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Olga Smith, *Contemporary Photography in France. Between Theory and Practice*. Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2022. €45.00 (pb). ISBN 9-78-9462703445. €39.00 (eb). ISBN 9-78-9461664891.

Review by Pierre Taminiaux, Georgetown University.

The book *Contemporary Photography in France. Between Theory and Practice*, by Olga Smith, constitutes an ambitious and quite unique project. It attempts in particular to bring together the field of esthetics and that of socio-cultural analysis. In order to reach its main objective, it focuses its critical discourse on three major French thinkers of post-World War II and contemporary France, namely Roland Barthes, Jean Baudrillard and Jacques Rancière.

First, one must say that for a very long time, photography remained largely ignored as the object of a theoretical discourse on art and visual representation. The publication of Pierre Bourdieu's book, *Photography: A Middle-Brow Art* in the mid-nineteen sixties did not solve this issue, to the extent that it was mainly a sociological study that confined photography to the realm of everyday practices by the common man.[1]

In other words, the French intellectual world had to wait until 1980 and the publication of *Camera Lucida* by Roland Barthes to demonstrate a strong interest in the issue of photography as a genuine means of artistic expression.[2] This situation seems quite paradoxical, since the inventor of photography in the first part of the nineteenth century was a Frenchman named Nicéphore Niepce. Some of the most preeminent pioneers of the medium were also French, from Nadar to Atget.

By comparison, in the German-speaking world, Walter Benjamin wrote as early as the 1930s an important and quite enlightening essay on photography, "Little History of Photography." [3] It was part of a general reflection on the key role played by technical reproduction in the culture of modern capitalist societies. Benjamin emphasized in his essay the relevance of an historical perspective in order to demonstrate that photography constituted an autonomous medium and not a mere substitute for painting. In other words, he acknowledged the various esthetic developments of photography after more than one hundred years of existence.

Olga Smith first stresses the subjective and autobiographical nature of Barthes's discourse on photography. *Camera Lucida* was indeed written in the form of a first-person narration. In this sense, the author's main work on photography could not be defined according to a purely esthetic perspective, but rather as a highly personal and even intimate account of his relation to

photography. Moreover, one could argue that Barthes did not speak about photography, but rather about a few photographs that meant a lot to him. In the end, *Camera Lucida* even became a book about one single photograph, that of his own mother in the Winter Garden.

In many ways, Barthes defined photography as the last expression of romanticism in modern France. In this sense, his discourse was not formulated in contemporary terms, but rather in terms that belonged to a certain history of French literature rooted in the nineteenth century. According to such history, the unequivocal expression of sheer subjectivity dominated the main framework of visual representation.

The author clearly distinguishes between Barthes' subjectivity and Baudrillard's objectivity. She demonstrates quite well that Baudrillard's critical discourse on objects manifested itself already in the early stages of his career, namely in a book like *The System of Objects*.^[4] Photography, therefore, was inscribed within a whole set of commodities and symbolic exchanges. In this regard, one of the most striking articles written by Baudrillard on photography is entitled "Objects in a Mirror." It is part of his book *The Perfect Crime*, which was originally published in 1995.^[5]

Baudrillard's interest in photography only developed in the 1980s, as Smith stresses. It was in particular stemming from his personal ties with photographer Sophie Calle: he wrote in this regard various comments for her book *Suite Vénitienne*.^[6] Moreover, in "Objects in a Mirror" he stated that the photographer did not create his subject matter and that he only reproduced it. Therefore, Baudrillard was still largely influenced by a traditional and even stereotypical vision of photography that saw it as a purely mimetic means of representation.

In this sense, Baudrillard's approach was not very different from that of Barthes, beyond the obvious shift from subjectivity to objectivity. He just translated this mimetic sovereignty in post-modern terms, that is in terms that radically questioned the meaning of history and memory. Photography was literally seized in the moment, as a purely ephemeral set of pictures, to the extent that Baudrillard, in *The Perfect Crime*, meditated on virtual reality and its celebration of various forms of instant representation.

The most original dimension of Olga Smith's study is her focus on the lesser-known work of Jacques Rancière. Even if it is not very substantial, it sheds a new light on photography by criticizing in particular the widespread notion of medium and by putting forward instead the notion of milieu (or *sensorium*). Rancière was originally a member of the group *Révoltes Logiques*, which featured various French thinkers who searched for new and original theoretical perspectives independent from all major schools of thought, including post-structuralism to which Barthes belonged, and post-modernism, that of Lyotard and Baudrillard.

The appropriation of some of his texts by the contemporary art world seems quite problematic, though, inasmuch as Rancière never produced major works of art criticism. He is first and foremost a philosopher who specializes in theoretical and esthetic discourses on both literature and culture. This is a remark that one can make for Barthes and Baudrillard as well. Since the purpose of Olga Smith's book is to assert the identity of photography as an art form in France in the past fifty years, it should rely more consistently on the work of renowned art critics. In this regard, it refers only briefly to Michael Fried's essay *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before*.^[7]

Both Barthes and Baudrillard also approached photography as a mere addition to their main works of literary and social criticism. In this perspective, Barthes's *Camera Lucida* could have been entitled *The Pleasure of the Picture*, in reference to his famous essay *The Pleasure of the Text*.^[8] In the latter, he emphasized the fragmented nature of reading, which was drawn to short passages extracted from a book. He literally applied this theoretical perspective to the field of photography, with his emphasis on the punctum, that is on a mere detail in a picture that is able to catch the eye and to stir powerful emotions. Barthes actually compared it to a sting.

Baudrillard's reflection on the medium was also strongly influenced by his general theory of simulation, which was derived from the growing power of technology in contemporary culture. The problem is that such theory inevitably entailed a dematerialization of visual representation, and therefore of photography. Moreover, such viewpoint ultimately denied the truth-value of photography. Such quality played for decades an essential role in the artistic expression of the medium, particularly through the numerous works of the Magnum Group. In this case, the main strength of photography consisted in its ability to serve as an eyewitness to the turmoil of 20th-century history, from the Spanish Civil War to the Holocaust. In other words, one of the essential tasks of photography was to unveil the lies of propaganda and the deception of ideological discourse in the context of totalitarianism in general and fascism in particular.

One of the main merits of Olga Smith's book is to explore the creativity of numerous French artists who have used photography as their main means of expression in the past five decades. In this regard, she pays a particular attention to the seminal work of Christian Boltanski, whose installations featured numerous portraits of dead children, and also of Annette Messager. Indeed, both succeeded in synthesizing the realist tradition of photography with the conceptual approach of contemporary art.

The chapter that serves as a conclusion to her book is called "The Landscapes of France." It is both enlightening and thought-provoking, to the extent that it stresses the key role played by landscapes in the development of contemporary photography. As Smith writes: "Images of landscape give a visual manifestation to the 'imagined community' of the nation" (p. 126). They are able therefore to build bridges between people based on shared emotions and beliefs. In this regard, the French constitution protects the indivisible status of France's territory. Therefore, landscapes constitute a cultural legacy that photographers are keen to celebrate.

The author's explanation of both the goals and the accomplishments of the DATAR photographic mission are quite stimulating. This mission was created in the 1980s, at the height of President Mitterrand's power. It reflected the French government's investment in large-scale cultural and artistic projects (such as the BnF) and was recognized as the most important act of state sponsorship for photography in France. More precisely, The DATAR mission constituted a major photographic survey that was destined to document the transformations wrought upon the French landscape by modernization.

Olga Smith adopts here a critical perspective towards this ambitious project. She stresses the flaws, gaps, and blind spots of the institutional view. In particular, she analyzes the problematic changes stemming from urban development and modernization and their accurate representation in what she terms geo-photography. In this regard, she underlines Robert Doisneau's personal contribution to the DATAR mission. In order to portray the territory of the French people,

according to the official terminology, Doisneau went back to the same lower-class Parisian suburbs that he had pictured in earlier works such as *La Banlieue de Paris* (1949), made in collaboration with Blaise Cendrars. In such works, the streets of Paris were characterized by their utmost liveliness and agitation.

By contrast, the streets that he photographed in the 1980s were mostly deprived of human presence. The vibrant post-World War II social life of the same spaces had thus disappeared. In addition, new architectural projects had profoundly transformed the identity of the suburban landscape, as demonstrated by La Grande Borne. The latter exemplified the grey and gloomy social housing of the 1960s, which was paradoxically intended to serve as a model for future development. It is today associated first and foremost with poverty and crime.

As Olga Smith says in her analysis of Doisneau's work on landscapes: "Doisneau's status as the figurehead for humanist photography makes his break with this tradition all the more noteworthy" (p. 180). These noticeable changes implied a loss of representation of national identity in photography. Neither Doisneau nor the other photographers involved in the DATAR project could therefore produce images capable of visualizing the French nation, its republican values, its symbolism and mythologies.

In her conclusion, the author's critical discourse states thus the essential relationship between photography and the identity of the national community. In many ways, photography has itself become global, not so much because of the shift towards digital technology, but rather because of the social and cultural environment in which it is forced to operate. The risk of ever more homogenized pictures is thus great and represents a genuine challenge for all contemporary artists. In the final pages of the book, such warning is certainly implicit: the timeless essence of natural landscapes is indeed threatened by the numerous social and political upheavals of today's world.

Contemporary Photography in France. Between Theory and Practice constitutes an interesting and well-documented addition to the already rich body of critical work on the subject. It strives to analyze and describe numerous artistic practices that are esthetically diverse. Its intellectual scope is therefore broad and far-reaching. Finally, its numerous illustrations allow for an accurate visualization of the most recent developments of photography in France.

NOTES

[1] Pierre Bourdieu, with Luc Boltanski, Robert Castel and Jean-Claude Chamboredon, *Un art moyen. Essai sur les usages sociaux de la photographie* (Paris: Minuit, 1965).

[2] Roland Barthes, *La chambre claire: Note sur la photographie* (Paris: Cahiers du cinema, 1980); translated as *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981).

[3]. Walter Benjamin, "Little History of Photography" (1931) in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, vol. 2, part 2, 1931-34*, trans. Rodney Livingstone et al., ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1999), 507-530, 510.

[4] Jean Baudrillard, *Le Système des objets* (Paris: Gallimard, 1968).

[5] Jean Baudrillard, *Le crime parfait* (Paris: Galilée, 1995).

[6] Jean Baudrillard and Sophie Calle, *Suite Venitienne. Please Follow Me* (Paris: Éditions de l'Étoile—Cahiers du cinéma, 1983).

[7] Michael Fried, *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2008).

[8] Roland Barthes, *Le Plaisir du texte* (Paris, Seuil, 1973).

Pierre Taminioux
Georgetown University
taminiap@georgetown.edu

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