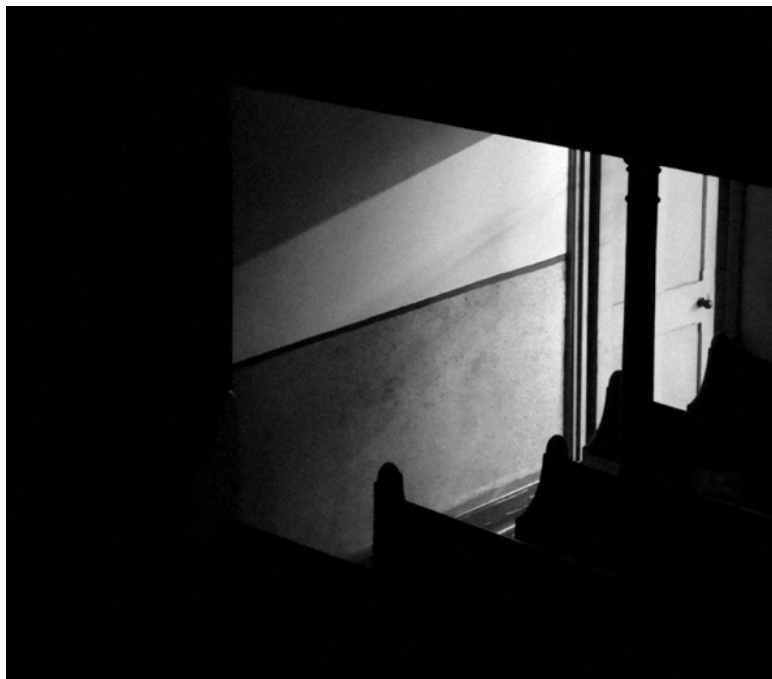


Fig.1: Funereal doorway

Introduction

Why is memory such an overriding influence within my practice?

What is the reason that history interests me so deeply? Could photography and memory be a contributing factor for my depression? These are some of the issues I intend exploring within this thesis as I attempt to understand my underlying negative emotions towards yesteryear, in a self-exploration of my deep and inner thoughts and beliefs.

Photography has had an unprecedented impact on our ability to record history for the best part of two centuries. The French scientist Joseph Niepce took the first recorded image, titled "*View from the window*", taken from his family's country home in 1826.



Fig. 2: *View from the window.*

At the time, Niepce would he have realised the magnitude of this vital discovery, and its ability to change our testimony of history for ever.

I intend using a selection of historical photos to accompany my writing, as they will help interpret my findings.

Having suffered from depression and anxiety for several years I often find myself reminiscing over days gone by, thus I believe this to be a contributing factor to my own melancholic images.

My aim is to construct a collection of self-exploratory observations, by probing and documenting my inner thoughts to reveal and help me understand my compulsion towards yesteryear, thus enabling me to feel compassion towards my own work, instead of hostility.

This document is intended to be a very intimate and personal reflection, that hopefully demonstrates my own internal battles,

intermingled with academic research made using books (both modern and historical), websites, biography and video.

My primary source of intellectual nourishment has come from a book by Eduardo Cadava, titled *Words of light – Thesis on the photography of history* (1997) as he discusses in detail the work of Walter Benjamin. I have been heavily influenced by his eloquent essays. Not only do they help decipher my own opinions, but they help unlock many concerns I have from deep within.

In the first chapter I will discuss photography and why it has been so influential to myself, including its integration with my mental health. The second chapter is a deeper inquiry, very much on an intimate level. Its purpose is to unearth my pessimism by understanding the roots of its presence. My intention is to better understand myself, subsequently enabling the greater progression of my practice going forward.

Chapter 1 - Photography

What started out as an innocent interest in photography, has slowly developed into a far deeper purpose that has allowed me to find my internal voice and given me some clarity in understanding myself and my deep, hidden thoughts.

...even though I don't feel old, I am begrudgingly getting there, for I am 50 next year, and the only pain I have is in my thoughts...

I have struggled with my mental health for several years now, due to a few reasons, unemployment, divorce, numerous house moves and even bankruptcy to name a few. However, by far the worst was having to experience grief, from the loss of my best friend.

...really gnarly writing, first thing that comes to my head, love it so far, lets me forget about my awful memory...

I can only describe my life so far as being pre and post-depression, but the exact transition between the two is blurred, as it was so gradual that I was totally oblivious to it.

...just sitting down, writing down my thoughts and feelings...

In 2015 I felt totally lost, not literally, but spiritually, I was feeling sad and felt I had no direction in life. That's when I decided to return to education and study something that I enjoyed, and luckily that turned out to be photography.

...I clearly remember my parents taking me to the old Odeon Cinema on the Kingsway, it had dark, plush, scarlet-coloured velvety walls and sumptuous hanging drapes, and we were going to see Disney's 'The fox and the hound'. I loved cartoons, as did most children my age, I was so excited...

Initially, it started out as not much more than a hobby, but soon I discovered that there is so much more to it. I found it helped me to express myself in a way that I never had before, and the benefits that came with studying photography were far greater than any antidepressant could provide.

...I have a mental breakdown, at the ripe old age of 8, I burst out crying, I can't watch anymore, I can't understand how anyone can enjoy watching such cruelty...

I also believe that contemporary secondary school education doesn't teach students 'how to see' beyond physical sight, as seeing is the capacity to know and interpret the world through direct perception (Ulrich, 2018, p. 27).

...and there it is, the start of my overriding emotion of being over sentimental, having ridiculously strong empathy towards the vulnerable...

By reading David Ulrich's book, *Zen Camera*, I realised that photography can be used to help me become present at any given moment, by trying to clear my mind, especially of any negative thoughts, and just concentrating on my surroundings (*Zen Camera* 2017).

...I feel an immense pity for those that have passed away and been forgotten, maybe they haven't been forgotten at all and I am just assuming this...

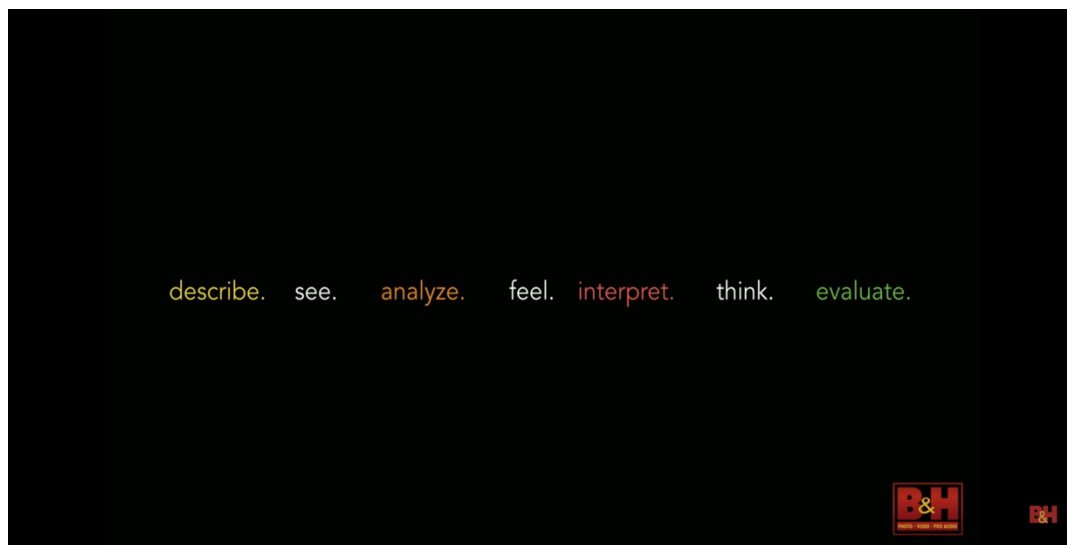
I have now made meditation part of my daily routine, where it grounds me and prepares me for the rest of the day, making sure I am grateful for everything I have.

...I have an underlying fear of getting old, without having made a mark on this world, not leaving a legacy...

Another invaluable source that helped me discover the benefits of photography was listening to Eileen Rafferty on YouTube, where in one video particularly (Rafferty, 2017), she talks about the basics of critiquing an image.

...I have no idea, yet, what or where the next stage of my thinking will take me...

This opened so many other doors for me, not only when it came to looking at other people's images, but also when considering how I would be looking to capture an image whilst portraying feeling/story within my own practice.



(Fig.3 Rafferty 2017)

...this is where the ideas get a little Vaseline to help them squeeze out of my brain...

In this recording of her teaching a photography class in America, she talks about breaking the critique process down into small chunks, and the technical side is usually just a small part.

...I realise I have been rambling, but I really wanted to do this...

There is a need to dig deeper and start looking at how it is making me feel inside, what message I may or may not be getting from an image, and of course any feedback, good or bad, where I would have done anything differently.

...It becomes instantly clear that the reason is hidden within my writing, it is my need to try and place a stamp on history, my history, before it is gone and forgotten...

She did point out that you can have a good or bad opinion of an image, or even something between, however when critiquing, it is never a good idea to be overly harsh as its whole intention is to encourage and not dishearten if possible.

...I am starting to realise that I have a hidden internal fear, that controls me, my thoughts, my existence...

In *Ways of Seeing* by John Berger, he dissects the meaning of some famous oil paintings from over the last few centuries, as after all, photography is just a technological development from these. But more importantly for me, the book consisted of seven essays, three of which have no words, yet he says at the beginning, “They can be read in any order” (Berger, 1972).

...It feels rooted deeper within, almost as if I have carried this sticky burden for most of my life...

This introduced me to the concept of a 'pictorial essay' which I had never considered before. Its potential sounded fascinating, having the ability to write an essay without having to use a single word.

...materialistically it is bricks and mortar, however its purpose for 'being', has now gone...

Ways of Seeing (date) also dissected many concepts, ideas and understandings involved with art, including photography. Berger initially separates the artist (photographer) and the spectator taking into consideration how the artist, having been influenced by culture and time, sees the subject in their eyes, at that precise time in history.

...how many, actual people, has the chapel touched, helped, encouraged, supported, saved, and said goodbye to over this time...

Berger explains how each interpretation is subjective, personal to the eyes of the person seeing it; understanding art therefore becomes about the 'ways of seeing'.

...But now, there is just me, carrying the burden, sounds terrible, it is no burden, keeping the flame alive for as long as I can...

Berger's concepts challenged the way I thought, and my methods for creating my own imagery within my personal practice. As a result, I have started to capture how I feel, seeing the world from a much deeper and personal level, rather than purely trying to capture something for its interesting or visually attractive qualities.

...destiny has somehow picked me to try and continue its legacy, in a small way, before it must end, as it will with all of us one day...

Berger's *Ways of Seeing* has altered my perspective so that I can understand how this was a natural progression in my art and practice, developing my self-expression without having to use any vocabulary, and no longer being concerned with my artistic direction.

...for it is my time, I need it to survive the day...

Berger also talks about the painters/artists from centuries ago and "paintings being created as ordered; they were destined for

specific places. The place determined the meaning of the painting” (Berger, 1972: p.58).

...I now realise that I can never get rid of these feelings, only learn to live with them...

This made me reconsider my previous mechanism for developing my own practice, by considering beforehand how my body of work may eventually be displayed.

...I get overwhelmed with the stories, tradition and past that the chapel would have witnessed over time, the joy and happiness that would have radiated amongst the members during this time of year...

It has made me question the whole notion of whether someone has the right to take ownership of an archive that probably wasn't intended for them.

...it teaches people valuable lessons about greed and gratitude and community and giving...

I was starting to get drawn towards sombre imagery, that portrayed grim and weird context. It almost became a fetish, an addiction, as that was the only style that really got me interested and keen to create more. In my eyes, the darker the better.

...I often think how I failed miserably with my life so far as I have always had a selfish side...



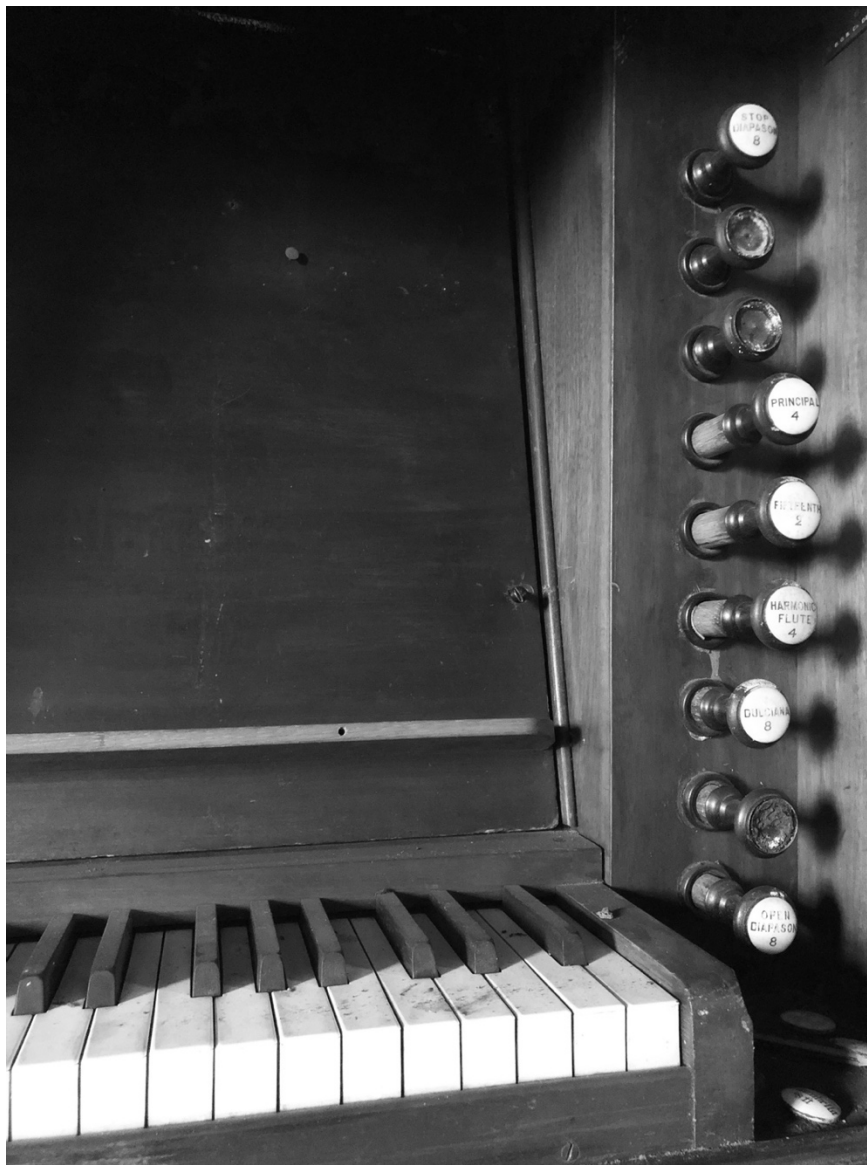
(Fig.4: It was all a lie)



(Fig.5 Surrender)

...the fear of being rejected still stands firm, and with selfishness comes the failure of giving, are these failures quietly grinding away at my innards...

Naturally, my practice was developing and my interest in historical imagery was also starting to expand, along with my inherent need to ponder over the past. Without even realising it, my artistic practice was really starting to take shape.



(Fig.6 *Where is the joy*)

...I really feel that I am luckier than most, but not necessarily for the right reasons...

Chapter 2- The Chapel, history & memory

The chapel found me when I needed it most. It was perfect timing in retrospect, as my depression was tightening its hold, and I was struggling to find a purpose in life.

...I also have a loving partner and family, whom I worry about losing daily...

It was 2018, and Seion chapel, in Glais, Swansea, had closed its chapel doors some eight years prior, and now that its members were down to just seven (three of whom were too old and frail to attend anyhow), it had been decided to deconsecrate the grounds and therefore the 'cause' was no more.

...my children have been torn between two resentful families, and now I feel the pain of losing that love as they are becoming adults, and I feel helpless to this...

This is where my journey began. I was given full access to the chapel's antiquity, by being its temporary custodian, so I began

delving into the history of this magnificent yet modest building,
and it just kept giving.

...I live a relatively lonely life, friends are few, more like acquaintances, for I lost
my one true friend...

As I was unearthing its history with each and every day that
passed, I became absorbed.

...this I need to let out at another time, as it needs a special moment, when I am
ready, to try and let it out...

It almost felt like an unnatural relationship was blossoming, as we
both needed each other's support; a much-appreciated distraction
for me, and a sliver of hope for the chapel's survival.

...she is the kindest most caring person I have ever met...

How ironic it all felt that the chapel had devoted its existence to
helping people in their times of despair, probably tens of
thousands of people over the last 150 years, yet here it was, all
alone, in its own moment of need, and yet it was still intent on
helping, helping me that is.

...maybe I'm a little resentful, for I haven't left a legacy like this...

I was becoming seduced by its archive, as it soon became apparent that there was so much of it. I began enjoying the arduous task of collating the information and I felt an inherent need to gather as much as I could before it was too late, and all forgotten.

...I realise, when I talk like this, it is all about me, me, me, me, I don't want it to be about me, I want to stop feeling selfish...

But why do I feel this compulsion?

...I need to slow down and concentrate on the task ahead of me, try and control my thoughts...

Was it because of the words of the historian Pierre Nora, as he had written “modern memory is, above all, archival. It relies on the materiality of the trace, the immediacy of the recording, the visibility of the image” (Merewether, 1997).

...I feel like I am reading a book, it keeps me on my toes, the type of book I love and crave, I look forward to seeing where it takes me...

In the latter part of this book, he discusses in detail how important the ‘archive’ is to human memory, as it acts as a witness, providing evidence of a given time and place in the past

that may have been remembered differently, or even forgotten, had there not been an archive to record it accurately.

...this book was written by me, it's just that my consciousness is only now letting it out as I write, I didn't expect that...

He discusses the notion that an artist uses memory and archives in their practice, not by just creating new archive work or even by creating research into an existing one, but by deconstructing the notion of the archive itself.

...why I feel drawn towards Seion Chapel, the comfort it provides me, its reliability, its charm, its knowledge and if there is a reason that destiny brought us together in this way...

This encouraged me to further explore this concept and to progress my practice, and I was looking forward to experimenting by dissecting existing archive material that I had amassed over the last few years.

...overwhelming feeling of security, it fills me with this powerful feeling of guaranteed safety...

One of my favourite discoveries from the chapel's archive was the history and background of one of the previous ministers.

...process of emptying my mind of thoughts and feelings, a nothingness that seems to take me closer to the true essence...

This minister was not your stereotypical clergyman. He had a very impressive past, varying from being a successful and respected Welsh poet, to being jailed by MI5 during the Second World War.

...for they are still there in spirit, if you try and believe that someone's soul continues long after the physical body has passed...

He was a pacifist and close friend with Kier Hardy, his name was Thomas Evan Nicholas, aka 'Niclas y Glais'

...Oak front door, with its solid stone step that shows the wear inflicted on it by millions of 'Sunday Best' shoes that have walked over it...

Nicholas was a Minister at Seion for some ten years, from 1904, and during this time entered, and won, many Eisteddfodau chairs for his Welsh poetry.

...I feel almost sorry for the chapel, as it has outlived all its members, and been witness to them all passing, one by one...

This progressed over the following decades and led to him producing many poetry books, nearly all in Welsh, where he spoke

about coalminers, working class families, and the poverty throughout the Valleys of Wales.

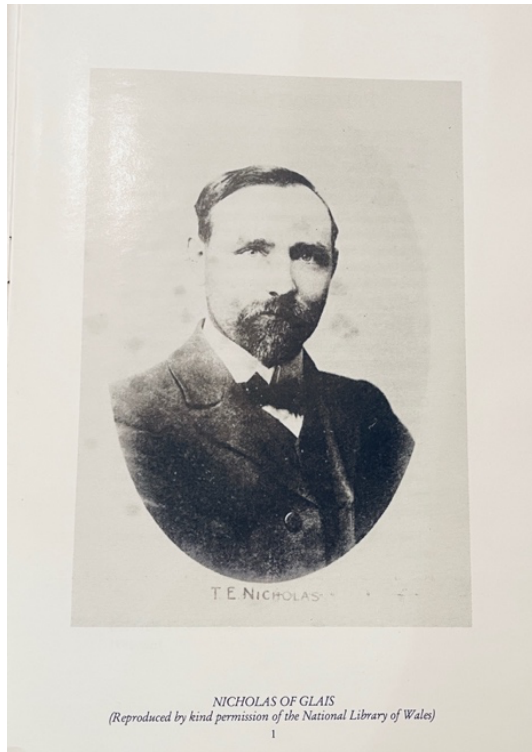
...these stories have no archive, no longer in anyone's conscious memory, they have now been forgotten, it is only the chapel with these memories, except the Chapel has no consciousness...

As I mentioned previously, Nicholas was jailed during the Second World War as MI5 were afraid that his pacifist views would endanger National security.

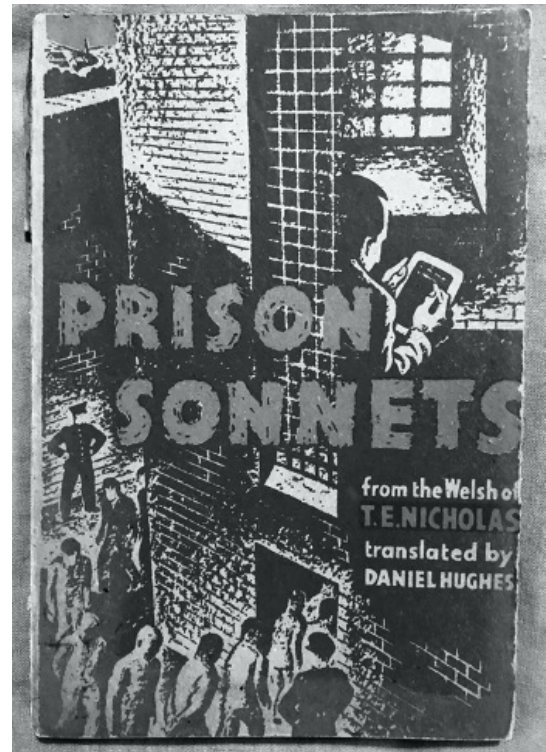
...what is history...

Whilst locked up at Swansea and then Brixton Jail, and whilst the guards had denied him writing paper, he secretly continued to write his poetry on slate during the darkness of night and cunningly had them smuggled out.

...Does it have to be in someone's subconscious mind for it to exist? For without someone's memory or thought of it, then maybe it no longer exists...

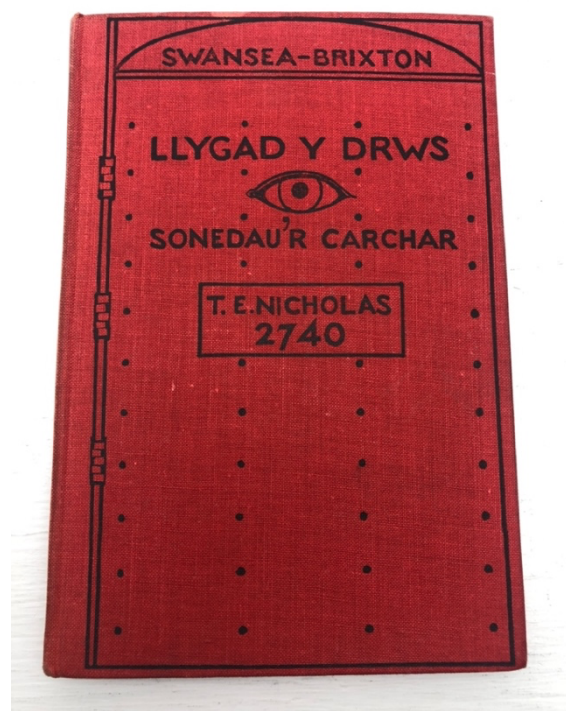


(Fig.7 Howell 1991)



(Fig.8 Nicholas 1943)

This book was the only one from his poetry collection that was ever translated into English.



(Fig.9 Nicholas 1941)

...everything that has ever existed, will eventually become true non-history, as if it never occurred...

Through the (cell) window

Naught is in sight but endless chimneys smoking, all walls with city's grime are daubed and dun.

Convenient place for plagues and fever stoking, when laden blackouts hide the healing sun.

Beyond the walls are trees and flowers in legions, the birds and hues and leaves on country steps.

There Snowdon lifts its head to cloudy regions, and Brenni shades the grave where father sleeps.

From Gwalia's paradise I hear them calling- the welcome of my friends from homes and woods.

I'm barred amid the brimstone and the brawling, for my resistance to the tyrant's goods.

I loved the rose, the streamlet's roundelay, Life's happy mischiefs, and the children's play.

(Nicholas, 1941, p.34)

...now becoming the gatekeeper to that passage of time...

The words from this piece of poetry allow us to appreciate how the memories of his home in Wales kept him sane, whilst confined to his grim prison cell.

...maybe I need to be locked up...

I feel that he is remembering the basic and simple, yet important features of his Welsh heritage, that are giving him hope at this

moment of need, and these fond memories are keeping him positive when all around him is despair and abandonment.

...it may be a dead end, but I can see that it is one step closer to my destination, if nothing else...



(Fig.10 Howell 1991)

...they need a certain amount of freedom for them to be true...

The true picture of the past flits by. The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognised and is never seen again...For it is an irretrievable image of the past that threatens to disappear with every present that does not recognise itself as intended in it

(Cadava, 1997 p.24)

It is suggested in the book *Words of light* (Cadava, 1997), that when a photograph is taken, it is a cemetery, as it is an image of a dead-living thing, in my opinion meaning the image, will at some point in the future, be of someone or something that is no longer alive or present.

...I must allow my sub consciousness to direct me when it nudges me away...

This is the closest I have got to explaining the way in which I see images. With saddened eyes and empathy, they speak to me differently. It is why I feel sorrow in an image.

...My brain feels delicate now, I will ponder on these ideas...

The meaning of 'Words of light' is also an intriguing way to contemplate photography, as an image can speak to us just as words can. He helps break photography down into its simplest and truest form, in parallel to discussing the works of Walter Benjamin's essays, and he tries to recreate the true essence of a photograph, a deeper meaning to its intention (Cadava. 1997).

...the not knowing only serves to amplify the dark feelings...

Part of my understanding is that we have created language so that we can communicate amongst ourselves as a species. It enables us to tell someone something, and vice versa, in that exact moment in time.

...guilt is also added to my negativity as I feel it is unjustified...

So, for instance, communication may have started as a neanderthal grunting to another, whilst evoking 'get away, this is my food, or we must fight'. This form of communication clearly developed over thousands of years to where we are today with an estimated 123 different languages worldwide and possibly over 15 million unique words (Quora, 2022).

...accustomed to the darkness, even fond of it on occasions...

These different languages are spread across the world, geographically assembled in most instances, but they all serve the same purpose, to communicate with each other, using an ever-increasing variety of words.

...just sat there hoping I give it some attention sometime soon...

As a result of this ability, we eventually had to create a means to record the language, as it could then be used en masse, and therefore words and writing were created.

...depression isn't my friend, and I can only describe it as cloak...

This seemingly never-ending number of words has created its own problems, as I mentioned earlier. It is subdivided into roughly 123 different languages.

...I try to avoid people, to be unseen...

Take an average British person. They have a vocabulary of roughly 20,000 English words (R.L.G. 2013), yet the entire English language has been estimated to have over one million separate words (Merriam-webster 2022).

...14 hours in bed, hoping to sleep off the impending doom and gloom, but that never works, again I keep feeling worse...

My point being this creates many difficulties by itself, i.e., a lack of vocabulary, therefore a lack of understanding too. It can be very time-consuming reading and writing, word by word etc.

...My initial instinct when I feel like this is to do nothing, or as little as possible, as motivation is ailing, like a large wooden hourglass emptying slowly, as I wait, patiently, for it to stop...

I have never considered myself as someone with a healthy vocabulary, as I struggle to say what I intend. This is probably why I am passionate about images rather than words.

...Flat, deflated, drained, exhausted, flagging, I am all of these, pulverized into a wilting gloom...

So, what if we could start again, with the knowledge we now have, and create a universal language, so everyone in the world can understand, and it doesn't consist of having millions of separate words, so it doesn't judge anyone on their mental ability, or lack of it, or where they were born.

...rain was beating down outside, pitch black...

Well, photography is just that. It is the truest yet simplest form of language available. It really is 'words of light'.

...Is it a sign I instantly thought, but a sign of what...

I fully appreciate that of course, language, is still vitally important and indeed was necessary to progress to where we are today, as

not only was photography only invented some 200 years ago, but there are many other caveats, such as someone being blind and unable to see an image, whereas braille and language solves this problem.

...I do still believe in a greater presence, something outside the realm of humans understanding...

Yet we do now have this technology and why isn't it being taught in junior schools as it has so much potential if we are taught to use it properly, and this is just at its basic level.

...this again comforts me that life isn't in vain, and we don't just get born...

Trying to look at photography at a deeper level, in his book, Cadava discusses that a photograph can also have an aura, often captured in old images.

...struggle with the reality of sadness, grief and unfulfilled dream, and then we die...

Some may suggest that is only down to the image being captured on film, and not a modern digital camera. Personally, I think there

is a lot more to it than the device used to capture the image. I will discuss my consideration on this.

...why am I consistently in a state of negativity, I am not sure, for I have everything to be happy about...

To try and understand and think of this differently, you can think of a photograph of the night sky, showing an array of stars. Each star represents a different time in history, as the light we are seeing from those stars, gathered at this precise moment, spans across thousands, if not millions of light years.

...hard lessons are sent our way to make us stronger, to teach us it is good to fail as that is how we learn...

Take just one of those stars. Chances are it isn't there anymore, it has burnt out and ceases to exist, yet it still appears to be there due to the length of time its light has taken to travel this far and will keep travelling for millions of light years into the future.

...my photography is often quite dark...

On the other hand, my physical being is here right now, but it must then also be understood that it is of a deceased me, just like the star.

...I have never had the time to give to myself, to be kind and empathetic to me, the real me, the me that is camouflaged by the exterior me...

So, by capturing an image, it must be of something that has died, which is the case for all photography in that case.

...all he said was 'how hard it was to be so old that nearly everyone that he had known during his life had long died, it was lonely getting old, very lonely...

This could creatively be seen as the aura of an image, for it sees something deeper within the image. It is telling a story without saying it, you only see it.

...I am trying to connect the dots, but there are too many...

It is possible to capture an atmosphere, or a sensation, it can't be pointed out in the image as such, yet it can be felt from seeing the image, as we become aware that it is no longer there. This can be its 'aura'.

...it is very tiresome; it grinds away at me a little every day...

He writes “Like the photograph that presents what is no longer there, starlight names the trace of a celestial body that has long since vanished. The star is always a kind of ruin.”

...they shouldn't consume anyone for they cannot be undone or changed now...

Therefore, light is never identical to itself, it is with this understanding that we can create an image that can have feeling, an ambience, an aura, as we now know from an altered perspective that an image is not always what it appears to be.

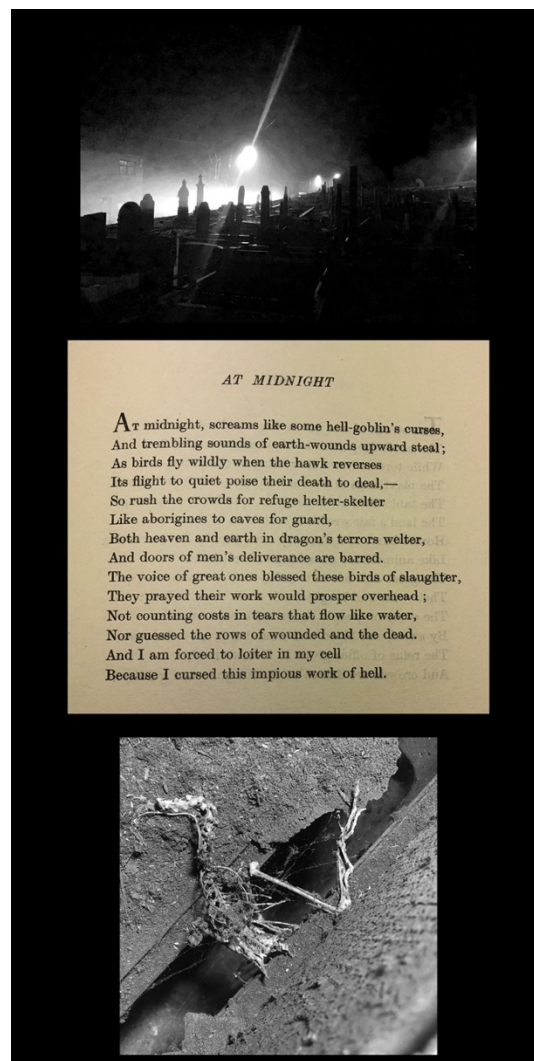
...I have so many questions but only a scattering of answers...



(Fig.11 Howell 1991, pp. 43)



(Fig.12 Hughes 2022)



(Fig.13 Hughes 2021)

Conclusion

How ironic, that my conclusion is in fact also the beginning, let me explain.

The process I have undertaken to complete this thesis has allowed me to explore and try to comprehend myself. That is the conscious me, not the physical me. You see, my physical body is fine, as far as I know, at least I have no concerns there, alas, it is my conscious self that is of concern.

Time is passing me by, I am all too aware of this, yet I feel I am stuck, unable to climb out of this dark hole I have found myself in. I am looking for an answer, but it is so difficult when I don't know what the question is. That is the closest I can get to explaining how I feel.

It feels like I am on a quest, to try and understand myself, to make peace with it, and to eventually just let it be, so that I can move on and concentrate on being present. By completing this thesis, I have made an important first step in my own personal self-development. It will be the foundation to my being, a critical moment I believe in my search for purpose.

I am gradually realising that it is not all about the past, nor indeed any future outcome, as the importance is all in the process, whilst also trying to fully experience the now. This is what I mean when I say, 'it is just the beginning'.

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