

Kathrin Yacavone: Benjamin, Barthes and the Singularity of Photography

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Kathrin Yacavone notes at the outset of *Benjamin, Barthes and the Singularity of Photography* that no book so far has been dedicated entirely to the theories of photography of the two eponymous gentlemen. Perhaps, she continues, this is because both produced mainly short works and essays, some of them aphoristic, none of which the disciplines of literary theory, cultural criticism, or even philosophy comfortably accommodate. Nor did Walter Benjamin and Roland Barthes ever meet or correspond with one another. The Frenchman could be elusive, once going so far as to ignore an indirect question raised at an academic conference suggesting he had never read the German's works. As if to emphasize the difficulty of the task before her, Yacavone observes that "Barthes makes only about a dozen or so direct references to Benjamin, ...yet not in any major text" (p.18). These evidentiary obstacles aside, the author purports to "reveal the similarities and differences between this theme of photographic singularity and *aura* and *punctum*, respectively, as Benjamin's and Barthes's best-known and most influential photographic concepts" (p.11). She succeeds, likely offering the sturdiest, if also most subtle, comparative analysis possible of the two theorists' writings on photography.

Yacavone's study, based on her 2008 dissertation, may be divided into three parts. The first examines Benjamin's

theory of photography as explicated primarily in his "Kleine Geschichte der Photographie" (1931) and "Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit" (1935). The author traces the development of Benjamin's critical perspective on photography as the medium ceased to be the province of merely a handful of scientists and artists and found itself within the means and capabilities of the masses. The rapid proliferation of an evolving technology that made unique claims on truth and authenticity, Yacavone argues, transformed the role of critic, who now had to identify photography's ideological uses, "whether progressive, as a means of mass liberation, or reactionary, as a means of mass control and exploitation" (p.30). While acknowledging the technology's documentary and historical functions, Benjamin, according to the author, also saw in photography – with the aid of text – the capacity to "reconstruct the truth of a past reality" (p.42). Enter Benjamin's notion of the *aura* and the importance of the viewer in resurrecting, in a fashion, the subject of a given portrait photograph.

Those familiar with the "Kleine Geschichte der Photographie" will, of course, recall that Benjamin comments extensively and in detail on a childhood portrait of Franz Kafka that never appears in the essay. For Yacavone, the photograph's absence "reinforces the idea that its deepest meanings are ultimately

personal, subjective and affective – not simply there to be directly perceived” (p.75). That is, Benjamin – practicing what he preaches – descends beneath the perceptual surface of the portrait and attempts to express an existential truth, a phenomenological experience, which ultimately concerns the theorist himself. In so doing, Yacavone contends, he sets the stage for Barthes’s project fifty years later.

The second part of the study explicates Barthes’s theory of photography, including the concepts of *studium* and *punctum*, as developed in *La Chambre Claire* (Paris 1980), while citing possible unacknowledged inter-textual references to Benjamin’s work. Both the “Kleine Geschichte der Photographie” and *La Chambre claire*, for example, contain the same photograph of Lincoln assassination conspirator Alexander Gardner, which Yacavone plausibly describes as an “imagistic citation of Benjamin” (p.22). Further, both theorists analyze portrait photographs using first-person discourse, establishing ethical relations between themselves and the photographic subjects and weaving connections between the past and the present. And like Benjamin, Barthes analyzes at length a portrait not included in his text, that of Henriette Barthes, his mother.

Indeed, though in *La Chambre Claire* Barthes relates his search for and extensively describes an image that captures the essence of his deceased mother (with whom he had lived for some six decades), scholars remain divided over the existence of the photograph. A couple of historical images of Barthes sitting in

his study reveal tantalizing glimpses of the so-called Winter Garden portrait, which features the image of a young girl standing in such a setting. Yacavone constructs a circumstantial but intellectually satisfying argument – and one integral to her definition of photographic singularity – that the portrait of Barthes’s mother does exist. In essence, she contends that *La Chambre Claire* demonstrates a “kind of existential confrontation between the self and the other [that] 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). Barthes thus engages in a redemptive criticism that provides a commonality between him and Benjamin.

In the third part of her study, Yacavone reinforces the connection between Benjamin and Barthes through their respective readings of Proust. The reader will need more than the usual undergraduate working knowledge of madeleine tasting and the flood of ensuing memories. To fully appreciate the analysis, one would be well advised to re-read Proust’s multi-volume *À la recherche du temps perdu* (Paris, 1913-1927) – from which the author draws aptly and freely – and familiarize oneself again with the novelist’s use of memory. Through insightful comparative readings of each man’s texts and biography, Yacavone argues that the “experience of singularity – the singularity of the other through photography – is for both Benjamin and Barthes necessarily connected to its narrative recounting within a larger historical-theoretical

and autobiographical context” (p.214). Benjamin thus anticipates Barthes, while Barthes provides a revelatory phenomenological perspective from which to read Benjamin. The author concludes with some thoughts on the ramifications of digital photography to her study, observing that for both theorists, the means of capturing images was of secondary importance to any psychological and phenomenological effects.

As befits an ambitious one-time graduate student trying to demonstrate her hard-earned background knowledge to an exacting

dissertation committee, Yacavone summarizes a remarkable amount of abstruse material – from French and German but always with English translation – in clear, relatively jargon-free prose. Her textual and photographic readings are deep, detailed, and perceptive. In the end, she is to be praised for affording a fresh understanding of two seminal figures of the theory of photography.

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