

## Chapter 16

# The Implicated Spectator: Inscribing Oneself Into a Photograph

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### ABSTRACT

*This chapter speculates about photographs that act as potential fields of projection, inviting imaginary processes through which a sense of otherness and lived experience enters into the image. Processes through which the photograph becomes other-than-itself. Using a performative style of writing, the essay directs questions at its readers to involve them into a conversation about viewing photographs as mental, remembered, and imaginary images alike. Actual photographs are reinterpreted by inscribing them with internalized images. Expanded self-portraits are moulded and contextualized with latent images stored in our visual memory. The chapter argues that these kinds of non-referential photographs are simultaneously imbued with seemingly paradoxical faculties—object-ness and image-ness, here-ness and there-ness, now-ness and then-ness—which can be used to test the attachability and elasticity of the image.*

*I had a flashback of something that never existed (Louise Bourgeois)<sup>1</sup>*

### I. IN SEARCH OF (UNLIKE) REFERENTS

#### Not Barthes' Winter Garden Photograph

*Have you ever happened upon a photograph that seems to depict somebody you know, or a place where you think you have been? An image that reminds you of a person, a feeling, or a situation you think you yourself have been in, while knowing perfectly well that the photograph you see can't possibly be connected to that situation or person you have in mind as an actual event in time? –*

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Those are those photographically stimulated recollections I am trying to think about in this essay. I refer to these photographic triggers as *non-like photographs*: images that left their worldly referents behind, now reflecting what we bring to them with a longing sense of false recognition. They might prompt something we want to see, something that constitutes a missing link or a lack, something that finds us even when we are not looking, something that catches us unaware. Enhanced by fading identifications or purposeful misrecognitions.

*Can you think of a photograph that has those faculties for you?* – Keep this image in mind; we will need it as the essay develops in its speculative ways. If you have it with you – great; if you only see it with your inner eye – equally good (as we are speaking in the context of memory and autobiography here, in the context of this book).

Our initial description of happening upon a photograph by looking at it as a *non-like* image doesn't apply to Roland Barthes' famous Winter Garden Photograph though: a portrait of his mother-as-child taken long before he was born, in which he finds something that reminds him of her, the mother he knew during his lifetime. A photographic portrait that he never shows to the readers of his book *Camera Lucida*, knowing that it wouldn't have the same wounding effect on us, because we never knew her, and therefore cannot experience the quasi-physical connection the image allowed him to keep alive after her death.

This quality of *having-been-there* – this little death of a moment, which becomes a thing of the past once it is being photographed – that Barthes isolates as the 'noeme' of photography, is in fact multifaceted. The term was developed by him in relation to memorising his mother after her death, through a long-gone moment in time that 'died' (according to Barthes) in the instant it was pictured, which he then used (shortly before his own death) to define what to him was 'essentially photographic'.<sup>2</sup>

## **Not Proust's Madeleine**

In contrast, Our Photograph (the image we have in mind) does not necessarily depict a person we actually know, or a situation we have been in, or a place we have been to. It is not about the thing it represents, an actual thing that once-has-been-there, in front of a lens, at a specific moment in time. Leaving indexical connections and imprinted histories behind, Our Photograph only *reminds* us of somebody or someplace or sometime we connect with, because it has something woven into its fabric that triggers a memory-effect, reminiscent of something we experienced, something that exists in front of our inner eye, whether or not it was photographed there and then, whether or not it was actually recorded on the photograph that reminds us of that very something. Some kind of photographic springboard or launch pad.

*But how is it possible that Our Photograph sparks unintentional memories and asks us to perceive something that looks at us, revisits us and echoes a moment we are now reminded of, as it finds us by way of the image? Perhaps more like a time-machine, an equally hypothetical device that permits travel into past and future.*

The main character in Marcel Proust's (1913/1992) novel *In Search of Lost Time* famously describes how tasting small Madeleine cakes dipped in lime-blossom tea as an adult suddenly unlocks the involuntary recollection of time spent with his aunt Leonie during his childhood.

Known as the 'Madeleine-effect', here it is not the sight of the Madeleine cake, but the combined smell and taste of tea and cake, that unlocks the memory linked to that childhood cake and with it the recollection of actual people and places from his past. But the act of eating-a-cake that reminds you

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