

## Chapter 16

# The Implicated Spectator: Inscribing Oneself Into a Photograph

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### ABSTRACT

*This chapter speculates about photographs that act as potential fields of projection, inviting imaginary processes through which a sense of otherness and lived experience enters into the image. Processes through which the photograph becomes other-than-itself. Using a performative style of writing, the essay directs questions at its readers to involve them into a conversation about viewing photographs as mental, remembered, and imaginary images alike. Actual photographs are reinterpreted by inscribing them with internalized images. Expanded self-portraits are moulded and contextualized with latent images stored in our visual memory. The chapter argues that these kinds of non-referential photographs are simultaneously imbued with seemingly paradoxical faculties—object-ness and image-ness, here-ness and there-ness, now-ness and then-ness—which can be used to test the attachability and elasticity of the image.*

*I had a flashback of something that never existed (Louise Bourgeois)<sup>1</sup>*

### I. IN SEARCH OF (UNLIKE) REFERENTS

#### Not Barthes' Winter Garden Photograph

*Have you ever happened upon a photograph that seems to depict somebody you know, or a place where you think you have been? An image that reminds you of a person, a feeling, or a situation you think you yourself have been in, while knowing perfectly well that the photograph you see can't possibly be connected to that situation or person you have in mind as an actual event in time? –*

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Those are those photographically stimulated recollections I am trying to think about in this essay. I refer to these photographic triggers as *non-like photographs*: images that left their worldly referents behind, now reflecting what we bring to them with a longing sense of false recognition. They might prompt something we want to see, something that constitutes a missing link or a lack, something that finds us even when we are not looking, something that catches us unaware. Enhanced by fading identifications or purposeful misrecognitions.

*Can you think of a photograph that has those faculties for you?* – Keep this image in mind; we will need it as the essay develops in its speculative ways. If you have it with you – great; if you only see it with your inner eye – equally good (as we are speaking in the context of memory and autobiography here, in the context of this book).

Our initial description of happening upon a photograph by looking at it as a *non-like* image doesn't apply to Roland Barthes' famous Winter Garden Photograph though: a portrait of his mother-as-child taken long before he was born, in which he finds something that reminds him of her, the mother he knew during his lifetime. A photographic portrait that he never shows to the readers of his book *Camera Lucida*, knowing that it wouldn't have the same wounding effect on us, because we never knew her, and therefore cannot experience the quasi-physical connection the image allowed him to keep alive after her death.

This quality of *having-been-there* – this little death of a moment, which becomes a thing of the past once it is being photographed – that Barthes isolates as the 'noeme' of photography, is in fact multifaceted. The term was developed by him in relation to memorising his mother after her death, through a long-gone moment in time that 'died' (according to Barthes) in the instant it was pictured, which he then used (shortly before his own death) to define what to him was 'essentially photographic'.<sup>2</sup>

## **Not Proust's Madelaine**

In contrast, Our Photograph (the image we have in mind) does not necessarily depict a person we actually know, or a situation we have been in, or a place we have been to. It is not about the thing it represents, an actual thing that once-has-been-there, in front of a lens, at a specific moment in time. Leaving indexical connections and imprinted histories behind, Our Photograph only *reminds* us of somebody or someplace or sometime we connect with, because it has something woven into its fabric that triggers a memory-effect, reminiscent of something we experienced, something that exists in front of our inner eye, whether or not it was photographed there and then, whether or not it was actually recorded on the photograph that reminds us of that very something. Some kind of photographic springboard or launch pad.

*But how is it possible that Our Photograph sparks unintentional memories and asks us to perceive something that looks at us, revisits us and echoes a moment we are now reminded of, as it finds us by way of the image? Perhaps more like a time-machine, an equally hypothetical device that permits travel into past and future.*

The main character in Marcel Proust's (1913/1992) novel *In Search of Lost Time* famously describes how tasting small Madeleine cakes dipped in lime-blossom tea as an adult suddenly unlocks the involuntary recollection of time spent with his aunt Leonie during his childhood.

Known as the 'Madeleine-effect', here it is not the sight of the Madeleine cake, but the combined smell and taste of tea and cake, that unlocks the memory linked to that childhood cake and with it the recollection of actual people and places from his past. But the act of eating-a-cake that reminds you

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of being at your aunt's when eating-that-kind-of-cake during your childhood, is slightly different from looking-at-a-photograph that reminds you of something or someone or sometime like-that-photograph. *But how is it different?*

Transposing sight and smell onto the visual plane, we realise that the childhood-Madelaine and the adulthood-Madelaine have no physical or temporal connection. While the newly eaten adulthood-cake is only 'like' the childhood-cake, the photograph of the mother-as-child is supposedly a direct imprint of the mother-as-child and therefore imbued with 'sameness' (much like a relic).<sup>3</sup> The new Madelaine is therefore only a *reminder* of that time, not a *remainder* that has been kept from that time. Proust's new Madelaine makes him only remember his childhood Madelaine, even if based on lived experience of the same character now experiencing this memory-effect, while Barthes treats the photograph of his mother-as-child as a remainder of her whole person, even though he was not yet born when that photograph was made (aided by having-been-touched and passed-on by his mother).<sup>4</sup>

In contrast, Our Photograph (the one we have in mind) becomes a non-referential image because we do not aim to understand what it *re-presents*, rather engaging with what it *presents* to us here and now. Here, any former 'documentary' photograph is identical with the latter 'imaginary' photograph. They are the very same photograph, but they unlock different things according to who looks at them and which connections, connotations or associations are being made. That photograph is of course still an indexical trace of an 'original' place and moment in time, but that scene is either *unknown* to us, or we cannot verify it, thus leaving an opening or a gap that can be filled or *overridden* by symbolic and iconographic readings, loose connections, by rekindling of old memories, or creating memories by way of association or leaps of the imagination. Here, in Our Photograph, artificial memories of technical images interact with natural and personal recollections in complex ways, turning photographic images into sites of commemoration or sites for celebration and reconstruction.

The closest Barthes seems to come to our speculative understanding of viewing photographs in terms of inscribing-lived-experience is when he describes his longing to inhabit a house in the Alhambra shown on a 19<sup>th</sup> Century photograph. He describes his wish to be in this place, a place that appears to him both motherly and homely, as a 'fantasmatic' double movement between being carried back to a place in himself and forward to a utopian time: between 'having-been-there' and 'going-there'.<sup>5</sup> But as much as Barthes embraces the pricking surprises of the *punctum*, in the end, both he and Proust are perpetually in search of a (lost) referent – the lost childhood, the lost mother – aiming to bridge the gap between past and present through a substitute (eating another Madelaine, reviewing a photograph). And in that sense Barthes's 'punctum' is similar to Proust's 'involuntary memory': Always looking to reproduce the original event, as if trying to step into the shoes of the photographer, to step back in time, even though knowing perfectly well that the past cannot be returned by a photograph, at the same time still finding hope in the photograph's indexical assertion that the pictured scene once actually has-been-there.<sup>6</sup>

## **Other-Than-Itself**

What is being asked here, in this chapter, is not how successful the mnemonic function of photography is – neither if photographs pass or fail as memorabilia or autobiographical containers for personal affairs, nor if photographs have a positive or negative role to play as documentary evidence, or as records of historical and cultural events.

Instead, I would like to pose the question *what else materialises* when we look at photographic images; what else can be *transported* and *transmitted* by the act of looking at photographs, and what the

possibilities of the photographic medium are to *translate* and *transcribe* the viewing self into the image – stressing other possibilities than those generally assumed for technical images (such as photographs or lens-based media). In short: *what else is evoked* when a photograph acts in the most literal sense of the word as a ‘medium’: a thing that *mediates*, a thing by which or through which something is done; a thing that has an agency; that is a channel of communication; that transmits physical forces or acts as an intervening substance through which sensory impressions are conveyed.

*So, what is a photograph that is other-than-itself? What is it beyond and beside itself? What is it, other than a representation of something that has-been-there, other than a referent to a lost presence, other than an unrecognizable trace?*

What we have learnt so far is that Our Photograph (the one we are keeping in mind) has become a non-like image, because it acts like a non-like referent within a non-representational construction. And that is because we connect it to something *other-than-itself*. This is probably because we do not know what was originally photographed. Probably because we do not know what it used to re-present. At this point, we only know what it *triggers* in us. At such a point, the photograph becomes something ‘other’ than a representation of something or someone or someplace. Something other-than-itself. A photograph that has forgotten its referent and has absorbed the otherness of the internal images we bring to it. A photograph that triggers a process of *imaginary montage* by which we overlay the physical image with a remembered scene, the lived experience of an earlier impression.<sup>7</sup> Far from being a documentary trace, it has become an imaginary photograph: Our Photograph.

As a screen for projection or a field for inscription, Our Photograph gains an imaginative *surplus* through an act of recognising it as something other-than-itself by way of engaging in a productive process of mis-reading and re-construction in front of the image (rather than trying to recognise the scene that once-has-been-there, in front of a camera). This surplus is the ‘extra’, the thing that goes beyond communication, that sits beside signification and acts beyond denotation.<sup>8</sup> It ‘misses’ that thing that anchors it as a referent in the real world. But rather than that being a lack, it is this *gap* that allows us to project onto it, to personalise and inhabit it.<sup>9</sup> An excess that exceeds the literalism of the transparent sign, and that triggers connotation by revealing an affective sense of alterity to us.

Equally a double movement, Our Photograph is therefore always both – a *picture* and an *image* – and it therefore always has both seemingly paradoxical faculties: *object-ness* (as a physical object in our hand) and *image-ness* (as an imaginary scene or a psychological imago); *here-ness* (as an image now present) and *there-ness* (as scene depicted elsewhere yet absent); *now-ness* (as a live event that unfolds now as we look at it) and *then-ness* (once taken from a moment in the past).

And it is also an image that takes on a shape-shifting life-of-its-own in order to connect with an aspect of ourselves, like an extended self-portrait (even if it does not depict a person). And just like an echo-chamber, or an ex-bodily phantom-limb, it speaks to this earlier experience of ourselves that animated the photograph for-us and in-front-of-us, in order to make-it-present for-the-future; in order to present it to our future-selves. And in so doing, it triggers and becomes a living part of ourselves – a part it once-was, or will-be.<sup>10</sup> As if looking into the past: a (photographic) *déjà vu*, or as if looking into the future: a (photographic) *fata morgana*, perhaps.

As an imaginary figure of the future, Our Photograph comes back to find us, possibly to haunt us. As a now unconnected moment of duration, it becomes connected to our life, to ourselves. A potentially superstitious figure of thought, activated by a physical photograph, now over-written, that we might

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share a mutual desire with or that we might need to overcome.<sup>11</sup> A recurring image of the future that turns perception into recognition, perhaps.

These kinds of re-imaginings that arise from Our Photograph might prick us all out of a sudden (like Barthes' *punctum* does), but they might equally dawn on us rather slowly, creating an after-feeling of sorts, drowning us by insisting that something is now missing. A dark awakening that makes us think we might have forgotten something, a thing that might slowly be surfacing. Something that turns us into spectators that have become implicated into the internal structure of Our Photograph.

## **II. IN SEARCH OF CO-AUTHORING**

### **Potency and Agency**

*Still got your image in mind? Right. Do you know anything about it? What does it say to you? In which language, which accent? – I guess the less you know about it, the less it is connected to a real place or a real moment in time. So, what kind of questions do you have for your photograph? Where do you think that surplus-element is located that hovers over the photograph to greet you? Where might it have come from in your past, how do you encounter it in this photograph? Does it make you feel homely or unhomely? And how do you imaginatively connect it with today, in this very moment? And how does that change how you relate to the body of the photograph in front of you?*

As an internalized image, Our Photograph makes connections across the gap between a hovering moment of the past and the photograph we experience now. A bridge between image and its imaginary referent. But it is an unstable, elastic and improvised connection, and the meanings that settle on it remain restless and keep resettling as we attempt to cross it. As a result, they remain unresolved images, floating signifiers that remain in progress while strangely reminding us of ourselves. Actualities set adrift.

In addition to the dual image-and-object faculties mentioned above, it seems important to add that Our Photograph (the one we are keeping in mind) also has *potency* and *agency* that distinguish it from definitions of representation, reference and likeness.

*So, what is its potency?* Potency asks for what is potent in Our Photograph, and what lays latent and might be disturbed or uncovered. Always a relative term, it refers to those things that originate from your image, those that move and affect you. But it also introduces the idea that images have the capacity 'for' something and to 'receive' something. In short: the ability to invite otherness.

*And what is its agency?* Agency describes how Our Photograph speaks to us, and how it reaches us. How it moves into the world, how it materializes ideas and how it transmits these into the respective context where it is shown. Agency is the capacity of the image to project, to gesture, to evoke, to communicate autonomously, to transgress and negotiate. In short: the capacity to reach out to us viewers.

Both potency and agency add to the elasticity and attachability of Our Photograph, the reason why we can animate it, to perform it, to project onto it and freely associate with it – in order to engage into a meaningful process and to find ourselves in one's image.

## **A Writerly Author**

*But: how do we collaborate with Our Photograph? How do we invite agency and potency into the image?* – An open work is like an open conversation. It changes, it might not go the way we expected, but it might be fruitful. We need to be in conversation with our images in order to encourage an encounter with our internal images, intentional or not, thus inviting intersubjective interaction, renewed exchange and relationships with these image-constellations.

Maybe the connection here is again Barthes – Barthes who described himself as a mere reader and viewer, but who also spent much of his life writing critical books about reading and viewing, while trying to write an impossible novel as an author. *So, how does he as a writer invite open readings himself?*

In his text ‘The Death of the Author’, written five years after, Umberto Eco (1989) published his book *The Open Work*, Barthes describes a new ‘performative’ way of writing, which he sees as a pleasurable open-ended textual practice that refuses to fix meaning. He postulates that it important to stop looking for the author’s biography as a referent behind every move of the text to find explanations, so that out of this absence a ‘writerly’ text can emerge.<sup>12</sup> A postmodern multi-dimensional space, where language itself acts and performs, which in turn gives us readers the chance to inscribe ourselves in multiple ways without attempting to look for any singular origin, any final signified or any ultimate meaning, and create along with the author.<sup>13</sup>

And in fact, what is needed for a collaborative approach to image-making in terms of a performative exchange with images is not the authoritative voice of an author who tries to lock words into stable meanings, but a written voice that allows viewers or readers to participate in image and/or text to co-produce and develop meandering meanings that can settle in different ways.

*So is it, that the photographer must be a performative image-maker who performs the act of image-making, which in turn allows its empowered viewers to enter into the processes of the work, because the work reaches out to its viewers, to each and every viewer differently? Because – rather than biographical information about the author steering the meaning – the performative gestures of making are still present in the gestures of the work, inviting intertextuality and polyphonic interpretations?*

## **III. IN SEARCH OF MAKING OPENINGS**

### **Teaching ‘Making’**

*Could you draw Our Photograph (the one you have kept in mind)? – Could you draw it with your eyes closed, concentrating on the outlines that define light and shadow, or on the depicted materialities? Could you describe it to someone so that they can transcribe and materialise it for you? What are its constitutive elements for you? And what else could this action of transfer entail to externalize and convey what you memorize with that photograph you kept in front of your inner eye? Could you re-stage or re-enact that trigger in order to re-photograph it? And could this re-staged and re-photographed new photograph become a bridge to that specific something Our Photograph reminds you of? An opening to an unconnected moment of your past, a closing, or a new beginning?*

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Both viewing and reading have always been part of teaching: learning about precedents, -isms and discourses, looking to interpret works and ideas in different contexts and as part of different disciplines. *But: How do we bring our knowledge about the work of the Open Image into our teaching about image-making? How can we encourage non-likeness as a creative strategy?*

While we can't aim to photograph Barthes' *punctum* (because it can only find us when looking at a photograph), we might be able to invite non-like otherness into our photographic processes based on how we choose our artistic strategies. There is image-work to do, much in the sense of 'Arbeit am Kunstwerk' (the work at/with/on/about/for the work of art): a visual and a critical praxis.

As a researcher, I look for these gaps and slippages of meaning where the work needs to be thought in context. Or where it is open for de-constructions and re-contextualisations that allow for different entry points, perspectives, approaches and positionalities (without 'appropriating' it).

As an artist, I look for possibilities that invite meanderings between the different elements in the work and its respective dissemination context, leaving openings to relate these elements to each other while making links that allow for different encounters with the work through individual inscription possibilities as 'interpretation-making' (which is not to be confused with being 'vague', 'unspecific' or 'noncommittal'). For me that means keeping the gestures of searching, that are part of my artistic making-process, visible in the work and how it is displayed, thus stressing the atmosphere and the tonality how the work communicates.<sup>14</sup> By inviting viewers to enter into a performative act of 'image-making' as a transformative act of 'meaning-making', they are not just 'consumers of images', but as active participants in the work, who make (third) meaning(s) by way of undertaking 'image-work'. Where the work becomes a catalyst for an interplay between image and imaginary referent, between work and meaning-making (aka process of description, analysis and interpretation).

As a pedagogue, I start from introducing the gap of representation between image and referent, and from the paradox of presence and absence that we can utilise as photographic image-makers. And while much of today's photography seems to hide behind autobiographical navel-gazing without much critical engagement into the methodological processes of nostalgia or melancholia (supposedly documenting personal 'feelings' or 'memories'), in my view the most useful pedagogic reply to such escapisms into the private remains to ask: 'Why should I care? Why is your work relevant to others? And how can it contribute to the understanding of photographic processing?' As viewers, but also as thinkers, and makers. To then enhance artistic strategies how specific answers to these questions can be folded back into the work.

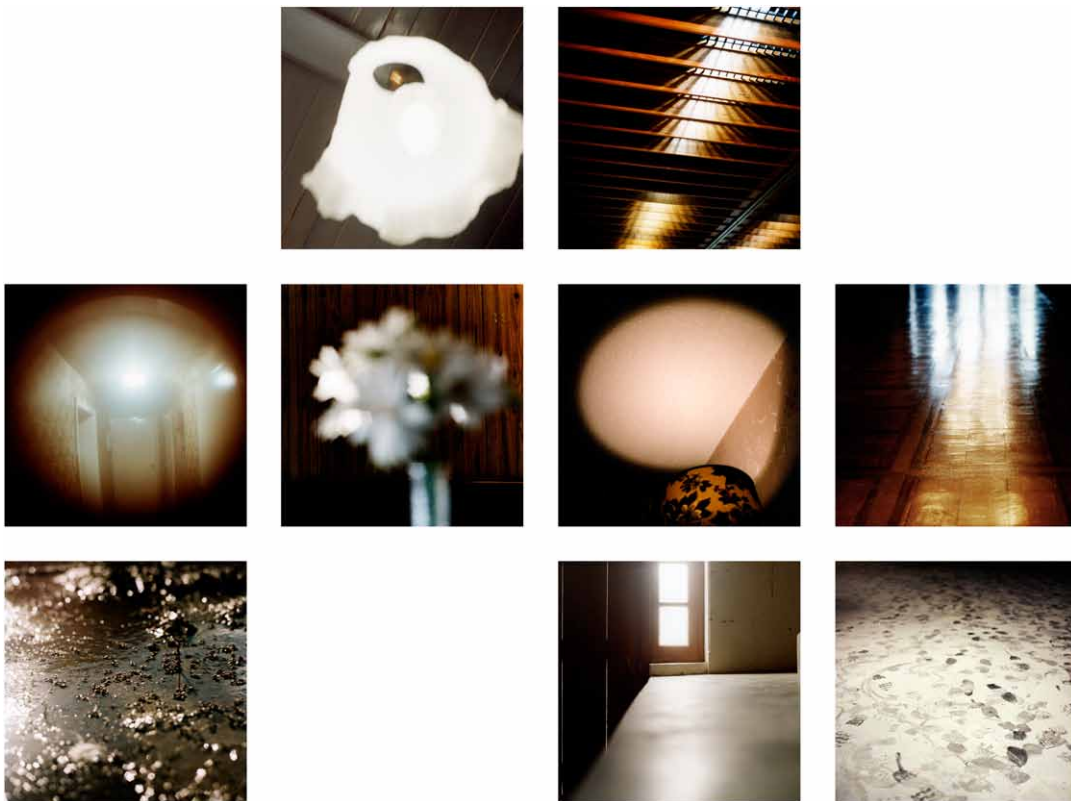
Evidently, the question about making an Open Work will remain – just like anything that we want to keep current. But the more it lingers in the contexts of making-work with photographs or other lens-based images, the more we might start talking about 'imaginary' rather than 'documentary' photographs and how they relate to what we bring to them. Our Photographs.

## **Expanded Self-Portraits**

I will conclude on 'making', with a work in which I tried to use photographs as open invitations for inscriptions, translations or transpositions. This process might fail, it might not 'work' for you, but we also don't have to 'like' every work. But if it does work, if it does trigger your spatial or psychological or auditive 'memory', then that photograph has achieved a sense of transportation by way of being an 'imaginary photograph'. A non-like photograph that becomes a field of projection: an expanded self-portrait.

‘Skin Deep’ (2010) consist of portraits of spatial encounters, mind spaces rather than specific places, that explore how photographs resonate with visual recollections. They look for something that speaks to our collective memory, that reflects on our sense of time passing, through describing experiences of light, materiality and spatial awareness. The work conjures up rooms that fold in on themselves, fall down on you, continuously unsettling the conventional figure-ground relationship of our perception by halting the process of trying to grasp them. Embalming the inner skin of a somehow familiar place, the images function like photographically transcribed peripheral visions of space – locating a sense of premonition behind matter where sight gives way to touch.

Figure 1. Wiebke Leister (2010) *Skin Deep* 2010. (Copyright, the author)



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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Louise Bourgeois, no. 18 of 34, from illustrated book 'Ode à l'oubli' (Ode to Forgetting), 2002.
- <sup>2</sup> *La Chambre Claire — Note sur la photographie* was the last book by Barthes to be published during his lifetime. In ch 27 summarizes that for Barthes the essential question of a photograph is '...did I recognize her?' Ch 28 then reveals the Winter Garden Photograph as a portrait when the mother was 5 years old that showed him 'the truth of the face he had loved' – a photograph that goes 'beyond what would be reasonable for the technical nature of photography to offer'. For Barthes, this image offered her 'truth', making it 'essential', writing: 'it achieved for me utopically, the impossible science of the unique being' (71). Concluding: 'From now on I could do no more than await my ... death' (72). And for Barthes equally the 'essence' of the medium photography was in this photograph. In ch 32, he states that a photograph can never deny being based on a specific referent in the real world that once has-been-there in front of the camera (ie mother-as-child), and that through this connection the photograph has the capacity to 'seem true' to him, compelling him to actually believe that its referent did once really exist, a confirmation testifying that the subject of the photograph was alive, 'at once past and real' (77). But he also recognizes in ch 37: 'A photograph is not memory and in fact 'blocks memory'. He concludes in ch 38 that because all photographers deal with life, they are in fact 'agents of death' and that all photographs are in the end demanding signs of our own future death (Barthes, 2000).
- <sup>3</sup> A relic contains the mortal remains of a saint, but it can also include any object that has been in contact with the saint of the remains of that saint.
- <sup>4</sup> The ability of a previously blocked memory to be unexpectedly invoked by an experience has been compared to Barthes' *punctum* as an affective personal response to a photograph, while voluntary memory is more akin to his *studium*, resembling the work of a historian.
- <sup>5</sup> House in the Alhambra photographed by Charles Clifford: "(...) deriving from a kind of second sight which seems to bear me forward to a utopian time, or to carry me back to somewhere in myself (...) it is as if I were certain of having been there or of going there." (Barthes, 2000, pp. 38-40)
- <sup>6</sup> "With the Photograph, we enter into flat Death" (Barthes, 2000, ch. 38, 92).
- <sup>7</sup> "The 'obvious' meaning covers all of the semantic area, which was previously divided between denotation and connotation, but a small portion of territory has now been ceded to support a 'third meaning': 'the supplement that my intellection cannot succeed in absorbing', which Barthes terms the obtuse meaning. This meaning is supported by, 'what, in the image, is purely image (which is in fact very little)'. (...) "Barthes opens up several paths in 'The Third Meaning 'without traveling very far down any of them.'" (Burgin, 1986, pp. 77-8, quoting Barthes: 'The Third Meaning; Research notes on some Eisenstein stills' [1970] in *Image Music Text* [1977], p. 61). In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes then devises 'studium' and 'punctum' to describe two similar levels of meaning: one general (aka 'obvious') and one private (aka 'obtuse').
- <sup>8</sup> In 'Rhetoric of the Image' (1964), Barthes describes two kinds of linguistic messages: 'denotation' as a literal meaning that is universally recognised as the representation of a thing; a non-coded message in which the signifier and the signified here are essentially the same. 'Connotation' to describe any implied or subjective meanings, personal associations or interpretations drawn from an image.

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- <sup>9</sup> “To ask, what do pictures want? Is not just to attribute them life and power and desire, but also to raise the question of what it is they lack (...). To say, in other words, that pictures ‘want’ life or power does not necessarily imply that they have life or power (...). It may simply be an admission that they lack something of this sort, that it is missing or (as we say) ‘wanting’. (...) The living image is, in my view, both a verbal and a visual trope (...). It is, in other words, a secondary, reflexive, image of images, or what I have called a ‘meta-picture.’” (Mitchell, 2005, p. 10)
- <sup>10</sup> Mitchell: *What do Pictures want?* 10, *Picture Theory*, ch 2.
- <sup>11</sup> Derrida: *Copy Archive Signature*, 15; Barnard: *Derrida and Photography Theory*, 299).
- <sup>12</sup> *Barthes: Death of the Author*, 145-8
- <sup>13</sup> Batchen: *Photography Degree Zero*, 8. Compare: W. Kemp’s ‘Beholder’s Share’, H. Bredekamp’s ‘Bildakt’ and W. J. T. Mitchell’s ‘Pictorial Turn’.
- <sup>14</sup> Flusser: ‘The Gesture of Searching’, *Gestures*, 159.