Beyond Barthes

Rethinking the phenomenology of photography

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This article attempts to outline a phenomenology of photography, oriented by the situation of photography in contemporary media culture. Various recent photographic art practices have come to emphasize what may be seen as specifically phenomenological issues of appearance, perception and form. The widespread use of photography to address questions of cultural identity has tended to appropriate existing images and genres of imaging practice in ways that compound embodied appearances with their cultural and technical mediation, and to play on the phenomena displacements thus produced. Cindy Sherman's work is paradigmatic here.[1] Other artists have exploited photography's propensity to archival organization and explored the temporal experience characteristic of photographic series extending across different forms of display, organized to mediate specific documentary information by establishing perceptual patterns and generic visual connections. Bernd and Hilla Becher are canonical figures in this regard.[2] Similarly, one could note the significant and continuing transformation of the scale of photographic artworks. Jeff Wall's lightboxes are exemplary for their adoption of the scale of both modern painting and street advertising to construct narrative images perceptually underpinned by their luminescence and their scalar relation to the viewer.[3]

An implicit demand for phenomenological analysis can also be discerned in the ways in which established discourses and practices of photography have been challenged by consecutive waves of new digital imaging technologies and the invention and consolidation of the Internet. This may sound like a surprising claim, since theoretical attempts to understand these innovations tend to conceive of the experiences they engender in *anti*-phenomenological terms – for example, contrasting the kinds of perception proper to photography to the technical and cultural novelty of new media, in order to theorize the unprecedented relationships they seem to establish between body and image.[4] In this context, great emphasis has been placed on the forms of spatio-temporality taken by new imaging technologies, such as their propensity to instant global dissemination and simultaneous viewing, and the ways in which experience of images under these conditions is haunted by doubts arising from the mutability of digital information. However, in broad terms this is also a familiar situation, resonating with wave upon wave of similar claims made for previous technological innovations (including photography) and the promises they held out. And this logic of supersession threatens, as much as it promises, understanding of these relationships between body and image. Phenomenology still has much to offer here. But this can only be demonstrated by responding to the profound objections to phenomenology within the theory of photography today.

Photography's appearances

If phenomenology understands itself broadly as the science of appearances, what would a phenomenology of photography be? Obviously, it would have to analyse the manner in which photography 'appears'. But it is hard to say what photography is on the basis of looking at any particular photographic image, machine, process or practice.

An obvious starting point would be to pay detailed attention to individual photographs. This would place an enormous critical weight on one's decision regarding which images to look at, since, if the point of such analysis is to extrapolate general insights about photography from attention to specific photographs, the privilege granted any one image would appear arbitrary. The value of singular analysis would be won at the cost of excluding an effectively infinite field of other images. This problem might provoke an alternative approach: to consider the ways in which different arrays of photographic equipment structure experience by defining the possibilities of image production. One

might consider, for instance, the 'domestic' Polaroid and the daguerreotype; forms marked by significant similarities and differences deriving from their material characteristics. Viewing an old daguerreotype means looking at a small – originally highly polished, but possibly now damaged – reflective surface of a unique and historically precious image-object, factors that act as phenomenological conditions for what one might know or surmise regarding the extended exposure time over which the image was made. How do these considerations inform the similarities that the daguerreotype bears to the small, hand-held and unique form of the Polaroid, especially in light of the marked differences that emerge when one recalls conventional ideas of the Polaroid's instantaneity, its rich colour and densely layered opacity as these combine to characterize understanding of its usage? How might one account, phenomenologically, for the historical and social conditions that emerge through analysis of such forms? Given the problems encountered here, one might change tack again and explore the phenomenology of photography by projecting a notion of photographic experience as such. But what purchase would such an expansive, arguably too formal, notion of photographic experience in general have on the specific material characteristics of different photographic practices and on disputes regarding their cultural and historical significance?

These various questions and obstacles have produced a considerable quantity of criticism directed towards phenomenological approaches over the last forty years. No doubt for many this criticism makes the idea of reviving either problematic or banal. Yet, I want argue that a phenomenology of photography does in fact persist in the field of photographic theory, albeit in an obscured and highly eccentric form. One can clarify what is stake here by recalling that radical – Marxist, feminist, semiotic and psychoanalytical – theorizations of photography in the 1970s constituted themselves in rejection of the connoisseurial and politically suspect discourses of perception and sentiment quite rightly taken to inform many discussions of visual art and photography at the time.[5] It was on this basis that phenomenology was ruled out for most interesting theorizations of photography in the later twentieth century. This shift proved so influential that, looking back, one can find virtually no substantial theoretical text that explicitly addresses photography in formal phenomenological terms.[6]

Yet, in pausing to consider such a lack, there is at least one striking exception that may come to mind: Roland Barthes's *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Pho-*

tography.[7] Readers of *Camera Lucida* can be divided according to whether they take its phenomenological aspect to be problematic or not. For instance, many have accepted Barthes's phenomenology at face value, often because it is loose enough to facilitate co-option to some other set of interests.[8] Others have taken the view that Barthes's first-person narrative compromises his wider theoretical claims and that this exhausts what phenomenology might have to say about photography.[9] More recently, *Camera Lucida*'s phenomenology of photography has been accepted, but only to argue that both phenomenology and photography are historically obsolete.[10] What should be noted here is that these apparently very different readings share key assumptions: not only do they take *Camera Lucida* to define correctly the relation between phenomenology and photography, but they also accept its basic conception of phenomenology, even where they reject it. One aim of this article is to expose the precise character of these assumptions and to outline an alternative.

Camera Lucida's phenomenology aims to grasp the essence of photography. More specifically, it is an 'eidetic' phenomenology – something routinely underappreciated in the reception of Barthes. For the moment it suffices to note that the concept of 'eidos' comes to mean pure essence in Husserl's later phenomenology and that eidetic phenomenology is conceived as the universal science of transcendental appearances. The crucial point here is that Barthes effectively collapses phenomenology into Husserl's eidetic phenomenology, ignoring alternative forms, principally Heidegger's influential development of an existential phenomenology. The decisive task in reading *Camera Lucida* as a phenomenology is thus to characterize and critically evaluate its eidetic character, and to delimit this from other possibilities of phenomenological analysis. The accumulated disputes over the phenomenological character of *Camera Lucida* have not pursued this task. *Camera Lucida* therefore *contains* the phenomenology of photography today, in the sense of enabling it to persist within the hostile terrain of contemporary photography theory, while constricting what such a phenomenology might be. Its critique must therefore be my point of departure.

Of course, if one steps back from the discursive sphere of photography theory, eidetic phenomenology has been the subject of intense critiques from the tradition of existential phenomenology, from Heidegger through to Merleau-Ponty. But this tradition has not produced a phenomenology of photography, except perhaps in a deeply negative or marginal way. Despite photography's dominance as a cultural form through-

out the twentieth century, existential phenomenology has tended summarily to reject it, ignore it, or reduce it to the umbrella of a wider critique of modern technology.[11] We therefore have little to start out with from here. Barthes's phenomenology is eccentric to this tradition and it appears a very minor contribution to it, but it does at least offer a serious engaged phenomenology of photography. There is another, more complex and ironic, value in *Camera Lucida*: there are in fact powerful existential aspects to Barthes's phenomenology itself. Barthes's deployment of eidetic phenomenology harbours its self-criticism, and, out of this, generates rich existential insights into the way photography appears for us within media-saturated cultures. But Barthes does not develop this phenomenology other than negatively. This shows in the inadequacies of his account of photography, whether this concerns its socio-historical or its technical form. My aim in this article is thus to extract Barthes's negative phenomenology of photography and thereby prepare the ground for its positive elaboration.

Rereading *Camera Lucida*

The focus of *Camera Lucida* is on the forms of generality and specificity that Barthes takes to shape experience of photography. His account hinges on an absolutely specific idea of photography's essence, defined by an entirely formal notion of photographic time and articulated in terms of an extremely singular form of experience. The first part of the inquiry asks: 'Why mightn't there be, somehow, a new science for each object? A *mathesis singularis* (and no longer universalis)?'[12] In response, Barthes projects a 'science of the singular', oriented by his insistence that emotion should lead reflection, heuristically, 'from photograph to photograph' in order to account for the specific manner in which photography mediates desire.[13] In a notoriously unargued move, photography is defined by the supposed necessity with which it makes reference to a unique event that had to have unfolded before the camera for an image to be produced.[14] Here, it is the chemical and mechanical nature of the negative-based photographic apparatus that guarantees the evidentiary character of photographic images. The ostensive function of such photographs (the way they are often assumed to point towards something else and to efface themselves in the process) is central to the representational operations put in question: 'the Photograph is never anything but an antiphon of "Look", "See", "Here it is".'[15] It is on these bases that Barthes derives his widely celebrated concepts of the *studium* and *punctum*, which respectively signify the broad field of culture shaped by generalized forms of intentionality and the kind of emotional event that might irrupt from this sphere, punctuating and puncturing it with affective value.[16] Famously, the *punctum* is first thought in terms of the multiple details registered by photographs. Their proliferation is taken to be a function of the camera and not the photographer (that is, an excess of detail enters into the photograph despite, and not because of, the manifest intentions of its producer). The form of desiring specificity aimed at through the *punctum* is impersonal and machinic, and stands in opposition to what Barthes thinks of as the overdetermined form of photographic culture.[17]

In *Camera Lucida*'s second part Barthes presents an account of photographic time conceived in terms of loss and remembrance.[18] In general, here, photographic time is taken to be exemplary of the period of writing, in both a personal and a historical sense. Indeed, the categories 'personal' and 'historical' are collapsed into one another as a phenomenological problem, and it is in this light that time comes to be seen as the essence of photography: 'there exists another *punctum* … than the "detail". This new *punctum*, which is no longer of form but of intensity, is Time, the lacerating emphasis of the *noeme* ("*that-has-been*"), its pure representation.'[19] Among other contrasts, the movement characteristic of film is opposed to photographic stillness to define photography as an image form that interrupts historical time ('motionless, the Photograph flows backwards from presentation to retention') and underwrites conceptualization of an 'ecstatic' encounter with the past.[20] Photographic time (the presentation of pastness) and space (the basically spatial form of ostension) are thus radicalized and sutured together in a transcendental framework that is explicitly Husserlian. Pathos, then, becomes the conceptual core of the gesture towards theorizing the ecstasy of photography, with which the book ends.

Mad or tame? Photography can be one or the other: tame if its realism remains relative, tempered by aesthetic or empirical habits (to leaf through a magazine at the hairdresser's, the dentist's); mad if this realism is absolute and, so to speak, original, obliging the loving and terrified consciousness to return to the very letter of Time: a strictly revulsive movement which reverses the course of the thing, and which I shall call the photographic *ecstasy*.[21]

The fate of experience in modernity is thus conceptualized according to the 'impossible-possibility' of a live encounter with the dead, and this is generalized as an ecstatic specificity that temporalizes significant experience in a world full of photographs.

The concepts developed in *Camera Lucida* continue to be widely used. Barthes's association of the photograph's 'freezing' action with death, and his conclusion that still photography is exhausted by pastness, especially, have been diagnosed as sponsoring a widespread and problematic 'rhetoric of immobilization'.[22] Another commentator has recently described the tendency to accept at face value Barthes's radicalization of photographic indexicality as dwelling in 'the shadow of the cloying melancholia of a post-Barthesian era of photographic theory'.[23] Yet, however much one might agree with these criticisms, they should not be taken to mean that any phenomenological theorization of photography would necessarily suffer the same fate. Nonetheless, justification of this claim necessitates a more specific account of Barthes's phenomenology of photography itself.

Orthodoxy, method, fiction

The clue to this task is to be found in the fictionalizing use to which Barthes puts formal phenomenological method, and his claim that it is overdetermined by phenomenology's historical status as orthodoxy. The analysis of how orthodox phenomenological method is appropriated here should begin by considering the manner in which Barthes reveals his own heuristic approach in relation to it. The strategy is outlined in a passage that informs the rest of the inquiry, so it is worth quoting at length:

> In this investigation of Photography, I borrowed something from phenomenology's project, and something from its language. But it was a vague, casual, even cynical phenomenology…. First of all, I did not escape, or try to escape, from a paradox: 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 … only contingency, singularity, risk…. [I]s it not the very weakness of Photography, this difficulty in existing which we call banality? Next, my phenomenology agreed to compromise with a power, *affect*; affect was what I didn't want to reduce; being irreducible, it was thereby what I wanted, what I ought to reduce the Photograph *to*; but could I retain an affective intentionality, a view of the object which was immediately steeped in desire, repulsion, nostalgia, euphoria? Classical phenomenology … had never, so far as I could remember, spoken of desire or mourning. Of course I could make out in Photography, in a very orthodox manner, a whole network of essences: material essences (necessitating the physical, chemical, optical study of Photography), and regional essences (deriving, for instance, from aesthetics, from History, from soci-

> ology); but at the moment of reaching the essence of Photography in general, I branched off; instead of following the path of a formal ontology (of a Logic), I stopped, keeping with me, like a treasure, my desire or my grief; the anticipated essence of the Photograph could not, in my mind, be separated from the 'pathos' of which, from the first glance, it consists.[24]

This passage has received much commentary, mainly concerning its emphasis on desire and contingency. What has been neglected is the way it approaches these themes by characterizing phenomenology, historically, as a scholastic orthodoxy, and, conceptually, as a classicizing methodology.[25] Barthes asserts that the object of phenomenology – what is to be revealed by the transcendental science of immediate experience – and the failures of its orthodox form – its supposed avoidance of affect and the formal logic taken to encourage this oversight – suggest a way to conceptualize the paradox he places at the core of photography: the contingent form of its universal essence. He reads phenomenology (an explicit *mathesis universalis*) symptomatically, as a form of writing that has failed in the face of affect, and this shapes his *mathesis singularis* of the photograph. The generalization of this diagnosis is both casual and sophisticated. One can summarize it in the following manner. In *Camera Lucida*, phenomenology is set up as a fiction, an analogon of reified social experience, and the 'breaking down' of phenomenology in the face of affect parallels and facilitates articulation of the 'breaking out' of authentic significance from banalized social reality. As such, it also fictionalizes the key concern of phenomenology, namely immediate experience. This diagnosis prepares phenomenology's appropriation as a 'literary' form and it provides the framework for Barthes's eidetic phenomenology of photography.

Of all the novelistic or literary motifs in *Camera Lucida*, its phenomenological fiction is the least examined and most central. If one were to take the advice given by Victor Burgin and read *Camera Lucida* as a 'fiction', which remains a good suggestion, it would appear most fruitful to do so in terms of the way it deals with phenomenology.[26] In his comment that *Camera Lucida* is 'novelistic', Burgin tries to make sense of its deployment of phenomenology 'in tandem' with psychoanalysis. He sees this as a basic contradiction, because of the way in which phenomenology 'rejects the notion of the unconscious', but here he is swayed by those points at which Barthes misleadingly identifies phenomenology with Sartre.[27] The important position of psychoanalysis in cultural criticism

makes such stringent denials of the unconscious appear suspect, and Burgin's response that it would be a shame to deny the analytic gains made by psychoanalysis is compelling. Nonetheless, it is worth dwelling on the fact that Burgin takes this to necessitate a denial of phenomenology, as this elides the way that Barthes distances his own inquiry from psychoanalysis. In any case, such a response does not address the way in which Barthes explicitly locates his account of photography on the problematized territory of formal phenomenology. This can be clarified further through analysis of Barthes's appropriation of Sartrean and Husserlian concepts and procedures.

For Sartre

The fact that *Camera Lucida* is dedicated to Sartre's *The Imaginary* (1940) is significant, as many of Barthes's concepts are derived from this book.[28] It appears odd, however, given that Barthes's earlier work had played a significant part in intellectual developments taken to render Sartre's ideas obsolete, or at least distinctly unfashionable. What needs to be appreciated is both the centrality of Sartrean themes and concepts to *Camera Lucida* and the manner in which they are turned to distinctly un-Sartrean ends.

There are many points at which *The Imaginary* informs *Camera Lucida*. For instance, the introduction of the *punctum* is prepared with reference to Barthes's description of being bored in the face of many newspaper photographs.[29] Barthes borrows the term 'analogon' from Sartre's discussion of the image as 'an equivalent of perception' that one 'animates' in imaginary relation to something.[30] Sartre's continual play on metaphors of 'adherence' and 'stickiness', and his account of the forms of 'emanation' that characterize images for desiring consciousness, are central to the rhetorical construction of Barthes's notion of photographic reference.[31] The ultimately magical and melancholy character of such reference for Barthes is also close to Sartre's notion of imagination: 'The act of imagination … is a magical art. It is an incantation destined to make the object of one's thought, the thing one desires, appear in such a way that one can take possession of it. There is always, in that act, something of the imperious and the infantile, a refusal to take account of distance and difficulties.'[32]

Sartre develops a phenomenological psychology in *The Imaginary* oriented by the question, 'what are the characteristics that can be attributed to consciousness on the basis of the fact that it is consciousness capable of imaging?'[33] Imagination, perception and cognition are conceived as fundamental 'attitudes' of conscious-ness, defined by the different ways they bring things to light. But imagination presents a problem as it does not, in principle, depend upon the forms of presence and apodicticity that Sartre sees as definitive of perception and cognition. It is characterized according to its 'irrealizing' function, as in his prefatory note: 'This work aims to describe the great "irrealising" function of consciousness, or "imagination", and its noematic correlate, the imaginary.'[34] On this model, the object imaged is an 'irreality' in so far as it entails evocation of something not present or conceptually generalizable, yet that is, crucially, still concrete. The irrealizing function of imagination is worthy of attention because it entails the denial of the perceptual and cognitive form of the presence and meaning of things, whilst affirming being-in-the-world. One's conscious experi-ence can be modulated to focus on that which is distant or unreal, in the past or future, but to take up such possibilities imaginatively is only to modulate one's experience in relation to the environment against which they stand out to be enacted. Decisively, imaging consciousness gives an object but at the price of only including what one puts into it: 'the object of an image is never anything more than the consciousness one has of it.'[35] Sartre takes this to mark out the imagination as being the most distinctively intentional and thus, for his phenomenological approach, the most defining mode of consciousness.

Camera Lucida is indebted to Sartre in these terms but an important difference remains. Barthes insists that photography is an absolutely historically distinct and epoch-making form of image. However, this very difference also facilitates his appropriation of Sartre's concepts and language: 'Photography's referent is not the same as the referent of other systems of representation.… It's not optionally real; it's necessar-ily real … Every photograph is somehow co-natural with its referent.'[36] This takes historical form: 'Every photograph is a certificate of presence. This is the new embarrassment, which its invention has introduced into the family of images.'[37] The cultural dominance of photography is read out of this relation and is alluded to as a context in which 'I see photographs everywhere, like everyone else, nowadays; they come from the world to me, without my asking.'[38] On Sartre's model, elaboration of differences between forms of representa-tion is secondary to articulation of the different modes of world disclosure granted by the fundamental atti-tudes of consciousness. Barthes's emphatic conception of the ontological significance of photography commits him to the idea that its historical innovation served to interrupt intentional consciousness, as such, and to

transform it. Sartre's notion of the imaginary is turned into a description of the colonization of consciousness by photography. His emphatic notion of intentionality (the always situated consciousness-of-something that finds itself thrust out into a worldly relation with things) is carried over into *Camera Lucida*, but only to the extent that it describes cultural operations that instrumentally prefigure imaginative possibility.

The critical balance rests on what Barthes takes photography's status to mean. This can be seen most clearly in his celebrated assertion regarding the essence
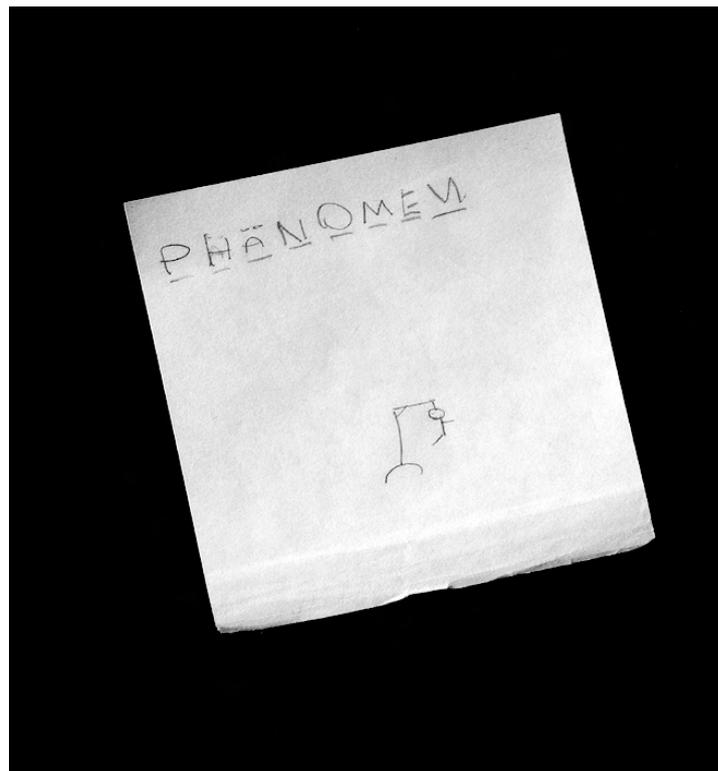
of photographic time: that the photograph is character-ized as certifying no more and no less than 'That-has-been'.[39] Experience of this takes the following form:

> One might say that the Photograph separates atten-tion from perception, and yields up only the former, even if it is impossible without the latter; that this is an aberrant thing, *noesis* without *noeme*, an action of thought without thought, an aim without a target.[40]

The concepts *noesis* and *noema* describe a cor-relation that is structuring of intentional conscious-ness for Husserl. The active character of intentional consciousness-of-something can be considered from the perspective of its being directed (*noesis*) as well as from the point of view of that to which it is directed (*noema*). The pairing was conceived by Husserl to overcome the problematic form of separation pertain-ing between the notions of subject and object. Perhaps this striking formulation most clearly characterizes

what I have identified as Barthes's fictional treatment of phenomenology. It is undoubtedly informed by Sartre, yet would be strictly impossible on his terms, in which the situated character of even the most imaginatively attenuated experience is always already structured by precisely this correlation of *noesis* and *noeme*. In Barthes's version, the noematic correlate of the image, the imaginary, is cut loose from its existential moorings. In this light, one can note that the novel temporality of the photograph outlined in Barthes's earlier essay 'The Rhetoric of the Image' is articulated in terms of a specifically spatio-temporal paradox: 'What we have is a new space–time category: spatial immediacy and temporal anteriority, the photograph being an illogical conjunction between the here-now and the there-then'.[41] Divorced of its spatial aspect, this paradox is made emphatic in *Camera Lucida*. In the earlier text the photograph 'is never experienced as an illusion', it is 'in no way a presence' and elaboration of its temporal paradox is followed by the warning: 'claims as to the magical character of the photographic image must be deflated'.[42]

Camera Lucida examines this illogi-cal coincidence as offering an absolutely intimate experience of the past, thus: 'In Photography, the presence of the thing is never metaphoric … the corpse is alive, as corpse: it is the living image of a dead thing.'[43] Barthes's account of this relation is intrinsically melancholic; the presence of what is gone is won at the expense of its having passed from the live realm of carnality into the metaphysically nebulous sphere of mechanically and chemically regis-tered light in photographic emulsion (though Barthes reportedly used newspaper supplements as a major source, so this last term should really read 'ink on paper'). But the photograph does not just evoke the dead; it gives one the experience of the dead as speci-fied in a way that only the living can be. There are two, co-dependent, members of the 'living dead' at work in this magical relation. It describes a form of animation of the lost other, but only through a desire on the part of the living for some kind of redemption from their habituation to the deathly form of their otherness to themselves. Figuring photography's form of reference as a radicalized certificate of presence produces an imaginary relation that bears the distinctive marks of Sartrean intentionality, but in dismembered form. Barthes trades upon the radical sense of exteriority

characteristic of Sartre's notion of consciousness, but refigures this paradoxically as a kind of personification of desire emerging from an overdetermined culture of photographic mediation. This is a move that reserves and purifies a moment of transfigured and intentionless affect, somehow redirected and 'returned' to the subject by the photograph as an 'aim without a target'. Thus it is that the 'anti-intentional' character of Barthes's account of photographic culture is radicalized and his dissatisfaction with the conventional engineering of the viewer's response to images turns out to be a categorical feature of photography's essence. This marks Barthes's move to a transcendental rather than existential account of the experience of photographic experience. Sartre's psychology is thereby exceeded, but in a direction that would be ruled out by his distinctive privileging of existence over essence. The transcendental notion of photographic time that Barthes tries to make sense of here is facilitated by a further appropriation – this time from Husserl's eidetic reduction.

The ecstasy of Husserl's reduction

One should recall that 'eidos' is the central term in Husserl's later transcendental phenomenology, in which essences are the universal and rule-giving norms for empirical experience of objects, meanings and facts.[44] The desire of eidetic phenomenology is to bring universal essence to cognition, and, in light of this, one must also recall that Barthes's inquiry is oriented by the assertion that the eidos of the photograph is rooted in its contingency. In order to explore what this means it is necessary to rehearse key moments of Husserl's eidetic reduction. Husserl approaches the thinking of essence through the methodological procedure of 'epoché' or 'reduction'. This controversial form of reflection took different shapes in the development of his thought. Generally, however, it is intended as a reflective setting aside of one's concerns regarding the actuality of engagements with objects and practices and the ways that these structure and inform one's life in the world; the idea being that such an act of wilful imaginative suspension could facilitate intellectual access to the essential characteristics of experience. This procedural aspect of the eidetic reduction structures Barthes's report on his own reflective procedure.

The eidetic reduction is supposed to strip away the contingent factors of experience: 'The universal which first comes to prominence in the empirically given must from the outset be freed from its character of contingency.'[45] An important stage in this is 'imaginative variation', which entails thinking of something in

such a way as to turn it into an arbitrary example. An exemplary thing is considered, in Husserl's words, as 'a point of departure for the production of an infinitely open multiplicity of variants'.[46] The idea is that one attempts to think of imaginative variations through which such an exemplar could be considered, whilst still remaining intuitable as a thing of its kind. It is important that the entire set of imaginative variants thus produced remain 'immediately intuitable'; that is, that one can imagine them all at once and as a set, yet without concern for their actual existence. For Husserl, if one were to attempt to think an infinitely varied list of actual variants, the resulting image or intuition upon which one might settle would not rest on an imaginatively projected generic characteristic. One would merely perform 'the inventive imagining of a thing or a figure, changing into arbitrarily new figures', the upshot being that one would only ever encounter 'something always new, and always only one thing: the last-imagined'.[47] In contrast, imaginative variation is supposed to produce the intuition of variations that exhibit a 'unity that runs through this multiplicity of successive figures' and to reveal the general essence of the thing to imagination: 'In such free variations … an *Invariant* is necessarily retained as the *necessary general form*. … [T]his form stands out in the practice of voluntary variation, and as an absolutely identical content, an invariable *what*, according to which all the variants coincide: *a general essence*.'[48] The process of imaginatively producing intuition of such a general invariant suggests how one might think universal essence: 'This general essence is the *eidos*, the *idea* in the Platonic sense, but apprehended in its purity and free from all metaphysical interpretations, therefore taken exactly as it is given to us immediately and intuitively in the vision of the idea which arises in this way.'[49] The idea is supposed to emerge *sui generis*, and yet be conceptualizable, guaranteed by the way imaginative variation remains in touch with and does not add anything to the relation between the object reflected and the agent of its reflection. Having sketched the framework of this procedure, it is possible to set aside more detailed consideration of the eidetic reduction as the outline given describes its appropriation by Barthes.

Throughout *Camera Lucida* Barthes describes encounters with images according to his way of passively leafing through books and magazines, looking at the images in them one at a time, only stopping to reflect upon those that strike him as significant: 'I was glancing through an illustrated magazine. A photograph made me pause.'[50] This is the basis of

the choices he exercises and it is dependent upon the material flow of a potentially infinite number of actual images. His manner of procuring for himself a reflective situation in which his 'attention' is readied for separation from his 'perception' in the form of a 'noesis without noeme'[51] appears fatefully, however, to be delimited by Husserl's warning against performing the merely 'inventive imagining of a thing or a figure, changing into arbitrarily new figures'.[52] One can articulate Barthes's repeated descriptions of the particular situations in which he reports seeing photographs – leafing in an acedic manner through colour supplements, for example – as a quasi-corporeal variation on the reflective procedure of imaginative variation. That this is oriented to (and claimed to have succeeded in producing) the occasional, puncturing irruption of photographic essence, renders this a highly eccentric appropriation of the method of eidetic reduction. Surely this is to give over to some external form of agency the very ability to set out on this reflective performance? This is the explicit purpose of Barthes's eidetic reduction, but in the form of the paradoxically subjective ecstasy of cultural mediation. No consideration is given to the conceptual and material resistances that the social character of this inherently inter-subjective mode of reflection might face. These fall, so to speak, into the gap between Barthes's encounter with photographs and his report on the results. This gap is the textual space in which he articulates the transcendental radicalization of Sartre's existential form of imaginary intentionality.

But his eidetic purification of photographic affect leaves a problematic remainder, or, perhaps, represses a question that returns to haunt eidetic phenomenology's reconstruction as a theory of photography. It would seem clear, given the characterization of photographic culture according to *punctum* and *studium* – and the way in which these terms are generalized, later in the book, according to the pathos-ridden opposition 'Mad or Tame?' – that Barthes's own status as the subject of reflection is reduced to one half of a performance, which must also include the more or less anonymously authored movements and processes shaping the forms of cultural production he excoriates. This strategy incorporates into the reflective structure of Barthes's eidetic fiction a concretely instantiated conception of photography as an interminable encounter with specific moments of an effectively infinite series. Repetition and reproducibility are thus absolutely central to it.[53]

What is supposed to signal the appearance of the essence of photography is the absolute specificity of the affective experiences that only certain images provoke. But in order to get to this Barthes seizes upon the constantly appearing, constitutively replaceable, and arbitrarily emergent 'last-imagined' and quite generic example that the unthematized presence of a cultural operator 'in general' gives him. The immediate singularity he seeks is thus, precisely in its most poignant and personal instances, socially mediated in form. The critical exposition of Barthes's eidetic phenomenology of photography therefore reveals that the contingency of the desire that irrupts from looking at photographs turns out to have, so to speak, the wrong kind of contingency: it turns out to be intersubjective or social. This quality of the 'last-imagined' photograph thus stands as a subterranean correlative to the singularly significant experience that Barthes desires. Here, following the trail of Barthes's assertions that photographs are essentially indexical, and that mass culture is inherently banal, returns one to the phenomenological fiction they authorize, but in a manner that shatters its crystalline eidos of photography.

Existential phenomenology

In *Camera Lucida* the whole idea of a phenomenology of photography is contracted into eidetic phenomenology. Given *Camera Lucida*'s pivotal function as a placeholder for the phenomenology of photography, this contraction occludes consideration of other, non-eidetic, phenomenological approaches. This is further complicated by *Camera Lucida*'s own remarkable contribution to this alternative, which effectively turns the transcendental science of eidetic appearance into a form of existential cultural critique. It is little wonder the reception of Barthes has neglected this. But subsequent appropriations of concepts such as the *punctum*, desire, death and photographic temporality make the theory of photography hostage to his notion of photography's eidos. Furthermore, it is this aspect of *Camera Lucida* that enables a rethinking of the phenomenology of photography today.

The critical issue here hinges on Barthes's assertion that the categories of radical singularity and absolute specificity structure the phenomenology of photography. As shown above, it is this commitment that renders his eidetic theory of photography problematic. This has a range of implications. It rules out many important aspects of photography that strongly suggest themselves for critically oriented phenomenological analysis. For instance, no detailed consideration is given to the materiality of photographs, as is obvious from the fact that Barthes's major source of images is colour supplements (a matrix of dots printed on paper),

whilst his vocabulary of photography's technical form centres on the phenomenal effects and ontological significance of photographic emulsion. It also distorts important aspects of his discussion of photography as an image form. Barthes in fact derives all of his insights about photography from those of its forms that rely on negatives, without the specific analysis that this commitment would seem to demand – for instance, in terms of the negative's inherent reproducibility.

One of the main conclusions I want to draw from these considerations is that, whilst *Camera Lucida* is an emphatically eidetic phenomenology of photography, its construction is oriented to an existential analytic, which would be better addressed through an explicitly existential phenomenology. Barthes's 'fictionalizing' of an eidetic account of photography orients him to an existential analysis of reified cultural experience, but this remains limited, holding at a distance those material, historical, technical and cultural questions that are not congruent with the focus on singularity and specificity. One can return, here, to the key passage in which he outlines the phenomenological character of his inquiry (quoted at length above) to note that, while Barthes denies a phenomenology of material and regional essences – in favour of a stress on the pure contingency of affect – he does not, as announced, actually 'branch off' from the 'path of formal ontology'.[54] Rather, he surreptitiously stays on this path. After setting photography up as an existential problem, Barthes remains oriented to a transcendental account of emotional experience, which assumes too quickly the achievement of societal reification over meaningful experience, and which surrenders too easily the critical value of specific analysis in favour of a self-consciously weak metaphysics of specificity.

As already remarked in the introduction, the obvious point to make about Barthes's fixation on Husserl is that it can be subjected to the critiques of eidetic phenomenology developed by later phenomenologists. The pertinent difference between eidetic and existential phenomenology can be briefly indicated by reiterating the fact that the former's priority is to conceive the ideality of essence – that is, the manner in which it stands prior to and independent of the existence of particular objects. Broadly speaking, existential phenomenology prioritizes the inverse, as in Sartre's famous slogan: 'existence precedes essence'.[55] Sartre thus disavows the eidetic reduction, but Merleau-Ponty outlines a more ambivalent position. In answer to the question, 'What is phenomenology?', with which the preface to the *Phenomenology of Perception* begins,

he writes: 'Phenomenology is the study of essences.… But phenomenology is also a philosophy which puts essences back into existence'.[56] His further formulation resonates with Barthes's peculiar treatment of the reduction. Merleau-Ponty writes: 'Reflection does not withdraw from the world towards the unit of consciousness as the world's basis … it alone is consciousness of the world because it reveals that world as strange and paradoxical.… The most important lesson which the reduction teaches us is the impossibility of a complete reduction.'[57] This could stand as an existential reformulation of Barthes's relation to Husserl's method of imaginative variation; most notably in so far as Merleau-Ponty maintains the reflective character of the reduction, and goes on to articulate its interruption as a key figure for thinking about embodied and situated experience. The reduction fails, but it remains significant as a form of thought that thus becomes, so to speak, interminable. Merleau-Ponty's rethinking of the phenomenological reduction therefore promises much for the rethinking of *Camera Lucida*.

Unfortunately, this cannot be said for Merleau-Ponty's account of photography, which is patently limited and outmoded.[58] The tradition of existential phenomenology has yet to produce a phenomenology of photography worthy of the name.

Notes

1. The phenomenological implications of such gestures in the work of Sherman is discussed by Amelia Jones in '"The Eternal Return": Self-Portrait Photography as a Technology of Embodiment', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol. 27, no. 4, 2002, pp. 947–78. See also her *Self/Image: Technology, Representation and the Contemporary Subject*, Routledge, London and New York, 2006.
2. For a phenomenologically oriented history of the Bechers' project, see Blake Stimson, *The Pivot of the World: Photography and its Nation*, MIT Press, Cambridge MA and London, 2006.
3. For a problematic but influential account of this tendency that makes scale central, see Michael Fried, 'Barthes's *Punctum*', *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 31, no. 3, Spring 2005.
4. See Mark Hanson, *New Philosophy for New Media*, MIT Press, Cambridge MA and London, 2004.
5. See Victor Burgin, 'Something about Photography Theory', *Screen*, vol. 25, no. 1, January/February 1984, p. 62. This edition of *Screen* includes other articles making similar points, as in Simon Watney's 'Photography – Education – Theory'; see especially his comments on the redundancy of ontology for photographic teaching on p. 69.

6. One should note, in this context, that psychoanalysis has come to prominence as a theoretical framework through which to address issues that may otherwise have been subjected to phenomenological analysis. See, for instance, Kaja Silverman, *The Threshold of the Visible World*, Routledge, London and New York, 1996.

7. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard, Cape, London, 1982.

8. I take Fried's essay 'Barthes's *Punctum*' to be exemplary of this tendency.

9. John Tagg's *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories*, Macmillan, London, 1988, presents a trenchant criticism of this type.

10. Hanson's *New Philosophy for New Media* gives an account of digital media that exemplifies this interpretation.

11. Here, classically, one can note Heidegger's critique of technology in terms of his view that it tends to distort lived relations and to instrumentalize nature, as expressed in his concept of *Ge-stell*, the 'enframing' function of technological form. See Martin Heidegger, 'The Age of the World Picture' (1937) and 'The Question Concerning Technology' (1953), both in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, Harper & Row, New York, 1977.

12. Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 8. In coining the term *mathesis singularis* Barthes contrasts his account of photography with Husserl's appropriation of the Leibnizian concept *mathesis universalis*, which Husserl used to articulate the movement of phenomenology towards transcendental ontology, and its projected status as 'the systematic unity of all conceivable a priori sciences, but on a new foundation which overcomes "dogmatism" through the use of the transcendental phenomenological method'. Edmund Husserl, '"Phenomenology", Edmund Husserl's Article for the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1927)', trans. Richard E. Palmer, in *Husserl: Shorter Works*, eds. Peter McCormick and Frederick A. Elliston, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame IN, and Harvester, Brighton, 1981, p. 32. Something of the universal ambition of transcendental phenomenology abides, paradoxically and intentionally, in Barthes's inversion and thus also in his aim to grasp the form of singularity he posits at the heart of photography.

13. Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 60.

14. This is a radicalization of the notion that photographs are indexical signs. The status of the photograph as an indexical sign has been the subject of much heated debate. It is a concept derived primarily from comments made by Charles Sanders Peirce (in 1897) in 'Logic as Semiotic: The Theory of Signs', in *Philosophical Writings of Peirce*, ed. Justus Buchler, Dover, New York, 1955. For discussions of the controversial nature of this concept, see Peter Osborne, 'Sign and Image', in *Philosophy in Cultural Theory*, Routledge, London and New York, 2000, pp. 20–52; and James Elkins, 'What Does Peirce's Sign System Have to Say to Art History?', *Culture, Theory and Critique*, vol. 44, no. 1, 2003.

15. Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 12.

16. Ibid., pp. 25–7.

17. In her study of Barthes's writings on photography, Nancy Shawcross notes the sense in which (from *Mythologies* to *Camera Lucida*) they are oriented by this dissatisfaction with the 'intentional engineering of viewer response on the part of the photographer' (and, one might add, editors and curators). In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes tends to the view that such 'engineering' is endemic and attempts to conceptualize a form of specificity that escapes it. Nancy Shawcross, *Roland Barthes on Photography*, University Press of Florida, Gainesville, 1997, p. 26.

18. This narrative is, famously, concerned with the photographic resurrection of Barthes's recently dead mother, centring on the unpublished 'Winter Garden' photograph depicting her as a child. *Camera Lucida*, pp. 63–75.

19. Ibid., p. 96.

20. Ibid., p. 90. This contrast between film and photography is framed with reference to Husserl's account of internal time consciousness, which conceives the temporal experience of objects in terms of the object's identity in the face of change. Famously, he described this relation according to the ways in which aspects of experience emerge in anticipation of the more or less immanent future and maintain their consistency by dint of the way the temporal phases structuring this relation ('retention', 'primal impression' and 'protention') recede together into the more or less recent past. See the 'Lectures on Internal Time Consciousness', in *Husserl: Shorter Works*, pp. 277–88.

21. Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 119.

22. Paul Frosh, '*Filling the Sight with Force*: "Smoke", Photography and the Rhetoric of Immobilisation', in *Textual Practice*, vol. 12, no. 2, 1998, pp. 323–40.

23. David Green, 'Marking Time: Photography, Film and Temporalities of the Image', in David Green and Joanna Lowry, eds, *Stillness and Time: Photography and the Moving Image*, Photoforum and Photoworks, Brighton, 2006, p. 17.

24. Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, pp. 20–21.

25. This description of phenomenology as a writerly form links *Camera Lucida*, albeit obliquely, to Barthes's critique of literary classicism as it is developed in *S/Z* (Jonathan Cape, London, 1975), and addressed in *Criticism and Truth* (Athlone, London, 1987).

26. 'The review of *Camera Lucida* as a work of fiction is yet to be written'. Victor Burgin, 'Re-reading *Camera Lucida*', in *The End of Art Theory: Criticism and Postmodernity,* Humanities Press International, Atlantic Highlands, 1986, p. 88.

27. Burgin writes of any possible synthesis of psychoanalysis and phenomenology that it could not be achieved at the level of theory, 'which would be impossible'; rather one should look for this 'at the level of literature'. Ibid., p. 83. See also *Camera Lucida,* p. 115.

28. Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Imaginary: A Phenomenological Psychology of the Imagination*, trans. Jonathan Webber, Routledge, London and New York, 2004.

29. Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, pp. 19–20.

30. Sartre, *The Imaginary*, p. 18 and p. 25.

31. Ibid., pp. 159–75.

32. Ibid., p. 125.

33. Ibid., p. 179.

34. Ibid., p. 3.

35. Ibid., p. 10.

36. Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 76.

37. Ibid., p. 87.

38. Ibid., p. 16.

39. Ibid., pp. 76–7.

40. Ibid., p. 111.

41. Roland Barthes, 'The Rhetoric of the Image', in *Image–Music–Text*, trans. Stephen Heath, Hill & Wang, New York, 1978, p. 44.

42. Ibid.

43. Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 79.

44. As Levinas noted in commentary on this point, the normative status of ideal essences is not, strictly speaking, to be directly derived from an attempt to 'identify essences with a character or moment of individual objects that has been isolated by an effort of attention.… Ideality is not the indetermination of an object; ideality characterises the object's mode of existing.' Cognitive articulation of the proper form of essence, so conceived, is the aim of Husserl's later phenomenology. However, one should remark (to quote Levinas's gloss once more) that 'The mode of existence of ideal objects in some way refers us back to individual objects and contains an implicit relation to individual objects. But the existence of individual objects does not serve as a premise for eidetic knowledge, which is independent of the effective existence of individual objects.' Emmanuel Levinas, *The Theory of Intuition in Husserl's Phenomenology*, 2nd edn, trans. André Orianne, Northwestern University Press, Evanston IL, 1995, pp. 104–7.
45. Husserl gives an explicit methodological description of the eidetic reduction in *Experience and Judgement: Investigations in a Genealogy of Logic*, ed. Ludwig Landgrebe, trans. James S. Churchill and Karl Ameriks, Northwestern University Press, Evanston IL 1973, p. 340.
46. Ibid.
47. Ibid.
48. Ibid., p. 341.
49. Ibid.
50. Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 23.
51. Ibid., p. 111.
52. Ibid., p. 340.
53. This point links the current discussion to Osborne's critical analysis in 'Sign and Image', and especially his comments that *Camera Lucida* suggests, but neglects to make explicit, the centrality of reproducibility for photography. See pp. 39–40.
54. Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 21.
55. Jean-Paul Sartre, 'Existentialism is a Humanism' (1946), trans. P. Mairet, in *Existentialism from Dostoyevsky to Sartre*, ed. Walter Kaufman, Meridian, New York, 1989.
56. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (with revisions by Forest Williams and David Guerrière), Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1981, p. vii.
57. Ibid., p. xiv.
58. Merleau-Ponty hardly ever mentions photography and when he does it is in resolutely negative terms that serve, critically, to structure his phenomenological aesthetics. See 'Cézanne's Doubt' (1945), 'Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence' (1951), and 'Eye and Mind' (1961), all collected in *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting*, ed. G. Johnson and M. Smith, Northwestern University Press, Evanston IL, 1993.