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## THE RELATIONSHIP OF DEATH TO PHOTOGRAPHY IN *CAMERA LUCIDA*

Early in 1977 during a radio interview Roland Barthes gave a preview of what was to become a major theme in *Camera Lucida*:

In the final analysis, what I really find fascinating about photographs, and they do fascinate me, is something that probably has to do with death. Perhaps it's an interest that is tinged with necrophilia, to be honest, a fascination with what has died but is represented as wanting to be alive.<sup>1</sup>

Louis-Jean Calvet, who reported the above comment in his biography of Barthes, said that this was the first time that Barthes had spoken in public about his fascination with death in relationship to photographs. Calvet also says that it was the death of Barthes' mother, Henriette, in the Paris flat they shared on October 25, 1977, that precipitated the writing of *Camera Lucida* two years later after grieving and brooding over her photographs.<sup>2</sup> It was Barthes' final book, for he passed away on March 26, 1980, following a traffic accident, just weeks after publication of *Camera Lucida*.

While it is of human interest that Barthes' final book was framed chronologically by the deaths of arguably two of the most important people in his life, his mother and himself, this paper focuses on the various roles that death played in his philosophical exploration of photography. I intend to show that death was more than an important device that Barthes employed to analyze photography in *Camera Lucida*. For him, death is closely connected to photography in ways that are personal and human, technical, psychological and emotional, artistic, spiritual and essential. The latter descriptive words are helpful to me in dividing up the sections of this paper; these classifications are related and sometimes overlap. In addition to exploring each of these areas, I will introduce a challenge from John Tagg to Barthes' thesis that

the essential feature of photography is the accurate recording of someone or something that has actually existed in a moment of time; what Barthes called the *that-has-been*. I will supplement the latter criticism with the idea that advances in technology, such as digitalized photos, may also challenge Barthes' notion of the essence of photography. Also, I will question Barthes' criticism of photographs that leave out this essential feature for him, the *that-has-been*. Overall, I will tend to agree with much of Barthes' analysis, sharing with him to a degree a fascination with the photograph's ability to capture and hold a moment in history.

### **The Personal/The Human**

Many people commonly shoot and save photographs of people they know, including family members, friends and acquaintances. When we look at such photographs, the subjects either are dead or will die someday. Barthes makes this point about photography in the very first lines of *Camera Lucida* as he recalls a photograph of Napoleon's youngest brother, Jerome, taken in 1852: "I am looking at eyes that looked at the emperor."<sup>3</sup> Perhaps one could say Barthes is making the point doubly in this case. It is not only the photo of a person that once existed in that way in a moment in time and is now deceased. It is also that the person's eyes looked at another now deceased human being of significance to Barthes (and many others). Of the 25 photographs that Barthes used to illustrate *Camera Lucida*, all but two have a person or several people in them; in most the humans are the primary subject matter. My point is that although Barthes was not personally acquainted with many of those pictured in the book, the human being (the person) is important as the subject because death is of primary importance when he looks at a picture. What is there in every photograph, he says, is "the return of the dead."<sup>4</sup> Of course this ability of photography to memorialize a person is related to what Barthes later in the book identifies as the essence of the photograph: the *that-has-been*.

Of course, the photograph that plays a central role in the book portrays someone Barthes knew very well: the Winter Garden picture of his deceased mother as a child. I will say more about the role of this picture elsewhere in the paper.

### **The Technical**

I am using the term technical to cover Barthes' characterization of photography as a process that represents a kind of death caused by objectifying the human being. Looking at a photograph of himself he remarks, "I have become Total-Image...Death in person...they turn me, ferociously, into an object."<sup>5</sup> The author seems to chafe at the experience of having his identity separated from his consciousness: "the Photograph is the advent of myself as other."<sup>6</sup> Also, "I then experience a micro-version of death (of parenthesis): I am truly become a specter."<sup>7</sup> He later analogizes people fixed in photographs to those butterfly collections where the insects have been anesthetized and pinned to a flat surface.

So this is another deathly feature of photography for Barthes. But it would be inaccurate to stop here because he does introduce an important feature of photography that seemingly extends the life of the subject of the photograph, at least for him. He calls it the *punctum*, which is that aspect or detail—it could be a physical object or an element of time—that leaps out of the picture and pierces the viewer. Photos with punctum grab Barthes; those without it, do not. For example, the punctum in the "Family Portrait" is the gold necklace worn by a black woman dressed in her Sunday best. Because it became a sad reminder of a necklace once worn by a relative of Barthes, that necklace has given the black woman a whole life outside the portrait.

Under the heading of technical, I also want to include the significance Barthes attaches to his description of the photograph as literally an emanation of light from the subject that creates

the photographic image on a plate or paper negative covered with chemicals. That radiation of light, he feels, connects us to that person who is now or will be deceased.

### **The Psychological or Emotional**

I am not certain I should be creating a separate category for the psychological or emotional way that Barthes sees death in photography, except that one quote seems to cry out for special attention. After he talks about the death by objectification he feels from looking at photographs of himself, he says something even more revealing and profound: “Ultimately, what I am seeking in the photograph taken of me (the ‘intention’ according to which I look at it) is death: Death is the *eidos* of that photograph.”<sup>8</sup> Obviously this is consistent with his comments about his fascination with death and photography in the radio interview some two years prior to writing the book. It is beyond the scope of this paper to speculate about why the death theme is so important to Barthes. He was already talking about it before the death of his mother. Calvet, the biographer, points out that this fascination with death would not have been news to Barthes’ friends who had heard him talk about his interest in the Shroud of Turin, which some believe bears the imprint of Christ’s face. The fact is that death was important to him, especially in developing his philosophy of photography. I will continue to focus on how death appears in that context.

### **The Artistic**

In his brief discussion of photography as an art form, Barthes deems it closer to theater than to painting because of the role of death. He says “the first actors separated themselves from the community by playing the role of the Dead: to make oneself up was to designate oneself as a body simultaneously living and dead.”<sup>9</sup> He traces this practice of painting the faces of actors or the wearing of masks through totemic, Chinese, Japanese and Indian theater. Barthes finds this

same relation in photography: “however ‘lifelike’ we strive to make it (and this frenzy to be lifelike can only be our mythic denial of an apprehension of death), Photography is a kind of primitive theater, a kind of *Tableau Vivant*, a kind of figuration of the motionless and made-up face beneath which we see the dead.”<sup>10</sup> I think this goes back to what we said earlier; photographs portray either dead people or people who will die in the future.

### **The Spiritual or Metaphysical**

The Winter Garden photograph of his mother at age five became the key to resolving death for Barthes. He ran across it as he was sorting through photographs shortly after her death. This one image was both just and accurate, for in it Barthes could see the gentleness and kindness which constituted her essence for him. It reminded him especially of her last days when he nursed her, holding a bowl of tea for her. Their roles were reversed then, she becoming his little girl, uniting him with the essential child he would later see in the Winter Garden photograph. In that child-like dying condition, Barthes said ultimately he experienced his mother “strong as she had been, my inner law, as my feminine child.”<sup>11</sup> This helped him to resolve death in accord with the views of some philosophers who say the individual transcends himself through the act of procreation, reproducing himself through a child. Barthes had not procreated, but he had “in her very illness engendered my mother... That is what I read in the Winter Garden Photograph.”<sup>12</sup>

The discovery of the Winter Garden picture also helped Barthes to find what he believed was the essence of the photograph. Now he understood that he must look at photographs not from the viewpoint of pleasure, but in relation to love and death.

### **The Essence of Photography**

The essence of photography for Barthes, as mentioned previously, was the capability of capturing or freezing a thing or person in a moment in time. “I can never deny that *the thing has been there*. There is a superimposition of reality and of the past.”<sup>13</sup> What he intentionalized in a photograph was neither art nor communication, but reference.

We often may be indifferent to this unique aspect of photography, he ponders. But the Winter Garden photograph roused him from his indifference, for in it he had identified both truth and reality, to which he credits the genius of photography. By the truth of the Winter Garden photograph Barthes apparently means that it conveyed essential characteristics of his mother, her gentleness and kindness. By reality, he seems to be saying that she actually existed at that moment in time back in 1898. In comparison, he claims that no painting, even if it seemed “true” to him, could compel him to believe the subject had really existed.

This essential feature of photography also raises metaphysical questions for Barthes. Looking at old photos of people he does not know prompts questions about whether any of them are still alive. But beyond that he finds himself asking the more fundamental question: “why is it that I am alive *here and now*?”<sup>14</sup>

### **Questioning the *that-has-been***

The tones of magic and astonishment with which the photograph struck Barthes did not have the same impact on John Tagg. The latter attempts to burst the Barthian bubble with the much more cynical and materialistic view that “the existence of a photograph is no guarantee of a corresponding pre-photographic existent.”<sup>15</sup> He points to the obvious manipulations evident in some photo montages, but does not stop there. For Tagg every photo is the result of some kind of distortion resulting from the material apparatus and social practices.

The optical and chemical devices in the photographic process organize experience and produce a new reality consisting of a paper image, Tagg argues. At every stage the process is subject to chance effects and deliberate decisions, as well as to varied skills and divisions of labor. He questions, therefore, how this process can guarantee the level of truth and reality Barthes claims to have found in the Winter Garden photograph. It is the central argument of Tagg's book, *The Burden of Representation*, "that what Barthes calls 'evidential force' is a complex historical outcome and is exercised by photographs only with certain institutional practices and within particular historical relations, the investigation of which will take us far from an aesthetic or phenomenological context."<sup>16</sup>

My response to Tagg is that he makes some valid points, but I don't think he necessarily destroys Barthes' thesis about the essence of photography. Certainly Tagg is correct about the variety of possible interventions—intentional and unintentional—between the subject of the photo and the actual paper photograph that is produced. But I think he goes too far in concluding that the photograph cannot deliver the confirmation of a past existence that Barthes sees in his mother's photograph. In fact, unless trickery is involved, the Winter Garden photograph is probably the most accurate representation Barthes could have of his deceased mother as she looked at the age of five (the reality in Barthes' jargon). The truth of the photograph with regard to Mrs. Barthe's essential qualities is a subjective feature that only the son can determine. That's why Barthes chose not to display it in his book: he was convinced that those who never knew her as well as he did would be unable to appreciate that same truth.

It makes me wonder if we are dealing with apples and oranges here. I question whether Tagg and Barthes have the same interest in photographs. Tagg seems far more interested in evaluating photographs in their public contexts (social, political and historical), while Barthes is

more concerned about the direct, private interaction between the viewer and the photograph. While it is true that Barthes does make political and historical inferences, it does not appear to be his primary interest in the photos that most deeply affect him. This may be explained by using Barthes' own distinction between *studium* and *punctum*. Let's use the "Family Portrait" on Page 44 of *Camera Lucida* as an example. The *studium*, or cultural background which Barthes brings to the photo, consists of his comments that the African-American family is dressed in their Sunday best, "in an effort to assume White Man's attributes."<sup>17</sup> But the *punctum*, what really pierces Barthes as the viewer, are small details about the standing woman: her belt, strapped pumps and (as mentioned earlier) her gold necklace. While Tagg would probably have much to say about what this picture tells us about American culture, history and the role of African-Americans (*studium*), I think he would be much less interested in those smaller details that captivate Barthes (*punctum*). Tagg can legitimately challenge Barthes' interpretations on the public level of *studium*, but less so on the personal level of *punctum*.

Another challenge to Barthes' notion of the *that-has-been*, one that adds more leverage to Tagg's concerns, comes from the technical advances of digitalization. Anybody that can afford a digital camera and a computer, and learns the appropriate skills, can readily alter photographs. If we aren't sure of the origins of a photograph, how can we verify the reality it purports to portray? In defense of Barthes, his thesis seems to hold where we can verify the authenticity of the photograph. How much longer I can continue to argue this in the face of technical advances, only time will tell.

One further worry of mine about Barthes is his concern, as expressed in the last few pages of *Camera Lucida*, with society's attempts to tame photography in two ways. First, by making photography into an art, and second, by generalizing or banalizing it, the images no

longer possess the essential *that-has-been*. He refers to Commander Puyo's strollers and sado-masochistic pornography to illustrate his point. Since he did not literally illustrate the book with these two examples, I must draw upon my own experience to decipher his meaning. No one can deny that there are many different kinds of photographs in contemporary society that are not intended to portray literal, historical truth in the way that many of Barthes' selections in the book do. But whether manipulated physically or electronically (in the case of digital photos), the image still can be said to have captured something that was there before the camera at a moment in time. This could be true even in the case of a montage that utilizes various people or things captured in different moments of time. But surely Barthes understood this.

Barthes seems to mean that these modern images lack *punctum*. They are devoid of what Barthes calls "the photographic *ecstasy*," meaning they no longer present an absolute and original realism, "obliging the loving and terrified consciousness to return to the very letter of Time."<sup>18</sup> Perhaps this reveals both the strength and weakness of Barthes' philosophy of photography. The *punctum*, that which really reaches out from the photograph and grabs the viewer, is subjective and relative to the viewer. Its emotional strength has been amply described by Barthes, especially in relationship to the Winter Garden image of his mother. The weakness lies in his belief that we, the readers of his book, could not feel the same thing; so he omitted that picture.

My concern is that the subjective nature of *punctum* leaves it up to each viewer of a photograph to experience it. I want to say that there could be a potential detail or time element of some kind in every photograph that might serve as *punctum* for somebody. It might work for me, although not for Barthes. And that's a good thing. As he says in the concluding lines about

confronting the two ways of photography from the standpoint of viewer, “The choice is mine...”<sup>19</sup> And mine too.

### Concluding Remarks

Emotionally, I want to support Barthes’ thesis about the essence of photography, the *that-has-been* and death. I too am drawn to old photographs, those portraying people I have known as well as strangers, and for the same reasons. I am looking into the eyes of someone who was actually in front of the camera at a past moment in time. This is very powerful.

On the other hand, I appreciate different kinds of photographs. There are many different types of photographic images, and what Barthes believes is the essence of a photograph does not apply to all of them; probably not to most. This does not make the latter photographs bad or without value. They just do not move Barthes in the same way as the ones that he focuses on in his book.

Barthes has provided the world with a moving essay containing wonderful insights into photography. His is a valid way of looking at a photograph. It is not the only way.

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<sup>1</sup> Louis-Jean Calvet, Roland Barthes, a Biography, trans. Sarah Wykes (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 220.

<sup>2</sup> Calvet, 226-227.

<sup>3</sup> Roland Barthes, Camera Lucida, Reflections on Photography, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 3.

<sup>4</sup> Barthes, 9.

<sup>5</sup> Barthes, 14.

<sup>6</sup> Barthes, 12.

<sup>7</sup> Barthes, 14.

<sup>8</sup> Barthes, 15.

<sup>9</sup> Barthes, 31.

<sup>10</sup> Barthes, 31-32.

<sup>11</sup> Barthes, 72.

<sup>12</sup> Barthes, 72.

<sup>13</sup> Barthes, 76.

<sup>14</sup> Barthes, 84.

<sup>15</sup> John Tagg, The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), 2.

<sup>16</sup> Tagg, 4.

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<sup>17</sup> Barthes, 43.

<sup>18</sup> Barthes, 119.

<sup>19</sup> Barthes, 119.

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