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CONTEMPORARY ISSUES IN MATERIAL AND VISUAL CULTURE

WHAT SORT OF EVIDENCE DO PHOTOGRAPHS SUPPLY?

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION:

The PORTRAIT is the most impressive and interpretative of photographs. Encompassing most genres, it lends itself to study and critique much like the very subjects it points at. Be it of a person, an animal, a building or an object, it can be a document, a proof, a symbol, a story or any or all at once. This very nature of its metamorphosis is attractive and disturbing at the same time. As appealing as it's non-adherence to any particular style or class is, its defiance to classification creates a sense of chaos and frustration.

The Photograph has a two-part role to play. Firstly, it provides EVIDENCE of an occurrence and secondly, (as a derivative of that evidence) it makes that which has occurred ETERNAL or IMMORTAL.

In his book 'The Unbearable Lightness of Being', Milan Kundera refers to the German adage, "Einmal ist Keinmal", "What happens but once, might as well not have happened at all. If we have only one life to live, we might as well not have lived at all." Simply put, we don't get second chances to alter our decisions or change our fate. This is in essence the role a Photograph plays. As a witness to that fleeting moment, it captures and entombs it for eternity, so we can revisit and review it, but not alter it.

But so does Film. Yet is there a difference? Films are alive. They move with a life force that the photograph doesn't possess. Films talk. They engage us with their opinions. Their language is vivid and assertive. The photograph on the other hand is a silent, frozen spectre, a ghost of something that existed in the past. It has no audible voice and its language is vague and subjective. It makes me wonder. Is Photography the shy younger brother, always overshadowed by his older brother's confident and appeasing manner? Or is he the cool hippie non-conformist who chooses his own path and leaves the rest to make sense of its behaviour? But that's another story altogether. Best stay focused on the task at hand.

In this paper, I will highlight the role of the Photograph as *Proof* or *Evidence*. Marjorie Perloff's text "*What has occurred once: Barthes' Winter Garden / Boltanski's Archives of the Dead*" from *Writing the Image after Roland Barthes, Photography: A Very Short Introduction*, provides us with two different approaches to the evidentiary quality of the Photograph. On the one hand, Roland Barthes holds that what you see must have been whereas Boltanski's manipulation of facts poses the question – Is it really? The truth and authenticity of an image thus challenged, we are forced to identify and revise our own perceptions of whether or not the Photograph is a *true Witness of Reality*.

CHAPTER 2

THE PHOTOGRAPH AS EVIDENCE

In the very beginning, whilst introducing his book 'Camera Lucida', Roland Barthes poses the question of the Classification of Photography. He quickly distinguishes between “*a* photograph” and “*the* photograph”. The first he says “is never distinguished from its referent” and the second “always carries its referent with itself”.

It encompasses yet distinguishes itself through its subject. A photograph builds within itself a uniqueness, which separates it from others through the referent, but at the same time it is limitless in its interpretation as *the* photograph. *The* photograph then becomes a tool or an object of photography: a space or a frame within which *a* photograph is displayed. It is essentially like looking out the window at a landscape. The moment you are enthralled and captured by the scene within the frame, the gap between the outside and the inside melts away.

Barthes points out that, “The portrait-photograph is a closed field of forces. Four image repertoires intersect here, oppose and distort each other. In front of the lens, I am at the same time: the one I think I am, the one I want others to think I am, the one the photographer thinks I am, and the one he makes use of to exhibit his art.”

Each Avatar is a reinvention of a perceived reality. Barthes uses two words: “inauthenticity” and “imposture” to describe this phenomenon. Add to this, the perception of the viewer or observer, and we have infinite parallels or versions of a photograph, true only and particular to the universe it was created for, yet universal when combined in a single frame of the photograph.

Barthes says, “This fatality (no photograph without something or someone) involves Photography in the vast disorder of objects – of all the objects in the world; why choose (why photograph) this object, this moment, rather than some other?” This *choice of object* allows us to contextualise and interpret a photograph.

Barthes refers to the *Photographic Referent* as “not the *optionally* real thing to which an image or a sign refers but the *necessary* real thing which has been placed before the lens, without which there would be no photograph.”

“Every photograph” he says “is somehow co-natural with its referent”.

The role of the *referent* emerges stronger than that of the photographer or the observer, as it is *What we see* as opposed to *What is shown to us* that has a deeper impact on our perception of the photograph.

“What I see has been, in this place which extends between infinity and the subject (operator or spectator); it has been here, and yet immediately separated; it has been absolutely, irrefutably present, and yet already deferred”, says Barthes.

But what kind of evidence does it provide and for whom?

The *punctum*, (according to Marjorie, “the prick, sting, or sudden wound that makes a particular photograph epiphanic to a particular viewer”) is distinguished from the *studium* or the study of the photograph in relation to the “period, clothes, photogeny”. Where one is subjective to the knowledge of the photographic referent, the other is an objective study of an unknown or unfamiliar subject or referent.

This is the essence of any family album. The photographs will have a deeper meaning for those familiar with the subjects, the history, the relationships, the story behind the poses in the photographs, whereas a stranger would look at them and see just a collection of photographs depicting random people doing mundane everyday ‘chores’. It would be familiar simply because of the universality of the event but it would hold no personal meaning or *punctum*.

In his book ‘Camera Lucida’, Barthes refers to his search for a picture of his deceased mother and his frustration of not finding one that was ‘true’ to his memory of her.

He writes, “I was struggling among images partially true and therefore totally false. To say, confronted with a certain photograph, “That’s almost the way she was!” was more distressing than to say confronted by another, “That’s not the way she was at all.”

He equates this *almost* to the image of his mother in his dreams. The boundaries of reality thus blurred, he questions what’s *real* and what is made up by his own subconscious.

When you wake up from a dream-state, there is a sense of the details rapidly slipping away and a strong urge to hold on to it and ultimately a sense of panic when the effort proves fruitless. Barthes feels a similar tussle as he sifts through the pile of photographs, trying desperately to hold on to *his* memory of his mother, which is rapidly waning in his own mind, only to find it in a photograph of her five-year-old self he had never known or *witnessed* before. Yet the *referent* in the photograph invoked in him the *prick of punctum*. In a complete reversal of roles he gives birth to a new identity of his mother, as he recognised in that photograph the child he had cared for (nursing his dying mother).

“I who had not procreated,” he says, “I had in her very illness, engendered my mother.”

Marjorie observes “the emanation of the referent which is for him (Barthes) the essence of the photograph, is thus a wholly personal connection. The intense, violent, momentary pleasure (*jouissance*) that accompanies one’s reception of the photograph’s “unique being” is individual and “magical” for unlike all other

representations, the photograph is an image without a code, the eruption of the Lacanian 'real' into the signifying chain, "a *satori* (says Barthes) in which words fail".

I don't agree that the photograph is an image without a code. Every photograph is filled with codes; some specific to the *unique being (punctum)*, while others are universal (*studium*). A photograph without a code would have no language, no way of communicating its intent. It would be naked, stripped of its very essence.

Although Barthes "asserts that the photograph was an image without code", he further states, "To ask whether a photograph is analogical or coded is not a good means of analysis. The important thing is that the photograph possesses an evidential force, and its testimony bears not on the object but on time. From a phenomenological viewpoint, in the photograph, the power of authentication exceeds the power of representation."

Boltanski approaches the subject of *authenticity* from another angle. He creates his own reality. His dissatisfaction with what is *real* and his subsequent construction of a simulated reality challenges Barthes' views of authentication and representation. Not so much the idea of "that has been" but more the notion of "what has occurred only once".

Boltanski's attraction to Photography's ability of "furnishing the evidence of the *real*" doesn't necessarily contradict the Barthesian view of "every photograph is a certificate of presence". Boltanski also associates the Photographic referent with the photograph, in a sense reiterating Barthes' view that "In photography I can never deny that the thing has been there".

But even Barthes finds fault with this evidentiary quality of the Photograph.

As Barthes puts it, "...very often (too often, to my taste) I have been photographed and knew it. Now, once I feel observed by the lens, everything changes: I constitute myself in the process of "posing," I instantaneously make another body for myself, I transform myself in advance into an image. This transformation is an active one: I feel that the Photograph creates my body or mortifies it, according to its caprice"

What we recognize as an unerring rendering of the truth or 'real' is therefore nothing more than a version of the truth altered by the mere act of taking a photograph. A Photograph is then a 'composition' of the subject by the photographer, by the subject and ultimately by the observer. The truth changing face each time. So what 'self' should it (the photograph) be 'true' to? Or is this 'self' an imagined one: one that eludes capture?

As 'Evidence' a photograph may fail to attain it's purpose, betrayed by its own need to be present and accountable. Unlike the falling tree in the forest, a witness to a 'moment' inadvertently destroys its objective. To be witness, therefore, is not to give evidence to the 'real' but to skew reality and deface it.

Boltanski on the other hand revels in this disparity between what's 'real' and what is perceived as 'real'. Using a web of staged images and misleading captions he beckons the observer to simply 'believe' the images are real merely by stating that they are. Marjorie Perloff questions this method. "Under such circumstances," she writes, "*authentication* becomes a contested term. How does one document what has occurred only once when the event itself is perceived to be a simulation?"

But is this deception the work of the Photograph or that of the Photographer? *The Photograph* has not in anyway falsified what it sees. In Boltanski's work it is *evidence* of a *deception*. It doesn't wilfully create something that isn't there. It still adheres to its role of "Look at this". A Photograph on the other hand, which is a by-product of the three intersecting elements, is one that belies the true reality. We see transference of the ethical code from the subject to the object. It is merely 'personification', giving human qualities to a photograph making it less objective and more subjective. The photograph thus becomes accountable for the actions of the referent, the photographer and the viewer.

Boltanski's deception stems from his troubled childhood; his father had to fake his own death to escape deportation to the concentration camp and certain death. A traumatised Boltanski created new memories to replace the ones he was forced to repress. Memories cannot be trusted. They change with every recall. Like a game of Chinese whisper (the relay of a message whispered by one person to the next, and so on, till it comes full circle back to the person at the start of the chain) memory transforms itself more often than not to fit eventually into a neat little box of one's perceived reality.

Marjorie Perloff notes that, "Memory plays no such role in Boltanski's work." Here she quotes Boltanski's interview with Delphine Renard;

Boltanski states, "I have very few memories of childhood and I think I undertook this seeming autobiography precisely to blot out my memory and to protect myself. I have invented so many false memories, which were collective memories, that my true childhood has disappeared"

Marjorie further observes, "For writers and artists born in World War II France, and especially for Jewish artists like Perec and Boltanski, the Proustian or Barthesian *souvenir d'enfance* seems to have become a kind of empty signifier, a site for assumed identities and invented sensation."

Boltanski's installation 'Detective' is proof of this deception of perception. The photographs have no identity. They are static, providing no information. At face value they are photographs of people: old, young, men and women. We are informed that some are criminals and some are victims. Yet without any information telling us which are criminals and which are

victims, the faces take on both the roles. This lack of information, unleashes a bout of doubt. Can we be trusted to determine if this boy is a victim? What if this is a childhood picture of a serial killer? Even though our eyes see the evidence the Photographs show us, we fail to make any sense of it. Here the lack of evidence is evidence. It is evidence that we do not and cannot trust ourselves (and by association, these images) unless we've seen it for ourselves. It is also evidence that we rely on others (*punctum*) to interpret photographs for us (*studium*).

Several of the projects Boltanski undertook, deal with the question of IDENTITY. For example, his work 'the Inventaire des objets ayant appartenus a un habitant d'Oxford (1973)' is an array of photographs Boltanski took, of items owned by an Oxford student, after the student's untimely death. By photographing these items individually and out of context with a neutral background, he in fact deconstructed the student's identity, but by displaying them in a grid formation, he has in a way, reconstructed the student's identity. As parts these items may have the *prick of punctum* to any viewer giving it a universal appeal (that shirt could belong to anybody), but as a whole it bears witness only to the life and identity of the student (*those things belong to him*).

In his work 'Les Suisses morts', the smiling, jovial portraits Boltanski collected from the obituary section of the Swiss regional newspaper 'Le Nouvelliste du Valais', placed again in a grid, bear witness to a neutral class of people who have nothing in common, except the fact that they are now deceased. Their individual identity is concealed in their death. Although the referents in the photographs are dead, we identify them by these photographs taken when they were alive and well.

Boltanski says, "The thing about pictures of dead people is that they are always taken when the subjects are alive, all tanned, muscular, and smiling. The photo replaces the memory. When someone dies, after a while you can't visualize them anymore, you only remember them through their pictures"

The same can be said of any memory we have, not necessarily of people who have recently died.

For instance, when my godchild was two years old we took her to the park for a picnic. My dad took several pictures of the family lazing out on the grass on a sunny day. There are photographs of my godchild laughing as I pushed her on the swing set. Twelve years have gone by and the only memories I have of this event are the ones I got from these pictures. I don't remember how we got there or what we did in between these photographs taken by my dad. The same goes for any family event: Birthdays, Anniversaries, Weddings and Holidays.

Even though I was physically present and a witness to the event, the memories I am left with are derived from the point of view of the camera and therefore the photographer. I no longer

look at myself in these pictures through my eyes but through the eyes of my dad who took the photographs. In a sense, I floated out of my own consciousness and entered his. So I see myself as he sees me and I remember the scene through his eyes.

It brings up the question of how we see ourselves in photographs. Is it like looking into a mirror? Or is it looking at you through someone else's eyes. Is it a screen or filter that colours our perception of 'self'. Am I looking at 'me' (referent) as 'me' (spectator) or 'me' (referent) as 'he/she/they' (photographer) look(s) at 'me'? What a conundrum! And which memory would have longevity?: My 'real' memory or my 'perceived' memory.

Unlike cinema, where the subjects move about the frame unhinged, giving them a lightness and a sense of floating through a space, the Photograph binds and tethers the referent to that frame; to a chair perhaps or to another person or a particular scene, instantly weighing them down. Their heaviness resounds in this immobility, trapping them in a state of cryogenics. Every time an image is revisited, it sets off a freeze-thaw action that continuously erodes the memory of the 'real' and fragments it.

Jean-Pierre Montier quotes Barthes in his book 'Henri Cartier-Bresson and the Artless Art', as saying "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 becoming a counter-memory."

A new phenomenon emerges from this observation. This realisation that the memory of an image attaches itself to the point of view of the photographer, causes the death of every other viewpoint and a birth of a new symbiotic relationship between memory and point-of-view, which is in tandem with the existence of this evidence provided in the Photograph. Memory therefore lives through its own death (what is perceived as real takes the place of what is in fact real). The photograph goes from being a positive reproduction or a 'Photo positive' to a mirror image, one that is true but untrue, a 'Photo negative'.

CHAPTER 3

IN CONCLUSION

What we see is what we believe. As a body of evidence, the Photograph works just like our own eyes. It observes and relays exactly what it sees, a true representation of the referent. It is only because of its ability to capture and hold in its possession the chosen moment that will never repeat itself; we have the chance to relive it. What Barthes calls “the *noeme* of photography”- “that has been” and will never ‘be’ again, “what has only occurred once”. We may attempt to replicate this moment, manipulate it or even fake it; it will never be the same, it will never be ‘real’ but just a facsimile of what was ‘real’.

The *evidence* a Photograph provides is subjective only in our perception of it, but its *authenticity* remains objective. It’s how we look at an image (sociologically, culturally, psychologically) and how we relate to it (personally or impersonally) that makes this evidence relevant or irrelevant. Boltanski’s work shows that the photograph doesn’t claim to identify the referent and depends solely on external aid to point the observer in the direction of the identity of the referent.

As a tool in itself, it doesn’t lie but is caused to lie by the participation of these external factors; for example, the photographer who chooses a certain subject or angle for its cultural or social value, or the referent who has chosen to pose a certain way to make himself/herself more appealing, or the biased observer who interprets the image in a certain way. The photograph is meant to bear the burden of all these variables and produce a ‘reality’ that appeals to all.

It stays, however, pure by virtue and its only role is to preserve a moment that can’t be preserved otherwise and in this role it is most reliable and dependable. And herein lies its ‘true’ purpose, to ‘freeze’ not to render ‘dead’. A cryogenic unit, from which the referent can be, revived...not a tomb. The dead cannot be brought back to life. Yet our memory of them can keep them in stasis. That is where the magic of the Photograph helps us; it prolongs our memory. It is a constant reminder of a time, a place, a person or a feeling. It lives!

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