

I wanted to play on the paradox and a reversal of the stereotype. But it does have a symbolic reality: I try to say that what is terrible about a photograph is that there is no depth in it, that it is *clear evidence* of what was there.

Your book is a "note," and yet it creates concepts . . .

It was with sincere modesty that I called it a "note" in the subtitle, because it's a short book, with no encyclopedic pretensions. It's just barely a thesis, a proposition. But on the other hand, I'm quite conscious of the *particularity* of my position, which is on the edge of this scientific field . . . One must define one's terms whenever one writes a work of analytical reflection, and I chose two Latin words that simplified things. *Studium* is the general, cultural, and civilized interest one has in a photograph. It's what corresponds to the photographer's work: he tries to please our *studium*, our . . . taste, in a way. Thus, all photos of reality in general have a sense of *studium*.

But I noticed that certain photographs touched me more sharply than their general interest warranted, through details that captivated me, surprised and awakened me in a rather enigmatic fashion. I called that element the *punctum*, because it's a kind of point, a sting, that touches me sharply.

A "pleasure of the image" after the "pleasure of the text"?

The first part of my book could have been called that. But I then begin a more painful reflection on an episode of mourning, on grief. I try to discover and explain what causes this painful impression: the violence of "what was there." This is "photographic ecstasy": certain photographs take you outside of yourself, when they are associated with a loss, an emptiness, and in this sense my book is symmetrical to *A Lover's Discourse*, in the realm of mourning.

The Grain of the Voice Interviews 1962-1980

Trans. Linda Coverdale

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From interviews conducted by Angelo Schwarz (late 1977)
and Guy Mandery (December 1979)

On Photography

Barthes is one of the men who will leave his mark on our time. From Mythologies to A Lover's Discourse, Roland Barthes's analyses of different elements and aspects of society are talked about, imitated, sometimes mocked, but never ignored. His influence on the intellectual life of France is undeniable.

Here are some of his thoughts on photography and the role it plays in modern society.

ANGELO SCHWARZ: *Photography is now commonly defined as a language. Isn't this definition confusing, in a way?*

To call photography a language is both true and false. It's false, in the literal sense, because the photographic image is an analogical reproduction of reality, and as such it includes no discontinuous element that could be called *sign*: there is literally no equivalent of a word or letter in a photograph. But the statement is true insofar as the composition and style of a photo function as a secondary message that tells us about the reality depicted and the photographer himself: this is *connotation*, which is language. Photographs always connote something different from what they show on the plane of *denotation*: it is paradoxically through style, and through style alone, that photographs are language.

As Baudelaire already observed, photography is closely linked to an industrial process. Could we, then, define

it as a system of writing strongly conditioned by this industrial process?

Film and photography are pure products of the Industrial Revolution. They're not part of a heritage, a tradition. That makes them extremely difficult to analyze: we should invent a new aesthetics that can deal with both film and photography by differentiating them, whereas in reality there is a cinematographic aesthetics that functions on the basis of stylistic values of a literary kind. Photography hasn't benefited from this transference, appearing instead as a kind of cultural poor relation for whom no one wants to claim responsibility. 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. There are forthcoming books by Susan Sontag and Michel Tournier. The photograph is a victim of its superpower; since photography has the reputation of literally transcribing reality or a slice of reality, no one ever thinks about its real power, its true implications. We have a double perspective on photography that is always either excessive or erroneous. A photo can be thought of as a purely mechanical and exact transcription of reality, which is photo reportage, or family pictures in certain cases. This is obviously excessive because even a straightforward news photograph implies some consideration, some ideology behind the shot. Or else, at the other extreme, a photo can be thought of as a kind of substitute for painting; this is what is called an art photograph, which is another exaggeration, because it's evident that a photo is not art, in the classic sense of the term.

There are theories of film—why is there no theory of photography?

I think that we are victimized by cultural stereotypes. Film immediately took its place in culture as an art of fiction, of imagination. Even though the first cinematographic works in the period of the Lumière brothers were records of reality (*Train Arriving in Station*, *Workers Leaving the Factory*), the true development of film has been a fictional development. As an activity (or a

technique) opting for the security of a simple recording of reality, photography has not been able to enjoy such a development. Society has repressed what it thought was only a technique, while unblocking what it took to be an art.

You wrote recently that there was something in common between the work of a writer and that of a photographer. But what are the flagrant historical differences between these two activities?

They were born at different times, they have different signifiers; I'm not quite sure what the signifiers of photography are. I have no experience as a photographer, I don't know what it's like to take photographs. I am a pure consumer of photographed products. It's obvious that photography and writing don't use the same material. The writer works with words, pieces of material that already have meaning, but photography is not a language, it doesn't deal with pieces of material. There's an obvious difference.

How can it be that photography, in your own words, is foreign to both art and the "illusory naturalness" of the referent?

A photograph is caught between two dangers. It can mimic and copy art, which is a coded form of culture, but it cannot copy as well as painting, because its referent, the object it photographs, is experienced as real by someone looking at the photo. There's a very strong constraint there, which is why photography cannot be an art like painting.

But, on the other hand, the photographed object is illusively natural because in reality this referent is selected by the photographer. The camera's optical system has been chosen from among other possible systems inherited from Renaissance perspective. All that implies an ideological choice in relation to the object represented. In short, a photo cannot be a pure and simple transcription of the object that presents itself as natural, if only because a photo is one-dimensional; and besides, photography cannot be

an art, because it copies mechanically. That is the double misfortune of photography, and any photographic theory would have to start from that difficult contradiction.

The photographer is said to be a witness . . . Of what, would you say?

You know, I'm not a partisan of realism in art, or a supporter of positivism in the social sciences. I would therefore say that the photographer bears witness essentially to his own subjectivity, the way in which he establishes himself as a subject faced with an object. What I say is banal and well known. But I would greatly emphasize this aspect of the photographer's situation, because it is generally repressed.

Is a grammar of the image possible?

In the strict sense of the word, a grammar of photography is impossible, because there is no discontinuity (of sign) in a photograph. At the most, one might be able to establish a lexicon of connotative signifieds, especially in commercial photography. If photography is to be discussed on a serious level, it must be described in relation to death. It's true that a photograph is a witness, but a witness of something that is no more. Even if the person in the picture is still alive, it's a moment of this subject's existence that was photographed, and this moment is gone. This is an enormous trauma for humanity, a trauma endlessly renewed. Each reading of a photo, and there are billions worldwide in a day, each perception and reading of a photo is implicitly, in a repressed manner, a contact with what has ceased to exist, a contact with death. I think that this is the way to approach the photographic enigma, at least that is how I experience photography: as a fascinating and funereal enigma.

GUY MANDERY: *You are about to publish a book with photographs; can you tell us what it's about?*

It's a modest book, done at the request of *Cahiers du cinéma*, which is publishing a series of books on film; they left me free to choose my own subject, however, and I chose photography. My book will disappoint photographers.

I say this not from coquetry but from honesty. Because my book is not a sociology, or an aesthetics, or a history of photography. It's more like a phenomenology of photography. I consider the phenomenon of photography in its absolute novelty in world history. The world has existed for hundreds of thousands of years, there have been images for thousands of years, since the cave paintings . . . There are millions of images in the world. And then, all at once, around 1822, a new type of image appears, a new iconic phenomenon, entirely, anthropologically new.

It's this newness that I try to examine, and I place myself in the situation of a naïve man, outside culture, someone untutored who would be constantly astonished at photography. This is why my text might disappoint photographers, because this sustained astonishment obliges me to ignore their photographically sophisticated world.

How is the book organized?

I look at several arbitrarily chosen photographs and I try to reflect on them, to see what my consciousness tells me about the essence of photography. This is a phenomenological method, an entirely subjective one. I tried to find out why certain photographs moved me, intrigued me, pleased and concerned me, and why others did not. There are thousands of photos that say absolutely nothing to me. You have to be blunt about it.

It doesn't make any difference whether they're newspaper or so-called artistic photographs?

No. I chose to be guided by my *pleasure* or my *desire* in regard to certain photographs. And I tried to analyze this pleasure or desire, which brought back certain reflexes of semiological analysis. I tried to analyze what it was in certain photos that involved me, clicked with me, produced a kind of shock in me that was

not necessarily the shock of the subject depicted. There are traumatic news photos in newspapers and magazines that perhaps command high prices because they are traumatic, but they don't affect me at all. On the other hand, there are some rather anodyne reportage photos that can suddenly strike a chord in me, affect me. That is what I tried to analyze. Then I noticed that, by being guided by my pleasure, I was certainly getting results, but I was not able to define what it was that radically opposed photography to all other types of images. Because that was my intention. And so at that point . . .

. . . But I don't want to go into detail because my book involves a bit of intellectual suspense, and I don't want to ruin the effect. In any case, at this stage I decided to consider a private photograph, in relation to a recent personal loss, the death of my mother, and it was in reflecting on a photograph of her that I was able to formulate a certain philosophy of photography, which puts into relation photography and death. This is something that everyone feels intuitively, even though we live in a world of living photographs, lively images. That is the philosophy I tried to explore and formulate. I won't say any more about it, it's all in the text. Obviously, I concentrated on photographs of people rather than landscapes, and I don't deny that I postulated a certain "promotion" of private photography. I think that in contrast to painting, the ideal future of photography lies in private photography, images that represent a loving relationship with someone and possess all their power only if there was a bond of love, even a virtual one, with the person in the photo. This is all played out around love and death. It's very Romantic.

What does the book look like? What photographs did you select?

The photographs I chose have an essentially argumentative value. They are the ones I used in the text to make certain points. The book is, thus, not an anthology. I wanted to show not the best picture, or even my favorite picture, from each photographer's work, but simply the photo I needed to illustrate my argument.

But I did of course try to use pictures that are beautiful in themselves.

What was the corpus from which you made your selections?

It was very narrow, a few albums and magazines. I used the *Nouvel Observateur Photo* a great deal.

There are many old photographs, because I think that the golden age of photography was at its beginnings, its heroic period. But more contemporary photographers like Avedon and Mapplethorpe are also represented. There are some great photographers whose work I like very much who are not represented. The photographs in my book simply correspond to moments in the text.

What place does photography have in your work in general? Do you use it as a tool to cull information about society?

One thing I truly enjoy working at is showing a relation between text and image. I have always found an intense pleasure in such work. I love to write captions for pictures. I did this in my book on Japan, in my *Roland Barthes*, and I have just completed such work in *Camera Lucida*. What I love is the relation of the image and the text, a very difficult relation but which thereby provides truly creative enjoyment, the way poets used to enjoy working on difficult problems of versification.

The modern equivalent is to find a relation between text and images.

I should also say that if I chose photography as the subject of my book, I did so, in a way, *against* film. I realized that I had a positive relation to photographs, I love to look at them, whereas I have a difficult and somewhat resistant relation to film. I don't mean that I never go to the movies, but in the end, paradoxically, I put photography above cinema in my little personal pantheon.

Nowadays, photography is being recognized as an art . . .

. . . The game isn't over yet. I would say rather that every photograph is answerable to art, except (paradoxically) art photographs.

Socially, in any case, photography is well on the way to being recognized as art. Nevertheless, it has a very special, very close relation to reality. Would you agree that photography is a bridge between art and non-art?

Yes, that's quite true. I don't know if it's a bridge, but it's certainly an intermediate zone. Photography displaces, shifts the notion of art, and that is why it takes part in a certain progress in the world.

Le Nouvel Observateur, April 20, 1980

From an interview conducted by Philip Brooks, which was published almost a month after Barthes's death

The Crisis of Desire

What does it mean to be an intellectual in France today?

Gide, who at first supported Soviet Russia before becoming a critic of the regime, and who took a stand on colonialism as well, was one of the last to play the traditional role of the intellectual who also remains a great writer. Now, writers are somewhat in the background; there really aren't any more great writers, properly speaking. After Gide there were still Malraux and Aragon . . . Instead of a new wave of great writers, there came the massive invasion of intellectuals; in other words, professors. There's even a real intellectual caste. And what is threatening is the considerable development of the media, television, radio, the press, which pass on anti-intellectual attitudes. In fact, if France becomes a petit-bourgeois country, intellectuals will lose their identity more and more. They will be obliged either to seek refuge in obscure publications, as today's poets do, or to install themselves as intellectuals within the media themselves—which is in part the approach of the "new philosophers," intellectuals who have decided: "We're not going to let ourselves be constantly manipulated by the media; we're going to gain entry to the media by using their own methods, and by changing our language so that it will be more understandable to more people." Personally, I'm not attacking this position, which I find perfectly defensible. The "new philosophers" try to publicize the problems raised by their intellectuality: liberty, morality, everything in the world that calls for debate.