Chapter 5
The Photograph Not as Proof but as Limit

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> For Levinas, then, the human is not *represented by* the face. Rather, the human is indirectly affirmed in that very disjunction that makes representation impossible, and this disjunction is conveyed in the impossible representation. For representation to convey the human, then, representation must not only fail, but it must *show* its failure.
>
> —Judith Butler, *Precarious Life*

Photographs have been doctored, falsified, and manipulated since their invention, yet the notion that a pictured person is somehow captured by a photographic image persists. This myth of indexicality—the legacy of the view of the photograph as containing a trace of the subject, as having a special relationship to the real—runs throughout photography discourse, specifically discourse about photographs of suffering and how viewers might respond ethically to them. In this chapter, I engage Roland Barthes's *Camera Lucida* and the work of artists Josh Azzarella and Trevor Paglen as examples of an alternative view of photography as limit rather than proof. I then turn to different approaches to 'unknowability' and mystery—found in the work of Judith Butler, Emmanuel Levinas, and Gordon Kaufman—to frame this limit as a resource for ethical responses to photographs of suffering. Rather than understanding photography as proof, I argue that photography can be viewed as a mode of representation that fails to capture its subjects and that also makes its failure visible. Photography exists at the limits of representation, revealing there is more to the subject than can be contained by the image. I contend that understanding photography this way provides resources for constructing a mode of looking that maintains a form of otherness based on unknowability. It is out of this unknowability—this recognition of the limits of one's knowledge of the other—that the possibility for ethical relationships emerges.

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5.1 Roland Barthes's Camera Lucida

Throughout *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes appeals to theological language to describe photography—what it is, how it works, and what happens when viewers look at photographs [9].[1] He uses words like revelation, resurrection, ritual, grace, transcendence, and the soul. Photographs, Barthes writes, appeal to the "religious substance out of which I am molded" [1, p. 82]. They function as an "experiential order of proof," "the proof-according-to-St.-Thomas-seeking-to-touch-the-resurrected-Christ" [1, p. 82]. They are like "icons which are kissed in the Greek churches without being seen" [1, p. 90]. Ultimately, Barthes compares looking at photographs to a kind of private meditation practiced by believers in the Middle Ages [1, p. 97].

Though theological terms are pervasive in *Camera Lucida*, they have been largely ignored by critics. I turn to this language not to make an argument about what the use of Christian symbols and language suggests about Barthes's interest in religion, or about his own faith practice or lack thereof. I propose, instead, that attention to the theological metaphors Barthes engages uncovers something about how Barthes understands photography in *Camera Lucida* that might not be visible otherwise. *Camera Lucida* is animated by the argument that photography can falsify reality by implicitly arguing for our ability to know others. Against this false knowledge, Barthes proposes an understanding of photographs as both incarnate and transcendent, a view that provides useful tools for constructing a model of ethical viewing that trades seemingly definitive knowledge of the other for a mode of relation in which the photographed *other* is essentially unknowable [10, p. 509].

Part two of *Camera Lucida* is a meditation on death—Barthes's mother's and his own—and on photography's relationship with death and resurrection. Barthes turns to one photograph in particular, a picture of his mother as a child, the 'Winter Garden Photograph.' Barthes insists that the photograph of his mother in the Winter Garden incarnates a paradox: the paradox of one who is dead and one who is going to die [10, p. 513]. Barthes writes, "I tell myself: she is going to die. I shudder, like Winnicott's psychotic patient, *over a catastrophe which has already occurred*. Whether or not the subject is already dead, every photograph is this catastrophe" [1, p. 96]. Barthes see the inevitable death of the pictured subject when he looks at photographs, and he also sees his own, which renders him silent. He writes, "The horror is this: nothing to say about the death of the one I love most, nothing to say about her photograph, which I contemplate without ever being able to get to the heart of it, to transform it. The only 'thought' I can have is that at the end of this first death, my own death is inscribed; between the two, nothing more than waiting" [1, p. 93].

Barthes has a similar feeling when he has his photograph taken. When he stands in front of the lens, he is "neither subject nor object but a subject who feels he is becoming an object: I then experience a micro-version of death (of parenthesis): I am

[1] I explored Barthes's use of theological language in 'The Photograph as Mystery,' which is referred to throughout this chapter [10].

truly becoming a specter" [1, pp. 13–14]. Because Barthes feels that photographs contain "this imperious sign of my future death," looking becomes something that is done in private, something he calls "under-the-breath-prayer" [1, p. 97]. He writes, "Toward the end of the Middle Ages, certain believers substituted for collective reading or collective prayer an individual, under-the-breath prayer, interiorised and meditative (devotio moderna). Such, it seems to me, is the regime of spectatio. The reading of public photographs is always, at bottom, a private reading" [1, p. 97]. Barthes makes photographs "private" by creating a relationship between himself and the person in the photograph: when looking at historical photographs, he calculates the age he was when the photo was taken; when looking at family photographs, he traces his ancestral lineage of which he is the "final term"; and even when looking at photographs with which he seems to have no "link," he reads them as "the private appearance of its referent" that connect him to the "Intractable of which I consist" [1, p. 98]. In other words, public photographs become the "explosion of the private into the public," and Barthes seems to challenge the viewer to look at them in such a way that the private—"the absolutely precious, inalienable site where my image is free"—is not violated [1, p. 98].

Barthes draws a distinction between *punctum* and *studium*, perhaps the most well known terms from *Camera Lucida*. Barthes defines *studium* as "a kind of general, enthusiastic commitment, of course, but without special acuity" [1, p. 26]. The *studium*, for Barthes, is "of the order of *liking*, not of *loving*"; it is a "vague, slippery, irresponsible interest one takes in the people, the entertainments, the books, the clothes one finds 'all right'" [1, p. 27]. Contrasted to this general interest with which Barthes engages most photographs is the *punctum* that "lightning-like" will "break (or punctuate) the *studium*" [1, p. 45 & p. 26]. Barthes chooses the Latin word *punctum* to describe this second element of photographs, a word that carries multiple meanings, designating "this wound, this prick, this mark made by a pointed instrument," referring to punctuation ("the photographs I am speaking of are in effect punctuated, sometimes even speckled with these sensitive points; precisely these marks, these wounds, are so many *points*"), and signifying a "sting, speck, cut, little hole—and also a cast of the dice" [1, pp. 26–27]. Barthes concentrates on *punctum* as wound, and in *Camera Lucida*, it is both what wounds the viewer and the wound itself [10, p. 516].

When Barthes notices particular details, partial objects, time itself, or the inevitability of death in photographs that wound him, the *punctum* becomes for him a "'thinking eye' which makes [him] add something to the photograph." He describes this "additional vision" as "in a sense the gift, the grace of the *punctum*" [1, p. 45]. This "grace" requires both silence and a kind of looking that is not looking at all. Barthes writes, "Ultimately—or at the limit—in order to see a photograph well, it is best to look away or close your eyes" [1, p. 53]. He continues that, "The photograph must be silent (there are blustering photographs, and I don't like them): this is not a question of discretion, but of music. Absolute subjectivity is achieved only in a state, an effort, of silence (shutting your eyes is to make the image speak in silence). The photograph touches me if I withdraw from its usual blah-blah: 'Technique,' 'Reality,' 'Reportage,' 'Art,' etc.: to say nothing, to shut my eyes, to allow the detail to rise of its own accord into affective consciousness [1, pp. 53–55].

The challenge photographs pose depends on whether there is a part that remains "unanalyzable," what Barthes calls "the *air* (the expression, the look)," "that exorbitant thing which induces from body to soul" [1, p. 109]. The air is connected to Barthes's sense that the subject of the photograph "seems held back by something interior" [1, p. 113]. Because people in photographs look at something that cannot look back—the camera, the inanimate "piece of black plastic"—they retain something of themselves for themselves [1, p. 113]. Strangely, it seems to be this *withholding* in the subject that creates the sense that the viewer is seeing the subject as she is. In other words, the subject is captured precisely when it is most obvious that it is impossible to capture her [10, p. 524]. In the moment of recognising the other—the moment when Barthes declares, "There-she-is!"— Barthes also understands the other can never fully be known. No matter how closely Barthes looks at the Winter Garden Photograph, he cannot find what it is that he sees; it is a kind of failure of representation that shows its failure. He writes, "to scrutinise means to turn the photograph over, to enter into the paper's depth, to reach its other side (what is hidden is for us Westerners more 'true' than what is visible). Alas, however hard I look, I discover nothing: if I enlarge, I see nothing but the grain of the paper: I undo the image for the sake of its substance" [1, p. 100]. He continues, "Such is the Photograph: it cannot *say* what it lets us see" [1, p. 100].

The photograph that gives Barthes the "splendor of her [his mother's] truth" is precisely the photograph that "does not look 'like' her, the photograph of a child I never knew" [1, p. 103]. Barthes insists "a photograph looks like anyone except the person it represents," yet photographs can also make visible what could never be seen otherwise: "the Photograph sometimes makes appear what we never see in a real face (or in a face reflected in a mirror): a genetic feature, the fragment of oneself or of a relative which comes from some ancestor" [1, p. 102 & p. 103]. There is in photographs both the absence of the object and proof that the object existed [1, p. 115]. "The Photograph then becomes a bizarre *medium*," he writes, "a new form of hallucination: false on the level of perception, true on the level of time: a temporal hallucination, so to speak, a modest, *shared* hallucination (on the one hand 'it is not there,' on the other 'but it has indeed been'): a mad image, chafed by reality" [1, p. 115]. Photographs are evidence that "*this-has-been*," what Barthes calls the "fundamental belief, an 'ur-doxa' nothing can undo" [1, p. 107]. He continues, "But also, unfortunately, it is in proportion to its certainty that I can say nothing about this photograph" [1, p. 107]. The combination of absence and presence, of the seen and unseen, of evidence and speechlessness, of inaccessibility and intimacy, dictates how Barthes approaches photographs [10, pp. 524–525].

5.2 Josh Azzarella and Trevor Paglen

I turn now to two artists, Josh Azzarella and Trevor Paglen, whose work makes visible the mode of representation explored by Barthes's meditation on the Winter Garden Photograph, an image he does not reproduce in *Camera Lucida*. I chose to

examine work by these artists in particular because both Azzarella and Paglen created series of images responding to torture and to US policies that sanction torture. My interest in photography discourse, and in ethical resources for constructing responses to photographs of people in pain, began in the spring of 2004 when I first saw in the *New York Times* a photograph taken at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq—the now-iconic 'Hooded Man' standing on a box, arms outstretched, electrical wires attached to his body. Many people insisted the photographs from Abu Ghraib be published and distributed because they assumed the photographs would elicit an emotional response that would lead to political action against the torture depicted in the photographs, and indeed the photographs have had that effect. But this has not been the only response to the photographs. Their publication was met with a wide range of response—moral outrage, empathy, triumphalism, warmongering, indifference, sexism, sexual fantasy, humor, racism, and humiliation. This varied reception exposes as false the assumption many photography theorists make that viewing representations of violence *necessarily* leads to empathy, and that empathy *necessarily* leads to beneficent action on behalf of those pictured. I suggest that rather than the false proximity and definitive knowledge of the other that can be generated through both empathy and viewing photographs as proof, a sense of the limits of the viewer's knowledge of the other—like limits described by Barthes in *Camera Lucida*—must be created. Azzarella's and Paglen's work can be read as doing just that.

Erasure plays a central role in many of Azzarella's images. He edits out key components of iconic photographs and videos—the assassination of Martin Luther King, the shootings at Columbine, the portrait of Lee Harvey Oswald, the My Lai massacre, and the lynching of Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith on August 7, 1930 in Marion, Indiana, to list just a few—and then reproduces the images in that altered form.[2] For example, in 'Untitled #20 (Trang Bang),' he erases from Nick Ut's photograph Kim Phuc and the other Vietnamese children running from the South Vietnamese's napalm attack, and only the soldiers walking on the road remain.[3] In the video 'Untitled #6 (W.T.P.2),' an airplane continues to fly past the towers of the World Trade Center without hitting them.[4] In the Abu Ghraib series, Azzarella removes the prisoners from the photographs. Gone are the 'hooded man,' the prisoner and the leash, and the line of naked men. Instead, the viewer is confronted by photographs of a cardboard box in an empty room and a man looking through images on his digital camera, of Lynndie England standing, of Lynndie England smiling and giving the thumbs up.[5]

Although I am worried that he participates in the logic he is trying to critique, I also think by erasing the prisoners, Azzarella possibly challenges and expands 'representability.' In *Frames of War*, Judith Butler writes, "The critique of violence must

[2] For more examples of Azzarella's work: http://www.joshazzarella.com. Accessed March 2014.

[3] Azzarella, Josh. 2006. DCKT website. http://dcktcontemporary.com. Go to 'artists'/'Works also available by'/'Josh Azzarella'. Accessed March 2014.

[4] Azzarella, Josh. 2004. Vimeo. http://vimeo.com/21674069. Accessed March 2014.

[5] Azzarella, Josh. 2006–2008. DCKT website. http://dcktcontemporary.com/artists/1768/collections/175. Accessed March 2014.

begin with the question of the representability of life itself: what allows a life to be visible in its precariousness and its need for shelter, and what is it that keeps us from seeing or understanding certain lives in this way" [5, p. 51]. By erasing the figure of the prisoners who are being tortured, I propose that Azzarella makes visible the political erasure that preceded and followed their torture—the fact that the prisoners are tortured in part because they are not seen as human beings. By enacting that erasure, Azzarella invites viewers to face, in Butler's words, that "it is our inability to see what we see that is also of critical concern" [5, p. 100].

Because many viewers are familiar with the photographs from Abu Ghraib, they know what is missing when they look at Azzarella's re-visioning of the photographs. In Levinasian terms, the photographs simultaneously work "to *give face* and to *efface*" [5, p. 77]. Viewers see an empty cardboard box, and yet they know a man is standing on it, hooded by a blanket and with electrical wires connected to his body. When viewers see England smiling and giving the thumbs up, they know she is standing next to a line of naked men being sexually assaulted and tortured. Viewers 'see' the prisoners because they can imagine them, but the prisoners are simultaneously hidden from viewers, protected from our gaze. Viewers, therefore, have the sense, as Butler writes, that "Something exceeds the frame that troubles our sense of reality; in other words, something occurs that does not conform to our established understanding of things" [5, p. 9].

Something similar happens in Trevor Paglen's photographs. Paglen—artist, investigative journalist, photographer, and experimental geographer—"visually exposes never-before photographed US sites used either for torture or for the transportation of prisoners to places where they will be tortured" [2, p. 62].[6] Paglen turns telephoto lenses and technologies used for astral photography on "black sites"—military and prison industrial complexes, including chemical and biological weapons proving grounds, secret detention centers, and secret spy satellites [2, p. 63].[7] In "Hitching Stealth with Trevor Paglen," Bryan Finoki writes, "Paglen somehow finds a way to hijack the panopticon and stare back at the warden through his fortress glass" [quoted in 2, p. 63].

Because Paglen's photographs are often, by necessity, taken from long distances, his images are ambiguous (blurry, vague, hard to decipher), raising questions about the ability of photography to represent "truth" and generating a sense of "doubt and uncertainty" [2, p. 62]. This creates a "delay," Karen Beckman writes, and she claims that, "This delay in turn causes us to ponder, in the temporal space created by the photograph's complex and uncertain relation to knowledge and truth, what activism would look like if it were founded on ambiguity, incomplete understanding, doubt, and obscurity, rather than slogans, unity, loyalty and coherence—if it began from a recognition of the limits of the visible and of our concomitant inability to render the world transparent" [2, p. 62].

[6] Paglen, Trevor. 2005–2007. Bellwether website. http://www.bellwethergallery.com/artistsindex_01.cfm?fid=149&gal=1. Accessed March 2014.

[7] Paglen, Trevor. 2006–2012. Paglen website. http://www.paglen.com/?l=work. Accessed March 2014.

Anti-war photography usually depends on representations of human suffering, showing the very violence photographers wish to protest. The effectiveness of photography's role in depicting human suffering to 'mobilise shame' has been questioned (most famously by Susan Sontag in *Regarding the Pain of Others*). Paglen's art continues that questioning and offers "representational alternatives… for those wishing to intervene in acts of atrocity," what Beckman calls a "shift from face to space" [2, p. 63]. Beckman proposes that Paglen's art models a kind of "political art" that is based on the *limits* of ideas and knowledge rather than on definitive knowledge. Paglen asks the viewers to question what photographs actually show, which is important work, "[a]t a time when acts of torture and degradation seem to be shamelessly staged for the camera," when images/photographs were used to start a war (by Colin Powell and George Tenet, for example), and when "ambiguity and otherness constitute two of the targets of the war on terror" [2, p. 66]. Paglen, Beckman suggests, "resists a paradigm of total understanding and offers instead a limited and blurry view of ourselves as the starting point for the acts of thought, speculation, imagination, and care; recognising that, as Judith Butler has argued, 'the question of ethics emerges precisely at the limits of our schemes of intelligibility'" [2, p. 67; 4, p. 21].

5.3 Unknowability, Mystery, and Ethical Viewing

In *Giving an Account of Oneself*, Butler argues that the ethical surfaces not when we think we know the most about ourselves and each other, but rather when we have the courage to recognise the limits of our knowledge. For Butler, there are two essential ethical questions—"Who are you?" and "How ought I to treat you?"—and both questions reveal the fact that "there is an other before us whom we do not know and cannot fully apprehend" [4, p. 25 & p. 31].

Butler is interested primarily in interruptions and is wary of coherence, in particular of narrative coherence that may "foreclose an ethical resource—namely, an acceptance of the limits of knowability in oneself and others" [4, p. 63]. Butler proposes an "ethics of relation" that does not depend on "empathy, identifications, or confusions" [4, p. 34]. "Rather," she writes, "this ethic desires a *you* that is truly an other, in her uniqueness and distinction. No matter how much you are similar and consonant, says this ethic, your story is never my story. No matter how much the larger traits of our life-stories are similar, I still do not recognise myself *in* you and, even less, in the collective *we*" [4, p. 34][8].

Many versions of Christian theology center on the unknowability of God and the limits of theological knowledge and constructs. Might these theologies provide resources for thinking about how to be in ethical relationship with, in Butler's terms, a "*you* that is truly an other"? Are there resources for constructing an ethical practice for looking at and responding to photographs of others in the work of theologians whose work consists of articulating what standing in and living from a

[8] Butler is referring to Adriana Cavarero's *Relating narratives: Storytelling and selfhood* [6].

place of not knowing might look like? Unknowability and mystery have functioned in (some) theologies to trouble human authoritative practices, and yet have also functioned as sources of mystification and domination. Can unknowability and mystery trouble authoritative practices in the case of photography/art as well? In the case of torture? What might be the drawbacks of an ethic based on unknowability and mystery? What might be the benefits?

In *Precarious Life*, Butler engages Levinas to articulate how we are bound morally to others because "we are addressed by others in ways that we cannot avert or avoid" [3, p. 130]. She writes, "This conception of what is morally binding is not one that I give myself; it does not proceed from my autonomy or my reflexivity. It comes to me from elsewhere, unbidden, unexpected, and unplanned. In fact, it tends to ruin my plans, and if my plans are ruined, that may well be the sign that something is morally binding on me" [3, p. 130]. Butler quotes Levinas at length:

> This approach to the face is the most basic mode of responsibility… The face is not in front of me, but above me; it is the other before death, looking through and exposing death. Secondly, the face is the other who asks me not to let him die alone, as if to do so were to become an accomplice in his death. Thus the face says to me: you shall not kill… To expose myself to the vulnerability of the face is to put my ontological right to existence into question. In ethics, the other's right to exist has primacy over my own, a primacy epitomized in the ethical edict: you shall not kill, you shall not jeopardize the life of the other. [3, pp. 131–132][9]

For Levinas, to see the face of the other—"The face as the extreme precariousness of the other. Peace as awakeness to the precariousness of the other"—means both to recognise that you could kill the other and to choose, instead, to protect the other at all costs, even at the cost of losing one's own life [9]. Levinas's notion of 'the face' as the most basic mode of responsibility centers on a passivity at the limits of passivity that is ultimately a form of protection. Something is required of, demanded of the person who lets him or herself see the face of the other, an action that is ultimately not an action: thou shall not kill.

I engage Levinas here because his project centers on a way of *looking* at another human being that leads to the protection of the other's life not because the other is like me, but precisely because the other is *other*. Levinas is interested in developing an ethical system that does not depend on sameness but rather emerges at points of difference and fragmentation. Some have described Levinas's notion of being held hostage by the other, of protecting the other even if it means losing your own life, as extreme. Others have argued that it is impossible to move from his theoretical encounter with the face to an ethical or moral system one can practice in every day life. But I find resources in Levinas, both for stopping political violence (which often justifies itself by defining the 'other' as a threat to 'us') and for developing a mode of looking that might help people practise responding to otherness in ways that are more life-giving than destructive.[10] How then, might viewers move

[9] Butler is quoting Levinas in conversation with Richard Kearney [8].

[10] Editor: the reader is referred to Thompson's discussion of otherness as both a demand for interpretation and as an affective starting point for an ethical relationship in Chap. 12.

from a radical, emotional, theoretical confrontation with death and the limits of human knowledge to concrete political action? What might an ethical response to a photograph of an other look like?

Theologians like Gordon Kaufman, whose work is rooted in the ultimate mystery of God and the corresponding finitude of human beings, and who are at the same time committed to human agency and accountability and to living in more just and life-giving ways, offer a model for turning confrontations with photographs and images of others into a conscious ethical practice, pointing to the need for further exploration of the contribution theology might make to photography and visual theory. Kaufman, for example, conceives of mystery as an ethical category. Because Kaufman takes God's mystery seriously and believes we must always acknowledge our "*unknowing* with respect to God," he understands theology as human construction. The words used to talk about God are *human* words, infected with our own limitations, interests, and biases. We must engage, therefore, in relentless criticism of our faith and its symbols, always knowing we might be wrong [7, p. 53].

My hope is that looking in a way that leaves room for the unknowability of another person—for mystery—is contrary to interrogation, although I am worried that it might also reinscribe problematic notions of 'otherness,' the very notions used to justify and condone torture and war. Rather than turning the other into the person the viewer wants or needs him/her to be, I propose a kind of seeing—whether of person or photograph—in which the viewer remains ever aware of the limits of her understanding, allowing herself to be challenged by the other's *otherness*, by the fact that the other can never fully be known. Out of this unknowability ethical relationships can emerge when a viewer recognises that the other human being is different, yet then chooses to see this difference as something that must be protected rather than harmed, erased, assimilated, tortured, or killed.

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