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CR: The New Centennial Review, Volume 7, Number 2, Fall 2007, pp. 155-173
(Article)

Published by Michigan State University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/ncr.2007.0035>



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Unsettling Photography

Kafka, Derrida, Moses

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AND WHO TOOK THE PHOTOGRAPH? IS IT SOME SORT OF FAMILY OCCASION? Your father and brother appear to be in dark suits, with white ties, but the so-called brother-in-law is wearing a coloured one. Dearest, how powerful one is, face to face with a picture, and how powerless in reality! I can easily imagine your whole family stepping aside and removing themselves, leaving you on your own, while I lean across the big table searching for your eyes, finding them, and dying of joy. Dearest, pictures are wonderful, pictures are indispensable, but they are torture as well (Kafka 1978, 202).

To confront the photograph, as Kafka just did—in the darkness or dark room of the night from December 6th through 7th, 1912—always also is to confront a moment of unsettling, a moment in which the photograph, in its refusal to yield its nonself-identity to our identity-seeking gaze, unsettles us by unsettling itself. I wish to set in motion a polylogue among Derrida and the figures whose proper names frame his own in the “group

portrait” of my title—Kafka to the left, the German photographer Stefan Moses to the right—a kind of unsettling freeze-frame of unsuspected family relations taken on a holiday or holy day of technical illumination. In the course of my engagement with Derrida and Stefan Moses, I will be interrupted periodically by incoming missives from Kafka, the great unknown theorist of photography, sent on their way between September 1912 and August 1913. Kafka’s snapshot-like reflections on the difficulties and the explosively charged mini-tragedies of promising, taking, sending, receiving, interpreting, and missing photographs in his love letters to Felice Bauer will illuminate our polylogue as embodiments of the interplay between the luminous (*photo*) and the trace (*graphy*).¹ Kafka’s obsessive engagement with photography can be said to belong to a larger, heterogeneous orbit of literary meditations on photography, reflections that, in the French modernist tradition, encompass such texts as Charles Baudelaire’s “The Salon of 1859,” Marcel Proust’s *The Guermantes Way* (1920, a volume of *In Search of Lost Time*), and André Breton’s surrealist novel *Nadja* (1928). In the German tradition, the literary discourse on photography extends from Weimar-era texts such as Thomas Mann’s *The Magic Mountain* (1924) and Kurt Tucholsky’s and John Heartfield’s collaborative book of texts and photomontages *Deutschland, Deutschland über alles!* (1929) to post-war projects such as Bertolt Brecht’s book of anti-war poems and photomontages *War Primer* (1955) to the discussion of photography in Günter Grass’s novel *The Tin Drum* (1959) and the recent hybrid novels of W.G. Sebald.

I wish to begin with Derrida’s polylogue about the photograph, which in turn will open onto a polylogue among Kafka, Derrida, and Moses. (“Polylogue” is the formal designation that Derrida first gives his 1978 engagement—in many voices and various personae at once—with Heidegger’s and art historian Meyer Shapiro’s competing readings of Van Gogh’s peasant shoes in the section “Restitutions” of *The Truth in Painting* [1987]. Derrida will take up this fractured voice heard in his engagement with painting in his later reading of another visual medium, photography.) First, then, let me pose a series of open questions. What would it mean to think the photograph neither in terms of reproduction nor with an eye to the reproducibility of

that which is said to exist already, but rather in terms of a force field of relations that erratically thematize, always one more time, their own status as a relation, a relation that differs from and with itself even while suspending itself? In other words, what would it mean to alter our assumptions about the nature of the relation between the photograph and that which it appears to reproduce, as well as the relation of the photograph to the very idea of relation itself? Learning how to read the ways in which the *téchne* of the photograph perpetually illuminates and obscures the relation of the relation to itself and to its referential function then would emerge as inseparable from the experience of learning to learn from the medial specificity of photography and from the idiomatic and unverifiable language of a given photograph. In contemporary work on photography, whether analog or digital, such issues are implicitly encoded—but rarely addressed directly—by writers such as Susan Sontag on the relation of photography to the pain of others; by such philosophers of the image as Vilém Flusser and his concern with a positively inflected “telematic” society; by historians of photography such as Geoffrey Batchen and their understandable preoccupations with the photograph’s material and cultural inscriptions; and by theorists of photography such as Hubertus von Amelnunxen and his ongoing investigations of how certain indexical and postindexical modes of seeing have rendered the late modern subject a “homo photographicus.”²

What, then, would our stance be vis-à-vis the referential pull of these ontic commitments, given the impossibility of ever viewing photography as such and the concomitant necessity of only ever viewing a particular instance of photography: *this* photograph’s *here and now* that arrives before my gaze as a translation of the specificity of a particular *there and then*. It seems that the photograph perpetually resists my Hegelian effort to see the universal of the Absolute manifest itself in the singularity of the particular. We could say that, viewed from the perspective of these concerns, the photograph reformulates the three central preoccupations of philosophy according to Kant (What can I know? What should I do? What can I hope for?) as photography’s abiding question, “what can I relate to?” Or, more precisely, what is my relation to relation?

As Derrida writes in *Right of Inspection*, his 1985 engagement with the images of a photo-novel by the Belgian photographer Marie-Françoise Plissart:

In terms of the exteriority of the referent its being-in-the-past certainly cannot be eliminated. But when the referent itself consists of frames that are themselves framed, the index of the wholly other, however marked it may be, endlessly defers reference. The chimera becomes a possibility. If there is an art of photography (beyond that of determined genres, and thus in an almost transcendental space), it is found here. Not that it suspends reference, but that it indefinitely defers a certain type of reality, that of the *perceptible* referent. It gives the prerogative to the other, opens the infinite uncertainty of a relation to the completely other, a relation without relation. (1998)³

The relation without relation that one of Derrida's voices casts—in the polylogue that is his text—as the art of photography itself, the relation that, within the image, announces itself *as* relation but which never fully can guarantee the hermeneutic key to its internal and external networks of reference, gives rise to a multitude of senses and experiences that are mediated by the *mis-en-scène* of the relation itself. Therefore, one of the voices in Derrida's polylogue says: "You will never know, nor will you, all the stories, nor even the totality of one single story, I kept telling myself as I looked at these images." These lines open, and periodically return to punctuate, *Right of Inspection*. Here, the language of photography is inseparable from the experience of plurality and the plurality of experience. This double plurality encrypted in the photograph works to transform the aesthetic experience of time, language, gender and genre, along with the very logic of a hermeneutics of seeing. Decoupling perception from cognition, Derrida's engagement with photography works to open the medium to its own alterity, to the ways in which photography exposes the nonself-identity and internal self-differentiation that, for him, ultimately condition any act of aesthetic experience and its ethico-political futurity. The concept of a photographic relation without relation illuminates syntactical linkages among some of the major claims of a Derridean aesthetics as it unfolds in the language

of technically mediated images. From this perspective, *Right of Inspection* would need to be understood in the context of Derrida's other sustained engagements with photographic aesthetics—especially “The Deaths of Roland Barthes” and his little-known extended discussion with Hubertus von Amelunxen and Michael Wetzol, so far only available in German as “*Die Fotografie als Kopie, Archiv und Signatur*”—as well as in terms of the supplementary status that photography assumes in relation to Derrida's major aesthetic claims about the visual arts and visual culture more generally, especially *The Truth in Painting* (1987) and *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins* (1993).

The relation without relation that the photograph relates to us cannot be thought in isolation from a certain adherence to the referent and the idea of referentiality, even though reference cannot remain immune from the unrelatedness of the relation. As Derrida reminds us in “The Deaths of Roland Barthes,” the photographic referent “does not relate to a present or a real but, in an other way, to the other, and each time differently according to the type of ‘image,’ whether photographic or not” (2001, 48). Therefore, we are faced with the question of how to name the relation in and of the photograph without having to decide between referent and reference once and for all, always choosing both and neither as we engage the singular tenses, past and present, of the photograph. The having-been of what was photographed, then, opens a space that always unfolds *after* the event and with—that is, both in tandem with and according to—the reading of that event's history-marking occurrence.

Returning to an explication of the interruptive, other-directed *punctum* that Barthes contrasts with the intentional structure of the *studium* of the photograph, Derrida suggests a new term to name this photographic relation without relation that manifests itself, among other things, in the strategic refusal to decide between referent and reference. This is what we “might call the unicity of the *referential*,” a word that allows us “not to have to choose between reference and referent: what adheres in the photograph is perhaps less the referent itself, in the present effectivity of its reality, than the implication in the reference of its having-been-unique” (57). One way to understand Derrida's logic of the *referential* is to imagine the uniqueness and singularity

of the photographed, not merely in the retroactive documentation of its existence that conceptualizes photography as the process of collecting archival evidence, but rather in the very relation that the photographic act allowed the various participants in the scene of photography (the subject, the photographer, the camera, the equipment, the light, and the perspective, among many others) to enter a singular and unique relation to each other. The photograph then would not be the record of any extraphotographic, autonomous singularity that had merely waited to be recorded. Rather, the photograph, in its legibility as a form of the *referential*, could be understood as an inscription with light of the uniqueness of a specific and now irretrievable relation, in a way that emphasizes both the specific relation—or set of relations—assumed during the scene of the photographic act and stages, in a medium-specific way, the general concept of relation itself.

The thinking of this double relation without relation that the photograph enacts in the space of the *referential*—the singular relation of the specific image and the general concept of relation—could be extended to include another doubling. If this double relation of the relation without relation is specific to the medium of photography, it also exceeds that medium's specificity in its staging of a certain extended reality of thought. As Derrida suggests, taking “all differences into account, we would not be reducing the specificity of . . . photography were we to find it pertinent elsewhere: I would say everywhere” (49). What photography teaches us about the *referential* is that the particular relation without relation that it captures is itself related to other relations without relation. That is to say, the relation without relation that photography relates is itself something of a photograph—and therefore a matter of technical reproducibility—a whole host of relations without relation. Seen from this perspective, the photograph performs in the singular time and space of its own idiom a relation without relation that saturates all relations and the presentational acts without which they would not exist.

Incoming missive: *At the risk of ruining your Sunday, I am sending you my most recent photograph, and three copies at that, since I think I have discovered that in larger quantities it loses some of its horror. I don't know what to do, flashlights always give me a mad look—the face twisted, the eyes crossed and staring. Don't worry, dearest, I don't*

look like that, this picture doesn't count, it isn't one you should carry around with you. I'll send you another one soon. In reality I am at least twice as beautiful as in this picture. If that's not enough for you, dearest, then things are indeed serious. In that case, what am I to do? However, you do have a fairly true picture of me; the way I look in the little book [Meditation] is how I really look, at least that's how I looked a short while ago. And whether you like it or not, I belong to you. Franz (Kafka 1978, 255).

The aesthetics of the photographic self-portrait, in which the self-identity of the relation is suspended, is a case in point. The mourning that this aesthetic scene stages is not only a function of its status as a *memento mori*, as Barthes famously suggests, it also is a function of its status as the embodiment of an impossibility. The subject's gaze can never simply be itself—that is, its gaze cannot be available as an object to an other who is looking at it and, in the same moment, observe itself as a gaze that is being looked at. In his German conversation about photography, Derrida remarks on the impossibility of this simultaneity. “One assumes,” he says, “that the portrait captures the eyes, . . . that for which, among other things, photography exists. We assume of the gaze that it is what the subject itself cannot see in its life. If you look at yourself in a mirror, you see yourself either seeing or being seen, but never both at once.” Derrida continues:

In principle one believes of the cinematographic or photographic camera that it should capture a gaze which the eyes that are looking at it themselves cannot see. I am seen the way you see me talking etc. [. . .] but with a gaze that I, present as one who lives, cannot see. And if I therefore give someone my gaze, the photographed double of my gaze, I give him something with which I see but that I myself am incapable of seeing. A situative heteronomy obtains there; I give myself to the other there where I cannot give myself to myself, where I cannot, as it were, see myself seeing. (2000, 294)

For Derrida, then, to the extent that I give myself, so radically and irreducibly, to the other, incapable of seeing or even verifying my own gaze as a gift, I expose myself to the expectations that the other imposes on me in an encounter with my image. In a gesture of deliverance, I as a photographed

self offer myself to an uncontainable economy of subjects and objects that never can be identical with itself or with what is external to it.

The vexed question of the photographic self-portrait resides at the core of a project by Munich photographer Stefan Moses (b. 1928), the great chronicler of German life, whose work not only has appeared regularly in such magazines as *Der Spiegel* and *Stern*, but whose images, since the 1950s, have introduced into German photography a singular precision, rigor, and soberly playful beauty. In 1963 he began facilitating a series of photographic self-portraits of well-known German writers, artists, philosophers, athletes, and public figures, including Theodor W. Adorno, Ernst Bloch, Otto Hahn, Karl Jaspers, Walter Jens, Ernst Jünger, Erich Kästner, Alexander Mitscherlich, and Max Schmeling, among many others.⁴ Moses traveled all over Germany with a kitschy chrome mirror on wheels, borrowed from the dressing room of a department store, to visit his subjects in their “own” environments and to encourage them to photograph themselves in front of the department store mirror with his camera. In the process, he too made a series of photographs of these sessions, delivering a perpetual metacommentary on, or portrait of, the very act of self-portraiture. Moses asked his subjects to linger with the scene of self-portraiture, to take their time, to find just the right moment—something akin perhaps to the Greek *kairos*—to release the shutter; his subjects would sometimes spend an entire morning or afternoon positioning and studying themselves in the chrome mirror to wait for just the right moment that would capture them, in a sudden flash of simultaneous illumination and blindness. No quickies, no halfhearted efforts, no cop-outs or crop-outs.

But what would be the right moment for a photographic self-portrait? What would make a self privilege this moment over that, this possibility of release over any number of others? We recall that Paul de Man commences his *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* with an epigraph from Pascal: “If one reads too quickly or too slowly one understands nothing” (de Man 1979, n.p.). In a certain sense, even though this is not spelled out by de Man, his entire project can be understood as returning us again and again to the question of the right speed of reading. Yet what would be the right speed? And what would

be the right moment for me, as the photographer who is also the subject of the photograph, to release, that is, to let go and surrender to the luminous trace that is photography, light-writing? We could say that the task with which Moses's subjects are charged is one of finding, or, since it can hardly be coaxed, being open to, the simultaneity or interpenetration of two otherwise distinct genders that normally must not touch each other. In German, "moment" has two genders: it is sometimes *der Moment*, sometimes *das Moment*. As a masculine noun, *der Moment* designates a temporal condition, a point to be understood in relation to, and as the product of, time; as a neuter noun, *das Moment* refers to a conceptual position or philosophical perspective. The subjects who participate in Moses's theater of self-portraiture are called upon to locate a *Zeit-raum*, or temporal space, in which the apparent mutual exclusivity of these two genders—one of which, the neuter, already is something of a nongender—collapse. Where *der Moment* and *das Moment* become indistinguishable in a dance of light and shadow, illumination and blinding, the right moment, temporally and conceptually, demands recognition and affirmation by the release of a shutter, even if a shudder suddenly comes over us and even if we shudder to think what the potentially illicit bringing together of *der* and *das* eventually could mean for our captured bodies.

The otherness that traverses every photograph, the very alterity that makes photography what it is, even when it seems to record the familiar and the self-same given, is the point at which its unsettlingness is properly illuminated. "Photography," as Jean-Luc Nancy puts it, "is a monster with two subjects, with a double body (human) and a single, cavernous head whose eye blinks on and off. At this point, at this moment, in this place of the photograph in which time blinks and is distended as an immobile surface, the most exact and the most rigorous *nous autres* is produced." He continues to suggest that "each one affirms its alterity while both together make the request for an identity distinct from every other, in whose distinction they are absorbed into one another, one by the other" (2005, 104). Here, we are reminded of the ways in which it "is the identity of the photograph itself, openly non-identical to itself and thus strangely identical to the superimposition of the two others in it, the viewfinder and the viewed

surprising one another,” in a way in which we may observe the two “of them together, as a ‘photograph,’ pronouncing a kind of silent *nous autres*” (104–5). While in Nancy’s specific example the *nous autres* unfolds between a portrait of James Joyce and the photographer Gisèle Freund, Moses’s series of self- and other-portraits insists on the ways in which the other-directedness of the nonself-identical photograph is the very condition of possibility for the self-portraiture of a subject that is no longer at home with itself, has become fractured and displaced, inhabited by many others that make it what it is and what it presents to the click of the camera and its analog or digital afterness.

Moses calls his series “Selbst im Spiegel” (“Self in the mirror”). Unlike his other sustained photographic series—such as “Deutsche” (“Germans”), with its self-conscious citation of August Sander’s archetypal photographic portrait of the Weimar Republic; his “Couples” series, with its gestural citation of such photographers as Freund and Germaine Krull; or his photographic mask project, which is indebted to the masks that play such an important role in the studios of artists such as Kirchner, Klee, Braque, and Picasso—“Selbst im Spiegel” situates Moses in relation not only to the myth of Narcissus and to Lacan’s sublimely painful mirror stage, but also, in the history of photography, to the work of Polish avant-garde artist Witkacy. Witkacy developed, at the beginning of the twentieth century, a technique for taking doubled and tripled photographic portraits through the strategic use of multiple mirrors, and his groundbreaking work was rediscovered by young photographers in Germany in the late 1950s.⁵ The photographs that comprise “Selbst im Spiegel” coalesce around a series of aporias that exhibit each self—but who is this self?—in its *Geworfenheit*, its thrownness into a relation with itself as an other of which it cannot fully take account, a self that is as much invented as it is mimetically reproduced by the click of the camera, and a photograph that is as much an other-portrait—the empirical embodiment of a consciousness that encounters itself in the guise of a reflection whose difference from the self first gives the self to the self—as it is a self-portrait. Is the photographic self-portrait in the mirror therefore the image of an empirical referent or of the semblance (*Schein*) of that alleged presence? What the “Selbst im Spiegel” series finally gives us to think is the

nonselself-identity of the self itself, the dispersal and displacement that make the self what it is. The photographic self-portrait engages a certain relation without relation as the advent of the image.

To elaborate on this photographic nonself-identity that enacts the relation without relation, we may return from Moses's photographs to those of Plissart, which thematize in a variety of registers the implications of this nonself-identity. Thus, one voice in Derrida's polylogue on Plissart's photographs reminds the other voices and us that "Benjamin emphasized that very same thing concerning the detail, namely that the *invention* of photography and the *advent* of psychoanalysis *concur*. Through a strange concurrence in the technical apparatus, more or less at the same moment, you can see Ps and Ph unite: a reading of the significant 'detail' in a blowup, in a process of increasing enlargement, of *découpage* or montage, a reinscription of metonymies, displacement, substitution, restaging, analysis of the figurative function of words in the silent *Darstellbarkeit*." Alluding to Walter Benjamin's, and through him Siegfried Kracauer's, analyses of the photographic image in "Little History of Photography," Derrida can be read as delivering a metacommentary, from the perspective of the nonself-identity of the photographic relation, on the Benjaminian concept of the "optical unconscious" that differentiates between a readability of the ontic world by the naked eye and one that is always already mediated by the *techné* of the nonhuman or posthuman apparatus. As such, the photographic machine and its products also join the psycho-prosthetic functions of the other technical devices and apparati that Derrida later addresses in the mnemonic terms of *Archive Fever* (1996).

If one of the voices in Derrida's polylogue therefore suggests that "you should speak of these photographs as of a thinking, as a pensiveness without a voice, whose only voice remains suspended," then it is the searching for a voice without or beyond the voice as presence—indeed, the present trace of an absence—that the photograph encodes. This present trace of an absence, even when it is not immediately recuperable in a dialectical sense as the absence that is merely a distant presence, as the singularity that is but a repeatable difference, would then not present the mere object of a thinking but, rather, the image that gives us thinking itself to look at. Speaking of

the photograph as a kind of thinking, a reflectiveness that always strives, as in Heidegger, to think what thinking might mean in the first place, means to think thinking not simply as an extension or amplification of what is thought, but as a setting into relation of elements or nodal points into what Adorno famously calls a constellation, a setting into relation that does not leave untouched the relation of the presence or absence of what is thought or given us to think photographically. The heterogeneous spectral images of former concentration camp sites by contemporary German photographer Dirk Reinartz, collected in his monograph *Totenstill* (1994), provide a case in point. The blurred photo-paintings of Gerhard Richter (the *other* one) and their oddly translational yet postmimetically mimetic relation to the photograph add another complex layer of mediation.

Incoming missive: *I am enclosing a snapshot of myself when I was perhaps five years old; at the time the angry expression was put on as a joke, now I suspect it was secretly meant. But you must send it back, it is owned by my parents, who own everything, and want to be part of everything. (Today of all days I had to write about your mother!) When you've sent it back, I'll send you others, including a recent bad and silly one, which you may keep if you like. I can't have been five years old in this photograph, more likely two; but as a lover of children you will be the better judge. When children are around I prefer to close my eyes. Franz. This would be the most inappropriate moment to ask you to give or lend me a photograph of yourself. I just mention it (Kafka 1978, 161).*

As the British scholar Graham Clarke, echoing Hubert Damisch, suggests in his standard work on the cultural history and theory of the photograph, because the photograph interrupts time and removes its subject from history even as it records it for posterity, there is a sense in which every “photograph . . . has no before or after: it represents only the moment of its own making” (1997, 24).⁶ And yet, we could say that the photograph possesses an afterlife, a temporal structure of experience and ghostly reception that will not let it rest in its separation from the before or the after. Even the very first photographic image ever taken, Joseph Nicéphore Niépce's 1826 “View from a Window at Gras,” a heliograph that required an exposure time of some eight hours, demands, in all its graininess and darkly spectral remove, that we come to terms with its “after” in the history of the medium. Indeed, the nonself-identity of the

ghostly photographic image that announces itself as a relation without relation ultimately cannot be thought in isolation from the effect of a coming after, a certain *afterness*. “Concurrence and recurrence, you say,” Derrida writes, “but since what is lacking is the name or noun for it, the idiom, and the country, I see them chase *after* it. They both pursue and flee the name. They are *after it*. They come after it, in other words follow it, but, since they run behind it, in fleeing it you see them here *depart before it*, run to meet it, which amounts to the same thing.” The temporal disjunction that Derrida puts his finger on, the afterness of the scene of photography, finds an illuminating cross-articulation in Benjamin’s meditations on Baudelaire. There, in a sentence on the image that reads like a gloss on all of Benjamin’s images—photographic, dialectical, filmic, theatrical, translational, figurative, perhaps even the allegorical *Denkbild*, or thought-image, itself—we read: “Das, wovon man weiß, daß man es bald nicht mehr vor sich haben wird, das wird Bild [That of which one knows that one soon no longer will have it in front of one, that becomes image]” (1991, 590). In this temporal-spatial disjunction of the image, which, like Derrida’s insistence, decouples perception from cognition, *Wahrnehmung* from *Erkenntnis*, something becomes what it is only from the perspective of what it will have been and what it will have ceased to be even before it has become it. The image’s afterness here is encrypted in its presence-towards-absence, which thereby also is disrupted. To become an image—that is, a true, melancholic image in the deep experiential sense of *Erfahrung*, rather than in the giddy experiential elation offered by a mere *Erlebnis*, the splinter in one’s eye that Adorno memorably tells us is the best magnifying glass—also means to encode a future decay, a ruin or trace that is already silently at work in what is—not, however, in the Blochian sense of an aesthetic *Vorschein*, or anticipatory illumination, but in and as a *memento mori* that every photograph also already embodies. “He is dead, and he is going to die,” as Barthes writes of Civil War photographer Alexander Gardner’s haunting 1865 “Portrait of Lewis Payne,” an image of a handcuffed young inmate in a Washington, DC prison waiting to be hanged (1993, 97). As Barthes reminds us, “each photograph always contains this imperious sign of my future death” (97).⁷

Incoming missive: *That wonderful, excessively and undeservedly long letter! Dearest, you made me so happy. And with it the picture, strange at first, because of your unfamiliar posture and surroundings, but the longer one looks the more it falls into place, till now, in the light of the lamp on my desk—as in the sunlight of long ago—the dearest face becomes so lifelike that one longs to kiss the hand on the edge of the boat, and does. At that time you looked in better health than you do now; on the other hand—perhaps because of all that well-being—you look extremely sulky. What were you holding? A peculiar little bag? And who stuck the leaves in your belt? [. . .] And now you hold out hopes of more pictures. Dearest, you must keep this promise. One can't tell from the envelope, one rips it open as though it were just a letter [. . .] but then one finds a picture inside and you yourself slip out of it, as one fine day I will see you getting out of a railway carriage. [. . .] To rid you of all doubts (not for the sake of creating any doubts), I am sending you a flash photograph of myself. It is rather repulsive, but then it was meant not for you but for a power of attorney for the Institute (Kafka 1978, 191).*

The other-directed polylogue that is photography embodies a discourse that an aesthetics of light-writing, if there is one, can hardly do without. “Therefore,” Derrida writes in *Right of Inspection*, “a primal scene exists before and after the fall. It belongs in any case to the time of writing on light, to the history of photography . . . let there be light, the story of the fall, the negative, Lucifer, angels of light and darkness—it’s all there, no more, no less.” It is as though photography were able to capture this primal scene, giving it to us to learn to read, appropriating for itself all the revolutionary force and refractory brilliance with which William Henry Fox Talbot, writing in the middle of the nineteenth century with his photographic “pencil of nature,” developed the process of turning a positive into a negative before it reemerges as a positive.

Encrypted in a series of relays and relations, promises and deferrals, the ontological status of the photograph itself deserves to be rethought. No longer simply a material entity—the product of a more or less mimetic process of recording and archiving the traces of an object’s former presence—the photograph offers a model for conceptualizing thought itself. To the extent that this radical model of thinking exceeds the themes and motifs that structure the history of metaphysics, that is, to the extent that it holds open the possibility of the unexpected, the surprising, and the unprogrammable,

the photograph rightly can be said to portray the reality of such thinking. Thought in this way, the photograph no longer can be viewed as merely an inscription with light by the pencil of nature, but rather ought to be seen as the point at which a multiplicity of uncontainable self-differentiation intersects in a purposeful, irreducible dance of light and darkness or, in the age of digital reproduction, in an inexhaustible proliferation of plus-minus information. Contrary to conventional notions of the image as ontological substance, as canonized in such works as André Bazin's "The Ontology of the Photographic Image," the reality effect that the photograph occasions bespeaks not simply the absence of a former (and, in principle, re-presentable) visual presence, but rather the reality of a thinking of alterity and even the alterity of thinking itself. Having departed from the view (and world-view) of the photograph as an ontologically stable object, we are led by the photographic image into a distant land of alterity and dissimulation, an idiosyncratic strangeness that provides us with erratic glimpses of a thinking yet to come. This future thinking will have been more rigorous than the merely conceptual, even while it cannot do without concepts. It will have been more indebted to the aesthetics and presentational specificity of the image than conventional philosophizing has dared to acknowledge. The photograph not only *exhibits* the openness of thought itself; it *is* this openness.

Unexpectedly, the photograph, an openness that nevertheless has a form, can be viewed as belonging to the aesthetic or artistic sphere of which Heidegger speaks in his 1935/36 lecture on "The Origin of the Work of Art." Heidegger's reflections are concerned "with the enigma of art, the enigma that art itself is. It is not a matter of solving the enigma. The task is to see the enigma [*Zur Aufgabe steht, das Rätsel zu sehen*]. One has called this reflection, almost from the inception of a separate reflection upon art and artists, aesthetic" (1980, 65). The thinking that aesthetic presentation can open up for us is thus not meant to explain and, by extension, to explain out of existence, what in fact remains irreducible, singular, and resistant within the work. Rather, learning to think aesthetically, to think with and through the work of art, means learning to *see* what exactly the enigma or riddle is. Thinking means remaining open to what threatens to make thinking

impossible. In other words, it requires a certain humility with respect to the hidden difficulties that gnaw at it—whether they be ossified modes of institutionalized philosophizing, encrusted worldviews that are taken to be self-evident, unexamined ideologies that mistake contingencies for universal truths, or other hidden assumptions that prevent us from seeing the full complexity of what is to be thought and of the task of thinking itself. We could say that the photograph offers us an unexpected mode of seeing that aids us in our task to learn to see the difficulty of thinking. *Zur Aufgabe steht, das Rätsel zu sehen*: The photograph constitutes a snapshot of our learning how to think and of the myriad difficulties that always conspire to prevent us from doing so. “What greater anxiety is there today than the anxiety before thinking? [*Welche Angst ist heute größer als die vor dem Denken?*],” Heidegger asks (65). This anxiety is brought into the open by the photograph. The photograph neither celebrates nor eradicates this anxiety. Instead, the photograph gives this anxiety over to reflection by exposing it.

The other-directed polylogue called light-writing therefore can be thought as taking place in the pictorial scene of what Heidegger calls a *Lichtung*, or clearing: not an illumination per se—since the flash always also blinds—but the stage that provides just the right conditions—fleeting, finite, precarious, mortal—upon which the intricate dance of light and darkness is given the opportunity to open onto a serious play of significations. The ecstasy and tragedy that Kafka, Derrida, and Stefan Moses frame are the blurred focal points of a snapshot that, in its theatricality and other-directedness, knows no common measure with the certainty of hermeneutic closure. In its elusive afterness, the photograph smiles, knowingly, even when it grimaces, speaks of its pain and deferral, even when it appears to be joyously and fully itself. As Kafka tells us, photographs are “wonderful,” photographs are “indispensable, but they are torture as well [*aber eine Qual sind sie auch*].” Viewed from this perspective, a photographic afterness shares something of the experience that suffused Derrida’s last words on October 8, 2004, relayed by his son Pierre at the grave and which now conspire to yield an image of Derrida, not a final or funeral image, to be sure, but another image, a final image without closure, an image of finality

that is nevertheless always also just one image among so many others, an image that is no longer and that is no longer simply one. Derrida said: “My friends, I thank you for coming. I thank you for the good fortune of your friendship. Don’t cry. Smile, as I would have smiled at you. I bless you. I love you. Wherever I am, I am smiling at you.”⁸



NOTES

Early versions of part of this essay were presented as invited lectures at Cornell University, Northwestern University, SUNY Buffalo, the Penn Humanities Forum at the University of Pennsylvania, as well as at the December 2005 MLA panel in Washington, “Thinking after Derrida III: Literature and Art,” which was organized by the Division of Philosophical Approaches to Literature. The essay was completed during my tenure at the University of Bonn as a fellow of the Alexander von Humboldt-Stiftung. I thank my various hosts and interlocutors for their congenial engagement with my ideas.

1. Jean-Luc Nancy reminds us of this etymology of photography in “Nous Autres” (2005, 104).
2. See Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003); Vilém Flusser, *Für eine Philosophie der Fotografie* (2000); Geoffrey Batchen, *Each Wild Idea: Writing, Photography, History* (2003); and Hubertus von Amelnunxen, “Fotografie nach der Fotografie” (1995).
3. The pages of this edition, both those containing Plissart’s photographic plates and those containing Derrida’s commentary, are unnumbered. Quotations from this work therefore appear without page number in the text.
4. A representative selection of this series is now available in the magnificent volume of Moses’s photographs as well as of numerous essays and other texts by such critics as Ilse Eichinger, Hans Magnus Enzensberger, and Alexander Kluge, among many others (see Stefan Moses, *Die Monographie* [2002]).
5. See Matthias Harder, “Bilder einer deutschen Gesellschaft. Das fotografisch-epische Theater des Stefan Moses” (2002, 23).
6. Clark’s account should be supplemented by Bernd Stiegler’s recent history of the theory of photography, *Theoriegeschichte der Photographie* (2006), and by Martin Schulz’s investigation of whether there can be a “science” of the image or only of images in *Ordnungen der Bilder: Eine Einführung in die Bildwissenschaft* (2005).
7. Derrida expands upon Barthes’s conjunction of photography and death when he writes:

It is the modern possibility of photography (whether art or technique matters little here) that combines death and the referent in the same system. It was not

for the first time, and this conjugation of death and the referent did not have to wait for the Photograph to have an essential relationship to reproductive technique, or to technique in general, but the immediate proof given by the photographic apparatus or by the structure of the *remains* it leaves behind are irreducible events, ineffaceably original . . . By the time—at the instant—that the *punctum* rends space, the reference and death are in it together in the photograph. (2001, 53)

8. Derrida's last words were recorded for us by David Farrell Krell in "Shudder Speed: The Photograph as Ecstasy and Tragedy," (2004, 21–22 n. 1). Krell's essay also represents a fine meditation in its own right on various experiential and conceptual aspects of photography.

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