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Sensing the Image: Roland Barthes and the Affect of the Visual

Elena Oxman

There is a well-worn narrative, perhaps even a “mythology,” according to which Roland Barthes undergoes two distinct phases as a theorist. In the first phase, he is the mythologist-semiologist who crusades against the “pseudo-physis” of culture, unmasking its myths and decoding its signs. In the second phase, he retreats to the immediacy of his moods and passions, more interested in desire than demystification, in pleasure than politics. At first glance, these opposing tendencies play out nowhere more emphatically than in Barthes’s writings on cinematic and photographic images. While his early semiological texts strive to demystify the apparent immediacy of images by showing how they operate as signs, his later writings celebrate precisely those elements of the image that elude signification—the *punctum* of the photograph, the “obtuse meaning” of the film—dimensions of the image that can be seen but not described, sensed but not linguistically signified.

It is perhaps not surprising that Barthes’s later writings have been diagnosed as a theoretical regression—the “belles-lettres musings” of someone who seems to have forgotten his own lessons, or perhaps regrets them.¹ Indeed, Jacques Rancière has explained Barthes’s retreat from semiology as a “drama of repentance,” wherein he “expiates his sin of ... having wished to strip the visible world of its glories, of having transformed its spectacles and pleasures into a great web of symptoms and a seedy exchange of signs” (FI 11). As compensation, Rancière suggests, Barthes “bends the stick in the other direction by valorizing...the utter self-evidence of the photograph . . . the purity of an affect unsullied by any signification” (FI 15). Rancière’s assessment of *La Chambre Claire* speaks to a certain tendency in the reception of Barthes’s later texts, which have been celebrated for their literary merit but which are no less criticized for having regressed to a naïve, quasi-phenomenology. Hence, in his opening remarks for the 2001 symposium titled “Back to Barthes,” Jonathan Culler declares that if Barthes is to have enduring value for contemporary critical theory, it is “the early and middle Barthes and not the late, nostalgic or sentimental Barthes” to whom we must return (439).

In this essay, however, I want to return to Barthes from a different angle, tracing a critical trajectory through his writings on film and photography that cannot be reduced to regression or repentance.² No doubt, Barthes's writings after 1970 seem to venture away from the critical project of his semiological work, and at times they may strike us as surprisingly naïve. For instance, when he devotes his 1970 essay "Le Troisième Sens" to the "obtuse" aspects of several Eisenstein stills—those "touching" points in the images that cannot be described since they extend outside "culture, knowledge, information"—he seems to be falling prey to the very mythology of the image that his early work had taken such pains to expose (*Image/Music/Text*, 55.) Similarly, when he begins *La Chambre Claire* by asking, "What does my body know of photography?" it may seem that the consummate critic of Nature has nostalgically returned to Nature, to what Annette Lavers deems the "mindless yet meaningful depths of the body, with a mythical hope of translating them into words without the mediation of language" (31). Yet it is precisely those points where Barthes seems naïve or "forgetful" that must be reconsidered and ultimately revalued. After all, Barthes makes *forgetting* a productive force—the gesture that augurs the extension and intensification of his theoretical project rather than its waning. Discussing his shift away from semiology, Barthes recalls: "I undertook to let myself be borne on by the force of any living life: Forgetting. Unlearning, yielding to the unforeseeable modifications that forgetting imposes on the sedimented knowledge, culture, and beliefs one has traversed" ("Inaugural Lecture," 478). Barthes's later writings must be viewed in the light of this critical practice of forgetting, and, what's more, as a critique of the scientific assumptions that had driven his early work. The later writings must be viewed, in Nietzschean terms, as an "attempt at self-criticism."³

Indeed, Barthes's later writings owe a great deal to Nietzsche, to whom he refers with frequency after 1970 and who, I will argue, becomes his most important interlocutor after Saussure.⁴ Specifically, it is Nietzsche's concern with the problem of Science—"Science considered for the first time as problematic, as questionable" (*Birth of Tragedy*, 18)—that drives Barthes's critique of the structuralist-semiotic project that he had helped to found. Following Nietzsche, Barthes launches a critique of the "will to truth" that drives the seemingly objective science of semiology; and yet, in returning to his own "pinnacle of particularity" in his later writings, Barthes does not merely retreat to a form of subjectivism, but instead charts a path away from the scientific commitment to what Nietzsche calls "Method."⁵ At the outset of his 1977 course at the Collège de France, *Comment Vivre Ensemble*, Barthes describes how the science of semiology, in proceeding according to Method, follows a "protocol of

operations to obtain a result: to decipher, explain, or describe exhaustively (“I myself was lured,” he adds) (33, my translation). Method thus requires a “pre-meditated decision” concerning the “right path” (*chemin droit*) of thought (CV 33). Against the pre-scriptions of Method, however, Barthes notes the potential for a “violence undergone by thought,” a “training” of forces that act upon thought and that comprise what Nietzsche calls “Culture” (CV 33).⁶ Only by opening thought to these forces, Barthes tells us, by “stumbling between different snippets, stages of knowledge (*savoir*), of taste (*savoir*),” does thought escape the generalities of Method and arrive at a particular place (CV 34).⁷

It is precisely this “force to thought” that I will suggest we encounter in Barthes’s writings on film and photography—media that initially strike him as the consummate realm of ideology, but that also thwart the semiological methods he brings to bear upon them, unleashing new adventures in thought.⁸ Barthes’s final book, *La Chambre Claire*, exemplifies this turn away from Science that the image provokes, but even in his early writings on the image—in his canonical early essays on photography and his little known writings on the cinema—we witness a burgeoning challenge to the science of semiology and its discursive practices of interpreting, decoding, and deciphering. This challenge, I will suggest, emerges from the sensible domain of the image, a “this side of language” (*en deçà de langue*) that comprises the image’s most mystifying power (its supposed “naturalness”), but also a field of affects or “emotion-values” (*emotion-valeurs*) that cannot be subsumed to the language of semiology (see *IMT*, 30, 59). Far from suggesting a mythical realm “beyond” language, this affective dimension of the image becomes the terrain of a rival critical practice—what Barthes, following Nietzsche, will call *evaluation*. Rather than signaling the exhaustion of critique—much less of discourse—how might Barthes’s affective encounters with images both extend and renew his critical practice? In tracing Barthes’s writings on film and photography, I aim to contribute to the ongoing revaluation of the “late” Barthes, but also to ask how the *sensibility* of images forms the basis for a renewed aesthetic criticism—a criticism where the link between knowledge (*sophos*) and taste (*sapio*), of which both Nietzsche and Barthes remind us, might be recovered.

1. “Broken Signs”

Describing his motivation for *Mythologies*, the 1957 collection in which his earliest writings on film and photography appear, Barthes recounts: “In short, in the account given of our contemporary circumstances, I resented seeing Nature and History confused at every turn, and I wanted to track down, in the decorative display of *What-goes-without-saying*, the

ideological abuse which, in my view, is hidden there" (*Mythologies*, 11). The cultural phenomena that Barthes sets out to demystify in his various "mythologies" range from professional wrestling to the Eiffel Tower, but among the ranks of "what-goes-without-saying," he attributes a special mystifying power (*un pouvoir mystificateur*) to photographic and cinematic images (*Oeuvres Complètes*, 722, my translation). In various articles (on "The Family of Man" photography exhibit, on film *noir*, and on Kazan's *On the Waterfront*, to name a few of his photographic and cinematic subjects), Barthes emphasizes the potential of these media to produce "true signs (with) a false meaning," to appear as natural emanations of the real and obscure the moment of their cultural production (OC I 945). Yet it is not until Barthes encounters Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics* in the late 1950s that he discovers a means to theorize the "pseudo-physis" of the image in terms of its function as a particular sort of sign, and thus, to approach both photography and cinema under the banner of a structuralist science.

In his 1961 essay, "The Photographic Message," Barthes famously describes the photograph as a "message without a code," a concept that he will continue to develop in his 1964 essay, "Rhetoric of the Image" (IMT 17). The photographic image, Barthes contends, is a unique kind of message in that it bears an analogous (rather than arbitrary) relationship to its object; "there is no need to set up a relay, that is to say a code, between the object and its image" (IMT 17). Far from suggesting a "pure" image, this "denotative" power of the photograph serves an ideological function, working to naturalize the culturally coded connotations for which it acts as a "support." This naturalizing power is particularly evident in advertising images, where the denoted image "innocents the semantic artifice of connotation" and "seems to found in nature the signs of culture" (IMT 37, 45). Thus, in the *Panzani* poster that Barthes analyzes in "Rhetoric of the Image," the photograph's denoted level effectuates "a kind of natural being there of objects; nature seems spontaneously to produce the scene represented" (IMT 45).

The thrust of Barthes's discussion of denotation in these early essays is to demystify the notion of a "pure image" divorced from signification by showing that denotation is always imbricated with connotation. The denoted level of the image not only naturalizes the connoted level but is *itself* always connoted (precisely as the truth, objectivity, or "naturalness" of the message). And yet, at the end of "The Photographic Message," Barthes briefly wonders whether this relation between denotation and connotation might ever be undone, whether the image might ever elude a connotative meaning and exist in its "pure," denotative form:

Is all this to say that a pure denotation, a *this side of language* is impossible? If such a denotation exists, it is perhaps not at the level of what ordinary language calls the insignificant, the neutral, the objective, but, on the contrary, at the level of absolutely traumatic images. The trauma is a suspension of language, a blocking of meaning. (IMT 30)

We should pause here to consider Barthes's curious invocation of a "this side of language" (*en deçà de langue*), since it seems to posit a realm "beneath" or "before" language that Barthes is simultaneously at pains to deny, or at least to chalk up to a "mythology" of the image. And yet here, Barthes associates the *en deçà de langue* with a traumatic effect that works *against* the mythological function of connotation. "One could imagine a kind of law," he writes: "the more direct the trauma, the more difficult is connotation; or again, the 'mythological' effect of a photograph is inversely proportional to its traumatic effect" (IMT 31). This subversive function of the traumatic image portends Barthes's later theories of the "obtuse" meanings and the *punctum*, which he opposes to the connotative meanings (or *studium*) of culture. And yet, if Barthes does not dwell upon the traumatic image in this early essay, this is because he proposes an image that evades connotation only through a total foreclosure of meaning. The traumatic image is "by structure insignificant," he tell us; confronting it, "there is nothing to say" (IMT 30).

Barthes has more say about this challenge to connotation in his 1960 essay, "Le Problème de la signification au cinéma."⁹ In contrast to the tone of confidence in the photography essays, this essay is permeated by a sense of uncertainty—a disarmament before the film image that prompts Barthes to ask: "to what extent does semiology have rights (*les droits*) over the analysis of film?" (OCI 1044). To be sure, there are many filmic images that do fall under the jurisdiction of semiology, comprising a "rhetoric" of the filmic sign. These images produce a relation of "equivalence," where an image (the turning pages of a calendar, for instance) actualizes a concept ("time passing").¹⁰ And yet, Barthes points to a "peripheral zone" of meaning in the cinema where visual and acoustic signifiers do not find a signified value—where the "analogy between signifier and signified is in some sort of disjoint, unattended" (1040). These "broken signs" (*signes décrochés*) elude determinate meaning and yet they remain "intelligible." Moreover, Barthes associates this realm of "uncertain signifiers" with a particular *aesthetic* vocation: "The art and originality of the film director is situated in this zone (of broken signs); one could say that the aesthetic value of a film is a function of the distance that the *auteur* knows how to introduce between the form of the sign and its content without leaving the realm of the intelligible" (1040). As he does in the photography essay, then, Barthes raises the possibility of an image that eludes connotation;

and yet, rather than a foreclosure of meaning, here, Barthes invokes what he will call the “suspension of meaning”—an aesthetic tactic that he first recognizes in the theater of Brecht but increasingly associates with the cinema.¹¹ In a 1963 interview with *Cahiers du Cinéma*, he speculates that the cinema is,

...by its material and structure, much better prepared than the theater for a very particular responsibility of forms which I have called the technique of suspended meaning...The best films (to me) are those which best withhold meaning... To suspend meaning is a very difficult task, requiring at the same time a very great technique and total intellectual loyalty. That means getting rid of the parasite meanings, which is extremely difficult. (*Grain of the Voice*, 19)

Barthes cites Luis Buñuel’s film “The Exterminating Angel” (1962) as an exemplary vehicle of suspended meaning, claiming: “It is not at all an absurd film. It’s a film that is full of meaning; full of what Lacan calls *signifiance*. It is full of *signifiance*, but it doesn’t have any *one* meaning, or a series of little meanings” (GV 21).¹²

The concept of *signifiance* as “suspended meaning” will play an increasingly important role in Barthes’s thought, reappearing in relation to the image in his 1970 essay “Le Troisième Sens.”¹³ Yet even in these early essays, Barthes gestures towards the suspension of meaning as a critical potential of the image. How then does this critical potential, this “responsibility of forms” that Barthes assigns to the image relate to the critical task of semiology? I would suggest that while Barthes’s early essays approach the image as a “privileged plane for semiology,” they also raise the question of semiology itself as method that favors the *determination* of meaning rather than its suspension, and that thus must be called into question (OC I 1039). Indeed, what is the nature of the will or desire that takes the image as something to be deciphered or explained? Considering an advertisement that includes both text and image, Barthes notes that:

...the language clearly has a function of elucidation, but this elucidation is selective, a meta-language applied not to the totality of the iconic message but only to certain of its signs. The text is indeed the creator’s (and hence society’s) right of inspection over the image; anchorage is a control, bearing a responsibility—in the face of the projective power of pictures—for the use of the message. (IMT 48)

This passage seems to be concerned with the ideological operations of advertising. But I would suggest that it no less concerns the ideological operations of *semiology itself*. After all, even as semiology works to decipher the operations of power and ideology at work in the “image-repertoire” of culture, does it not simultaneously deploy its own forms of power—subjecting the image to its “rights of inspection,” “anchoring” images in its desires? In the late 1960s, Barthes’s critique of the “will to truth” that

lurks beneath the meta-language of semiology will rise to the surface of his writings;¹⁴ yet even at the height of his semiological period, we see fault lines in his practice begin to emerge through his encounters with images. Finally, we might say that while Barthes writes about images in order to decipher or illuminate them, those images simultaneously throw their light upon his language, casting into relief the very “signs” through which science of signs carries out its operations.

2. “A new, rare practice...”

Barthes’s mounting critique of the semiological science that he had helped to found is inseparable from his increasing engagement with the writings of Nietzsche in the late 1960’s.¹⁵ In his “Attempt at Self-Criticism,” Nietzsche identifies the “problem of science” as central to his philosophical project:

What I then got hold of, something frightful and dangerous, a problem with horns but not necessarily a bull, in any case a new problem—today I should say that it was the problem of Science itself, Science considered for the first time as problematic, as questionable. (BOT 18)

For Nietzsche, the category of Science (*Wissenschaft*) encompasses both the human and social sciences and designates, above all, a paradigm of knowledge production that conceals its own values and biases under the mantle of “objectivity.” It is precisely this tendency that Barthes recognizes in semiology, which carries out its “science of language” through the lens of a meta-language without investigating the values and desires embedded in its own discourse. “Any interpretation is based on a positing of values,” Barthes writes, echoing Nietzsche, and the seemingly “indifferent” language of science is in fact driven by a *will to truth* so prevalent that it is no longer recognized as such (*Responsibility of Forms*, 278). Barthes locates the will to truth of semiology in its desire to fix or arrest meaning and its attendant commitment to the form of the sign. “We are beginning to understand now that the sign is a historical concept, an analytic (and even ideological) artifact,” Barthes writes in 1973 (“Theory of the Text,” 33). The “civilization of the sign” commits us to certain values: identity, closure, determinate meaning. While modern literature begins to explore the disjunctions of meaning, semiological criticism remains wed to a series of operations that attempt to arrest meaning, to “prevent it from trembling or becoming double or wandering” (“TT” 33). Specifically, criticism confines itself to “two types of operation, both intended to repair the holes which a thousand causes (historical, material, human causes) can punch in the integrity of the sign: restoration and interpretation... This conception of the text (the classical, institutional and current conception) is obviously linked to a metaphysic, that of truth” (“TT” 33).¹⁶

In one sense, semiology represents the culmination of this “metaphysics of truth”; yet semiology also bears the potential to fracture the uniformity of its own discourse, since as a science of signs, it occupies a unique position from which to “reopen the problem of the linguistic status of science” (RL 10). To do so, semiology must subject the “language by which it knows language” to the force of a critique (RL 7). It must recognize the “neutral, transparent” language of science as a moral language, bespeaking a desire so general that it often escapes notice: a desire to ask the question “what does it mean?” above all others, and in doing so, to secure the *identity* of its objects. More than a critical reflexivity, Barthes demands an excavation and destruction of the values that underwrite the semiological project, a “semioclasm” where the task is no longer “to reveal the (latent) meaning of an utterance, of a trait, of a narrative, but to fissure the very representation of meaning... not to change or purify the symbols but to challenge the symbolic itself” (IMT 167). While Barthes had tentatively begun to explore the “fissuring” of meaning in the realm of images, it is not until his 1970 essay “Le Troisième Sens,” that he confronts the possibility of *semiology’s* own fissuring in relation to the image, and finally, the prospect of a rival critical practice.

“The Third Meaning: Research Notes on Some Eisenstein Stills” thus extends a line of inquiry that Barthes had opened in his early essays on film and photography, considering a level of the image that resists determinate signification (a level he will designate as the “obtuse” or “third” meaning as opposed to the “obvious” meaning). Yet while in the early essays, Barthes describes this resistant factor as a sort of sensible alterity within the image—here, the obtuse meaning erupts as a “tear” within semiology itself. In the wake of Barthes’s critique of semiology, then, we will see that the obtuse meaning poses a challenge not only to the “obvious meaning” of the image but to the obviousness of the *desire* for meaning. Barthes dramatizes his own relation to this desire for meaning by beginning the essay in a familiar mode of “reading” the images, only to suggest how this reading falters in the presence of a rival desire.

Considering a still from Eisenstein’s *Ivan the Terrible* of “two courtiers ...raining down gold over the young czar’s head,” Barthes identifies two levels of meaning: communication and signification. The first level, he tells us, is informational, including “everything I can learn from the setting, the costumes, the characters, their relations, their insertion in an anecdote with which I am (even vaguely) familiar,” and thus demands a semiotics of the “message” (IMT 51). The second level, that of “signification,” requires a “mode of analysis. . . more highly developed than the first,” since it contains symbolic, referential, diegetic, and historical references demanding an expanded repertoire of approaches (psychoanalysis,

economy, dramaturgy) (51). Barthes proceeds to read both of these levels of the image, to “understand” the image in a sense, only to discover that this understanding is insufficient, somehow disappointing: “for I am still held by the image” (53). What in the image continues to hold him? Barthes ventures a description: “a certain compactness of the courtier’s make-up, thick and insistent for the one, smooth and distinguished for the other; the former’s ‘stupid’ nose, the latter’s finely traced eyebrows, his lank blondness, his faded pale complexion, the affected flatness of his hairstyle suggestive of a wig...” (53). At first, Barthes is not sure how to “justify a reading” of these details:

Not situated structurally, a semantologist would not agree as to their objective existence. . . and if to me (the third meaning) is clear, that is *still* perhaps (for the moment) by the same “aberration” which compelled the lone and unhappy Saussure to hear in ancient poetry the enigmatic voice of the anagram, unoriginated and obsessive. Same uncertainty when it is a matter of *describing* the obtuse meaning. (60)

Scientifically “disarmed,” Barthes pursues the obtuse meaning as a sort of anomaly within his research that nonetheless demands to be classified—but how? It is as if the obtuse meaning can be *seen* but not *named*: “I do not know what its signified is, at least I am unable to give it a name, but I can see clearly the traits, the signifying accidents of which the—consequently incomplete—sign is composed” (53).

Like the broken signs that he had encountered in Buñuel, the obtuse meanings appear as signifiers without signifieds, occupying a realm not of signification but of *signifiante*. *Signifiante*, Barthes tells us in *Pleasure of the Text*, is “meaning insofar as it is sensually produced” (*le sens en ce qu’il est produit sensuellement*); it is “value shifted to the sumptuous rank of the signifier” and not signification (*Pleasure of the Text*, 61, 65). And yet, *signifiante* is not simply “sensation”; it is not reducible to a physiological effect, for in making it such, we have already signified the sensation. Instead, it is sense that hesitates or “shudders” at the level of the signifier without correlating to a signified value.¹⁷ Thus, in the still from *Battleship Potemkin* of an old woman crying, the closed eyelids, the taut mouth, the hand clasped on the breast signify the obvious meaning of “grief,” but the *signifiante* of the image arises “somewhere in the region of her forehead” (*IMT* 57). While the signifiers of “grief” can be correlated with their signified value, the obtuse meaning is visible but not namable. It “cannot be described because in contrast to the obvious meaning, it does not copy anything—how do you describe something that does not represent anything?” (*IMT* 61). Here, Barthes points to a logic of *repetition* as the condition of signification—a condition to which the obtuse meaning, by definition, will not submit. “The sign is a follower, gregarious,” Barthes

writes several years later. "In each sign sleeps that monster: a stereotype" ("IL" 461). Indeed, while the obvious meanings in the image refer to stereotypes, existing cultural meanings that Barthes claims "seek (him) out" (the word "obvious," he reminds us, means that which "comes ahead"), the obtuse meanings seem to come from nowhere (they are "utopic" in this sense) and correspond to nothing: "Everything that can be *said* about Ivan or Potemkin can be read of a written text (entitled 'Ivan' or 'Potemkin') except this, the obtuse meaning. I can gloss everything in Euphrosyne, except the obtuse quality of her face" (IMT 54, 64).

At this point, we must confront a paradox at play in Barthes's discussion of the obtuse meanings thus far: while he insists on their singularity, he nevertheless categorizes them, precisely as the "obtuse" or "third" meanings. He extracts them from one economy of repetition (the sign as a "stereotype") only to insert them into another (the *topos* or type he designates as the "obtuse meaning"). And yet, while the sign functions as a repetition founded on the value of the copy, the obtuse meanings appear as repetitions that are different every time. We find this typology throughout Barthes's work after 1970; whether the "obtuse meaning," the "grain of the voice," the "text of bliss" or the *punctum*, Barthes defends the visibility, voice, or phrase that "eludes the peace of nominations" and that thus will not submit to semiological analysis (IMT 162). And yet, is there an alternative means of "arriving at" this unnamable element? We have arrived at the central problem of "The Third Meaning," a problem that takes us from the image to the realm of writing, or rather, that germinates along the seam where image and writing come into contact: namely, how to *write* the obtuseness of the image without subsuming it to the realm of the obvious? How to avoid, the moment one writes, signifying and thus entrapping those elements that called out to one precisely insofar as they resisted signification? This question is not so much answered as posed by this essay, where the "obtuse meanings" augur the eruption of a new practice of writing, which is also a new desire:

Finally, the obtuse meaning can be seen as an accent, the very form of an emergence, or a fold (a crease even) marking the heavy layer of informations and significations... it is a gash razed of meaning (*of the desire for meaning*). It outplays meaning, subverts not the content but the whole practice of meaning. A new -rare- practice, affirmed against a majority practice, that of signification. (IMT 62)

The obtuse meanings, then, do not simply suggest the eruption of difference within the process of signification (the "deferral" of meaning).¹⁸ Nor do they serve merely as markers of Barthes's singular experiences of Eisenstein's images that remain impossible to convey in language.¹⁹ Instead, the obtuse meanings signal the arrival of a new "rare" practice of

writing. But what form will this practice take? The difficulty of this essay lies in the fact that while Barthes dramatizes a certain exhaustion of the meta-language of semiology (which must be “discarded, like a booster rocket”), he is less clear on what might replace it (*IMT* 65). Not submitting to signification, the obtuse meanings seem to require a language of pointing (of “That! That’s it!”) or of the haiku (Barthes, in fact, translates one of Eisenstein’s images into haiku form). And yet, halfway through the essay, Barthes briefly gestures toward another approach to the obtuse meanings, another way of “writing” the image. Considering several details from *Battleship Potemkin* (a woman’s oversized bun of hair, the “rounded caps” of two workers), Barthes writes simply: “I believe that the obtuse meaning carries a certain *emotion*. Such an emotion is never sticky; it is an emotion that simply *designates* what one loves, what one wants to defend: an emotion, a value, a valuation” (*c’est une émotion-valeur, une évaluation*) (*IMT* 59). Here we have the strangest, arguably the most “obtuse” moment of the essay, as Barthes’s fairly sober account of the obtuse meaning is “blunted” by what seems like a naïve, perhaps sentimental (if not “sticky”) declaration of love. Yet it is precisely the *sentiment* that erupts here (“we savor, we love the two rounded caps in image X” he writes), that augurs the arrival of a new critical practice—a practice that Barthes, following Nietzsche, will call “evaluation.”

“To evaluate is not a subsequent but a founding act,” Barthes writes in 1973; he specifies that evaluation must be “understood in the critical sense that Nietzsche gave it,” as a rejection of the *adiaphoria* or indifference of science (*RL* 119). Indeed, while science requires a subject who “abdicates that which he does not know of himself, his irreducibility, his force,” Barthes’s assertion of the “emotion-value” carried by the obtuse meanings constitutes a founding act of evaluation, since it signals the eruption of a point of view, a *desire*, within the discourse (*CV* 33). What do I love? What do I want to defend? These are the questions that come to replace the semiologist’s “indifferent” question of “what does it mean?” and that at the same time open writing to the forces that seize it. Indeed, when writing becomes evaluation, it no longer thinks *about* the texts that it encounters, but rather in *conjunction* with them, succumbing to the adventures of thought and language that they provoke.²⁰

Finally then, we might say that the obtuse meanings do not so much elude language but demand a different language, where words no longer engage in the tasking of naming, identifying, or decoding (the obtuse meanings signal the exhaustion of precisely these activities), but rather become steeped in “emotion, value, and valuation.” And yet, while “The Third Meaning” gestures toward this “new, rare practice,” the evaluation itself remains undeveloped in this essay. In fact, the passage we have

been considering in which Barthes momentarily expresses his “love” for Eisenstein’s images remains the essay’s most vulnerable point, since it threatens to reduce the obtuse meanings to no more than subjective impressions or personal musings. “What else is there to say about what one loves except, I love it?” Barthes asks elsewhere (RF 286). Indeed, for Barthes, as for Nietzsche, evaluation is never simply a matter of “saying what one loves,” but instead calls for the *creation of values*.²¹ In his 1980 volume, *La Chambre Claire*, Barthes not only produces an evaluation of the photographic image – the force that it poses to thought – but confronts the central challenge of evaluation as a critical practice: namely, how to extract the value of an image without plunging the discourse into a realm of subjective appreciation? Instead of simply “saying what one loves,” how to produce the *value* of that love—to “openly and actively affirm a value and produce a valuation?” (RF 284).

4. A Non-indifferent Discourse

Barthes’s professed goal in his last major work on the image may strike us as antiquated, perhaps hopelessly so. “I wanted to learn what photography was in itself,” he writes at the outset of *Camera Lucida* (3). And yet, Barthes invokes the traditional philosophical quest for essences, only to subvert it, asking not “what is photography?” but “what is photography for me?” Rather than suggesting a retreat to subjectivity, this question signals a critical shift away from the *adiaphoria* of science and towards the Nietzschean practice of evaluation. In an essay on Bataille’s “The Big Toe,” Barthes describes the difference between “knowledge” and “value”: “Knowledge (*le savoir*), says of everything, ‘What is this? What is the big toe? What is this text? Who is Bataille?’—but value, following the Nietzschean expression, extends the question, “What is this for me?” (qtd. in Ungar 58). While “science goes on indifferent (= without difference) as to what is valid in itself, as to what is valid for everyone,” it becomes a generalized discourse, spreading itself over a greater and greater diversity of situations and reducing them to the same (RF 278). It is against this reduction of photography under the gaze of an indifferent science, and moreover, against his own reduction to the position of the indifferent scientist, that Barthes resolves to make his individuality the “heuristic principle” of *Camera Lucida*:

I decided to consider only those photographs which give me pleasure or emotion Instead of following the path of a formal ontology, I stopped, keeping with me, like a treasure, my desire or my grief; the anticipated essence of the Photograph could not, in my mind, be separated from the “pathos” of which, from the first glance, it consists. I was like that friend who had turned to photography only because it allowed him to photograph his son. As Spectator, I was interested in

Photography only for "sentimental" reasons; I wanted to explore it not as a question (a theme) but as a wound: I see, I feel, hence I notice, I observe, I think. (CL 21, 26)

The sentience of the body—of Barthes's particular body—is thus the "non-indifferent" starting point of *Camera Lucida*. Indeed, the question "what does my body know of photography?" drives the first half of the book, in which Barthes develops his theory of the *punctum*. Like the obtuse meaning, the *punctum* refers to that point in the image that "pricks" him (*ce qui me point*), that he "loves," and that cannot be referred to existing cultural meanings (the *studium*). Barthes thus devotes the first half of the book to developing a typology of the *punctum*, believing that it is here that he will find the essence of the photograph. And yet, while the *punctum* plays a vital role in the first half of *Camera Lucida*, we must remember that Barthes abandons it midway through the book, deciding that it is finally inadequate to his task. What explains this curious choice? Barthes tells us that while the *punctum* allows him to dispense with any illusion of an "objective" science, it veers too far in the other direction, suggesting a "subjectivity reduced to its hedonist project" (CL 70). Finally, the *punctum* is a means for Barthes to say "what he loves" in various images, but, he discovers that saying "I love it" is not enough. In seeking an alternative to the "objective" meta-language of science, Barthes encounters another form of sterility in the realm of "I like and I don't like"; he thus resolves to make the second half of *Camera Lucida* his "recantation," his "palinode" (CL 60).

"Now one November evening shortly after my mother's death, I was going through some photographs..." (CL 63). Barthes begins the second half of the book not by evacuating his subjectivity but by following it in another direction, no longer seeking the essence of photography but the essence of his mother (the two quests, we will see, can hardly be separated). Barthes recounts sorting through his collection of photographs only to realize that he was looking for something in particular, the essence of that "face that I had loved" (CL 67). He finds this "irreplaceable quality" in an image of his mother as a young girl in a Winter Garden; yet he discovers something more in this image: until seeing the Winter Garden photograph, Barthes had been "indifferent" to an aspect of the photograph that now strikes him with a sudden force—a quality he calls "the intractable" or the "that has been" (*ça a été*). It is precisely this "intractable" quality of his mother that the Winter Garden image gives him, and from which he decides to derive the essence of all photography.

But in what sense does this quality comprise the "essence" of photography? Barthes acknowledges that the essence he discovers "emerges according to a paradoxical order, since usually we verify things before

declaring them to be true" (CL 77). Rather than deriving this essence, Barthes draws attention to his own role in "conferring" it upon the image in the moment that he encounters the Winter Garden photograph. Once again, we must look to Nietzsche to appreciate Barthes's notion of essence here. Deleuze explains that for Nietzsche, "essence...is a perspectival reality and presupposes a plurality. The essence of thing is discovered in the force which possesses it and which is expressed in it... *essence is always sense and value*" (NP 77). Barthes is clear that he discovers photography's essence in the moment that it "compels him to believe that its referent had really existed," when it gives rise to the "unique emotion" of the "that has been." Here, the essence of photography has less to do with what photography *is* than with the particular affect it unleashes, and in this sense, the essence of photography remains inseparable from the point of view that grasps it in a moment of affective intensity. Finally, the "that has been" suggests not the absolute essence of photography, but the designation of a "sense and value"; it suggests not the eternal truth of photography, but the "truth that it deserves."²² "All the world's photographs formed a Labyrinth," Barthes writes. "I knew that at the center of this Labyrinth I would find nothing but this sole picture, fulfilling Nietzsche's prophecy: 'A labyrinthine man never seeks the truth, but only his Ariadne'" (CL 73). Indeed, the Winter Garden photograph is Barthes's Ariadne, since it reveals to him "the thread which drew (him) towards Photography" (CL 73); it reveals the value that lies beneath his love.

Thus, in the second half of *Camera Lucida*, we begin to distinguish a new typology. Displacing the *punctum*, the "that has been" becomes the aspect of the image that Barthes will elaborate and ultimately defend. He discovers what photography is "for him"; and yet, the "that has been" suggests more than his pleasure in individual photographs. Instead, it comprises the "astonishing" affect--the emotion-value--that photography and photography alone can give him. What, then, is the value that Barthes accords to the "intractable" or the "that has been"? Barthes describes the "that has been" as a "second *punctum*" that is not confined to the detail but reverberates across the entire image: "This new *punctum*," he tells us "is Time, the lacerating emphasis of the *noeme* ("that has been"), its pure representation" (CL 96). Amid the "daily flood of photographs," the "that has been" of the photograph is usually experienced with indifference, yet this indifference extends to Time itself, which is measured according to a homogenous flow of images, the "generalized image-repertoire in which we live" (CL 118). If the image-repertoire produces a time without differences, where one cliché follows another, it requires the force of a different time—Time experienced as a *wound* and not from the perspective of indifference—to break the flow and "return us to the very letter of Time" (CL

119). The Winter Garden photograph gives Barthes not just his mother's singularity, then, but the *value of the singular*, the intractable moment that cannot be equated with any other, and that carries him to its particular place. The wounding encounter with the singular quality of his mother (her *noeme*) thus coincides with the essential value that Barthes bestows upon photography: the value of the singular as such.

Barthes's evaluation of photography finally remains inseparable from his own encounters with individual images—from those intractable moments that produce, for him, the value of photography. "Every truth is a truth of an element, of a time and a place..." Deleuze writes of Nietzsche, and in this sense, we should not take *Camera Lucida* as Barthes's final or absolute word on the image. Indeed, Barthes writes several other evaluations of photographs and films in the late 1970's, including essays on Richard Avedon, Daniel Boudinet, Lucien Clergue and Michelangelo Antonioni, each one emerging from a distinct encounter with the image—from something particular that "advenes" or sparks his desire.²³ To conclude then, I want to turn to one of Barthes's last published writings: an open letter to Michelangelo Antonioni. While Barthes had frequently expressed his resistance to the cinema as the most ideological of mediums, in Antonioni's cinema Barthes discovers a type of image that "troubles" meaning rather than relentlessly replicating it, and that suggests a value of the image to be found in cinema and photography alike.

5. "Beyond" the Image

While Barthes recognized the cinema's potential to suspend meaning and thus to challenge the "ideolects" of society, he more frequently approached it with skepticism as the consummate realm of ideology. "The image captivates me, captures me," he writes in 1975. "I am *glued* to the representation, and it is this glue which establishes the *naturalness* (the pseudo-nature) of the filmed scene... the Ideological would actually be the image-repertoire of a period of history, the Cinema of society" (RL 348). The dogmatism of the cinema is comprised not only by the clichés, the "stereotyped rhetoric" of film, but by the apparatus itself, which compels the subject to identify with a "reality" that relentlessly unfurls. While the stillness of the photograph opens a space of "pensiveness," a foothold for critique, the cinema confronts the viewing subject with "a continuum of image": "Like the real world," Barthes writes in *Camera Lucida*, "the filmic world is sustained by the presumption that, as Husserl says, 'the experience will constantly continue to flow by in the same constitutive style'" (CL 89).²⁴ Yet in Antonioni's cinema, and specifically in his long takes, Barthes discovers an image that is not only "pensive" but acquires a specifically cinematic force, since the *duration* of the shot defines its power.

Barthes describes this power as that of a “scandalous look,” a look that regards things “radically”: “I can imagine that you are a filmmaker,” he tells Antonioni, “because the camera is an eye that is constrained, by its technical disposition, to look. What you add to this disposition... is to look at things radically, until their exhaustion” (OC IV 904).

Indeed, in the penultimate shot of *Professione Reporter* (*The Passenger*), we see the pensiveness of Antonioni’s look, as the camera pulls away from the protagonist (who has adopted another man’s identity and now is fleeing from unknown enemies) and lingers on a courtyard beyond his window. During the course of the seven minute shot, a series of uncertain signifiers float in and out of the frame, (a little boy, the wandering figure of “the girl,” a dog, a succession of automobiles). We are kept in suspense as to the fate of the protagonist, as the camera opens its gaze onto a world of passing details that seems to have lost its narrative coordinates. Barthes describes the “crisis of meaning” that results, as if the camera’s prolonged look *undoes* the world that it regards. “There is true *uncertainty*... Your last films carry this crisis of meaning to the heart of the identity of events (*Blow Up*) or people (*Professione Reporter*)” (OC V 902). Barthes reminds us that a careful technique is required to produce this “vacillation of meaning” (*syncope du sens*), which does not simply reject meaning but catalyzes a process of “making meaning subtle.” Finally, it is in this “subtlety of sense” that Barthes locates the political stakes of Antonioni’s cinema:

Why is this subtlety of meaning decisive? Precisely because meaning, the moment that it is fixed and imposed, the moment that it is no longer subtle, becomes an instrument, a stake of power. To make meaning subtle is thus a secondary political activity, as is any effort which seeks to dissolve, to trouble, to undo the fanaticism of meaning. (OC V 903)

Once again, Barthes defends a certain “fissuring” of meaning as the necessary critical tactic, while suggesting that this activity is never an end in itself. Barthes is drawn to Antonioni’s images not only insofar as they trouble meaning, but also insofar as they suggest the possibility of “what lies beyond meaning” (OC V 901). This “beyond” does not suggest an absence of meaning (since for Barthes, meaning has no “outside”), but rather, a utopic space of possibility – a space from which it becomes possible to imagine “the new world.” “Your concern with our times is not that of a historian, politician, or moralist,” Barthes tells Antonioni, “but rather that of a utopian who seeks to perceive the new world in precise ways, because he desires this world and because he already wants to be a part of it. The vigilance of the artist, which is yours, is the vigilance of love, of desire” (OC V 901). Indeed, in refusing to signify dogmatically, Antonioni’s images contain within themselves a utopic “beyond,” a “blind

field" (*hors-champ*) that is both outside and inside the image, absent and present, suggesting worlds of sense that await discovery.

Finally, I would suggest that this *beyond* is the point that Barthes desires in images, not because it stands "outside" of meaning, but because it "launches his desire" beyond the given towards new possibilities for meaning. "The New is not a fashion," he writes in *Pleasure of the Text*; "it is a value, the basis of all criticism" (PT 40). Indeed, crucial to Barthes's conception of criticism is that it not simply seek the fissures of meaning, but that out of these fissures it produce new forms of discourse—that it imagine *possibilities for sense beyond the given*. In the images he loves, Barthes's discovers a visible realm that is charged with the force of the not-yet-named. It is from this realm that he launches his language beyond what it knows in order to *create* values rather than finding them where they already exist.

Barthes's embrace of this utopic dimension of images takes us a great distance from his earliest writings on film and photography, where he dwells upon their ideological content and their most determined meanings. And yet, perhaps this dual valence of the image as both over- and under-determined is precisely what draws Barthes to film and photography, and what makes them such difficult and productive zones of writing. In his notes for an exhibition by the photographer Daniel Boudinet, Barthes identifies a certain "fatality that unites the writer and the photographer": "The photograph is like the word," he writes, "a form that wants to say something right away. Nothing to do about it: I am constrained to go right to the sense—at least to a sense" ("Daniel Boudinet," 74). Finally, the challenge posed by images coincides with the challenge posed by words, and the writer, photographer and filmmaker share a struggle: to resist the certainty of their mediums, to challenge the "truth" of language and of images, to joyfully know that "the world signifies only that it signifies nothing" (OC I 944). Far from a black hole of meaninglessness, this *nothing* describes a space of possibility, the site from which Barthes begins, and begins again the task of his critical practice.

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Notes

1. David Bordwell describes Barthes as popularizing "a vein of belletristic musing." Bordwell and Noel Carroll eds. *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), 31.

2. For revaluations of Barthes's later writings on the image, see Nancy Shawcross, *Roland Barthes on Photography* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1997) and Jean Michel Rabaté, ed., *Writing the Image After Roland Barthes* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania Press, 1997). For more general considerations of the critical value of Barthes's later writings see Steven Ungar, *Roland Barthes: The Professor of Desire* (University of Nebraska Press, 1983) and Diana Knight, *Barthes and Utopia: Space, Travel, Writing* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1977).
3. Nietzsche added his "Attempt at Self-Criticism" to the beginning of the 1886 edition of *The Birth of Tragedy*. Barthes's invocation of "forgetting" also owes something to Nietzsche, who, as Deleuze points out, treats forgetting as a "plastic regenerative, and curative force." Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 113. (hereafter *NP*)
4. In his biography of Barthes, Louis-Jean Calvet notes that Barthes had been reading Nietzsche as early as 1935, and indeed, Barthes's first published article, "Culture and Tragedy" (1942), centers on Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy*. But as Andy Stafford suggests, it was only in the late 1960's that Barthes began to "engage systematically with Nietzsche's ideas." Stafford, *Roland Barthes, Phenomenon and Myth: An Intellectual Biography* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2004), 289. See also Calvet, *Roland Barthes* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1995) 33.
5. In his essay, "*Longtemps, je me suis couché de bonne heure...*," Barthes writes, "Perhaps it is finally at the heart of this subjectivity, of this very intimacy which I have invoked, perhaps it is at the 'pinnacle of my particularity' that I am scientific without knowing it..." *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989) 290. (hereafter *RL*).
6. Barthes had first invoked the Nietzschean opposition of method/culture in his final course at the *École pratique des hautes études* (*Fragments d'un discours amoureux*). He credits Deleuze with bringing this opposition to light in his 1962 volume *Nietzsche et la Philosophie*, and quotes Deleuze in this passage. See *NP* 123-126.
7. Barthes's play upon *savoir* and *savoir* recalls Nietzsche's relation of *sophos* to the Latin *sapio* (meaning both "I taste" and "I am wise"), suggesting the relation between knowledge and "taste"—a relation which the "generalized knowledge" of Science no longer retains. See Christian Emden, *Nietzsche on Language, Consciousness and Body* (University of Illinois Press, 2005) 17.
8. In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes describes the "attraction certain photographs exert upon him" as an "adventure": "this picture *advenes*, that one doesn't." *Camera Lucida*, trans. Richard Howard, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 19. (hereafter *CL*).
9. See also Barthes essay from 1960 titled "Les Unités traumatiques au cinéma." (*OC I* pp. 1047-1056).
10. Barthes notes that *l'analyse sémiologique* is founded when "a relation of equivalence is posed between two terms where one actualizes the other" (*OC I* 1049).
11. While Barthes seems to privilege the cinematic image as the site of suspended meaning in these early essays, nowhere does he foreclose the possibility of photography achieving this same effect. Rather than sketching a strong line of division between photography and cinema, Barthes seems to be interested in two tendencies or potentials of the image that, as will become clear in his later writings on images, traverse the realms of photography and cinema alike: on the one hand, a tendency to adhere to the form of the sign, where signifiers correspond to determinate conceptual values, and on the other hand, a potential to unleash signifiers without signifieds, to form a sensible surface that eludes determinate meaning. The photography essays, dealing primarily with the institutional images of advertising, clearly concern themselves with the former tendency.
12. In addition to Lacan, Barthes references Benveniste and Kristeva in relation to the term *signifiance*. See Stephen Heath's introduction to *Image/Music/Text* for a discussion of the term.

13. See also *Pleasure of the Text* pp 61-65.
14. Most accounts locate Barthes's "break" with the scientism of semiology between 1966 and 1970. See Rabaté pp 4-5 and chapter 4 of Ungar's *Roland Barthes: Professor of Desire*.
15. Douglas Smith notes the increasing interest in Nietzsche during this period in France, due largely to the publication of Deleuze's *Nietzsche et la Philosophie* (1962) and Pierre Klossowski's *Nietzsche et le cercle vicieux* (1969). Barthes was familiar with both texts. See Smith, *Transvaluations: Nietzsche in France 1872-1972*. London: Clarendon, 1996. 152-162. For discussions of Nietzsche's influence on Barthes see Arkady Plotinsky's essay "Un-scriptable," in which he examines Barthes's concept of the "writerly" (*scriptable*) in relation to Derrida, Nietzsche, and Bataille (in Rabaté, pp 243-258) and Stephen Ungar's *Roland Barthes: Professor of Desire* pp. 58-63.
16. In addition to Nietzsche, Barthes's debt to Derrida is evident in this essay, particularly to his three books published in 1967, *Of Grammatology, Writing and Difference*, and *Speech and Phenomena*. For discussions of Derrida's influence on Barthes see Rabaté's introduction to *Writing the Image* and Arkady Plotinsky's essay in that volume, "Un-Scriptable."
17. In *Roland Barthes*, he writes: "Meaning, before collapsing into insignificance shudders still: *there is meaning*, but this meaning does not permit itself to be 'caught'; it remains fluid, shuddering with a faint ebullition." 97. *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley: U of California Press, 1977).
18. While the obtuse meaning evokes the "deferral" of Derrida's *différance*, for Barthes, this deferral always suggests the positivity of a new desire, and thus, of a new possibility for discourse.
19. In his essay "Roland Barthes's Obtuse, Sharp Meaning," Derek Attridge argues that the "obtuse meaning," like the "grain of the voice" and the *punctum* suggests the "impossible" task of doing justice to a "singular response that resists or exceeds what can be discursively conveyed" (Rabaté, 80). I would add, however, that while Barthes often refers to the impossibility of "naming" that which he loves in art, music, or images, this impossibility only signals the exhaustion of a certain practice of writing (description, predication) in favor of another (evaluation).
20. In *S/Z*, Barthes asks: "What texts would I consent to write (to rewrite), to desire, to put forth as a force in this world of mine?" (4). "The Third Meaning" suggests how the image becomes increasingly "writerly" as opposed to "readerly" (to use Barthes's terms from *S/Z*). Indeed, the notion of writing as a *production* which comes to the fore in *S/Z* relates closely to the practice of evaluation. *S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974).
21. See Barthes's essay "Languages and Style" where he warns that "evaluation cannot be reduced to appreciation" (RL 119). On the philosophical task of creating values, see Nietzsche's "Beyond Good and Evil," section 211.
22. Deleuze writes that in Nietzsche's thought, "we have the truths that we deserve depending on the place we are carrying our existence to, the hour that we watch over and the element that we frequent...Every truth is a truth of an element, of a time and a place. The minotaur does not leave the labyrinth" (NP 102).
23. Barthes's essay on Avedon appears as "Thus and So: Roland Barthes on Richard Avedon," trans. Richard Howard, *University Art Museum Berkeley* (February 1980), 11. "Daniel Boudinet" appears in *Roland Barthes, Le Texte et L'image* (Paris: Pavillon des Arts, 1986). Barthes wrote the preface to Lucien Clergue's *Langage des Sables* (Mareille, 1980). "Cher Antonioni" appears in *OC V* 900-905.
24. Barthes echoes this idea in the section titled "Saturation of the Cinema" in *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, 54.

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