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Kathrin Yacavone, *Benjamin, Barthes and the Singularity of Photography*. New York and London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2012. ix + 247 pp. Bibliography and index. \$100.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-1-4411-1808-0.

Review by Kris Belden-Adams, University of Mississippi

In *Benjamin, Barthes and the Singularity of Photography*, Kathrin Yacavone defines the medium's "singularity" through a closer look at the writings of two oft-quoted commentators on the medium, Walter Benjamin and Roland Barthes. The book, based on the author's 2008 doctoral dissertation in the School of Literatures, Languages, and Cultures at the University of Edinburgh, offers a view of these authors' work through a literary/cultural studies lens. This proves to be a strength and weakness of the book. On one hand, Yacavone's project reiterates and summarizes ground already covered by other scholars, rather than advancing it as much as readers might hope. Alternatively, the book introduces valuable interdisciplinary analogies that only occasionally, if ever, have been applied to the study of the photography's history and theorization, such as Derek Attridge's concepts of "singularity" and "event," Giorgio Agamben's writings about "demand," and Marcel Proust's theme of "involuntary memory." Ultimately, the book's contributions to expanding existing discourses on the medium outweigh its weaknesses.

In the introduction, Yacavone argues that these two commentators' essays and reviews of photography have not been extensively addressed in the form of a published book. But the work of Benjamin and Barthes has been addressed substantially in recent discourses by scholars, including (but not limited to): Geoffrey Batchen, Mary Ann Doane, Carolin Duttlinger, James Elkins, Jeanine Ferguson, Michael Fried, Rosalind Krauss, Carol Mavor and Susan Sontag. These authors testify to the enduring importance of Benjamin and Barthes to the study of the medium, but receive little mention or sustained discussion, even in footnotes. Sontag, whose commentaries on photography have been under-recognized by academicians, provides a conceptual and chronological link between the work of Benjamin and Barthes. Her work is mentioned in no more than a few lines (p. 25).

Nonetheless, after a brief explanation of the necessity of Benjamin's and Barthes's work to the theorization of photography, Yacavone starts the challenging work of establishing Benjamin's direct influence upon Barthes. Both wrote about the same authors and general subjects, and had mutual friends/acquaintances. Barthes attested to knowing about Benjamin's writings on popular theater. But in his later writings, Barthes rarely cited any outside influences, making the work of tracing direct influence a challenge. However, as Yacavone points out, Barthes did cite Benjamin's "Kleiner Geschichte der Photographie" ("Little History of Photography") in one instance, and Barthes discusses several of the same illustrations in *La Chambre Claire: Note sur la Photographie* (*Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*). [1]

With Benjamin's influence upon Barthes noted, the book continues with an overview of Benjamin's writings on photography and makes specific references to case studies by Benjamin that serve to argue Yacavone's thesis about photography's "singularity." Readers familiar with Benjamin's work on photography might find these sections to be repetitive of existing scholarship, while newcomers to the

subject may benefit from these summations. Yacavone's book is thus accessible to readers who may not be as familiar with these discourses. This structure is repeated in the second half of the book to introduce Barthes's writings, too.

After laying out the context of Benjamin's "Little History of Photography" essay, the book begins to discuss the *Newhaven Fishwife/Elizabeth Johnstone Hall* (1843-47) photograph by David Octavius Hill and Robert Adamson. In Benjamin's words, the photograph "fills you with an unruly desire to know what her name was, the woman who was alive there, who even now is alive and will never be wholly absorbed in 'art'" (p. 49). This peculiar power that is unique to portrait photography is an example of the medium's "singularity"—the central theme that guides the book's inquiry. For many readers, the term "singularity" may trigger associations of this project with the arguments about photography's ontology and "essence" that prevailed in the 1980s. But that is not the book's intention. Yacavone explains, by reference to Attridge's concept of the "event," that photographs fundamentally force viewers to confront the "unavoidable confrontation between the self and the other" (p. 10) that is deeply personal, subjective and potentially redemptive. Only *portrait photography*, she argues, can trigger this phenomenon, which is "felt and perceived as external to oneself, as opposed to an only imaginary one which is by nature never outside of the self" (p. 185).

Thus, "singularity," as defined by Yacavone, depends on a tangible image, as opposed to an imagined one. This idea is immediately complicated in the book's examination of the wedding portrait *Karl Dauthendey (Father of the Poet), with His Fiancée*. In an essay, Benjamin identifies the woman as Dauthendey's *first* wife who committed suicide, and he remarks that her troubled gaze foreshadows her fate. But as Carolin Duttlinger has pointed out, the woman in the image is Dauthendey's *second* wife. Benjamin also confuses St. Petersburg—where the portrait was made—with Moscow. Yacavone acknowledges these imaginative aspects of Benjamin's history. The emotional impact of Benjamin's incorrect foreshadowing of Mrs. Dauthendey's second wife's suicide provides what Barthes might call its "punctum," or "piercing" impact upon a reader/viewer of Benjamin's history. As Duttlinger has theorized, Benjamin's mistakes present "an alternative concept of *aura*, one which transcends fixed historical or technological categories through the model of an imaginary encounter between viewer and image." [2]

To expand upon Duttlinger's idea of a reception history for such photographs, Benjamin's errors exemplify viewers' tendencies to create multiple possible narrative contexts for photographs, and these stories might convey varying truths, such as the emotional impact of "seeing," for instance, residue of Edgar Allen Poe's unsuccessful suicide attempt four days earlier in a November, 1948 daguerreotype by Edwin Manchester of author Edgar Allen Poe (*The Cornwell Daguerreotype*). These variegated, imaginative and foreshadowing anecdotes (which benefit from temporal hindsight) detach the photograph from any singular or privileged *auratic* experience in a fixed time and space. Such narratives offer the possibility of an infinite number of temporal experiences with photographs, which become springboards for storytelling. Still, the book maintains its narrowed focus on the psychological dynamics of "otherness" experienced by viewers in the "event" of looking at portrait photographs, especially self-portraits.

In chapter three, Yacavone complicates that dynamic by suggesting that every photograph involves a circular "gaze" that both the portrait's subject and a viewer reciprocate. Objects of "the gaze" thus become active agents of "gazing" at the viewer, and vice-versa. But to question this idea for a moment, we must take into account that viewers of photographs are conditioned to be aware that they are looking at a flat, imprinted, lifeless material object that can provide only an inanimate likeness of a person. As he hoped that staring at a photograph of his deceased mother might help him recover some new insight about her in *La Chambre Claire (Camera Lucida)*, even Barthes was frustrated with the inability of a photographic subject's gaze to help redeem her lost presence. [3]

Chapter four of the book introduces the work of Barthes, his context, and his methodological shift from semiotics to phenomenology, following the same pattern as the first half of the book (brief introduction to the author, a summary of the writer's work and specific arguments based on photographs that Barthes discusses). Other scholars have summarized and contextualized Barthes's work on photography, and his ideas' impact on the history of photography, such as Batchen's edited volume of essays, *Photography Degree Zero: Reflections on Roland Barthes's Camera Lucida*.<sup>[4]</sup> Deferring to other texts for these encapsulations might have enabled Yacavone the freedom to further develop the thesis about photography's "singularity," and to respond to other authors' arguments about Barthes. But for newcomers to Barthes's work, these summaries may be valuable.

At the start of the section's discussion of *Camera Lucida*, Yacavone positions Barthes's intentions for the project. While binary relationships (particularly, the tension between the two "poles" of "aesthetic formalism" and "ontological realism" (p. 144)) informed Barthes's work, he wanted to escape association with either project. Informed by an exposure to deconstruction, Barthes does address realism (by arguing that photography conveys a "that-has-been"), but he also problematizes any such statements with contradictory assertions (such as stressing the medium's "certification of presence" over its truth to appearance, for instance).<sup>[5]</sup> This book aptly notes Barthes's vacillating rhetoric in his poststructuralist- and deconstruction-influenced writings, and accentuates his insistence on personalizing the reception study of photographs. But it nonetheless positions Barthes with the "realist" camp of theorists, despite his apparent avoidance of such clear-cut associations in *Camera Lucida*. Moreover, the state of the current discourse is defined by Yacavone as no different than that of Barthes's decade: as a dialogue "caught between two methodological poles" of "seeing photographs as an artistic image" and, at the other extreme, as "a direct impression of the real" (p. 144). This encapsulation overlooks about thirty years of discursive work in the medium since Barthes's death in 1980, some of which was inspired by his writings. These conversations complicated and broke down essentialist views of the medium. Photography's history is no longer exclusive to "art" photography, but includes an expanded field of vernacular and "photographic" practices. Its theorization is far more multifaceted than just the study of ontological realism. But even then, our discourses accommodate nuance. While photography wields the rhetoric of the real, it is capable of multiple *realisms*. Barthes accommodated such flexibility in his writings, which account for their staying power.

In chapter five, the book offers a counterargument to "[t]he predominant views among Anglo-American Barthes scholars... that the Winter Garden photograph of the mother is likely a fiction and/or that it simply does not matter whether it exists" (p. 164). Specifically, Margaret Olin and Diana Knight separately have argued that Barthes's discussion of a photograph of his recently-deceased mother at age five—an image that never appears in *Camera Lucida*, and has yet to be discovered—may be based on a non-existent image.<sup>[6]</sup> Yacavone presents two photographs of Barthes seated at his desk with the same image nearby.<sup>[7]</sup> This, she argues, is photographic proof that the elusive *Winter Garden* photograph exists. Unfortunately, neither image is clear enough to discern the subject/s of this photograph. So the issue remains unresolved.

What is far more interesting is Yacavone's assertion that "[i]n a French-speaking context, in contrast, the prevalent assumption is that the photograph did or does exist, and—rightly, I would argue—that the photograph's actual existence gives genuine meaning to its absence from the text" (p. 164). The reader is left to wonder: *why is it so important that the image did, or does, exist? What is at stake here for French scholars, but not for English-speaking ones?* The author provides no further discussion of the motivations behind either group of scholars' investments in these positions.

The material existence of the portrait of Barthes's mother is essential to Yacavone's "singularity" thesis, because the "existential confrontation between the self and the other" prompted by portrait photographs "can only be triggered by an *actual* photograph, felt and perceived as external to oneself, as opposed to an only imaginary one which is by nature never outside of the self" (p. 185).

Nonetheless, the photo's absence is meaningful, with or without the material object. Let's imagine for a moment that Barthes's *Winter Garden* photograph was an amalgam of Barthes's own memories, triggered by the photograph of Franz Kafka that was described by Benjamin in "A Short History of Photography" and that appeared in *Le Nouvel Observateur*, as Knight and Olin have suggested. The narration of the photograph by Barthes is still *about Barthes*, as Olin suggests:

"In the *Winter Garden* Photograph, Roland Barthes discovered not his mother, or not only his mother, but also himself, himself as a child, specifically as a child known from photographs. A chain of photographs leads Barthes, searching from image to image, to the unexpected discovery of himself as his own mother, just as he had been his mother's mother while he cared for her during her last illness." [8]

Yacavone's thesis about the subjective, personal, and arbitrary nature of narratives prompted by viewing photographs still applies here, even without the photograph's material existence. Barthes's story for the *Winter Garden* image is really an encounter with the "otherness" of *his own* childhood, which Barthes knew partially from photographs and oral histories. Barthes's mother might not even have remembered herself at that age, either, and may have similarly constructed her notion of "childhood" from images such as the *Winter Garden* photograph. What results, in part, from Barthes's discussion is a preponderance of the modern/postmodern phenomenon of *knowing oneself and others through photographs*.

The material manifestation of the *Winter Garden* image is also less significant than Barthes's strategic and surely purposeful decision *not* to reproduce it. By making this choice, Barthes effectively puts readers of *Camera Lucida* in the position of amalgamating the *Winter Garden* photograph. Thus, he relies on his readers' over-familiarity with the ubiquitous vernacular portraiture genre, and on the primacy of his words to create images. That is to say, as readers, we do not need to see the image because we know its "type," and therefore can easily conjure a mental image of the missing photograph based on our knowledge of others we think are like it. Barthes's omission of the image points out one effect of living in a world saturated by photographs—and photographic reproductions.

At several points in the book, Yacavone hints at the task of addressing the distinctly Modern/postmodern *affect* of knowing oneself, others and the world through photographic mediation. The medium's portable, ubiquitous images inspire multiple narratives that can be viewed and re-viewed across multiple spaces and times. These conditions have an impact on human cognition, as does the near-instantaneous transmission of digital images through time and space. Although the book takes on a very narrow facet of that phenomenon ("singularity," or confronting a subject as "other"—with a sense of ethical responsibility, and with the *necessity* of a portrait photograph), it begins to account for the peculiar absence/presence dialectic sparked by the medium. That certainly is a contribution worth noting.

## NOTES

[1] Roland Barthes, *La chambre claire: note sur la photographie* (Paris: Cahiers du Cinéma, Gallimard, Seuil, 1980). The text was translated into English in 1980: Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981).

[2] Carolin Duttlinger, "Imaginary Encounters: Walter Benjamin and the Aura of Photography," *Poetics Today*, 29/1 (Spring 2008): 79.

[3] Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 115.

[4] Geoffrey Batchen, ed., *Photography Degree Zero: Reflections on Roland Barthes's Camera Lucida* (Cambridge, Mass.: The M.I.T. Press, 2009).

[5] Barthes, pp. 87, 94.

[6] Diana Knight was the first to pose the possibility that the *Winter Garden* photograph might be an invention: Diana Knight, *Barthes and Utopia: Space, Travel, Writing* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997), pp. 265-266.; Margaret Olin, "Roland Barthes's 'Mistaken' Identifications" in *Touching Photographs* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2012), pp. 51-69.

[7] Figure 1: Detail of photograph on desk, Daniel Faunières, *Roland Barthes at his Desk in Paris*, 1979. Source: p. 165 and Figure 2: Detail with photograph in top left corner, Francois Lagarde, *Roland Barthes at his Desk in Paris*, April 25, 1979. Source: p. 166.

[8] Olin, pp. 65-66.

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