History Begins at Home

Photography and Memory in the Writings of Siegfried Kracauer and Roland Barthes*

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For Geoffrey Wigoder, in memoriam

There is nothing more terrible, I learned, than having to face the objects of a dead man. Things are inert: they have meaning only in function of the life that makes use of them. When that life ends, the things change, even though they remain the same. They are there and yet not there: tangible ghosts, condemned to survive in a world they no longer belong to. What is one to think, for example, of a closetful of clothes waiting silently to be worn again by a man who will not be coming back to open the door?
Paul Auster, *The Invention of Solitude*[1]

INTRODUCTION

The idea for this article arose following several instances of personal loss in my family that led to death becoming far less abstract for me. Even prior to these concrete triggers, however, which had forced me to rethink my ideas about death and memory, I was inspired by a story narrated during a dinner party in an Upper West Side New York City apartment. The hostess was a well-established television correspondent for an American corporation network, whose work entailed rushing to

hot spots all over Latin America to report on political and natural disasters. Opposite her sat a photographer who had just completed a project about ancient Indian altars in Latin America that had survived destruction despite modern progress. Between the television reporter (who relied on startling events to shock the viewer into believing in the absolute significance of the present) and the photographer (who was engaged in eternalizing the distant past) sat our narrator and told us the true story of someone whose past had suddenly caught up with him in an unexpected way.

Forty-nine years after the end of the Second World War, Stephen Bleyer walked into a bookshop in Montreal and came across a book of never before published photographs from the Russian archives, following the collapse of the communist block. As he leafed through the pages of the book, filled with photographs taken by Russian soldiers of concentration camp victims during the liberation of Auschwitz, he suddenly came across a photograph of a youth looking over his shoulder toward the camera (figure 1). The boy's skeletal body made him barely recognizable. Bleyer suddenly felt faint and had to sit down on the bookshop steps. After a moment, he started to roll up his sleeve in a jerky movement and uncovered the number tattooed on his arm. He compared this serial number (an impersonal proof of identity) with the "represented" and indexical number in the photograph, inscribed on a board below the wooden box that served as a seat for the young man. The numbers matched. Bleyer rose from the steps and approached the cashier, who was busy calculating other sorts of numbers on the cash register. She reached out her hand to take the book, expecting to clear the magnetic code that would identify the book and the price, but then looked utterly baffled by Bleyer's request: he asked her to verify the number on his arm against the number on the page.

After buying the book he contacted the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum where these photographs were now stored and asked for a copy and for more information. According to our narrator, Bleyer was faxed the full-frame photograph on an official museum page that added another dimension to looking at the anonymous youth in the book. He was now represented by three registers: an image-portrait, a serial number and an archival record—one identifying the photograph as a classified subject (Holocaust, camps, children, dates,) and placing it in a
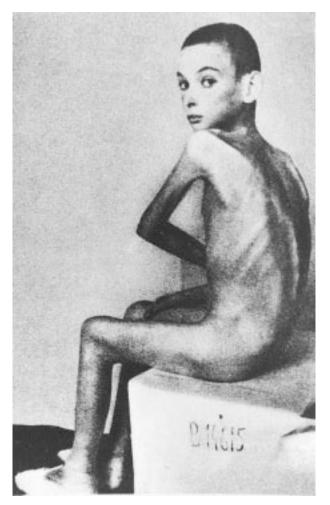
Fig. 1. Stephen Bleyer, Auschwitz, 1945. (Courtesy of
the State Museum Auschwitz-Birkenau in Oświęcim.)

larger collective context that historicized the personal portrait in relation to a scheme of genocide, providing visual proof of a past that many perpetrators had wished to deny and victims had wanted to forget or to recall selectively because of the pain that was involved in remembering.

What did this process of identification entail as Bleyer looked at the ghost of his past in a photograph that presented him as a stereotype of a camp survivor whom he barely recognized? He had to rely on a number that had a semiotic function to attest to an arbitrary order, a chance placement in a queue, and a systematic way of murder. Both the number on his arm and that on the board—B14615—written and printed on the skin/surface of the body/photograph, pertain to some sort of objective evidence, which does not rely on memory. His moment of detection relied also on nonrecognition: seeing himself as he had never been able to see himself in the camp, on the one hand, and finding it difficult to identify himself after so many years, on the other. The sudden and painful retrieval of the trauma, caused by this uncanny meeting with the past, led him to request the museum administration to change the generic title beside the photograph, which he had discovered was now hanging on the museum wall, and place his own name beside it.[2] Our narrator went on to add that this experience had given Bleyer the incentive to seek in other archives for newsreel footage from the concentration camp that might enable him to find his family members among the crowds. Thus, he set out to turn impersonal newsreels into a family album from which he could redeem the images of members of his family who had perished.

A while later I found myself experiencing my own personal shock at the discovery of my great-aunt's body in a hotel room. As soon as I had identified her, however, the paramedics immediately covered her face with a blanket and wanted to whisk the body away—according to the Jewish *Halakhah,* the dead body is contaminating and therefore must be buried on the same day. I insisted that they leave the room, wishing to have one last look at this much-loved relative whom I did not want to part from. Maybe it was my Irish-Catholic roots, or the pagan in me, that wanted to sit beside her for many hours and speak to her, especially as she still looked as if she was sleeping peacefully. I suddenly noticed that all her accouterments had become acutely visible, testifying in a strange way to all the intricate mechanical operations she had had to use

in order to go to sleep and wake up on a daily basis: hence, the room presented itself to me as a photograph whose details had become crisply clear because the person who had used all the objects in the room (the walking stick, the coffee thermos, the breathalyzer machine and all the pills neatly arranged in small bottles) had died. This effect was highlighted by the poster reproduction of an Impressionist painting by Monet that hung directly over the bed: it showed a group of women in a garden withdrawn in the background of the painting after having finished their meal. Left in the foreground was a boy who was playing on the ground beside a table where the painter presented the remains of the dinner. This still life would have never been effective without the departure of the figures from the foreground, and it illuminated the situation I was in: my great-aunt's most personal objects were visible because she had withdrawn from the world but was still present in the room.

In a few moments my aunt would arrive and deal with the loss of her favorite relative by immediately packing her clothes and literally "checking her out" from the hotel, as though the act of handing in the room key to the clerk at the desk was a symbolic act of separation that announced my great-aunt's final exit. (Prior to this, my aunt was to sift through my great-aunt's clothes in the closet and throw everything out except the clothes she herself had bought her, as if this possessive act was also able to declare her affection and bond.) But before my aunt arrived and the body was removed, leaving only its trace on the starched sheets of the hotel bed, I had time to think about an observation Maurice Blanchot made about the ritual of laying out the body in Catholic practices of mourning.[3] Death turns the body into a shadow; into a representation that is removed from reality, as we no longer look at the real person we know. Whom was I looking at? At the woman I had dined with a couple of days earlier, or at an image of a person that would fade the moment the body was removed and I would have to rely on photographs to remember her? I later thought of one of the major differences between Catholic and Jewish practices of mourning. The Catholic's laying out of the body for public inspection relies on a greater emphasis on the image as ornament, enabling the body itself to function as a sign for the deceased person, which must be viewed in order to achieve separation. In the Jewish tradition, burying the body on the same day leads the mourners during the *shiv'ah* (the seven days of ritual

mourning) to emphasize the *oral* practice of temporarily bringing the dead back to life by recalling stories of what they had done and said in the past. Later, the entire commemorative ritual of remembering will rely on the *Kaddish* prayer that helps the mourners call forth the name of the deceased, either privately or loudly into the public space of the congregation during prayer, to show the importance of the name and the utterance in the act of remembrance.

Both Jewish and Catholic practices raise questions about the difference between the function of memory and the use of images as a *memento mori* to retrieve the past. Are photographs able to recuperate the "essence" of the person we love? Do photographs invigorate our memories or only prove that a person existed? I shall try to address these questions by discussing Siegfried Kracauer's and Roland Barthes' writings on photography and the function mental images have in mediating between the past and us. I shall rely on three of Kracauer's publications in which photography is discussed: The "Photography" (1927) essay was written in his early Weimar period. His book *Film Theory* (1960) starts with a short summary of the history of photography. Later, almost forty years after the initial essay on photography, he took the subject up again in his book *History: The Last Things before the Last* (1969).[4] I will discuss the difference between Kracauer's early and late writings in relation to Barthes' writings on photography, which can also be divided roughly into two periods. In his early writings on photography his semiotic and structuralist approaches to language and culture influenced his reading of photographs in articles such as "The Photographic Message" (1961), "The Third Meaning" (1970) and "Rhetoric of the Image"(1964). But in *Camera Lucida* (1980), Barthes' writing became more personal and this impacted upon his reading of photographs as being capable of transparency and without a code.[5]

I shall illustrate the theoretical discussion with a sample of photographs from a family album given to me by my great-aunt, Mona Lillian, and which had belonged to her sister, Paula Ruby, who was my grandmother. Ruby pasted the photographs, captions and dates in a meticulous linear order, starting from her birth and leading to her acting career, her marriage and the birth of her children. Thus, during her retirement, she filled her leisure time in the present by being preoccupied with the past in order to ward off her impending death in the fu-

ture—creating such albums was her own way of immortalizing herself and rekindling her stage career that had ended prematurely following her marriage.[6]

GRANDMOTHER'S GARMENTS

My grandmother is posing in a studio as the eponymous heroine of a famous historical play (figure 2). The click of the camera has frozen her and removed her from the flow of time. A small colored aureole that was added during the retouching of the photograph has given her a ground that is meant to distinguish her theatrical presence from the flat surface of the photographic paper (a commodity that will be used to advertise her skills and later end up in the family album). The aura created by this artificial colored cocoon gives the impression that she has just emerged from a genie's bottle capable of storing time. She stands on the tinted ground next to a shawl, which adds a naturalistic "oriental" detail. Such descriptive detail was common among nineteenth-century painters and photographers who wanted to bring reality into the studio and juxtapose it with the artificial pose of the subject. The pose, on the other hand, belonged to a more predictable rhetoric of gestures; it enabled the sitters to assume a social pose, which they thought was expected of them by their peers, or to adopt an attitude they imagined other respectable people had performed in the past. The elderly woman I remembered still had the same expression in her eyes. Her experience in the theater made her automatically strike a pose whenever a camera was directed at her.

"Is this what grandmother looked like?" asks Kracauer at the start of the "Photography" essay, as though he was actually scrutinizing a photograph. The question instills doubts about the capability of photography to represent the essence of a person and cajole us into remembering people. Several issues are at stake: Kracauer argues that "were it not for the oral tradition, the image alone would not have sufficed to reconstruct the grandmother's identity." Only subjective memory and knowledge of the grandmother, transmitted by generations of her family, could lead to a true understanding of her personality. But once her contemporaries are gone, who can attest that this is truly a photograph of a particular grandmother? Maybe it is simply someone

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who resembles her? In fact, in the course of time, the grandmother turns into just "any young girl of 1864." Moreover, once she dies the mimetic function of the photograph is also irrelevant for there is no longer a need to compare the image to its referent. Her smile may have been arrested by the camera but "no longer refers to the life from which it has been taken. Likeness has ceased to be of any help. The smiles of mannequins in beauty parlors are just as rigid and perpetual," writes Kracauer.[7]

Grandmother's old-style garments become a metaphor for the disparity between fashion and history. Kracauer claims that "photography is bound to time in precisely the same way as *fashion*. Since the latter has no significance other than as current garb, it is translucent when modern and abandoned when old."[8] In making an analogy between photography and fashion, Kracauer was targeting the proliferation of current-event photography in the Weimar Republic. He perceived the surge of photographs in the illustrated press as a sign of a culture afraid of death. Mechanical reproduction replicated a culture that was attuned to fashion and technical innovation, enabling the snapshot to create a world that had taken on a "photographic face." In this self-satisfied narcissistic mood of self-replication the flood of photographs "sweeps away the dams of memory and the sheer accumulation of photographs aims at banishing the recollection of death, which is part and parcel of every memory image."[9] In this sort of mood photography is unable to resurrect the dead because even the recent past appears totally outdated.

Memory images

Kracauer finds memory images far more useful. History can only be brought back through the medium of subjectivity. He sees Proust's *mémoire involontaire* as the perfect model. A person is able to condense or embellish memory, unlike the photograph that in the passage of time only appears to darken, decay and shrink in proportions. The camera is capable only of capturing a brief moment that accentuates space rather than temporality. The medium of subjective memory, however, can shatter the space-time configuration in order to piece the salvaged fragments together into a new meaningful order. Kracauer notes that when the grandmother stood in front of the camera "she was present for

Fig. 2. Paula Ruby Wigoder as Cleopatra, 1926.

one second in the spatial continuum that presented itself to the lens. And it was this aspect and not the grandmother that was eternalized."[10] In contrast, the memory image is capable of giving the impression of the whole person because it condenses the subject into a single unforgettable image: "the last image of a person is that person's actual *history*," writes Kracauer, and it is presented by the *monogram* "that condenses the name into a single graphic figure which is meaningful as an ornament."[11] Another form of condensation takes place in the making of a painting. The history painter does not paint his subject in order to present him in a naturalistic setting, but instead, through many sittings, aims to achieve an idea-image that captures the spirit of the sitter. Photography, on the other hand, is limited to showing us the appearance of the subject. It does not enable us to penetrate through the outer veneer to find the essence of the subject. This superficiality extends to the inability of photography to divulge the process of cognition of history. Kracauer regards photographs as a heap of garbage, as merely able to stockpile the elements of nature without a selective process.

In the closing pages of his "Photography" essay Kracauer makes an unexpected turn in his argument. Photography is given a role in the study of history. Suddenly, the mute surface appearance of the photograph that was impenetrable to probing the essence of the subject becomes an advantage. The photograph can only signify meaning in hindsight once the personal value of the image has been diminished after the grandmother and her grandchildren have died and the garments merely look peculiar. Moreover, in Kracauer's dialectical fashion, the fault he found in photography's capacity to simply stockpile the elements of nature becomes an asset once the photographs are piled and viewed *en masse* "in unusual combinations, which distance them from human proximity." In this new order, belonging to the "general inventory" of the archive, photography can yield information that had hitherto gone unnoticed. In writing that "it is the task of photography to disclose this previously unexamined *foundation of nature*," Kracauer anticipates Benjamin's definition of photography's optical unconscious that enables an image to store and release meanings that were neither perceived by the photographer nor recognized by his peers.[12] Kracauer notes that "for the first time in history, photography brings to light the entire natural cocoon; for the first time, the inert world presents itself in its indepen-

dence from human beings." Photography is able to change perspective through showing us aerial views and bringing "crockets and figures down from Gothic cathedrals."[13] Hence, there is a tension between photography's capacity to negate history by dwelling on the moment and its capacity to release the residues of nature that were previously invisible and open up new ways of interpreting reality later on. Once the interest in redeeming the singular subject disappears, leaving no need for the photographs to perform the task of resurrecting the dead as a *memento mori*, then the function of the archive becomes important: the collection of photographs, lying in hundreds of boxes and waiting to be sorted, evokes the image of an orphanage. In this jumble of homeless images, one can suddenly find a new order that enables reality to be examined critically through the use of film montage, the photographic collage, and through adopting a surrealistic approach that estranges reality.

The unseen photograph of the "unique being"

In *Camera Lucida,* a book Barthes described as his "last investigation," as though he envisaged his own unexpected death shortly afterwards, his writing became more personal. He searches for the quintessential image of his mother, which he criticizes photography for not being able to provide him. The photograph of his mother, which he eventually finds, becomes his guide, like Ariadne's thread, for his entire desire to understand the meaning of photography; an investigation that leads him to characterize photographs as wounds that are capable of resurrecting very strong personal traumas. His search for his mother's photograph starts on a November evening, shortly after her death.[14] He sits in her apartment looking through some photographs with very little hope of "finding" her because he understands one of the agonizing features of mourning: no matter how many times he might consult the photographs of his mother, he will not be able to "summon them up as a totality." He only finds fragments of her that he is also able to recall from his memory but which are unable to produce "a living resurrection of the beloved face." Photographs from her distant past make him realize that history separates him from her, as he sees her now in ways he had never witnessed during his lifetime. "Is History not simply that time when we

were not born?" asks Barthes, and adds, "I could read my nonexistence in the clothes my mother had worn before I can remember her." "Grandmother's garments" as seen in Kracauer's essay, take on a different meaning for Barthes. Seeing a photograph of his mother from 1913 leads him to remark that "there is a kind of stupefaction in seeing a familiar being dressed *differently.*" Like the peculiar effect the old clothes were shown to have on contemporary spectators, in Kracauer's essay, Barthes too realizes that his mother is "caught in a History" of taste that distracts him from his personal view of her. However, unlike Kracauer, he does not perceive the photograph as a timeless testimony of the way people looked, which made the former describe the clothes as remaining intact on a body that has turned into a mannequin; instead, the clothes only reinforce the materiality of the subject's body as Barthes notes that clothing too is "perishable," making "a second grave for the loved being" who is visible in the photograph. This leads him to conclude that a photograph of a person whose existence preceded our own constitutes the "very tension of history" because its existence relies on our ability to consider, observe and contemplate it, yet, "in order to look at it, we must be excluded from it."[15] History, as the time that existed "before me," is what interests Barthes because it cannot entail any anamnesis.

Barthes paradoxically searches in photographs for the *monogram-matic image* of his mother, which Kracauer argued that only subjective memory could give: namely, "the last image of a person is that person's actual *history.*" Nonetheless, Barthes reverses Kracauer's axiom when he finally finds the essential photograph of his mother, not in the last images from her life but in the earliest photograph of her as a child, which serves more as a premonition of what she will become than as an indication for him of what she had been. Barthes is in fact caught in a division between pre-self history (the photograph of his mother before he was born) and anamnesis (his recollections of his mother). The photograph shows her at the age of five and her brother at the age of seven standing by a wooden bridge in a glassed-in conservatory, known in those days as a Winter Garden. For the first time a photograph is able to give him "a sentiment as certain as remembrance," which leads him to experience an involuntary and complete memory of the kind Proust experienced one day when "leaning over to take off his boots, there

suddenly came to him his grandmother's true face 'whose living reality he was experiencing for the first time'." For this reason, the Winter Garden photograph was no "ordinary" photograph that merely presented him with an "analogical" testimony of her identity, but instead "was indeed essential" and achieved for him "utopically the impossible science of the unique being."[16] Where did this utopian being exist? Possibly somewhere between the camera's mechanical ability to record her presence and his own ability to find in the young girl's eyes the expression of "sovereign innocence" that made it possible for him to read her entire good-natured personality in her eyes: "I saw the kindness which had formed her being immediately and forever," writes Barthes.[17] This is also the photograph that he is unwilling to show us because it exists "only for me. For you, it would be nothing but an indifferent picture, one of the thousand manifestations of the 'ordinary'."[18] He resorts to a famous photograph by Nadar as a substitute photograph, which carries an ambiguity as to whether it is the photographer's mother or wife, to explain the quality of the experience he found in looking at his mother's photograph: it "contained more than what the technical being of photography can reasonably offer."[19]

While Kracauer relied on a metaphysical and materialist reading of images in his early writings, Barthes made use of phenomenology to combine a concrete reading of photographic objects with the need to emphasize the role that mental intentions (reception, retention and projection) perform on them. In *L'Imaginaire,* Jean-Paul Sartre, to whom Barthes dedicates *Camera Lucida,* makes a distinction between the photograph, the caricature, the sign and the mental image, in a section aptly titled "The Image of the Family." A photograph can show us the person's features but still fail to show character because it "lacks life" and does not reflect "his expression." A mental image may be equally imperfect because it lacks clarity. The person we see in the photograph may invoke a completely different image to that of the person we know in our minds. Hence, we become aware of our ability to animate the photograph, "of lending it life in order to make an image of it."[20] This is precisely the process Barthes undergoes in his reading of the old 1898 sepia print of his mother whose corners have been blunted "from having been pasted into an album."[21]

THE FAMILY POSE: THE GRAMMAR OF PHOTOGRAPHY
ACCORDING TO BARTHES

"Photography," writes Barthes, "began historically as an art of the Person: of identity, of civil status, of what we might call, in all senses of the term, the body's *formality*."[22] The nature of photography is founded by the pose. What makes the photograph different from any other type of art is that it is a certification of a presence. The simple paradigm of life/death is reduced to a click of the camera that separates the pose from the final print.[23] In early societies, Barthes notes, memory, the substitute for life, becomes eternal because the monument upholds the very immortality of death. "But by making the (mortal) Photograph into the general and somehow natural witness of 'what has been,' modern society has renounced the Monument." This results in a paradox:

> The same century invented History and Photography. But history is a memory fabricated according to positive formulas, a pure intellectual discourse which abolishes mythic Time; and the photograph is a certain but fugitive testimony; so that everything, today, prepares our race for this impotence; to be no longer able to conceive of *duration*, effectively and symbolically; the age of the photograph is also the age of revolutions, contestations, assassinations, explosions, in short, of everything which denies ripening.[24]

Photography and death represent a complex relationship. Looking at the persons in the photograph can bring them to life in the mind of the viewer: "photography has something to do with resurrection," writes Barthes; yet photographers determined to capture actuality are also described as "the agents of death," despite the fact that they may stage photographs to give the impression of life to ward off death. Kracauer similarly described the purpose of the proliferation of photography magazines in Germany that distracted people from the fear of dying because they emphasized current events. The most crucial analysis of photographs that Barthes undertakes involves providing photography with a grammatical tense. "The photograph does not necessarily say *what is no longer*," writes Barthes, "but only and for certain *what has been*." This distinction is decisive. In front of a photograph "our consciousness

does not necessarily take the nostalgic path of memory."[25] For this reason Barthes chooses the tense of the absolute distant past that has nothing to do with speech and belongs to narrative and history; it is the formal grammatical tense whose inscriptions we find on gravestones. Barthes writes: "not only is the Photograph never, in essence, a memory (whose grammatical expression would be the perfect tense, whereas the tense of the Photograph is the aorist), but it actually blocks memory, quickly becomes a counter-memory."[26] However, Barthes is inconsistent in that he noted earlier in the book that "the name of photography's *noeme* will therefore be: That-has-been, or again: the Intractable."[27] This is the perfect tense, which Barthes characterizes as the time of memory. However, we realize Barthes is not seeking to recover lost time in a Proustian sense but rather to acknowledge that photographs shock us precisely because they are incapable of retrieving the past. All they can do is to attest that a "now" in the past existed.

Barthes considers that the sense of wonder that used to occur to many observers when looking at early photographs is no longer. Such a sensation, however, still exists for him, especially at the start of *Camera Lucida,* when he discusses the photograph of Napoleon's youngest brother, Jerome, taken in 1852. Barthes realizes in amazement that "I am looking at the eyes that looked at the Emperor."[28] This triangulation of his gaze looking at a person who looked at the Emperor can be found elsewhere in the triangular time-formula Barthes gives for looking at historical photographs. A photograph of the road to Bethlehem, taken by August Salzmann in 1850, shows nothing but the stony ground and olive trees. "Three tenses dizzy my consciousness," writes Barthes, "my present, the time of Jesus, and that of the photographer, all this under the instance of 'reality'." The dizzying effect Barthes alludes to in historical photographs is a sort of mise-en-abîme of history (like a hall of mirrors) that causes "this vertigo of time defeated."[29] Barthes is referring to the ability of the historical photograph to contain a "defeat of time" that alludes to a double absence: in the example of the photograph of Lewis Payne in his cell waiting to be hanged, the *anterior future* declares both that this person is going to die and that he is already dead.[30]

PRESENT-ABSENTEES: THE PHOTOGRAPHER, THE STRANGER
AND THE HISTORIAN

Forty years after writing his "Photography" essay, Kracauer returned to
the subject in his books *Theory of Film* and *History: The Last Things
before the Last*. The Proustian subjective process of *mémoire involontaire*
that Kracauer relied on in his early writings is replaced by an image of
photographic self-alienation to describe the condition of detachment that
is necessary for the cognition of history. In what can only be described
as "the return of the grandmother," Kracauer again reverts to Proust by
choosing a scene from *The Guermantes Way* as a paradigm for the
relationship between the photographer, the stranger and the historian.
Marcel enters unannounced into his grandmother's living room after not
having seen her for a long time. "I was in the room, or rather I was not
yet in the room since she was not aware of my presence," writes Proust.
The meaning of this line hinges on the narrator's ability to be *present* but
at the same time *absent* as long as an exchange of gazes does not take
place between him and his grandmother. The sight of his grandmother
sitting and reading on the sofa is likened to a photograph that is
presented mechanically before the eyes of an observer, who suddenly
feels that all he has known and felt for his grandmother has vanished
because, for a brief moment, he is able to see her real character, "heavy
and common, sick, lost in thought ... a dejected old woman" whom he
suddenly does not know.[31]

In *History* Kracauer explains that Marcel's "vacant mind" (the
ability to be self-effaced and turn into a detached stranger) enables him
to perceive his grandmother as she really is because he has divested
himself from the "complete Marcel" (the lover who has subjective
memories and knowledge of her). Consequently, Marcel's "inner
picture" of his grandmother yields to a photographic representation of
her precisely at the moment when "the loving person shrinks into an
impersonal stranger" who is not influenced by his memories of her.[32]
From a Proustian point of view the scene lends itself to becoming a
photograph because the passivity of the observer is likened to the notion
of the camera as an objective mirror. Kracauer disagrees and claims that
Marcel's vision of his grandmother is more complex. He envisions a
palimpsest situation that enables Marcel the stranger to superimpose

himself on Marcel the lover whose inscription is temporarily effaced. Similarly, he compares this dialectical sensibility to the way photography combines a "realistic" and a "formative" approach. The nineteenth-century definition of the subjectless camera that merely records the world is replaced with the belief that the camera is able to convey the subjective creative will of the photographer through his choice of filters, camera angles and printing styles.

The "palimpsest sensibility" that so far characterizes the dialectical relations of the stranger/lover and the formative/realistic approaches in photography is supported by another comparison between the detached vision of the photographer and that of the stranger that Marcel performed before his grandmother. The stranger resides in a space of "extraterritoriality." He lives either in enforced or free-willed exile that causes him to be severed from his roots and culture. The new and old identities reside together in a state of flux and uncertainty that ensures "he will never belong to the community to which he now in a way belongs."[33] The condition of being somewhere and nowhere and of carrying one's past identity into a new surrounding produces the palimpsest sensibility; this is the realm of the stranger that Kracauer claims has ceased to belong:

> Where then does he live? In the near-vacuum of extra-territoriality, the very no-man's land which Marcel entered when he first caught sight of his grandmother. The exile's true mode of existence is that of the stranger. So he may look at his previous existence with the eyes of one "who does not belong to the house."[34]

The next turn in Kracauer's argument is to compare the stranger with the historian and his methodological approach to the study of the past. The photographic relationship between the "realistic" and the "formative" approaches are compared to the "passive activity" of the historian's journey during the research and interpretation of historical material later on. When the historian sifts through the primary material he resembles the stranger as his thoughts ambulate between the past and the present with no fixed abode. Like Marcel, the historian must be detached and self-effaced at the first stages in order to prevent his theoretical ideas from obstructing the "unexpected facts" that "perhaps

turn out to be incompatible with his original assumptions."[35] Then, the historian's subjectivity enters at the stage of interpreting the material. A gray area exists between the ability of the material to do its own talking and the historian's subjective skills as a story teller. For Kracauer, self-effacement does not imply a quest to reach an objective state of knowledge. Instead, objectivity is replaced by "unmitigated subjectivity." The historian's journey does not imply an ability to divide history into universal abstractions and neat epochs. He is free to move from the present to the past as he pleases and, to use a reference to mythology, "must return to the upper world and put his booty to good use."[36] Elsewhere in *History*, Kracauer cites another example of the historian's journey from darkness to light to describe this freedom of mobility:

> Like Orpheus the historian must descend into the nether world to bring the dead back to life. How far will they follow his allurements and evocations? They are lost to him when, re-emerging into the sunlight of the present, he turns for fear of losing them. But does he not for the first time take possession of them at this very moment—the moment when they forever depart, vanishing in a history of his own making?[37]

History is thus perceived as the moment in which the past is petrified into an image. Orpheus's journey from darkness to light evokes for me the process of printing a photograph. The image is developed in the dark room. A precise amount of time marks the journey in which it emerges from the paper, making its way to visibility like Euridyce's ascent to reality—*the return of the dead*. An impatient photographer, who prematurely turning on the light to see the photograph before it has been transferred from the developer to the fixative bath that protects it from fogging, like Orpheus looking back over his shoulder, would cause the image to vanish. Both Orpheus and the photographer are tested for their patience; their faith relies on a prerequisite to wait. Both take hold of reality precisely at the moment when they lose sight of it.

"Time exposure" versus the "snapshot"
in the family photograph

We have discussed the difference between Kracauer's early and later attitudes to photography. The "Photography" essay relied on a Proustian model of subjective memory to recover the past. At this stage photography was presented as a subjectless technical instrument capable only of capturing a spatial configuration of a temporal instant that is incommensurable with history, which can only be brought back by a memory image. In Kracauer's later writings, the analogy between "camera reality" and "historical reality" aims to explain a relationship between photography and history that revolves around the concept of estrangement as a precondition for the ability of the historian to retrieve the past and interpret it. In both his early and late writings, the figure of a grandmother plays a crucial role. In the "Photography" essay, the image of the grandmother was related to how we perceive the past, whereas in the *History* book the image of the grandmother that Kracauer borrows from Proust serves to illustrate the present; one deals with the photographic object and the other with photographic vision. Barthes' later writings on photography also deal with two major ways of interpreting the photographic object: unlike other forms of representation in art, photography's referential character and absolute indexality create a concrete relationship between reality and its copy on the surface of the photograph. Once this is established, it gives way to a more subjective way of reading photographs that emphasizes the receptive role of the viewer. Barthes' reliance on a phenomenological approach to the study of mental images enabled him, like Kracauer, to rely on Proust and on the subjective import we bring to looking at photographs.

Kracauer's and Barthes' definitions of photography, however, do not sufficiently address the notions of time that can occur as a result of different types of photographic exposure. In order to make some finer distinctions on the subject, and bearing in mind what has been discussed so far, I shall make use of two examples from my own family album. Both photographs were taken in Dublin, on two separate occasions: the first shows the male members of my Jewish immigrant family during a celebration (figure 3); the second shows my father and my grandfather walking in College Avenue, not far from Trinity College (figure 4). (In

Fig. 3. The Wigoder family in Dublin.

Fig. 4. Louis and Geoffrey Wigoder walking in College Avenue, Dublin.

the second photograph, my father is approximately the same age as his father was in the first photograph, standing on the right side of the group portrait.) The second photograph was taken by an enterprising commercial street photographer, who had snapped them without asking permission and then offered to sell the photograph, which they were surprised to receive. It is precisely the vertical angle of this photograph that gives the street scene its impression of movement and highlights the chance nature of their walk; in contrast, the impression of stillness, in the first photograph, is partially due to the horizontal composition that roots the subjects to the ground.

In his article on the photographic paradox, Thierry de Duve discusses the distinction between photographs that act as "pictures" and those that act as "events."[38] The photograph as "picture" is an autonomous representation of reality that curiously ceases to refer to anything outside itself, especially when it is framed and hung on a wall; here it represents the real as a frozen gestalt. The photograph as "event," in contrast, makes us aware that it is only a fragment from reality, which calls attention to the fact that something has been frozen precisely because life is continuing outside the frame. The photo-portrait is an example of a "picture": "whether of a live or a dead person, the portrait is funerary in nature; a monument. Acting as a reminder of times that have died away, it sets up landmarks of the past." While this kind of "picture" gives the impression that something has been witnessed that no longer exists, the "event" produces a paradoxical effect of capturing life but not being able to convey it. Hence, "whereas the snapshot refers to the fluency of time without conveying it, the time exposure petrifies the time of the referent and denotes it as departed."[39] De Duve claims that the portrait "picture" is conducive to the family album because "time exposure is congenial with the ebb and flow of memory" as it "does not limit its reference to the particular time when the photograph was taken, but allows the imaginary reconstruction of any moment of the life of the portrayed person to be imagined." Hence, the charm of a photo album relies on the fact that while each photograph is a landmark in a person's lifetime, memory is able to shuffle "in between landmarks, and can erect on any of them the totality of this life."[40]

On a recent family visit to Ireland, in search of our Jewish and Irish Catholic roots, we trotted around the Jewish landmarks in Dublin. My

father was the guide and his sudden recollection of street names and directions surprised even himself, who had always claimed to have such a bad memory. In the Jewish museum the family photographs (of which my father's family had contributed a few) had received captions, which placed them outside the immediate private context of the family album and turned them into a testimony of a small community whose faces and dress one observed as types. But once my father became our guide, his knowledge of the people in the photographs and his ability to recount so many anecdotes about their lives again reversed our way of looking at them and caused the inevitable question to be raised: was his oral testimony no less important than the photographs, or maybe even more significant? I recall thinking this while I was battling simultaneously with a technical decision. Being unable to include both my father and the exhibited photographs in the frame of the video camera, I briefly wondered what was the more important to show—the photographs or my father describing them as he pointed his index finger at the different people he knew. (In fact, I chose the effective way of showing the photographs while letting the viewer hear their description on the sound track.)

Aided by my father's memory, my great-grandfather's autobiography and the ghost of Joyce's Bloom roaming the streets of Dublin, we started to visit the former residences of relatives who were no longer alive. My aunt insisted on going to almost every address where our relatives had lived, as though visiting the "real" locations would guarantee us some access to the past. I was more skeptical. Would a new modern house, albeit in the "right" location, give me any indication of the past or would it have been more useful for me to see an older house, even in a different location, in order to have a sense of the way people had lived? The indifference I felt for these locations changed once we arrived at my great-grandfather's house, for one single reason: I was able to fabricate a memory of the location based on the old photograph of my great-grandfather and his sons who were posing for the photograph in the backyard of their home, which the commercial photographer had turned into an outdoor studio. Hence, I conflated the sight of the front of the house, in the present, with the photograph of its backyard, in the past, thereby projecting a mental image onto the house that now served as a screen.

Three tenses jockey for position in this group portrait: the photograph marks an event in the present that its members want to document for posterity while the celebration is actually taking place off frame, probably inside the house. The fashionable elegant dress they wear contrasts with the shabby wall and the vine that serve the photographer as the background for his makeshift studio. The out-of-focus wall recalls picturesque photographs of decay whose purpose is to record the way bits of the past still exist in the present in order to convey melancholy. But there is also a future conditional tense embedded in the social meaning of this group photograph: it is impossible to appreciate the figures' modern (for the times) dress without noticing that they are standing with their polished shoes on the muddy ground of a working-class backyard, where the facilities existed outside the house. The photograph represents the genealogy of two family generations: the seated bearded man, Meir Joel Wigoder, after whom I am named, arrived in Dublin from Lithuania. His eldest son Harry, who is seated on the left, was responsible for the family business and enabled his two younger brothers to study dentistry at Trinity College. (They were the first Jewish students to graduate in that field from Trinity.) Hence, my grandfather's debonair pose, standing in a three-quarter view with his hands in his pockets, actually implies a future event that he is anticipating, aware of his responsibility to finish his studies and migrate to the north of England, where he and his brother were to advance the family on the social ladder and become respectable middle- and upper-middle-class members of society.

But for now, my grandfather and the rest of the men in the family are dressed up in rented attire, which they will have to return the following day after the celebration. Unlike the modern air of his sons, my great-grandfather, who is the centerpiece of this group portrait, actually belongs to the late nineteenth century: his coat does not fit and even the hat seems slightly out of place. His seated pose recalls to mind Kracauer's connection between photography and fashion. He noted that a photograph from the recent past that "claims to be alive" can appear more outdated than the representation of a past that existed long ago. Grandchildren observing the recently worn outfit of their grandmother find it comical because "it would hide the legs of a modern girl."[41] In our photograph, however, it is not the passage of time that creates the

comical tension between the present and the past. It is this bearded man who is hiding an old body in a clearly borrowed and overlarge suit that makes us smile. The hat and coat already cling to him as they did to the grandmother in the photograph once she had died and become a mere mannequin in Kracauer's example.

The way each member poses is also compelling. My great-grand-father's hands rest on his laps and are unable to attest to his beautiful Hebrew calligraphy as he sat day after day in a framer's shop in Dublin writing religious scripture while selling the pictures of Catholic saints that he hung reluctantly on the walls. His narrowed eyes cannot attest to his limited attention to local affairs, as reflected in his diary where, on one of the most important days in the calendar of Irish history, on the week of the Easter uprising, he was only worried about a single thing: would his son be able to go out safely and buy the unleavened bread for the Passover meal? His sons are much more adept at posing for the camera. Three of them look directly at the lens and in doing so they define the transparent border between us and their world, which keeps them so separate from us. Only one brother looks away from the camera and gives the impression that there is a world beyond; the way he hugs his youngest brother breaks up the slight formality of the scene as well. The boy looks at the camera with that special gaze children have when they look straight at you but are also able to be somewhere else in their mind—for the young boy the camera exists not so much as a recording eye that is singling out his existence, but more as a good excuse for him to join the adult world of his brothers, who are clearly much older. Finally, it is the eldest brother, the provider and clever entrepreneur of the family, who reveals a far more relaxed pose than the rest of the members in the photograph, as he sits sideways, crossing his legs and folding his hands around the chair's backrest.

My family portrait belongs to the sensibility of "time exposure" whose aesthetic structure was initially practiced in the nineteenth-century portrait tradition, which relied on having the sitters face the camera and remain immobile for long durations of time. Although our photograph was taken during a period when snapshot cameras enabled swift photography in the streets of the city, this particular type of portrait was still made with a large format camera, which enabled the sitters to prepare themselves for the photograph. Their motions are arrested twice:

once by the pose they strike before the camera, seconds before the photograph is taken, as though the force of the lens has already petrified them; and a second time, by the click of the camera that instantly separates them from the present they wish to preserve. Walter Benjamin, who was captivated by the effect that nineteenth-century portraits had on viewers, wrote that in the early daguerrotypes the effect of the prolonged sitting gave the impression that these photographs were set up to last for a long time: "One needs only look at Schelling's coat," remarked Benjamin, as "it enters almost unnoticed into immortality; the forms which it assumes on its wearer are not unworthy of the folds in his face."[42] According to Benjamin, the stiff pose betrayed a condition of impotence of an entire generation in the face of technical progress in the mid-nineteenth century. The direct look of the sitters encapsulated them in their cocoon while the stillness that was required of them by the long exposure was felt in the general impression of silence they exuded. "The procedure itself," wrote Benjamin, "caused the models to live, not out of the instant, but *into* it; during the long exposure they grew, as it were, into the image."[43] Benjamin evokes an image of becoming that recalls the actual way the figures emerge on the photographic paper during the developing stage.

De Duve's exposition of "time exposure" bares a similarity to Benjamin's description, with one major difference. While there is a tinge of melancholy in Benjamin's fascination with the aura of the first portraits and the way the sitters have been fixed in time like insects in amber, De Duve describes the subjects' process of turning into objects on the surface of the photograph, not as a process of emerging, but as a procedure in which time is siphoned out to create a photograph that represents a situation in which "the past tense, as hypothetical model, would freeze in a sort of infinitive, and offer itself as the empty form of all potential tenses." De Duve defines this state as the absolute zero degree:

> The time exposure doesn't refer to life as process, evolution, diachrony, as does the snapshot. It deals with an imaginary life that is autonomous, discontinuous, and reversible, because this life has no location other than the surface of the photograph. By the same token it doesn't frame that kind of surface death characteristic of

the snapshot, which is the shock of time splitting into *not anymore* and *not yet*. It refers to death as a state of what has been: the fixity and defection of time, its absolute zero.[44]

De Duve's definition of time exposure recalls how nineteenth-century caricaturists depicted the photographer standing by his camera with little to do but to look at his watch until the exposure was over. Could the duration of time exposure be visible in the enforced stillness of the sitters? The mystery of making a photograph, according to Stanley Cavell, "lies not in the machinery which produces it, but in the unfathomable abyss between what it captures (its subjects) and what is captured for us (*this* fixing of the subject), the metaphysical wait between exposure and exhibition, the absolute authority or finality of the fixed image."[45] The image of the photographer waiting passively for the long exposure to be completed recalls Kracauer's evocation of Marcel standing at the doorway of his grandmother's room.

We have already discussed this idea earlier, of the photographer/stranger disconnecting himself in order to be able to see the grandmother objectively. Kracauer's disagreement with Proust led him to emphasize the importance of the subjective and projective qualities of the photographer's ability to make aesthetic judgments. Even in candid photographs there was a process of selection, which led Kracauer to describe the street photographer as an "explorer" with a melancholic disposition, strolling aimlessly in the streets intent on finding his elegiac objects.[46] It is into the contingent realm of street photography that my father and grandfather entered unknowingly, in the second photograph, as they walked into the commercial photographer's frame not far from Trinity College, from where my father had also graduated and is seen here wearing the university scarf. Their sudden abduction from reality recalls the way Proust described photography's "affinity for the indeterminate."[47] Kracauer refers to Proust's description of another image-photograph of an Academician leaving the Institute. The street photograph is unable to present the dignified pose and general type of personality of the person but only the momentary action as he tries to hail a cab. For Proust this implied that photography cannot be entirely selective and its role was mainly to record "unshaped nature" as it appeared in all its disorderly details.

Of all the photographs I have of my father, I chose this particular one for my desk for two reasons. I found this snapshot to be a remarkable feat because the photographer had succeeded in providing a "natural" photograph of my father and grandfather (it is the only photograph from that period in which my family members are not posing) as well as a good street scene that relies on recordng the anonymity of the pedestrians, and which now gave me the privilege of being able to identify my father and grandfather. This was the photograph I had never had of myself walking with my father. By looking at it I was able to project my deep affection for a person who had introduced me to the art of walking. It enabled me to recall our first walks to synagogue in my childhood, as well as countless strolls in London and New York, where we had had our best conversations and expressed our keenness for fun. For my father, as for the flâneur, the city was a text of signs that enabled his creative mind to engage in puns and especially to use street names and plaques to recount the past. He was a walking encyclopedia who came to life when he strolled in Jewish graveyards and when he read the obituary columns, joyous of other persons' achievements and with the gift of engaging in oral history.[48]

This photograph acted as my madeleine and produced for me my own Proustian moment. When I first saw it my entire attention was captivated by the fold in my father's coat that was created by the thrust of his stride and his open gait. The fold exists here only because the camera was able to fix it and remove it from time. Not only did this fold become a metonymy for the entire art of walking I had so much enjoyed sharing with my father, but it also recalled simultaneously two physical sensations that transported me to different periods of my life. The feeling of comfort and security I had received from my father as a child was recalled as a remembered sensation of placing my cheek on his arm while we were walking and feeling his raincoat rubbing me. Then, when I entered my teens I longed to wear my father's coat, to prove that I had entered adulthood and was now tall enough to wear this weighty coat. To wear it made me feel that I had separated from my father, but also that I was continuing his path. The dialectical recollection of being with father and without father, and of being a child/adult, achieved by the shift between feeling the rough texture of the cloth on my cheek and enjoying the silky texture of the lining when I slipped my hands into the

coat, was concretely represented by the fold, whose very nature is transitory: the fold consists simultaneously of the inside and the outside of the coat and as such belongs to neither side. It creates a third, fugitive area, one that Kracauer himself had a predilection for in his writing about the intermediary areas, which belonged to the stranger, the exile and to those who wait. He would have appreciated the association I had during this experience, which led me to the British object-relations psychologist W. D. Winnicott who coined the terms "transitional space" and "transitional objects" in his study of infant and child behavior.[49]

The "transitional object" such as the blanket the child does not wish to part from because it confers security and comfort is an example. The infant recognizes the object as "not-me" during a period when he starts to realize that he is separate from his mother. Clinging to the blanket provides the infant with a symbolic representation of the mother, which enables her to exist in his mind even when she is not present. This is the beginning of the infant's capacity to distinguish between reality and phantasy and it opens up an intermediate area of experience, which enables individuals later on to keep inner and outer experience, subjectivity and objectivity, illusion and reality both separate and yet interrelated. Thus we can speculate that the family portrait can serve as a transitional object during the process of mourning. The photograph of the deceased person, while serving to keep the memory alive, also, and particularly, helps the grieving person to understand that the dead will no longer return.

THE DETAIL: KRACAUER'S UNBOUND REALITY AND BARTHES' PUNCTUM

De Duve's terms enabled us to distinguish between two different photographic times that are not necessarily technical, although they can be, when we compare the pose with street photography. Our first inclination could be to make a rough comparison between the rehearsed pose and the spontaneous incidental snapshot. However, we should recall Benjamin's remark that despite all the careful rehearsing of the pose by the photographer, the viewer "feels an irresistible compulsion to seek the tiny spark of accident, the here and now."[50] Let us return to my great-grandfather's group photograph. Although it does not have that spark of

accident that can take place in the vicinity of a group of people who are posing, it does have a detail that I only recently discovered and found compelling because it disturbs the ceremonial air, which the group is trying to create for the family occasion. Harry, the eldest brother, who is seated on the left side of the photograph, is actually holding a barely visible cigarette in his hand. A small detail perhaps, but one that may explain why his hand appears to be moving away from the direction of his pose, as though he was trying to keep that little disturbance away from the camera. In doing so, he has implanted a strange thought in my mind: to what time frame does the burning cigarette belong? Does the duration of the burning cigarette resemble the hourglass, which could have measured the length of time these people had been made to remain still by the photographer; or, does the cigarette (which does not belong to such a formal family pose) represent the spark of accident, outside the technical time-making of the photograph, which the sitters had abandoned once they assumed the pose and entered what De Duve described so aptly as the prolongation of time that leads to the infinite tense and to the zero degree of time?

Let us tackle the role of this detail in a different way. Benjamin, as we have noted earlier, had attributed the spark of accident we find in photographs to the ability of the camera to see far more things than the human eye, and it was our ability to discover things in hindsight in the photograph that led him to describe the photographic surface as having an "optical unconscious." My own interest in my father's stride was already embedded in the fascination nineteenth-century viewers had in looking at stereoscope photography to learn how pedestrians walked in the streets of Paris and especially to gauge how each step landed on the ground. It was the ability to stop time, make photographic enlargements, use microscopes and engage in time-lapse photography that led to discoveries about locomotion. Today, the improved technology of computer science enables viewers at the touch of a button to zoom in and out of a photograph to discover street names, house numbers, minuscule tags and numerous details that had hitherto not been visible. A recent group of photographs that had come to my attention was shown to me with pride by a person who had "cleaned" the surface of his grandfather's photographs and discovered many things previously hidden from view, also partially due to the old faded state of the

photographs. I wondered how far an image could be cleaned before such tiny details would disappear and whether this new scientific ability and demand for greater exactitude would not sterilize so many old photographs whose dark faded tones were precisely the reason for their ability to preserve the aura of the past. The subject of the photographic surface becomes even more pertinent today precisely because of the new technology, which allows deep penetration into a two-dimensional photograph. In our example, the words "College Studios" were embossed on the surface of my family group photograph from behind, turning the print into a commercial commodity with a copyright and an author. Just below my great-grandfather's knee, the photographer had stamped the print with the words "proof only," as if to say that the quality of this photograph (and therefore the degree of professionalism of the photographer) could be improved. But it also means that this wonderfully sharp photograph is only a copy of reality and as such its surface manifestations must have some limitations. Both Kracauer and Barthes found it important to address the issues of the photographic surface and the accidental details.

At first we detect a slight animosity regarding the limitations of the photographic surface in Kracauer's "Photography" essay. Unlike the ability of the *monogram* to condense a person's past into a single image, "in a photograph, a person's history is buried as if under a layer of snow."[51] Barthes expressed similar frustration when looking at his mother's Winter Garden photograph. He noted that if we scrutinize a photograph long enough we wish to turn it over as if to learn more by looking behind it; and if we blow it up and enlarge its details we expect it to provide more meaning; but in fact, however hard we look we discover nothing more because the knowledge of the photograph is already construed at first glance. Kracauer's criticism was odd considering that only a year earlier, in his influential essay *The Mass Ornament*, he had celebrated the importance of surface manifestations in reality as being capable of revealing unnoticed aspects of popular culture that were neglected by historians. The significance of surface details became pertinent in Kracauer's writings once he shifted from the subjective-memory process as being the sole model for recuperating the past to realizing that reality and history were fragmented random experiences that did not rely on chronological time.

For this reason photography, especially the snapshot, came in handy because it emphasized the discontinuous aspects of reality; it enhanced the need to delve into the particular and overcome any tendencies for abstraction and generalization that Kracauer abhorred in the study of history and philosophy. It took Kracauer a few more decades to readdress these issues in *Theory of Film*. Here he proposes a "material aesthetics" approach to the study of film based on the premise that the medium has no connection with the realm of art. By placing it as a direct continuation of photography's affinity to the "visible world around us," he claims that cinema's aim is to record "physical reality" because it pays special attention to capturing the transient atmosphere of "street crowds, involuntary gestures, and other fleeting impressions."[52] Such chapter subheadings as "The Unstaged," "The Fortuitous," "Once Again the Street," and "Concept of Life as Such" reveal Kracauer's preoccupation with the elusiveness of physical reality, which he wishes to redeem by rescuing forgotten and despised elements of mass culture from oblivion.

Barthes preferred photography to films precisely because of the inherent limitations he found in the surface of photographs. "Such is the Photograph," writes Barthes, "it cannot *say* what it lets us see." The inability of photography to redeem reality is already visible in the photographic surface that Barthes describes as a "flat death."[53] What made Kracauer so ardent about the ability of film to bring things to life was precisely the limitation Barthes found in it: "Film can no longer be seen as animated photographs: the *having-been-there* gives way before a *being-there* of the thing; which omission would explain how there can be a history of the cinema, without any real break with the previous arts of fiction, whereas the photograph can in some sense elude history."[54] Barthes refuses to consider photography as a progressive continuation of perspectival experiments in art that have taken place ever since the fifteenth century. He wishes to break away from history and start to consider photography from the vantage point of the nineteenth century, by conferring on it a special status, made possible by the modern invention of a chemical solution that is able to fix images forever.

The affinities and differences between Kracauer and Barthes are even more fascinating in wake of the criticism they received for being "realists" in their dealings with photography. How could a historian and film critic, who professes to want to analyze cultural codes, rely on the

optical impressions of unmediated realistic details as a means of redeeming reality? What exactly did the avid semiotician imply when he claimed that, although the reading of images takes into consideration cultural codes, the photograph is inherently an image without a code? It is perplexing that both Kracauer and Barthes take pleasure in seeking details that give the impression they exist for themselves, as though their transparency (creating the effect of "naturalization" in an otherwise coded textual field) is due to the impression they give of not being an outcome of a formative approach or a contemplative gaze. I press this point because, ironically, the discovery of these realistic details relies on the most subjective process of detection that emphasizes the receptive process of a unique and individualized subject far more than the quality of the object under scrutiny or its meaning in reality. Kracauer offered a solution to this paradox by giving the example of Marcel and discussing the way that formative and realist approaches in photography can coexist. Barthes does the same thing by comparing the mechanical and personal aspects of photography as if he too was thinking of Marcel standing in the doorway before his unsuspecting grandmother:

> The scene is *there* captured mechanically, not humanly (the mechanical is here a guarantee of objectivity). Man's interventions in the photograph (framing, distance, lighting, focus, speed) all effectively belong to the plane of connotation; it is as though in the beginning (even if utopian) there were a brute photograph (frontal and clear) on which man would then lay out, with the aid of various techniques, the signs drawn from a cultural code.[55]

Barthes adopted this subjective/objective model to the methodology of reading images. In "The Photographic Message" he makes a distinction between "denotation" and "connotation." The former represents the brute facts we see in photographs, and the latter the coded messages that the photograph implies. In his essay "The Third Meaning," these sets of terms were then exchanged for the difference between the "obvious" and the "obtuse." The obvious meaning governs the semantic relations between denotation and connotation while the obtuse meaning represents the ability of details to grab hold of his attention without his being able to place them in any fixed interpretation.[56] These

relationships had an important bearing in Barthes' *Camera Lucida*. He defines two particular terms in his personal approach to reading photographs: the *studium,* which governs all the information we can glean from a photograph based on our knowledge of the facts that are presented to us, evoking a "polite interest" which we associate with learning; and the *punctum,* which is far more complex because it disturbs the *studium* by rising unexpectedly from the photograph to prick and wound us. It is almost always a detail that gives the impression of being directed at a particular person and therefore causing a subjective response that is not necessarily shared by all; each person may find a different *punctum* in the same photograph.

Kracauer recalls being fascinated by the representation of the surfaces of reality already as a child. In his youth he had scribbled a title for a future paper on cinema: "Film as the Discoverer of the Marvels of Everyday Life." The use of the word "marvel" to denote the moments of the everyday that are usually not noticed reminds us that the everyday relies on repetition, giving the impression, as Maurice Blanchot pointed out, that it was not invented but has always existed. Kracauer responded in particular to Lumière's first films: the arrival of the train in the station, the workers leaving the factory, and especially the shot of leaves rippling in the wind were described by him as "detached records" that "resembled the imaginary shot of the grandmother which Proust contrasts with the memory image of her." Here, again, Kracauer uses the impassive detached observer to define the qualities of images in nature that suddenly reveal themselves after having persistently been veiled by ideologies.[57]

I am not sure whether it is possible to give a definite answer to why the lure of unmediated reality relies so much on a personal experience that is often explained either in romantic projective terms, or as the effect of distance that Walter Benjamin characterized as the "aura" of the object. In Theodor Adorno's semi-biographical essay on Kracauer he gives some important clues: Kracauer's celebration of material reality may relate to the way Adorno describes him as "a man with no skin, as though everything external attacked his defenseless interior; as though he could defend himself only by giving voice to his vulnerability."[58] Childhood traumas were transformed into a mode of vision of the stranger who watches the world as though he were on a constant

journey. Seeing everything anew related to his fixation with childhood as a form of play that emphasizes "the benignness of things." When Adorno calls him a "curious realist" there is more than a tinge of criticism for a writer who he felt was too concerned with the "primacy of the optical" and less critical of forms of reification whose function in capitalist society was also to give the false impression of an unmediated world of objects that hid the means of production.

Barthes too was enticed by this sort of optical allure. Writers on Barthes appear to have overlooked the obvious analogy between how he described his relationship with his mother and the fascination he had for the uncoded aspects of photography. For a person who intricately defines portraits according to how the pose is construed in social terms, and never reveals the real person, he describes his mother differently, as one who "did not struggle with her image," as he did, and therefore "she did not *suppose* herself." Elsewhere he writes that her kindness "was specifically *out-of-play*, it belonged to no system."[59] This is especially noticeable in his description of their mode of address, which gives us the impression that in her presence he must have felt at times the way Kracauer did when he looked at the rippling leaves of Lumière's film: "In a sense I never 'spoke' to her, never 'discoursed' in her presence, for her; we supposed, without saying anything of the kind to each other, that the frivolous insignificance of language, the suspension of images must be the very space of love, its music."[60] In order to impress upon us the experience of unmediated reality that exists as such, and unlike Kracauer's emphasis on the optical experience, which leaves the spectator always alienated from the object of his vision, Barthes emphasizes the concrete relationship between the photographic object and its referent. The eyes play but a small role in this indexical relationship where, like the first sun-drawings, the object leaves its trace on the photographic surface as if it was a fossil. The indexical process is compared to the way the image is "extracted," like juice from a lemon, by an action of light as the photograph becomes an emanation of the referent.[61]

Kracauer did not compare history and photography to prove a mimetic relationship between them but only one of affinity and correspondence. Barthes was not at all interested in the analogical relations between photography and reality that other forms of art, like drawing, were capable of having. Both writers stressed the problematic

connection between the photograph and the referent by opening up a new territory for investigation that examines the space between reality and representation, the present and the past, the act of observation and the process of imagination; a space whose intermediary appeal recalls the character of Kracauer's evocative definition of the anteroom area. In the last chapter of *History* Kracauer examines the relationship between philosophy and history. He concerns himself with the difference they pose between the need to define absolute truths and relative truths, between generalized concepts and concrete particular details. Kracauer disregards the "either/or" distinctions between philosophy and history and suggests a "side by side" approach that enables polarities to coexist. Anteroom thinking designates this sort of approach of attentive openness and waiting that recalls the stranger's "extraterritorial" sensibility. The relationship between history and photography is defined by Kracauer in terms of the anteroom area as "both realities are of a kind which does not lend itself to being dealt with in a definite way," because both elude "the grasp of systematic thought." The anteroom area defines the way history and photography "share their provisional character with the material they record and explore," and this especially concerns the levels of reality that Kracauer analyzes in the study of the daily (*Lebenswelt*).[62]

I believe that the image of this intermediary area, typified by the dialectical possibility of the side-by-side approach, can serve as representative of all the issues discussed in this article. Kracauer's subjective/objective stance toward the analysis of reality; the formative/realist approach to photography; the active passivity of Marcel the lover and the detached observer are examples. They are encompassed as well in the definition of the palimpsest sensibility. In the dictionary "palimpsest" is defined as "the visible surfaces of earlier writings that were erased and are still legible in a manuscript (typically related to the early papyrus or parchment types of scripts)," evoking this double existence that is apparent in the second definition of the word: "An object, a place, or an area that reflects its history." I have tried to find a concrete image for this space in photography and films. In *Camera Lucida* it exists in the simple example Barthes gives to explain that reality and photography are intertwined by a special relationship, another sort of skin, which make photography belong to "that class of laminated objects whose two leaves cannot be separated without destroying them both: the window pane and

the landscape."[63] But an even more pertinent example exists in the realm of film. The cinematic dissolve that is used to signal the passage of time superimposes two images. The transition between these images is often imperceptible on the screen unless its motion is arrested on the editing table: there in the blurred space that reveals the relationship between cinematic movement and stilled images (one which Barthes also characterized as having a "palimpsest" relationship in his study of stills from an Eisenstein movie) exists this space between the image that has not fully departed and the new one that has not yet been fully formed—like Marcel standing on the *threshold* of his grandmother's living room, neither fully inside nor outside.[64] A combination image is formed whose beauty and particularity cannot be foretold; an optical no-man's land that cannot be grasped and belongs to no one; a space of freedom and distraction that presents a pure optical experience that makes the real unreal. For Barthes the anteroom area may have existed in the gaps between all the voices he incorporated as a semiotician, man of letters and cultural critic. In both instances of describing his pleasure in reading texts and looking at photographs, he indicated this other space that exists between the text, the photograph and the mental image of the viewer, when he claimed that we only really start reading a book or looking at a photograph when we lift our eyes from the page or see the photograph in our mind after we have already put it away in a drawer.[65]

And it is these intermediary areas—the space opening up between the photograph of the young man in the concentration camp and the memory it ignited in the elderly man's mind; between the perception of my great-aunt's corpse as an image and my recollection of her; between my grandmother's act of pasting photographs in an album to re-create her family history and the fact that she no longer resembled herself in these photographs—that led me to write about the relationship between photography and memory. Indeed, history begins at home.

NOTES

Meir Wigoder

1. Paul Auster, *The Invention of Solitude* (New York, 1988), 10. I never managed to finish reading this book beyond this passage, after it had startled me so strongly in a Barnes and Noble coffee shop that I spilled my entire coffee cup on the table and over a stranger who was sitting by the table and reading peacefully. Three weeks later my father died unexpectedly and I faced his own belongings with apprehension and confusion.

2. Stephen Bleyer's photograph hangs in the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum. In the book the title of the photograph reads as follows: "a 14-year-old Jewish boy from Hungary, prisoner number B14615. (Photo taken during a medical examination after the camp's liberation, 1945)." See figure 96 in Teresa Swiebocka et al., eds., *Auschwitz—A History in Photographs* (Bloomington and Indianopolis, 1993), 105.

3. Maurice Blanchot, "Two Versions of the Imaginary," in P. Adams Sitney, ed., *The Gaze of Orpheus and Other Literary Essays* (New York 1981), 79–90.

4. The three main texts of Siegfried Kracauer that I rely on are: "Photography," in *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays,* trans. and ed. Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, MA, 1995), 47–64; *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (Princeton, 1997); and *History: The Last Things before the Last* (New York, 1969). My reading of Kracauer's theories is indebted to several rich essays published in a special issue on Kracauer in *New German Critique,* no. 54 (Fall 1991). The following articles were especially helpful: Gertrud Koch, "'Not yet accepted anywhere': Exile, Memory, and Image in Kracauer's Conception of History," 95–110; Inka Mülder-Bach, "History as Autobiography: The Last Things before the Last," 139–58; Heide Schlüpmann, "The Subject of Survival: On Kracauer's *Theory of Film,*" 111–26; and Miriam Hansen, "Kracauer's Early Writings on Film and Mass Culture," 47–76. See also D. N. Rodowick, "The Last Things before the Last: Kracauer and History," *New German Critique,* no. 41 (spring/summer 1987): 109–39.

5. "The Photographic Message," "Rhetoric of the Image" and "The Third Meaning" are published in Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text,* trans. Stephen Heath (New York, 1977); see also Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida,* trans. Richard Howard (London, 1984).

6. Although this article does not enter into a direct dialogue with recent publications on the subject of the representation of the family in photography and its relation to memory, it does belong to the recent scholarship on the subject; cf. Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Postmemory* (Cambridge, MA, 1997); idem, ed., *The Familial Gaze* (Hanover, 1999); and Annette Kuhn, *Family Secrets: Acts of Memory and Imagination* (London, 1995).

7. Kracauer,"Photography," 47, 48.

8. Ibid., 55 (here and elsewhere emphasis in the original).

9. Ibid., 59.

10. Ibid.

11. Ibid., 51.

12. See Walter Benjamin, "A Short History of Photography," in A. Trachten-berg, ed., *Classical Essays in Photography* (New Haven, 1980), 203.

13. Kracauer, "Photography," 62

14. The subject of the death of Roland Barthes' mother is treated in Jacques Derrida's "The Deaths of Roland Barthes," in *Philosophy and Non-Philosophy since Merleau-Ponty,"* ed. Hugh J. Silverman (New York, 1988), 259–343.

15. Barthes, *Camera Lucida,* 63–65.

16. Ibid., 70, 71.

17. Ibid., 69.

18. Ibid., 73.

19. Ibid., 70.

20. Jean Paul Sartre, *L'Imaginaire,* translated in English as *The Psychology of the Imagination (*Secaucus, NJ, n.d), 34.

21. Barthes, *Camera Lucida,* 67.

22. Ibid., 79.

23. Ibid., 92.

24. Ibid., 93–94. Kracauer also correlates between the invention of photography and the birth of historiography. He cites the example of Ranke who criticized the prevalent approaches to writing about the past and demanded that the sole object of historical writing should be to show things "how they actually were." The early-nineteenth-century photographic approach, emerging from the ideas of the "Realist Manifesto" also craved fidelity to nature as if no camera operator was standing behind the camera.

25. Barthes, *Camera Lucida,* 85.

26. Ibid., 91.

27. Ibid., 77. The disparity between the uses Barthes makes of the aorist and the perfect tenses to characterize photography is discussed in Ann Banfield, "L'Imparfait de L'Objectif: The Imperfect of the Object Glass," *Camera Obscura* 24 (Sept. 1990): 65–88.

28. Barthes, *Camera Lucida,* 3.

29. Ibid., 97.

30. Ibid., 96.

31. Kracauer, *Theory of Film,* 14.

32. Kracauer, *History,* 83.

33. Ibid., 84.

34. Ibid., 83–84.

35. Ibid., 84–85.

36. Ibid., 88.

37. Ibid., 79.

38. Thierry de Duve, "Time Exposure and the Snapshot: The Photograph as Paradox," *October* 5 (Summer 1978): 113–25.

39. Ibid., 116.

40. Ibid, 123.

41. Kracauer, "Photography," 55.

42. Benjamin, "A Short History of Photography," 205.

43. Ibid., 204.

44. De Duve, "Time Exposure and the Snapshot," 116.

45. Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film* (Cambridge, MA, 1980), 185.

46. Kracauer, *Theory of Film,* 16–17.

47. Ibid., 20.

48. My father's encyclopedic and archival sensibility led him to a prolific career: after the death of Cecil Roth in 1970, he became editor-in-chief of the 16-volume *Encyclopedia Judaica;* he also set up the Oral History Department at the Hebrew University and was one of the founders and the director of the Israel Film Archive on Mount Scopus. He was a major contributor in founding the Israel Diaspora Museum in Tel Aviv, and in his sixties carved a new career for himself in Christian-Jewish relations. He also worked as a part-time journalist, contributing to the *Yorkshire Post,* the *Jerusalem Post* and the Catholic weekly *The Talbot,* as well as being a BBC correspondent during the trial of Adolph Eichmann in Jerusalem.

49. See W. D. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (Harmondsworth, 1982), chap. 1, "Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena," 1–30.

50. Benjamin, "A Short History of Photography," 202.

51. Kracauer, "Photography," 51.

52. Kracauer, *Theory of Film,* xlix (preface).

53. Barthes, *Camera Lucida,* 100 and 92; cf. Steven Ungar, "Persistence of the Image: Barthes, Photography, and the Resistance to Film," in Steven Ungar and Betty R. McGraw, eds., *Signs in Culture* (Iowa City, 1989), 139–55.

54. Barthes, "Rhetoric of the Image," 45.

55. Ibid., 44.

56. For a summary of these issues and an interesting insight into *Camera Lucida,* see Victor Burgin, "Re-Reading *Camera Lucida,*" in idem, *The End of Art Theory* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ, 1986), 71–92.

57. Kracauer, *Film Theory,* 31.

58. Theodor W. Adorno, "The Curious Realist: On Siegfried Kracauer," *New German Critique,* no. 54 (Fall 1991): 161. Barthes writes of the affinity he feels with a photograph, linked to it by a sort of umbilical cord that attaches his gaze to the photographic object by the agency of light, which is like "a skin I share with anyone who has been photographed" (*Camera Lucida,* 81). Here too, skin denotes a lack of boundary rather than something that demarcates our limits in the world.

59. Barthes, *Camera Lucida,* 67 and 69.

60. Ibid., 72.

61. Ibid., 81 and 80.

62. Kracauer, *History,* 19.

63. Barthes, *Camera Lucida,* 6.

64. Barthes writes in "The Third Meaning" that "film and still find themselves in a palimpsest relationship without it being possible to say that one is *on top* of the other or that one is *extracted* from the other" (67). Elsewhere, in *Camera Lucida* Barthes uses the word "superimposition" to explain the way the photograph is a combination "of reality and of the past" (76).

65. Barthes writes in *Camera Lucida*: "Ultimately—or at the limit—in order to see a photograph well, it is best to look away or close your eyes" (53).