
RE-Rereading Camera Lucida: Viewing Barthes through Victor Burgin

... those who fail to re-read are obliged to read the same story everywhere.

Roland Barthes, *S/Z*

Artist and critic Victor Burgin uses the above quotation to open his essay "Rereading Camera Lucida," a critical examination of Roland Barthes's theoretical current throughout *Camera Lucida: Reflections in Photography* (1980), *Image-Music-Text* (1977), and *Mythologies* (1957). The first time I read *Camera Lucida* I was on the train from Cusco to Machu Picchu, Peru, which travels alongside the Urubamba River in the Sacred Valley of the Incas in the Andes. At that moment, I was interested in photography's role in objectifying a ruin and objectifying (a) people. In my rereading with Burgin, I found myself not only questioning my role but also reconsidering the phenomenology of my interpretation.

As I watched others in the process, I lost all desire to capture any of the scenery around me. I'd had enough of the local women's persistent pressure: "Foto, miss! Miss, foto." I did not want to pose with my family for cliché tourist photos, but it was impossible to disregard the occasion. As Barthes writes, "What did I care about the rules of composition of the photographic landscape, or, at the other end, about the Photograph as family rite?" (1) Yet like Barthes, I could not dismiss the intrinsic personal value of photography or retreat to a simplistic sociological critique of tourist photography. Barthes says it best: "Yet I persisted; another, louder voice urged me to dismiss such sociological commentary; looking at certain photographs, I wanted to be a primitive, without culture." (2) At these words I paused. What did he mean by this? And was it appropriate? As I gazed out the train window, peasant children looked up from their work in the fields to wave as we passed them in a floating flash.

Barthes writes of subjective discomfort, being "torn between two languages, one expressive, the other critical," and the effort to dismiss a systematic reduction of his critical language to a particular discourse such as semiology, sociology, or psychoanalysis. (3) This burden is obligatory to the artist, but what of the discomfort of the human being objectified as "observed subject?" The "observed subject" might convey something through gesture or posture, but his fated objecthood inevitably undermines his critical capacity. The object is never the Operator or the Spectator.

To Barthes, the experience of being photographed involves a "sensation of inauthenticity," characterized as "a subtle moment when, to tell the truth, I am neither subject nor object but a subject who feels he is becoming an object: I then experience a micro-version of death (of parenthesis): I am truly becoming a specter." (4) By this account, the folk-dressed natives are corpses of their true beings while, to the tourist, they embody the original, unadulterated, and primitive. Their colorful dress, weathered

CRISTIN TIERNEY

skin, and dark hair beg objectification, but this palpability is beyond superficial. It is super-authentic. Their appearance is never for itself but for authenticity's sake. Dressed for admiration like dolls in a cabinet, they become lifeless--or as Barthes suggests in consideration of photography's history, they become "museum objects." (5) Their objectification by the tourist's photograph is, if not a micro-death, an artfully subtle life-removal.

Burgin intentionally rereads Barthes intertextually to delineate the structural motifs throughout his texts. (6) Barthes's early structuralism unequivocally reveals the binary distinction (in photography and literature) of denotation and connotation--the literal and the symbolic meanings. In his essays "The Photographic Message" (1961) and "Rhetoric of the Image" (1964) Barthes demonstrates the distinct but operationally related roles of the signifier. Their relationship, he contends, is paradoxical insofar as the literal image cannot exist on its own and thus "cannot be substantial but only relational." (7) Photography's ability to transmit literal information without forming it through a code of signs offers a sense of objectivity, distinguished by temporal disjunction. Barthes sees this evasion of history and ability to "represent a 'flat' anthropological fact" as the photograph's message without a code. (8) His binary theme carries into "The Third Meaning" (1970), in which denotation and connotation are redefined as informational and symbolic levels of meaning, categorized collectively as obvious meaning. To complement, Barthes identifies the obtuse: "the supplement that my intellection cannot succeed in absorbing" (9) Expanding upon his earlier investigations, Barthes acknowledges the "slight" in the photograph that evokes the viewer's affect, but often as private rather than public recognition.

In rereading *Camera Lucida*, I found a curious bookmark: a postcard my mother had given me of the Hapu. Initially, the ethnographic lineup struck me as lifeless and prosaic. Facial expressions were modest, the dress traditional, and the scenery recognizably local. Then my mother had directed my attention to the lower right corner. Camouflaged in the tones of grass and stone, a toddler stands with his naked rear to the photographer and gazes up at the group. He is nearly imperceptible but, once recognized, he is unquestionably the anchor. Is this baby bottom the "third meaning" of this photograph?, I wondered. What meaning, obtuse or not, could this child's gesture indicate?

Where many theorists at this semiotic juncture have turned to psychoanalysis, Barthes investigates a private realm by meditating on desire and grief in the wake of his mother's passing. Burgin considers Barthes's paradoxical discourse as an attempted dialogue between semiology and phenomenology. For Barthes, it is "on the one hand the desire to give a name to Photography's essence and then to sketch an eidetic science of the Photograph; and on the other the intractable feeling that Photography is essentially (a contradiction in terms) only contingency." (10) Barthes does move from essence to contingency in *Camera Lucida* by way of the studium and punctum; with the studium corresponding with the obvious and essential common ground; and the punctum corresponding to the obtuse and contingent--affect that is naturally private. The studium is readily understood while the punctum is slight, surfacing in details. As with the obtuse, Barthes relies on the punctum to understand the true essence of photography because, as he admits, he "wanted to be a primitive." (11) By this, Burgin argues, Barthes wishes to be free of the enculturation that begets obvious connotation. In his rereading, Burgin critically examines the "intentionality" of phenomenology: the idea that our consciousness, by projecting appearances, is responsible for what we believe to exist, both literally and symbolically.

CRISTIN TIERNEY

For the tourist, the indigenous utopia is an imaginary project in the sense of its labor and its intention put upon another's existence. In courting new realms of life, the tourist (and anthropologist/cultural theorist/flaneur) wants to witness and experience the Other, the object of his investigation, as a pure and uninhibited essence. In photographing indigenous locals, the tourist favors authentic appearance. Anyone who spends time in Cusco's Plaza de Armas will notice that the interactions of tourists with local children are plentiful but particular. The children are either costumed, offering to pose for paid photographs, or dressed casually, selling souvenir postcards from a shoebox--very likely how my mom purchased the postcard she gave me. These children fulfill the tourist's ideal by catering to his imagination and offering tangible images for his collection. Still, the tourist's experience of indigeneity almost always remains a phenomenological projection. It is desired, it is imagined, it is life-removing--and it is cause to mourn.

Barthes mentions that classical phenomenology never addressed desire or mourning, but it is hard to distinguish intention and yearning. In considering Barthes's phenomenology, Burgin cites Jean-Paul Sartre's *L'Imaginaire* (1940), the work to which Barthes considered *Camera Lucida* an homage. Sartre writes, "The act of the imagination is a magical one. It is an incantation destined to produce the object of one's thought, the thing one desires, in such a way that one can take possession of it. In that act there is always something of the imperious and the infantile." (12) The force and demand of the imagination is a strength associated with a pre-linguistic state of desire. Without verbal capacity, the imagination becomes so cavalier and autocratic that intention supercedes yearning to the point of conquest. By this understanding of intention, we see the tourist photographer alongside the classic ethnographer as colonialist, conquistador, and child. The photographic act that intends to capture authenticity mirrors the child who imagines in order to realize a desire. Through the imagination and subsequently the photograph, the tourist photographer gains possession of an ideal image, and the fantasy existing outside of linguistic expression is fulfilled.

Through Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan, Burgin discusses infantilism and symbolism and concludes that Barthes's phenomenology is incompatible with Burgin's psychoanalytic and intertextual approach because Barthes denies the concept of the unconscious. (13) Only in "The Third Meaning" does Barthes draw upon the unconscious through Julia Kristeva and the concept of signifiante. Burgin clarifies Kristeva's use of signification as akin to Lacan's symbolic or Barthes's *studium*--both in the public realm of meaning. But signifiante for Barthes is what Kristeva deems semiotic: that which is linked to the pre-social processes of the body.

It is the meaning that is forced into repression through the "speaking subject's" socialization process; "it is anterior to language and ... (dis)covered in terms of the 'primary processes' of the unconscious (metaphor and metonymy) which are in turn known only through the disturbances they create in the orders of rational discourse." (14) Understood this way, we can relate Barthes's *punctum* to the infantile gesture as the rudimentary articulation of the "speaking subject"--the raw expression and unrepressed gesture of the photograph's observed subject.

As I reconsidered the photo of the Hapu, I realized that both subject and object enact the infantile in the production of phenomenological implications. As a gesture of the "speaking subject," the infantile is involved in the production of the *punctum*. The object of a photograph, for instance, can express and evoke the "primary processes of the unconscious," leading us to the essences that escape our collective imagination.

CRISTIN TIERNEY

This perception allows us to understand the punctum as the photograph's true a-cultural essence, as in that intangible element Barthes sought in wanting to "be a primitive." The primary, primitive, and pre-social punctum is always what affects us with such profundity. Whether we consider it unconscious or simply personal (perhaps indebted to desire and mourning), the punctum inarguably arrives on a level that is nonlinguistic and involved with our pre-social sensibilities.

The infantile drive on the end of consumption is incorporated by its absence of linguistic communication but remains a discourse defined more by desire and force of imagination. The consumptive infantilism is driven by presumption and the desire to produce and conquer the fantasy image. In my reading of the postcard photo, its punctum is unquestionably the toddler's naked bottom, but not merely as the slight detail that arouses delight or affect. My amusement at the child's bottom is in some sense personal and in many ways contingent (as Barthes would maintain), but as a disturbance of an attempt at coherent image production, I follow Burgin through Kristeva and understand the punctum as the child's pre-social impulse. The toddler is yet outside the socialized realm in which he would repress the instinct to drop his pants at whim, and the punctum is my shock and amusement at this recognition. Yet I also see the photographer's act as infantile in its clearly egoistic desire for ethnological authority and authenticity--as an intentional image made tangible through the photograph. As an act saturated with colonial arrogance, I disdain the photographer's infantilism as much as I champion that of the child. I glorify the toddler's stance as a radical act of anti-representational rebellion, consciously turning his back to the photographer in a nonlinguistic gesture of disdain, while turning up to the posed crowd to mock the objectivity of the photographer as Operator. But on second thought, I see even in my second reading what Barthes repeatedly overlooked in his: that theory and desire aside, my understanding is still my imagination, and it is merely my intention.

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Notes:

1. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1981), 7. 2. *Ibid.*, 7. 3. *Ibid.*, 8. 4. *Ibid.*, 14. 5. *Ibid.*, 13. 6. Victor Burgin, "Rereading Camera Lucida," in *The End of Art Theory: Criticism and Postmodernity* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press International, 1986). 7. Roland Barthes, "Rhetoric of the Image," in *Image-Music-Text* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 42. 8. *Ibid.*, 45. 9. *Ibid.*, 54. 10. Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 20. 11. *Ibid.*, 7. 12. As quoted in Burgin, 80 81. 13. *Ibid.*, 83. 14. *Ibid.*, 84.