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Melancholy objects

MARGARET GIBSON
School of Social Science, University of New England, Armidale, Australia

ABSTRACT *Through psychoanalytical concepts, interview research and biographical text, this paper discusses the importance of objects in the lives of the bereaved. D. W. Winnicott's concept of the transitional object is used to analyse grief work through objects. Like the transitional objects of childhood, the bereaved often mourn through intimate things belonging to the now deceased. It is not just the experience and process of grief that transitions with and through objects, but objects too transition in terms of their status, value and meaning. Objects once intensely used in grieving are often experienced ambivalently later on. As concrete symbolic material, objects orient in time and space the often disorientating and displacing experiences of grief. This paper makes a temporal and category distinction between objects incorporated* in *the work of mourning and objects that, with time and distance, become the remembered objects* of *mourning. Melancholy objects are conceptualized as the memorialized objects of mourning.*

KEYWORDS: grief; transitional objects; melancholy objects; mourning; memorialisation; photography

> As we looked at her straw bag, filled with balls of wool and an unfinished piece of knitting, and at her blotting pad, her scissors, her thimble, emotion rose up and drowned us. Everyone knows the power of things: life is solidified in them, more immediately present than in any one of its instants.
>
> Simone de Beauvoir, *A Very Easy Death*.

Introduction

There are dead objects [1] and then there are objects of the dead—those spectral, melancholy objects mediating, and signifying, an absence. As part of mourning and memory, objects function as metaphorical and metonymic traces of corporeal absence (Ash, 1996; Pointon, 1999; Hallam & Hockey, 2001). Most people take for granted the objects around them, never thinking that many will survive their own being and come to stand in for them, in their absence. Objects play a role in grieving because they are embedded in the construction of identity and 'trajectories between persons' (Komter, 2001: 59). This paper is concerned with the emotional effects of objects, emotionally effecting objects, and emotional

Correspondence to: Margaret Gibson, School of Social Science, University of New England, Armidale, NSW 235, Australia; E-mail: mgibson@pobox.une.edu.au

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transitions through objects. In the early stages of grief the deceased person is close to the living—it was not that long ago that they too were alive and touchable. But as time passes the temporal and corporeal distance between the living and the dead widens and the haunting effects of grief diminish. Objects often lose some or all of their conjuring power of reverie and mediation with the lost, absent person.

The title of this paper, melancholy objects, refers to objects that have been central to grieving, and particularly, the memory of grieving. Melancholy objects are conceptualized as objects that memorialize mourning. While Susan Sontag (1997: 70 – 71) did not have a theory of melancholy objects, she wrote about photographs as melancholy objects because they record the past-ness and unrepeatability of the lived instant of time and the image (the image of time, and the time of the image), and the human condition of mortality. Roland Barthes (1981: 90) also identified the photograph as a melancholy object linking it to time. The photographic image, he writes, 'is without future, (this is its pathos, its melancholy)'.

In looking at photographic images of ourselves and of others we recognize the mortality of what was and will never be again. All photographs are '*memento mori*' (Sontag, 1997: 15), serving as 'a witness to life and as a rehearsal for death' (Phelan, 2002: 979). I will return to the photograph as an object of mourning in the last section of this paper, which includes autobiographical text.

Absent research subjects/objects

The significance of objects in relation to death and grief has had poignant accounts in literature and memoir—texts such as Gustave Flaubert's *Madam Bovary* (1950), Simone de Beavoir's *A Very Easy Death* (1965), Drusella Modjeska's *Poppy* (1990) and recently Siri Hustvedt's novels, *The Blindfold* (1992) and *What I Loved* (2003). Literature and memoir has given affect to De Beauvoir's insight on the 'power of things' in death. For example, in his memoir, *A Mother's Disgrace*, Australian writer Robert Dessaix (2000: 154), tells the story of how his father, mowing the lawn one day, stopped mid-way to start a letter to him. He 'wrote about half a page and in mid-sentence died'. Dessaix *cannot* read this letter from his father (1994: 154) and it seems to have become, through time, a psychic crypt of deferred mourning and irreducible grief.

Against a background of literary accounts, there is a notable absence of qualitative, sociological research into grief and material culture. While there is sociological/cultural/historical research on objects in relation to death, memory and mourning [2], a more intimate history of grief objects through interview research (rather than memoir or individual narratives) is missing. This is partly because research into objects and material culture has, to date, largely focused on the areas of consumption, commodity culture, and theories and practices of gift-giving and exchange relations.

In response to this absence I conducted primary research on grief in relation to the material possessions of deceased family. In 2002 to early 2003, I interviewed 30 Australian women and men between the ages of 30 and 75, all of whom have experienced family bereavement. These interviews explored the emotional,

symbolic and memorial value of objects in times of bereavement and the different valuings of objects within and amongst family. The interviewees spoke about a wide variety of objects. The list includes items such as shirts, dressing gowns, jumpers, dresses, wrestling suits, rings, necklaces, earrings, photographs, hair, hats, vases, chairs, couches, books, letters, diaries, pipes, violins, saddles, boots, sneakers, watches, eye glasses, wallets, badges, tools, soft toy bunny rabbits, and tennis rackets. This paper focuses on two types of objects—photographs and clothing.

A number of family bereavements were represented in the interviews—deaths of mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, daughter, son, aunts, uncles, husbands and wives. The death of fathers was the most numerically and narratively represented family death in the interviews. This is partly because fathers were the first and sometimes only family bereavement. The higher representation of fathers is not surprising given that, on average, men die at an earlier age to women. Rather than offering an overview of the interviews as data, this paper theorises from fragments of interview text from six interviews.

Transitional objects

The psychoanalytic concept of cathexis is a useful framework in which to consider the emotional life of objects. Cathexis is the term for psychic charge or emotional stimulus attached to love objects and figures of identification (Freud, [1911]1958: 221). In mourning there is a withdrawal of cathexis from the lost object as the ego recovers a relationship to the outside world through new investments in people and activities. In psychoanalytic literature *object* generally refers to persons rather than inanimate things, but it can equally include the investments and transferences of cathexes to actual material objects. This is exemplified in Winnicott's (1971) concept of the transitional object. While his concept of transitional objects emerged out of research into childhood development and the complex negotiations of inner and outer reality, separation and attachment, it transcends the periodization of childhood and a developmental perspective. As psychic and bodily differentiation between the child and mother progresses, the child psychically mediates this separation, and the threat of loss with objects such as teddy bears, dolls, blankets and other comforting things. In one particular interview a story was told about a transitional object hugged by a dying elderly woman. The interviewee, Luce [3], recounted a memory of shopping with her wheel-chaired mother:

> My mother was in a nursing home in Camberwell, Melbourne [Australia]. She had a poisoned foot and couldn't walk. She had a catheter in and a catheter bag. Anyway I put her in a wheelchair with her leg sticking out the front and the catheter bag hanging on the side. I just took her down to Camberwell shopping centre, which is kind of the upper middle class in the eastern suburbs. We went to this place and I bought her a milkshake—we sort of zoomed around and that was beautiful. That was in March and she died the very beginning of May.

On this outing Luce also bought her mother a soft toy bunny rabbit.

> It was Autumn, the sun was shining and it was beautiful. The place we went to used to be called the Chocolate Box—I don't think it is called that anymore. There were these rabbits there, it was just before Easter and they had bunches of Easter Eggs around their necks and my mum said she wanted one and I bought it for her. It was . . . the sort of thing you do with a child . . . So there was me, the child, buying this toy really, this beautiful soft rabbit with these Easter Eggs for my mother. When she died I said I wanted that rabbit because I bought it for her and my mother sort of hugged it like a little kid . . . (Interview 2002).

The story unfolds a memory *of* the unfolding of the memorable. The toy rabbit is a transitional object both symbolically (in terms of the mother's transitional status of dying) and emotionally. In this story, the transitional object mediates a self-to-self relationship and not just a self-to-other relationship. The rabbit returns the mother to her childhood and a relationship with the maternal/primordial through a role reversal with the daughter.

According to Winnicott, transitional objects are invested with a magical quality—they have protective powers warding off danger and offering comfort. Teddy bears, dolls and other toys are animated egos and ego projections over which a child exercises control of its environment and relationships. Transitional objects express the anguish and militate against the mother's absence as a primary figure and corporeal site of absence and loss: 'It is not the object, of course, that is transitional. The object represents the infant's transition from a state of being merged with the mother to a state of being in relation to the mother as something outside and separate' (Winnicott, [1971] 1997: 14–15).

These objects are not just mediating between 'I' and 'you', 'self' and 'other', 'here' and 'there', they materialize, whilst trying to 'fill in' the psychic experience of this gap or spacing. In other words, there is an existential dimension to the transitional objects in that they mediate nothingness. If the child negotiates the outside world and the existential anxiety of absence partly through the transitional object, it is not surprising that the grieving might also negotiate their lost object with emotional props and buffers. In grieving, as in childhood, transitional objects are both a means of holding on and letting go. This was exemplified in a number of interviews, particularly the one below. The interview shows that when the intensity of grief changes so too does the meaning, value and emotional effect of the transitional object. The transitional object of this interview was a jumper belonging to a deceased husband.

> Anna: I wore my husband's jumper [sweater] for weeks and weeks. I use to hug myself in it and press it against my body. I must have sucked all his smell out of it . . .
>
> Me: Did people know that you were wearing his jumper?
>
> Anna: My kids knew and my mother . . . I don't think I made a point of telling people. I found some people a bit judgmental about grief, you know, you're suppose to get over it. I suppose I did grieve through John's things. . .

> Me: Do you still have that jumper?
>
> Anna: Yes . . . I've packed it away . . . I don't feel the need to wear it anymore . . . I don't think I'd throw it out . . . It's packed away . . . I think about it sometimes. . .I suppose I don't need it like I did.
>
> Me: Would you wear the jumper again?
>
> Anna: No, no . . . I wouldn't . . . wouldn't want to. You can't go back (Interview 2002).

Anna [4] hugs herself as herself and/or as her husband in the jumper. As a transitional object, the jumper mediates the void of death and an irreversible absence. In Anna's last comment, the jumper took on a slightly different meaning to the way she had spoken about it earlier. Her voice expressed a sense of anxiety about the very thought or image of wearing that jumper again. Through the transitions of grief the object shifted in both its function and status. It is still emotionally effecting but in a different way. The jumper could be described as a melancholy object because it recalls the memory of early grief and the grief of time passing. Anna says, 'You can't go back', and the jumper's shifting status signifies this recognition and the recognition that Anna herself has moved on.

The melancholy object is a double signifier. It is the object (or objects) materialising and signifying the mourning of mourning. In other words, the melancholy object signifies the memory of mourning and as such it is the memorialized object of mourning. It could be experienced in a number of different ways depending on the specific object, its relationship to the deceased and to the bereaved, as well as the grief experience and process. For Anna, the jumper seemed to remind her that the mourning object, in this case a jumper, itself becomes an object of mourning and symbol of loss. Initially, it mediated the loss of her husband but the object too, it would seem, transitions in grieving.

The jumper is a reminder of the loss of grief as an intense pervasive state of being. The jumper itself has memorialized mourning and is not the same object it started off as being, that is, an object enabling indirect corporeal contact with a deceased husband. However, the melancholy object as a memorialized object could also signify the incompletion of mourning—a reminder that grief never entirely goes away. The melancholy object is then the affective remainder or residual trace of sadness and longing in non-forgetting.

Another interviewee, Patricia [5], experienced a transformative and healing moment through her deceased father's favourite shirt. Unbeknown to Patricia, this shirt was given to her husband by her mother. One day as she pegged clothes on the clothesline, she saw an apparition of her father—her husband was walking towards her in the shirt and for moment she believed it was her father.

> I thought it was my Dad . . . To this day, I can still remember the smell, the texture, the colour of that shirt . . . The shirt, that day, I'm sure was a turning point in my grieving process (Interview 2002).

In another interview, Peter [6] spoke of a transitional object that brought him back to repressed grief. He spoke about how, as a young man in his early twenties, he faced his father's death at a hospital. It was a situation where his family and relatives put psychological pressure on him to hide his grief in the presence of his father and in front of them. The transitional object that brought back repressed grief was a badge once worn on the lapel of his late father's coat.

> There's a very painful, painful memory in relation to a badge. My father identified very strongly with it . . . It was sixteen years later [after he had died] that my sister asked whether Dad had spoken to me, had given me anything before he died. I said no. My relationship with my Dad was emotional because it was relationally very fraught . . . He'd actually given her the badge. It's not that I wanted the badge but that it was a *very significant* thing for him to give. I didn't mind her having it but the absence of any other symbol of our relationship really hurt, very deeply and enabled me to reconnect with all the grief I'd been experiencing when he was dying in hospital (Interview 2002).

The interviewee Carla [7], also valued her husband's clothing for keepsakes. She kept things that represented aspects of his identity. For example, two wrestling costumes—he was a champion amateur wrestler in both Britain (his country of origin) and Australia. She also kept his maroon shorts, and an orange T-shirt 'to let me know the humorous side of him and also a pair of underpants that had spiders or was it flies?—I can't remember'. Carla spoke briefly about the residue of his smell: 'I did keep a pair of his sneakers which I used to smell occasionally—that's very powerful because you can envisage him standing right beside you when you've got this smell' (2002).

The sneakers enabled Carla to evoke imaginatively her deceased husband's presence. Because clothing is imprinted with the shape, size, and odour of the lived body it has a power of immediacy that perhaps photographs lack. Of course, clothing and photographs are materially different objects. Through the evocation of smell as well as image, clothing might be more effective in momentarily bridging (though never entirely) the space/time separation distancing the living from the dead. In contrast, the photograph *shows* the body. It is the body *seen*; the body reached out for and touched, in an objectified, represented form. The photograph records, in an instant, a body image and a body memory—that is, how we remember the body of the deceased. In contrast, the sight, touch and smell of a loved one's old hat, favourite shoes or coat can trigger a body image and thus a memory of the body [8].

The photographic image always points backwards in time. As a material object, the flat surface of a photograph lacks the thickness, texture and form of a hat, shoe or jumper, which has been shaped by the wearer's body. Unlike the instantaneousness of a photographic imprint, the wearing of clothing stretches over time. However, both photographs and clothing mark time just as they are marked by time. And like clothing, photographs fade and look old. And yet an item of clothing marked by its use—the wear and tear of life—embodies time differently to a photograph.

Objects, however, are used to remember and grieve in ways that shift, rather than fix, these interpretations of material differences. This is because an object is not just a pre-given form; it is actively *informed* by its use. For example, Lisa [9] spoke of how she sometimes touches the photographic image of her deceased father. She has held photographs of him to her heart. When a person presses a photograph to their chest they are not looking at the photograph. Lisa is holding a photograph like it is a body, her father's body. Even a photograph, then, can be touched and held in ways that give the flat surface an imagined thickness and form—like a body or a body object such as clothing. Through its use, and the particularity of its significance to an individual's memory and grieving, objects can be *transformed* in ways that are antithetical to their assumed objective, material form. It is individual biographies and personalities—the nuances of subjective life—that perhaps ultimately determine the use, meaning, and affect of a type of object in grief.

Materiality and mourning

In a more general sense, to exist in relation to death is to be a transitional subject and object to both self and others. Through experiencing aging, and witnessing death, human beings come to know the metamorphosis of their own and other's material existence. No longer present in their physical being, the deceased socially and corporeally transform to the status of non-being, and through burial, non-visibility and non-contact. Of course what is partly buried is the perception/recognition of the ultimate destruction of the body. The ongoing absence of the deceased in their bodily being is one of the profound existential shocks of bereavement and the desire for their bodily return is a powerful fantasy in the early months of a death. Francoise Dastur (1996: 46) in *Death: An Essay on Finitude*, articulates the paradoxical effect of absence in relation to presence. He suggests that through mourning we are more with the other than was perhaps possible in life: '. . . the very fact that we have lost him or her the dead person is more totally present to us than he or she ever was in life'.

The transitional nature of human corporeal existence is both compensated for and replaced by representation and objects. Of course beliefs in an enduring spirit or soul independent of matter (including the matter of memory) is another way in which grief is managed and consoled [10]. In grief, inner psychic reality is torn from outer reality—there is an irreparable incommensurability, as the internal memory-image of the deceased has no ongoing presence, reinforcement and testing in external reality. Thus while the dead are continuously part of the thoughts and memories of the grieving, their images in memory—their faces and bodies in all their historical transitions—are subject to fading and oblivion without external referents such as photographs, portraiture, and detailed images in writing. Furthermore, the bodily image just before the time of death is often super-imposed upon any prior images and this is especially so in the case those who died over a period of time or traumatically from suicide or homicide. The wasting away of the dying is often an indelible and dominant memory image for the grieving.

Living memory of the dead is itself mortal as those who remember the dead in turn die. Photographs remind us of the discontinuity of memory within individuals, between individuals, and across generations.

Philosophically, photography, like writing, has been disdained as a technology that aids forgetting rather than remembering: 'Not only is the Photograph never, in essence, a memory . . . but it actually blocks memory, quickly becomes a counter-memory' (Barthes, 1981: 91). The Photograph, it would seem has an inauthentic status for Barthes, Walter Benjamin, Henri Bergson and others (see Catherine Keenan, 1998; and Paula Carabell, 2002) because it is superimposed by an exterior technology and not an inner impression formed by direct experience with the outside world. Paula Carabell argues that for Henri Bergson, photography 'forces the individual to fix on a moment he [*sic*], himself, did not generate, thus reducing the flow and development of his inner life' (2002: 181). The Photograph as an inauthentic, even corrupting counter-memory, is aptly captured by Derrida's notion of the supplement as that which is 'added on' and also that which 'substitutes for and supplants' the original (Kamuf in Derrida, 1991: 33). But memory has long been contested as anything but original—the future rewrites the past, as Freud argued, just as the Photograph reveals the elisions and gaps of memory without necessarily filling these in.

Through death, the most mundane objects can rise in symbolic, emotional and mnemonic value sometimes outweighing all other measures of value—particularly the economic. Even before bereavement, objects closely associated with dying family and friends are either becoming memorialized or are already memorialized. This is partly known as anticipatory grief (Glick *et al.*, 1974; Parkes, 1975—but see Fulton, 1971) but it relates to a wider concept of mourning as an ongoing process that begins with the earliest psychic experiences of separation and individuation from significant others—particularly mothers. In 'Mourning and Melancholia' [1917] (1960), Freud describes how the infant in its primary stage of narcissism incorporates the mannerisms and gestures of primary love objects and/or figures of identification as formative of its own ego (1917: 249). Unlike mourning, melancholia is an unconscious disavowal of loss which, at first, enables the preservation of the other within the self. However, for Freud melancholia is the pathological underside of mourning because it is an unconscious refusal to acknowledge a loss which blocks mourning. Nevertheless, it is through an original melancholic identification and incorporation of lost objects that the ego comes into being. In 'The Ego and the Id', Freud suggests that as the psychic (unconscious) mechanism of incorporation of abandoned object-cathexis, melancholia becomes the prior condition for mourning ([1923]1960). If mourning is the process of working through the grief of loss then melancholia is the condition of its possibility as the irreducible trace economy of unresolved and unresolvable grief. In other words, mourning is never completed because there is never a return to zero—a point at which grief is emptied from the ego. This is because a zero sum would be equivalent to loss of the ego itself.

Articulating/citing Derrida's idea that mourning begins after or even before the name separates from it bearer, Saghafi writes: 'Conventionally, we believe

that mourning begins with the death of the other, but from the first moment that the name separates from its bearer, and perhaps even before, mourning—"the interiority (of the other in me, in you, in us)" (Derrida cited in Saghafi: 2001: 46)—has commenced (2000: 99). Arguably, mourning commences before the separation of the name—a distinctly masculine-paternal genealogy of mourning that Derrida privileges even while hinting at, but ultimately omitting, the feminine and the maternal body.

As the primordial site of corporeal and psychic separation and individuation the maternal body/figure for the child is that *other* genealogy of mourning and nostalgia for home that underwrites the paternal name. But at the same time, the maternal body as origin/ground/home excludes the paternal body as a primary site of introjection and self-formation and this could be a source of mourning in and of itself. Feminist critiques of religion and myths of origin (including the origin of death), have written of the envy of patriarchal religions evidenced in the appropriation and naming of the cosmological place of origin through a single male Creator-God (Daly, 1973; Froula, 1983; Gibson, 2001; Irigaray, 1985, 1991; Stanford Friedman, 1993). While envy, domination and misogyny are part of these appropriations; mourning may also be a factor. The always already displaced paternal body as a corporeal and symbolic home may constitute, psychically and socially, an economy of loss that is compensated in patriarchal religion and culture.

As discussed earlier, objects are associated with people as part of the construction of identity. But 'association' is problematic if it implies that people can be remembered, and thereby stand in independent detachment from the materiality of their existence and the materiality of existence in general. While material things are associated with the deceased they are also part of the substance *of* their very being. In other words, the dead are remembered in their clothes and place of dwelling, and cannot be remembered in immaterial abstraction as pure spirits. This might seem an obvious point, but it becomes important when considering religious beliefs in the separation of spirit from body at the time of death. The belief in the eternal life of the spirit does not actively honour or even spiritualise the dead in their ongoing earthly traces through things, places and people. The bereaved, religious or not, are often deeply attached to the material legacies of the deceased and the memory of the deceased is indelibly tied to places, objects, images and bodies.

A recorded message and photograph

During the time my own father was dying, I experienced the ghostly reverberation of his *things*. Like most of the people I interviewed, there are transitional and enduring objects of my grief and remembrance: a jacket, a chair, a voice recorded message, and a photograph. In the interviews I spoke about my own grief history in order to constitute the interview as an inter-subjective space of discourse. It is the photograph and recorded message that I will write about in this last section of the paper.

My father died of bone cancer. I was with him that night, and was close to 9 months pregnant. My father's ever-diminishing, skeletal body was in stark contrast to my own expanding form. The child growing within was preparing to cross the threshold of my body into the world while my father was preparing to cross another threshold. I had hoped that my pregnancy would give him a reason to live and fight the cancer. My desire was not enough. He knew *of* Joshua but he would not *know* Joshua. I mourned this loss before and after his death, before and after Joshua's birth.

During the middle period of his dying, I asked my father to record a message to Joshua on a tape recorder. This he did after some hours of postponement. I had one of those little micro cassette recorders—the sort that professional men and women use all the time when they record notes to themselves or verbally dictate letters. My father was a solicitor and he was used to these little machines. I've seen him hold a micro cassette up to his mouth hundreds of times when I was child and adult, and when he raised his arm to begin recording, I saw a memory of him. My partner Matthew and I stood near him as he began recording. He was clearly emotional, as indeed were we:

> Hello Joshua. This is your grandpa. At the present time he is very sick lying in a hospital bed in Brisbane. What I'm looking at is a photo of you. It's a lovely photo in your mother's womb.
>
> Joshua, I may not be around when you are born but nevertheless I want you to know that I have seen you. And I want you, at all times, to be loyal to your mother and over the due period of time your mother will tell you many stories, I hope, of grandfather and what he did over the years.
>
> Goodbye Joshua.

How to speak to the unborn in the face of one's own death? I realised what a huge thing I had asked of my father, and what a strange and complicated existential experience it must have been. In front of Matthew and me, my father was not only acknowledging his own death but speaking as a dead man—*in absentia* [11]. My father's voice and message records his way of being and speaking in the world, transcending any specific memory of him. Unlike a photograph the tape recording breaches a silence that is capable of shocking the body back into a sensory experience of living memory: 'in listening to the recorded voice we hear what was (and inserted into our real time, still is) the thing manifest, absolute, poignant. We are touched by it: it enters into us by way of physical sense' (Mel Gooding cited in Carabell, 2002: 182).

Saying to Joshua a first and final hello and goodbye, he asks something of each of us—loyalty and remembrance.

After the recording, Matthew took a photo of Dad, Joshua and me (Joshua is visible and invisible in and through my body). I had earlier showed my father the ultrasound image of Joshua and I held this photo, as the photo was being taken. It is a sad image traced by two ghosts—the ghostly trace that is the

quality of an ultrasound image, and the ghost of my father. I too am a ghost in that photo.

Through the technology of photography, human beings have made themselves into spectres (Barthes, 1981: 14; Derrida, 2001: 60–66). Spectrality is part of the desire of looking at photographs—we invite being looked at 'by ghosts' (Saghafi, 2000). The absent, yet representationally, present body also haunts the photographic image. The three-dimensional body as a flat surface image on photographic paper, haunts as the substantial, the longed for, and the impossible.

In the direct look at the camera lens the photographed subject says: 'Here I am', asserting their existence *into* the recording of the image. Registered in the image is my father's imminent death. In this photograph, my father is disengaged from the lens and production of the image. Technically, in terms of the image, he is *in* the photograph but he is not *there*. This raises for me an ethical dilemma about publishing a photograph where my father is not actively making himself *into* an image. In photographs of two or more people there is generally a collective process at work—a participatory consciousness—that brings a certain kind of image into being. This participatory consciousness is a form of consent—it says 'yes' to the recording of the image. This is another marked absence in the photograph—neither my father nor my son have, or can, consciously put their selves in the

Figure 1. This photograph was taken in January 2001 in a Hospice in Brisbane, Queensland, Australia.
'Photographs turn the past into an object of tender regard, scrambling moral distinctions and disarming historical judgments by the generalised pathos of looking at time past'.
Susan Sontag, *On Photography*.

image. The fact that my son is not consciously engaged with the outside world seems less ethically fraught because it is one thing to have been in the outside world and yet another thing yet-to-be-there. I am the only person or consciousness that is actively performing for the camera. I smile, and thereby instantiate the signifier of happiness—part of modern convention and construction of the family 'snapshot'. But the performance is also perceivably one of 'bearing up' in front of my father and the lens, and this marks the image with oppositional signs.

Scenes of dying, as I have argued in relation to film, 'can be very moving and ethical in their respect for the life of the individual who faces the proximity of his/her own death and where others compassionately bear witness to this facing' (Gibson, 2001: 310). While the ethical dilemma of publishing this photograph remains unresolved (perhaps permanently), it is notable that photography of the dead, including adults and children, has quite a long history as mourning ritual especially in America (Van DerZee, 1978; Burns, 1990; Ruby 1995). This ritual is no longer culturally sanctioned as generalized practice and probably continues in a piecemeal and private way (Hallam & Hockey, 2001: 146). More recently it has become an acknowledged and encouraged grief therapy for the parents of stillborn, and very early deceased, babies (Meredith, 2000). But whether or not photographs are taken of the living, the dying or the dead, photography itself is a technology of mourning. It is part of the very structure of photography:

> photography, or the photographic event, assumes the mortality . . . the possibility of the loss or death of the photographed. In order for photography to be at all possible, its most rudimentary requirement dictates that photographs be able to circulate freely, separated from the presence of the photographed. Each photograph, then, functions as the announcement of the absence or death of what is photographed . . . The photographic structure is what makes the bereaved memories of a mourning-yet-to-come possible (Saghafi, 2000: 102).

Joshua and Dad have only met each other through a photograph [12]. My father is with Joshua for the first and last time, in the only way that is possible. They were in the same photograph at completely different stages in life, and yet existentially they were close to each other. One is on the cusp of birth, the other, the cusp of death. In my life, here and now, this tape recording and photograph are the two most precious objects of the dead. While Joshua grows and matures, I am the custodian of a gift from a grandfather to a grandson—a gift that Joshua is yet to receive and understand.

Conclusion

In the most simple, fleeting and poignant moments, people grieve with and through objects. While objects assist in grieving, exemplified by the transitional object, they may be experienced as impoverished, never substituting for the person themselves. Death vacates as well as raises the meaning and value of objects. When family members sort through the material possessions of a deceased loved one,

objects might appear abandoned, even unhomely. Keeping objects is a way of reclaiming and rehousing (making homely) the remains of a life now gone.

The relationship between the material and emotional is a quiet, often unspoken aspect of personal grieving. In the interviews it was apparent that people really *knew* this research subject but had not brought their experiences to story. In the interviews many people found themselves speaking about objects and recognising, perhaps for the first time, that they were worth speaking about.

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Notes

[1] I am referring to objects that have lost, forgotten or unknown associations with people and are not experienced in affective or memory inducing ways.

[2] I would like to acknowledge the recent and very significant research work/book *Death, Memory and Material Culture* by Elizabeth Hallam and Jenny Hocky.

[3] Luce is an academic, mother of three adult children and aged in her mid-fifties. In the interview she spoke of her father and mother's death.

[4] Anna is in her late forties and is a secondary school teacher. She described the relationship she had with her husband as 'passionate and close'. She also spoke of the emotional effect of losing two important men in her life—father and husband. Her mother is still alive.

[5] Patricia was born in 1950 and is a community services officer. She is married with four children. In the interview she named her grandmother, father and cousin as the significant bereavements of her life to date. Of all these deaths, she spoke mostly of her father.

[6] Peter is a counsellor and married with four children. He was born in 1945. His mother is still alive. In the interview he spoke about how his mother has already given him objects that are symbolically and memorially important to him.

[7] Carla describes herself as an artisan and was born in 1949. Her first husband died in 1989. She has two children from this marriage.

[8] Of course a photograph showing a favourite item of clothing being worn complicates, perhaps even undoes, this interpretation.

[9] Lisa was born in 1964, married with two young children, and works as a full-time mother. She described her father's death as devastating. He died in 1998.

[10] As an aside, one of the concerns of the interview research was to investigate the importance of material culture despite or perhaps because of religious beliefs in everlasting life and disembodied spiritual being. This is, however, too large an issue to be considered in this paper. I found from the interviews that both religious and non-religious men and women were emotionally dependent on the material objects of deceased loved ones. Indeed, one could argue that the material and the spiritual are psychically intertwined particularly in times of grief. I suspect that most interviewees of religious belief would not give up the material traces/memories of their deceased family in order to actively live by the philosophy of spirit existing/surviving independently of matter.

[11] Thanks to Felicity Plunkett for suggesting this Latinism.

[12] Of course this meeting is only a representation—it is in the staging of the photographic image. It is also a fiction of reading or interpretation of the image that is underpinned by grief and longing.

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Biographical Note

Dr Margaret Gibson currently works in the School of Social Science at the University of New England, Australia. Her book, on objects of the dead, is due for publication by Melbourne University Press late in 2005.

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