

**ROLAND BARTHES AND FRANÇOIS
LARUELLE ON THE ESSENCE
OF PHOTOGRAPHY**

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**ROLAND BARTHES E FRANÇOIS
LARUELLE SOBRE A ESSÊNCIA
DA FOTOGRAFIA**

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LARUELLE SOBRE LA ESENCIA
DE LA FOTOGRAFÍA**

ABSTRACT

Artigo inédito

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This study aims at a non-standard stance on the Art and Science of Photography. The first section on François Laruelle draws on the critique of philosophical makings as the technique of Photography, a relation figured as the photocentric destiny of Western thought. The second section investigates the nature of Photography as research in Roland Barthes' silver-salt ontology and effects. From the common ground of a Non-Standard Photography, this study eventually assesses similarities and differences between the approaches of François Laruelle and Roland Barthes toward a Photography of another kin and kind.

KEYWORDS Roland Barthes; François Laruelle; Photography; Photo; Aesthetics

RESUMO

Este artigo busca adotar uma postura não padrão em relação à arte e à ciência da fotografia. A primeira seção, sobre François Laruelle, baseia-se na crítica à filosofia como técnica da fotografia, uma relação entendida como o destino foto-centrado do pensamento ocidental. Na segunda seção, sobre Roland Barthes, o artigo explora a investigação sobre a natureza da fotografia como pesquisa de sua ontologia e efeitos de sais de prata. A partir do terreno comum de uma fotografia não padrão, o artigo eventualmente avalia semelhanças e diferenças entre as abordagens de François Laruelle e Roland Barthes em prol de uma fotografia de outro gênero e ordem.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Roland Barthes; François Laruelle; Fotografia; Foto; Estética

RESUMEN

Este artículo tiene como objetivo adoptar una postura no convencional sobre el arte y la ciencia de la fotografía. La primera sección sobre François Laruelle se basa en la crítica de la creación filosófica como técnica de la fotografía, una relación que se representa como el destino centrado en la fotografía del pensamiento occidental. En la segunda sección sobre Roland Barthes, el artículo explora la investigación sobre la naturaleza de la fotografía como un estudio de su ontología y efectos de la sal de plata. Desde el terreno común de una fotografía no estándar, el artículo finalmente evalúa similitudes y diferencias entre los enfoques de François Laruelle y Roland Barthes en nombre de una fotografía de otra índole y especie.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Roland Barthes; François Laruelle; Fotografía; Foto; Estética





INTRODUCTION

This study aims at a non-standard stance on the Art of Photography (practice) and the Science of Photography (theory). Its first section on François Laruelle draws on the critique of philosophical makings as the technique of Photography, a relation that figured the White, the Lights, the Clarity, and Vision as the photocentric destiny of Western thought. In its second section on Roland Barthes, this study investigates the nature of Photography as research in its silver-salt ontology and effects. Both sections aim to build a common ground for a Non-Standard Photography from which to extract, in the third and final sections, similarities and differences between the approaches of François Laruelle and Roland Barthes and offer concluding remarks on a Photography of another kin and kind.

On the one hand, Roland Barthes (1981, p. 3) states in *Camera Lucida*:

This question grew insistent. I was overcome by an “ontological” desire: I wanted to learn at all costs what Photography was “in itself”: by what essential feature it was to be distinguished from the community of images.

Such a desire really meant that beyond the evidence provided by technology and usage, and despite its tremendous contemporary expansion, I wasn't sure that Photography existed, that it had a "genius" of its own.

On the other hand, in *The Concept of Non-Photography*, François Laruelle (2011, p. 4) provides the following definition:

Here is the first meaning of "non-photography:" this word does not designate some new technique, but a new description and conception of the essence of photography and of the practice that arises within it; of its relation to philosophy; of the necessity no longer to think it through philosophy and its diverse "positions," but to seek an absolutely non-onto-photo-logical thinking of essence, so as to think correctly, without aporias, circles or infinite metaphors, what photography is and what it can do.

From the outset, one may note in the aforementioned excerpts that François Laruelle and Roland Barthes commonly employ an unorthodox formulation as they search for the unique/generic identity/essence of their photographic discourse/objects. Photography is at once unique and generic for its simultaneously located and dispersed character long after its invention. Being either a technique, an art, or commerce, Photography responds all too well to the metaphysical and representational phantasies

of Western Sciences and Arts, namely, the collapsing of the distance between Original and Copy, the continuing reproduction of Being, the expressing of Things by Media most Clear and Light, thus suppressing the Logocentrism of Ancient and Modern societies into new, contemporary, now onto-*photo*-centric regimes. As much as one is unable to conceive of the Visual Arts of Image and Media without their photographic and technical support, one must remind oneself that the rationale of Photography forms and informs its techno-historical eventuality.

If Barthes' growing interest in Photography collides with the prejudice against images that thrives amid well-thinking, 19th-century culture, it is because their iconoclastic representatives see Photography exit the black box agenda, namely, clarity, which is the Platonic truth-distorting device. Indeed, all the daring axioms about the photo as an emanation of the referent or its attestation of presence (as it began to circulate in *Camera Lucida* after Barthes allowed himself to assume a certain resistance on his part to be homologated by language in previous works) are avowedly contrary to the general clamor of those who only presume their falsification. So much so that, from the outset, in "Fragment 2" (BARTHES, 1981), the author's "ontological desire" to know what Photography is

“in itself” or in its “essence” is not declared without stumbling into the verification of the importunate voice of a certain Science that goes to say Photography would be nothing more than sociological commentary on the family rite.

In fact, the team of sociologists that literally infuriates Barthes at this point in the volume for treating Photography as a social protocol of integration (whereas Barthes is moved by some loving photo) is captained by none other than Pierre Bourdieu for the expertise of another book with a better intellectual tone, pointing precisely to the massification of Photography as a vulgar medium; as the title reads: *Photography, a Middle-Brow Art* (BOURDIEU, 1996). And yet one must note that Barthes called into question Semiology itself as it is associated with the ordinary discussions on Image, ignoring such an anthropologically new object. According to such a Barthes, more realist than semiotician, the novelty of the object is its being the perfect analogon of the external world:

The realists, of whom I am one and of whom was already one when I asserted that the Photograph was an image without code – even if, obviously, certain codes do inflect our reading of it – the realists do not take the photograph for a “copy” of reality, but for an emanation of *past reality*: a *magic*, not an art. To ask whether photograph is analogical or

coded is not a good means of analysis. The important thing is that the photograph possesses an evidential force, and that its testimony bears not on the object but on time. From a phenomenological viewpoint, in the Photograph, the power of authentication exceeds the power of representation (BARTHES, 1981, pp. 88-89).

Photography may be the occasion of redefining both the Art of Photography and the Thought of Photography, i.e., its theory and practice, as well as their very opposition. It is, therefore, our general intention to represent photographic representation otherwise, via Barthes and Laruelle. In each case, Photography is researched not as much for the representational character between photo and photographed but in what Photography is and what Photography can do in its essential capacities or ontological strategies, without referring to conceptual authorities of either sociological, technical, or philosophical sort. Given their way, what sets these writers apart from Standard Photography is their *construct* of the Essence, Being, or Identity of Photography, which is, the paradox of such a task notwithstanding, essentializing rather than essentialist, ontologizing rather than ontological, and identifying yet non identical.

Indeed, “Photography never ceases to reflect its own enigma, which is the logical extension of modernity’s ambiguous

attitude towards both technique and art” (Taminiaux, 2009, p. 7). However, the inscription of Photography within Time (History) and Space (techno-urbanity) seems too sociological and realistic for our taste. After Laruelle and Barthes, we vent a Photography without date and rubric as it were, which reflects the impossible Science of Photo-Fiction of François Laruelle as well as the Art Photography of Barthes. This study, therefore, aims at mitigating something missing in the photographic discourse, namely: “What remains missing, somehow, is the true knowledge of an object that successfully resists any specific inscription within the cultural sphere” (Taminiaux, 2009, p. 7).

Speaking of lacks and mitigations, we acknowledge that our study should ideally have been written in Portuguese due to the absence of Laruellean commentators in Brazil. However, from within the Brazilian academic milieu, the aim refers to contributing to the international debate on Image Studies, particularly within the unexplored nexus of Barthes as interpreted by Laruelle, hence our contrastive, old-school commentary on the essence of photography. Nonetheless, it is important to note that two brief studies regarding Laruelle and his Theory of Photography and Non-Philosophy have recently been published in Portuguese: “Da ciência-ficção: a hipótese

ficcionalista em François Laruelle” (CALIL, 2023) and “François Laruelle ao uso da estética e história da arte” (CALIL, 2022). While these studies update the Brazilian scholarship on Image Studies on these matters, they also prepare the ground for the Barthesian element, which this study incorporates.

■ FRANÇOIS LARUELLE: NON-PHOTOGRAPHY AND PHOTO-FICTION

In Laruelle, the concept of Non-Photography insurges itself not against Photography as a techno-historical, artistic-scientific existence but against the Legend of Lights prior to the Enlightenment, vicarious of the labyrinth of mirrors and the geometric optics of Philosophy. According to Laruelle, legend has it that in the Beginning was the Flash, “not so much illuminating a World that was already there, as making it surge forth as the figure of those things that its fulguration would have forever outlined for the West” (LARUELLE, 2011, p. 1). As the philosophical legend of the primal Flash, the genesis of the World, hence the Origin of Philosophy in the spirit of Photography, Laruelle notes how Philosophy enunciates the Cosmos as it taking distance and taking photos, announcing itself as its very own onto-photo-generator. A transcendental photographer

analogous to Heraclitus' child, Philosophy in photographing the World produced it, in a photography "with no camera, and perhaps for that very reason destined ceaselessly to take new shots of that first flash, consigned to extinction" (LARUELLE, 2011, p. 1).

For Laruelle, therefore, no reason exists to separate Philosophy from this photographic legend: Philosophy is nothing more than the legend of the enlightening illumination of things by photo-words taken from a distance by Philosophy-Photography, hence, onto-photo-logo-centrism. This photo-taking distance is what "founds the photo-grapho-centric destiny of the West. Well before the invention of the corresponding technology, a veritable automatism of photographic repetition traverses Western thought" (LARUELLE, 2011, p. 2), hence its obsession with Vision (*theoria*), with painting (*pictura*), with letters (*scriptura*), with appearances (*phenomena, realia*, etc.). The photo-verification of things is instituted, i.e., is imposed under the illumination of Lights, Clarity, and Sharpness: lights, camera, and action and behold the World in a Flash, namely, Photo-Philosophy verified photologically, never as a trick of the senses.

Thus, Philosophy will have been a trope in the search for the fading light of its original Flash, repeated and rephotographed by

the chain of historical philosophers. What Laruelle conjectures as the Meta-photo-graphic Hypothesis of the Origins of Philosophy is nothing more than a certain photograph taken too quickly, taken to have been taken well: “an activity of transcendental photography constituted by the absence of adequate technology, indeed on the very basis of this absence” (LARUELLE, 2011, p. 2). Photography without technique, without art, without science, forever destined to reflect and nostalgically its founding myth, Philosophy is a certain form of primitive-primitivist thought that would have been constituted not by a Mirror Stage but by a Flash Stage, a Darkroom Stage, giving it an ontological fragility at its foundations. Laruelle continues with the hypothesis:

[...] this photographocentric pulsion at the heart of thought, something like an *objective photographic Appearance* that it draws on, like an uncircumventable element, makes it impossible to rigorously think the essence of photography. If the latter functions as a *constitutive* metaphor of philosophical decision, how could it then be thought *by* philosophy without a vicious circle resulting? Any philosophy of photography whatsoever – this is an invariant – will appeal to the World, to the perceived object, to the perceiving subject, all supposedly given, and given initially by that transcendental flash that will have made the World surge forth from the midst of being (LARUELLE, 2011, p. 3).

That is why to Photo-Philosophy Laruelle opposes a practical process that makes the photo-World a mere occasion, releasing photographic representation from the photo-philosophical. Rather than talking about Revolution, a concept charged with Philosophy begging for beginnings, turnings, and churnings, something which would have nothing to do with a science of Photography, one “but [talks] of the photographic mutation or cut; of the novel emergence, under precise technological conditions, [...] other than that which traditional ontology and its contemporary deconstructions form and govern” (LARUELLE, 2011, p. 36).

Hence, Laruelle treats non-philosophical Photography as a discovery of a scientific nature rather than an artistic one, as a new object of theoretical thought, suspending all the problems of the genesis-creation in their most varied positions, be them historical, aesthetic, political, or technological, no longer analyzable, aestheticizable, or historicizable in the ontological presuppositions and thoughts of Greek extraction. “Only a rigorously non-photographic thought, that is to say, a thought from the start non-philosophical in its essence or its intimate constitution, can describe photography without begging the question [...] philosophically anticipated in an ideal essence and empirically realistic” (LARUELLE, 2011, p. 4),

delivering Photography as an art and technique to the scientific-inventive experience of Non-Photography.

Laruelle adds to the concept of Non-Photography the dimension of Photo-Fiction as a new, hypothesized, scientific-generic principle. Photo-Fiction takes its inventiveness from photographic art, returning invention to theoretical practice. Photo-Fiction dispenses with Photography as the materiality of multiple photos and frees itself from the treatises and standard sciences of Photography, from the relation of the “of” of Photography, from its intention, tension, ontology, or surplus capital values. Thus, one can ask oneself what after all one is doing. If a question neither of the artist nor of the aesthete, what is Photo-Fiction all about? Laruelle answers: “I’m not doing aesthetics, but I’m trying to build a thought that exceeds or replaces the general process of philosophical aesthetics and its descriptions. This is a practice of a quite special genre that is not completely standard or recognized” (LARUELLE, 2012, p. 12).

In a somewhat laboratorial fashion, instead of making the camera from diagrams in manuals or techno-industrial rationalities, Laruelle designs a totally new apparatus as *Philo-Fiction* (and not *Philo-Sophia*), capable of producing not

simply photos, but Photo-Fictions. “This Photo-Fictional theoretical apparatus will be an aesthetic impossibility, a non-aestheticizable or non-philosophizable impossibility, and it is as such that it will realize a non-aesthetics of the photo” (LARUELLE, 2012, p. 12). Photo-Fiction designates and effectuates a singular apparatus one must conceive as it lies beyond commercial or philosophical sale since Photo-Fiction is theoretical rather than industrial. Photo-Fiction is a generic extension of the photographic apparatus, neuter for its aesthetic-philosophical pretensions. Photo-Fiction could be called a micro-model rather than a miniature and reduced in the sense of phenomenology rather than of its metric dimensions.

For Laruelle, the products of Photo-Fiction shall be “a kind of chaos that is even more intense than the photo, perhaps as a mixture of Cubism and fractality exerted on the same conceptual material, based on a special logic of what we could call an Art-Fiction or a Non-Standard Aesthetics” (LARUELLE, 2012, p. 13). What is standard in Aesthetics is that only Philosophy as the *dominatrix* of all Sciences, to use a medieval expression, would be able to justify Art accomplishing the real and that only Philosophy can give Art its proper and fair description, whether progressive or regressive, liberal, or conservative. Such limitation offers, rather

than a problem for Laruelle *per se*, the limitation of Philosophy within this framework as no longer philosophical in itself as it is made in the aid of Art and ultimately has an artistic meaning.

Non-Photography and Photo-Fiction are “neither an extension of photography with some variation, difference, or decision, nor its negation. It is a use of photography in view of a non-photographic activity which is the true element of the photo, its meaning, and its truth” (LARUELLE, 2011, pp. 4-5). They invalidate Photography, rather than only a technical act, deemed the auto-philosophical self-interpretations accompanying Photography, i.e., the “photographism” that takes place in thought, forgetting the essence of photography ever since Photography has been subjected to philosophical appropriations, which are all onto-photo-logical. For Laruelle, Onto-Photo-Logic manifests itself in the form of a circular self-position of the photographic technique and of elements taken from the World (body, perception, motif, camera), and such a self-position means a perverse self-reflection in any case, the foundation of the onto-photo-logical prejudices of the West, redoubled and fetishized in the Western thought tendencies of Photo-Graphism and Photo-Logic, getting away with the so-called critical and philosophical vigilance which never

turns against its own practices lest they turn non-philosophical, anti-photo-logo-centric.

Laruelle concludes that it is insufficient to erect the metaphorical Origins of Philosophy to think of the photographic with the necessary rigor (something that philosophers have always done) in their way of taking distance and taking new photos:

It is more urgent to find the means to suspend or to bracket out, radically and without remainder, all of the Western onto-photo-graphics; to rethink what a ‘shot’ is according to its essence. Supposing, as we shall suggest, that the essence of the shot is nothing photographic, that it totally excludes the onto-photological metaphor, then it is according to this originary and positive non-photographic instance that we must ‘see’ photography anew, rather than on the basis of photography itself and therefore circularly, without rigor. The essence of photography is not itself ‘photographic’ in the onto-photographic sense of the word (LARUELLE, 2011, pp. 5-6).

Hence Laruelle’s notions of Standard and Non-Standard applied to photographic phenomena and discourses. The distinction between “standard” and “non-standard” is central to his critique of traditional philosophical structures, particularly of Photography. Standard Photography (or “onto-photo-logic”) is grounded in the assumption that photographs represent wordily reality by philosophical concepts such

as subject, object, reflection, etc. This approach treats photography as a tool for mirroring the world within pre-existing conceptual frameworks. In contrast, Laruelle’s concept of “Non-Photography” rejects this reflective model. It views photography as an immanent process tied to the “force (of) vision,” a non-representational activity that precedes any philosophical formulae. Non-Photography, rather than aiming to reflect or reproduce the world, creates a “quasi-space” of theoretically-axiomatically enclosed *figmenta*, hence fiction as a form of *essence*, a being operating outside the standard logic of Image-mediation.

The opposition between “standard” and “non-standard” extends beyond Photography to the project of Non-Standard Philosophy, comprising Laruelle’s works from the 2010s onward. While Standard Philosophy claims to provide a comprehensive, self-sufficient framework for understanding society or reality, Non-Standard Philosophy undermines these claims by subordinating Philosophy to non-philosophical principles, such as science or generic thought. Laruelle employs a “unilateral duality,” acknowledging the reality of Philosophy but positioning it as secondary to non-philosophical instances. Drawing inspiration from Quantum Physics, which, as Photography, works with Light

in a non-corpuscular fashion, Laruelle parallels concepts such as superposition and non-commutativity, illustrating how multiple perspectives can coexist without being reduced to a single unified system. Thus, Non-Standard Philosophy opens new possibilities free from bounds to the onto-photo-logic, enabling creative and experimental Image Studies.

ROLAND BARTHES: THE PHOTO-APHASIC SEMIOLOGY VERSUS THE PHONO-LOGIC MYTHOLOGY

Prior to Photography, let us return to Semiology – Barthes’ essentials. The Barthesian Semiology is of the Word. It is the precedence of the problem of language, the fatal mediator of the modern experience of World-via-Word, that moves the *nouvelle critique* of which Roland Barthes became spokesperson as early as the 1960s amid the controversy triggered by his structural readings, i.e., non-historic-social and non-Sorbonist of the Classic of Classics that Racine is. Before that, during the 1950s, the concept of Writing Degree Zero had already redefined style as a mark of a withdrawal of the *écrivain* in the face of this same deadlock, whereas the concept of Myth signaled the escalation of

arbitrary signs to Homeric abuses of language in the demiurgic assemblages of the Media. Barthes' New Criticism turned itself away from repertoires to direct itself to an understanding of the Crisis of Literature as resistance to the Myth of Literature and to a sarcastic, impious, non-Marxist denunciation of the mystification of collective representations as the rustle of Language. The fine instrument of these operations, "the necessary conjunction of these two enterprises: no denunciation without an appropriate method of detailed analysis, no semiology which cannot, in the last analysis, be acknowledged as semioclasms" (BARTHES, 1991, p. 8).

It is from the same sensitivity against verbal violence that the new Barthesian iconology proceeds. Indeed, even though the Mass Media are mainly journalistic and even because the French Press much such as Barthes was still much literate, he had always been as interested in linguistic ultrasignifications, as in the rhetoric of images, namely, the Photo. Therefore, as much as his problem was the *parole* in the Saussurean sense of language performance by a speaking-writing subject, Barthes' attention was drawn to the eternal subscription of visual discourse to linguistic reason or the speaking *ethos* of the image. Take for instance, in *Mythologies*, the exhibition "The Family of man"

of socialist-realist photos, which aimed to show human gestures in the daily life of all peoples of the world in defense of the beautiful thesis made to reconfirm the doxa of the ordinary spectator that Man is born, Man works, Man lives, and Man dies everywhere in the same way. In Barthes' analysis, the exhibition shows itself to be so closely related to the curator's and its artists' previous convictions that it is impossible to ignore the humanitarian creed that serves as an alibi for them. On such a mythology of Photography in the service of Ideology, Barthes wrote: "Any classic humanism postulates that in scratching the history of men a little, the relativity of their institutions or the superficial diversity of their skins (but why not ask the parents of Emmet Till, the young Negro assassinated by the Whites what *they* think of *The Great Family of Man?*), one very quickly reaches the solid rock of a universal human nature" (BARTHES, 1991, p. 101).

It is in the same direction that the entire iconographic album of the book goes, the fringe of the Roman in the Roman historical reconstructions of Hollywood, a politician running for office whose gaze is lost in infinity as an expression of a great ideal within a vision of civilization dictated by the image in which everything one sees reaches one already covered by the reactive layer of Logos.

Describing the new politics of the gaze in Barthes involves pointing out that the speaking subject is always subjected to the conceptual articulations inherent to the handling of the relations between the signifier and the signified. Therefore, even the very images that reach them in a world in which everything seems to be proposed to the eye subject themselves to the right to language:

in attempting to reconstitute in its specific structure the code of connotation of such a large communication which is the Press Photography's, we can hope to recover, in their very finesse, the forms of which our society makes use to comfort itself, as well as the measure, the turns and the profound function of such an effort: a perspective rather appealing, as one has initially said, as far as Photography is concerned, it develops itself under the form of a paradox: one that makes an inert object a language and one that transforms the lack of culture of a "mechanical" art into the most social of institutions (BARTHES, 2002b, p. 1133, our translation).

The wake of those considerations crafted a whole, albeit small, set of concepts throughout the 1960s and 1970s that provided photographic information as a continuation of photographers' general culture and, that being said, as a result of a contract already established between addressees and recipients. Such a set of concepts are, in order of appearance: the Myth, the Obvious,

and the *Studium*. The terminology speaks for itself. It aims at images without imagination – didactic, at best. They lie in the field of what is perceived by interposed knowledge. As one reads in fragment 11, entitled “*Studium*”:

Many photographs are, alas, inert under my gaze. But even among those which have some existence in my eyes, most provoke only a general and, so to speak, *polite* interest: they have no *punctum* in them: they please or displease me without pricking me: they are invested with no more than *studium*. The *studium* is that very wide field of unconcerned desire, of various interest, of inconsequential taste: *I like / I don't like*. The *studium* is of the order of *liking*, not of *loving*; it mobilizes a half desire, a demi-volition; it is the same sort of vague, slippery, irresponsible interest one takes in the people, the entertainments, the books, the clothes one finds “all right” (BARTHES, 1981, p. 28).

And yet, entering such a Theory of Visuality also involves indicating another set of concepts, one rather *sui generis* because of its being negative, this time gauging a pregnant Photography, opposing the bare sociality of studious Photography. Namely: the third sense, the obtuse, and the *punctum*. From the same opposition as Degree Zero *vis-à-vis* Literary Mythology, proportional point by point to the previous trio, they disarm the sign and its paradigm. The inclination

toward the middle way or the third margin of meaning is indeed characteristic of Barthes. Degree Zero is a *tertius*, a neutral, as it puts meaning in suspense between signification and non-signification. That is also captured by the obtuse image, dodging the obvious by showing what it is unable to absorb.

That is what can too be understood of the *punctum*: “the photographer, such as an acrobat, must defy the laws of probability or even of possibility; at the limit, he must defy those of the interesting: the photo becomes ‘surprising’ when we do not know why it has been taken” (BARTHES, 1981, p. 33). This quote indeed reflects Jacques Derrida’s question about painting as representation by visual images: “Why always say of painting that it renders, that it restitutes?” (DERRIDA, 1987, p. 258). Starting with the polaroid of a backlit curtain aperture in Barthes’ apartment by Daniel Boudinet in the opening of *Camera Lucida* and ending with the young man by Imre Kertész, who stares at nothing in the last portrait of his album, the entire photographic archive placed there is made to justify in some way a *parti pris* of nonsense, delivering the photo image from being spoken as to enable it to drag the real with it.

The remarkable counterintuitive virtuous circle that follows Barthes recognizes the suspensive power of writing when the

latter no longer leads anywhere outside of itself, assuming that photographic images also cease to be contingent when they no longer cultivate prelections. There exists some correspondence, therefore, in the first Barthes between the literal, objectual, cataloging literature of a Robbe-Grillet and the perfect analogy of Photography, which also resists the assault of so-called pacifying values, incurring the paradox of a message without a code. In the intermediate phase, which reappears in another famous essay on the *Battleship Potemkin* photograms by Eisenstein, from the time of Barthes rereading Balzac in *S/Z*, in which by the obvious/obtuse pair anodyne images, the meaning of which jumps ahead or out at the eye of the beholder, differ from those which strike unexplained blows.

Barthes finds the former, for instance, in film shots in which the emphatic, non-polysemic images appear, in the mourning gestures of two common women, their hands on their chests or covering their mouths, suppressing a sob, quoting Byzantine saints and pietas, worthy of the masterful portraitist and political man who the filmmaker is. As for the second kind of images, for example, Barthes detects it in the groaning effigy of an old woman with her eyes closed, who, however, has a scarf on her

head that strangely descends to the height of her eyes, dividing her forehead in half and tracing thereby a straight line making her a little caricatured, donning the impression she is disguised. It is in the second kind of photographic images that this somewhat ridiculous aspect breaks with the compunction that it should express for a good understanding of the scene, this being the obvious of the photo.

Even though it can be seen as a *tombeau* for a dead mother revolving around an old photograph of the late Henriette Barthes, the only one not to be included in the book, *Camera Lucida* can only confirm this vision of the non-sensical or of the more-than-sensical in photos which mean nothing, and for that reason are ever so much more touching. In addition to 24 unpretentious portraits permeating the 48 fragments of the book, this is a good reason why a corpus is discovered, *in extremis* sought in French artists, for now quite unknown, especially in Brazil, whose worlds are distinguished by Silence. The works of Boudinet as well as of Lucien Clergue and Bernard Faucon are from this last Barthesian salon, a trio of counter-naturalist landscape artists, all of whom are insensitive to glosses, dealing with small studies, now collected in the fifth volume of Barthes' complete works.

All these images contain the same *memento mori* shot in the portraits in *Camera Lucida* given not only the perfect immobility of the objects but also (and for that very reason) the funereal effect of a time that seems perpetual. Worthy of notice are the impressions rather than the *expressions* the *tableaux vivants* by Faucon make with their jovially dressed real boys placed to appear in natural settings and yet at the same time arranged, in which they mingle with wax figures, accumulating two immobilities and transforming all the figures into automata and androids. The astonishment provoked would be that of a violent doubt on what is true or false with these derisive scenes save for Photography as the very Art of Stillness, rendering such a pathetic reading into a denial of the expected correspondence between the inner life and the outer. It is to this very meta-discourse that Barthes' reflection alludes: "Bernard Faucon does not photograph a living picture: he produces a photograph *redoubled* in a living picture" (Barthes, 2002a, pp. 473-474, our translation). Therein lies the essence of the artist's photos. Barthes writes to him, moreover, to say: "Your photos are wonderful for me, i.e., ontologically (if I may use such a pedantic word), the photo itself at the limit of signification being fascination" (Barthes, 2015, p. 252, our translation).

Related to a Semiology of the Word, the *punctum* refers, in short, to this ebb of Commentary to which Barthes would still be returning on the eve of his death, when presenting a seminar project for the 1979-1980 season at the Collège de France, never to be realized, on the world of Proust by Nadar. The works would have no intellectual objective, he then explained, as their only aim was the production of “an intoxication, a fascination, the action proper to the Image” (Barthes, 2002c, p. 391, our translation).

As toxic and silvery as the very salts of Photography.



ON THE PHOTOGRAPHIC IN ROLAND BARTHES AND FRANÇOIS LARUELLE: SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES IN THEIR ESSENCE OF PHOTOGRAPHY

We have expounded on some photographic conceptions by both authors in the two preceding sections. Let us now move on to a contrastive assessment of Roland Barthes and François Laruelle on the essence of Photography. We shall point out similarities and differences in Barthes’ and Laruelle’s considerations, highlighting convergences and divergences in their scholarly enterprises on Photography.

Such a search for the essence of Photography in Laruelle and Barthes mirror previous discussions by both authors. On the nature of such a search, it is at once ironic as far its vocabulary and purposes are concerned, yet it takes seriously the character of invention research, dodging all the interpretive realism that constitutes (and one is unable to exaggerate in so saying) *each and every* enterprise of philosophical-ontological order. As surprising as this could seem, Barthes' refusal of scientific methods and scholarly practices of research eventually harmonizes with Laruelle's non-standard, quantic, generic science-fictions.

In Laruelle, on the one hand, the (re)search for essences other than photographic takes place, for instance, in research fields such as Dance and Music, namely, First Chorography and Opera of Philosophers, extending itself to the research on the essence of the invariant in Philosophies as technologies of essentialist reduction. In Barthes, on the other hand, it is by questioning the essence of Photography, of the *noema* distinguishing it from other types of images (such as painting, cinema, etc.), that the author insists on the chemical aspect of the photographic image, hence attributing to the Photo and Photography an alchemical, magical sense, an essence of emulsions of silver salts. It is evident from

their research strategy that the essence of Photography for Laruelle and Barthes is hardly a philosophical or ontological finding in the standard meanings of the word.

For Laruelle, as well as for Barthes, the revelation of Photography is improperly given in evidentiality, therefore, in the naturalistic cognoscibility between the photographed and the photo, from which one would extract a social theory or a realistic description. In Barthes, representation is given by the phantasmagory of revelation, which also offers a means to a non-standard stance on Photography, highlighting its transubstantial essence, much as in Laruelle's photos taken with his eyes closed. Insofar as Barthes models Photography against Haiku, he fashions Photography in an aesthetical, literary mode that is aware of the responsibility of forms as well as of refusing a Photography revealed according to Realism-Naturalism, therefore Journalism, Sociology, and Philosophy itself. Laruelle models Photography against Photo-Philosophy, and that in a quantic (non-corpuscular, undecided) and generic (axiomatizing, conceptualizing, from without space and time) stance, foregoing Aesthetics, Art History, and Technology as maidens of Philosophy, which photo-determines Photography in photo-philosophical nexa and doxa (standards).

Such doxological, mythical ultrasignifications have for Barthes the power to turn the magic of the Photo into abusive rhetoric (Barthes, 1991). Thus, among the many myths of French daily life from the 1950s examined in *Mythologies* are photo campaigns of politicians, of natural catastrophes, of Marlon Brando, of Einstein... All the chapters of the book devoted to Photography attest that the Myth in fact introduces a social use in a matter. This is what happens, for example, with the photographic operation by the Harcourt Studio, which deifies the actors of French cinema, casting them diagonally in the rectangle of the screen so they appear to be in eternal rest. The Semiologist Barthes claims, in this case, to oppose the voice of Marx to that of Saussure, convinced that collective representations are systems of signs, acquiring value from passing from the pious hands of sociologists to those of the semioclast. The advantage lies in moving away from deploring the bourgeois world to the fine analysis of its mystifications, namely, its Legends.

There lies more than Saussure in this contestation. To refer to Éric Marty in the critical apparatus of the first volume of Barthes' *Oeuvres Complètes*, the "subtext" of *Mythologies* is after all Sartrean. It is not by chance that *Camera Lucida* would be dedicated to Sartre,

namely, *The Imaginary*. It is with Sartre, a reader of Husserl, that “Fragment 36” evokes Phenomenology, later preparing the note of what is mainly ratified. In the last instance, it is about capturing the traces of the absolute past, with all that is mortal. It is a trauma formulated in the French expression *ça a été*: “The *noeme* of Photography is simple, banal; no depth: that has been” (Barthes, 1981, p. 115). The Husserlian concept lends itself to the meaning of directing a camera toward an object. Phenomenologically, this means, rather than the referent of a representation, the directly affected referent itself, just as, on the plane of thought (*nous*), objects are affected by the intentionality of consciousness. The fact is that, due to the chemical fixation of the object via silver salts and photographic revelation, the object becomes spectral – a silver ghost.

What counts for Barthes in Sartrean Phenomenology is his manner of arriving at the sensible world repressed by the philosophies of historical ruin, theories of the marketing spectacle and simulacrum understood as the mirroring of the mirror or the representation of the representation, namely, the perfect crime (Baudrillard, 2008). Sartre for Barthes not only enables one to think of imagination as an instrument of knowledge, but also for this very reason as authorizing the dissociation of the golden calf

from bad thinking. Were this not enough, Barthes – for whom Photography can only be a piece of interesting information and yet with no acuity if one fails to admit its *pathos*, which is in the silent catastrophe of time paralyzed on the photo – is equally inclined to consider that many photos tell him nothing because he finds no “existential position” in them. It is this very same innocuity that *Camera Lucida* has in mind when opposing the painful dimension of the *punctum* to the distanced knowledge of the *studium*, the two late Barthesian concepts summarizing the regime of Myth and Degree Zero. Hence, dedication aside, Sartre is quoted in “Fragment 7”, regarding the adventure that a photo may or may not produce: after all, “without adventure, no photograph” (Barthes, 1981, p. 19).

A return to such Photography reveals unsurprisingly that the Saussurean Semiology for Barthes resumes the understanding of the image, namely, that Photography would be in the stream of consciousness, functioning as a metaphysically inferior element among others. In Barthes’ refashioning of Photography, Husserl and Sartre serve to redefine it as a sort of consciousness. “All the evil was born from the circumstance that one *came to the image with the idea of synthesis*, instead of extracting a conception of synthesis from the reflection on the image itself,” writes Sartre (2007, p. 162,

our translation), highlighting “one came to the image”, hence alluding to the psychologies of the imagination, the Bourdieus of his time. With that in mind, Barthes perceives that the tendency is to say that what the photograph represents is fabricated and that the debate is vain.

In the mid-20th century in which the Barthes is inscribed, the standard photo and a denial of its standardization are deduced from all this controversy. Laruelle, after Barthes, seems to share this common ground and take it to another level, radicalizing the critique of the doxa and of the Myth in his account of the Legend of Philosophy in the Spirit of Photography. Both authors, in the end, converge in a negative stance on Photography, subtracting the Art of the Photo from Sociology and Philosophy in the name of an ontology of the Photo targeting the essence of the Photo or Photography *in itself*, without resource to supposedly material, materialistic externalizations, authorities, or contexts.

CONCLUSION

In summary, the first section on François Laruelle has drawn on the critique of philosophical makings as Photography’s

technique, a relation that figured the White, the Lights, the Clarity, and Vision as the photo-centric destiny of Western thought. In the second section on Roland Barthes, this study investigated the nature of Photography as research of its silver-salt ontology and effects. Both sections aimed to build a common ground for a Non-Standard Photography from which, in the third section, similarities and differences between the approaches of François Laruelle and Roland Barthes have been extracted.

In conclusion, this study sought a non-standard stance on the Art of Photography (practice) and the Science of Photography (theory). The distinction between standard and non-standard approaches to the Art and Science of Photography highlights a fundamental opposition: the standard aligns with traditional philosophical frameworks based on binary structures, socio-political data, or the pursuit of totality, whereas the non-standard actively resists these discourses by reconfiguring thought and subordinating traditional philosophy to principles beyond its scope, such as science or essence. This shift not only limits the claims of philosophy to completeness, but also opens new paths for exploration. Concepts such as Non-Photography and Photo-Fiction exemplify this rupture by viewing photography as

an inherent process grounded in the “force of vision” rather than in reflexive representation. Ultimately, the non-standard fosters a transformative understanding of Photography, emphasizing its dynamic essence over static interpretations.

Our study wanted to envision an Art and Science of Photography of another kin and kind. We say “of another kin” as Photography has been envisioned in a system of relations other than the parentage of philosophical or sociological authorities, foregoing either Marxist or historicist narratives of industrial provenance or non-classical pedigree. We say “of another kind” as Photography has been captioned by descriptions that neither reduce it to realistic-naturalistic genres of discourse nor try to standardize it in a critique of technique and modernity. Hence the affiliation relations (kin) and familiar essence (kind) of Photography are heavily disfigured and, for that very reason, ever more attractive.

In short, if for Laruelle Photography is the task of Science, hence a Science-Fiction of Photography or Photo-Fiction, for Barthes Photography is a *graphic* Art, hence Light Writing. In short, while Laruelle evinces the essence of Photography in-Art, Barthes shows the Art of Photography in-Writing. In their research on the essence of Photography, neither Barthes nor Laruelle serves as the employee

of the year in camera factories or as emissaries in the Institutes of the Lights. On the contrary, Barthes and Laruelle as researchers of Photography convert the Being of Photography in the essence of Photography, figuring it, rather than in static descriptions (*de esse*), in onto-dynamical inscriptions (*de essentia*). In the end, Roland Barthes and François Laruelle capture Photography in poses, modelings, and settings other than standard by their new captions.

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