The Kairos of Photography: Barthes and Guibert

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Abstract
This article revisits Roland Barthes' theory of photography, focusing on studium, punctum, and the noematic claim "that-has-been." It argues that photography does not primarily represent but attests to existence through the temporality of kairos. The problem is further developed through Hervé Guibert's practice, which reveals both the impossibility and persistence of capturing the decisive moment. The text proposes a shift from representation to ontology, emphasizing photography as a medium of presence, loss, and affect.
Key words: photography, kairos, punctum, noeme, ontology, representation

1. The Phantasm of Photography

For Roland Barthes, the phantasm of photography lies in its object - the person or a thing - captured only once and only for himself. In his book on photography, *Camera Lucida*, the philosopher and the writer searches through photographs of his recently deceased mother. He examines various images of her, organizing them according to the time and place in which they were taken. He recalls a photograph he once found, and published elsewhere (Barthes, 2020). Yet now he is unable to locate the picture that would be truly singular, truly meaningful. For he is not concerned with just any photograph, nor even with any particular one. Barthes is searching for a photograph that exists only for him: one that, in showing his mother, would reveal her essence (eidos).
He writes: "(…) sometimes I recognized a region of her face, a certain relation of nose and forehead, the movement of her arms, her hands. I never recognized her except in fragments, which is to say that I missed her being, and therefore I missed her altogether. It was not she, and yet it was no one else" (Barthes, 2000: 65).
Barthes immerses himself in the search for this photograph of his mother. He is driven by longing, but also by a kind of fetishistic impulse. He can't rest peacefully. He seeks to recover his mother in her imagined form - that is, to complete a process of sublimation that would allow him to move from melancholy toward the process of mourning.
Yet can he truly succeed?

2. Henriette

Henriette Barthes, née Binger, was a young, twenty-two-year-old woman when, on 12 November 1915, she gave birth to her son, Roland. The boy's father, Louis Barthes, was ten years older than his wife. He died less than a year after the birth of his son, in combat on the North Sea. Posthumously, he was awarded the title of Chevalier de la Légion d'Honneur, and Henriette became a "war widow." As for Roland, ten years later he was "adopted by the state" (Calvet, 1994: 9). In this act, the figure of the father, if one may put it this way, was replaced by the power of the state. The law of the household became the general law. Yet the home was filled with the voices of women and their local rules, within which Roland found himself without regret.
As for the father, beneath a photograph depicting him in uniform, Barthes would write: "(le père) n'était pris dans aucun discours du souvenir ou du sacrifice" (Barthes, 2002: 595) or: The father (…) was lodged in no memorial or sacrificial discourse (Barthes, 2020: 16). He adds that, owing to the care of his mother, the memory of the father was tenuous, and that it bore the flavor of a *gratification silencieuse* / "silent bounty". (Barthes, 2020: 16).

If Oedipal love entails the necessity of destroying the figure of the father, then here, in the silence surrounding him, in the acknowledgment of his eternal absence, we may perhaps be dealing with a gracious abnegation. There is no need to abolish absent idols. Barthes's father is absent to him because there was no language for him, no *nomos*, and thus no more or less adequate name. Additionally there was no law of the household that he would have expressed, nor the fear he might have inspired. Thanks to this - within a *silent gratification* - the father could be anyone. He was therefore the one who was absent, he was the one who was silent (but not the missing one).

In his autobiography, beneath a photograph of his mother, Barthes places a single votive sentence: *La demande d'amour* ("The demand for love", Barthes, 2020: 5). The photograph depicts a young woman on a path in front of a house. A boy nestles against her, wearing dark knee socks, short trousers, and a sweater. He is no longer entirely a child; he is almost already an adolescent. Looking at this photograph, one has the impression of the burden the woman carries. Yet neither on her face nor on the boy's face is anything visible other than the devotion of affection. The woman is dressed in a long, pleated skirt, dark tights, and low-heeled sandals. These details - significant after the lesson drawn from Roland Barthes's book on photography - reveal her origin, her cultural rootedness, as well as the context that the work of interpretation superimposes upon this image (a mother: tired, devoted, modest, gentle).

In the photograph of the boy, what comes to the fore is his evenly cut fringe, the light color of his hair, and his eyes directed straight toward the camera. Perhaps it is precisely the photographer who addresses this particular pair: "Please look at me, stand still, do not move." This stillness, this immobility, is inscribed in the photograph - not only because photographic technology exerts such power over its subject, but also through the clearly perceptible staging of the entire composition. This photograph - this evidence - presents devotion, closeness.

There is no doubt that the bond between mother and son is deep and enduring. They would live together - with only brief interruptions for Roland's studies, his academic and leisure travels, illnesses, and stays in sanatoria - throughout their entire lives. The mother would fill Roland's thoughts, his diary entries, his letters to friends, his recollections, lectures, and interviews. She would become his companion, never his *wife*, yet, toward the end of her life, his child. "During her illness - he would write in a moving confession - I nursed her, held the bowl of tea she liked because it was easier to drink from than from a cup; she had become my little girl, uniting for me with that essential child she was in her first photograph" (Barthes, 2000: 72). The closeness between the son and his dying mother is rendered in a narrative of devotion and care, within which one can distinctly sense the silence of the sickroom, the dimmed windows, the creaking of the floor and of old furniture, the powdery scent emanating from wardrobes and cabinets in which she - the mother / the daughter - had arranged, throughout her life, clothes, precious objects, and memories.

It is also a story of the fear of departure, of an approaching, unimaginable loss that is - certainly, inexorably - decided. Only now does Roland Barthes become fully an orphan. Henriette dies on 25 October 1977 in their shared apartment on rue Servantoni in Paris. Together with his brother Michel Salzedo, Roland Barthes decides to bury her in the town of Urt. The family owns a house there (massive, substantial), purchased by Henriette in 1961. Every summer they spend there together with Roland. The philosopher (and the writer) values the structure of the day, its pre-established hours (morning tea, feeding the domestic fowl, tidying up, breakfast with mother, and work, that is: writing). Routine, locality, and also the light of the South allow Barthes to experience a sense of blissful plenitude. "Urt - writes Barthes's biographer Louis-Jean Calvet - was a typical southern village. In the streets people greeted each other, said hello and joked in their heavy Gascon accent. Such familiarity was, of course, completely foreign to the reserved Roland Barthes. But above all, there was the special

light of the Adour valley, whose praises he sang to his friends regularly" (Calvet, 1994: 144). Silence, seclusion, but above all: light - which distinguishes the entire region from the night of Paris (about which Barthes would also write in Soirees de Paris) - evoke in him a pleasure that he records in writing (but not in photography).

Of this exceptional light Roland Barthes writes: "The great light of South West appears, noble and subtle at the same time; it is never grey, never gloomy (even when the sun isn't shining); it is light-space, defined less by the altered colours of things (as in the other Midi) than by the eminently inhabitable quality it gives to the earth. I can think of no other way to say it: it is a luminous light. You have to see this light (I might almost say: you have to hear it, hear its musical quality)" (Barthes, 2010: 7). This undoubtedly leads to the desire not only to write, but also to "take photographs," since a photograph is, in essence, fixed light, in which time and the sensitivity of the photosensitive material (the camera matrix, the film) meet. A photograph is a record of light and time, produced by the eye and the finger of an artist attuned to the representation of the world - that is, to the image - which both is and is brought into being through him and his action.

Meanwhile, Barthes cautions that this light cannot be photographed: "don't try to photograph it: to judge it, to love it; you have to come and stay, so you can experience the range of place, season, weather and light" (Barthes, 2010: 11). Perhaps this is why he travels there during the happiest moments of his life, recalls and writes about this place, and also decides that it is precisely there that the story of his mother should come to an end.

The funeral ceremony is modest, private. There are no photographs of its course, no account. Soon Barthes returns to Paris. Only then does he inform those close to him and the media of his loss. Before long he writes: "For what I have lost is not a figure (the Mother), but a being; and not a being but a quality (a soul): not the indispensable but the irreplaceable" (Barthes, 2000: 75). The only possible consolation is memory, and this is sustained by photographs, which Barthes examines, seeking in them the essence of his mother, her being, her truth. He sorts, arranges, probes, and gazes at small cardboard images, none of which for a long time restores his mother to him in her essence.

Finally, after two months of mourning - borne through the work of writing (about his mother, about photography, and about death) - Roland Barthes submits for publication his final and perhaps greatest work: *Camera Lucida*. At the center of this work lies precisely the photograph he had been seeking, which he found in an almost magical moment and which, however, he will not show to us, publicly.

3. Two Thresholds of Fascination with Photography

The book has a clear and logical structure: forty-eight short chapters divided equally into the arrangement of compact fragments, so favored by Barthes. The fragment, from the beginning of Barthes's career, was his preferred mode of expression. It recalls index cards on which one records important sentences, passages, and quotations, reflections. In Barthes, however, these index cards become wholes that seduce the reader. In the case of Camera Lucida, logic also enters into the structure, along with rhetoric governed by the principle of decorum, and order - elements that are intended not so much to facilitate reading as to introduce order and method into the author's process of thought - and into his emotional confusions caused by the sorrow following the loss of his mother.

In a certain sense, this is perhaps Barthes's most structuralist work, although in fact it has essentially nothing in common with the theory of structuralism itself. The two equal parts of the book mark nevertheless a path furnished with significant signposts. The first half of this map, comprising twenty-four sections, constitutes a philosophical and historical analysis of photography. It is here that the distinctions fundamental to contemporary - or rather: post-Barthesian - theory of photography appear. Today it is

difficult to imagine that these categories did not exist, and yet their use has extended far beyond photography.

Studium is knowledge, an order of recognition and analysis; it is what can be said, what can be established about a given photograph and its image, what it evokes as a proximate reference. It is also that from which, in historical, political, sociological, cultural, and finally philosophical contexts, we derive knowledge (not: pleasure).

Barthes clarifies: "The first, obviously, is an extent, it has the extension of a field, which I perceive quite familiarly as a consequence of my knowledge, my culture; this field can be more or less stylized, more or less successful, depending on the photographer's skill or luck, but it always refers to a classical body of information (…) it is *studium*, which doesn't mean, at least not immediately, 'study', but application to a thing, taste for someone, a kind of general, enthusiastic commitment, of course, but without special acuity. It is by studium that I am interested in so many photographs, whether I receive them as political testimony or enjoy them as good historical scenes: for it is culturally (this connotation is present in studium) that I participate in the figures, the faces, the gestures, the settings, the actions" (Barthes, 2000: 25).

The order of knowledge, however much it may have an addictive aspect - since through its contexts it produces a fetish of erudition and "broad horizons" - is in Barthes always enriched by a phrase worthy of a writer. Perhaps his later inclination toward essayism and his hesitation toward academic writing have their source in the stance and theory of Michel Foucault, for whom the academy and its knowledge is always a site of the production of discourse, and thus of the control of Power. Barthes and Foucault knew each other very well; they were friends, yet their mutual relations were not unequivocally positive. Undoubtedly, Barthes always moved more distinctly than Foucault in the direction of the fluidity of the text (with the structure of the fragment).

And this is perhaps why, for Roland Barthes the description of photography is not merely a lesson or the delineation of its framework. Knowledge of what a photograph represents - and of the photograph itself: its origin, its author, its contexts, and even its methods of, so to speak, production - is important, engaging, but also repetitive and deeply general. Barthes always seeks photographs for himself; he seeks the emotions they provide, rather than the knowledge that may be derived from them. When, for example, he speaks of André Kertész's photograph of "Polish soldiers" (1915), he states: "nothing extraordinary, except this, which no realist painting would give me, that they were there; what I see is not a memory, an imagination, a reconstruction, a piece of Maya, such as art lavishes upon us, but reality in a past state: at once the past and the real" (Barthes, 2000: 82).

In studium, therefore, it is not a matter for him of knowledge about something, although such knowledge can easily be obtained. What is at stake is not what the photograph represents, but what, within it - and sometimes beyond it - appears in the field of vision: that which is perceived, the truth (noema).

If it is possible, while setting aside phenomenological considerations on the structure of cognition, to recognize the truth of what has been (perceived), and to which the photograph bears witness, the next step in Roland Barthes's lesson in reading photographs is already the blessing of punctum. It is only here that the true game of rescue begins.

Punctum is the wound of the photograph, its essence, but not on the level of knowledge or understanding - rather, of emotion. And not just any emotions, but those that lead the viewer to an exclamation proper to discovery, to a primary interjection ("ah!", "oh!"), and to the clarity of understanding ("so that's it!").

Punctum is thus a clear seeing, perhaps even a revelation. Barthes writes: "(…) it is this element which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me. A Latin word exists to designate this wound, this prick, this mark made by a pointed instrument: the word suits me all the better in that it also refers to the notion of

punctuation, and because the photographs I am speaking of are in effect punctuated, sometimes even speckled with these sensitive points; precisely, these marks, these wounds are so many points. This second element which will disturb the studium I shall therefore call punctum, for punctum is also: sting, speck, cut, little hole – and also a cast of the dice. A photograph's punctum is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)" (Barthes, 2000: 26). That which arrives suddenly, yet is immediately clear in its entirety and beyond doubt, an undeniable site - but here, for many, will lie the weakness of punctum - remains incommunicable in the sense of an objective transmission of the same experience.
Punctum is therefore always singular, personal, and exclusive.
As an example of punctum, one may recall the surprise that another photograph by André Kertész provides to Barthes (Violinist's Ballad, Abony, Hungary, 1921), which he describes here as an experience of metonymy. Here is a blind violinist led by a boy along the road of a poor small town. Here is a small child running up, intrigued by this unusual spectacle. Two frail little trees by the house, the gleam of windows (spring light). The road is unpaved; two tracks pressed by cart wheels run along it. Barthes writes: "(…) now, what I see, by means of this 'thinking eye' which makes me add something to the photograph, is the dirt road; its texture gives me the certainty of being in Central Europe" (Barthes, 2000: 45). This "what I see," this "for me" of the photograph, reveals the essence of punctum as something private, one's own, ultimately, indeed, superimposed, additional. Punctum is private, incommunicable in terms of meaning, because although one may show someone the "that" of the photograph, it does not necessarily become accessible in the experience of delight.
It is almost certain that the indicated site of the wound, for another spectator, will become a source of disappointment or uncertainty. They will perceive in it nothing beyond an interesting element, a detail not so much devoid of value as possessing insufficient significance. But for Barthes, the point is not the communication of value, but experience. Punctum is personal; it requires neither explanation nor interpretation - it is always one's own. (For me, in the same photograph by Kertész, it is rather the boy's feet - unlike those of the violinist and even the child - bare.)
The fascination with photography in Roland Barthes ultimately stems not so much from an interest in what it says, what can be learned from it, nor even from the ontological status of the photograph. Rather, it arises from what it (at times, sparingly) does. Yet it is not only a matter of emotions (emotion/aversion/surprise/delight). The author of Camera Lucida states clearly that the existence of the photograph has a particular character: holding a photograph in one's hand, looking at it, it is not the photograph that we see, but what it represents. And it is in relation to what it represents that we pose a question of an ontological nature (it was, it's gone, no longer is: but it was! Certainly: it has been.).
It may also be added that the very materiality of photography - whether analog or of another medium, including the contemporary digital form - does not, in principle, command our attention. Knowledge of what the photograph represents engages us only briefly. But that which wounds in the photograph, which irritates, makes it become an assurance of something that truly existed. Thus, it is not so much how the existence of the photograph is possible that is of interest here, but - at least for Barthes – the impact, the effect it produces beyond itself by means of the ontological status of what it represents (in the detail that pricks).

4. Noeme

There is no photograph without an object of representation (Barthes, 2000: 6). And that which it represents - notes the author of the concept of the "death of the author" - was once and will never be repeated; it is already and forever dead. "What the Photograph reproduces to infinity has occurred only once: the Photograph mechanically repeats what could never be repeated existentially" (Barthes, 2000: 4). Here lies the

significance of Barthes's discovery: that the essence of the photograph is the noeme, that is, in his understanding, the proof of existence - that what is represented has certainly been.

In one of the most important passages of the book - in fragment 33 - Roland Barthes declares: "First of all I had to conceive, and therefore it is possible to express properly (even if it is a simple thing) how Photography's Referent is not the same as the referent of other systems of representation. I call 'photographic referent' not the *optionally* real thing to which an image or a sign refers but the *necessarily* real thing which has been placed before the lens, without which there would be no photograph. Painting can feign reality without having seen it. Discourse combines signs which have referents, of course, but these referents can be and are most often 'chimeras'. Contrary to these imitations, in Photography I can never deny that *the thing has been there*. There is a superimposition here: of reality and of the past. And since this constraint exists only for Photography, we must consider it, by reduction, as the very essence, the *noeme* of Photography." (Barthes, 2000: 76).

The noeme of photography is therefore bound up with perception and an unquestionable reference, and thus ultimately constitutes proof of existence. Barthes further clarifies: "The name of Photography's *noeme* will therefore be: 'That-has-been', or again: the Intractable. In Latin (a pedantry necessary because it illuminates certain nuances), this would doubtless be said: interfuit: what I see has been here, in this place which extends between infinity and the subject (*operator* or *spectator*); it has been here, and yet immediately separated; it has been absolutely, irrefutably present, and yet already deferred" (Barthes, 2000: 77).

Ultimately, Barthes concludes: "In the daily flood of photographs, in the thousand forms of interest they seem to provoke, it may be that the noeme '*That-has-been'* is not repressed (a *noeme* cannot be repressed) but experienced with indifference, as a feature which goes without saying" (Barthes, 2000: 77). The noeme of photography does not require confirmation or general acceptance. It was for me - says the *spectator* - and affirms - *for me* - the reality of the representation. All this in order to rediscover and rescue, in the photograph of the mother, the truth of her existence.

Let us emphasize: this entire, perhaps strenuous, operation of seeking proof of existence is necessary for Barthes not within the Aristotelian order of knowledge about reality, but in an entirely private one - that is, a loving one. Through the noeme, Barthes discovers the essence of the mother in the Winter Garden Photograph, and thus discovers her undeniable existence, the proof that she was, that she truly was.

5. Kairos

This discovery, as well as, in a broader context, his interest in - or even passion – for photography, Barthes revealed in a radio interview that took place on 23 January 1978. We are still before the publication of the book on photography and also, perhaps most significantly, two years before his own death. The interview on France Culture takes the form rather of a series of conversations among thinkers who are also friends. In the third of five meetings with Bernard-Henri Lévy and Jean-Marie Benoist, Roland Barthes raises the question of "the pleasure of the image". That is - beyond the pleasure of writing - the function of creation, whose effect is an eruption of emotions irreducible to process, a kind of axiological structure of feeling.

Barthes's biographer notes that: "In this view, art photography was of no greater theoretical interest than documentary photography, and what was really fascinating about a photography was that it said, 'it has existed'. In other words its interest lay, quite simply, in the fact that it immortalized a significant moment of a person: 'In the final analysis, what I really find fascinating about photographs, and they do fascinate me, is something that probably has to do with death. Perhaps it's an interest that is

tinged with necrophilia, to be honest, a fascination with what has died but is represented as wanting to be alive'" (Calvet, 1994: 219).
Is this private understanding of the ontology of existence evidence of Roland Barthes's weakness? Does the passage from the order of knowledge into subjective feeling not threaten the position of the philosopher of structures and the principles of the construction of meaning? As far as social reception and popularity are concerned, certainly not, since Camera Lucida remains one of Barthes' most popular and still vital works.
Photography, in its own language and by means of its own modes of communication, is capable of showing (and proving) death. This is what has been and what is certainly already past - the photograph says this, and it always says it. The banality and universality of this assertion "that-has-been" (ça-a-été) - thus has, as we have noted, the undeniable value of the noeme. This is ultimately the center of the photograph: this naïve knowledge that the object of representation truly existed and that it existed only once.
Thanks to this, Barthes is able to demonstrate a certain paradox of language, which, in describing a photograph, can connect the present moment (in which the photograph is viewed) with the past moment (when it was taken). In this way, looking at a photograph of his mother, Barthes can say that she is young in it and that she is at the same time (already) dead: that she is simultaneously alive and dead.
Ultimately, this means that the only truth that can be experienced is a truth of the past, one attested by a moment of time that will never be repeated, neither twice nor again.
Roland Barthes holds to this epiphanic thought and observes that a third element – besides studium and punctum - is necessary in photography: kairos, a particular time, a specific moment. What is at stake here is not so much time that passes or has passed (and thus not chronos), but precisely *this-here-now* moment, a divine "yes," a moment that occurs once and once only. Yet it occurs with certainty (like the mother, like her love and her existence, which the photograph, after all, confirms). And here begins the second part of Barthes's account.
It will not be a recollection, for time – kairos - does not concern memory, but the immobilization of Time. Barthes writes: "In the Photograph, Time's immobilization assumes only excessive, monstrous mode: Time is engorged. (…) The Photograph is violent: not because it shows violent things, but because on each occasion it fills the sight by force, and because in it nothing can be refused or transformed (that we can sometimes call it mild does not contradict its violence: many say that sugar is mild, but to me sugar is violent, and I call it so)" (Barthes, 2000: 91).
The conviction that the photograph, in which the wound of memory appears, proves the existence of its represented object (or indeed: that every photograph does so) leads Barthes to recognize that a revelation of this nature is violent. And through this, it confirms the truth of representation and renders it indisputable.

6. The Erotics of Photography

Susan Sontag - a friend of Barthes and his great admirer - writing about Robert Mapplethorpe's series Certain People, observes that "Most photography comes with a built-in cognitive claim: that the photograph conveys a truth about the subject, a truth that would not be known were it not captured in a photograph. In short, that photographing is a form of knowledge" (Sontag, 2001: 236). In this way, by means of studium, photography belongs to everyone. However, if some punctum appears in the photograph for the viewer, the photograph immediately becomes one's own. Through the arrest of attention by a fundamental element, as Sontag would say, its hermeneutic meaning becomes irrelevant, because what emerges here is the "erotics of art" (Sontag, 2013). And this is indispensable in order, instead of knowledge, to discover existence.
At the very beginning of the book, in a certain phase of disorientation or excess, Barthes declares: "I see photographs everywhere, like everyone else, nowadays; they come from

the world to me, without my asking; they are only 'images', their mode of appearance is heterogeneous. Yet, among those which had been selected, evaluated, approved, collected in albums or magazines and which had thereby passed through the filter of culture, I realized that some provoked tiny jubilations, as if they referred to a stilled center, an erotic or lacerating value buried in myself (however harmless the subject may have appeared); and that others, on the contrary, were so indifferent to me that by dint of seeing them multiply, like some weed, I felt a kind of aversion toward them, even of irritation: there are moments when I detest Photographs (…) a certain picture by Mapplethorpe led me to think I had found 'my' photographer; but I hadn't – I don't like all of Mapplethorpe" (Barthes, 2000: 17).

Erotics is not a reflection of understanding, but of experience, and it is individual. It is important, particularly with regard to the art of photography, whose medium reproduces images infinitely. In order to pass from the side of "pleasure" to the side of "ecstasy," Barthes suggests moving away from discourse toward experience (in which one can undoubtedly hear the thought of Michel Foucault from the period of The History of Sexuality). One need neither narrate nor show a photograph that is ecstatic. Perhaps precisely because it is exclusive? Erotics surpasses pornography, preserving mystery, even a final veil, which arouses curiosity rather than mere desire. In photography there is also this same motif of exclusivity.

Moreover, the discursivization of photography - the creation of definitions and their dominant interpretations - undermines its original capacity to produce an impression, and thus its quality as a fetish. It is rescued, admittedly only for a moment, by the punctum of a given photograph. And yet it is not this, or not this alone, that speaks of fascination. It is precisely kairos (a moment - distinct, after all, from chronos: duration) that participates in the salvation not so much of the scene as of the viewer, the spectator. This magic - to return to the genius of Robert Mapplethorpe's photography - is perceived by Roland Barthes in one of his photographs, which the philosopher here calls "Young Man with Arm Extended." He writes: "(…) the photographer has caught the boy's hand (the boy is Mapplethorpe himself, I believe) at just the right degree of openness, the right density of abandonment: a few millimeters more or less and the divined body would no longer have been offered with benevolence (the pornographic body shows itself, it does not give itself, there is no generosity in it): the photographer has found the right moment, the kairos of desire" (Barthes, 2000: 59). Mapplethorpe was known for his studio photographs, that is, staged compositions. Yet one would be mistaken to think that in this kind of photography the singular shot, the stroke of luck, the smile of fortune, does not matter.

It is often said of great artists of photographic art that their defining trait is not the ability to stage meanings, nor even the capacity for composition, but precisely a sensitivity to the moment - a kind of fortune - when a single, unique instant worthy of preservation comes into being. This capacity is a particular photographic sensitivity, a certain openness to the event, but also an awareness of the weight of the transience of time. One might say that the exposure triangle (ISO, aperture, and shutter speed) corresponds analogically to the triad of the photographer's talent (sensitivity, openness, and moment). Photography, more than anything else - certainly more than painting or writing - is capable, within this triadic structure, of capturing kairos, the moment of creation. And for this reason, it is an incomparable creative and generative medium.

Toward the end of his life, with his final publications, Roland Barthes became profoundly personal. In her monumental biography of Barthes, its author Tiphaine Samoyault also draws attention to the significant difference between Barthes's last book and his earlier works. "Ce qu'il a écrit dans la deuxième partie est beaucoup plus intime que dans le Roland Barthes ou les Fragments…. Il n'y use pas de cette science des degrés qui a toujours été sa manière et qui le protégeait." (Samoyault, 2015: 676). Is Barthes weary of the academy? Does he adopt a critical stance toward scientia?

With evident willingness, he seems to move away from the order of explanation, interpretation, and cognition toward an almost intimate idiosyncrasy. "The last book is part memoir (of his mother), part meditation on eros, part treatise on the photographic image, part invocation of death – a book of piety, resignation, desire (…)" (Sontag, 2001: 86).

Susan Sontag herself, moreover, follows a similar path to Barthes, understanding photography as proof of mortality. She writes: "Photography is the inventory of mortality (…). As the fascination that photography exercise is a reminder of death, it is also an invitation to sentimentality. Photographs turn the past into an object of tender regard, scrambling moral distinctions and disarming historical judgments by the generalized pathos of looking at time past" (Sontag, 1990: 70).

In 1976, in New York, the only album published during the lifetime of the outstanding photographer Peter Hujar appeared under the title Portraits in Life and Death (Hujar, 1976/2023). In the foreword, Susan Sontag - Hujar's friend - wrote: "We no longer study the art of dying, a regular discipline and hygiene in older cultures; but all eyes, at rest, contain that knowledge. The body knows. And the camera shows, inexorably. (…) Peter Hujar knows that portraits in life are always, also, portraits in death" (Sontag, 1976).

Not as repetition, but as an impulse for something to emerge unexpectedly - through the metaphor that photography is - as a feeling of the absence of the need for meaning, that is, a sufficient emptiness, Barthes writes: "A detail overwhelms the entirety of my reading; it is an intense mutation of my interest, a fulguration. By the mark of something, the photograph is no longer 'anything whatever'. This something has triggered me, has provoked a tiny shock, a satori, the passage of a void (it is of no importance that its referent is insignificant)" (Barthes, 2000: 49). Which is, after all, another name for the kairos of experience and of photography.

The kairos of the event captured in the photograph speaks of death, yet it speaks of it within life, whose existence it attests.

7. The Winter Garden Photograph

It is striking that, while referring to kairos and defining the photograph through the noeme, that is, as that which certainly has been (Barthes, 2000: 77), Roland Barthes famously does not show in the book the photograph that is central to it - the photograph of his mother. He writes: "I cannot reproduce the Winter Garden Photograph. It exists only for me. For you, it would be nothing but an indifferent picture, one of the thousand manifestations of the 'ordinary'; it cannot in any way constitute the visible object of a science; it cannot establish an objectivity, in the positive sense of the term; at most it would interest your studium: period, clothes, photogeny; but in it, for you, no wound" (Barthes, 2000: 73). It is as if the entire argument toward understanding what photography is, were in fact not so much a demonstration of epistemic truth, nor even of its ontological existence, but a record of the invisible, a metaphysics of absence. The photograph would thus be a formula that does not show what it contains. In this sense, it would be: the absence of photography.

And yet Barthes provides a number of details belonging to the studium of this photograph. We know that it is an image of a girl with her brother, posing in the Winter Garden for a photograph in 1898 in Chennevières-sur-Marne. Barthes recognizes his mother in the girl presented here through "the distinctness of her face, the naive attitude of her hands" (Barthes, 2000: 69). These signs, in the son's view, attest to her essence, which consisted in her "assertion of a gentleness" (Barthes, 2000: 69). Barthes concludes: "I could not define it better than by this feature (among others): that during the whole of our life together, she never made a single 'observation'. This extreme and particular circumstance, so abstract in relation to an image, was nonetheless present in the face revealed in the photography I had just discovered" (Barthes, 2000: 69). And this gives him grounds to state that it is not *just an image*, but *a just image*.

And although we cannot see it, it serves for us as a guide - one to which, in the process of empathetic cognition, we remain devoted - and which leads us to the question of the objectivity of photography.

Does photography - the act of photographing and its result - truly assert the objective existence of the world (whether represented or produced)? In Polish, as in French, the word "lens" (*obiektyw* / l'objectif) refers to a system of lenses - fixed or variable focal length - mounted on the camera body. In this word there resonates a promise of rendering reality as it objectively is. What is at stake here - both in language and in the image - is truth not so much as correspondence, but as identity. In Barthes's "this has been" (ça-a-été), one can hear not only temporality, but also the "that"- it / ça - (which *has been*).

From a technical point of view – says Hubert Damisch in the text entitled "Five Notes for a Phenomenology of the Photographic Image" - photography is nothing other than a process of inscription, "a technique of inscribing" (Damisch, 2003: 87). Photography has its reference in - studium, that is, one can say something factual about it, and it can also tell us something about the facts of the world and reality. Yet its essential reference is of a metaphorical nature. For this reason, in photographs that distribute, as it were, the individual wound of punctum, we do not seek confirmation of how someone was dressed or what was eaten a hundred years ago (although it might be higly interesting), but rather a mood, the essence of something that proves to be important in the present and on an individual level.

The charge against this function of photography so cherished by Roland Barthes becomes the object of reflection for Joan Fontcuberta. The author does not accept that the "ça" of the photograph corresponds to truth, since he suspects that, as incommunicable, it does not exist. After all, the photograph of Barthes's mother remains solely within the sphere of conjecture or studium and, for anyone, will most likely not constitute proof of kairos. "I propose to affirm a photograph that speaks and that allows itself to be spoken" (Fontcuberta, 2025: 149). According to him, the photograph should stimulate in viewers a disposition toward objective, communicable, and broadly conceived analysis.

In Fontcuberta's view, Barthes is a true maître-à-penser, even an "intellectual father" of the theory of photography - but a father who, in Freudian terms, must be killed "to start thinking for oneself" (Fontcuberta, 2025: 149). Why? The author explains, addressing the author of Camera Lucida directly: "You focused your attention on a limited area of photography; yours was a personal view but also discriminatory, restrictive, an exclusive vision limited to your own biographical premises (…) but you overlooked fundamental dialectical aspects that touch on anthropology and politics, such as photography's function as an agent of persuasion" (Fontcuberta, 2025: 150).

In his polemic with Barthes, Joan Fontcuberta explains that "against Barthes" does not signify mere opposition. The term may also mean "in front of," or even "in contact with" (Fontcuberta, 2025: 147). He also notes, at the very beginning of his essay, that apart from Walter Benjamin, it is precisely Roland Barthes and his Camera Lucida that constitute the most frequently cited work on photography ever written. This is not only due to the charm of the language employed by this great aesthete that Barthes was. The significance of Camera Lucida also lies in the fact that the individual notion of kairos, as the truth of what has certainly been, is valid for anyone who has ever held in their hand a photograph in which they suddenly recognized a primal wound and said to themselves: "this is the *ça* of what I see." "This has been" thus rescues not only the past, but also every present moment in which it is recognized.

As for truth, according to the author of Against Barthes, one cannot speak here of its discovery, but only of its construction. And this may only mean that, in the case of photography, its kairos is likewise, in this interpretation, a phantom.

8. The Living Sound of the Wood

All this means, quite simply, that in Roland Barthes's theory of photography it is not the image, not representation, that is of primary importance, but truth as the fact of existence. In a certain sense, what is fixed in a photograph - even if it is posed, that is, staged, theatrical - preserves not the image, but its existence. The question that arises here is not whether the photograph represents something true, but rather whether the truth it presents refers to anything beyond itself. For if the photograph answers the question of existence affirmatively, then beyond this assertion nothing appears unequivocal. This is why Barthes does not situate his argument within epistemological, analytical, or structuralist considerations. Nor does he refer to art history or aesthetics, but rather to an ontology of time.

"For me - writes Roland Barthes - the Photographer's organ is not his eye (which terrifies me) but his finger: what is linked to the trigger of the lens, to the metallic shifting of the plates (when the camera still has such things). I love these mechanical sounds in an almost voluptuous way, as if, in the Photograph, they were the very thing – and the only thing – to which my desire clings, their abrupt click breaking through the mortiferous layer of the Pose. For me the noise of Time is not sad: I love bells, clocks, watches – and I recall that at first photographic implements were related to techniques of cabinetmaking and the machinery of precision: cameras, in short, were clocks for seeing, and perhaps in me someone very old still hears in the photographic mechanism the living sound of the wood" (Barthes, 2000: 15).

It would seem that Barthes's fascination, in recognizing kairos as the truth of the photograph, nonetheless overlooks one detail - without which, after all, the photograph could not come into being. Beyond the camera - or any device capable, by means of a system of lenses, of fixing an image onto a photosensitive medium - the indispensable living element of every photograph is its author. This, in turn, leads us to a question of a different order: if it is the author of the photograph, the photographer, who records the image - and in this way, by fixing events, confirms kairos - then is he himself part of this proof, or rather its producer? In other words, is he an element of studium, or does he belong to the order of punctum (as the sender of content, the producer of meaning, and above all an absolutely existing constitutive element of the photograph)?

One thing here is particularly striking. The photographer - apart from, as in the case of Robert Mapplethorpe, self-portraits - is absent from the photograph, and yet is indispensable. When Roland Barthes does not show but describes the photograph of his mother, which restores to him her eidos, he imagines the figure of the photographer who took it and who "had said 'Step forward a little so we can see you'."

A little further on, Barthes develops this reflection on the photographer and adds: "The unknown photographer of Chennevières-sur-Marne had been the mediator of a truth, as much as Nadar making of his mother (or of his wife – no one knows for certain) one of the loveliest photographs in the world; he had produced a supererogatory photograph which contained more than what the technical being of photography can reasonably offer (…) the Winter Garden Photograph was indeed essential, it achieved for me, utopically, the impossible science of the unique being" (Barthes, 2000: 70).

One may therefore say that the proof of the past existence of a loved person—in this case, the author's mother - is the result of the conjunction of the presence of the photographer and the particular moment of kairos, which together give rise to the punctum of the photograph, and thus to the noematic certainty of the existence of the representation.

9. The Visible and the Hidden in Photography

Photography is part of the visual arts. It should be remembered that its aim - beyond information, memory, and proof - is pleasure. Photography fascinates. Photography provokes anger or pain. It renders one powerless or inspires hope. All this takes place through visibility and concealment.

Two excerpts from a lecture by Susan Sontag delivered at a Wellesley College photographic symposium on April 21, 1975: "I was in China a year and a half ago and wherever I went, the Chinese said to me, 'Where is your camera?'. I was apparently the first person to ever come to China in the past few years (since foreigners have started going again) who hadn't gone with a camera. They understood, of course, that to go to China was a big thing for us foreigners and that what those foreigners did when they came to an event that was particularly interesting was to take a picture of it" (Sontag, 1975: 65).

And above:

"Oscar Wilde said that the way you see is largely determined by art, in the larger sense. Though people have always seen, now there is a process of framing or selection which is guided by the kinds of things that we see reproduced. Photography is an art form which is basically and fundamentally connected with technology and a technology whose virtues are its simplicity and its rapidity" (Sontag, 1975: 64).

Photography, in showing something - always showing something - turns it into an image of the visible. But it also always conceals. It conceals through the overlooking of a detail or its omission. It conceals through cutting, cropping, trimming the frame - everything beyond it remains part of the photographed reality, yet is excluded. Finally, it also conceals through the very choice of the photographic object.

If, in humanist photography, I select from a crowd a person whom I portray against the background of a given group or environment, I omit the one standing next to them, who will be excluded from the narrative of the image, forgotten. And as a result, it is as if what has been omitted had never existed. Photography is therefore a work of art; photographing is an artistic activity; its effect belongs to the aesthetic order. But at the same time: photography is power.

The power of photography selects its object not only as representation, but also into existence. By showing it, it renders it public; by concealing it - through omission, cutting, or the conscious decision not to perceive - it deprives it of existence, degrades it, annihilates it. And yet, if a photograph does not show something, this does not mean - and we can say this with conviction - that the object did not exist or that it had no significance. Perhaps, then, beyond the category of the visible in photography, one might also establish a category of the invisible, the hidden. In such a case, the omitted, excluded object would acquire a counter-public status. Yet it would still exist, in its niche, in its background or on the margin - which, as the great bell hooks has taught us, may for someone constitute a fully legitimate center.

And what if one were to tell the story of photographs of the invisible? What if there emerged a narrative of omission, exclusion, of concealment in photography - one that, while touching upon technology, ontology, and politics, would nevertheless remain, at its source, an art of alternative existence?

10. Hervé Guibert: L'image fantôme

Hervé Guibert has his own understanding of photography. "I think things other than lenses make 'good photos,' ethereal things, of the order of love, or of the soul, forces that pass through and inscribe themselves, fatally, as the text that gets written in spite of ourselves, dictated by a higher voice…" (Guibert, 2024). Is this voice a call? A command, or perhaps a request?

Guibert came to know Roland Barthes through writing. He was already within the circle of Michel Foucault. They became friends. Camera Lucida made a profound impression on Guibert. He wrote a highly favorable text about the book in Le Monde, published on 28 February 1980. "D'abord, à une première lecture survolante de La Chambre claire, ce n'est pas une voix tonnante que veut affirmer la vérité de la photographie. C'est une voix menue, douce, prudente, obligée, un peu nonchalante, que ne piétine pas, non, mais qui avance par petits bonds, par petits scintillements, par petits chipotages d'écriture.

S'il y a une vérité ici, c'est celle de la sincérité du sujet" (Guibert, 1980). Neither this admiration nor the fact that Barthes stimulated the imagination of young writers can be surprising.

A particular proliferation of language and one of the most important steps that Guibert undertook in his writing career was the creation - considered a response to Camera Lucida - of the book L'image fantôme.

Guibert's book begins with words that can easily be understood as a direct response to Barthes's central thesis that the photograph always shows death. Guibert writes: "Photography is also an act of love" (Guibert, 2014: 10). The development that follows is likewise consistent with Barthes's intention. Guibert describes a photograph he took of his own mother, the entire process of preparation, and shares his impressions and anxieties. In an intimate manner, he allows us into the world that, as a photographer, he wishes to preserve forever in the form of an image. He removes - much like Barthes (?) - even the father, who, in his view, would hinder the mother's unfolding within the photograph. Finally, he takes the photograph. The mother comes alive, becomes at ease, plays with the camera lens, smiles, and ultimately becomes young again. The session ends in success.

Seemingly so. It turns out, however, that what was meant to be a sublime moment leading to the preservation of kairos proved impossible. Guibert had loaded the film incorrectly; the camera did not take the photographs - or rather, in his own words: "I had photographed nothing. Blank, the essential moment lost, sacrificed. It was the opposite of awakening from a nightmare: the development of the film was like awakening from a dream-session, which, instead of being wiped away at once, becomes, with the reality of the absence of an image, a nightmare rather than a dream" (Guibert, 2014: 14).

The artist nevertheless decides to preserve the memory of the photograph and the session, as well as of his mother, by writing a book. Since there is no photograph, a text emerges. If the photograph had existed, there would be no text. Which ultimately, as he states, means that "For this text is the despair of the image, and worse than a blurred or fogged image – a ghost image" (Guibert, 2014: 16). And in French the same phrase goes: "Car ce texte est le désespoir de l'image, et pire qu'une image floue ou voilée: une image fantôme…" (Guibert, 1981: 18). Thus, unlike in the case of Roland Barthes where the issue was that of an absent photograph we are here confronted with a text about absence.

The mother of Hervé Guibert does, however, have her photograph. In the album The Only Face, among photographs of himself, friends and lovers, of Michel Foucault, and of his two aunts Suzanne and Louise, there also appears a photograph of his mother. The woman stands by a window; her hair is combed up high and held in place with a band. She is dressed in a shirt of masculine cut, wears no makeup, and does not smile. In her hand she holds a photograph depicting a woman with curled hair (is it herself in youth? Or perhaps her mother?). Guibert captions the photograph simply: "the mother." He does not give her name, nor does he describe the image. He leaves us with a sense of mystery, of an unfinished, barely begun narrative.

And yet - in the foreword to the publication - he writes: "(…) my mother had cancer surgery three weeks ago, and when I saw her again for the first time, I saw a jaundiced old woman, staggering down the hallway holding a drain in her hand. (…) Photographing her like that was out of the question; I even thought that I would never photograph her again. (…) Three weeks later she moved out; an ambulance brought her to a clinic in the suburbs for radiation. I went back to see her. Suddenly, in the hallway, as I steered myself towards the door that bore the number she had given me and that I already knew by heart, I saw a very vibrant ray of light. I went into the room, which was vast and luminous, slanting rays from a skylight illuminating my mother as she lay in bed. And suddenly that light reconciled me with my mother, and with my hope that she would stay alive. I wanted to take her photograph. I told her she was beautiful and

I believed it. For the first time, I thought she was going to live: the light on her face, the renewal of photographic allure, was its guarantee" (Guibert, 2025). Which, of course, proved to be an illusory guarantee.

And yet between the photographs that Hervé Guibert took and those he could not take, between the texts he devoted to his mother and to photography - the memory of her has been preserved, a memory which, beyond imagination, remains for us anonymous (and yet - true).

In Ghost Image, Guibert recounts a story about Roland Barthes. He writes: "I must have known R.B., the writer, for about six months – ever since I sent him my first book and he answered me, ever since we began writing to one another. That was in the fall of '77 (I found the date in my diary). Then we met, and we had dinner together several times. He lives alone with his mother, who is already quite old and sick. She is often the one who answers the telephone, I know her voice. But throughout the fall, R.B. postponed all our meetings. His mother was ill, he was helping her. His own voice on the phone became weaker and weaker, and sad, marked by a weary politeness. (…) One day, I wrote him a letter expressing my desire to photograph him with his mother, since it was to her that he devoted all his time and attention, since it was primarily this bond that was strongest. (…) I received no answer and was worried that my proposal, though formulated with a great deal of precaution, might have shocked him, or simply irritated him (…) Maybe ten days later, barely ten days later, I called him, somewhat apprehensive about his response. His voice was even less animated, fainter than it usually was. I asked him if he had in fact received my letter. He said to me, 'Haven't you heard? Mama died ten days ago…'. So he had received my letter when his mother was dead, or was about to die, or had just died" (Guibert, 2014: 138).

Roland Barthes dies on 26 March 1980. His final farewell takes place in the morgue of the Salpêtrière hospital in Paris (the same hospital in which, four years later, Michel Foucault would die). The coffin with his body is transported by train to Urt, where Roland is laid to rest in a shared grave with his mother. The grave is modest - a simple stone slab, without photographs.

Conclusion

This article has argued that photography, in Barthes's thought, is not primarily a representational medium but an ontological event grounded in the temporality of *kairos*. By tracing the conceptual movement from *studium* and *punctum* to the *noematic* structure of "that-has-been," it has shown how photographic experience exceeds epistemic frameworks and enters the domain of affect, presence, and loss. The engagement with Hervé Guibert further reveals the constitutive tension between the desire to capture the decisive moment and the structural impossibility of its preservation. In this perspective, photography does not secure reality but testifies to its irretrievable disappearance while simultaneously affirming its having-been.

Ultimately, the kairos-dimension of photography discloses it as a site where existence is experienced at the intersection of visibility and absence, and where meaning emerges from the singularity of encounter rather than from representation.

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The author confirms that this manuscript has not been published previously and is not under consideration for publication elsewhere. The author agrees to receive a printed copy of the journal issue upon acceptance.

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The author used AI-assisted tools (ChatGPT) solely for translation support. All arguments, interpretations, and scholarly content are entirely the author's own. No AI tools were used in the development of the research, argumentation, or conclusions.

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