

MAGALI NACHTERGAEL

**CAMERA LUCIDA'S ICONOGRAPHY***or Roland Barthes' Visual Manifesto for Minorities*

**ABSTRACT:** *Camera Lucida* has gained a lot of popularity both as an autobiographical and theoretical text, addressing issues of mourning, absence and indexicality of the photographic medium. This common reading unfortunately pays little attention to the global and pictorial economy at large in the book. Indeed, Barthes has very carefully chosen the pictures, as its manuscripts and editing notes prove. The final selection, understood as part of a more general politics of images in Barthes's writings—and we can go as far as *Mythologies*—shows a constant and acute awareness of the power and ideology of photographic representation. This is certainly why, if we take a closer look at the illustrations of *Camera Lucida* as a whole, we discover a photographic album bringing up the faces of minorities or marginalised people into light. The album then appears as a meaningful system in the book but also in the history of images in Roland Barthes's works, resulting in a visual and committed manifesto for minorities and displacing our point of view on Barthes's political and social positions. In the light of Barthes's personal history with images, we will analyse how he developed a parallel discourse to the text with photographs that sheds a renewed light on its writings.

**KEYWORDS:** Roland Barthes, Photography, *Camera Lucida*, Visibility, Minorities.

When Barthes wrote *Camera Lucida* in 1979, he was already an established intellectual, a post-structuralist professor at the prestigious Collège de France, and had been lecturing on “the preparation on the novel”<sup>1</sup> for two years. Even if, as has been noted, he stepped back from the polemical and fairly committed posture he had assumed in the 1950s, as Andy Stafford (2015) states in his “critical live”, he remained, in many respects, the critical Barthes of the beginning. Since *Mythologies* (1957), a collection of brief articles on everyday myth-making published between 1954 and 1956 in Maurice Nadeau's Marxist and committed review *Les Lettres nouvelles*, Barthes focused in particular on the margins of events, preferring little facts to national actions, small anecdotes to big history,

---

<sup>1</sup> I will refer to Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida. Reflections on Photography* (1980), abridged *CL*, transl. R. Howard, New York, Hill & Wang, 1981 and for the French edition, *La Chambre claire, note sur la photographie*, Paris, Cahiers du cinéma-Gallimard-Seuil, 1980.

secondary roles to heroes. Close to the *École des Annales* at the end of the 1950s, a French transdisciplinary and contextual history movement,<sup>2</sup> he called for a “history of youth” in 1955, for a “history of tears”, and coined the concept of “biographèmes”, those autobiographical details that are more revealing than major events, in *Sade, Fourier, Loyola* (1971). Paying constant attention to the small rumours of the contemporary and certainly connected to his *Zeitgeist*, Barthes developed a singular and political gaze centred on the theory of images, language and signs in society. As stated by the critical theorist Shawn M. Smith, in *Camera Lucida* he makes himself “the measure of photographic meaning”, following the idea of the “self as a politically autonomous subject who is authorized to look”.<sup>3</sup> His writings, albeit far too restrained for activists or committed intellectuals, always addressed political issues on the subjects he scrutinised, displaying a certain degree of bravery considering his peripheral situation among academics:<sup>4</sup> among literary critics, he sparked a controversy that led to the “new critique” (*On Racine*, 1963) with the established Sorbonne, later calling for a non-dualist reading of literature in *The Pleasure of Text* (1973). His studies on theatre, under Brecht’s influence, or on fashion, clearly embraced social concerns, including class struggles, self-fashioning, gender or social and intimate relationships (see his articles on Brecht’s *Mother Courage, S/Z, The Fashion System, A Lover’s Discourse: Fragments* and his classes on *The Neuter* or *How to Live Together*, wherein he coined the notion of “vivre-ensemble” that became a key French social and political concept).

Still, Roland Barthes had a particular fascination with photography. Since *Mythologies*, images stand out as inspiring sources in his writings: some of his “petites mythologies du mois” are explicitly based on press shots, or photo-essays published in magazine or newspapers, as perfectly demonstrated by Jacqueline Guittard’s illustrated edition of the book (Barthes 2011). Barthes’s analysis of Brecht’s *Mother Courage* is mediated by the pictures of Roger Pic, a highly committed photographer, who went to Vietnam in 1967 to bring back an exclusive embedded photo-essay in the Viet-Cong guerrilla, “Au Coeur du Viet-nam” (French translation of Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*). Having befriended the Trotskyist Georges Fournié at the sanatorium in Leysin, back in Paris Barthes was introduced to Maurice Nadeau and Edgar Morin, prominent Marxist figures, and

<sup>2</sup> On this question, see Noghrehchi 2017.

<sup>3</sup> See Smith 2009, 246-247.

<sup>4</sup> Barthes never obtained a PhD, nor did he complete one of the ‘concours’ granting qualification to teach in the national education system. For details on this, see Samoyault 2017.

became a collaborator of the openly far-left and anti-colonialist critical reviews *Combat* and *Arguments*. In “The Photographic Message” (1961) and “Rhetoric of image” (1964) in *Communications*, his two first major theoretical articles on photography, the Marxist influence surfaces again: after the exercises in mythographical deconstruction, both essays offer theoretical tools to dismantle the ideological forces of capitalism at large in images and discourses.

### Barthes’s Creative and Multi-Layered Photo-Essays

When Barthes started working on the *Camera Lucida* project, his experience with images had become richer on many levels, though his Marxist past seemed to be fading into the distance. First, he doubled up his own analytical activity with visual experimentations in the book form, as well as through new theoretical methods. As such, the images partook in a new conception of the essay, turning into a kind of theoretical and creative photo-essay: in the *Empire of Signs*, his subjective vision of Japan is conveyed in a theatrical and sensual set where only young men, idols or transvestites appear in images. And in what appears at first glance to be a tribute to Japan and its civilisation, from under the thin skin of the travel narrative the real subject of the photo-text emerges: his erotic encounters in a country where homosexuality is not synonymous with deadly sin. In the book, Barthes experiments with ways of intertwining pictures and texts to create a multi-layered reading, in which the principle of trite illustration is outstripped. Five years later, in *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, he invents a conceptual and reflexive autobiography made up of fragments and photographs, carefully captioned and organised in order to bypass the traps of self-representation: for two years and through a seminar entitled ‘Le Lexique de l’auteur’, Barthes mused intensively on the form he would give to the book he eventually referred to as his ‘RB’ but also as a matrix to another even more radical autobio-photographical project he was to conceive by the end of the 1970s: an “autobiography in images”. In *Camera Lucida*, though, he adds another turn of the screw. The intimate becomes a key concept for understanding the larger issues addressed not only in this book, but also in previous writings. The death of his mother prompted him to dedicate a book to her, opening up personal considerations on mourning, which fuelled prevalent interpretations in Barthesian criticism for decades. At the theoretical level, he tries to define the essence of photography and elaborates on the binary key concepts of *studium* and *punctum*, another feature that has been the subject of considerable

commentary in the photographic realm. Still, and this is what I will focus on, very little attention had previously been paid to the global visual composition, considered as a whole and not as distinct illustrative items.

On the latter, a genetical approach to the notes and manuscripts held at the Bibliothèque nationale de France has shown how the images were specifically chosen, a process Jean Narboni recalls in *La Nuit sera blanche et noire* as the editor and commissioner of the book.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the collection of images builds a parallel discourse to the text by itself, while echoing, illustrating or relaying the content. This activity of curating images had previously been described as a “pleasure” in *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, yet it displays—or, I would say, makes visible—recurring visual topics that reveal other issues dear to Barthes, including the notion of the family. In *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, he already stated that his personal model was based on a very “feminine family”, generating a form of “family without familialism”. Fatherless as a toddler, he lived almost all his life with his mother and half-brother Michel Salzedo, conceived out of marriage with an already married Jewish man who gave him his surname. However, this situation led Henriette Binger, who had settled close to the Barthes side of the family in the Basque country, to be rejected by the protestant community of Bayonne. These very intimate and stressful events during Barthes’ young life, along with the period spent at the sanatorium and his own homosexuality, which removed him entirely from normative marriage and family, made him reconsider the very notion of the family very early on. Considering this seminal, key concept as a crucial one, it casts a new light on his first seminar at the Collège de France dedicated to the “vivre-ensemble”, “living-together”, a kind of utopian re-foundation of a family or friendly environment, “care-ful”. Thirdly, and this brings us back in time, the widespread, universal idea of humanity as a big family, under very normative rules, compelled Barthes, in *Mythologies*, to harshly criticise the discourse associated to the photographer, curator and propagandist Edward Steichen’s “greatest exhibition of all times”, *The Family of Man*. I could give other examples, but this is merely to say that the family and its photographic representations had always been present in Barthes’ works, so deeply that he undertook the “Autobiography New Look” project, composed only of images, “50 *gestus* of his life” inspired by Brecht’s critical position on images, as the notes to the manuscript state.<sup>6</sup> Following the latest trends in literature and contemporary art in the 1970s, Barthes seems to have been very aware and connected to the latest issues

---

<sup>5</sup> See his recollection of the edition, Narboni 2015.

<sup>6</sup> See my article in French Nachtergaele 2012b.

involving identity-affirmation and assertiveness in self-representation.<sup>7</sup> As the project began around 1978, we can consider *Camera Lucida* as kind of middle-experiment, bridging the gap between this project and the other one he had no time to develop on Marcel Proust's visual and personal world. This last seminar by Barthes (the class he delivered in parallel with the public ones at the Collège de France), a project on Proust's photographs by Nadar, was supposed to be made up of a series of photographs, which would be displayed to his audience without any text. He had only prepared basic biographical information on the people shown in the images, and it would have been a kind of long slide show, very similar in outline to the "Autobiography New Look". This project also shows how Barthes had become involved in creating visual displays, and the increasing power he assigned to photography as an active element of his creative and theoretical activity. Moreover, his attention to his contemporary regime of visibility reflects both his theatrical background and his desire to develop the visual dimension of his theoretical production, as part of a conceptual process for which his illustrated trilogy (*Empire of Signs*, 1970, *Barthes by Barthes*, 1975, and *Camera Lucida*, 1980) appears to be the experimental laboratory.

### The Photographic Album of *Camera Lucida*

The original edition of *Camera Lucida* encompasses 26 photographic plates, mostly borrowed from the bibliography provided by Barthes (two pictures are private). However, along with classic pictures borrowed from Beaumont Newhall's *The History of Photography* or a monograph of Nadar, many of the pictures had been presented in recently published magazines. Such magazines were of two types: some were popular, such as *Photo* or *Rolling Stone* (the American version); some were more elegant in terms of their conception and print, such as the two special photographic editions of the *Nouvel Observateur* (*Spécial Photo*), a French leftist weekly. Five monographs are cited: two on André Kertész, who has three pictures in the book; one on Nadar; and one on August Sander, whose portraits were censored by the German Nazis. In addition, the seventh issue of *Creatis* (1978) can be found, but without any mention of the entire portfolio dedicated to the American gay photographer Robert Mapplethorpe. Once again, Barthes hovers between explicit visibility and invisibility of gay visual culture as Mapplethorpe's appearances in *Camera Lucida* are more

---

<sup>7</sup> I explain this medium and artistic context in Nachtergaele 2012a.

than explicit with two shots and six mentions, and with Barthes even referring to him as what he thought could have been “his” photographer.

The presence of the *Rolling Stone* issue in the iconographical sources may also come as a surprise. In fact, the issue dated 21 October 1976 presented the complete bodywork of Richard Avedon's series that Barthes partially commented on in 1977 for the French magazine *Photo*. This also explains why he took pictures from these magazines, with which he had collaborated or to which he had previously had access through a commission. Barthes' article ‘Tels’ (‘Such’)<sup>8</sup> addressed a gallery of portraits Avedon had created during the American presidential elections, a series called, and by no coincidence, ‘The Family, 1976’.<sup>9</sup> Starting from Avedon and this series, one can witness the early stages of a key theoretical and affective future statement present in *Camera Lucida*: the supposed essence of photography would lie in this “tel”, which regularly recurs in the book, chiefly when Barthes recognises his mother “telle qu'en elle-même”,<sup>10</sup> at the emotional climax of the book.<sup>11</sup>

From the series ‘The Family’, Barthes takes Philip Asa Randolph's portrait, which appears on page 53 of *Rolling Stone*. Quite strikingly, Barthes choses from this “great American Family” a non-white representative, a minorised subject, who is fighting, precisely, to be equal to the rest of the American white supremacist family. Even if this aspect is not flagrant in the series ‘The Family’ specifically, Richard Avedon, in *Nothing Personal*, published in 1964 in collaboration with James Baldwin,<sup>12</sup> had already expressed his attachment to the equal rights cause. However, Avedon's photographs, like those of Kertész and Mapplethorpe, are displayed in *Camera Lucida* at key moments of revelation in photography: the other portrait by Avedon, which is included in *Nothing Personal*, is *William Casby, Born a Slave, 1963*, which exposes not the essence of

<sup>8</sup> Roland Barthes, « Avedon » [« Tels », on Richard Avedon's portraits], *Photo*, 112, January 1977: 58-79. Barthes's photographic references are very eclectic, partly inspired by his friend François Braunschweig, with whom he was in a brief relationship and who went on to become an important classic and vintage photographic gallerist in Paris with his friend and collaborator Hughes Autexier.

<sup>9</sup> *Rolling Stone*, 21 October 1976: 50-97. This series had been commissioned by the magazine and ended up in a collection of 73 portraits, edited by Renata Adler.

<sup>10</sup> “as into herself...” (CL, 71).

<sup>11</sup> “Une photographie se trouve toujours au bout de ce geste ; elle dit : ça, c'est ça, c'est tel ! mais ne dit rien d'autre”, CL (French edition), 16, “the gesture of the child pointing his finger at something and saying: that, there it is, lo! but says nothing else”, CL, 5, Richard Howard did not translate the part of the sentence on the gesture.

<sup>12</sup> I would like to thank Elsa Bachelard for presenting this book to the French audience during the conference *The Committed Phototext*, Saint Denis, 30 May-1 June 2018.

photography but rather the “essence of slavery”. This characterises Barthes’ referential approach to photography, which denied the role of the photographer to a large extent and instead valorised the represented subject. For Barthes, this image came out of the other second major iconographical source, the special issue of *Nouvel Observateur*: the separate sources indicate Barthes’ desire to lend visibility to Avedon’s portraits of the African-American, and he gathered them in his book, along with the James Van der Zee portraits, also to be found in these issues and featuring the Harlem Renaissance movement.

The photographic corpus from the special issue of *Nouvel Observateur* is particularly eloquent, and Barthes takes a lot of pictures from the second one.<sup>13</sup> I will merely raise some points that show how the iconological context of these images provides us with a lot of information on the making of the book. Firstly, and notably, Walter Benjamin’s famous text ‘Kleine Geschichte der Photographie’ (1931) is translated into and published in French for the first time. If, curiously enough, Barthes never mentions it, he certainly read it as he chose pictures for himself to illustrate the text. On pages 10 and 11, comes out the Alexander Gardner’s *Portrait of Lewis Payne* in 1865. Barthes states: “the picture is handsome, as is the boy...” (*CL*, 96). The picture is opposite a photograph taken by George Washington Wilson in 1863, which shows Queen Victoria on horseback, and is described by Barthes as “entirely unaesthetic...” (*CL*, 56), quoting Virginia Woolf.

A quick comparison between the original captions in the magazine and Barthes’ caption in *Camera Lucida* also reveals an interesting aspect of his photographic *mise-en-scène* in the book and how he transformed the portraits (the genre most represented in the book) into a theatre stage. As I have said, dominant figures are not welcome in Barthes’ photo album. The presence of Queen Victoria may be intriguing, however, even if, in the magazine, the comparison with the Lewis Payne portrait accentuates the difference between the handsome Payne and the “entirely unaesthetic” queen. For instance, the text accompanying the portrait of Queen Victoria provides essential elements to what Barthes identifies as the *studium* of the image (a concept derived from the opposition between “connotation” and “denotation”). The caption from *Nouvel Observateur* reads: “à la bride, John Brown en kilt, empêchant respectueusement la monture de bouger, allégeance qui dut aller droit au cœur des descendants de Rob Roy” (*NOSP* 2, 11), which is transformed by Barthes into “for even if I do not know just what the social status of this Scotsman may be (servant? equerry?), I can

<sup>13</sup> *Nouvel Observateur. Spécial Photo* (abridged *NOSP*), 2, November 1977.

see his function clearly: to supervise the horse's behaviour" (*CL*, 57). The Scotsman is there to tame the horse, a recurring character presented in a working and dominated context. If we look at the original context of Savorgnan de Brazza's portrait by Nadar (father or son, a doubt remains in the *NOSP* description), one detail struck the editorial team. Barthes uses this comment and turns it into a *punctum*, the second part of his twofold photographic concept. Let us compare the captions, however. The *Nouvel Observateur* states: "Le moins qu'on pouvait quand même attendre, c'est la main du bon Brazza sur l'épaule du gentil congolais. Au lieu de quoi on a ... la main du Congolais sur la cuisse de Savorgnan" (*NOSP* 2, 12)<sup>14</sup> while Barthes puts it this way: "one of the two boys, oddly, has rested his hand on Brazza's thigh; this incongruous gesture is bound to arrest my gaze, to constitute a *punctum*" (*CL*, 51). Barthes also takes up and develops the theme of the mask in a slightly different way, starting with *William Casby's* legend: "Beauté angoissante de celui qui dut, une vie durant, adapter un masque à son vrai visage enfoui" (*NOSP* 2, 21). This becomes "the essence of slavery is here laid bare: the mask is the meaning, insofar as it is absolutely pure (as it was in the ancient theatre)" (*CL*, 35), a meaning that clearly differs from the social mask evoked in the original caption. In the same issue, one finds Avedon's *William Casby, Born a Slave*, 1963 (*NOSP* 2, 22) and Lewis Hine's *Idiot Children in an Institution, New Jersey*, 1924 (*NOSP* 2, 32).<sup>15</sup> Here again, Barthes borrows James Van der Zee's *Family Portrait* in 1926 and Nadar's *Savorgnan de Brazza* (1882) sitting with two Congolese sailors (*NOSP* 2, respectively 18 and 13).

In Barthes' manuscripts and notes, other pictures were primarily intended to illustrate the text. Some remained ideas, such as historical shots like Auguste Salzmann's *Jérusalem et le chemin de Beit-Lehem* (1850), or Paul Strand's *La Famiglia, Italy*, 1953.<sup>16</sup> Barthes also noted a double page in the *Special Photo* of the *Nouvel Observateur* showing a wedding picture from 1910 (*NOSP* 2, 40-41.). Some came closer to being printed in the editing process. The last changes cast a revealing light on Barthes' iconological intentions in his project. Four plates are set aside *in extremis*: *Sandinistes lors de l'occupation d'un village*, 1979 by Koen Wessing, the

<sup>14</sup> Robert Delpire, the famous photography editor, is surrounded by a group of collaborators: Bernard Cuau, Barbara Nagelsmith, André Arnol, Françoise Mercier, Francis Pénaus and Robert Sadoux. The description of the photograph is not signed.

<sup>15</sup> The picture illustrates Jean-François Chevrier and Jean Thibaudeau's text, « Réflexions sur le portrait photographique », *NOSP* 2, 26-41.

<sup>16</sup> « Auguste Salzmann, Jérusalem et le chemin de Beit-Lehem » (1850), in *Histoire de la Photographie française des origines à 1920*, Créatis, 1978, and Paul Strand, *La Famiglia, Italie*, 1953, in Beaumont Newhall, *History of Photography*, MoMA, 1964, 121.



Victor Hugo portrait by Nadar in Brussels in 1882 (where he had noted “An ethnographical knowledge: the length of the nails”),<sup>17</sup> another portrait of French Métis writer Alexandre Dumas and André Kertész’s *Pont des arts* are also taken apart.

It is now commonplace to note that the famous Winter Garden photograph is not shown in the book, and its absence has been widely commented on. First, I would like to recall that if the image is absent, many others are. Secondly, the portrait of the mother as a young girl is in no way taboo, as the photograph ‘The Stock’ shows her aged five with her brother, Philippe, and her maternal grandfather. The following pictures are absent but mentioned and sometimes analysed: William Klein’s impressive *Fighter Painter*, the *Andy Warhol* portrait by Duane Michals, and, less noticed, Bruce Gilden’s crossdressers in *New Orleans, 1973*. If Robert Mapplethorpe appears twice in the book, other pictures contained in issue no. 7 of *Créatis* inspired some insights in Barthes: one was *Iris* (1977), portraying a phallic luxurious flower, and the second, *Patrice*, focused on a penis emerging from a cotton woven pant. These pictures, evoked but not visible, open up a very present and powerful visual culture surrounding Barthes since the beginning of the 1970s and with which he concludes the book. It has indeed been noted far less that the last chapter of *Camera Lucida* takes place in a “black box”, a night club in New York where Barthes goes to see what Mapplethorpe depicted so vividly: the “tableaux vivants” of gay pleasures. The comparison between the pictures and the visual experience makes a clear point: the end of the *Camera Lucida* takes place in a gay backroom in New York and this brutal image is no more presentable than that of the mother. These hide-and-seek operations inform us of Barthes’ position and project, as calls for greater visibility in the homosexual community were increasing. Barthes had his parallel family of friends and relationships driven by his attraction for men. If he did not show it publicly, he explicitly mentions the fact in *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*. He also provides some clues as to his own community as early as *Mythologies*, with cultural clues being clearly identified by the homosexual and especially gay culture (Nachtergael 2017, 417-437). In his biography, Stafford recalls that after his mother’s death, he considered his homosexual friends and some elected individuals as ‘his family’. He did not hide his taste for the Robert Mapplethorpe portrait or for Bob Wilson, which captures his look. These images are very far from the heterosexual clichés that ruled the Steichen’s *Family of Man* (and not of woman).

<sup>17</sup> Roland Barthes, manuscrit de *La Chambre claire*, NAF 28630. *Dactylogrammes* « Copie pour impression ». [*Photographies non retenues dans la version finale*], Bibliothèque Nationale, département des manuscrits, Paris.

The reasons why critics focused on the Winter Garden image are multiple and explicitly stated by Barthes himself. I will therefore not insist on this aspect. We might imagine that Mapplethorpe clichés are as much a part of a private sphere as that of the mother, which generates very intimate emotions and behaviours. The construction of the book highlights another equivalent image, a symmetrical, absent one: if in the second part of the book, after the palinody, the Winter Garden picture is absent, the one that opens the book is not visible either. The reader will never see the “photograph of Napoleon’s youngest brother, Jérôme (1852)” that led Barthes to experience a visual time loop: “I am looking at eyes that looked at the Emperor” (*CL*, 3). However, contrary to the Winter Garden, the reader forgets that the picture exists and is not there. On the double page dedicated to “La Famille impériale”, a small, slightly blurred portrait shows, “Prince Jérôme, ex-king of Westphalia, youngest Napoleon’s brother. President of the senate in 1852” (Arthaud, Hébert-Stevens 1962, 28). What do these disappearances mean?

### *Camera Lucida as an “Anti-Family of Man”*

Let us return to the question of the family and Barthes’ critique of the visual sources of this universalised “familialism”. Where Edward Steichen, in *The Family of Man* (1955), had chosen to draw a very determinist chronology of life, love and marriage, birth, youth, work, war and death, Barthes breaks this normative and highly familialist storytelling in the photo albums of *Camera Lucida*, while also recalling what he had pointed out in his mythology: “La Grande famille des hommes”. The sequence developed by Steichen has every appearance of a logical biography. Yet it leaves no place for the outcast, the marginals, the human beings whose fates diverge from the common and universalised path, and this is exactly what Barthes confronts in his 1956 text through two rhetorical questions directly addressing racism. Hence, “(but why not ask the parents of Emmett Till, the young Negro assassinated by the Whites what they think of The Great Family of Man?)” is swiftly followed by, “let us also ask the North African workers of the Goutte d’Or district in Paris what they think of The Great Family of Man” (Barthes 1972: 100-101), reinforcing the contrast between a supposed universal idealistic human family and the brutality of historical and social conditions. Thirty years later, Barthes chose to make them visual in his “bright room” (literally, “chambre claire”). And, instead of showing his mother, he presents an anti-family that does not look like his but with whom he shares a utopian, theatrical and

fictional space. In “Race and Reproduction in *Camera Lucida*”, Shawn Smith makes a very interesting, convincing point on what Barthes does not see—maybe unconsciously at the time—in this picture: that the family portrait is a portrait of Van der Zee’s parents themselves. As Smith (2009, 243-258) states, Barthes subsumes his own family within this family that does not resemble his, seeing, in her reading, a form of paternalism and a denial of the black cultural identity in Barthes’ appropriation. Something “out of fashion” draws Barthes’ attention: the “strapped pumps” and “belt worn low by the sister” standing “like a schoolgirl” (*CL*, 43). Further on in the book, he returns to this image and associates it with a new *punctum*: the “necklace” that reminds him of his aunt—his dead father’s sister—and that she was wearing was “no doubt” the same as the one he “had seen worn in [his] own family”. In a piece of photographic fiction, Barthes superimposes a black Harlem family from the early twentieth century onto his own family, whom he had previously introduced to his readership in *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* as very middle-class and petit-bourgeois, suggesting that he felt something like a tie between his own family and James Van der Zee’s portrait, a cultural but also affective connection.

However, the allusions to an expanded, non-normative family do not stop there: the Philip Asa Randolph portrait, again by Avedon, a strong defender of equal rights, is presented by Barthes as “the leader of the American Labor party (who had just died while I wrote these lines)” (*CL*, 110), signifying that he was fully aware of his political position and legacy in the United States and in the struggle for rights. His portrait is then described in the caption as presenting “No impulse of power” (*CL*, 108) and in the text, he is associated with this “air of goodness”, and the “luminous shadow” that also describes Henriette Binger’s portrait in the Winter Garden photograph: in French it is the “air de bonté”, the same expression that is used, but translated by Richard Howard as “kindness”, breaking down the boundary between these two figures, who both died recently. This distinctive “air de bonté” thereby becomes the essence of the picture, in a tautological move recalling Avedon’s “Tels” and Philip A. Randolph portrait: “Telle était pour moi la Photographie du Jardin d’Hiver”.<sup>18</sup> Of course, people on the verge of death are a point of obsession in Barthes’s book of mourning, mingled with desires for the young and troubling Lewis Payne, a conspirator against Lincoln. Yet what strikes Barthes is that “he is dead and is going to die”, and what “pricks [him], is the discovery of this equivalence” between the Winter Garden image and this one, the “anterior future” of death in which he reads the fate of his own mother: “In front of

---

<sup>18</sup> “Such, for me, was the Winter Garden Photograph” (*CL*, 70).

the photograph of my mother as a child, I tell myself: she is going to die” (CL, 82).

The portrait gallery and play of equivalences continues with other children inhabiting the images of the book. When Barthes was taking care of his ill mother, she became a little girl, but a disabled one. Lewis Hine’s poor idiot children, the young Ernest, a potential starting point for a novel, or the young boy that closes the album, holding a very young, fragile puppy, are the other vulnerable people that accompany Barthes in a narrative of mourning that progressively becomes a manifesto for minorities. All these voiceless subalterns, people left out by society, are granted visibility in *Camera Lucida* and enter into the light of a small history of photography, made not for great men, but for the little people. Each picture shows the contrary of what the history of photography and, reversely, the photography of history, tended to establish: a grand narrative of great men. Nadar’s mother is not Nadar himself, and we see relegated people more than powerful ones: those condemned to death; homosexuals; children with disabilities; street kids; barefoot mendicants; a trolley horse going to Harlem, which reminds one of Nietzsche’s beaten horse; slaves; black Americans fighting for their rights (Philip Asa Randolph); a whole family of minorised—invisible—people in society.<sup>19</sup>

It should be noted that *Camera Lucida* occurs at a pivotal moment in Barthes’ new conception of the political, forsaking the vindictive discourses; he prefers subtle subversive and theoretical forms. *Camera Lucida* perpetuates a twofold critical opposition that characterised *Mythologies*: first, the iconography of *Camera Lucida* shows that Barthes methodically dismissed all famous and powerful figures from his photographic album. If a poet appears, it will not be Victor Hugo, the most famous French poet, but rather Marceline Desbordes-Valmore, a minor female poet known for “the slightly stupid virtues of her verses” (the French version says “bonté”, a word associated with Barthes’ mother once again). Instead of Alexandre Dumas, a patriarch embodying a generous bonhomie with his wife, preference is given to James Van der Zee’s family portrait in Harlem. Each picture builds a new family album that removes the patriarchal figure, the heterosexual norm and the dominants.

Perhaps not entirely consciously, with this family album—an orphan album, as the mother and father are absent—Barthes goes back in time to a very old mythology, linked to the so-called universal family: the “greatest

---

<sup>19</sup> This a point I developed through an exhibition I co-curated with Pascal Beausse and Claire Jacquet, *The Family of the Invisibles. Photography after Barthes's Camera Lucida in French Collections*, 5 April-29 May 2016, exhibition catalogue, Seoul, Seoul Museum of Art, 2016.

exhibition of all times”, Edward Steichen’s *The Family of Man*, violently criticised by Barthes in 1956, appears to be the visual palimpsest of the photo album of *Camera Lucida*. In the latter, another family emerges: that of the one left-behind, of an orphan who frequents other orphan figures, with no fixed filiation or assignation. The only private photograph, ‘The Stock’, shows a young girl with her grandfather, as I have mentioned. Yet there again, a very important figure is absent: Barthes’ grandfather, Louis-Gustave Binger, Henriette Binger’s father, who was the great man of the family, on his mother’s side. Binger, a famous colonialist who gave his name to the harbour of Abidjan, Bingerville, in Ivory Coast, was an explorer, author of best-selling exploration texts and the first governor of Ivory Coast for France.<sup>20</sup> In *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, he was the only family member pictured in an engraving; the others appear in photographs. And this is certainly not because there were no pictures of Binger; on the contrary. In *Camera Lucida*, we therefore see neither intimate scenes nor great men: neither Napoleon’s brother, the great second role of history, nor Alexandre Dumas, nor Hugo with his long nails appear in the book. In this small visual parallel world constructed by Barthes, *William Casby, Born a Slave* meets James Van der Zee’s family portraits.

### Conclusion

With *Camera Lucida*, Barthes wanted to honour his mother, with whom he had lived for a long time. His personal life had been far from conventional. Having been sick during the war, he did not live it fully. As a homosexual, he did not care about the bourgeois norms of marriage or heteronormative relationships. Fatherless and a pupil of the nation, he had to support his family financially when he left the sanatorium. His mother’s love affair with a married man, Jewish while she was a protestant, was the reason for her rejection from the protestant community of Bayonne. These details, presented in Barthes’ biographies by Marie Gil and Tiphaine Samoyault, help us understand Barthes’ own social position, always on the margins, always aside. Holding neither a PhD nor the “agrégation”, he could not teach at the university: the help of Michel Foucault, an old friend with whom he used to go to see wrestling in popular venues in 1956, was crucial for entering the Collège de France.

---

<sup>20</sup> For this part of the story, see Vincent Meessen’s film, *Vita Nova* (2009), 25’, sound and colour documentary, and the edition, Meessen 2015.

These details are not mere anecdotes; they determine Barthes' ethical position in the face of what he called the "Norm" of the petit-bourgeoisie, with a capital "N": this dominating social norm is fought by left-wing thinkers, especially Marxist philosophers such as Henri Lefebvre, who was a neighbour and friend of Barthes in Southern France. They favoured social conditions and historical realism, as Barthes always did. When Barthes wrote *Camera Lucida*, May '68 was already ten years behind him. Guy Debord and Jean Baudrillard took the place of the man who started to criticise the "society of spectacle". Yet Barthes' May '68 may have been more June '69, which marked the beginning of the public visibility of gay people in the United States, known as the riots of Stonewall that led to "gay pride" and the "outing" of the gay community. Other issues arose with this visual revolution: the "new look"; "camp"; equal rights. It opened up a new discipline—visual studies—included in the largest realm of the "cultural studies" in which the New Left was situated (Herbert Marcuse or Noam Chomsky). We can also find an encyclopaedic bias at work in Barthes' writings: his interest in childhood (childhood studies), photography and its role in society (see W.J.T. Mitchell's *Picture Theory*, where he describes *Camera Lucida* as a photo-essay, an "agonistic" category, which means polemic and struggling for ideas), but also the questions of genre (*S/Z*, *The Neutral*) and even post-colonialism.

If we consider *Camera Lucida* as a prismatic intersection of upcoming trends in social sciences, keeping in mind the visual dimension and political trajectory of Barthes, we are forced to see something other than a tomb for a dead mother or a weak theoretical book on photography, as stated by French writer and critic Hervé Guibert (*Le Monde*, 28 February 1980). The genesis of the book and a careful study of its iconographic choices are fruitful approaches: they suggest that the book is more than a personal quest or a fiction; it is, rather, a true visual montage with a strong political commitment. It also means that the book could have been a kind of prototype for further experimentations in the realm of visual culture, as well as showing the global economy of the images in the book, which led to an ethical, political and creative position in Barthes proving his capacity to deploy a real politics of images.

## REFERENCES

- ARTHAUD, C., HEBERT-STEVENS, F. (eds.). 1962. *Cent ans d'histoire de France*. Paris: Arthaud.
- BARTHES, R. 1972. *Mythologies*. Trans. A. Lavers, New York: Noonday Press.
- . 2011. *Mythologies*. Ed. J. Guittard. Paris: Seuil.
- BEAUSSE, P., JACQUET, C. NACHTERGAEL, M. (eds.). 2016. *The Family of the Invisibles*, 5 April-29 June 2016, exhibition catalogue. Seoul: Seoul Museum of Art.
- MEESSEN, V. 2015. *Third Form*. Brussels-Milan: Normal-Mousse.
- NACHTERGAEL, M. 2012a. *Les Mythologies individuelles. Récit de soi et photographie au 20<sup>e</sup> siècle*. Amsterdam-New York: Faux Titre, Rodopi.
- NACHTERGAEL, M. 2012b. "Vers l'autobiographie *New Look* de Roland Barthes. Photographies, scénographie et réflexivité théorique." In D. Martens, A. Reverseau (eds.), "Figurations iconographiques de l'écrivain." *Image and Narrative* 13/4: <http://www.imageandnarrative.be/index.php/imagenarrative/article/view/276/232>.
- NACHTERGAEL, M. 2017. "Barthes à l'aune des Queer et Visual Studies." In J.-P. Bertrand (ed.). *Roland Barthes: Continuités*, 417-437. Paris: Christian Bourgois.
- NARBONI, J. 2015. *La Nuit sera noire et blanche, Barthes, la Chambre claire et le cinéma*. Paris-Nantes: Les Prairies ordinaires-Capricci.
- NOGHREHCHI, H. 2017. "Roland Barthes et les Annales." In J. Guittard, M. Nachtergael (eds.), *Revue Roland Barthes* 3/March: [http://www.roland-barthes.org/article\\_noghrehchi.html](http://www.roland-barthes.org/article_noghrehchi.html).
- SAMOYAULT, T. 2017 [2015]. *Barthes: a Biography*. Cambridge (Mass.): Polity Press.
- SMITH, S.M. 2009. "Race and Reproduction in *Camera Lucida*." In G. Batchen (ed.), *Photography Degree Zero*, 246-247. Cambridge (Mass.): MIT Press.
- STAFFORD, A. 2015. *Roland Barthes*. London: Critical Lives, Reaktion Books.

## FILMOGRAPHY

*Vita Nova* (2009), dir. V. Meessen.

