

Touching From A Distance: Spirit & Index

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Abstract

In *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes famously describes the ‘future anterior’ tense of the photograph, the catastrophe every photograph embodies; in *The Pencil of Nature*, William Fox Talbot outlines the ‘natural magic’ of a medium that would fetter ‘the most transitory of things, a shadow, the proverbial emblem of all that is fleeting and momentary [...] fixed for ever in the position which it seemed destined for a single instant to occupy.’

Locating the photograph in a lineage of art production framed, since Pliny’s telling of the Corinthian Maid myth in the *Natural History*, by the compensation of loss, I examine the temporal convolutions of the photograph through an exploration of the photographic act and apparatus, as well as through a set of three images beginning with Barthes’ discussion of William Gardner’s portrait of Alexander Payne before his execution; through the staged suicide of Hippolyte Bayard’s Self Portrait as a Drowned Man; and finally in the spirit photographs of William Mumler. Derrida’s late formulation ‘hauntology’ joins Barthes’s future anterior in the conceptual framework this essay seeks to develop.

Through a discussion of these three images I explore the emergence of the visible image from darkness, and place the 19th Century spirit photograph, in its unification for the catastrophic and marvellous dimensions of the medium, at the centre of a photographic ontology.

The photograph is handsome, as is the boy: that is the studium. But the punctum is: he is going to die. I read at the same time: This will be and this has been; I observe with horror an anterior future of which death is the stake [...] Whether or not the subject is already dead, every photograph is this catastrophe.

Roland Barthes¹

The phenomenon which I have now briefly mentioned appears to me to partake of the character of the marvellous... The most transitory of things, a shadow, the proverbial emblem of all that is fleeting and momentary, may be fettered by the spells of our ‘natural magic,’ and may be fixed for ever in the position which it seemed destined for a single instant to occupy.

Henry Fox Talbot²

i. the absent lover

In the *Natural History*, the Roman historian Pliny the Elder describes the mythic origins of painting and sculpture in the trauma of romantic loss:

It was through the service of that same earth that modeling portraits from clay was first invented by Butades, a potter of Sicyon, at Corinth. He did this owing to his daughter, who was in love with a

1 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Vintage, 2000), 96.

2 Henry Fox Talbot, “Some Account of the Art of photogenic Drawing, or, The Process by Which Natural Objects May Be Made to Delineate Themselves Without the Aid of the Artist’s Pencil;” reprinted in *Photography: Essays & Images*, ed. Beaumont Newhall (London: Secker & Warburg, (1839) 1981), 25.

young man; and she, when he was going abroad, drew in outline on the wall the shadow of his face thrown by a lamp. Her father pressed clay on this and made a relief, which he hardened by exposure to fire

with the rest of his pottery; and it is said that this likeness was preserved in the Shrine of the Nymphs...³



Fig 1. Joseph Wright. *The Corinthian Maid*. 1782-1784. Paul Mellon Collection, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. <http://www.nga.gov/content/ngaweb/education/teachers/lessons-activities/origin-myths/corinthian-maid.html>.

So the work of art, in this account, serves as a substitute for the lost object of desire. The question of contact with the absent lover plays a significant part in these proceedings: the present lover directly casts his shadow; the Corinthian maid directly traces his shadow; her father fashions his sculpture directly from the trace. We have, then, a concatenation of intermediary layers, drawn together by this thread of contact: the lover, firstly, who casts the shadow; the tracing by hand of the shadow on the wall, which will persist in his absence; and the fashioning of the sculpture from this tracing – which as a three-dimensional artwork will serve to fill the void left behind with the hard presence of a

physical likeness, founded on this layering of absences. The sculpture, literally and figuratively, fills the space the departed lover has vacated, and because of the role of a kind of ramified contact in its production ensures that the artwork stands in a different relation to its subject than obtains in other kinds of representation.

Without touching on the Corinthian maid, André Bazin, in ‘The Ontology of Photography’, makes much the same point, finding a ‘mummy complex’⁴ at the origin of painting and sculpture: “The religion of ancient Egypt, aimed against death, saw survival as depending on the continued existence of the corporeal body. Thus, by providing a defense against the passage of time it satisfied a basic psychological need in man, for death is but the victory of time. To preserve, artificially, his bodily appearance is to snatch it from the flow of time, to stow it away neatly, so to speak, in the hold of life.”⁵ So art partakes of a disavowal of human finitude, reclaiming a virtual image in the stead of the object itself. A few lines later, he says: “It is this religious use, then, that lays bare the primordial function of statuary, namely, the preservation of life by a representation of life.”⁶ Bazin’s account here marks a certain shift, however, from the idea of art as consolation to a conception of art as actually redemptive in its effects.⁷ Here representation itself becomes a technology

3 Pliny, *Natural History*, XXXV, trans. H. Rackman (Loeb Classical Library, 1952), 43.

4 André Bazin, “The Ontology of the Photographic Image,” in André Bazin, *What Is Cinema?* Vol. 1, trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 48.

5 *Ibid.*

6 *Ibid.*, 49.

7 Early in this essay he writes, “No one believes any longer in the ontological identity of model and image, but all are agreed that the image helps us to remember the subject and to preserve him from a second spiritual death.” He continues: “In spite of any objections our critical spirit may offer, we are forced to accept as real the existence of the object reproduced, actually re-presented, set before us, that is to say, in time and space. Photography enjoys a certain advantage in virtue of this transference of reality from the thing to its reproduction.” But it seems that the critical spir-

of immortality, in which the gap between the virtual image and the thing itself is collapsed, ensuring the survival of the latter in the endurance of the former.

In this essay I will discuss the figuration of these ideas with reference to spirit photography, another technology of immortality; in pursuit of what Barthes, in *Camera Lucida*, calls the noeme or ontology of the photographic medium; and within the context of the late-Derridean formulation of hauntology.

ii. hauntology: theme and process

In a 1993 colloquium at the University of California, Riverside, Derrida undertook a reading of Marx that would begin by focusing on the first proper noun of the *Communist Manifesto*: 'A spectre is haunting Europe...' Reading Marx via *Hamlet*, Derrida would coin the neologism 'hauntology', a homonym in spoken French for the word 'ontology'. "As in *Hamlet*," he writes in *Specters of Marx*,

...everything begins by the apparition of a specter. More precisely by the *waiting* for this apparition. The anticipation is at once impatient, anxious, and fascinated: this, the thing ("this thing") will end up coming. The *revenant* is going to come. It won't be long. But how long it is taking. Still more precisely, everything begins in the imminence of a re-apparition, but a reapparition of the specter as apparition *for the first time in the play*. The spirit of the father is going to come back and will soon say to him "I am thy Fathers Spirit" (I , iv), but here, at the beginning of the play, he comes back, so to speak, for the first time.⁸

Hamlet would prove fertile ground for such a reading of Marx: the story, as Derrida says, begins with a repetition, not with the appearance of the ghost of the prince's father but with its reappearance; and the Denmark of the play, in a phrase Derrida takes for his epigraph, is crucially one in which "the time is out of joint" (an intriguingly spatialising turn of phrase, as if time itself has been dis-located). A certain convolution of temporality takes place: a return for the first time; it won't be long but how long is it taking, which sounds like a line from *Waiting For Godot*; time dis-located.

Of particular pertinence to the question of hauntology, Bernardo, a sentry, reports that he "has seen nothing." The more straightforward formulation might be that he has not seen anything, but in this phrase the nothing is conceived as a thing itself, a positive presence: a phantom of language, perhaps, of reification and the tendency of abstract nouns to thingify the (no)things they designate – or perhaps simultaneously something more and something less, something that cannot be accounted for in the everyday's economy of objects: a gap in the play's famously unstable reality system, a glitch in its Matrix. In a phrase I will return to in a moment, the nothing Bernardo says he has seen can be said to inhabit a zone of ontological uncertainty between Being and Nothingness.

it cannot withstand the persuasive resemblance of the photograph, "the irrational power of the photograph to bear away our faith," for before very long he tells us, in direct contradiction of his first claim cited here, that "The photographic image is the object itself, the object freed from the conditions of time and space that govern it. No matter how fuzzy, distorted, or discolored, no matter how lacking in documentary value the image may be, it shares, by virtue of the very process of its becoming, the being of the model of which it is the reproduction; it is the model." His use of the phrase *second death* is particularly interesting with regards to the theological themes this essay will explore, in terms of its role Judeo-Christian eschatology.

8 Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994), 2 - 3

The Thing is still invisible, it is *nothing* visible (“I have seen nothing”) at the moment one speaks of it and in order to ask oneself if it has reappeared. It is still nothing that can be seen when one speaks of it. It is no longer anything that can be seen when Marcellus speaks of it, but it has been seen twice.⁹

Twice – a repetition, a recurrence, a return

The figure of the ghost, at this juncture, plays a key role in deconstruction’s close attention to the differential chains of meanings in language: nothing is ever purely itself, there is always some trace of its opposite or alterior – no single unit possesses its own meaning, which is always deferred in the circulation of linguistic relations, the context within which individual words become meaningful and without which they cannot signify.¹⁰ The spectral, then, is a kind of residue of *différance*, and indeed hauntology can be seen as a late formulation of that earlier neologism. But the significance of the spectre becomes broader than this, in the context of deconstruction’s critique of the metaphysics of presence: the hauntological here displaces the ontological – as Mark Fisher¹¹ has put it, “Derrida’s neologism uncovers the space between being and nothingness.”¹² Or as Colin Davis has argued:

Hauntology supplants its near-homonym ontology, replacing the priority of being and presence with the figure of the ghost as that which is neither present nor absent, neither dead nor alive. [The ghost is] a wholly irrecoverable intrusion in our world, which is not comprehensible within our available intellectual frameworks, but whose otherness we are responsible for preserving.¹³

So the ghost is an intrusion, something from outside that ventures within, and at the same time destabilises the very boundary it seems to breach, because it is ‘neither present or absent, neither alive nor dead.’

Davis notes on two occasions the relationship between the spectral as a particular theme and as a general feature of writing, in a point that will form the crux of this essay: “The attraction of hauntology for deconstructive-minded critics arises,” he says, “from the link between a theme (haunting, ghosts, the supernatural) and the processes of literature and textuality in general.”¹⁴ Later on he notes that “Ghosts are a privileged theme because they allow an insight into texts and textuality as such.”¹⁵ So the operations of language and writing can be seen to mirror the operations of the spectral, that mode of (non)being characterised by absences, traces, quasi-presences: in language this relates to the intertextual presences of other speech and other speakers, in the deferral of meanings, the endless play of *différance*, the absence of the referent, and of the utterance in the absence of an embodied voice. In this framework, ontological uncertainty becomes an operational principle because all ontological questions are suspended. I want to highlight here these particular splits – between speech and speaker – because I will return to it in part four of this

9 *Ibid.*, 5.

10 In this we can see something of the notorious claim “Il n’y a rien en dehors du texte.”

11 Fisher was central to the second life of hauntology (after the first spectral turn of theory in the early 1990s), particularly in the field of music criticism and its intersection with politics.

12 K-Punk (Mark Fisher), “Home Is Where The Haunt Is: The Shining’s Hauntology,” *K-Punk* (blog), January 23, 2006, <http://k-punk.abstractdynamics.org/archives/007252.html>.

13 Colin Davis, “États Présents: Hauntology, Spectres and Phantoms,” *French Studies* 59, no. 3 (2005), 373.

14 *Ibid.*, 377.

15 *Ibid.*, 378.

essay, in terms of an identical split between substance and appearance that marks the simulacrum, which in turn finds a kind of technical perfection in the homological iconicity of the photograph.

The above link between theme and process, I want to argue, can be made with regards to the relationship between spirit photography and photography as such, between the iconography of spectres and the (hau)ontology of visual representation itself; the particular species of the photograph that is the spirit photograph – in its constructedness, its uncanniness, in its contraction of temporal registers, in its combination of index as tracing and index as pointing – can cast a certain light on to the wider genus of photography, its noeme or ontology. We will see how the visual is already a spectral field in which the operational logic of the photograph aggravates the intensity of the haunting.

iii. origins & ontology

Two stories, in précis

The most familiar story of the medium locates its origins in painting, in the camera obscura's role as an artists' tool for the construction of Albertian perspective, incorporating it into the pictorial technology of the Renaissance. This account finds justification in Henry Fox Talbot's own accounts of his experiments, designed to fix the image in the camera obscura and so invent a method of "photogenic drawing." In many ways this narrative still underlies the popular understanding of the medium. But there is another story to be told about the medium, one that Barthes alludes to when he talks of locating its origins not in painting but in the theatre,¹⁶ a narrative that finds its own justification in Daguerre's role in the history of the diorama: in artificial spectacle, instead of traces and impressions.¹⁷ In the first, the photograph is a kind of perfect document, faithful to its object, for which it is transparent; in the second, it is a fantasia, a pictorial artifact, occasioning the object it would appear to re-present, in varying degrees of translucency and opacity.

These differing accounts will pertain to the two paradigmatic conceptions of the medium I shall outline shortly.

The mummy complex

Since its invention photography has been associated with death, in various literal and figurative ways, from Delaroche's marking its advent as the death of painting to the genres of posthumous portraiture and spirit photography. It has been likened to death masks and funeral shrouds, to processes of embalming and to the use of fetishes designed to protect against loss, on the one hand, and as something that might steal a person's soul, killing the subject piecemeal, on the other.¹⁸ Ralph Waldo Emerson expressed a similar sentiment, one that would also find articulation in *Camera Lucida*, when he asked: "Were you ever daguerreotyped... and did you look with all vigor at the lens of the camera... [to find that] unhappily the total expression had escaped from the face and you held the portrait of a mask instead of a man?"¹⁹ Siegfried Kracauer likens the people in photographs to manikins, and of course doll-like likenesses are the ur-type of the Uncanny, possessors of a curious quasi-

¹⁶ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 31.

¹⁷ See, for example, Marina Warner, *Phantasmagoria: Spirit Visions, Metaphors, and Media into the 21st Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

¹⁸ A dread Balzac famously held and which Kracauer, in a different register, would also advance in 'Photography.'

¹⁹ Quoted in Francois Brunet, *Photography and Literature* (London: Reaktion Books, 2009), 68.

living deadness.²⁰ Elsewhere in 'Photography,' Kracauer claims that the prevalence of photographs is "a sign of the fear of death[...] In the illustrated magazines the world has become a photographable present, and the photographed present has been entirely eternalized. Seemingly ripped from the clutch of death, in reality it has succumbed to it."²¹ Everywhere you turn in the literature, popular, academic, or literary, we find this linkage with death; concomitant with this we find an equally enduring association with the haunted and haunting, with photographs as both agents and bearers of haunting, an association I shall draw out shortly.

This raft of associations, deeply embedded in the popular understanding of the medium, constitutes one powerful conception of photography's nature, answering to the first, still popularly dominant story told about the origins of the medium as described above. For the purposes of this essay, I will call this photography's temporal paradigm: it is the theoretical and affective formation that most acutely concerns itself with the past, with the passage of time and thus with mortality. It exemplifies the psychological formation Bazin termed the 'mummy complex'; *Camera Lucida* provides the starkest expression of this tendency.

It is a model that we can oppose to a tendency long latent in the medium's history, once suppressed by the strictures of a Modernist 'straight' photography, but which has come to the fore in more recent decades, answering to the second account of photography founded on the diorama: for the purposes of my argument I will term this the *deictic paradigm*, concerning itself in the spirit of the index as *pointing*, as index finger, as performative gesture, as opposed to that spirit of the index taken as trace. These two components, in short, answer to the two key actions of the Peircean index, which I shall probe in the fourth part of this essay: tracing and pointing.

In certain ways this is an uneasy relationship, but it is precisely in this unstable compound of the temporal and the deictic, of emanation and indication, that the photographic hauntological can be said to reside, a point I will soon develop when I turn to a selection of particular photographs; but first I want to turn from this link between photography and death to a similarly enduring association with the marvellous.

If the relationship with death resides in the form of the index as emanation, as trace of the expired moments of the world, the relation with the marvellous grows out of its iconicity – out of miraculous resemblance, its homological identity, or seeming identity, with its depicted object.

A terrible distinctiveness

In September 1862, Matthew Brady despatched the photographer Alexander Gardner and his assistant James Gibson to document the aftermath of the battle of Antietam in Maryland, the bloodiest of the civil war, exhibiting the photographs a month later at his gallery in New York. On the 20th of October, an anonymous writer in the *New York Times* would describe the exhibition to the wider public:

Mr. Brady has done something to bring home to us the terrible reality and earnestness of war. If he has not brought bodies and laid them in our door-yards and along the streets, he has done something very like it [...] These pictures have a terrible distinctness. By the aid of the magnifying-glass, the very features of the slain may be distinguished. We would scarcely choose to be in the gallery, when

²⁰ Siegfried Kracauer, *The Mass Ornament* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 56.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 59.

one of the women bending over them should recognize a husband, son, or a brother in the still, lifeless lines of bodies, that lie ready for the gaping trenches.²²

In this passage, photography's unparalleled descriptive power produces a 'terrible', now commonplace, effect: the depicted bodies might be present for the viewer, made all the more appalling in that moment of familial recognition. One sense of the adjective terrible, of course, points to awe: that which is terrifying is always also awesome. This sense of presence, founded on similitude, underpins all photography in which the content is legible: it grants sanction to documentary's claim to truth and enables the cognitive and affective estrangement of manipulated pictures such as Chino Otsuka's uncanny family photographs or Jerry Uelsmann's symbolist dreamscapes.

Twenty-two years prior to *The Dead of Antietam* exhibition in New York, Edgar Allen Poe described the process of daguerreotype development in a related way:

When taken out, the plate does not at first appear to have received a definite impression – some short processes, however, develop it in the most miraculous beauty. All language must fall short of conveying any just idea of the truth, and this will not appear so wonderful when we reflect that the source of vision itself has been, in this instance, the designer. Perhaps, if we imagine the distinctness with which an object is reflected in a positively perfect mirror, we come as near the reality as by any other means. For, in truth, the Daguerreotype plate is infinitely (we use the term advisedly) is infinitely more accurate in its representation than any painting by human hands. If we examine a work of ordinary art, by means of a powerful microscope, all traces of resemblance to nature will disappear – but the closest scrutiny of the photogenic drawing discloses on a more absolute truth, a more perfect identity of aspect with the aerial perspective are those of truth itself in the supremeness of its perfection.²³

Infinite, perfect identity, miraculous beauty, truth itself in the supremeness of its perfection – such language abounds in the early discourses around photography: Lady Elizabeth Eastlake, the English art critic and historian, would also term the medium "miraculous",²⁴ and Henry Fox Talbot, inventor of the calotype process, would call it a "natural magic".²⁵ If a miracle is an event that confounds the operating norms of the world, a cosmic *deus ex machina* that plunges the incumbent reality-system into crisis and announces the advent of a new dispensation, then such language seems apposite, because in the photograph a very different relationship between the picture and its content obtains than in all prior pictorial modes; and for miracles, of course, all language must fall short, for the vocabulary of the Old cannot

22 Anonymous, "BRADY'S PHOTOGRAPHS.; Pictures of the Dead at Antietam," *New York Times*, October 20, 1862, <http://tinyurl.com/mfe5paf>.

23 Edgar Allen Poe, "The Daguerreotype," *Alexander's Weekly Messenger*, January 15, 1840, http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/P8400008_POE_ALEX-WEEKLY_1840-01-15.pdf.

24 Lady Elizabeth Eastlake, "Photography," in *Classic Essays On Photography*, ed. Alan Trachtenberg (New Haven, CT: Leete's Island Books, Inc, 1980), 39. First published in the *London Quarterly Review*, 1857.

25 Talbot, "Some Account," 25.

hope to encompass the New.²⁶ In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes terms this homology “concomitance”,²⁷ a similarly theological word in its relation to the Catholic Eucharist.

The 19th Century, of course, was the age of technological wonders: telegraphy and radio, which promised the abolition of space, and photography and the gramophone, which promised a certain abolition of time – a promise that would find its fulfilment in the spirit photography of practitioners such as the Bostonian William Mumler. Jeffrey Sconce has examined the deep and ongoing relationship between these technologies and the supernatural in *Haunted Media*²⁸ and it is a relation that persists to this day.²⁹ This array of technologies, reproductive (photographs) and transmissive (telephones), share what Sconce terms ‘telepresence’, and it is this powerful sensation of contact from a distance – across space, across time, across the border between life and death itself – that lies at the heart of their uncanny, affective power. I shall examine the question of touching and its relation to the index – a peculiarly haptic kind of sign, fraught with sensuality – in the fourth part of this essay.

In the ensemble of these relationships – photography and death, photography and the marvellous – the emergence of spirit photography becomes inevitable. In that context of technological wonders, it is a small step from believing in the transmission of the human voice across vast spaces and the retention of human likenesses through time, to believing in the bridging of earthly life and the hereafter as made evident in spirit photographs and phantom sound recordings; ancient superstition and technology find a poignant marriage in such forms. In terms of the function of the artwork as outlined in the introduction to this essay, we can perceive here the shift from consolation and assuagement to recuperation: the dead lover revived.

William Mumler would eventually stand trial for defrauding the public, after spirit ‘extras’ seen in his pictures were identified as living residents of Boston. A letter from one of his customers, a certain Dr W.N. Hambleton, submitted by the defence, makes clear the relation between photographic resemblance and the miraculous:

The countenance represented in the photograph has been recognized at sight by a number of his old acquaintances - among whom is the physician who attended my father in his last illness - as an excellent likeness of him. Thus is added another of those incontrovertible evidences that our friends can return from the ‘other shore,’ bringing us the knowledge of their heavenly home and of their undying sympathy for the children of mortality.³⁰

26 One might draw out a connection between the miraculous and the traumatic, founded on this failure or blockage of language.

27 Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 84.

28 Jeffrey Sconce, *Haunted Media* (Duke University Press, 2000).

29 A recent episode of Charlie Brooker’s near-future science fiction series *Black Mirror* involved the aggregation of social media data for the production of an uncanny, near-perfect android substitute for the protagonist’s dead husband (note, again, the romantic connection as outlined in the introduction), and Hideo Nakata’s seminal 1998 horror film *Ringu* involved a cursed video tape, the viewing of which would ensure your death within a week, *unless you copied it and passed it on*. Similarly, the Internet is awash with digital photographic evidence of supernatural ‘orbs’ and ghosts.

30 Louis Kaplan, *The Strange Case of William Mumler, Spirit Photographer* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 122.

iv. emanation/indication: contact

In the previous section of this essay, I argued that photography's hauntological character resides in the unstable combination of its two forms of the indexical sign, those of trace and indicator. Before expanding on this point it will be useful to outline some of the basic features of the index in its original formation in Peirce's work.

The most straightforward part of the idea is that an index is a kind of non-iconic sign partaking in some physical connection with its signified: the smoke of a fire, the fingerprint of a thief left at the scene of a crime. The connection is direct: the fire directly produces the smoke; the thief directly touches the mantelpiece or windowsill. Contact is made. The index therefore differs from other forms of the sign such as the icon in that it does not resemble its referent, and from the symbol insofar as its relation to the referent is not a matter of arbitrary convention, as in the lexical sign.

The second part refers to what Roman Jakobson has called 'shifters': words, empty of semantic content, that serve a context-sensitive gestural function: look at that sunset, look at this photograph... In an essay on indexicality and medium specificity, Mary-Ann Doane explained it in this way:

Deixis is the moment when language seems to touch ground, to adhere as closely as it can to the present reality of speech. Peirce was acutely aware of this and hence contested the traditional wisdom that dictates that a pronoun (such as "this," "that," "I") is a substitute for a noun. These pronouns have a directness and immediacy that all nouns lack; they are capable of indicating things in the most straightforward way. Therefore, Peirce claims that "a noun is an imperfect substitute for a pronoun."³¹

To link this back to Bazin, we see here the recurrence of this peculiar relationship between representation and Thing in which the representation plays the role of a surrogate. Of course, this is an old dynamic in Western culture: Blake's insistence on the perfection and primacy of the intensely particular, beauty in a handful of dust, foreshadows the sentiment, while Platonism reverses the relation – we might say that for Plato, the pronoun is the imperfect substitute for the abstract nouns of the Forms. But the question of the perfection or otherwise of the substitute is irrelevant to the fact of substitution. The directness and immediacy, we must note, characteristics of the index, have also long been taken, in one form or another, to characterise the photograph as a peculiar kind of picture. The promise of this immediacy is the assuagement of the Corinthian maid, the recuperation of her loss. If indexicality sometimes seems like a tenuous account of the vexed encounter with the real offered by photography, we can find the persistence of the idea in the intensity of the libidinal investments made clear in the *Natural History*. Due to the suasive power of its iconicity, we long for a kind of contact with the referent of the photograph, a longing it solicits and betrays. The Spirit photograph, as a particular genus of the photograph, throws this desire into the sharpest relief, makes plain the operational necessity of desire in our everyday experience of the photographic, and thereby illuminates the wider species.

The development of cameraphone photography readily includes each sense of the index: people take photographs to recall events such as gigs and weddings, and they

³¹ Mary Ann Doane, "The Indexical and the Concept of Medium Specificity," in "Indexicality: Trace and Sign," ed. Mary Ann Doane, special issue, *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 18, no. 1 (2007): 134

also take photographs to point things out to friends and family – a snapped picture of something funny or peculiar or otherwise noteworthy, sent without explanation for its meanings will be clear within the context of that familial exchange. The first says *we were here*,³² the second look at this. Digital imaging has sometimes been interpreted as a marked break with ‘traditional’ photography,³³ but these two examples highlight the continuity of digital in the functional persistence of the two forms of the index.

Pointing itself, in the second component of the index, shares a peculiar relationship to contact, because to point to something is precisely *not to touch it* – there is always a gap between the index finger and the object. This everyday *deixis* becomes strange when the pointing occurs in the absence of the object.³⁴ This absence, as we shall shortly see, is what Derrida means in claiming that death is a condition of the mark: “One writes in order to communicate something to those who are absent. The absence of the sender, of the receiver [destinateur], from the mark that he abandons, and which cuts itself off from him and continues to produce effects independently of his presence and of the present actuality of his intentions [vouloir-dire], indeed even after his death, his absence, which moreover belongs to the structure of all writing...”³⁵ If this enabling absence has certain peculiar ramifications for language and literature (all stories, in this formulation, become ghost stories), its ramifications for photography are stranger still, because while fiction’s object never existed and does not exist, photography’s object existed once but no longer exists. Photography, in other words, always points at something that has ceased to be, and so, by the lights of the temporal paradigm, is always saturated with the fact of this cessation.

The strangeness in this relation consists in the connection between contact and resemblance, between indexicality and the photograph’s peculiar form of homological iconicity. Resemblance might have been the principal goal of the medium’s inventors,³⁶ and indexicality the chief quality that distinguishes the medium from other forms of picture-making, but a photograph that does not resemble its object through distortion is still indexical; resemblance is not therefore a simple product of indexicality. So where does the strangeness in this relation, between index and resemblance, reside?

32 Uploaded to social media within seconds of its capture, transmitted globally with unfathomable speed, it might also say: *we are here*. This would constitute a particularly digital temporality, a genuinely novel development in the history of the medium; an index pointing neither retrospectively or prospectively, but instead pointing *here, now*, not a *that* but a *this*.

33 Most substantively by William J. Mitchell in *The Reconfigured Eye* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994). The ontological question here pertains to whether we grant the material of the technology or the practice of its usages primacy in our definition of photograph’s essence, to use that most vexed of terms. Mitchell certainly argues for the former, highlighting the way the pixel-grid shatters the tonal and pictorial continuity characteristic of the analogue image.

34 The absence central to fiction, in terms of the literary hauntological, and an absence central to the photograph, whose object is always already gone.

35 See “Signature Event Context” in Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc.* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University, 1988), 5.

36 Henry Fox Talbot, *The Pencil of Nature* (London: Longman, Brown, Green and Longmans, 1844), 4, <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/33447>: “Such, then, was the method which I proposed to try again, and to endeavor, as before, to trace with my pencil the outlines of the scenery depicted on the paper [by the camera obscura]. And this led me to reflect on the inimitable beauty of the pictures of nature’s painting which the glass lens of the Camera throws upon the paper in its focus—fairy pictures, creations of a moment, and destined as rapidly to fade away. It was during these thoughts that the idea occurred to me...how charming it would be if it were possible to cause these natural images to imprint themselves durably, and remain fixed upon the paper!”

My answer is that it consists in the way that resemblance, in part, supplies the index with its psychic charge, its affective power, its evidentiary force: it endows the index with the spectatorial sensation of contact. I say 'in part' because there is a certain circularity to this relation: we might also say that the index supplies the resemblance with its peculiar power, because otherwise it is just another kind of picture.

We should note that this account of the index in its indicative mode is ensconced within the terms of the temporal paradigm. Pointing in the purely *deictic* sense reverses the direction of the pointing finger. In the temporal framework it points

backwards: in the deictic paradigm, by contrast, it might point in some other direction altogether.

The central issue is that the promise of contact is one that the index can never fulfil, in part because pointing itself requires the absence of touch. Photography therefore is poised between these countervailing forces, between the desire for contact and the necessity that no contact be made. Herein lies the agony and allure of photographs, the Barthes of the present forever excluded from the Winter Garden, no matter how desperately he presses his face up against the glass.

Pointing at something, moreover, always entails its extraction from its context: one points something out. This marks the beginning of the photograph's process of dematerialising abstraction, cutting the subject out from the continua of everyday bodies and objects, which may have reached its apotheosis in the digital form: unstuck from its object, prised from its substrate, converted into binary. Barthes makes this relationship between visuality and spectrality evident in the compacted roots of the Greek word *eidolon*, meaning both image and phantom, and the relation between apparition and appearance.

And the person or thing photographed is the target, the referent, a kind of little simulacrum, any *eidolon* emitted by the object, which I should like to call the spectrum of the Photograph, because this word retains, through its root, a relation to "spectacle" and adds to it that rather terrible thing which is there in every photograph: the return of the dead.³⁷

Pointed out, extracted, the object becomes image, becomes spectral. It becomes something that haunts.

Futurity

In a further knot in the braiding of deixis and temporality, another feature of the kind of pointing discussed must be *examined*. I will underscore this now insofar as it is central to what Barthes calls the 'future anterior' tense of the photograph, which the final passage of this essay will examine in terms of a sequence of images beginning with the portrait of the young man addressed in *Camera Lucida*.

This further knot, a chink in the temporal genesis and therefore nature of the photograph, relates to the question of pointing. In blunt terms, the photograph always begins with the pointing of the camera at some object in the world – this much is obvious. What is key is that, for the final photograph, so wrapped up in the pastness of the past, the process must begin with the pointing out of something yet to be. The photographer, peering through the lens, looks at the object before the occasion of the image, and the captured image must always come afterwards. By

³⁷ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 9.

necessity, the photographer cannot see the moment of capture, which belongs to the privacy of the apparatus, only the moment prior to it. As the photograph is taken the photographer is blind,³⁸ a further instance in the dialectic of visibility and invisibility, of positive and negative, light and dark, that permeates photography – and which it shares with the occult and its own dynamic of the hidden and revealed.³⁹

The consequences of this occlusion of process are manifold. We may sketch two in particular as they pertain to the current discussion:

1. The frame, conceived in that private darkness, constitutes a field in which a multiplicity of accidents might occur, because in the moment of exposure the photographer relinquishes control to the apparatus and to the world in its manifold recalcitrance; I will return to the question of accidents in my discussion of Mumler's spirit pictures,⁴⁰ as it will relate to the role of intentionality in Barthes's *studium*, and the absence of such in the *punctum*.

2. Ansel Adams' famously uses the ugly neologism *previsualisation*, which implants a certain futurity in the structure of the photographic act: one imagines what the film will capture when the shutter is tripped, when the negative is developed, etc. So photographs, bound so intimately to the elapsed moments of the world, begin by pointing at the future.⁴¹

In this way, photography involves a peculiar temporal convolution, incorporating the vanished past, the vanishing present, and that virtuality we call the future into the unassuming unity of the simple photograph. For Derrida, death and a certain ghostliness reside at the beginning of language, in the mark's quality of iterability.⁴² The mark, in this conception, is always a future-oriented thing, and always carries with it the possibility of surviving the marker's death as well as the death of the recipient, which is the condition of iterability as such and therefore of language. In this way writing severs the speech from the voice – from a classical conflation of embodied speech with presence – in much the same way as the photograph, in its flawless iconicity, its fidelity to nature, severs appearance from the substance that appears.⁴³

38 I think of Madame Sosostris in *The Waste Land*, with her wicked pack of cards, of which one is blank; the charlatan whose prognostications – “fear death by water” – nevertheless prove correct in the later figure of the drowned Phoenician sailor. Tiresias, the poem's seer, is also blind, further extending the logic of blindness/vision and the visionary.

39 In this vein we might claim that the red light of the dark room is always also the red light of the séance; and while one sits for a photograph, a séance, too, is also a kind of ‘sitting.’

40 The Swedish painter and filmmaker Friedrich Jurgenson placed a microphone and a tape recorder in his garden to record birdsong. When he played the recording back, he heard the voices of his late father and his wife on the tape. Does not photography, indeed all recording, partake in an identical process?

41 Which at this stage is a virtuality, much like communism, the *Manifesto's* spectre that haunts Europe: a virtual attractor, a prospective rather than retrospective haunting.

42 See “Signature, Event, Context,” in Derrida, *Limited Inc*, 1.

43 Another essay could examine the role of the supplement and of secondarity in terms of much of the work that we could bracket within the deictic paradigm, such as Cindy Sherman's elaborate play of costume and performance or Thomas Demand's paper and cardboard constructions, because where the temporal paradigm will always understand the photograph in its primary form as an emanation of a past reality, as a secondary effect, the deictic will understand the captured moment – to use a specifically temporal phrase – as a product of the occasion of the photographic act itself, reversing the relation of dependency. With reference to Derrida's discussion of the reappearance of the ghost, we might say that the photograph in these types of work is not a *recurrence*

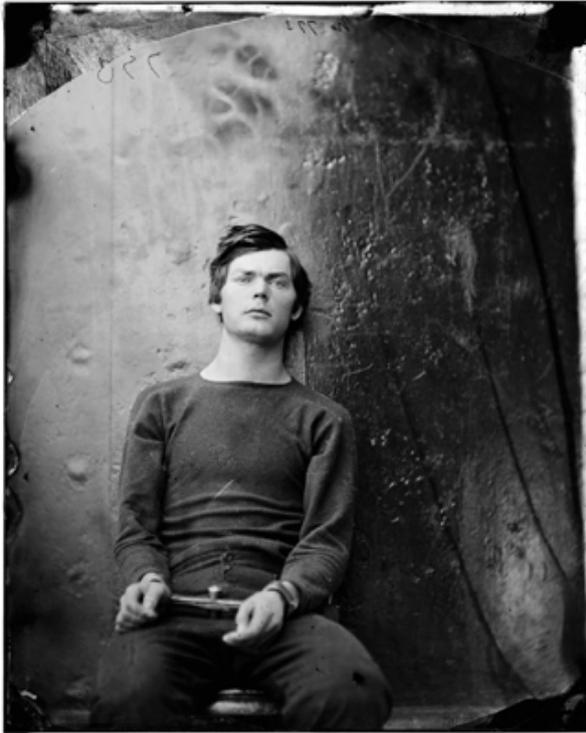


Fig. 2. Alexander Gardner. *Lewis Payne*. 1865. *Selected Civil War photographs, 1861-1865, The Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C.* <http://loc.gov/pictures/resource/cwpb.04208/>.

This, I think, is what Barthes calls the future anterior of the photograph. I also described *Camera Lucida* as the starkest expression of the temporal paradigm, a property that consists most specifically in its hauntological charge; the passage from *Camera Lucida* that provides this essay's first epigraph exemplifies this quality in the present tense of the prose, which loops the loop once more: in *Camera Lucida*, we have the past moment, the past future and the vanishing present of photographic spectatorship all ensconced within the persistent virtual presence of prosaic voice, of the iterability of Barthes' text. A literary haunting haunted by the spectres of



Fig. 3. Hippolyte Bayard. *Autoportrait en Noyé [Self Portrait as Drowned Man]*. 1840. *Société Française de Photographie, Paris.* <http://www.machina.su/edition/9785901410660/fragments/drowned/>.

So photography requires darkness in order that its images might come to light. In this context the photograph does not capture the Thing, so much as it describes the Thing's manner of departure: the catastrophe Barthes finds in every photograph.

v. some images

For Barthes, the portrait of Lewis Payne before his execution (fig. 2) embodies the paradox he finds at the heart of the photograph: he is dead and he is going to die. The image is an emanation of a past moment – through its adherence to the referent, it grants us a certain access to that moment. At the same time it indexes the future of that moment – the young man's certain death. I concluded an earlier section of this essay with the claim that the photographic hauntological consists in the unstable compound of index as trace and index as indicator; in the temporal loop – I picture a Möbius strip, the present and future flat with the past – fashioned of past moment, past future and the ever-vanishing present of photographic spectatorship.

photography. Remember that, for Derrida, death is the very condition of iterability, of language itself: if the little book is a work of mourning for his mother, Barthes's own death itself is the condition of the book. Haunting is persistence, repetition, recurrence. Each reading of the

but its very occasion. And in an example of that unstable compound of temporality and deixis, an element of this relation will always permeate work undertaken in the temporal mode: you might decide, for example, to set out and document your journey along the south coast of England, but what you end up with will be always also be a document of that desire to document, because the journey would not have been undertaken without that intent to photograph. For the time being, I note these cases in passing, as examples of the braiding of temporality and deixis outlined above.

book conjures Roland Barthes, that grieving ghost. The textual is a spectral field, a Twilight Zone of language, a fog in which objects are never quite brought into focus. As Davis claimed, the appeal of hauntology resides in a link between the themes of spectres and the process of texts, but the link exists prior to language, prior to the sign, in the animal mark itself. The photograph, as mark, as sign, sustains an identical logic. The visual, too, is a spectral field.

In the final part of this essay, I will turn to some further convolutions, to further loopings of the loop.

Hippolyte Bayard's Self Portrait as a Drowned Man (fig. 3) surely counts as one of the strangest photographs ever made. Its occasion can be given in précis, for the true significance of the picture resides above the level of such detail: Bayard, the inventor of one kind of photographic process, was a rival to Daguerre, who would win all the acclaim for the medium's invention, along with a pension from the French government, as well as his position in the history – in our first story – as inventor of the medium. We have not had time to explore the relation between the photographic sign and the lexical sign, which surely deepens photography's hauntological dimension, but Bayard's photograph would be of particular interest in such a connection, for the back of his picture reads:

The corpse which you see here is that of M. Bayard, inventor of the process that has just been shown to you. As far as I know this indefatigable experimenter has been occupied for about three years with his discovery. The Government which has been only too generous to Monsieur Daguerre, has said it can do nothing for Monsieur Bayard, and the poor wretch has drowned himself[...] He has been at the morgue for several days, and no-one has recognized or claimed him. Ladies and gentlemen, you'd better pass along for fear of offending your sense of smell, for as you can observe, the face and hands of the gentleman are beginning to decay.⁴⁴

The photograph points: *look what you have done!* But of course it is a fiction. The deictic-performative, so characteristic of the postmodern, resides here in the years of the medium's origin. We have an acute braiding of the temporal and indicative. Bayard plays dead, darkening his hands and face to suggest rot. Perhaps it is the stasis of the image that forces the connection with death, which we always take to be a kind of final stasis, the image itself a kind of rigor mortis. He is dead and he is going to die, says Barthes of the handsome young man. Bayard's picture now, for us, long after his death, loops the loop once more, in its persistent present tense: *he is alive and he is pretending to be dead and he is dead and he is going to die*. It is a strange catastrophe.

The next photograph provides a variation on this theme. I cannot reproduce it here; the only copy I have seen is blu-tacked to a friend's bedroom wall. It is a young man, similarly handsome, well dressed in a good suit, his eyes shut, hands raised to his lips in a gesture of prayer. One cannot help but to read a certain humour into his expression, a youthful irreverence set against the solemnity of the pose. Of course he is smiling. But he is also dead, positioned in this way by friends for the photograph, which captures the moment it occasions, a dead man, as seemingly alive as anyone who was ever actually alive when photographed. Photographs can only go so far: the depths recess away beneath the gloss surface of the print or screen. The loop loops; it convolves.

⁴⁴ Text quoted in The Museum of Hoaxes, "Portrait of the photographer as a Drowned man," http://www.museumofhoaxes.com/hoax/photo_database/image/portrait_of_the_photographer_as_a_drowned_man.



Fig 4. William H. Mumler. *Mary Todd Lincoln (1818-1882) (untitled spirit photograph with Abraham Lincoln's shadow)*. 1870s. *European and American Art*, Harvard Art Museum/Fogg Museum, Cambridge, MA. <http://www.harvardartmuseums.org/art/173769>.

itself – an extrusion, something extra, something extraordinary.

Mumler's spirit photographs involve two key indexical functions. They point: look – the spirit endures. And they trace: some residue of the afterlife, of Hambleton's 'other shore', distilled on the glass. The sensuality of touch, of course, has a vast array of mystical uses: the laying on of hands, the reading of palms. In this vein, the circumstances of production for Mumler's picture include a further kind of contact: during the exposure, Mumler would often touch the camera, as if the connection were a current conducted through his body, through his hands, his fingers, and into the mute apparatus.

The loop loops: looking at these pictures now, we have the faces of the living, the faces of the dead, each long

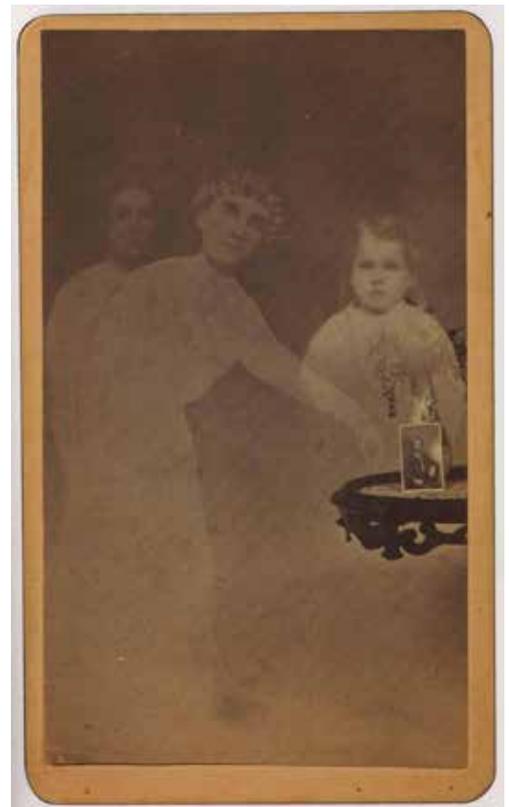
Fig 5, William H. Mumler. *Three "spirits" with a photograph on a table propped against a vase with flowers*. 1862-1875. The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles. <https://www.google.com/culturalinstitute/asset-viewer/three-spirits-with-a-photograph-on-a-table-propped-against-a-vase-with-flowers/FgGnggo50k9c5Q?hl=en>.

The Uncanny always involves a peculiar stasis, a quasi-living deadness, a quasi-dead vitality, formulated most clearly in the figure of the doll – and the doll, in its limpness, resembles nothing quite so much as a dead infant. Here we find the photographic Uncanny, conceptual cousin of the hauntological: in its provision of images of the living and the dead, it collapses, within the fictive metaphysics of the image, the seeming difference between the two, creating a weird equivalency between the inhabitants of the present and the denizens of the past, and so while it grants the dead a certain imagistic vitality it also imparts a deathliness to the living, making them mute and static, petrified.

The dead young man appears alive. Is he not smiling as he prays?

In conclusion, two spirit photographs

Spiritualism served a specifically consolatory role, in the context of wars – peaking during the Civil War, then again during WWI – and high infant mortality rates. The spirit photograph, in the official account, began as an accident, William Mumler developing a plate in his Boston studio to find spirit extras in the image. The accidental is the guarantor of authenticity, of innocence, for deception requires intention; and intention, of course, is the precise character of the *studium*. The face of the spirit is the face of the *punctum*



gone, one and all, collapsed into that equivalency described above. My impression, though, is that it is the spirit extras who seem most alive: the sitters appear deathly, perhaps as the famous consequence of the long exposures of the day. In any case, the photograph reduces both sitter and extra to the status of an eidolon. We are haunted by haunted spectres. The loop loops.

One final photograph, a final convolution. In a stroke of entrepreneurial genius, Mumler expanded his market beyond Boston and its environs by seeking business from clients who could not make it to his studio. He would accept family photographs, mailed to him, which he would position on tables before his camera, tables which seem in these pictures peculiarly physical, quite sharply substantial, jutting into the frame from its sides, and then re-photograph them. These pictures, a minority of his oeuvre, condense the psychical-spectatorial truth of photography. The family pictures possess enough charge, enough presence, to generate the extras on their own. The photographic trace of the sitter is potent enough. Mumler's photographs in this vein register the meta-photographic fact of the medium's hauntedness, simultaneously naïve and self-reflexive, photographs about photography, whose eidos is death. They are the species that illuminate the genus, the most precise formulations of photography's hauntological character.

And so the loop loops; so the photograph convolves.

Bio: Seán Padraic Birnie is a writer and photographer from Brighton. His work can be seen at seanbirnie.com.