

CAMERA

LUCIDA

REFLECTIONS ON PHOTOGRAPHY

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*Roland Barthes*

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TRANSLATED BY RICHARD HOWARD



HILL AND WANG

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Trying to make myself write some sort of commentary on the latest "emergency" reportage, I tear up my notes as soon as I write them. What—nothing to say about death, suicide, wounds, accidents? No, nothing to say about these photographs in which I see surgeons' gowns, bodies lying on the ground, broken glass, etc. Oh, if there were only a look, a subject's look, if only someone in the photographs were looking at me! For the Photograph has this power—which it is increasingly losing, the frontal pose being most often considered archaic nowadays—of looking me *straight in the eye* (here, moreover, is another difference: in film, no one ever looks at me: it is forbidden—by the Fiction).

The photographic look has something paradoxical about it which is sometimes to be met with in life: the other day, in a café, a young boy came in alone, glanced around the room, and occasionally his eyes rested on me; I then had the certainty that he was *looking at* me without however being sure that he was *seeing* me: an inconceivable distortion: how can we look without seeing? One might say that the Photograph separates attention from perception, and yields up only the former, even if it is impossible without the latter; this is that aberrant thing, *noesis* without *noeme*, an action of thought without thought, an aim without a target. And yet it is this scandalous movement which produces the rarest quality of an air. That is the paradox: how can one have an *intelligent*



*"How can one have  
an intelligent air  
without thinking of anything  
intelligent? . . ."*

A. KERTÉSZ. PIET MONDRIAN IN HIS STUDIO. PARIS, 1926

*air* without thinking about anything intelligent, just by looking into this piece of black plastic? It is because the look, eliding the vision, seems held back by something interior. That lower-class boy who holds a newborn puppy against his cheek (Kertész, 1928), looks into the lens with his sad, jealous, fearful eyes: what pitiable, lacerating pensiveness! In fact, he is looking at nothing; he *retains* within himself his love and his fear: that is the Look.

Now the Look, if it insists (all the more, if it lasts, if it traverses, with the photograph, Time)—the Look is always potentially crazy: it is at once the effect of truth and the effect of madness. In 1881, inspired by a splendid scientific spirit and investigating the physiognomy of the sick, Galton and Mohamed published certain plates of faces . . . It was concluded, of course, that no disease could be read in them. But since all these patients still look at me, nearly a hundred years later, I have the converse notion: that whoever looks you straight in the eye is mad.

Such would be the Photograph's "fate": by leading me to believe (it is true, one time out of how many?) that I have found what Calvino calls "the true total photograph," it accomplishes the unheard-of identification of reality ("*that-has-been*") with truth ("*there-she-is!*"); it becomes at once evidential and exclamative; it bears the effigy to that crazy point where affect (love, compassion, grief, enthusiasm, desire) is a guarantee of Being. It then approaches, to all intents, madness; it joins what Kristeva calls "*la vérité folle*."



*"He is looking at nothing;  
he retains within himself  
his love and his fear:  
that is the Look . . .*

A. KERTÉSZ: THE PUPPY. PARIS, 1928

The *noeme* of Photography is simple, banal; no depth: "that has been." I know our critics: What! a whole book (even a short one) to discover something I know at first glance? Yes, but such evidence can be a sibling of madness. The Photograph is an extended, loaded evidence—as if it caricatured not the figure of what it represents (quite the converse) but its very existence. The image, says phenomenology, is an object-as-nothing. Now, in the Photograph, what I posit is not only the absence of the object; it is also, by one and the same movement, on equal terms, the fact that this object has indeed existed and that it has been there where I see it. Here is where the madness is, for until this day no representation could assure me of the past of a thing except by intermediaries; but with the Photograph, my certainty is immediate: no one in the world can undecieve me. The Photograph then becomes a bizarre *medium*, a new form of hallucination: false on the level of perception, true on the level of time: a temporal hallucination, so to speak, a modest, *shared* hallucination (on the one hand "it is not there," on the other "but it has indeed been"): a mad image, chafed by reality.

I am trying to render the special quality of this hallucination, and I find this: the same evening of a day I had again been looking at photographs of my mother, I went to see Fellini's *Casanova* with some friends; I was sad, the

film exasperated me; but when Casanova began dancing with the young automaton, my eyes were touched with a kind of painful and delicious intensity, as if I were suddenly experiencing the effects of a strange drug; each detail, which I was seeing so exactly, savoring it, so to speak, down to its last evidence, overwhelmed me: the figure's slenderness, its tenuity—as if there were only a trifling body under the flattened gown; the frayed gloves of white floss silk; the faint (though touching) absurdity of ostrich feathers in the hair, that painted yet individual, innocent face: something desperately inert and yet available, offered, affectionate, according to an angelic impulse of "good will" . . . At which moment I could not help thinking about Photography: for I could say all this about the photographs which touched me (out of which I had methodically constituted Photography itself).

I then realized that there was a sort of link (or knot) between Photography, madness, and something whose name I did not know. I began by calling it: the pangs of love. Was I not, in fact, in love with the Fellini automaton? Is one not in love with certain photographs? (Looking at some photographs of the Proustian world, I fall in love with Julia Bartet, with the Duc de Guiche . . .) Yet it was not quite that. It was a broader current than a lover's sentiment. In the love stirred by Photography (by certain photographs), another music is heard, its name oddly old-fashioned: Pity. I collected in a last thought the images which had "pricked" me (since this is the action of the *punctum*), like that of the black woman with the gold necklace and the strapped pumps. In each of



them, inescapably, I passed beyond the unreality of the thing represented, I entered crazily into the spectacle, into the image, taking into my arms what is dead, what is going to die, as Nietzsche did when, as Podach tells us, on January 3, 1889, he threw himself in tears on the neck of a beaten horse: gone mad for Pity's sake.

**48** Society is concerned to tame the Photograph, to temper the madness which keeps threatening to explode in the face of whoever looks at it. To do this, it possesses two means.

The first consists of making Photography into an art, for no art is mad. Whence the photographer's insistence on his rivalry with the artist, on subjecting himself to the rhetoric of painting and its sublimated mode of exhibition. Photography can in fact be an art: when there is no longer any madness in it, when its *noeme* is forgotten and when consequently its essence no longer acts on me: do you suppose that looking at Commander Puyo's strollers I am disturbed and exclaim "That-has-been!"? The cinema participates in this domestication of Photography—at least the fictional cinema, precisely the one said to be the seventh art; a film can be mad by artifice, can present the cultural signs of madness, it is never mad by nature (by iconic status); it is always the very opposite of an hallucination; it is simply an illusion; its vision is oneiric, not ecmnesic.

The other means of taming the Photograph is to generalize, to gregarize, banalize it until it is no longer confronted by any image in relation to which it can mark itself, assert its special character, its scandal, its madness. This is what is happening in our society, where the Photograph crushes all other images by its tyranny: no more prints, no more figurative painting, unless henceforth by fascinated (and fascinating) submission to the photographic model. Looking around at the customers in a café, someone remarked to me (rightly): "Look how gloomy they are! nowadays the images are livelier than the people." One of the marks of our world is perhaps this reversal: we live according to a generalized image-repertoire. Consider the United States, where everything is transformed into images: only images exist and are produced and are consumed. An extreme example: go into a New York porn shop; here you will not find vice, but only its *tableaux vivants* (from which Mapplethorpe has so lucidly derived certain of his photographs); it is as if the anonymous individual (never an actor) who gets himself tied up and beaten conceives of his pleasure only if this pleasure joins the stereotyped (worn-out) image of the sado-masochist: pleasure passes through the image: here is the great mutation. Such a reversal necessarily raises the ethical question: not that the image is immoral, irreligious, or diabolic (as some have declared it, upon the advent of the Photograph), but because, when generalized, it completely de-realizes the human world of conflicts and desires, under cover of illustrating it. What characterizes the so-called advanced societies is that they

today consume images and no longer, like those of the past, beliefs; they are therefore more liberal, less fanatical, but also more "false" (less "authentic")—something we translate, in ordinary consciousness, by the avowal of an impression of nauseated boredom, as if the universalized image were producing a world that is without difference (indifferent), from which can rise, here and there, only the cry of anarchisms, marginalisms, and individualisms: let us abolish the images, let us save immediate Desire (desire without mediation).

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

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