

Notes on Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*

Part Two

The narrative resumes with Barthes at home, going through his family photographs shortly after his mother's death, "sorting" out the images of her, distanced from many of them by History. [64]

"There I was, alone in the apartment where she had died, looking at these pictures of my mother, one by one, under the lamp, gradually moving back in time with her, looking for the truth of the face I had loved. And I found it." [67]

What Barthes finds is "the Winter Garden photograph"—his mother, five years old, with her older brother, seven, "standing together at the end of a little wooden bridge in a glassed-in conservatory.... He was leaning against the bridge railing, along which he had extended one arm; she, shorter than he, was standing a little back, facing the camera...". [67] In this private moment of memory and mourning, Barthes gazes at the photograph and "rediscovers" his mother.

As it turns out, the "Winter Garden Photograph" (not illustrated in the text, which puts its existence in question) was to provide the author with the thread leading him out of the labyrinth of photographs and "toward Photography". His change of direction paid off. He now understands that he "must interrogate the evidence of Photography, not from the viewpoint of pleasure, but in relation to what we romantically call love and death". [73]

Barthes's first task was to distinguish the Photographic Referent from the referents found in all other systems of representation. Paintings can produce fictional representations; they can depict that which is not present. Language combines many signs, most of which have an indirect relation to their referents. But the Photographic Referent has **indexicality** as a necessary feature—the trace which is linked to the fact that "*the thing has been there*". Here he refers to the intentional object, the "**that-has-been**" (*noeme*) of Photography. [76f] This is, by extension, what makes the Winter Garden photograph the object that it is for Barthes. Bringing the Photographic Referent "into the light" is what gives the term "camera lucida" its relevance for Barthes. [80]

"The Photograph does not necessarily say *what is no longer*, but only and for certain *what has been*. This distinction is decisive.... [T]he Photograph's essence is to ratify what it represents." [85]

Barthes goes so far as to say that, while "language is, by nature, fictional", "[e]very photograph [by contrast] is a certificate of presence." [87] "From a phenomenological viewpoint, in the Photograph, the power of authentication exceeds the power of representation." [89]

Here, once again, it's important to acknowledge and **emphasize** the **phenomenological** character of Barthes' investigation—based on the way things **appear** to us in the everyday sense of the term. We may be wrong about the **existence** of the photographic referent, but we can't be wrong about the way it **appears** to us—as existing. That, it seems, is central to Barthes' approach to Photography in *Camera Lucida*. And this phenomenological certainty about what shows up in the photograph—the "*that-has-been*"—gives rise to another *punctum*—a *punctum* not of **form** (detail), but of **intensity** (time)—temporality, mortality, the "*this-will-be*".

Barthes' characterization of the *punctum* of Time echoes Sontag's comments in *On Photography*.

"All photographs are *momento 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." [OP, 15.]

“Photographs state the innocence, the vulnerability of lives heading toward their own destruction, and this link between photography and death haunts all photographs of people.” [OP, 70.¹]

Barthes nuances his claim about the temporality of the photograph as the “that-has-been” to include the **necessity** and **opacity** that comes with it.

“In the image, as Sartre says, the object yields itself wholly, and our vision of it is *certain*—contrary to the text or to other perceptions which give me the object in a vague, arguable manner, and therefore incite me to suspicions as to what I think I am seeing. This certitude is sovereign because I have the leisure to observe the photograph with intensity; but also, however long I extend this observation, it teaches me nothing. It is precisely in this *arrest* of interpretation that the Photograph’s certainty resides: I exhaust myself realizing that *this-has-been*; for anyone who holds a photograph in his hand, here is a fundamental belief, an ‘*ur-doxa*’ nothing can undo, unless you prove to me that this image *is not* a photograph. But also, unfortunately, it is in proportion to its certainty that I can say nothing about this photograph.” [106f]

Thus, the mute image of the photograph is the other side of its “certainty”.

Approaching his conclusion, Barthes characterizes the essence of photography as banal—“*that-has-been*”. But this banality and apparently self-evident conclusion give rise to a “madness”.

Again, following a phenomenological line of thought, the image in the photograph is an “*object-as-nothing*”—an **absence**. But, at the same time it is an object “*that-has-been*”—an immediate certainty, a **presence**. “The Photograph then becomes a bizarre *medium*, a new form of hallucination: false on the level of perception, true on the level of time: a temporal hallucination, so to speak, a modest, *shared* hallucination (on the one hand “it is not there”, on the other “but it has indeed been”): a mad image, chafed by reality.” [115]

Barthes’ phenomenological meditation ends at a fork in the road for one who engages with photography.

“Mad or tame? Photography can be one or the other: tame if its realism remains relative, tempered by aesthetic or empirical habits (to leaf through a magazine at the hairdresser’s, the dentist’s); mad if this realism is absolute and, so to speak, original, obliging the loving and terrified consciousness to return to the very letter of Time: a strictly repulsive movement which reverses the course of the thing, and which I shall call, in conclusion, the photographic *ecstasy*.”

“Such are the two ways of the Photograph. The choice is mine: to subject its spectacle to the civilized code of perfect illusions, or to confront in it the wakening of intractable reality.” [119]

Questions

Starting with the concept that seems to get all the attention, how are we to assess the claims made for the **existence** and **effect** of the *punctum*? Here our understanding of the phenomenological method is crucial. What Barthes appeals to is the spectator’s particular, individual experience. The *punctum*, as irreducibly personal and private, has no public measure outside of the spectator’s experience. According to Barthes, it is very much a **subjective**, not an **intersubjective**, phenomenon. It is also **unpredictable**, **unintentional**, and **inexplicable**. “Nothing more to be said.” Either you recognize it when it occurs, or you do not. Either it pokes, provokes, and strikes you as described, or there is nothing at all in your experience that you can identify as having those general characteristics.

¹ Both quotes cited by Michael Fried, *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before*, 369, n. 22.

But is there, perhaps, something more in play—something hidden or elusive? Are the **criteria** necessarily subjective and the **experience** fundamental, unanalyzable, and irreducible?

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