This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in Photographies on Sept 13, 2019, available at https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/17540763.2019.1627392.

Photography and Writing, or the Intimacy of the Image: a dialogic encounter between Barthes's Camera Lucida and Blanchot's philosophy of Otherness.

Abstract: This article was prompted by James Elkins' argument - developed in his book, *What Photography Is*, from 2011 - that there is no actual relationship between Roland Barthes's theory of photography and Maurice Blanchot's philosophy. Drawing on considerations of an historical, philosophical, and literary nature, the article argues for the importance of a dialogic encounter between Barthes and Blanchot, demonstrating that the interconnection between the concepts of image and writing appears as a crucial aspect in the theory of both authors. At the same time, by contesting Elkins' wider criticism of Barthes's *Camera Lucida* (1982), the article aims to develop better-informed theoretical understandings of Barthes's thoughts on photography. The final section of the article attempts to map promising points of connection between Barthes, Blanchot, and Proust, in order to reassess the notion of *punctum* in its broader relation with the concepts of time and death.

Introduction: Elkins on Barthes's *Camera Lucida*

In the texts entitled *Writing*, and *Selenite, Ice and Salt*, both included in the book *What Photography Is* (2011), James Elkins harshly criticizes the photographic theory developed by Roland Barthes in the book *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (1982). Elkins begins by presenting a set of general considerations on *Camera Lucida*. He points out that the traumatic event concerning the death of Barthes's mother impels the construction of a disturbing text, patiently weaved around the concepts of death, memory, and photography. He then considers that Barthes's book must be understood as a personal, experimental act of writing that intersects with a speculative reading on the significance of photography. Consequently, Elkins affirms that the personal writing adopted in *Camera Lucida* appeals to forms of examination that should engage with both the analytical and essayistic dimensions of Barthes's book.

After introducing these aspects, which are effectively crucial in the assessment of *Camera Lucida*, Elkins advocates writing a book whose strangeness would provoke a similar disturbance to the one caused by Barthes's text. According to Elkins, "the only

way to reply to a book as strange as Barthes's is to write another one even stranger" (Elkins 2011, 14).

It is important to note that Elkins' overall work offers a sophisticated analysis of photography in its relationship with writing, technology, and knowledge. His attempt to contest Barthes's book aims at challenging conventional readings of photography, providing an arena for alternative theoretical insights regarding the role of the photographic image and visual meaning. Additionally, he pays serious attention to alternative practices in which photography intersects with new and emerging forms of visuality.

Notwithstanding, in his analysis of Barthes's *Camera Lucida*, Elkins fails to contend with its philosophical complexity, ignoring some of the most important ontological implications of a book that, as stated by Barthes, is propelled by an "ontological desire" towards photography (Barthes 1982, 3). Elkins copiously quotes authors who commented on Barthes, but, intriguingly, he never actually addresses the authors with whom Barthes maintained a close and influential dialogue. Simultaneously, Elkins' arguments are, at times, surprisingly simplistic, operating in terms of binary oppositions between truth and fiction, transparency and opacity, immediateness and distance. As a result, the alternative photographic theory that he is anxious to construct becomes trapped within dogmatic statements and hasty accusations; his premises and revisionist claims are never appropriately substantiated.

Elkins lingers on the surface of the most important and enigmatic relations enacted by Barthes's book. He seems incapable of grasping what Geoffrey Batchen, for example, described as the "double meanings, asides, learned allusions [and] self-assured aphorisms" of *Camera Lucida*. Elkins misreads Barthes by neglecting the importance of *Camera Lucida* as a work of theory and literature that is never purely transparent in its meaning, producing its full effect "only in the process of being read" (Batchen 2009a, 11-12).

I now would like to quote some initial paragraphs of Elkins' book that reflect his position against Barthes's theory. This includes Elkins' opposition to Barthes's choice concerning the title for *Chambre Claire, Note sur la Photographie*, originally published in 1980 (of which *Camera Lucida, Reflections on Photography* is the English translation). According to James Elkins:

> Barthes could have called his book *Camera Obscura*: that would have been historically appropriate given photography's origins, but he wanted an archetypal image of light and Enlightenment. He chose *Camera Lucida*, I suspect, in order to oppose the camera obscura's connotation of darkness (Elkins 2011, 21).

Elkins goes on to say that Barthes's mention of the *camera lucida* follows a reference to Blanchot's philosophy:

> He quotes Blanchot saying photography is at once "altogether outside, without intimacy, and yet more accessible and mysterious than the thought of the innermost being" ("Plus inaccessible et mystérieuse que la pensée du for intérieur […] (Elkins 2011, 21).

Subsequently, in a long parenthesis:

> (The Blanchot quotation is one of the darkest moments of *Camera Lucida*. Even though the quotation is pivotal, and even though it is one of the densest and longest of the book, Barthes doesn't say where it comes from, and Derrida did not find the source when he cited it in "Les morts de Roland Barthes". I take the lack of citation as mirror of the lack of argument – there is no clear link between the *camera lucida* and Blanchot's chains of paradoxes […]).

Further, on the same page, and after providing a thorough technical description of the *camera lucida* - characterized as a meticulous and difficult instrument to handle, used as a support for drawing, and not exactly for photography - Elkins concludes:

> The camera lucida is just wrong for *Camera Lucida*: it's not about photography, it is a weird, difficult little instrument, not a metaphor of light; and it is not connected, by any logic I can follow, to Blanchot's observations about intimacy.

This article aims to demonstrate that Elkins fails to explore the potential of a dialogue between Barthes and Blanchot. Although the relationship between the two authors has received no critical attention until now, I argue that the comparative study of Barthes and Blanchot emerges as one of the most interesting ways of understanding the complexity of Barthes's theory of photography. Moreover, the article opens up an

important field of analysis regarding the interplay between text and image, an aspect often ignored by most of Barthes's critics, despite its decisive role in *Camera Lucida*. The article also suggests that serious concerns must be raised about theories that, particularly since the emergence of digital technologies, argue for the obsolescence of the epistemic and phenomenological principles of the so-called *analogic* photography.

I will argue that the phenomenological and ontological implications of Barthes's theory endure as one of the most exciting and important *loci* from which to discuss the meaning of photography, requiring the development of theoretical articulations and conceptual insights that have yet to be fully explored.

Problematizing the title of *Camera Lucida*

We have seen that Elkins introduces a series of complex issues concerning the fields of photography, history, and philosophy. What is at stake here is also the attempt to think about the photographic image in its relationship with writing, as can be inferred by Elkins' various references to authors such as Derrida and Blanchot. But, for now, I would like to return to the paragraph in which Elkins considers that the *camera obscura*, rather than the *camera lucida* (a visual device also constructed before the invention of photography), would better fit photography's historical origins.

The invention of the camera obscura was strongly linked to a technical dimension that contributed to the mechanization of both the human vision and the artistic gesture. In this sense, the camera obscura influenced the appearance of a new type of optical figuring that would be further enhanced by the consolidation of the photographic process. However, the architecture of the camera obscura and the epistemological criteria presiding over its design - sustained through the rhetoric of passiveness and transparency, as well as the stability provided by the geometrical perspective and the subsequent centrality of the eye - proved to be inadequate in regards to modernity's new demands towards mobility, flexibility, and perceptual multiplicity.

Whereas the linear perspective of the camera obscura converges with the Cartesian paradigm of knowledge and visual truth, the image of the camera lucida is characterized by its vagueness and uncertainty. The camera lucida is an optical device formed by a three-sided glass prism, suspended above the surface upon which the artist is drawing. It involves the unstable superimposition of the object and the projected image, as well as the continuous effort of the draftsman to combine both elements. As

the image is formed in a very small prism, it "is seen only by the draftsman and by no one else, except in the form of a tracing" (Batchen 2009a, 11).

Thus, the camera lucida disrupts the stability ensured by the model of the camera obscura. It reflects the unbalanced physiology and temporality of the human vision, revealing a space of intimate and subjective perception. This is why, according to Batchen, "Barthes perversely chooses the term [camera lucida] for this inward-looking" (Batchen 2009b, 266). In Barthes, the device acts as a metaphor for the work of discovering what is not immediately shown by the photographic image. Between the apparent objectivity of the document, and the subjectivity of the spectator who constructs the image through imagination, the perception of the photograph is inseparable from an intimate and emotional search that mobilizes the viewer's bodily and subjective responses.

Batchen accurately observes that *Camera Lucida* has an autobiographical tone, particularly felt on the passages in which Barthes describes the grief caused by his mother's passing (Batchen 2009a, 11). Nevertheless, more than to privilege personal expression, for Barthes the confrontation with photography complicates the subjective experience, as he expresses the sense of a continuous investigation that tests and undoes the self in the public domain of writing. Famously, the first page of *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* is a sentence written in his handwriting: "All this must be considered as if spoken by a character in a novel" (Barthes 1977).

Similarly, in *Camera Lucida* the personal experience of photography blends with a fictional and performative form of writing that aspires to express its *nothing-to-say-ness*, thus originating the disruption of the symbolic uses of language and conventional analytical tools.

This aspect acquires, as we will see in detail, special relevance in the second part of the book, dominated by Barthes's passionate investigation of the Winter Garden photograph. The photograph was found by Barthes in November 1977, after the death of his mother, and shows her in 1898 at the age of five, next to her seven-year-old brother. At one point, Barthes describes his attempt to get closer to the clarity that emanated from the maternal face. By consecutively enlarging the small area of the loved face registered in the photograph, Barthes enters "into the paper's depth", in an attempt "to reach its other side" (Barthes 1982, 100). But he soon realizes that this other side reveals the abstract and formless condition of photography's paradoxical figuration. Located between the clarity and the opacity of the subject, invisibility is revealed as a

part of the photograph, incorporating an impossibility of seeing that parallels the *nothing-to-say* earlier identified in the book:

> Alas, however hard I look, I discover nothing: if I enlarge, I see nothing but the grain of the paper: I undo the image for the sake of its substance; and if I do not enlarge, if I content myself with scrutinizing, I obtain this sole knowledge, long since possessed at first glance: that this indeed has been [...] Such is the Photograph: it cannot say what it lets us see (Barthes 1982, 100).

This episode haunts the entire book as a specter of both photography and writing. It shows that the image of the world provided by the photograph is not synonymous with exactitude, encompassing effects of entropy and blindness that prevent stable interpretations and descriptions. So, **Elkins'** suspicions ("He [Barthes] chose *Camera Lucida*, I suspect, in order to oppose the camera obscura's connotation of darkness"), are unfounded. Elkins ignores the subtleties of the historical and technological implications that his own description of the camera lucida summons up.

Ironically, **Elkins'** description of the camera lucida ends up highlighting a set of qualities that are directly related to the perceptual instability of the device. For example, Elkins tells us that operating the camera lucida implies "peering into a small aperture or try squinting to a tiny prism"; that when coupled with a microscope, it is difficult to "balance the little light" provided by the device with "the bright light of the microscopic object"; finally, that the drawing produced by the camera lucida is almost equivalent to trying "to read a book without glasses and with a tiny piece of sharp machinery hovering a few millimeters from your eye" (Elkins 2011, 22). Curiously, Barthes's metaphoric use of the camera lucida, if read more accurately, would support **Elkin´s** claims developed in earlier works: for example, in *The Object Stares Back*, he states that "just looking" is impossible and that seeing "must always involve force and desire and intent" (Elkins 1996, 21).

However, by misreading the potential of Barthes's metaphor, Elkins also fails to have a more positive approach towards Barthes's decision. Elkins isolates Barthes's phrase, "It is a mistake to associate Photography, by reason of its technical origin, with the notion of a dark passage (*camera obscura*)" (Barthes 1982, 106), to distort the affirmative force of Barthes's arguments. Elkins establishes an opposition that would lead Barthes to choose an image of light and clarity: "he wanted an archetypal image of

light and Enlightenment”. However, for Barthes, photography remains something unknown and unfinished. The issues concerning evidence and testimony are strictly attached to the regime of a radical alterity through which the referent is always the *other* of the represented object, and not its enlightened representation.

At the same time, **Elkins** also contradicts his own considerations on Barthes’s style of writing, described, at the outset, as healthily freed from academic constraints and disciplinary determinations. Elkins overestimates the lack of bibliographical reference to Blanchot’s phrase in *Camera Lucida*. The omission would reflect, according to Elkins, a resounding fragility of Barthes’s arguments: “I take the lack of citation as mirror of the lack of argument – there is no clear link between the camera lucida and Blanchot’s chains of paradoxes […]”, says Elkins.

Nowhere does Elkins explain why we should discard a relation between Barthes and Blanchot. Such authoritative disavowal overlooks decisive aspects of Barthes’s photographic theory. It avoids the discussion of important concepts in Barthes’s work, such as the concepts of otherness, desire, intimacy, and time. Symptomatically, despite their importance for the discussion of Barthes’s theory, Elkins never truly approaches these concepts throughout his book.

As I will try to demonstrate, it is precisely in the context of a conceptual discussion of *Camera Lucida* that a comparative study of Barthes and Blanchot acquires a particular relevance, opening up a more integrated and profound understanding of Barthes’s thinking on photography.

The fascination of the photographic image

In *Camera Lucida* the perplexity motivated by photography is initially identified by Barthes as occurring in the images in which he himself appears:

> I then experience a micro-version of death (of parenthesis): I am truly becoming a specter […] 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” (Barthes 1982, 74-75).

In *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, a book that combines personal photographs with meditative captions (somehow anticipating the interplay between

image and text later explored in *Camera Lucida*), Barthes describes an uncanny experience of dissemblance that breaks the mechanisms of psychological identification:

> […] [the photograph of myself] provokes in me a kind of obtuse dream, whose units are teeth, hair, a nose, skinniness, long legs in knee-length socks which don't belong to me, though to no one else: here I am henceforth in a state of disturbing familiarity: I see the fissure in the subject (the very thing about which he can say nothing) (Barthes 1977a).

These passages show that, for Barthes, the link between the photograph and the represented object requires the consideration of a visual and epistemological paradox, which is genetically inscribed in the very structure of the photograph.

The result is a particular theory of *indexicality* that surpasses the idea of a direct physical link between the photograph and the thing it represents. It is a way of understanding the index in a more complex way than the one provided by **Elkins**, who affirms that the indexical theory was only "helpful for some art criticism in the moment of minimalism, when it was important to stress photography's material nature and its independence of ideation" **(Elkins** 2011, 23).

According to Barthes, the photographic reference involves the interruption of reality and the simultaneous (re)appearance of the object under the form of a spectral presence. It involves a type of resemblance that has ceased to represent a stabilized or univocal reality: "I do not resemble me more" (Barthes 1977a). Barthes thereby invokes the existence of a co-extension between the referent and its *other*, a theme that would be persistently examined by the author in *Camera Lucida*. For example, in the first pages of the book, Barthes writes: "I want a History of Looking. For the Photograph is the advent of myself as other: a cunning dissociation of consciousness from identity" (Barthes 1982, 12).

This brings to mind what Blanchot has described, throughout his work, as a space of strange intimacy, more profound than any inner thought. In the phrase cited by Barthes in *Camera Lucida* (one of the densest and longest of the book, as correctly reminded by **Elkins**), Blanchot eloquently evokes a paradoxical movement of opposed terms to describe the "essence" of the image. In *The Book to Come* (*Le Livre à Venir*), originally published in 1959, Blanchot writes:

> […] the essence of the image is to be entirely outside, without intimacy, and yet more inaccessible and more mysterious than the innermost thought; without signification, but summoning the profundity of every possible meaning; unrevealed and yet manifest, having that presence-absence that constitutes the attraction and the fascination of the Sirens (Blanchot 2003, 14).

On the one hand, Blanchot asserts that the image is not a gratuitous fantasy. The image delivers us to ourselves: "The image is intimate", since "it makes of our intimacy an exterior power which we suffer passively. Outside of us, in the ebb of the world which it causes, there trails, like glistening debris, the utmost depth of our passions" (Blanchot 1982, 262). On the other hand, in Blanchot the image's regime of presence as absence undermines the rational principles of knowledge and perception. It opens up, in short, a space of "impossibility" (Blanchot 1982, 31).

But why speak of impossibility in Barthes's case? Because we are faced with the impossibility of restoring a linear correspondence between the photographic image and the conventional modes of representation and symbolic language; what is at stake here is also the impossibility of developing an action towards an end; and, ultimately, the impossibility of measuring time and taking hold of presence.

Indeed, for Barthes, the photographic image violently interrupts the continuous flux of reality and reconstitutes it through the exclamatory temporarily of the "that-has-been" (Barthes 1982, 77). The temporal reality of the photograph implicates the disruption of the grammar of the present time. It undermines the possibility of using the image as a merely symbolic instance of mediation between the reality and the viewer.

Both in Barthes and Blanchot, the viewer is attracted by the vision of what is impossible to see, a vision that simultaneously returns to itself in a relentless perseverance and endless fascination (Blanchot 1982, 33). In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes observes: "[…] trick of vocabulary: we say 'to develop a photograph'; but what the chemical action develops is undevelopable, an essence (of a wound), what cannot be transformed but only repeated under the instances of insistence (of the insistent gaze) (Barthes 1982, 49).

For both Barthes and Blanchot, the person who sees in a fascinated way, and through fascination itself, does not exactly perceive a real object belonging to the tangible world, but something undefined that is part of this *medium* of fascination. In turn, this is also (and fundamentally) the *medium* of desire: desire reveals a depth that is

beyond the image, attracting the eye towards an endless search related not only to the amazement caused by specific images, but also, in Barthes's case, to the broader ontological quest of photography, prompted by the Winter Garden photograph:

> First of all, I did not escape, or try to escape, from a paradox: on the one hand the desire to give a name to Photography's essence and then to sketch an eidetic science of the Photograph; and on the other the intractable feeling that Photography is essentially (a contradiction in terms) only contingency, singularity, risk [...] (Barthes 1982, 20).

Also in this sense, the paradoxical regime evoked by Blanchot must be related, within Barthes's project, both to the photographic image and to the act of writing, the later revolving around the mutism and reserve of the former.

Therefore, contrary to **Elkins'** claims, I contend that it is possible to draw multiple points of convergence between Barthes's *Camera Lucida* and "Blanchot's chains of paradoxes". What Barthes was pursuing was not an "archetypal image of light" that would cancel out the "connotation of darkness". On the contrary, Barthes was trying to conceptualize the constitutive paradox of the photographic image and its evasive form of visuality.

Already in the texts *Rhetoric of the Image*, and *The Photographic Message*, Barthes examined the specificity of the photographic medium in terms of an "illogical conjunction" between space and time. According to Barthes, such an illogical trait of the photographic representation originates a new consciousness of the image: "What we have is a new space-time category: spatial immediacy and temporal anteriority, the photograph being an illogical conjunction between the *here-now* and the *there-then*". For Barthes "[the photograph's] unreality is that of the *here-now* [and] its reality that of the *having-been-there* […]" (Barthes 1977c, 44).

Hence, **Elkins** also misreads *Camera Lucida* in the context of Barthes's broader investigation on photography, failing to address concepts that were systematically explored by Barthes in different moments of his work. As observed by Batchen, many of the concepts of Barthes's earlier semiotic analysis of the photographic image keep reappearing in *Camera Lucida* (Batchen 2009a, 8). This marks Barthes's interest in photography as a "truly unprecedented" "consciousness" of time and material reality.

The relation between Barthes and Blanchot is equally pertinent in this context, concerning the spatio-temporal complexity of the image. For Blanchot, the act of

perception usually involves a separation from things. But what happens, asks Blanchot, when the things we see seem to touch us at a distance, forming a kind of contact, or proximity, that imposes itself through distance? This is not an actual contact, says Blanchot. Rather, it concerns an act of seeing in which the gaze is absorbed into an immobile movement (Blanchot 1982, 32).

This comprehension is in line with many of Barthes's concerns. In Barthes, the fascination caused by photography is explained by a specific regime of presence that exceeds the presence in space, constituting a sort of "hallucinosis" (Barthes 1982, 13). This explains why Barthes locates photography at the extreme point of a movement of madness and desire, prompting a disturbing experience in which time and being are fissured. This is why, already in the final part of *Camera Lucida*, Barthes couples the exclamatory evidence of the "that-has-been", previously mentioned right at the beginning of his book,[1] with an "effect of madness", ultimately associated with the temporal reality of the Winter Garden image.

What Blanchot conceived of as the proximity imposed by the image through distance is comprehended by Barthes in terms of a temporal fold that mobilizes the viewer's affective and subjective responses to photography. In this sense, the photographic image appears as a malleable membrane that puts into contact apparently unrelated realities that escape the supremacy of the viewer's gaze.

The *spectral* condition of time and presence

The issue concerning the temporality of the photographic image defines the most important moments of Barthes's phenomenological and ontological quest in *Camera Lucida* (we can say that, in this book, the phenomenology of the photographic image unfolds into a ontology of the image). Oddly, the problem of time is rarely addressed by **Elkins**, further limiting his reading of Barthes's book, as well as the identification of common orientations of Barthes's and Blanchot's thinking regarding the image.

In both Barthes and Blanchot, the fascination produced by the image must be understood as a metamorphosis not only of presence, but also of time. In both, the

[1] "One day, quite some time ago, I happened on a photograph of Napoleon's youngest brother, Jerome, taken in 1852. And I realized then, with an amazement I have not been able to lessen since: 'I am looking at eyes that looked at the Emperor.'" This amazement would be at the foundation of Barthes's "ontological desire", already mentioned above: "I was overcome by an 'ontological' desire: I wanted to learn at all costs what Photography was 'in itself,' by what essential feature it was to be distinguished from the community of images" (Barthes 1982, 3).

spectral mode of presence converges with the spectrality of time, giving rise to what Blanchot termed as the immediately other. For Blanchot, "immediate presence is presence of what could not be present, presence of the non-accessible, presence excluding or exceeding any present" (Blanchot 1993, 38).

In a little known essay, Georges Didi-Huberman would demonstrate that these concepts are also explored by Blanchot in his literary work. For example, in *Au Moment Voulu*, from 1951, Blanchot describes the rapturous encounter with a woman who suddenly appears behind a door; a woman once known, whose image of youth abruptly reappears in a fleeting and fulminating moment:

> I kept looking at her, I thought: Here, then, from where came my astonishment. Her face, or rather her expression, which hardly varied, halfway between the most cheerful smile and the coldest reserve, revived in me a terribly distant memory, and it was this memory, deeply buried, more than old, which she seemed to copy to appear so young (Blanchot quoted by Didi-Huberman 2011, 36-37).

As Didi-Huberman notes, the similarity between the actual presence of the woman and the presence of who she was includes a gap, an interval that materializes the overlapping of past and present. In Barthes's terms: "what I see has been here, in this place which extends between infinity and the subject (*operator* or *spectator*); it has been here, and yet immediately separated" (Barthes 1982, 77).

In both Barthes and Blanchot, the image is formed at the level of this paradoxical relationship, when time is seen further back from the present, when something of the absent face starts to resemble the actual and vanishing expression. And all this, as Didi-Huberman writes, "[…] comes from a single blow, in the time of a door that opens up" (Didi-Huberman 2011, 37).

Notably, this is also the time of the photographic shutter, which indelibly marks Barthes's amazement towards the Winter Garden photograph. As stated by Batchen, by discovering "'something like an essence of the Photograph' (CL 73) [in the Winter Garden picture] Barthes traces its source to photography's peculiar articulation of time - the way photography simultaneously conjures past, present, and future in a single image form" (Batchen 2009a, 13).

In both Barthes and Blanchot, the now is seen as the return of something that is unexpectedly (re)discovered. It is revealed as the non-accessible that exceeds any

present. It exposes the boundless movement through which the naked presence of the other speaks in the mutism of a sudden face-to-face.

Indeed, *Camera Lucida* engages the reader with the enigma of an encounter that haunts the entire book. The encounter concerns, more precisely, Barthes's discovery of the Winter Garden photograph, which he describes as following:

> There I was, alone in the apartment where she had died, looking at these pictures of my mother, one by one, under the lamp, gradually moving back in time with her, looking for the truth of the face I had loved. And I found it (Barthes 1989, 67).

Slightly further on:

> I studied the little girl and at last rediscovered my mother. The distinctness of her face, the naive attitude of her hands, the place she had docilely taken without either showing or hiding herself, and finally her expression, which distinguished her […] (Barthes 1989, 69).

Barthes's encounter with the photograph designates, first of all, an event in which the order of time is radically disassembled. According to Blanchot, the convulsed time triggered by the image converges with the time of the narrative, giving expression to various durations, or *chronometries*, generated within the narrative itself (Blanchot 2003, 12). Also in Barthes, the passages performed from image to writing, and vice versa, involve the intersection of such chronometries, that is to say, the coexistence of different durations that slowly infiltrate in each other. Hence the use of different times and verbal rhythms within very short passages: "where she had died"; "gradually moving back in time with her"; "And I found it".

As in Blanchot (and here I am specifically addressing the final part of Blanchot's phrase quoted in *Camera Lucida*), it is a matter of following the strange and mysterious song of the Sirens, of conceiving of a pathway, or navigation, in "another time", the time of the narrative (Blanchot 2003, 9).

Blanchot says that the perversion of the image starts when "speech no longer presents itself as speech, but as sight freed from the limitations of sight. Not a way of saying, but a transcendent way of seeing" (Blanchot 1993, 29).

Barthes's writing fully converges with this idea: the idea that writing, in its poetic and essayistic form, is strictly related to the fascination caused by the image that penetrates the viewer, like a poignant instrument that causes a wound. (In this sense, for Barthes, the photograph constitutes a wound that appears in the place of the event; the photograph designates the (dis)placement of the portrayed object and the convulsion of the viewer's perception, instigating a project of writing that aims at originating an abstract-universal).

Therefore, contrary to what is advocated by Barthes's detractors,[2] **Elkins** included, the subjectivism ascribed to *Camera Lucida* is not synonym of "solipsism" and textual "hedonism" **(Elkins** 2007, 157). Instead, the book comprises what Jonathan Friday (2007, 161) dubbed an "autobiographical" movement that articulates the private and the public, the personal and the universal. Barthes himself asserted that "a subjectivity reduced to its hedonist project could not recognize the universal" (Barthes 1982, 60). That way, Barthes demonstrates that his interest was to preserve a far more complicated interpretation of subjectivism.

In the next section, I intend to deepen this issue in order to demonstrate that Barthes's categories of *studium* and *punctum* must also be rethought under a new light, challenging **Elkins**' rather conventional understanding of both terms.

Image and writing: reassessing Barthes's punctum

In *The Deaths of Roland Barthes* (1981), Jacques Derrida argues that the Winter Garden photograph is the image that Barthes "neither shows nor hides" (the photograph, we should remember, is never reproduced), but of which "he speaks" (Derrida 2007, 289). Derrida concludes that the photograph constitutes the *punctum* that irradiates Barthes's book (which must be seen as the public event of writing).

> The Winter Garden Photograph, which he neither shows nor hides, which he speaks, is the *punctum* of the entire book. The mark of this unique wound is nowhere visible as such, but its unlocatable brightness or clarity (that of *his* mother's eyes) irradiates the entire study. It makes of this book an irreplaceable event (Derrida 2007, 289).

[2] Cf. Patrick Maynard (1997); Jean-Michel Rabaté (1997); Nancy Shawcross (1997).

In his first characterization of *studium* and *punctum*, Barthes establishes a distinction. The photographic *studium* corresponds to the realm of the cultural “taste”, including the photographer’s intentions and the visual codes of interpretation. The *punctum*, on the contrary, is an element of the photograph that “rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me”, constituting the unique and incidental detail that captures the eye and the imaginary relations (Barthes 1982, 26). However, this opposition would become increasingly complex as the book progressed. Derrida argues that, as articulated by Barthes, the *punctum* also inscribes the power of metonymic expansion. It pluralizes what is unique and singular, thereby invading the field of the *studium*, associated to the public and dominant uses of image and discourse.

Therefore, Derrida argues that the relationship between the two concepts is not merely oppositional, as we might expect in the beginning, but intrinsically dynamic. Thus, the irreplaceable singularity of Barthes’s book (and, within it, of each photograph) simultaneously obeys a movement of repetition and pluralization through which the book is made available as a theoretical source. **Elkins** also fails to explore this idea by affirming that the *punctum* parallels the sublime and that it “couldn’t otherwise be put into a book or essay or academic paper”, that is to say, the systems through which knowledge is inscribed in the public space (**Elkins** 2007, 159).

But, as argued by Batchen, what matters is not the distinction between *studium* and *punctum*, but “their poststructural inseparability”, “the dynamic play of this impossible relationship”, the “supplement” that displaces the *punctum* from its certainty, affirming its potentiality and reserve (which is why Barthes opts not to reproduce the Winter Garden photograph) (Batchen 2009b, 268). Therefore, according to Batchen, “what was once confined to only a few select photographs is, [Barthes] recognizes, a constituent element of all of them” (Batchen 2009b, 268).

As a result, Batchen argues that Barthes’s book can even be read as a history of photography. Not *the* history of photography as a product of monolithic and deterministic descriptions, but an alternative model of *a* history of photography that does justice to the complex ways in which the visual image functions. This is a history whose composition incorporates the play between public and private, singularity and plurality, truth and fiction. A history capable of creating a resonant account that instills life into the multiple images of the *high*, and the *low* (or *vernacular*) cultures, examined by Barthes in *Camera Lucida*.

This play of differences is diametrically opposed to the binarisms that support **Elkins'** analysis. **Elkins** accuses Barthes's *punctum* of being a "deliberate eccentricity", an ordinary provider of memories, faces and melodramatic passions (Elkins 2011, 25). Barthes's book would then appear as a kind of private *pathos* that develops in "safe territory", using grief and loss as "the last remaining cover, the safest defense, the best fiction" (**Elkins** 2011, 25). That way, **Elkins** claims the need to consider a "less controllable practice" that would prevent us from being "distracted by faces and memories", resisting sentimentality as an easy way out for photography. This is why, he claims, his collection of photographs includes "things like rocks, ice, and salt", instead of portraits and human figures (**Elkins** 2011, 43). Already in *What Do We Want Photography to Be?* (2009), where he openly criticizes the trend of vernacular photography, **Elkins** claims "another photography, one that is not vernacular, does not rely on figures or recognizable scenes, that is less clearly a mirror of any viewer's memories" (**Elkins** 2009, 176).

First of all, the idea that Barthes's theory is exclusively drawn from portraits and images of well-known photographers containing human figures is inaccurate. For example, despite not being included in some foreign editions, the Polaroid by French photographer Daniel Boudinet, chosen by Barthes as the frontispiece for his book, acquires a central role in its layout, emphasized by its color print on special glossy paper.

The image, as described by Batchen, shows "the edge of a bed or couch with a pillow resting on it"; "[…] most of the picture is taken up with a diaphanous drawn curtain that overlaps in the center, obscuring our vision of what lies beyond. It parts a little as it touches the bed, allowing a flash of illumination" (Batchen 2009, 16).

In Barthes, photography entails an indeterminable relation between figuration and abstraction. It inscribes a form of abstraction (time and absence) within figuration itself, endowing both the look and the image with a specific form of persistence: both continue to exist even when the visible is cancelled out as representation and iconic resemblance, giving place to the spectral condition of the photographic evidence.

This is why, according to Batchen, "a number of scholars have argued that Boudinet's Polaroid is a central, perhaps even the central, image in Barthes's argument, despite never being mentioned by him" (Batchen 2009, 16-17). So, irrespective of the relative importance that each author gives to this image, in Batchen's opinion "any

translated edition of La chambre claire that does not include the Boudinet image should be regarded as fatally flawed" (Batchen 2009, 16-17).

Furthermore, in preserving an evaluation of photography that privileges good practices over bad practices, **Elkins** constructs a normative history that is utterly opposed to Barthes's wider intentions of discovering "the nature of the photographic experience" (Batchen 2009b, 264). In contrast to **Elkins**' arguments, the philosophical and even historical implications of Barthes's *punctum* go well beyond the "need to find photographs touching" (**Elkins** 2011, 44). For Barthes, absence is not a synonym of lost: lost aspires to the restitution of a vanished unity, whereas absence integrates what remains of the past as the ultimate possibility of reinvention and future construction. As in Derrida, the specter is always *revenant* (something that has been and returns) and *arrivant* (something that announces the becoming), operating in the intersection of past, present and future (Derrida 1994, 5).

In this regard, it will be equally important to demonstrate that Barthes's *punctum* cannot be reduced to what **Elkins** defines as a nostalgic and sentimental form of memory, rather acquiring the meaning of a place of contestation, or "counter-memory" (Barthes 1982, 91).

Barthes and Proust: involuntary memory and the ethical condition of time

Now, I would like to return one last time to Blanchot's quotation in *Camera Lucida*, in order to reveal the impact of counter-memory in Barthes's theory. Actually, the phrase appears in the context of Blanchot's discussion of the literary experience in Proust. Focusing on Proust's monumental *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu*, Blanchot speaks of those impressions, those insignificant incidents (such as the experience of tasting a madeleine cake, the tinkling of cutlery, or stumbling on an uneven path) that emerge as singular and physically embodied instants of time. Through them, Proust becomes aware of his literary gift, and, more importantly, he discovers the very essence of literature:

> We see that what is given to [Proust] at that instant is not only the assurance of his calling, the affirmation of his gifts, but also the very essence of literature - he has touched it, experienced it in its pure state, by experiencing the transformation of time into an imaginary space (the space unique to images), in that moving absence, without events to hide it, without presence to obstruct it, in this emptiness always in the process of

> becoming: that remoteness and distance that make up the milieu and the principle of metamorphoses and of what Proust calls metaphors. But it is no longer a matter of applying psychology; on the contrary, there is no more interiority, for everything that is interior is deployed outwardly, takes the form of an image. Yes, at this time, everything becomes image, and the essence of the image is to be entirely outside, without intimacy, and yet more inaccessible and more mysterious than the innermost thought; without signification, but summoning the profundity of every possible meaning; unrevealed and yet manifest, having that presence-absence that constitutes the attraction and the fascination of the Sirens (Blanchot 2003, 14).

Any attempt to relate Proust's literary work to photography would be considered counterproductive. Proust favors the tactile shocks, the sensations of hearing or tasting, in opposition to visuality, associated by Proust to the conscious and intelligible processes of thinking. As for photography, it embodies, for Proust, a form of cold and distant vision, cutting the object from the memories and sensations that involve the affective perception of reality. Barthes himself says that there is "nothing Proustian in a photograph" (Barthes 1982, 82). So, contrary to the conventional notion of memory, Barthes advances the alternative concept of "counter-memory":

> […] not only is the Photograph never, in essence, a memory (whose grammatical expression would be the perfect tense, whereas the tense of the Photograph is the aorist), but it actually blocks memory, quickly becomes a counter-memory (Barthes 1982, 91)

However, without realizing it, Barthes converges with Proust's understanding of time, engaging with his major conception of involuntary memory. As noted by Blanchot, in Proust, the insignificant incident that went unnoticed escapes the order of consciousness, returning not as a memory, but as an "actual event" that interrupts the fabric of time (Blanchot 2003, 12). Also for Barthes, the "counter-memory" activated by the photograph is associated to the discovery of an event that disturbs the order of time. As Proust himself would put it, the involuntary memory is a memory *freed from the order of time*. Blanchot further observes that, given its fecundity, the contradiction in which Proust apparently falls is irrelevant: to be "out of time" is what allows him to capture "a little time in its pure state" (Blanchot 2003, 13).

Such *pure* time, shaped by the simultaneity of distinct temporalities that strike the subject as pure sensation, produces the fragmentation (or *l'effondrement*) of the self. This is an aspect that, as we have seen, also traverses Barthes's theory. Moreover, in Proust, the simultaneity of two presences (that of the past and that of the present) forms the "unique ecstasy of time" (Blanchot 2003, 13): an experience in which two separate moments are combined, condensing the reality of time in a single, exorbitant instant.[3]

The proximity with Barthes's conceptualization of photography is evident. In Barthes, the immobilization of time in the photograph is given as an excess, as a *violence* through which the object is ripped from a continuum: "what I see has been here, in this place which extends between infinity and the subject" (Barthes 1982, 77). Similarly to Proust, Barthes therefore conceives of an experience of temporal ecstasy that would be particular important in his redefinition of the *punctum*. Completely ignored by **Elkins**, the following statement reveals to be crucial in our assessment of Barthes's project: "[…] I now know 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 representation" (Barthes 1982, 96). [4]

The temporality that can be travelled and made visible regardless of symbolic circuits explains the fascination caused by the Winter Garden photograph. In Batchen's

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[3] In Proust the figure of Time comprises a rare experience, in which two sensations, or two real facts, coexist; both fight as if opponents, leading to the creation of a specific temporality that interpenetrates both past and present. As Blanchot writes: "Thus the footstep that stumbles on the irregular cobblestones of the Guermantes courtyard is suddenly-- nothing is more sudden-the same footstep that stumbled over the uneven flagstones of the Baptistery of San Marco: the same footstep, not 'a double, an echo of a past sensation ... but this very sensation itself': a minute incident, but deeply moving, one that tears apart the fabric of time and by this rending introduces us to another world: outside of time, says Proust hurriedly. Yes, he asserts, time is abolished, since, at once, in a real act of capturing - fugitive but irrefutable - I hold the Venice instant and the Guermantes instant, not a past and a present, but one single presence that causes incompatible moments, separated by the entire course of lived life, to coincide in a palpable simultaneity" (Blanchot 2003, 12-13).

[4] This is why, in *Camera Lucida*, Barthes examines, after the encounter with the Winter Garden picture, several photographs in which the *ecstasy of time* is suddenly revealed. For example, describing the astonishment caused by the photograph taken by Alexander Gardner of Lewis Payne, who was about to be hanged, Barthes formulates a paradoxical time where "He is dead and he is going to die". We must also remember that August Salzmann's photograph of the path of Beith-Lehem, near Jerusalem, prompts Bathes's identification of three simultaneous times: "my present, the time of Jesus, and that of the photographer, all this under the instance of reality". Finally, Barthes describes the Look of the child portrayed by Kertész as a sort of inhuman stare that crosses over the past and the actual present (Cf. Barthes 1982, 96; 97 and 113, respectively).

words, it is “this suspension of time’s passage, this conjuring of [Barthes’s] mother as both alive and dead and therefore as neither, that moves him”. (Batchen 2009b, 267).

In this passage, Batchen seems to intentionally evoke the *neutral* (neither this nor that, but an irreducible third), a concept that acquires a special significance in Barthes’s theory. The concept had been at the basis of Barthes’s penultimate course given at the Collège de France, entitled *Le Neutre*. Interestingly, the concept also gains an important role in Blanchot’s philosophy. The neutral designates a relation of third kind that suspends the totalizing and unitary forms of discourse. In this sense, Blanchot´s account of the neutral speaks eloquently to Barthes’s *punctum* as well:

> […] the neutral cannot be represented, cannot be symbolized or even signified […] It is as though it were the infinite vanishing point from which the speech of the narrative, and within it all narratives and all speech about every narrative, would receive and lose their perspective: the infinite distance of their relations, their perpetual overturning and annulment (Blanchot 1993, 396).

In Barthes, the image of “Death” plays the role of the neutral: it does not allow itself to be seized unitarily, it strikes us in its inaccessibility, and it is discovered by the subject as the fictive counterpoint of a disarranged actuality, multiplied in a supplement of place and presence. Indeed, death appears not as a social and symbolic rite of passage, but as a limit-experience of the living person, what Blanchot described as a powerful movement “through which meaning comes toward us, and we toward it” (Blanchot 1993, xvii). But it is the dynamics between meaning and its collapse that should be clearly preserved in both Blanchot and Barthes, undermining **Elkins’** idea that Barthes’s *punctum* would correspond to a sort of “inviolate truth” (**Elkins** 2011, 42). In *Camera Lucida*, the alien nature of the past and the sense of finitude expose the vulnerable condition of the subject, challenging the idea that personal thinking parallels the discursive powers to classify and to exercise absolute domination over the other and the past.

As a result, the *punctum* should be preserved in its ethical implication as well. Rosalind Krauss points out that Barthes’s *punctum* had long been prepared and anticipated in his previous works, especially those in which the author rehearsed the idea of a third meaning, a third language that resists “the coercive powers of speech which force the speaker always to choose one side of the binaries that constitute him”

(Krauss 2009, 188). Batchen has also demonstrated that already in *The Death of the Author*, from 1967, Barthes called for an "open-ended textual practice", a form of writing that would appear as "truly revolutionary since to refuse to fix meanings is, in the end, to refuse God and his hypostases - reason, science, law" (Barthes quoted by Batchen 2009a, 8). Indeed, this is the opposite of what **Elkins** describes as the presumably "half-hidden religious meaning" of Barthes's thinking (**Elkins** 2011, 86).

Once again, we must move beyond **Elkins, in order** to conclude that the relation between Barthes and Blanchot also makes perfect sense here. For Blanchot, the essential feature of the neutral is not to allow ourselves to be grasped either in terms of immanence or in terms of transcendence (Blanchot 1993, 432). Similarly, Barthes's *punctum* urges the reader to think photography in terms of a non-univocal relationship that brings to the fore the concepts of time and absence. For Michael Fried, only on this basis will it be possible to challenge the "unary" photograph that defines the image-consuming regime (Fried 2009, 151).

We should note that for Barthes "the Photograph is unary when it emphatically transforms 'reality' without doubling it, without making it vacillate (emphasis is a power of cohesion): no duality, no indirection, no disturbance" (Barthes 1982, 41). In the final page of *Camera Lucida*, Barthes closes the book with a very similar idea:

> 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 (Barthes 1982, 119).

As argued by Sharon Sliwinski, Barthes' punctum constitutes "an attempt to describe what is indelible in photography itself". Accordingly, "more than a particular detail", the *punctum* "can be thought of as the very means by which photography makes the ineffable actually appear" (Sliwinski 2007, 250).

Following Sliwinski, I would add that the *punctum* makes time actually appear, configuring it as a form of duration that can be either the experience of suspension of Boudinet's polaroid; or the experience concerning the simultaneity between past and present, materialized in some photographs; or even the traumatic moment that witnesses

a past reality, related to the desire and the fascination of haunting images, as in the case of the Winter Garden photograph.

The relationship with a past that is not simply known, but materially *felt*, is the opposite of a mythical platonic time that would render the *punctum* as "a way of smuggling in a notion of the ineffable or nonverbal" (**Elkins** 2007, 159). **Elkins** completely underestimates the reach of Barthes's *punctum*. On the one hand, he examines the *punctum* in terms of the conventional dualism between the *studium* and the *punctum*, failing to grasp the idea that, in Barthes's *Camera Lucida*, the subjective experience of photography involves a textual action through which the personal and the public domains are intersected. On the other hand, **Elkins** moves too quickly to an association between the affective, or the non-cognitive experience of the image, and transcendence, confusing the *punctum* with the ineffable and the unspeakable.

Contrary to **Elkins**'s interpretation, according to which the *punctum* is a way of guarantying a sublime, Barthes's *punctum* witnesses the very shattering of conventional modes of perception and thinking, contributing, still today, to questioning redemptive and univocal narratives around the significance of photography.

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