



Barthes Lucida

An examination of the themes of death and mourning within Roland Barthes
'*Camera Lucida*'

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Throughout Roland Barthes book 'Camera Lucida' (Barthes, 2000), he explores the photographic image while in a state of mourning for his mother. He often draws upon references to death, in examinations of the photograph. However, Barthes' use of the words 'death' and 'mourning' in his book, seem to be separate from one another. One is born from emotion triggered by the passing of his beloved mother. In contrast, he is driven towards the other word, death, as if aware of his own mortality. It is easy to assume that both words are related to the passing of Barthes mother, for he 'mourns' her 'death', yet he speaks about the death of those he views in photographs without mourning. As with Alexander Gardner's portrait of Lewis Payne on death-row, where Barthes unremorsefully states that "the photograph tells me death is the future" (Barthes, 2000, p. 96). However, Barthes has consciously selected photographs whose posed subjects have since died, since many of the photographs he examines are a century old. Yet, none of us are witnesses to their death and would not normally speculate upon this thought, nor would we mourn if even in knowledge. In this essay I will examine the theme of death and mourning and how it diverges from the same entwined path of fate.

I wish to look at Barthes mourning first, for this is the driving force that has delivered 'Camera Lucida'. Without the death of Barthes mother, he would not have been inspired to write the book. Spending many sombre hours browsing through photographs looking for her essence led him to investigate the photograph. Many people search for a passed loved one through reminders left behind by those departed. Photographs with their reproduced likeness are the most common memento, as are other processions and the places with shared memories. Rosy Martin, takes a similar path as Barthes, after the death of her father. Choosing to make "a melancholic project", called 'Too close to home?' (Martin, 1999). In which she photographed the place in which she was raised, by her parents, in South London. In "returning to that amorphous place and restoring weakened connections through sensorial and emotional prompts that re-present the past in sufficient detail", Martin was able to look at "the relationship between photography and memory that has preoccupied" her mourning (Martin, 1999). Like Barthes, Martin busied herself with her life's work in an attempt to bury her grief.

It is often found that experiences with death allow people to gain a new perspective. For photographers, as Martin expresses, “the camera stands in for the searching eye, which averts from the gaze of the other, yet seeks evidence of presence” (Martin, 1999). This can go for those that are in mourning of their own fate, such as Jo Spence, where a diagnosis of a terminal illness transforms how we view our presence. After being diagnosed with cancer Spence’s “work was a response to her treatment... through alternative therapies” (Vasey, 2014). Her experiences as she became all too aware of death, inspired her work and shaped the way she worked. Collaborating and sharing some of those experiences with Rosy Martin, “drawing on techniques learned from co-counselling, psycho-drama and the reframing technique we began to work together to give ourselves and each other permission to display ‘new’ visual selves to the camera” (Jo Spence, 1984).

Barthes book was born from the mourning of his mother’s death, an emotionally inherited inspiration. Yet in observing the cruel hand of death he became all too aware of his own mortality, seeking to understand life in death and death in life, “the corpse is alive, as *corpse*” as Barthes suggests (Barthes, 2000, p. 79). This is in contradiction to his own belief that what is photographed is a single moment in time, forever framed in history, as that moment henceforth has passed never to ‘live’ again. Only a photographic representation to show that that moment happened. In the second half of this essay, I will explore Barthes fixation of ‘death’ in relation to his profound sense of his mortality.

Many people have been observed having had notable changes in behaviour before death incurred, no more so than Ayrton Senna. His 130mph crash was viewed by millions, around the world as they watched the 1994 San Marino grand prix at Imola. Oliver Brown speculates on this in his feature to mark the 20th anniversary on Senna’s death, “Ayrton Senna: The inside story of the Formula One legend’s death at Imola” (Brown, 2015). Brown quotes many of Senna’s compatriots and friends who have remarked on his behaviour that weekend, even Brown himself surmises that “he [Senna] become convinced that something at the Autodromo Enzo e Dino Ferrari was profoundly wrong” and that before the race Senna was “scrutinising the car with suspicion and leaning against the rear wing” as he had become “convinced the world was against him” (Brown,

2015). That weekend was plagued with crashes some fatal, even before that of Senna's own crash, it all "seemed too repetitive for it all to be mere coincidence" (Brown, 2015). It was the days of Formula One before the 'Drivers Association' and greater safety regulations. Where it wasn't uncommon for accidents to happen and the occasional fatality. Every driver was aware of this, and so one could put this down to an inner-self-doubt that in fact contributed to his death, but there hadn't been a single fatality in 168 races till that point. Damon Hill is quoted saying that "there was an atmosphere from the word go, even from before we go to San Marino" (Brown, 2015). Brown goes on to suggest that "if Senna did indeed harbour grisly premonitions of what was about to transpire, they were realised early" (Brown, 2015). Once in his car, Senna drove "like a man possessed" (Brown, 2015) up until his car failed, sending him into the wall at Tamburello. The late Dr Watkins, Formula One's chief medical officer at the time, upon reaching the crash immediately assessed the gravity of the situation recalling that "he [Senna] sighed, then his body relaxed... That was the moment I thought his spirit departed" (Brown, 2015).

In 'Camera Lucida' published shortly before Barthes finally succumb to the fate in which he had been writing, having been struck by a vehicle (Dillon, 2011), he makes subtle references to his own death. Barthes writes:

"Once she was dead I no longer had any reason to attune myself to the progress of the superior Life Force (the race, the species). My particularity could never again universalize itself (unless, utopically, by writing, whose project henceforth would become the unique goal of my life). From now on I could do no more than await my total, undialectical death" (Barthes, 2000, p. 72).

This one paragraph suggests that Barthes was writing out of necessity, knowing time would run out, making Camera Lucida his singular remaining goal. This explains why he felt to write more from his heart than from a mind of science. Yet this paragraph goes beyond that awareness that all life comes to an end, to the supernatural. It is as if he knew through some unconscious or conscious event that his own death was closer than he would have liked, not in fact giving up on the progress of life and the human race as he alludes to, or he would not have bothered to write 'Camera Lucida' at all. Perhaps in the dying moments of his mother, he experienced or saw something he could not

universalise in his written dialect. Thus he henceforth to seek it out, believing the photograph held the clue. "It is through photography that we discover the existence of this optical unconscious" (Benjamin, 1978), is this the same unconscious that Walter Benjamin writes, that Barthes is seeking while searching for his mother's essence in the many photographs of his family's album? Could Barthes unconscious be seeking to reminisce with his mother's soul, he witnessed leaving this world?

To answer these questions, I explored the unexplained phenomenon of near-death experiences. Dr Penny Sartori's paper on 'The Wisdom of Near-Death Experiences', summarised in a report by the Daily Mail (Sartori, 2014), opens the mind to a possible idea that Barthes may have shared in his mothers' death. In Sartori's report she recounts her time as a nurse witnessing death first hand, as well as her gained research as a doctor in this field. Sartori covers accounts of premonitions and out of body experiences, often by those whom are terminally ill and close to death. However, Barthes was not terminally ill having died from an accident, but he could have had a shared near-death experience. Sartori states that "science has not even begun to find answers... Similarly, no scientific theory has yet come close to explaining why a few people have near-death experiences" (Sartori, 2014). Her theory however, is that "Our brains are separate from our consciousness. In other words, the brain maybe channelling what some people call the soul, rather than responsible for creating it" (Sartori, 2014). This she states explains how our conscious self can leave the body and that of shared near-death experiences. Perhaps Barthes shared a near-death experience in his mothers' dying moments, like that reported in Sartori's report by Gail, "all of a sudden, I could see Mum walking into the distance on a path... around her head was like a sun" (Sartori, 2014). This would explain Barthes obsession with death, and add that to documented cases that "tribesmen and women believe that the camera will steal their souls" (Rowlands, 2009), would explain his goal to understand what makes a photograph and to categorise it.

Barthes was without a doubt looking at photographs from a point of view of life and ultimately death, perhaps in search of evidence of something unexplained. He writes upon discovering a photograph of his mother in the 'Winter Garden' "it achieved for me, utopically, the impossible science of the unique being" (Barthes, 2000, p. 71). Barthes

also writes “I often dream about her (I only dream about her)” (Barthes, 2000, p. 66). Premonitions could be dreams of a conscious state of mind and just as vivid. As vivid as memory, looking for a lost soul in a tear blotched photograph of a departed loved one. If his mother had not died he would not have discovered his mother’s essence in the ‘Winter Garden’ photograph, prompting him to write ‘Camera Lucida’ (Barthes, 2000). His mind and heart were equally torn just like the two parts of his book. The first half born from his mourning, inspiring him to find logical ideals to photographs he could not understand at first. But then another side of the book and himself seemed to seek out death wherever he could, in choosing photographs of those whom had already met death, knowing that someday he will too come to the same fate. Knowing that “death is the harsh victory of the race” upon completing his work (Barthes, 2000, p. 72).

Perhaps the image found in the early editions of ‘Camera Lucida’, of a forlornly dark room with a sliver of light between the drab curtains of existence, is there to lead you to question what is really on the other side.

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Word count: 1,894

