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Value and Significance

The misfortune of my childhood

Having examined how photographs and recorded music are adopted as complementary resources for helping people retain or revitalise their connections with the past, we turn now to a different aspect of their use. This concerns the cross-temporal value and significance derived from these mnemonic resources, in some cases quite beyond the deliberate purposes found for them in our day-to-day lives. Dealing with these cases takes us into a modality of remembering that we have so far only touched on, here and there, in a rather fleeting manner. Involuntary memory – the sudden and fortuitous re-emergence of particular features of the past, along with its accompanying sense of temporal transposition – is examined in this chapter through specific fieldwork examples, with recorded music appearing to be a more common and more potent catalyst of it than photography. This connects with our discussion of the aural as well as the visual *punctum*, and our critical reconsideration of the relationship between *punctum* and *studium*, in Barthes’s celebrated conceptual distinction between these two modes of response to photography. It also connects with our further appraisal of the inherently different properties of recorded music and photography and the ways in which these relate to memory and remembering. Their distinctive affordances, centred around their sonic and visual characteristics but not exhausted by them, are directly and indirectly allied with how they are used and appreciated in everyday life. Saying this is quite distinct from any notion that processes and practices of remembering are determined by particular technologies. So, for example, while responses to both of our two media of remembering are generally more powerful when they involve involuntary memory, there is clear evidence that, in certain
cases of intentional recollection, strong and significant mnemonic associations may arise from the use of either media. Recorded music may indeed seem to be a more powerful trigger of involuntary remembering, but no hard-and-fast assumptions about the mnemonic potential of the two media belong on the table we are talking around.

It is, of course, quite impossible to separate out the specific reasons why photography and music are put in the service of memory from the ways in which these two media are considered to be of value and significance in carrying echoes and reverberations of the past into the present. That is why we have already encountered various expressions of such value in what people say about the distinctive uses to which they are put and the ways they inform and validate the meanings made out of past experience, whether of events, people or places. There is clearly a good deal of interaction between the purposes to which these resources are put and the importance they have, or come to have, in people’s lives. Nevertheless, the values associated with their mnemonic associations, especially those which are long-enduring, cannot necessarily be inferred from their everyday uses. In any case, they demand more concerted treatment than so far afforded them if they are to be appreciated in anything less than a perfunctory manner. Developing such treatment is the objective of this chapter. The main way we shall attempt to achieve this is by focusing particularly on the role of the mnemonic imagination in the realisation of these values, invested as they are in the interwoven strands of connection across the different periods of our lives and of the social groups to which we owe allegiance or are in various ways affiliated with. The mnemonic imagination is vital in this.

As a way of underwriting this claim, we want to begin by considering a case where the mnemonic imagination has never been able to flourish. We have shown throughout the book that the mnemonic imagination fosters and facilitates transactional movement across time, bringing the past to bear in positive ways on the present and the situations and circumstances of the present. It uses resources drawn from the past in order to enrich and enhance our current experiences and what these provide for us or what active possibilities open out from them. This is fine in principle but it does presuppose that there are no recalcitrant obstacles or disabling lacunae standing in the way of movement between past and present. The cross-temporal interanimations of the mnemonic imagination cannot apply, or at least apply fully and effectively, where this movement is severely impeded. Events and experiences in the past may be such that any desire to return to the past is thereby destined to wither into the sand, its roots rapidly diminishing