THE QUESTION OF PHOTOGRAPHIC MEANING IN ROLAND BARTHES' *CAMERA LUCIDA*

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This essay explores Ronald Barthes' thoughts on photography by constructing a narrative of development in his thought that reaches its peak in his last book, *Camera Lucida*. I claim that Barthes' engagement with photography revolves around the desire to develop a new kind of sight, a sensitive one, which penetrates the visible world deeper than our ordinary ways of looking. In *Camera Lucida* Barthes develops an original view regarding photography's relation to time, albeit a view that has been misinterpreted or simply ignored in philosophical discussions of photography. I interpret Barthes theory of photographic meaning as dealing with the temporal relation that unfolds between the photograph, the photographed object and the spectator and claim that it offers an insight not only into the meaning of photographs but also into the uniqueness of our existence, uniqueness that we tend to ignore or forget.

My reading of Barthes opposes the prevalent interpretations of *Camera Lucida*. Barthes' project is seen as falling into one of two poles—understood either as a personal text about mourning, or as a species of some theoretical genus, i.e., as a psychoanalytic text or a general theory of photography.[1] While it is true that *Camera Lucida* parts from Barthes' earlier structural texts and that in it he does not concentrate on the ways meaning is conveyed in the photograph, he does not abandon meaning as expressible and does not withdraw into a private, "speechless" realm. On the contrary, *Camera Lucida*, through its repeating and finally successful attempts to articulate the "eidos" of photography, serves as testimony to the desire to share meaning and to articulate it in language that is public and shared.

Photographs pose a unique problem for Barthes: although there is nothing *in* them but the objects we see, an analysis of photographs on the level of their contents (through iconography and iconology) does not always fully exhaust the meaning we find them. Thus Barthes turns to the experience of looking at arresting photographs to show that the experience cannot be reduced to the photograph's features (it is not located on the level of details) nor can it be the outcome of the spectator's psychological constitution (the network of desires and expectations). In order to articulate the meaning we find in photographs Barthes turns instead to the concrete (an ordinary photograph, one that we find in our photo album) and develops from within it a picture of how meaning unfolds. Moreover, he shows us how our daily engagements as well as our theories conceal this meaning and suggests that the photograph, through its relation to time, can uncover this unique field of meaning. Now the philosophical significance of Barthes' work on photography often remains unexplored since he is considered mainly as a critic. However, I find in his writing, which is not always rigorous in the traditional philosophical sense, a unique conception of meaning: one that emphasizes the concrete as the locus point of meaning and wishes to use it to explore and sustain meaning.

The Language of Photography

Barthes always treated photographs as reproductions of the real. In "The Photographic message" (1961) he claims: "What does the photograph transmit? By definition, the scene itself, the literal reality."[2] Later in "Rhetoric of the Image" (1964) he says:

> In the photograph . . . the relationship of signified to signifiers is not one of 'transformation' but of 'recording' . . . the scene is *there*, captured mechanically, not humanly.[3]

And finally, he argues in a similar fashion in *Cameral Lucida* (1980):

> By nature, the photograph . . . has something tautological about it: a pipe here is always and intractably a pipe.[4]

Photographs, unlike paintings, do not allow us to distinguish the picture from the pictured, they are mechanical reproductions of reality

and there is no gap between them and the real things they depict.[5] We know that the thing photographed was placed in front of the camera, since unlike the painter the camera cannot create an image on its own. Furthermore, while the painter does not necessarily reproduce everything he sees in his painting, the photographer copies the real without discrimination: "the photograph, although it can choose its subject, its point of view and its angle, cannot intervene *within* the object" (RI 43). Finally, drawing demands apprenticeship (knowledge of perspective, talent) while photography doesn't (just press the button and there you have it!). Drawings, paintings and cinema, *re*present reality, their images are treated (through perspective, choice of colors, or editing the order of images in cinema) while photography simply *presents* reality leaving it untouched (although it can present reality in an unrealistic way, through blurring the photograph for example, or using acute angles).[6]

In the essays written in the sixties Barthes examines mass culture photography that by its nature communicates message to spectators. There, photographs are studied through their basic dissimilarity to texts, which also convey meaning but do so through words. In texts the message is "coded": the signifier stands for something other than itself and the relation between the signifier and the signified is an arbitrary one. Contrary to that, the photograph and the object it depicts are of the same nature, the person in the photograph *is* the person photographed.[7] The photograph's message is therefore *a message without a code*: "the sign of this message is not drawn from institutional stock, is not coded . . . in order to read this . . . level of the image, all that is needed is the knowledge bound up with our perceptions" (RI 36).

The absence of a code is an interesting phenomenon for Barthes. He asks, "How does meaning get into the image? Where does it end? And if it ends, what is there beyond?" (RI 32). In texts the signifiers (words) are the vehicle for meaning and the relation between the signifiers and the signified is an open one.[8] The meaning that we find in texts does not appear in vacuum and is not natural; it is always meditated through culture, which is the field of its formation. But the photograph always has a single indisputable reference—the object which appears in it. The photograph's reference is fixed and in this respect our interpretation is also fixed, bounded by the real which it cannot surpass ("this is how things were"). This fact gives rise to "general opinion [that] . . . has a vague perspective of the image as an area of resistance to meaning—this in the name of a certain mythical idea of Life" (RI 32). The photograph is seen as mythical since it shows us "pure" reality, prior to the order of language, prior to any construction, a mute testimony to things. According to this view the photograph shows primary and "untamed" reality and in this respect we cannot even describe what we see in it since "to describe is thus not simply to be imprecise or incomplete, it is to change structures, to signify something different to what is shown" (PM 18–19).

However, in press photography and advertisements the lack of codes is itself turned into a code. In those photographs "the connoted (or coded) message develops on the basis a message *without a code*" (PM 19). In the "Rhetoric of the Image" Barthes examines a French commercial for pasta. The photographed tomato signifies a tomato because it is photograph *of* one. The lack of mediating code makes up the message that the commercial conveys, in this case that the products of Panzini are fresh, and therefore we should buy them. This message disguises the intention behind it, disguised the fact that it is even a message. The photograph is also connoted even though it does not have, properly speaking, signs that stand for something other than themselves.[9]

Barthes distinguishes two levels of meaning in the photograph: one is the informational, or denoted, level in which we identify what we see in the photograph (a tomato) and the second is the symbolic level in which the message is connoted (e.g., as a photograph of freshly picked produce, fresh food as sign of health of quality). The unique thing about the photograph is that the connoted message gains "objectivity" due to the photograph's lack of code.

The Obvious Meaning and the Studium

In "The Third Meaning," a study of Eisenstein's stills from *Ivan the Terrible* Barthes refers to the informational and the symbolic levels as carrying "obvious meaning" which "seeks me out, me the recipient of the message, the subject of the reading, a

meaning that starts with SME and which goes on *ahead of me*; evident certainly . . . but closed in its evidence, held in a complete system of destination."[10] The obvious meaning is intentional; it is what the photographer chose to photograph (or the newspaper chose to publish) and it is taken from the general, common lexicon of symbols. It has a complete system of destination since the meaning is already known given the backdrop of conventions and beliefs that the viewer has. The obvious meaning is embedded in culture and studied through iconography and iconology.[11] It carries information that the spectator interprets and the variation in readings "depends on the different kinds of knowledge—practical, national, cultural, aesthetic—invested in the image and these can be classified, brought into typology" (RI 46).

The obvious meaning appears again in *Camera Lucida* as the "studium": the element in the photograph which we perceive as familiar due to our knowledge and culture. The Studium

> always refers to a classical body of information. . . . Thousands of photographs consist of this field, and in these photographs I can . . . take a kind of general interest, one that is even stirred sometimes, but in regard to them my emotion requires the rational intermediary of an ethical and political culture. What I feel about these photographs derives . . . almost from a certain training . . . it is *studium*, which doesn't mean, at least not immediately, "study," but application to a thing, taste for someone, a kind of general, enthusiastic commitment. (CL 25–26)

The studium is part of the general theoretical discourse; it is the way I read, or the way I am affected by the photograph according to my former knowledge which always plays a part in how things appear to me. I describe what I see in the photograph in light of my education, my political opinions, and my values.[12] Those were all "given" to me by culture and are not really "my own."[13] The same structures of meaning are used by the photographer that creates the image and by the viewer that interprets it. The studium is what we find in the photograph in as much as we see it as a particular case of something. For example, I call this a photograph of a freedom fighter because of those elements in it that designate fighting against oppression: the oppressor's flag is burnt, the man is marking victory with his fingers, etc.

The Obtuse Meaning

Already in "TM" Barthes finds in some photographs excessive meaning that cannot be captured, or explained away, by structural analysis. He calls this meaning the obtuse and says that it is "greater than the pure, upright . . . legal perpendicular of the narrative, it seems to open the field of meaning totally, that is infinitely . . . the obtuse meaning seems to extend outside culture, knowledge, information" (TM 55).

The third or obtuse meaning is contrasted with the informational and the symbolic meanings. While the last two levels are given to us (through culture) and are so to speak "tamed" and known (depend on an already existent body of knowledge), the obtuse meaning is not located in general knowledge and is therefore unexpected and difficult to handle.

Can the third meaning, or the obtuse, be shared? Can I point it out to someone? When I say, "the woman in the photograph is grieving" there are conditions, so to speak, that make the application of the term "grieving" to the woman justifiable. A stock of expressions manifests grieving and enables us to decipher this expression as grieving.[14] Culture, knowledge, and information are the substrates that make things intelligible for us, however they also limit the field of meaning since only through them things make sense for us. Extending outside culture, the third meaning is unexpected and we lack rules that can help us apply it to something. Being unexpected also makes it utterly particular. In saying "she is sad" for example, we determine the appearance of the individual face, and to this extent limit the individual, or make the individual share a feature with others: the face is sad rather than contemplative or worried, it sadness borrows something from pieta scenes, etc. In this sense it loses its individuality and becomes part of the general. Not so with the third meaning that "has something derisory about it: opening out into the infinity of language, it can come through as limited in the eyes of analytic reason; it belongs to the family of pun, buffoonery, useless expenditure" (TM 55).

Like the pun or the buffoonery, the obtuse builds on existing forms but at the same time manipulates them. Pointing to the obtuse is as worthless as explaining where the gist of the joke hides. Like the pun that seems meaningless to someone who understands the meaning of the words but doesn't understand the play of words, the third meaning can also appear meaningless, or as Barthes says "limited." Since it is not based on the stock of forms it is not necessary that it will appear, and hence it is not necessary that others will see it. I cannot locate the source of the third meaning in the position of the mouth or the angle of the eyebrows (in the way I locate the face's sadness in these features, for example). To analytic reason that thinks that meaning always has propositional content the obtuse seems limited and even useless (devoid of real meaning).[15] Analytic reason may claim that the play of words depends on the meaning of the words with which it plays and in this respect the primary, general meaning is prior to the humorous one, without the first the second would not be funny. Can we claim analogically that the third meaning is nothing without the informational and symbolic meanings?

Barthes' answer traverses the relation between obvious and obtuse meaning: The third meaning *is* language's infinity, and culture, knowledge, and information limit *it* (and not the other way around. The third meaning is not a limitation in the general meaning). The infinite field of meaning allows us to draw distinctions, make generalizations, but in itself is prior to all distinctions. At the same time, by resisting our attempts to be captured by concepts the third meaning exposes the limits of our ordinary understanding.

Since culture cannot assist us in grasping the obtuse, and we do not have rules for the application of this excessive quality, we are unable to anticipate its appearance, to say what will qualify as obtuse. For this reason it "seems to open the field of meaning totally, that is infinitely" (TM 55). The obtuse is not closed and determined like the meaning of "sad" or "unhappy" and we have no readymade ways of receiving and interpreting it. Therefore, in order to see it we need to be alert, it calls for special attention. Furthermore, we have to be creative in approaching it. Later, in *Camera Lucida* Barthes demonstrates such creativity when, trying to capture the third meaning in a photograph, he describes it at once as "a sentiment as certain as remembrance, just as Proust experienced it one day" and as "the last music Schumann wrote before collapsing" and also as "Nadar making of his mother . . . one of the loveliest photographs in the world" (CL 70).

Barthes says that the obtuse "has something to do with disguise" (TM 58). By linking it with disguise Barthes associates the third meaning with subversion, the obtuse subverts the obvious intentions of the photograph.[16] In "The Third Meaning" the obtuse emerges from details in Eisenstein's stills that indicate artificiality or disguise: the angle of the beard, the relation between the headscarf and the head, and mufflers tucked up to the chin are some examples. Barthes insists, however, that the obtuse is not the detail in itself but rather a way the detail operates on the image as a whole. The details in Eisenstein's stills reveal artificiality in two levels: the artifice of an actor disguised as a tsar and the artifice of the person disguised as an actor. The obtuse meaning declares its artifice but without positing itself at some external point that has a claim for authenticity. It shows us the arbitrariness of the scene (of the actor as a tsar and the person as an actor) and therefore its uniqueness. This interpretation explains Barthes' claim that the obtuse "does not even indicate an *elsewhere* of meaning (another content, added to the obvious meaning); it outplays meaning subverts not the content but the whole practice of meaning" (TM 62). For this reason the obtuse can seem insignificant: it gains meaning not from a point outside the particular scene (because there is no external point of view that will allow us to depict the artifice of our roles), but from within, it is literally *in*significant. By showing us the artifice of the scene from within the obtuse does not involve aping, hence "no parody, no trace of burlesque" (RI 58)

In a footnote to this essay Barthes says, "In the classical paradigm of the five senses the third sense is hearing. . . . This is a happy coincidence, since what is here in question is indeed listening"(TM 53n1). Taking this remark to a different place than Barthes did, we can say that the third meaning needs our attunement, that we need to "develop an ear" for it. In order to hear that excessive thing that

the photograph "speaks" we need to be open and to listen to *it*. This vague openness might be too slippery for some readers, and as though answering to a reader asking "Where is the third meaning? Where can it be located?" Barthes suggests that it is "not everywhere . . . but somewhere . . . in a certain manner of reading 'life' and 'reality' itself" (TM 53).

Barthes' First Attempt: The Punctum as Form, the Detail, the Partial Object

Returning to the observation made in "The Photographic Message" and "Rhetoric of the Image," Barthes emphasizes in *Camera Lucida* the photograph's adherence to its referent and says he is interested in "the referent, the desired object, the beloved body" (CL 7). The camera captured a particular moment that belongs, once the shutter has closed, to the past and so the photograph serves as evidence for the "absolute Particular" (CL 4). This particularity resists general classifications and brings out the contingency of each photograph: "Why choose (why photograph) this object, this moment, rather than some other? . . . There is no reason to *mark* this or that occasion" (CL 6) While we can explain the reasons for taking this photograph ("it was beautiful," or "I thought I could use it in court evidence" are such explanations) our explanations make the particular disappear in the general: the particular occurrence is thought through its similarity to some events and dissimilarity to others. In this respect our explanation does not reveal the reason for photographing *this* moment. Barthes uses phenomenology in *Camera Lucida* to explore photography "not as a question (a theme) but as a wound" (CL 21). He pays special attention to moments when "in this glum desert, suddenly a specific photograph reaches me; it animates me, and I animate it" (CL 20). Photographs can open us up to meaning which is not always available in our everyday existence, and it is this meaning that Barthes describes as life-giving or nourishing.

Barthes identifies two elements in the photograph—the studium and the punctum. The studium is the field of the photograph's connotations which are open to our interpretation.[17] The punctum punctuates the studium or breaks it. "This time it is not I who seek it out (as I invest the field of the *studium* with my sovereign consciousness), it is the element which rises from the scene, shoots out like an arrow, and pierces me" (CL 26).[18]

The punctum is identified with details that capture the eye and interrupt the photograph's order. In one photograph the punctum is the boy's necktie; in another it is long fingernails. In Lewis H. Hine's photograph, it is "the little boy's huge Danton collar, the girl's finger bandage" (CL 51). The punctum, says Barthes, is "that accident that pricks me" (CL 27). It is an accident since it was not put there deliberately, was not intended or staged.[19] It pricks since it takes us by surprise; we cannot look for it since there is no definite content or essence that we know in advance to seek. It appears, so to speak, by chance, the photograph could have gone without it.

Undetermined by the content of the scene, the punctum seems to emerge from the viewer's subjectivity. Eilene Hoft-March, for example, reads Barthes "unmitigated fascination with the punctum" as "the individual desiring to unseen and perpetuating that desire by not unveiling or exposing it to view."[20] In this reading the punctum becomes a partial object, a fetish, a mute substitution to a desire left unspoken.

Indeed, at this point Barthes' analysis seems not to transcend the mere enumeration of subjective preferences that dictate his attractions to such and such details. Thus "to give examples of *punctum* is, in a certain fashion, to *give myself up*" (CL 43). It is the pleasure of the spectator that serves as measure for all photographs; the detail makes us prefer some photographs over others and we can explain our attraction to this detail by appealing to our psychological constitution.

However, the punctum cannot be reduced to subjective preferences. Barthes insists that the punctum is not simply the sum of desires projected into the photograph. What he finds in the photograph is *there* to begin with. In other words, when we are moved by a photograph it is not simply because we recognize what we already invested in it. It is not our network of desires, hopes and fears that regulate the appearance of the punctum. All those belong to the realm of interests, of which Barthes gives the following examples:

> One can either desire the object, the landscape, the body it represents; or be astonished by what one sees; or else admire or dispute the photographer's performance, etc; but these interests are slight, heterogeneous; a certain photograph can satisfy one of them and interest me slightly. (CL 19)

We take interest in certain photographs (but also in people and experiences) since they gratify us or answer a need we have (they arouse us sexually, satisfy our curiosity). But that is not enough to explain the appearance of the punctum. A photograph might satisfy a desire and lack a punctum, and a punctum may appear with none of those interests at hand. A photograph with punctum makes us "linger over it . . . scrutinize it, as if . . . to know more about the thing or the person it represents. . . . I want to outline the loved face by thought, to make it into the unique field of an intense observation . . . to know its truth. . . . The photograph justifies this desire even if it does not satisfy it" (CL 99).

In a sense the photograph deepens our desire instead of soothing and eradicating it.[21] Saying that the punctum goes beyond interest does not mean that we are indifferent to it but simply that we do not see it through an ordinary, instrumental network. Seeing your face through the prism of my desires and preferences I don't' really see *it*. In order to have a genuine singular encounter I need to see your face as *your* face and not just as *a* face, i.e., I need to see you not only as performing some function in my life but as who *you* are. Barthes describes the emergences of the punctum as an adventure.[22] Can the adventure consist in its taking us beyond our desires? Not guided by our constitution we are in a way bare and exposed. With the punctum we see something that our desires, most of the time, prevent us from seeing. The adventure consists in seeing things as *they* are.

The meaning of the punctum is "what I add to the photograph and *what is nonetheless already there*" (CL 55). The punctum is *in* the photograph in a different way than the objects photographed are in it, therefore it is something I add with my vision (and yet it is not made up. I find it outside the order of the narrative but it is not merely a subjective reaction, it is *in* the photograph). The meaning that Barthes is trying to locate stretches outside the subject/object dichotomy.[23] However the first part of the book fails to articulate it and Barthes ends it in the following words:

> I had perhaps learned how my desire worked, but I had not discovered the nature (the *eidos*) of Photography. I had to grant that my . . . subjectivity reduced to its hedonistic project could not recognize the universal. I would have to descend deeper into myself to find the evidence of Photography, that thing which is seen by anyone looking at a photograph and which distinguishes it in his eyes from any other image. I would have to make my recantation, my palinode. (CL 60)

Barthes is not merely re-formulating the familiar tension between the particularity of the subject's likings and the generality of science's essences. Since the solution to the lack of success is not to eradicate the personal in order to get to the general, but to descend into it even more. In plunging deeper into the self one is letting go of desires, predispositions and expectations. In a sense plunging into oneself means erasing self-interests which are the self's interest; we care about our desires and hedonistic preferences since we feel (justly) that they constitute who we are. But however crucial those interests are to our constitution they are also sometimes blinding and limiting.[24]

Barthes' Second Attempt: The Punctum as Intensity, Time

The second part of the book opens with Barthes' mother's death. He recalls one November evening when he was "going through some photographs" of her (CL 63). Our natural tendency after a beloved's death is to turn to photographs as reminders of what's now gone. The photograph is seen as "external" visual memory. At the same time the photograph is stronger evidence than memory for the past's reality, since unlike memory the photograph doesn't distort things, doesn't color experience, and is not nostalgic. Therefore, the photograph gives us something that death cannot take away. The photograph, it seems, gains it power from its a-temporal nature; it depicts a frozen, still, reality, a reality immune to change and the passing of time. It therefore

gives us and preserves what we forever lost, the past.[25]

However, being lifeless and still does not distinguish photography from painting and it is not the lifelessness of the photograph that attracts Barthes. Furthermore, although possessing certainty that memory does not possess, the photograph seems unworthy in light of the loss of the person, the photograph cannot be compared to the actual mother or even to our live memories of her. To the mourning Barthes, none of the photographs "seemed . . . really right" (CL 64).

A photograph is wrong when it does not show what's in it in a right manner, when it does not do justice to what it depicts ("oh, that's wrong, I look nothing like that!"). Barthes remarks on his mother's pictures in a similar way: "I never recognized her except in fragments, which is to say that I missed her *being*, and that therefore I missed her altogether. It was not she and yet it was no one else" (CL 65–66). The being of the person is so often not in the photograph, and even if it is there it is often unnoticed. Handing my identity card to the security guard, he recognizes my face in the photograph (and so lets me in the building) and yet does he see *me* in it? Barthes misses his mother, and what he experiences with the photograph is literally missing *her*, the fact that the photograph stop too short, fails to hit, to meet her being. This changes when Barthes finds the *Winter Garden* photograph:

> The photograph was very old . . . just managed to show two children standing together at the end of a little wooden bridge in a glasses-in conservatory. . . . My mother was five at the time, her brother seven. . . . She, shorter than he, was standing a little back, facing the camera; you could tell that the photographer had said, "step forward a little so we can see you"; she was holding one finger in the other hand, as children often do, in an awkward gesture. (CL 68–69)

The *Winter Garden* photograph shows Barthes his mother, the truth of her face. He sees his mother in the young child and by that he is assuring that it is *her* he really sees, since the young child is not (yet) his mother. Hence he recognizes her not as a mother but as who she is, he finds "not a figure (the Mother), but a being; and not a being, but a *quality* (a soul): not the indispensible but the irreplaceable" (CL 75). Barthes traces in the photograph the outmost particularity of his mother. This particularity cannot be described through general terms; it is not her maternity that he recognized. It is not even a being, not reducible to the sum of features that consists a being (the face, the posture, the body). We see in the photograph a dispensable quality, the absence of which will not influence the being of the person.[26]

The quality that the photograph shows is often missed also in our daily encounter with people and things, and we miss it not because of distance (like the distance opened by death) but rather because of proximity (our proximity to people and things in our life, when we are busy living). The "truth of the face" is nothing over and above the particular person, or something concealed in the depth of her being.[27] It is simple and yet inexhaustible, cannot be captured by a single description and yet it is not inexpressible.[28] The dichotomy between the private and the general leaves no room for this quality. If we think only through this dichotomy we must conclude, as some have done, that "the punctum must be that which is precisely incommunicable since once something is capable of being communicated it must be subsumed under the heading of the studium."[29] Barthes tries to show the limitations of such dichotomy, and with the *Winter Garden* photograph he finally does. Hence, the *Winter Garden* photograph achieved "*the impossible science of the unique being*" (CL 71): it brought out, or brought to his attention, particular presence. The recognition of unique being has necessity ("it *is* her") and therefore it forms as science. However, this science is impossible since what we affirm ("*it* is her") is a contingent quality that cannot hold in science's generalities. It is not, therefore, "impossible because the uniqueness of that being is, after all, only in the eye of the beholder."[30] On the contrary, the photograph stops the subject's "imperialistic" tendencies and shows us the unique being which does not depend upon us.[31] When we encounter other people through our expectations, intentions and concerns and the particularity of their being, or their presence ("the truth of the face") rarely resonates.[32]

The *Winter Garden* photograph is not reproduced in the book. We may wonder why the

evidence for "the impossible science of unique being" was left out. Perhaps due to her disappointment from this mystery, Margaret Olin suggests that there is no *Winter Garden* photograph at all: ".most likely there was no *Winter Garden* Photograph to reproduce, or perhaps only the one of Franz Kafka at the age of six, described . . . by Walter Benjamin."[33] The absence of the photograph brings out an urge to have a definite object to point at, an object we can identify. Since this urge is left unsatisfied, why not abolish this mysterious photograph all together? Olin substitutes the *Winter Garden* photograph for Kafka's photograph and thus has something tangible at hand; she has an object with a definite appearance.

Denying the existence of the photograph or substituting it for another manifest the "blindness" that Barthes is trying to dismantle. This blindness might be the outcome of leaving in an age "of revolutions, contestations, assassinations, explosions, in short, of impatience, of anything that denies ripening" (CL 94). The punctum, as the first part showed, cannot be captured through details; it is not a fact among facts. In order to see it we need to develop an additional capacity of sight (to see beyond our desires, beyond the orthodox meaning). The refusal to reproduce the photograph stems from the understanding that the additional, or second sight "does not consist in "seeing" but in being there" (CL 47).[34] In other words, in order to be wounded by a photograph we need more than an object to look at. We need to refuse "to inherit anything from another" (CL 51), need to keep our eyes open for our own *Winter Garden*.[35]

With the *Winter Garden* Barthes finally uncovers the essence of photography. All photographs show, albeit we do not always notice, the passing of time. The photograph shows us what necessarily stood in front of the camera. At this point the past, which is usually the forgotten time, that cannot resist the distortions of our memories or escape our short memory, becomes real, and contrary to our everyday attitude it gains priority over the present.[36] Our awareness of the past's reality does not amount to a nostalgic attitude, to the will to return to what is no longer: "The photograph does not bring up the past . . . the effect it produces upon me is not to restore what has been abolished (by time, by distance) but to attest that what I see has indeed existed" (CL 82). We let the past that we see through the photograph (that-has-been) remain in its pastness. However, it does not become "yesterday's news." The experience of looking at pictures of people we loved and are now gone can be extremely painful. But the experience is difficult precisely because we do not (or cannot) superimpose our (present) desires on what we see.[37] Even saying in reaction to a photograph "how much I would like to see him again" is to acknowledge the past's complete reality and irreversibility.

But the past is not the only thing we see in the photograph. The photograph is an intersection of past (that-has-been, what actually stood in front of the camera), present (this is, what we see now in the photograph) and future (or more accurately what Barthes calls "anterior future," the future of the object from the perspective of the past, the mixing of "that will be" and "that has been"). Barthes says:

> The name of photography's noeme will therefore be: "that has been" or again: the intractable. In Latin (a pedantry necessary because it illuminates certain nuances), this doubtless can be said: *interfuit*: what I see has been here, in this place which extends between infinity and the subject (operator or spectator); it has been here, and yet immediately separated; it has been absolutely, irrefutably present and yet already deferred. It is all this which the verb *intersum* means. (CL 77)

The Latin *interfuit* is an aorist tense that means "it was/has been between." The verb *intersum* can also (in one of its primary uses) mean "to be separate from." The present is deferred in the photograph in the most literal way; it takes time for the light to travel, to reach the camera. So by its nature the photograph gives us the present by immediately separating it from the scene itself and putting it off into the future. But in this sense the present scene that the photograph documents is always already past by the time its light reaches the film, or silver plate. The sense of "being separated" is derived etymologically from the sense of "being in between" and the photograph indeed shows us something which is neither here nor there: time, in its flowing nature, which is always between, neither here nor there. To a certain extent, everything *is* already past.[38] Photographs

are evidence of the past as well as a prophecy of the future, they push the past into the present (showing us now what has been in the past) and show us that this present was the future of that past. Our present is already, from this perspective, the past of some future present. Like time which is neither here (in the present) nor there (in the future or past), the third meaning or the punctum is not here nor there: not private and yet not general, not subjective and at the same time not shared.

We see in the photograph the past as passing away, we see time's movement. The photograph ceases to be an image that freezes time. True, it is a still image like paintings, but in contrast to them it does not show us a frozen and a-temporal image. The photograph shows us temporality: the fleeting, ever changing, forever escaping moment, it is not "outside" time, but rather it carries time in it, or cuts time's linearity. The photograph shows us the ephemeral nature of things, a nature that we tend to forget, or suppress (in handling things as though they will be there, always accessible).[39] If we describe what we see in the photograph solely through the language of state of affairs "it was Tuesday afternoon, she wore red" we lose sight of the particularity, we affix what we see and restrict it to the domain of the past. And the photograph, although showing us the past, really reveals the present as retention of the past, and the present as already past.

By revealing the ephemeral nature of life the photograph calls us to recognize and acknowledge the singularity of existence. Although the photograph "is never distinguished from its referent" (CL 5), it reveals, through bringing time into play, something that daily contact with the object leaves untouched. In the photograph, says Barthes,

> the presence of the thing (at a certain past moment) is never metaphoric; and in the case of animated beings, their life as well. . . . Photography's inimitable feature (its *noeme*) is that someone has seen the referent . . . *in flesh and blood*, or again *in person* . . . an art of the Person. (CL 78–79)

Interaction with people and objects leaves little room to wonder about life's accidents, about the other's singularity (we have no time for that, we have to go on living). The photograph, choosing one moment over others, makes us wonder "why choose . . . this object, this moment, rather than some other?" (CL 6) in that echoes the question "why is it that I live *here and now*?" (CL 84). By capturing the "it-has-been," while it was still present, the photograph imposes a kind of necessity on the object, the necessity of the past (for us in the present). However this necessity is the necessity of contingent existence (we could have pictured a different moment, the moment could have been different). The photo, locked forever in this tension, illuminates the "unique being" (CL 71) and makes us relate "truth and reality in a unique emotion" (CL 77) which is perhaps that elicited by recognition: "it *is* her."[40]

To conclude, I want to look at the photograph that opens the book, the only photograph on which Barthes does not comment.[41] It is Daniel Boudinet's *Polaroid* (1979) that shows a dark bedroom with light gently permeating through the curtains, giving shape to the objects in it (the bed and the pillow on it). This moment in which light enters the room and yet the room is not fully filled by it is like the first moment of awakening; when we are no longer under the spell of sleep but not wholly awake. In the state of being half awake-half asleep, the soft light that enters through the curtains touches the objects and makes them visible to us, but they still seem as though visible through a thin veil and there is not a clear division between us and the world (our eyes are not yet used to what they see, everything just takes shape, starts to appear). This moment does not last long, as we usually wake up and lift the curtains, letting light into the room. The intermediate stage is not experienced as such and is usually thought of as an extreme point of one of two states, sleeping or full consciousness. The presence of the delicate state in which things start to appear is fleeting and Boudinet's photo captures it and so to speak restores it, or serves as a testimony for its presence. Similarly, Barthes' *Camera Lucida* lights up the field of intermediate meaning, which is none other than the ephemeral nature of our existence. Time, through the photograph, can subtly flicker and send its rays to us as the gentle light that makes things visible.[42]

ENDNOTES

1. Examples for the first kind of interpretations can be found in: V. Burgin, *The End of Art Theory* (London: Macmillan, 1986); J. Gratton, "Text, Image, Reference in Roland Barthes's *La Chambre Claire*," *Modern Language Review* 91 (1996): 355–64; H. Guibert, "Roland Barthes and Photography: The Sincerity of the Subject," *Critical Essays on Roland Barthes*, ed. D. Knight (New York: G. K. Hall, 2000), 115–21. For examples of interpretations of the second kind see: M. Fried, "Barthes's Punctum," *Critical Inquiry* 31 (2005): 539–74; M. Olin, "Touching Photographs: Roland Barthes's 'Mistaken' Identification," *Representation* 80 (2002): 99–118; C. A. Tsakiridou, "Barthes Explores Photography as a Wound," *Paragraph* 18 (1995): 273–85.
2. Roland Barthes, "The Photographic Message," in *Image-Music-Text*, trans. S. Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978), 16-17. References will hereafter appear parenthetically in the text as PM.
3. Roland Barthes, "Rhetoric of the Image," in *Image-Music-Text*, 44. References will hereafter appear parenthetically in the text as RI.
4. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 5. References will hereafter appear parenthetically in the text as CL.
5. Barthes wrote before photography was digitalized. For him the photograph is a perfect analogue of reality and "it is exactly this analogical perfection which, to the common sense, defines the photograph" (PM, 17). Today, when almost all images are treated and manipulated, talking about photography as presenting us with the real may seem naive. The question of analysis of digital media and the nature of digital photography in particular will remain outside the scope of the present essay.
6. In "Rhetoric of the Image" and "The Photographic Message," Barthes analyzes photography in terms of what will later be known in analytic philosophy as "transparency theory." Kendall Walton, for example, approaches photography in a way similar to Barthes' approach. Walton seeks the characteristic that constitutes the difference between photography and painting and finds it in the fact that photography is an unmediated production of the real, while painting is always mediated and gives us access to the *representation* of things rather than to things themselves. Very much like Barthes, who claims that photography gives us a "literal message", i.e., a message which is not coded, Walton thinks of the photograph as the bearer of "natural meaning" that entail that "to interpret a photograph properly *is* to get to the facts". See: Kendall Walton, "Transparent Pictures: On the Nature of Photographic Realism," *Critical Inquiry* 11 (1984): 265–66. Walton does not mention Barthes in his account.
7. By this I mean that the object is the natural origin of the image and that they share the same visual nature.
8. In *S/Z*, *The Death of the Author*, *Criticism and Truth* and other texts, Barthes goes against the assumption that a text has an essence, a core that the "right" interpretation reveals. In fact, Barthes subverts the very idea that the text has *a* meaning, and shows that texts always refer to other texts.
9. Photographs are connoted through the use of trick effects, pose, selection of objects, photogenia, aestheticism, and accompanying texts. In "Rhetoric of the Image" Barthes studies these ways of connoting the image. They are not however unique to the photograph and can be used in any visual depiction of reality.
10. R. Barthes, "The Third Meaning," *Image-Music-Text*, 54. References will hereafter appear parenthetically in the text as TM.
11. Iconography helps us identify the man with a skirt is a Scotsman in a kilt and iconology teaches us that the woman in purple is nobler than the woman in yellow.
12. A picture of an armed man can be interpreted as depicting a freedom fighter or a terrorist for example.
13. We always choose among options that are already laid out for us. Given that our options (to attend graduate school, marry, visit Paris) are public and shared, my choice is never genuine, it is never mine. Furthermore, my will is already determined in a sense as well (I am determined to choose among what is given and even not choosing is a choice among the already given possibilities).
14. That's not to say that there are essences that correlate to our concepts, the stock is a dynamic one and it is reshaped by society.
15. We can go on without it: "Take away the obtuse meaning and communication and signification still remain, still circulate, still come through" ("The Third Meaning," 60).
16. This kind of subvertion is preformed by the spy. The spy disguised as a government clerk is not really a clerk, although he looks like one and behaves like one. The spy subverts the role of the clerk from within by disguising himself as one.
17. Barthes says that "It is by the studium that I am interested in so many photographs, whether I receive

them as political testimony or enjoy them as good historical scene" (*Camera Lucida*, 26).

18. Here "The Third Meaning" still echoes: some photographs have additional quality to them, which is not reducible to the photograph's signs and symbols.
19. The punctum cannot be generated deliberately: When Bruce Gilden tries to create it through the contrast between "a nun and some drug queens" no effect is achieved "except perhaps that of irritation" (*Camera Lucida*, 47). The irritation is the feeling that the photographer tries to elicit a reaction from us by provocation, that he expects a certain reaction from us. We are irritated because we understand that the photographer has "figured us out," that he knows how we work, how we would react.
20. E. Hoft-March, "Barthes's Real Mother: The Legacy of *La Chambre Claire*," *French Forum* 17 (1992): 63.
21. Barthes does not suggest of course that we can become subjects devoid of all desires; that we can peel everything that constitutes our individuality (at least so we believe). He rather thinks that we can encounter things not only through the network of our desires. Or more accurately that certain encounters do not only work according to the model of desire-gratification.
22. Like all adventures this one produces "something . . . like an internal agitation, an excitement, a certain labor too, the pressure of the unspeakable which wants to be spoken" (*Camera Lucida*, 19).
23. Nancy Shawcross, in *Roland Barthes on Photography: The Critical Tradition in Perspective* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1997), notes that the book itself is written in a third form, resisting classification, a text between fiction, autobiography, and an essay in which content and form are one (68).
24. The call to descend into the self in order to eradicate the "ego" appears in Buddhist thought that may have influenced Barthes. In the bibliography that accompanies the original French edition Barthes includes two sources that deal with Buddhist thought.
25. John Berger, *About Looking* (New York: Vintage International, 1980), expresses this view: "What the camera does . . . is to *fix* the appearance of that event. It removes its appearance from the flow of appearances and it preserves it, not perhaps forever but for as long as the film exists. The camera saves a set of appearances from the otherwise inevitable supercession of further appearances. It holds them unchanging" (54–55).
26. The dispensable quality is not a feature which absence will affect the appearance of the subject (its being what it is); hence it is not the face or the body, although it is not something that exists independently of a particular face or a body.
27. Barthes discusses this topic through the contrast between the punctum and the photographic shock (*Camera Lucida*, 32–33). While the first reveals the "truth" of the photographed objects and thus makes us recognize their singularity, the shock brings out something that was hidden in the unconsciousness, something that perhaps the person himself was unaware of (dirty thoughts, jealousy, etc.).
28. "I could not express this accord except by an infinite series of adjectives, which I omit, convinced however that this photograph collected all the possible predicates from which my mother's being was constituted" (*Camera Lucida*, 70).
29. G. Allen, *Roland Barthes* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 126.
30. M. Perloff, "What Has Occurred Only Once: Barthes' Winter Garden/Boltanski's Archives of the Dead," *Writing the Image after Roland Barthes*, ed. J. M Rabaté (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), 40.
31. As Barthes says: "In the Mother, there was a radiant, irreducible core: my mother. It is always maintained that I should suffer more because I have spent ,my whole life with her; but my suffering proceeds from *who she was*; and it was because she was who she was that I lived with her" (*Camera Lucida*, 75). One wonders how can a reading of this text give way to the claim that Barthes invented a perfect mother and "thus perfected, the mother must of course be dead" (Perloff, "What has Occurred Only Once," 40).
32. This problem is formulated by Hagi Kennan in *The Present Personal* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005). Kenaan examines philosophy's failure to let the personal resonant in language, failure that results from accepting the hegemony of the propositional. Both the analytic and the continental traditions thought of language as a communal structure which becomes meaningful through public conventions. As a result, the analytic tradition thought of meaning as something located in the semantic realm alone, and excluded the presence of the personal from language. The continental tradition thought that those features of language force us to accept the fact that authenticity cannot be reached within language, and searched for the singularity of the self outside language. Kenaan points to the possibility of hearing the idiosyncratic voice of the other, and of answering the presence of the personal with language.
33. M. Olin, "Touching Photographs: Roland Barthes's 'Mistaken' Identification," *Representation* 80 (2002): 108. Olin bases her highly speculative argument on a mistake in identification she attributes to Barthes. According to her the women in the Van Der Zee's photograph *Family Portrait* (1926) does not

wear a golden necklace (which is the photograph's punctum) but rather a string of pearls (105–06). This clears the way for arguing that Barthes displacements of details is "just as Freudian as it is Lacanian" (110), that Barthes identifies the fabricated Winter Garden photograph with the Kafka photograph since it enables him to discover "not his mother, or not only his mother, but also, himself, himself as a child, specifically as a child known from photographs" (112). In this way Olin turns *Camera Lucida* from a book dedicated to the recognition of alterity in its most particular being into a text about the self's recognition of itself, or self discovery.

34. The second sight is mentioned in the book in relation to the photograph, which does not simply represent but gives us the definite "this-has-been," the being of the captured object. However, as I will try to show, this can be used in relation to the viewer, who also develops a second sight, which enables him to see beyond the facts of the photograph, to recognize the being of the other (which appears in the photograph).
35. For Derrida the Winter Garden Photograph is the punctum of the book: "The mark of this unique wound is nowhere visible as such, but it unlocatable clarity . . . irradiates the whole study. It makes of this book an irreplaceable event." Jacques Derrida, "The Death of Roland Barthes," in *Critical Essays on Roland Barthes*, 136.
36. The present is taken into account only by being a mediate asserting the presence of the past (the photograph I see now is asserting the reality of the past).
37. We cannot and do not try to restore the past. The nostalgic person cannot restore what she lost as well but that is because the present memory of the lost thing is too strong to let anything measure against it. The pains (*alegia*) of longing for a home (*nostos*) are incurable, since there is no home to which one can return.
38. As though to attest to that Barthes chooses photographs of people who are no longer alive but were alive when the photograph was taken (his mother, the portrait of Lewis Payne before his execution).
39. It might be that we forget about that simply because we don't have *time* for that. Because time is passing by, we are always behind trying to catch up, to make time for all the things we want to do.
40. While the essence of all photographs is time, we do not always notice that. Photographs that make us aware of that are those that have a punctum. But language here is misleading. The punctum, as we claimed, is not a detail in the photograph but rather the relation between photograph and spectator that gives rise to the awareness of the particular's singularity in time.
41. Surprisingly, while many comment on the absent *Winter Garden* photograph, no one remarks on the photograph that opens the book, but which Barthes himself does not discuss. It is interesting also to note that the title of the work, *Polaroid*, refers to its technique, a technique in which the gap between the moment of capturing the scene and the moment of reproduction is minimal. The fleeting nature of time is built into Polaroid pictures which always arrive a moment too late, after the real moment, the present moment that was captured, has past.
42. I am grateful to John Carvalho, who speaked my interest in Barthes and took the time to read earlier drafts of this essay. I am also grageful to Lewis Gordon for his support in the porject and to Noël Carroll, Chuck Dyke, Kristin Gjesdal, and Susan Feagin for their comments on earlier drafts. Finally, I wish to thank Hagi Kenaan, who, by providing many inspiriting comments, improved my thinking on these matters.

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