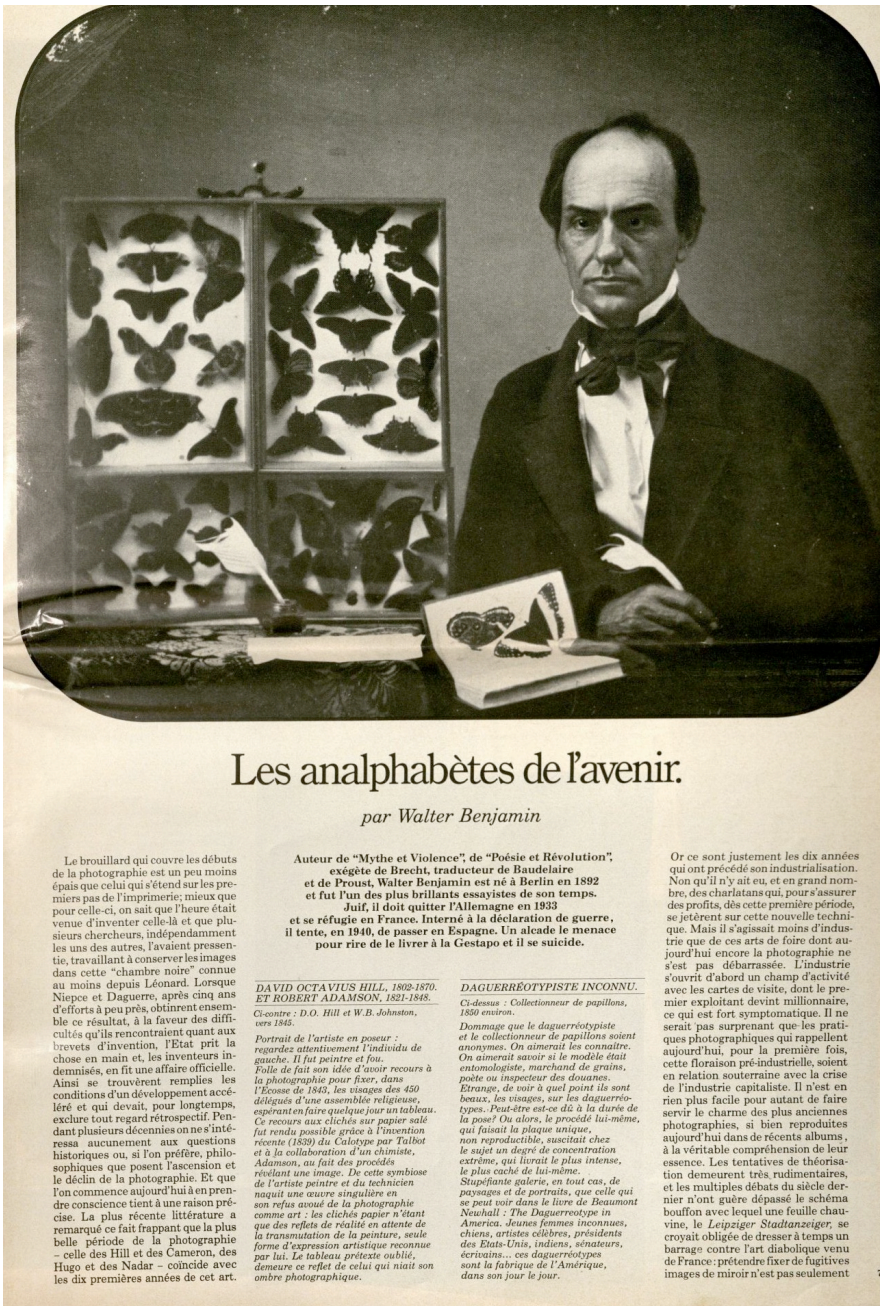
On the Reception of Photography:

Between Roland Barthes and Walter Benjamin

by Russell Stephens



Les analphabètes de l'avenir.

par Walter Benjamin

Le brouillard qui couvre les débuts de la photographie est un peu moins épais que celui qui s'étend sur les premiers pas de l'imprimerie; mieux que pour celle-ci, on sait que l'heure était venue d'inventer celle-là et que plusieurs chercheurs, indépendamment les uns des autres, l'avaient pressentie, travaillant à conserver les images dans cette "chambre noire" connue au moins depuis Léonard. Lorsque Niepce et Daguerre, après cinq ans d'efforts à peu près, obtinrent ensemble ce résultat, à la faveur des difficultés qu'ils rencontraient quant aux brevets d'invention, l'Etat prit la chose en main et, les inventeurs insatisfaits, en fit une affaire officielle. Ainsi se trouvèrent remplies les conditions d'un développement accéléré et qui devait, pour longtemps, exclure tout regard rétrospectif. Pendant plusieurs décennies on ne s'intéressa aucunement aux questions historiques ou, si l'on préfère, philosophiques que posent l'ascension et le déclin de la photographie. Et que l'on commence aujourd'hui à en prendre conscience tient à une raison précise. La plus récente littérature a remarqué ce fait frappant que la plus belle période de la photographie – celle des Hill et des Cameron, des Hugo et des Nadar – coïncide avec les dix premières années de cet art.

Auteur de "Mythe et Violence", de "Poésie et Révolution", exégète de Brecht, traducteur de Baudelaire et de Proust, Walter Benjamin est né à Berlin en 1892 et fut l'un des plus brillants essayistes de son temps. Juif, il doit quitter l'Allemagne en 1933 et se réfugie en France. Interné à la déclaration de guerre, il tente, en 1940, de passer en Espagne. Un alcade le menace pour rire de le livrer à la Gestapo et il se suicide.

DAVID OCTAVIUS HILL, 1802-1870. ET ROBERT ADAMSON, 1821-1848.

Ci-contre : D.O. Hill et W.B. Johnston, vers 1845.

Portrait de l'artiste en poseur : regardez attentivement l'individu de gauche. Il fut peintre et fou. Folle de fait son idée d'avoir recours à la photographie pour fixer, dans l'Ecosse de 1843, les visages des 450 délégués d'une assemblée religieuse, espérant en faire quelque jour un tableau. Ce recours aux clichés sur papier salé fut rendu possible grâce à l'invention récente (1839) du Calotype par Talbot et à la collaboration d'un chimiste, Adamson, au fait des procédés révélant une image. De cette symbiose de l'artiste peintre et du technicien naquit une œuvre singulière en son refus avoué de la photographie comme art : les clichés papier n'étant que des reflets de réalité en attente de la transmutation de la peinture, seule forme d'expression artistique reconnue par lui. Le tableau prétexte oublié, demeure ce reflet de celui qui niait son ombre photographique.

DAGUERRÉOTYPISTE INCONNU.

Ci-dessus : Collectionneur de papillons, 1850 environ.

Dommage que le daguerréotypiste et le collectionneur de papillons soient anonymes. On aimerait les connaître. On aimerait savoir si le modèle était entomologiste, marchand de grains, poète ou inspecteur des douanes. Etrange, de voir à quel point ils sont beaux, les visages, sur les daguerréotypes. Peut-être est-ce dû à la durée de la pose? Ou alors, le procédé lui-même, qui faisait la plaque unique, non reproductible, suscitait chez le sujet un degré de concentration extrême, qui livrait le plus intense, le plus caché de lui-même. Stupéfiante galerie, en tout cas, de paysages et de portraits, que celle qui se peut voir dans le livre de Beaumont Newhall : The Daguerreotype in America. Jeunes femmes inconnues, chiens, artistes célèbres, présidents des Etats-Unis, indiens, sénateurs, écrivains... ces daguerréotypes sont la fabrique de l'Amérique, dans son jour le jour.

Or ce sont justement les dix années qui ont précédé son industrialisation. Non qu'il n'y ait eu, et en grand nombre, des charlatans qui, pour s'assurer des profits, dès cette première période, se jetèrent sur cette nouvelle technique. Mais il s'agissait moins d'industrie que de ces arts de foire dont aujourd'hui encore la photographie ne s'est pas débarrassée. L'industrie s'ouvrit d'abord un champ d'activité avec les cartes de visite, dont le premier exploitant devint millionnaire, ce qui est fort symptomatique. Il ne serait pas surprenant que les pratiques photographiques qui rappellent aujourd'hui, pour la première fois, cette floraison pré-industrielle, soient en relation souterraine avec la crise de l'industrie capitaliste. Il n'est en rien plus facile pour autant de faire servir le charme des plus anciennes photographies, si bien reproduites aujourd'hui dans de récents albums, à la véritable compréhension de leur essence. Les tentatives de théorisation demeurent très rudimentaires, et les multiples débats du siècle dernier n'ont guère dépassé le schéma bouffon avec lequel une feuille chauvine, le *Leipziger Stadtanzeiger*, se croyait obligée de dresser à temps un barrage contre l'art diabolique venu de France : prétendre fixer de fugitives images de miroir n'est pas seulement

First page of French translation of Walter Benjamin's *Little History of Photography* in the Parisian magazine, *Nouvel Observateur.*

In November of 1977, a French translation of Walter Benjamin's, *Little History of Photography* was included in a special issue of the prominent Parisian magazine, *Nouvel Observateur*. Re-titled *Les analphabetes de l'avenir*, the essay was only the second translation of Benjamin's *Kleine Geschitchte der Photographie* to appear in French (Iversen 71),[1] with the original 1931 German version having been published in the Berlin periodical *Die literarische Welt* during the last years of the Weimar Republic (Benjamin 528). In the late spring of 1979, roughly a year and a half after the appearance of Benjamin's essay in *Nouvel Observateur*, Roland Barthes completed a manuscript subsequently entitled *La chambre claire: Note sur la photographie*, which delineated his own critical approach to the medium of photography (Calvet 235-236).[2] This new document by Barthes concluded by citing the time period over which it had been written – April 15th to June 3rd, 1979 (184). An English translation of Barthes' text was subsequently published in 1981 under the title *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. The 1977 special issue of *Nouvel Observateur*, which included Benjamin's essay, was dedicated to the subject of photography. Interspersed among its articles, it exhibited numerous striking photographs. When comparing Barthes' *Camera Lucida* with this 1977 *special issue*, one is immediately struck by the fact that Barthes' short book, which itself contains only twenty-five images, took six of its photographs directly from the pages of *Nouvel Observateur*. Fully four of the images he presents and discusses, including G. W. Wilson's 1863 picture of Queen Victoria on horseback and Alexander Gardner's 1865 image of Lewis Payne awaiting his execution, were contained within Benjamin's republished essay. In fact, in the original layout of Benjamin's *Little History of Photography* the images of Queen Victoria and Lewis Payne were presented side-by-side. Of the haunting

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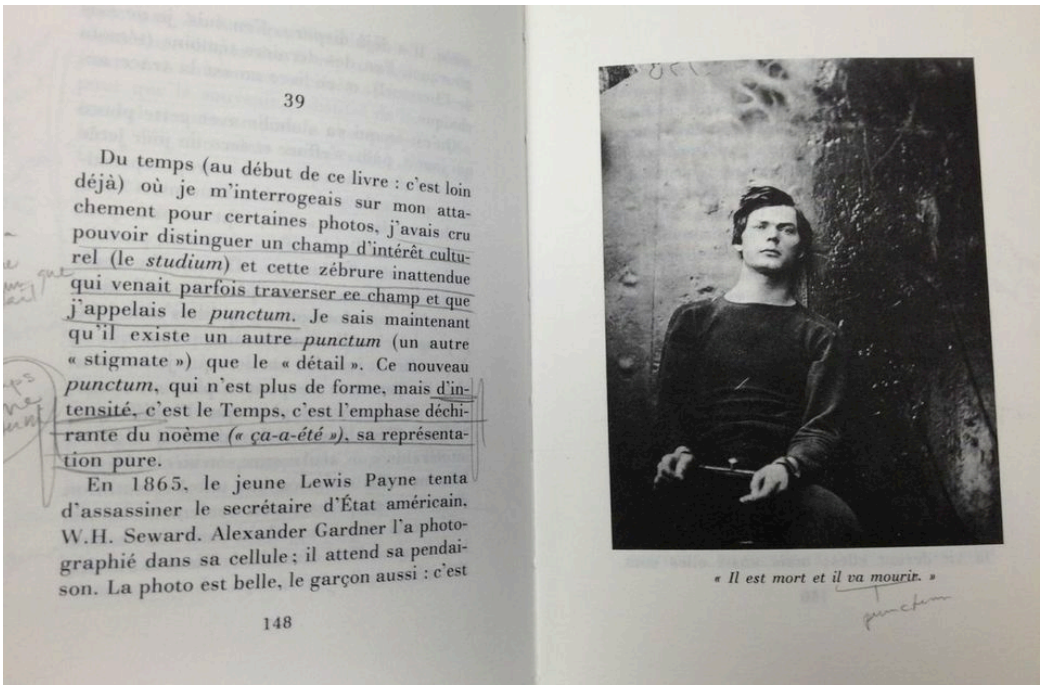
[1] "*Little History* was first translated into French in 1971." Iversen 71.

[2] "He (Barthes) wrote the whole of *La chambre claire (Camera Lucida*) at one go or almost, during the period between 15 April and 3 June, 1979." Calvet 235–236.

Nouvel Observateur - Alexander Gardner's 1865 image of Lewis Payne awaiting his execution; G. W. Wilson's 1863 picture of Queen Victoria on horseback.

photograph of Lewis Payne, Barthes writes, "… he is going to die … This will be and has been" (95-96).



Alexander Gardner's 1865 image of Lewis Payne within the two-page layout of Roland Barthes's *La chambre claire: Note sur la photographie.*

While the special issue of *Nouvel Observateur* from which Barthes' took the photographs is acknowledged by him in the bibliography of *La chambre claire*, there is no effective corresponding citation for *Les analphabets de l'avenir*, the French version of Benjamin's *Little History of Photography*. Interestingly, neither are the *Nouvel Observateur* or Benjamin's text subsequently cited within *Camera Lucida*. In an interview conducted in late 1977, Barthes does acknowledge the importance of Benjamin's writings on photography, saying, "There are few great texts of intellectual quality on photography. I don't know of very many. There is Walter Benjamin's essay, which is good because it is premonitory" (Barthes *On Photography* 354).[3] However, Barthes never clarifies exactly which of Benjamin's essays he is speaking of, and could well have been referring to the 1936 essay, *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility* which, at the time, had also recently been translated into French (Batchen *Palinode* 25). Underlining the fact that Barthes would most likely have been familiar with Benjamin's *Little History of Photography* essay was his professional proximity to the *Nouvel Observateur* itself. For a period of four months just prior to writing *La chambre claire* (*Camera Lucida*), Barthes had actually been employed by *Nouvel Observateur* as a weekly columnist (Calvet 230-231).[4]

Recent scholarship has highlighted a number of other correspondences between the two works. Geoffrey Batchen suggests that both essays were structured around a central "fulcrum" at the "half way point of the text" upon which their respective arguments "pivot" (260). Batchen argues that while Benjamin locates the concept of the "aura" at the center of *Little History of Photography*, *Camera Lucida* is divided into two parts of twenty-four sections, "so that one half of the book is a mirror image of the other" (260). Additionally, Batchen also notes that both Barthes and Benjamin approach the

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[3] Taken from an interview conducted by Angelo Schwarz (late 1977). Barthes "On Photography" 354.
[4] Hired by Jean Daniel, editor of *Nouvel Observateur*, Barthes weekly column in the magazine ran from December 1978 to March 26th 1979. Calvet 230–231.

photographic medium through critical analyses of everyday "banal" images (260). As such, within this approach, Benjamin is seen to discuss one of Karl Dauthendey's nineteenth century engagement photographs (Father of the Poet), while Barthes chooses to examine a childhood image of his mother (510-511).

> The photograph was very old. The corners were blunted from having been pasted into an album, the sepia print had faded, and the picture just managed to show two children standing together at the end of a little wooden bridge in a glassed-in conservatory, what was called a Winter Garden in those days. My mother was five at the time (1898), her brother seven. (Barthes 67)

Professor Margaret Olin has gone so far as to suggest that the title "Winter Garden Photograph" which Barthes' gives to this family picture of his mother and uncle, and which is clearly the most important image discussed by him within *Camera Lucida*, could have actually been derived from Benjamin's essay. Olin notes that Barthes never shows or reproduces this seminal childhood photograph of his mother within his book. She asserts that this was likely because the photograph didn't exist (Olin 81). Olin argues that Barthes had been inspired to label the imaginary image as the "Winter Garden Photograph," based upon a reference within the body of Benjamin's text to a melancholic picture of a six year old Franz Kafka (81). In *Little History of Photography* the English translation of Benjamin's allusion to Kafka reads, "There the boy stands, (Kafka) perhaps six years old, dressed up in a humiliatingly tight child's suit overloaded with trimming, in a sort of greenhouse landscape" (515). However, Olin points out that the French text found in *Les analphabetes de l'avenir* and *Nouvel Obserateur*'s special issue translates the phrase "greenhouse landscape" as a "winter garden" (81). Thus, according to Olin, the oblique reference to a decorative photographic background within

Benjamin's essay provided Barthes with the term for what she refers to as his "fabricated" "Winter Garden Photograph" (83). However, these observations aside, there has been little attempt in the literature to follow the development, alteration, or continuity of Benjamin's ideas within Barthes' analysis of photography. Accordingly, I will examine the ways in which aspects of Benjamin's critical approach to the medium have influenced and shaped Barthes' text.

Little History of Photography

As mentioned, Benjamin's *Little History of Photography* was originally published in 1931. The essay attempts to unfold the history of what, at the time had been a visual art form for just ninety years, through an exploration of the connections between the technological and social aspects of the medium. Benjamin begins by examining photography's first decade which took place from the late 1830's to the late 1840's - a period that he refers to as its "pre-industrial heyday" (507). During this phase, the medium was predicated on the iodized silver plate reproductive process known as the daguerreotype (507-508). According to Benjamin, at this time, photography was closer to "the arts of the fairground" than to that of industry (507). Benjamin also distinguishes this earlier period from the slightly later period of the visiting-card picture, when he suggests that in the latter, "industry made its first real inroads" into the new medium, and its manufacturer "became a millionaire" (507). In 1860, *carte de visite* effectively became a craze, as unlike the daguerreotype, it allowed for the realization of multiple inexpensive images from a single plate (Coe 35). Benjamin notes that within the first decade of the advent of the new medium, a passionate debate was sparked with respect to its impact and significance (508). On the one side of the debate were the reactionary, anti-technical

forces who opposed its use. They argued that a machine could never match 'God's' superior creative hand.

> Man is made in the image of God, and God's image cannot be captured by any machine of human devising. The utmost the artist may venture, borne on the wings of divine inspiration, is to reproduce man's God-given features without the help of any machine, in the moment of highest dedication, at the higher bidding of his genius.[5] (Benjamin 508)

For Benjamin, this argument stood as an embodiment of "the philistine notion of art," which was a "stranger to all technical considerations, (and) which feels that its end is nigh with the alarming appearance of the new technology" (508). On the other side of the debate were those who spoke perceptively about the probable wholesale human benefit of the new invention (508), "from astrophysics to philology: alongside the prospects for photographing the stars and planets we find the idea of establishing a photographic record of the Egyptian hieroglyphs" (508). However, one of the aspects that set the critical tack of *Little History of Photography* apart from other more orthodox approaches to the history of the medium was the importance Benjamin placed on the reading of his own personal, emotional, and esoteric responses to photographic images as a dimension of their aesthetic effect. This included being acutely attuned to discerning subtle shifts in the very nature of images arising out of the new medium.

Benjamin demonstrates this approach in a discussion of an unexpected phenomenon that became associated with this new technology during the first years following its introduction. He points out that initial photographic endeavors which had

[5] Benjamin quotes from the German newspaper *Leipziger Stadtanzeiger*. 508.

been undertaken by early practitioners who had been schooled in the art of painting often met with unintended consequences. Moments of pictorial reception which could not be explained by their previous experience as painters began to surface within photographs taken of human subjects. Here, Benjamin specifically cites the 1840's work of David Octavius Hill (508-510). Inadvertently breaking with the characteristic 'posed' image, Hill had taken a series of what Benjamin describes as 'unpretentious makeshift' photographic studies of human subjects. Hill had intended these only for his own use as visual research for a fresco he was producing for the Church of Scotland (508-510). Benjamin muses upon some unexpected effects which surfaced within Hill's photographs of a Newhaven fishwife:

> With photography, however, we encounter something new and strange: in Hill's Newhaven fishwife, her eyes cast down in such indolent, seductive modesty, there remains something that goes beyond testimony to the photographer's art, something that cannot be silenced, that fills you with an unruly desire to know what her name was, the woman who was alive there, who even now is still real and will never consent to be wholly absorbed in "art." (Benjamin 510)

The "…new … strange … something ..." that "…goes beyond testimony to the photographer's art…" which Benjamin saw within Hill's fishwife images included gestures and details which had not previously been depicted by painters (510). Benjamin suggests that the gestures and details which now surfaced specifically within the realm of photography due to the medium's clarity and fidelity to nature had the effect of inextricably altering the reception, reading, and experience of the image (510). According to Benjamin, unlike in the more deliberate field of painting, the technology of

photography allows for small details within the frame to surface, conveying meaning, which in this case, had overridden Hill's painterly intentions. The term Benjamin uses to describe this phenomenon within photography is the "optical unconscious."

> Whereas it is a commonplace that, for example, we have some idea what is involved in the act of walking (if only in general terms), we have no idea at all what happens during the fraction of a second when a person actually takes a step. Photography, with its devices of slow motion and enlargement, reveals the secret. It is through photography that we first discover the existence of this optical unconscious, just as we discover the instinctual unconscious through psychoanalysis. (Benjamin 510-511)

In her own book of the same name - *The Optical Unconscious* – critic and cultural theorist Rosalind Krauss discusses Benjamin's use of the term and the analogy he makes between the photographic process and psychoanalysis, which she describes at one level as "strange" (178). Krauss asks,

> …what can we speak of in the visual field that will be an analogue of the unconscious itself, a structure that presupposes first a sentient being within which it operates, and second a structure that only makes sense insofar as it is in conflict with that being's consciousness? Can the optical field – the world of visual phenomena: clouds, sea, sky, forest – have an unconscious? (Krauss 178-179)

Despite acknowledging that Benjamin's use of the term is "at an angle" to her own, Krauss does zero in on an understanding of Benjamin's concept of the optical

unconscious as being related to the application of technology (179). Drawing upon both the *Little History of Photography* and Benjamin's later 1936 essay, *Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility* Krauss states that for Benjamin,

> …the camera is an instrument that enlarges vision, much the way Freud spoke of it in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, where technological advances are viewed as a set of "prosthetic limbs" that expand the power of the individual. Benjamin likens the camera for example to the surgeon's knife that can operate dispassionately on the human body and by seeing it in fragments can enter more deeply into reality. (Krauss 179)

In fact, in his 1936 *Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility* essay, Benjamin moves even beyond the concept of technology as a "prosthetic limb." In this essay, he discusses how human perception itself, the way in which we see and experience the world, is not a fixed entity but one that has been historically conditioned by the increasing productive capacity of world.

> *Just as the entire mode of existence of human collectives changes over long historical periods, so too does their mode of perception.* [Benjamin's italics]; The way in which human perception is organized – the medium in which it occurs – is conditioned not only by nature but by history. (Benjamin 104)

Within the modern context, the medium of photography plays a role in the reorganization of human perception through its ability to bring things closer. As such, "everyday the need to possess the object in close-up in the form of a picture, or rather a copy, becomes more imperative" (Benjamin *Little* 519). The ability to copy, or to

mechanically reproduce the surrounding world, has lead to the destruction of what Benjamin refers to as the 'aura' of the object – its uniqueness in space and time (518-519).[6] Much like in the revelation of sedimentary layers, the historic progression which Benjamin unfolds within *Little History of Photography* evidences the ways in which technological advances within the medium of photography had served to shift the nature of modern experience. For example, in the 1840's David Hill's subjects described the phenomenon of being photographed as being "a great mysterious experience" (512). This would remain the case even if for these people, as Benjamin continues, the actual experience was no more than the consciousness of "standing before a device which in the briefest time could capture the visible environment in a picture that seemed as real and alive as nature itself (512)."[7] However, the arrival of better, faster lenses in the later part of the century resulted in a shift with respect to what was considered to be "photographically" real. In the 1880's, the disappearance of deep blacks or darkness from pictures further enhanced the ability of the medium to record "as faithfully as any mirror" (517). Yet, Benjamin notes that immediately thereafter, photographers began to simulate this lost quality of darkness from the past (517). In other words, the lost 'aura' of one generation's pictures was then mimicked by the succeeding generation.[8] So, while on the one hand, Benjamin saw photography as a medium which cut more deeply into reality and which brought to light new layers of detail within the world, he also saw it as diminishing the aura and the experience of these objects.

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[6] In the *Work of Art* essay Benjamin further develops this idea: "In the light of this description, we can readily grasp the social basis of the aura's present decay. It rests on two circumstances, both lined to the increasing emergence of the masses and the growing intensity of their movements. Namely: *the desire of the present-day masses to "get closer" to things, and their equally passionate concern for overcoming each thing's uniqueness by assimilating it as a reproduction.*" Benjamin *Art in the Age* 105.

[7] In this passage Benjamin uses quotes that appear to reference comments made by individuals at the time (1840's) commenting on their experience. However, he provides no citations. Benjamin 512

[8] This is a phenomenon we see replicated in our own time when some digital video is given "scratches" and "flashes" of "over exposure" on its edited images to provide the effect of the analog film footage that it has historically replaced.

As a critical strategy, Benjamin's interest in the "particular," the "trace," or "the microscopic" can be linked back to his earliest inclinations. In the 1910's, his readings of the Kabbalah, the ancient text of Jewish mysticism, had centered his focus on the idea that meaning could arise from within a document's smallest fragment (Buck-Morss 74-75). Later, this thinking evolved into a method of philosophical cognition which, according to Susan Buck-Morss, provided a means for making "the particularity of the object" release a significance that dissolved the object's reified appearance (74). Thus, according to Benjamin, though seemingly small and inconsequential, the microscopic, or "concrete particular" was understood to have the power to expose larger unintended social and historical truth (74).[9] As such, with respect to the importance of small and insignificant details of an object, Buck-Morss argues that Benjamin had a strong influence on the thinking of Theodor Adorno (74).[10] What is unique to his 1931 essay, *Little History of Photography* is that Benjamin applies the concept of the "particular" as a theory of reception with respect to the photographic image. Speaking of the importance of the small details within the realm of what he labels the "optical unconscious," which have now have been brought to light by the power of this new medium Benjamin states,

> Photography reveals in this material physiognomic aspects, image worlds, which dwell in the smallest things - meaningful yet covert enough to find a hiding place in waking dreams, but which, enlarged and capable of formulation, make the difference between technology and magic visible as a thoroughly historical variable. (Benjamin 512)

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[9] "The particular was not 'a case of the general'; it could not be identified by placing it within a general category, for its significance lay in its contingency rather than its universality." Buck-Morss 76

[10] "At the crossroads of two seemingly contradictory positions, insisting on the dialectical relationship of the phenomenon to the totality and, at the same time, on the necessity for microcosmic analysis, [Theodor] Adorno grounded his concept of the 'concrete particular.' There can be no doubt that it was Walter Benjamin who convinced Adorno of the validity of this approach." Buck-Morss 74.

Camera Lucida

There are parallels to aspects of Benjamin's methodological approach to the medium of photography within *Camera Lucida*. Barthes' text encompasses a search for what he refers to as photography's "essence" or *noeme* (76-77). In some respects, his entire book can be understood as a long attempt to both approach and define the medium. To this end, he begins by rejecting a myriad of classification systems - realism, pictorialism, the landscape, as well as notions of the "amateur" and "professional" as being external to the "object," and therefore incapable of revealing what is actually "new" about photography (4). Barthes also emphasizes his "unease" and "ultimate dissatisfaction" at deploying the critical language of several different discourses, among them sociology, semiology, and psychoanalysis (8). In this respect he notes that, "having resorted to any such language to whatever degree, each time I felt it hardening and thereby tending to reduction and reprimand, I would gently leave it and seek elsewhere: I began to speak differently" (8). Thus, quickly finding himself in a dilemma, Barthes moves to resolve his crisis by rendering himself the measure of his own investigation - "So I decide to take myself as the mediator of all Photography" (8). Over the course of the book, he sets out to discover photography's 'universal' quality. In so doing, he determines his mediating principle to be that which he personally finds appealing within photographs. Barthes labels his personal methodology as a "cynical Phenomenology," one laced with the power "of *affect,*" allowing it to make room for the qualities of "desire" and "mourning" (20-21). However like Benjamin, Barthes has simply broadened his own critical approach to photography to include his own personal receptivity and subjective experience of the medium. Barthes states, "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, and I think" (21).

In the book, Barthes surrounds himself with a small number of what he considers to be his own (found) photographs. In examining an image taken by the Dutch photographer Koen Wessing of a 1979 battle scene from Nicaragua, he notices the juxtaposition of two discontinuous elements – soldiers and nuns. Barthes notes that he prefers viewing heterogeneous images such as Wessing's photograph, which exhibit a contrasting duality (23-25). Other images from the same reportage, but which "bore no mark or sign," and which were unvarying in their display of the horrors of rebellion and war, were less engaging for Barthes (25). Based on his acute observations of his own reactions to these images, Barthes manages to distill two codependent elements of interest within a picture, and he gives both of these Latin names. The first is *studium*, which he defines as the overall field of information present in a photograph. Barthes states that *studium* does not mean, at least not immediately, "study," but rather the application to a thing, a taste for someone, a kind of general enthusiastic commitment, of course, but without special acuity (26). The second Latin term is *punctum*, by which Barthes means variably "a cut," "a sting," as well as "a role of the dice" (27). He suggests that "a photograph's *punctum* is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)" (27). In a 1959 image of a Russian street scene, Barthes suggests that the *studium* presents the subject of "what Russians wear" (28-30).[11] According to Barthes, a photo based solely on *studium* is something you can like, but will never "love" (27).[12] However, the *punctum* is different from a qualitative point of view, and it is the element of a photograph that pierces the *studium* (27). For Barthes, this act enables the picture to "touch him," or "arouse great sympathy" (42-43). For example, a 1954 New York photograph by William Klein has the *studium* of a scene from Little Italy (46).

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[11] "The photographer teaches me how the Russians dress." Barthes 28–30.

[12] "The *studium* is of the order of liking, not of loving; it mobilizes a half desire, a demi-volition; it is the same sort of vague, slippery, irresponsible interest one takes in the people, the entertainments, the books, the clothes one finds *all right*." Barthes 27.

However, the *punctum* which bursts through this image is the element of one small smiling boy's bad teeth, which Barthes declares has "stubbornly" grabbed his attention (43-46).

Some photographs, like those from news magazines or pornography, work only at the level of *studium*. For Barthes, there was "nothing more homogeneous than a pornographic photograph" (41). Pornography is like, "a shop window which shows only one illuminated piece of jewelry, it is completely constituted by the presentation of only one thing: sex: no secondary, untimely object ever manages to half conceal, delay, or distract …" (41). Barthes refers to these types of banal images as "unary photographs," images that emphatically transform reality "without doubling it" (40-42). They are homogenous, entirely coded compositions. *Punctum*, on the other hand, can be seen as an uncoded fragment lacking in intentionality (47). It is the "detail" within the *studium* that "alas all to rarely" catches his attention (42). Barthes states, "I feel that its mere presence changes my reading, that I am looking at a new photograph, marked in my eyes with a higher value. This "detail" is the *punctum*" (42).

However *punctum,* when seen as a detail (42-43) (or fragment) that bursts out of the image, can be likened to Benjamin's concept of the particular. In fact, both "*punctum*" and the "particular" describe the effect of a small element within a photograph that pierces or breaks through a larger field of representation. In Benjamin's case, that field was considered to be the "interesting" or "arty" photography of journalism (526). It is a place of fetishism, where "the creative in photography is its capitulation to fashion" and the watchword is the world of the "beautiful" (526). Analogous in some respects to Barthes' *studium*, it is something that Benjamin argued could help perpetuate reified social relationships (526). Here, Benjamin quotes Brecht as saying that, "…less

than ever does the mere reflection of reality reveal anything about reality. A photograph of the Krupp works or the AEG tells us next to nothing about these institutions" (526). Barthes also references Brecht's invocation of the weakness of the criticality of photography stating, "he was hostile to Photography because (he said) of the weakness of its critical power; but his own theater has never been able to be politically effective on account of its subtlety and its aesthetic quality" (36). Notably, Barthes never provides a direct citation for the quote (36).

At this point, in attempting to discern the degree of influence that Benjamin's essay had on the formulation of Barthes' ideas with respect to photography, it is necessary to step back and examine a text that Barthes had written ten years earlier on the topic of photography.

The Third Meaning

Barthes' ideas of *studium* and *punctum* were prefigured in a text he wrote on the subject of photography that appeared a decade before *Camera Lucida*. Published in 1970, *The Third Meaning: Research Notes on Several Eisenstein Stills* provides an examination of movie stills from the work of the Soviet Russian film director Sergei Eisenstein, which includes images from *The Battleship Potemkin* and *Ivan the Terrible*. Barthes begins his analysis by defining the presence of three separate levels of meaning. He quickly enumerates the first two levels which he names *information (communication)* and *symbolism (signification)*, and then sets them aside. The primary focus of his essay is an exploration of what he refers to as "the third meaning," that which exceeds signification within the image. Characterized by Barthes as simultaneously "persistent and fugitive, apparent and evasive," he names this third level *the obtuse meaning* (Barthes 44).

In this essay, Barthes lays out an approach to photography in which small details, qualities, inflections, either separately, or in unison with other details, challenge, disrupt, shift or otherwise alter the image's overall dominant meaning. Barthes explicitly states as much when he refers to the role of what he terms *the obvious meaning* (44) within the image. Over the course of the text, he describes numerous instances in which *the obvious meaning* within Eisenstein's respective movie images is undercut by this third or *obtuse* layer. For example, in an image from the funeral of the figure of Vakulinchuk in *The Battleship Potemkin,* we are presented with a close-up of a young woman bent over in mourning. However, because of her actual position within the frame, we can only see the edges of the scarf covering her shoulder and the very top of her head, which is dipping forward and out of view (49-50). Here, Barthes argues that the image's obvious meaning is undercut by an obtuse meaning residing within the particular details of the shape and style of the woman's hair. He states, "the folk significance of the wool scarf (obvious meaning) *stops* at the chignon; here begins the fetish – the hank of hair – a kind of *non-negating mockery* of expression. The entire obtuse meaning (its power to disturb) functions in the excessive wad of hair" (49).

In another still from Vakulinchuk's funeral, we are shown the medium close-up of an old weeping woman. Referring to this image, Barthes notes how several details including an "absurdly low kerchief" and the woman's "squinting eyelids" again come together to undercut the obvious meaning within image (48). Barthes observes that, "united with the noble grief of the obvious meaning they (low kerchief, squinting eyelids) form a dialogism so tenuous that there is no guarantee of its intentionality. The characteristic of this third meaning – at least in Eisenstein – actually blurs the limit separating expression from disguise…" (48). Tellingly, Barthes points out that in a

second still image of this old woman taken from exactly the same angle but either a few moments earlier or later, the details underpinning the obtuse meaning have vanished, leaving no more than the image's obvious meaning and message of grief (48). In other words, Barthes considers the phenomenon of details running counter to the obvious meaning within the frame as precariously balanced and fleeting.

Throughout his essay, Barthes continues to expand and elaborate upon the nature of obtuse meaning, noting that "unlike the obvious meaning, it copies nothing," and also that it lies "outside (articulated) language, but still within interlocution" (Barthes 48). He also references George Bataille's infamous image of the "big toe" as identifying "one of the possible regions of the obtuse meaning" (51). It should be noted that Bataille was an extremely complex and idiosyncratic social critic and thinker who conceived of human existence as being entirely mediated by and through a language which resided exterior to our own being (Hollier 65).[13] However, Barthes' most far reaching definition concerns his measure of the obtuse meaning in relation to the idea of narrative.

> The obtuse meaning is clearly the epitome of counter-narrative; disseminated, reversible, trapped in its own temporality, it can establish (if followed) only an altogether different "script" from the one of shots,

[13] In his essay, Hollier uses the metaphor of the Labyrinth (drawn from Bataille) to explain and describe Bataille's understanding of the relationship of human beings to language: "Human beings have a labyrinthine structure, the labyrinth is the structure of existence because existence is unthinkable without language ('man existing entirely through language') that is, it could not take place without the mediation of words (words, their mazes…). Language makes man into a relationship to, an opening to; it prohibits his withdrawing into utopian self-presence, cuts off his retreat toward closure. It dispossesses him of his origins. Language is the practical negation of solipsism. The impossibility of finding a basis within oneself. Like a negative umbilical cord (one that would attach a person not to the origin but to the absence or origin), an umbilical lack that must be produced through writing, and in writing, until death comes to cut the thread." Hollier 65.

> sequences, and syntagms (whether technical or narrative): an unheard-of script, counter-logical and yet "true." (Barthes 57)

In other words, the obtuse meaning not only stands in opposition to narrative, but it also provides the fragmentary embodiment of another as yet unfulfilled contingent reality. It is the other "script," the other reality, that lies submerged and "unheard" within story.

Near the conclusion of the text, Barthes references Eisenstein's theories with respect to film editing and montage, and acknowledges that they provided part of the critical basis for his approach to the photographic medium. In the 1920's, Soviet cinema developed extensive theories about montage and the process of film editing. Experiments by Lev Kuleshov demonstrated that ideas could be suggested to an audience simply but cutting back and forth between different images. For example, he showed that cutting between an image of a man and a bowl of soup could evoke the idea of hunger (Bentancourt 97). Eisenstein's own theories of montage were based on notions of collision (Eisenstein 34-37).[14] He argued that new ideas "exploded" from the juxtaposition of different images (34-37). The rising stone lions which appear at the end of the "Odessa Steps" sequence in his movie *The Battleship Potemkin* are one of the most well-known examples of this phenomenon. Following a civilian massacre by the Czar's troops in the town of Odessa, mutineers on the battleship *Potemkin* respond by launching an artillery attack. In the midst of the bombardment, Eisenstein's rapid montage of three successive images of stone lions – one sleeping, one waking, and one rising to its feet - give the impression that the marble creature has come to life. But more crucial for Eisenstein is the idea that explodes out from the edited sequence - that of the city of Odessa itself rising up against the horror of the Czar's injustice.

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[14] Also see Eisenstein's own books: *Film Form* and *The Film Sense.*

Having cited Eisenstein's theory of a film-based montage in which concepts explode between images, Barthes then quotes from the director with respect to the possibility of a montage existing within the image frame.

> "… the basic center of gravity …shifts to inside the fragment, into elements included within the image itself. And the center of gravity is no longer the element 'between shots'- the shock, but the element 'inside the shot'- the accentuation within the fragment…" Of course there is no audio-visual montage within the still, but Eisenstein's formulation is a general one, insofar as it establishes a right to syntagmatic disjunction of images and demands a vertical reading, as Eisenstein call it, of the articulation. (Barthes *Third Meaning* 57)

Here, Barthes underlines the fact that Eisenstein himself has left the possibility of an internal montage within the frame of the image open. Thus, Barthes both locates and attempts to legitimize the critical possibilities of *the obtuse meaning*.

In *The Third Meaning,* which was published in 1970, we can make out a prefiguring of the ideas of *studium* and *punctum* through the notions of the *obvious meaning* and the *obtuse meaning*. Here, the *obvious meaning*(s) of grief, revolution, and fascism which Barthes' discusses with respect to the still images can be seen to be crossing over into the "homogeneous" subject themes of war, pornography, and rebellion used within *Camera Lucida* in characterizing *studium*. Details such as the "excessive wad of hair" and the "squinting eyes" that Barthes mentions in relationship to the *obtuse meaning* make their way into certain characterizations of *punctum*, such as "the small smiling boy's bad teeth"

or "the other boy's crossed arms" (Barthes *Camera* 51).[15] Barthes also cites qualitative similarities between the *obtuse meaning* and *punctum*. He perceives both as uncoded fragments lying outside of language and lacking in intentionality. Further, he also loosely carries forward the contingent relationship that he has established between the macro and micro fields of representation. In her article *Notes on the Punctum*, Rosalind Krauss surmises as much when she points to the fact that Barthes had long sought out a "third language" to break through the "coercive powers of speech" (188). However, there are also sharp differences between the two texts. Nowhere in his definition of *the obtuse meaning* found in his earlier essay is there equivalence to Barthes' recognition in *Camera Lucida* of the substance of "Time" with which all photographs are imbued as being a *punctum*. Barthes describes this shift in his thinking, "I know now that there exists another *punctum* (another "stigmatum") than the "detail"." This new *punctum*, which is no longer of form but of intensity, is Time, the lacerating emphasis of the *noeme ("that-has-been")*, its pure representations (Barthes *Camera* 96).

Here, it is important to emphasize that all the images Barthes had analyzed in *The Third Meaning* were movie stills, and all but one were pictures taken of people who were acting in theatrical films. As such, most of the the detail within the photos had been purposefully constructed to participate in propelling a theatrical narrative. The lone exception was from the documentary *Ordinary Fascism*, in which Barthes identifies *the obvious meaning* with Fascism itself, and *the obtuse meaning* as resting in "the disguised blond stupidity of the youth carrying the arrows, the slackness of his hand, and his mouth, Goering's course nails, his trashy ring" (Barthes *Third Meaning* 54). My point is that

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[15] "Nadar, in his time (1882), photographed Savorgnan de Brazza between two young blacks dressed as French sailors; one of the two boys, oddly, has rested his hand on Brazza's thigh; this incongruous gesture is bound to arrest my gaze, to constitute a *punctum*. And yet it is not one, for I immediately code the posture, whether I want to or not, as 'aberrant' (for me, the *punctum* is the other boy's crossed arms.)" Barthes 51.

Barthes had developed his theory of *third meaning* within the context of a very specialized niche of photographic imagery and to a large extent, as a foil for the medium of cinema. Within Barthes' exploration of film, Krauss finds there to be a "perverse" desire to halt the temporal unfolding of the narrative of the cinematic medium (189). Many of the manifestations of obtuse meaning cited by Barthes touch upon the seam that exists between what is considered to be a "convincing" theatrical performance, and what is not. Costumes, make-up, styling, lighting, casting, framing, props, and of course the expressions and gestures of the actors: this is the stuff of theatre, mimesis, and it is also the place where Barthes finds his obtuse details. As previously mentioned, these include things like an "absurdly low kerchief," "squinting eyelids," as well as "a chignon that contradicts a tiny raised fist," or the "curds-and-whey texture of skin" (Barthes 49-51). All of these details, whether they were held, worn, or physically a part of a person, could be considered as props, costumes, or to otherwise be embodied by the actors themselves. In many respects, theatrical stills provide the perfect photographic vehicle through which to derive an anti-narrative theory of the "third meaning" that "sides (for Barthes) with the carnival aspect of things" (44). However, in their construction and function, they are far from representative of the type and range of imagery found within the medium of photography in general.

Between Barthes and Benjamin

At one level, I would argue that what Barthes discovered upon reading Benjamin's essay *Little History of Photography* was an application of his theory of the "third meaning" which had been largely conceived of in reference to cinema, to the "banal" photographs of everyday life. Benjamin's "optical unconscious," a methodological approach rooted in the phenomenon of small details (the particular) that pierce through

a larger "reified" field of representation, would most certainly have been recognized by Barthes as resonating with his own concepts regarding photography which were detailed in *The Third Meaning*. As his own books such as *Mythologies* attest, Barthes was himself no stranger to critical engagement with forms of popular culture. However, leaving aside Benjamin's larger theory with respect to the role photography played in the reorganization of human perception, what must have intrigued Barthes about Benjamin's work was its incorporation of both culturally high and culturally low subjects. On the one hand, *Little History of Photography* waded through discussions of Hill's daguerreotypes, the Parisian images of Atget, and the portraits of August Sander, much of which Barthes would himself later discuss in *Camera Lucida*. On the other hand, Benjamin's text also explored the more pedestrian layout of homes as a way of examining the medium as it passed through the everyday lives of people. For example, he notes that within early 20th century bourgeois households, photograph albums always got placed in what he refers to as the "chilliest spots" (515). The albums were, "leather bound tomes with repellent metal hasps … where foolishly draped or corseted figures were displayed: Uncle Alex and Aunt Rickchen, little Trudi when she was still a baby, Papa in his first term at university" (515). Further to this point, Benjamin discusses not only the childhood image of Kafka, who was "dressed in a humiliatingly tight child's suit," but, with some embarrassment, he also touches upon childhood photographs of himself (515). These photos, "make our (Benjamin's) shame complete, we ourselves – as a parlor Tyrolean, yodeling, waving our hat before a painted snowscape, or as a smartly turned-out sailor, standing rakishly with our weight on one leg, as is proper, leaning against a polished door jamb" (515). Again, it needs to be emphasized that Benjamin offered a description of his own personal experience with the medium. My point is that within the context of his critical investigation of photography, Benjamin created a place, not only for a discussion of the role and function of everyday images, but also of how the "banal" realm of the

medium had affected his own life. Certainly, this is an approach that Barthes fully embraced with respect to the images of his own mother. He begins the second section of *Camera Lucida* with this passage,

> Now, one November evening shortly after my mother's death, I was going through some photographs. I had no hope of "finding" her, I expected nothing from these "photographs of a being before which one recalls less of that being than by merely thinking of him or her" (Proust). I had acknowledged that fatality, one of the most agonizing features of mourning, which decreed that however often I might consult such images, I could never recall her features (summon them up as a totality). (Barthes 63)

In piecing together the elements of Benjamin's critical approach to photography, we arrive at a template which must have suggested a direction for a shift in Barthes' own methodological approach to the medium. This shift would be one that would include an adjusted altered application of his own theory of the "third meaning" to a wide spectrum of images across a broad popular and historical range. It was an approach that would also be applied to images from his own personal life. However, it was also a shift through which he could explore the phenomenon of "Time" as it was embedded within the substance of pictures. As I have pointed out, Barthes identifies the quality of "Time" with which photographs are imbued as a *punctum* within *Camera Lucida*. It should be noted that Barthes' argument with respect to this idea is again predicated upon a complex understanding of the nature of the photographic image. For Barthes, a photograph was understood to be indexically linked to the person or "referent" depicted within the image, and whose "real body" "emanated" from within the material substance

of the photo (80). In other words, Barthes understood every photograph of a person or scene to be "a certificate of presence," (87) a statement that "this-has-been" (80). The notion of indexicality was an idea that Barthes had prefigured in his 1961 essay entitled *The Photographic Message*. In this text, Barthes argued that photography consisted of two "separate" but "contiguous" structures (4). One structure was linguistic, whereas the other was "a prefect *analogon*" of "literal reality," and " a message without a code" (5). Within *Camera Lucida,* Barthes argues that the crisis of photography arises out of the temporal space between the present moment and the optical emanations from the past (96). The photograph of the would-be assassin Lewis Payne is deployed by Barthes within *Camera Lucida* as a direct case in point. In discussing Alexander Gardner's 1865 portrait of the young man seen sitting in his cell awaiting his execution, Barthes writes, "*this will be* and *this has been* [Barthes' italics]; I observe with horror an anterior future of which death is the stake ... Whether or not the subject is already dead, every photograph is this catastrophe" (96). Here it needs to be emphasized that for Barthes, every photograph is by its very "chemistry"(80)[16] and nature, imbued with this quality of "catastrophe." Barthes states, "All those young photographers who are at work in the world, determined upon the capture of actuality, do not know that they are agents of death" (92). Indeed, it is precisely with the reading of the Lewis Payne image that Barthes makes his declaration of "Time" as a "new *punctum*" (96). However, it should be noted that within *Little History of Photography*, Benjamin makes a very similar observation with respect to medium. In a discussion of a photo of Karl Dauthendey (Father of the Poet) and his fiancée, who would later commit suicide after the birth of her sixth child,

[16] "It is often said that it was the painters that who invented Photography (by bequeathing it their framing, the Albertian perspective, and the optic of the *camera obscura*). I say: no, it was the chemists." Barthes 80.

Benjamin notes the strange and awkward perspective that we, in the present have when we look across time at images from the past.

> Immerse yourself in such a picture long enough and you will realize to what extent opposites touch, here too; the most precise technology can give its products a magical value, such as a painted picture can never again have for us. No matter how artful the photographer, no matter how carefully posed his subject, the beholder feels an irresistible urge to search such a picture for the tiny spark of contingency, of the here and now, with which reality has (so to speak) seared the subject, to find the inconspicuous spot where in the immediacy of that long-forgotten moment the future nests so eloquently that we, looking back, may rediscover it. (Benjamin 510)

While, in this passage, Benjamin does not preface his observations with an indexical explanation of photography, he clearly expresses an awareness of the temporal disjuncture inherent in the medium with respect life and death. I would argue that the condition Benjamin in fact identifies as mediating between the past and future, between a subject and their fate, parallels Barthes understanding of Time *as punctum*, and "the lacerating emphasis of the *noeme* ("*that-has-been*") (96). Indeed, passages from Benjamin's description presented above, such as "the tiny spark of contingency" or "the inconspicuous spot where in the immediacy of that long forgotten moment the future nest so eloquently," speak to the discovery of "Time" and "Fate" within the very detail and "particularity" of the photographic image.

Providing one more twist to this argument is the fact that the Lewis Payne photo upon which Barthes makes his "Time is a *punctum*" pronouncement was one of the

images he took directly from the *Nouvel Observateur* publication of his Benjamin's essay. Again, it is true that the photograph is not an image that Benjamin's text directly references. However, the issue of the conflation and crossover of ideas that arises from Barthes' electing to make one of the key points in his argument using a photograph taken directly from Benjamin's published essay on the medium, is something that needs to be taken into account.

As mentioned previously, professor Margaret Olin argues that Barthes' "Winter Garden Photograph," clearly the most important image discussed by him in *Camera Lucida,* was actually drawn from a reference within Benjamin's essay (Olin 81). And as I've further pointed out, Olin has suggested that the key childhood picture of Barthes' mother, an image that he spends the last half of *Camera Lucida* discussing, was in fact a "fabrication" (Olin 83). However, I believe that in making this observation, Olin misses a larger point. With respect to the relationship between the two texts, I would argue that Barthes' conception of *Camera Lucida* proceeds directly from his reading of *Little History of Photography*. As such, Benjamin's essay becomes the crucible in which the shifts in Barthes' thinking with respect to the medium are hatched. This is not to suggest that Barthes' text was an act of plagiarism, though again he never references or cites Benjamin's essay. Rather, it is to grasp it as an instance in which, at a particular moment in time, the thinking of one intellectual passes through and transforms the ideas of another. Barthes was listening to what Benjamin had to say in *Little History of Photography*. And on account of what he heard, he wrote his book.

Russell Stephens

This paper was originally conceived of as a brief response to several articles which I had been introduced to in an art history graduate seminar conducted by Professor John O'Brian at the University of British Columbia on the subject of photography. I want to thank Professor O' Brian for his continued assistance in the development of this material. I would also like to thank Alex Werner-Colan at CUNY for his many helpful suggestions in the editing of this project.

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