

Task 2. The Workbook (Part A) – Weeks 4, 5 and 6 -- Photography's Self/Other

1. What do you think Barthes means when he says “the Photograph mechanically repeats what could never be repeated existentially” (4)

The photograph captures a physical manifestation that actually existed in our consciousness or “minds eye”. You can see the exact details of the image that existed in real life. The shapes, colours, light, tones, composition and movement of the things in the photo are literally “captured” because they were mobile and quick to change, however the camera has “stolen” or “immortalised” them; and no other mode of image making except film can do this with just as much accuracy. In our discussion it was said “the camera lens is like an extension of our eyes”, it directly takes our mode of visual perception and gives us a set-in-time representation of it. The photo is almost indistinguishable from reality. When we speak of reality we generally mean what we see with our eyes.

2. What do you understand by “A specific photograph, in effect, is never distinguished from its referent (from what it represents), or at least it is not immediately or generally distinguished from its referent ...” (5)

Barthes says that “a specific photograph, in effect, is never distinguished from its referent (from what it represents), or at least it is not immediately or generally distinguished from its referent ...” (5), meaning, as Stef explained during class, just as one looks through a window out to a landscape and doesn't take direct notice of the glass whilst looking at the landscape, the viewer of a photo doesn't fully recognise that they are looking at a photo rather than just the “real image” that is the referent; the dog, tree, mother or house in the image. Barthes refers to this as “adherence” a tacking of the image to the referent which, in Barthes terms, “makes it very difficult to focus on photography” as a medium of visual art.

3. Barthes comes up with two words “studium” and “punctum” in relation to his inquiry into photography. What does he mean by these words?

Studium: The intellectual interest in a photo; research, education, study of history, aesthetics, to grasp some social and cultural contexts.

Punctum: The images ability to puncture you; the images emotional affect; not all photos have punctum.

Nik showed a photo of his girlfriend in class and explained how the image made him think of “soul” and getting lost or rather pulled into a moment intensely. When in a loving relationship, a photo of the subject of desire can rouse deep feelings in you just as seeing them in reality can. This is what Barthes means when he speaks of punctum.

4. Who is in the Winter Garden photograph? Why is it special to Barthes?

His Mother. It is special to Barthes because it captures “the impossible science of the unique being” (71). However, it is important to recognise that Barthes does not say the photograph captures the science of all unique beings. The general onlooker would probably not glean this science from looking at a photo of Barthes mother; they might from a photo of their own mother perhaps. Lara said he probably does not include the photo as it is highly personal and he is still grieving over her. Luke said that readers would not have as deep a reaction as he would and so he left it to the reader to imagine their own sentimental image in their minds eye. Lisa said maybe Barthes doesn't include the photo because he didn't want to have to justify his reaction to the photo if the public doubted the photo to depict this precise science that Barthes said the photo produces.

5. What does “camera obscura” technically mean? Why do you think that Barthes prefers “lucida” to “obscura”?

Camera Obscura: is the natural optical phenomenon that occurs when an image of a scene at the other side of a screen is projected through a small hole in that screen as a reversed and inverted image on a surface opposite to the opening.

Camera Lucida: an instrument in which rays of light are reflected by a prism to produce an image on a sheet of paper, from which a drawing can be made.

In class Ben said photography may be more like using the camera lucida technology than the camera obscura technology, because the referent and the sign are superimposed onto each other in camera lucida, whereas the image is distorted before it is shown when using camera obscura.

When taking a photo, the person with the camera looks through the viewfinder and can see exactly what the image will look like; so they are gluing the referent to the sign in the same moment. This is similar to how camera lucida works and why we think Barthes prefers it over camera obscura.

6. Barthes is making poetic connections between memory, writing, photography as a form of writing and grief. He starts by writing ABOUT photography and it soon becomes writing ABOUT his mother’s recent death and he does so in a way that is more ABOUT him than her. Jot down your thoughts about these slippages of focus in his essay/memoir.

In the lecture, Linda said “in scholarship there is a rouse or conceit because the inquiry happens prior to the writing of it”, the text is written after the conclusions were found. On the other hand, in a scholarly personal narrative of Barthes’ style, his understanding unfolds in front of the viewers’ eyes, Stef referred to the act of essaying during class, it was explained as “negotiating the terrain between contexts” and “enacting the mind at work”.

During the writing of *Camera Lucida* Barthes found the winter garden photo and then spoke to the grief and loss of his mothers death. In effect, the reader bares witness to the power of photography and all forms of self-making like writing, painting and dancing, as they constitute memory and human experience. His slippages from writing about photography to writing about hi personal life is an example of how writing about any given subject can be a means in which we can start writing about ourselves. To embark on any inquiry is the exploration of an object or subject, and then subsequently the exploration of the self with the object or subject.