

Chapter One

Overlooking the Real in *Camera Lucida*

Critics of *Camera Lucida* persistently overlook the role of the Lacanian Real in Barthes' account, claiming that toward the end of his life, Barthes betrayed the poststructuralist project by embracing an unconstructed realism.⁷ John Tagg, for example, asserts that Barthes' work terminates with a "demand for [photographic] realism" (Tagg 1). Similarly, Peter Geimer regards *Camera Lucida* as "an almost canonical text" for espousing the view of "photographic transparency" (Geimer 122). In Geimer's characterization, "Barthes treats photographs as almost magic self-recordings of nature, representations without any technical interference, pure reference, all message, no medium" (122). By contextualizing Barthes' work with contemporaneous texts by Lacan, I argue, contra Tagg and Geimer, that *Camera Lucida* engages, not with photographic realism, but rather with the Lacanian Real. At the risk of imprudence, I venture an even stronger claim: that *Camera Lucida* constitutes Barthes' most properly "poststructuralist" text and that his engagement with the Real exceeds even that of Lacan's.

At first sight, Barthes does indeed seem to espouse a realist position in *Camera Lucida*. For example, Barthes' move away from the overtly poststructuralist discourse of the "duplicity of the signifier" toward a preoccupation with what he calls the "stubbornness of the referent" appears to signal a "realist" concern with the possibility of a direct, unmediated relationship with things in the world. This reading seems especially apt in the case of passages such as the following: "I perceive the referent (here, the photograph really transcends itself; is this not the sole proof of its art? To annihilate itself as a medium, to be no longer a sign but the thing itself?)" (Barthes CL 45). Here Barthes appears to be invoking the realist notion of the transparency of the signifier. Upon deeper scrutiny, however, this appearance dissolves. Rather

than regressing toward realism, I suggest, Barthes ends his career by engaging with what Lacan calls the “Real,” points of limitation of the symbolic order.

I will argue for this reading by examining two other places within *Camera Lucida*, which lend the impression that Barthes returns to realism, but on closer inspection turn out to signal a move toward the Real. At first sight, the nostalgic tenor of the book, in which Barthes mourns the death of his mother and laments the photograph’s inability to provide a “just image,” appears to express nostalgia for a lost reality.⁸ John Tagg, for example, suggests that: “the trauma of Barthes’ mother’s death throws Barthes back on a sense of loss which produces in him a longing for a pre-linguistic certainty and unity—a nostalgic and regressive phantasy, transcending loss, on which he finds his idea of photographic realism” (Tagg 4).⁹ But, if one follows Slavoj Žižek’s view of nostalgia, Barthes’ fascination here is not for some real “lost object” but rather for the “gaze.” The gaze, according to Lacan, is the unsettling, but entralling, object around which the scopic drive revolves, alternately positioning the subject as viewer and viewed, creating both “unrealistic anxiety” and a sense of self-scrutiny. Nostalgia, Žižek argues, involves fascination with the “gaze of the naive ‘other’ absorbed, enchanted by [an object]” (Žižek LA 114).¹⁰

An instance of nostalgia in exactly this sense is referred to in the opening sentence of *Camera Lucida*, where Barthes describes the initial “amazement” that provided the impetus for his contemplation of the photograph. As he explains, “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 the eyes that looked at the Emperor’” (Barthes CL 3). Barthes’ fascination is not with the lost object itself (Napoleon), nor a response to being looked at by the eyes of another, but rather with identifying with the gaze of another for whom the object was present. Similarly, in the Winter Garden photograph, the unpublished photograph in which he “finds” his mother, she is present as a child, as a figure he never knew. What he has “found,” therefore, is not simply the lost object but instead an identification with the point from which one could look at this child and see her “gentleness,” her “kindness” [which] having “proceeded from the imperfect parents who loved her so badly . . . was specifically out-of-play” (69).

The longing in question is not for the presumed gaze of her actual parents, however, since, as Barthes contends, they “loved her so badly,” but rather, as he makes clear, for the continuation of his own relationship to her. Barthes explains, “During her illness, I nursed her . . . ; she had become my little girl, uniting for me with that essential child she was in her first photo-

graph" (72). This, I argue, suggests that the nostalgia evoked by Barthes has little to do with a real "lost object" but instead centers on a notion of the gaze as a "stain of the Real" that violates the image's symbolic consistency. For Barthes, the photograph of his mother as a small child posing for the photograph can never evoke a "reality" for him, but it nevertheless materializes what Freud calls "psychical reality," moments which, whether or not they correspond to actual experience, yield unconscious effects. The gaze functions, then, as a remnant of this psychical reality, an embodiment of the partial object around which the scopic drive revolves. Thus, rather than experience an imaginary unity with the (M)Other, through the Winter Garden photograph Barthes encounters the gaze. In particular, the photograph allows him to identify with the place (that of an affectionate viewer who recognizes the child's gentleness) at which the object itself appears to the gaze. It follows that, despite its rhetoric, Barthes' account of the photograph aims not to rescue realism, but rather to show how the photograph may engage with a "body of experience [which] is excluded from reality," or what Lacan calls "the Real" (Quinet 145).

Thus, rather than a realism that accomplishes a "unity" between what is present and what is absent, that in Tagg's terms, aims to "transcend loss," the photograph, for Barthes, performs a loss of its own (Tagg 4).¹¹ That is, moving beyond the mimetic, the photograph incites the consciousness of loss by triggering an awareness not of the "*being-there* of the thing...but an awareness of its *having-been-there*"¹²—in other words, an experience of the Lacanian Real (Barthes "RI" 44).

Camera Lucida also invokes what we may take as the Lacanian Real in its formulation of the *punctum*. The photograph's *punctum*, Barthes explains, is the seemingly ordinary detail, which, due to structural contingency, violates the culturally expected reading—the *studium*. This concept of the *punctum* seems to presuppose a traditional approach to images, in which the I/eye that sees gives the image its meaning in terms of culturally encoded expectations. Such a Cartesian conceptualization of the relationship of viewing subject to image also undergirds realist accounts of language and the world. *Camera Lucida* thus seems to involve a turning back toward realist ways of thinking. But against this view, I point out that according to Barthes, the *punctum* is not a point of some deeply hidden meaning but instead is a point of non-meaning, "never coded," and thus operates at the level of the Real.

Consideration of the historical context of Barthes' work provides yet further support for the idea that, rather than a realist engagement with reality, throughout *Camera Lucida* Barthes seeks to engage with what amounts to the Lacanian Real. Not only has Barthes consistently opposed realist accounts of

representation, but also his later writings move increasingly toward more radical ways of conceptualizing the limits of representation.¹³ For example, Barthes' 1972 essay, "Change the Object Itself," written contemporaneously with Lacan's delivery of *Seminar XX, Encore: On Feminine Sexuality: The Limits of Love and Knowledge*¹⁴ (in which Lacan focuses prominently on the notion of the "object") strikes a Lacanian theme in calling for a theoretical practice that "fissure[s] the very representation of meaning... [and] challenge[es] the symbolic itself" (Barthes "COI" 167). In this essay Barthes also reworks the notion of the "object," providing it with a Lacanian cadence. For Barthes, as for Lacan, the object is to be understood neither in the realist sense as an actual thing in the world that language transparently represents nor in the Saussurian sense in which the object is the site of signification. Instead, according to Lacan, the object takes the form of the "Freudian Thing" (*das Ding*)—the "nonsignified and unsignifiable object" (Fink 95). And Barthes explicitly invokes this Lacanian principle in explaining that what he is searching for in the photograph is what "Lacan calls the Tuché, the Occasion, the Encounter, the Real, in its indefatigable expression" (Barthes 4). The *punctum*, as Hal Foster puts it, is the "visual equivalent...of our missed encounter with the real" (Foster 134).

With this in mind, I return to the following passage: "I perceive the referent (here, the photograph really transcends itself; is this not the sole proof of its art? To annihilate itself as a medium, to be no longer a sign but the thing itself?)" (Barthes CL 45). Barthes makes clear that this description of a denotation that resists mediation applies not to ordinary realist reproductions but rather to the rare photographs that he distinguishes as traumatic. For example, in "The Photographic Message" Barthes contends:

If such a denotation exists, it is perhaps not at the level of what ordinary language calls the insignificant, the neutral, the objective, but, on the contrary, at the level of absolutely traumatic images. The trauma is a suspension of language, a blocking of meaning.... [T]he traumatic photograph...is the photograph about which there is nothing to say.... One could imagine a kind of law: the more direct the trauma, the more difficult is connotation. ("PM" 30–31)

For Barthes, this distinction between a coded or connotative realism and an "intractable" or denotative realism lies at the heart of what he refers to as the "two ways of the Photograph" (Barthes CL 119). In the final page of *Camera Lucida*, Barthes distinguishes these "two ways" as "mad or tame." Photography, he declares, "can be one or the other: tame if its realism remains relative, tempered by aesthetic...habits...; mad if this realism is

absolute and... original" (119). Thus, for Barthes, the "intractable" realism of the photograph, leads not to the comforting "confirmation of an existence," as Tagg claims on his behalf, but rather to the madness of "photographic ecstasy" that derives from confronting in the photograph "the wakening of intractable reality" (119).

In this light, we may understand Barthes' allusion to the "stubbornness of the referent," not as an allusion to conventional realism, but rather as coming close to describing a violent encounter with the Real. In Lacanian terms, such a relationship with "the thing itself" (as the alluring, but terrifying *das Ding*) moves beyond the claims of realism and lands us instead in the abyss of the Real. Here, then, the physical imprint of the photographic referent, as a materialization of the thing that is lacking, takes on the qualities of the Lacanian object.¹⁵ The stubborn "trace" of the photographic referent, present as a stain on a—to use Tagg's description—"paltry piece of chemically discoloured paper," asseverates beyond its materiality. It persists, refuses to go away, overpowering the medium's ability to contain it within its symbolic net.¹⁶

Celia Lury perceptively describes Barthes' formulation of the relationship between photograph and referent as a "sticky realism": "as with glue, 'the referent adheres'" (Lury 91). In other words, the referent, for Barthes, "sticks" like the Real, "which always comes back to the same place"; "it carries it glued to its heel" (Lacan Sem XI 49; Evans 159). Further echoes of the Lacanian Real in Barthes' account of the photographic referent are clear in Alan Sheridan's writing. Sheridan, translator of several Lacanian works, explicates the Lacanian Real as "the ineliminable residue of all articulation, the foreclosed element, which may be approached, but never grasped: the umbilical cord of the symbolic" (Sheridan Sem XI 280). And Barthes too speaks of a "tenuous umbilical cord" as the "luminous shadow which accompanies the body" through which the "photographer gives life." The failure of the photographer to "supply" this "shadow" prevents the referent from persisting; without this "shadow," "the subject dies forever" (Barthes CL 110).

In what follows, I suggest that this articulation between Barthes' concept of the *punctum* and the Lacanian Real provides a theoretical basis for a subversive feminist spectatorship, which avoids some of the difficulties encountered by traditional feminist film theory. It is to an account of the workings of the *punctum* in André Kertész's photographs that we now turn.