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## I am Dead: Poe and French Theory

Magnetæsthetique : La perspicacité de la myopie dans *Les Lunettes*

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Souvent catégorisé comme l'un des contes de moindre mérite, *Les Lunettes* (1844) reste dans l'angle mort des études sur Poe qui tendent à ignorer son succès initial, les efforts inhabituels que son auteur a investis pour sa publication en Angleterre, et son projet de l'inclure dans le prochain volume de ses contes. Comme Balzac, Poe écrivait ses contes avec une certaine unité de composition, ce qui suggère que, au-delà de l'ironie et de la bouffonnerie aveuglantes, *Les Lunettes* était censé jouer leur rôle comme partie intégrante de son œuvre. Je fais l'hypothèse que l'intérêt de cette histoire est condensé dans son usage du néologisme « magnetæsthetics ». Coïncidant avec la découverte de l'électromagnétisme par Faraday, avec l'invention du télégraphe « magnétique, » et avec l'engouement pour le magnétisme animal de Mesmer, *Les Lunettes* nous laisse voir l'influence continue du magnétisme sur la pensée occidentale depuis que Platon a comparé dans *Ion* la transmission de l'enthousiasme poétique à une chaîne d'anneaux de fer aimantés, et qui continue aujourd'hui, à travers les contes extraordinaires de Poe, à informer une certaine conception du langage avancée par Jacques Derrida.

### Magnetæsthetics: The Insight of Short Sight in *The Spectacles*

Often castigated as one of his « least meritorious » tales, *The Spectacles* (1844) stands as a blind spot in Poe scholarship, which tends to gloss over its initial success, the unusual effort its author invested to publish it in England, and his plan to include it in the next volume of his collected tales. Like Balzac, Poe wrote his stories with a kind of unity of composition in mind, which suggests that, beyond its blinding irony and buffoonery, *The Spectacles* was intended to play an integral part in his oeuvre. The importance of this tale, I argue, is

condensed in its use of the neologism « magnetæsthetics ». In the midst of Faraday's discovery of electromagnetism, of the invention of the Magnetic Telegraph, and of the craze for Mesmer's « animal magnetism » *The Spectacles* provides a unique look into the ongoing influence of magnetism on Western thought that began when in *Ion* Plato compared the transmission of poetic « enthusiasm » to a chain of magnetized iron rings, and continues to this day, through Poe's extraordinary tales, to inform a certain conception of language advanced by Jacques Derrida.

magnetæsthetics, *The spectacles* d'Edgar Poe,  
électromagnétisme, Jacques Derrida

Overshadowed by the Derrida-Lacan polemic regarding the « Purloined Letter », the debate between Derrida and Barthes concerning « The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar » deserves more critical attention<sup>1</sup>. At the 1966 Johns Hopkins conference that famously sparked the « French theory » invasion of American campuses, Derrida invoked Poe's fantastic tale and its striking sentence, « *I am dead* », to engage Barthes in a debate that would last fifteen years. Following Barthes's presentation on « semio-criticism », where he had offhandedly dismissed the possibility of the utterance « I am dead »<sup>2</sup>, Derrida mentions that he was in agreement with him up until Poe came to his mind : « I wouldn't have spoken except that what was said about “je suis mort” [I am dead] reminded me of that extraordinary story of Poe about M. Valdemar, who awakens at a certain moment and says, “I am dead”<sup>3</sup> ». Derrida continues by referring to Edmund Husserl's theory of meaning to explain that « I am dead » may be a « contradiction in terms » (contresens) but it is not nonsense since it can be proven to be false. « I am dead » shows that, despite the lack of object, language can signify, and this characteristic is for Derrida the very « condition for a true act of language ».

I will retrace some of the main arguments of this debate by resituating them within the cultural and scientific context that initially inspired Poe to have Valdemar say, « *I am dead* ». During the first half of the nineteenth century, the relationship between life and death became the subject of renewed interest among followers of Mesmer's therapy known as « animal magnetism ». It had rendered manifest strange cognitive phenomena through trances called « magnetic somnambulism » that were associated with involuntary behaviors, clairvoyance, and haunting. Many considered these otherworldly states of dissociation the ultimate intermediary of « the great chain of being », the one linking the animal to the spiritual domain.

This interpretation of magnetic somnambulism received one of its most influential accounts in Justinus Kerner's *The Seeress of Prevorst* (1829). Kerner popularized the notion that magnetic somnambulism was a « small death » that marked the point of entry into spiritual life. In « The Facts in the Case of M.

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<sup>1</sup> Notable exceptions are Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse Revisited*, Ithaca, New-York, Cornell University Press, 1988, 125-6. Kevin Riordan, « Photography and First-Person Death : Derrida, Barthes, Poe » in *Narrating Death : The Limit of Literature*, ed. Daniel Keith Jernigan, Walter Wadiak, and Michelle Wang, New York, Routledge, 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Jacques Derrida *et al.*, *The Languages of criticism and the sciences of man ; the structuralist controversy*, ed. Richard Macksey and Eugeni Donato, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins Press, 1970.

<sup>3</sup> Jacques Derrida *et al.*, *The Languages of criticism and the sciences of man ; the structuralist controversy*, ed. Richard Macksey and Eugeni Donato, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins Press, 1970, p. 155.

Valdemar », Poe appropriated passages from Kerner's book to exploit the widespread interest in the « small death<sup>4</sup> ». He did so with such ingenuity that serious scientific periodicals reprinted the tale, missing its ironic dimension.

Over a century later, the ironic « *I am dead* » prompted a debate between Barthes and Derrida by clarifying an important difference in their theories of language. Derrida would have the final word in « The Deaths of Roland Barthes » the homage he wrote for Barthes following his premature death. In this work of mourning, Derrida examines Barthes's last published work, *Camera Lucida* (1980), and reconsiders the significance of the utterance « I am dead » as he explores how photography communicates an elusive metonymic power linked to death and at work in the notion of the *punctum*. I argue that Poe initially rendered manifest this metonymic power through ironic tales about magnetic somnambulism that conveyed a paradoxical multiple vision of the relationship between life and death.

## Valdemar's Magnetic Life and Death

Like countless other nineteenth-century writers, Poe drew inspiration from the findings and popularity of animal magnetism. He was well versed in the latest theories about animal magnetism and even wrote a favorable book review on a treatise dealing with the subject<sup>5</sup>. To add verisimilitude to what may appear at first supernatural, many of his tales relied on various forms of somnambulism that adepts of animal magnetism, or “mesmerism”, claimed to provoke and understand. In « Mesmeric Revelation » (1844), which was Baudelaire's first translation of his work, Poe sums up what was fascinating about animal magnetism at the time:

WHATEVER doubt may still envelop the *rationale* of mesmerism, its startling *facts* are now almost universally admitted. Of these latter, those who doubt, are your mere doubters by profession — an unprofitable and disreputable tribe. There can be no more absolute waste of time than the attempt to *prove*, at the present day, that man, by mere exercise of will, can so impress his fellow, as to cast him into an abnormal condition, of which the phenomena resemble very closely those of *death*, or at least resemble them more nearly than they do the phenomena of any other normal condition within our cognizance; that, while in this state, the person so impressed employs only with effort, and then feebly, the external organs of sense, yet perceives, with keenly refined perception, and through channels supposed unknown, matters beyond the scope of the physical organs; that, moreover, his intellectual faculties are wonderfully exalted and invigorated; that his sympathies with the person so impressing him are profound; and, finally, that his susceptibility to the impression increases with its frequency, while, in the same proportion,

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<sup>4</sup> « As early as 1855 the anonymous author of *Rambles and Reveries of an Art Student in Europe* pointed to the last page of Justinus Kerner, *The Seeress of Prevorst* [...] as the source for Poe's gruesome finale », in *The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar* (the two endings will be quoted below). Edgar Allan Poe, *The Science Fiction of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. Harold Lowther Beaver, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1976, p. 394.

<sup>5</sup> Poe's interest in animal magnetism has been well documented. See Bruce Mills, *Poe, Fuller, and the Mesmeric Arts: Transition States in the American Renaissance*, Columbia, University of Missouri Press, 2006. « Mesmerism » in *Edgar Allan Poe in Context*, ed. Kevin J. Hayes, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2013. Christina Zwarg, "Vigorous Currents, Painful Archives :The Production of Affect and History in Poe's "Tale of the Ragged Mountains"," *Poe Studies* 43, no. 1 (2010).

the peculiar phenomena elicited are more extended and more pronounced<sup>6</sup>.

The narrator « P » calls magnetic somnambulism « sleep-waking ». Predating mesmerism, sleepwalking does not emphasize enough the state of heightened wakefulness, called at times clairvoyance, second sight, or lucidity, of magnetically induced somnambulism. « Sleep-waking » heightens perception « through channels supposed unknown » that reach « matters beyond the scope of the physical organs » and generate states that « resemble very closely those of *death* ». This popular nineteenth-century analogy between death and mesmerism harks back to older beliefs that considered mineral magnetism linked to the mysteries of life and death. The earliest application of the compass in China was for the placement of buildings and tombs<sup>7</sup>. In the seventeenth-century, Athanasius Kircher claimed that the power of attraction and repulsion of the lodestone manifested the inherent power of sympathy and antipathy structuring the cosmos, and associated the former with life and the latter with death<sup>8</sup>.

The association of death and animal magnetism reached a peak of fascination with the 1829 publication of Justinus Kerner's *The Seeress of Prevorst*. In this biographical work, Kerner retraces the life of Friederike Hauffe, an extraordinary magnetic somnambulist endowed with otherworldly powers. Kerner knew Hauffe personally. He had been her magnetizer and confidant. *The Seeress of Prevorst* chronicles her short and tragic life, and includes philosophical passages inspired by what she said and did during her clairvoyant states. Many of these interpretations revolve around the themes of death, mourning, and the great chain of being.

In his introduction, Kerner argues that the realization of the transience of life through the death of a loved one provides a privileged access to « inner life ». Mourning provokes « Inner life », and is most clearly expressed in phenomena linked to magnetic somnambulism, or « magnetic sleep-waking ». Clairvoyance, premonition, possession, or, in short, « magnetic life », usually occur in ordinary people after they have suffered the trauma of a loss that undermines the grip of the « outer world » and the « intellect » and the « body » on their existence. In « magnetic life » the body becomes unnecessary, « as it were [...] dead », and gives way to a kind of spiritual supersensibility<sup>9</sup>.

Kerner opposes Hegel's view that magnetic somnambulism is a degenerate state rendered manifest by sick people, and should therefore be considered below the intellectual achievement of the « Spirit<sup>10</sup> » For Kerner, « magnetic life » is a

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<sup>6</sup> See Edgar Allan Poe, « Mesmeric Revelation » <http://www.eapoe.org/works/TALES/mesmerd.htm>.

<sup>7</sup> Val Dusek, *The Holistic Inspirations of Physics: The Underground History of Electromagnetic Theory*, New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press, 1999, p. 36.

<sup>8</sup> Martha Baldwin, "Athanasius Kircher and the Magnetic Philosophy", University of Chicago, 1987, p. 463.

<sup>9</sup> Justinus Kerner, *The Seeress of Prevorst: Being Revelations Concerning the Inner-Life of Man, and the Inter-Diffusion of a World of Spirits in the one we Inhabit*, trans. Catherine Crowe, London, J.C. Moore, 1845, 7-10, 15, 19, p. 22.

<sup>10</sup> Hegel took mesmerism seriously and wrote extensively on the subject. Glenn Alexander Magee, *Hegel and the Hermetic Tradition*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2001, p. 215-221. See also Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Le magnétisme animal : naissance de l'hypnose*, ed. François Roustang, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, « Quadrige Grands Textes », 2005.

« wonder » that exalts and transcends the human condition. Magnetic somnambulists reincarnate ancient mystics and martyrs who did not suffer from mental illnesses, but enjoyed the rare ascendancy of « magnetic life ».

Kerner use the “magnetic man” to link divine immortality to earthly mortality:

However superficially we observe the course of nature, we cannot help remarking that she always advances by minute steps—that her progress is a chain, of which no link is wanting—and that she makes no abrupt transitions. Thus, in the stone we see the plant—in the plant, the animal—in the animal, man—and in man, the immortal spirit. And as the wings of the butterfly are folded in the caterpillar, so in man—especially in certain conditions—the wings of a higher Psyche are revealed, ready, after his short earthly life, to be unfolded; and, by the magnetic man, before whom time and space are unveiled, we learn that there is a super-terrestrial world. The magnetic man is an imperfect spirit. In the polypus, which is the link between the plants and the brute creation, we see both an imperfect animal and an imperfect plant; whilst fixed to the earth like a plant, it stretches its arms into the animal world, and thus bears witness to it. And, in like manner, we see the magnetic man, whilst yet in the body, and enchained to the earth, putting forth feelers into the world of spirits, and bearing witness to that also. Such a striving after, and upward flight into, the world of spirits, we observe in all magnetic subjects; but never yet in so great a degree as in [Friederike Hauffe]. We have seen [...] how this nerve-spirit—arrested, as it were, in the act of dying—became sensible of the spiritual properties of all things [...]<sup>11</sup>.

Magnetism, metamorphosis, or the polyp, all appear to mark the passage of a limit that allows the great chain of being to congeal. Without these « imperfect » intermediaries, nature would fall apart. It would itself be imperfect, disconnected, disordered. The « magnetic man » is one of those go-betweens that make nature perfect by showing that its discontinuities are only apparent. Yet « magnetic man » can only do so because, unlike nature, he is not a self-contained whole or plenitude; he is caught between two domains, and functions like a Derridean supplement. Like the polyp and magnet, his purpose is to show that nature is a perfect continuum though he also functions as a stand-in for a missing link or absence.

## Ironic Death

The international success of *The Seeress of Prevorst* makes it a key source for understanding widely held beliefs concerning magnetic somnambulism. These beliefs emerge in Poe’s mesmeric tales, where they help render the supernatural natural, particularly in moments when magnetic characters oscillate between life and death<sup>12</sup>. « Mesmeric Revelation » makes direct references to Kerner’s book with passages stating that magnetic somnambulism resembles « death » in a way that « it resembles the ultimate life » or that there « are two bodies — the rudimental and the

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<sup>11</sup> Kerner, *The Seeress of Prevorst: Being Revelations Concerning the Inner-Life of Man, and the Inter-Diffusion of a World of Spirits in the one we Inhabit*, p. 151-152.

<sup>12</sup> Before *The Seeress of Prevorst* was translated into English in 1845, Poe had most likely read about Hauffe’s extraordinary talents as early as 1843, when she was evoked at length in Margaret Fuller’s *Summer on the Lakes* (1843). Mills, *Poe, Fuller, and the Mesmeric Arts: Transition States in the American Renaissance*, p. 115-116.

complete ; corresponding with the two conditions of the worm and the butterfly. What we call 'death,' is but the painful metamorphosis<sup>13</sup> ».

In this tale, the narrator-magnetizer named P follows the laudatory opening lines cited above by describing his last séance with Mr. Vankirk, a patient on the brink of death who had become clairvoyant under the influence of the mesmeric treatment. Due to intriguing otherworldly sensations experienced during their séance, Mr. Vankirk has started to doubt his own doubt about the immortality of the soul, and needs P to question him while in a state of magnetic sleep to seek out possible revelations about the nature of matter, mind, thought, and God. During the dialogue that ensues between the magnetizer and the sleep-waker, Mr. Vankirk is significantly referred to as "V", which visually evokes the split state affecting the somnambulist.

As the tale ends as V passes away, death is the final mesmeric revelation. The unusually rapid decay of V's body implies that he has been dead for some time, which prompts P to conclude: "Had the sleep-waker, indeed, during the latter portion of his discourse, been addressing me from out the region of the shadows?" Magnetic sleep could then make a dead man speak, while rendering this fantastic tale plausible for nineteenth-century readers. They would have been familiar with reports concerning similar magnetic experiences, and most likely have read or heard about Kerner's dramatic description of Hauffe's final departure:

"On the 5th of August 1829, she became delirious, though she had still magnetic and lucid intervals. She was in a very pious state of mind, and requested them to sing hymns to her. She often called loudly for me, though I was absent at the time; and once, when she appeared dead, some one having uttered my name, she started into life again, and seemed unable to die—the magnetic relation between us being not yet broken. She was, indeed, susceptible to magnetic influences to the last; for, when she was already cold, and jaws stiff, her mother having made three passes over her face, she lifted her eyelids and moved her lips. At ten o'clock, her sister saw a tall bright form enter the chamber, and, at the same instant, the dying woman uttered a loud cry of joy; her spirit seemed then to be set free. After a short interval, her soul also departed, leaving behind it a totally irre recognizable husk—not a single trace of her former features remaining. During her life, her countenance was of that sort that is borrowed wholly from the spirit within; for which reason, though many attempts were made, no artist succeeded in transmitting her features to the canvass. It is, therefore, not surprising that, when the spirit had departed, the face should no longer be the same. [...]

On the 7th, the post mortem examination took place, conducted by Dr. Off, of Löwenstein. The body was found wasted to a skeleton [...]"<sup>14</sup>.

Poe drew heavily from this passage of the 1845 translation of *The Seeress of Prevorst* for the striking conclusion of « The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar », which was published the same year, and where he re-implemented the same narrative structure of « Mesmeric Revelation », extending on its gruesome ending :

As I rapidly made the mesmeric passes, amid ejaculations of « dead ! dead ! » absolutely *bursting* from the tongue and not from the lips of the sufferer, his whole frame at once—within the space of a single minute, or even less—shrunk—crumbled—absolutely *rotted* away beneath my

<sup>13</sup> Poe, « Mesmeric Revelation ».

<sup>14</sup> Kerner, *The Seeress of Prevorst: Being Revelations Concerning the Inner-Life of Man, and the Inter-Diffusion of a World of Spirits in the one we Inhabit*, p. 333-334.

hands. Upon the bed, before that whole company, there lay a nearly liquid mass of loathsome—of detestable putrescence<sup>15</sup>.

« The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar » exploited the mid-nineteenth fascination with the association of animal magnetism and death so well that, despite the grotesque exaggeration of this last paragraph, it became a hoax when respectable scientific periodicals started to publish it<sup>16</sup>. Kerner also wrote a well-crafted sensational ending that rendered the seemingly supernatural rapid decay of HauFFE's body more palatable by implying that it could be corroborated by several witnesses, including a doctor mentioned by name.

Kerner and Poe have in common an obsession with death. But their approach to this elusive subject is completely different: Kerner, the true-believer, wants to convince the reader of the immortality of spiritual life with his earnest account of the “small death” as the ultimate step in the great chain of being. Whereas, Poe, the ironist, exploits the popularity of such reports to write a story designed not only to convince Kerner's gullible readers, but also to unsettle them through a parodic appropriation that undermines the promise of a dialectical resolution of death into life.

Gary Richard Thompson has shown how Poe leans on a conception of irony inspired by German romanticism that enables him to approach his obsessions with death, loss, and meaninglessness, from a critical distance<sup>17</sup>. In « The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar », Poe explores the themes of life and death, but manages to keep an ironic detachment through the ambiguity at the root of a successful hoax. The duplicity of such stories offer what Thompson calls a « multiple vision ». Their paradoxical interpretations always include the credulous and incredulous and the supernatural and natural readings of the tale, prompting both laughter and perplexity. Poe cannot then be taken seriously. Yet it is precisely at this moment, when he laughs at Kerner's expense, that he destabilizes the notion of spiritual immortality through an ambiguous tale that re-emphasizes the profound, and consequently grave, difference between life and death.

The irony at play in « The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar » hinges on this fundamental difference. Being terminally ill, Valdemar has agreed to be magnetized just before passing away. He survives his imminent death by several months, which prompts P, the narrator-magnetizer-Kerner impersonation to conclude that « death (or what is usually termed death) had been arrested by the mesmeric process ». However, while Valdemar is supposedly kept alive due to magnetism, he says « *I am dead* », which introduces a twist to Kerner's beliefs. Kerner would have argued that « magnetic life » is reached through the « small death » that is, through the death of bodily or « exterior life », but not necessarily through the annihilation of the « I » of the self. Poe's tale implies that the « I » is both alive and dead. Through the multiple

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<sup>15</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, « The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar » <http://www.eapoe.org/works/tales/vldmara.htm> .

<sup>16</sup> For a detailed account of Poe's mesmeric hoaxes see Antoine Faivre, « Borrowings and Misreading: Edgar Allan Poe's “Mesmeric” Tales and the Strange Case of their Reception », *Aries* 7 (2007).

<sup>17</sup> Gary Richard Thompson, *Poe's Fiction, Romantic Irony in the Gothic Tales*, Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 1973, p. 17, 27.



vision of irony, Poe maintains a paradoxical tension between this presence and absence that is at the root of the Derrida-Barthes debate.

## The Impossible Utterance

A year after their initial exchange at Johns Hopkins, Derrida published *Speech and Phenomena* (*La Voix et le Phénomène*, 1967) where he elaborated on what motivated his critique of Barthes. Building upon Husserl's phenomenology, he contends that:

the total absence of the subject and object of a statement—the death of the writer and/or the disappearance of the objects he was able to describe—does not prevent a text from “meaning” something [vouloir-dire]. On the contrary, this possibility gives birth to meaning as such, gives it out to be heard and read<sup>18</sup>.

He then writes a few pages later, « [t]his is not an extraordinary tale by Poe but the ordinary story of language<sup>19</sup> ». Although this sentence is the only direct mention to Valdemar's « I am dead » outside of the book's epigraph, it performs important functions. It reveals the philosophical dimension of Poe's fantastic tale and suggests that it anticipates twentieth-century phenomenology. It also gives Barthes a nudge, inviting him to respond.

In 1973, in his « textual analysis » of « The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar », Barthes will provide more details about his interpretation of « I am dead » concluding that this « impossible utterance [énonciation] » is both a scandal « of utterance [de langage] » and « of language [de la langue] ». For the scandal of « utterance »: « the utterance [énonciation] “I am dead,” literally, is foreclosed (whereas “I am sleeping” remained literally possible in the field of hypnotic sleep<sup>20</sup>) ». As we saw above, this statement is not completely accurate within the mid-nineteenth-century context that Poe successfully exploited for his hoax, and that was fascinated by reports from Kerner and others on the « small death » experienced by magnetic somnambulists<sup>21</sup>. As for the scandal of « language » Barthes writes, « [i]n the ideal total of all the possible utterances [énoncés] of the language, the juxtaposition of the first person (*I*) and of the attribute “*dead*” is precisely the one which is radically impossible [...], the unwarranted sentence performs an impossibility<sup>22</sup> ».

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<sup>18</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena, and other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*, trans. David B. Allison, Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1973, p. 93.

<sup>19</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena, and other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*, trans. David B. Allison, Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1973, p. 97.

<sup>20</sup> Poe does not use the expression « hypnotic sleep » which refers to a more scientific interpretation of somnambulism popular during the second half of the nineteenth century. But, elsewhere, Barthes uses the more historically accurate word « magnetized ». *Le Plaisir du texte*, Paris, Le Seuil, 1973, p. 70.

<sup>21</sup> Tracy Ware has also argued that Barthes does consider the ironical dimension of the tale. « The 'Salutary Discomfort' in the Case of M. Valdemar », *Studies in Short Fiction* 31, no. 3 (1994).

<sup>22</sup> Roland Barthes, « Textual Analysis of a Tale by Edgar Allan Poe » in *The Semiotic Challenge*, New York, Hill and Wang, 1988, p. 285-287.

## Camera Lucida and Metonymic Power

This last claim bothered Derrida the most. Following Barthes' untimely death, Derrida alludes to this point of contention in his 1981 tribute, « The Deaths of Roland Barthes ». In this mourning piece, Derrida pays homage to his departed « friend » through reflections on loss, memories (he remembers traveling with him to the 1966 Johns Hopkins conference), and through a reading of Barthes's last published work, *Camera Lucida* (*La Chambre Claire*, 1980). *Camera Lucida* is a treatise on photography and a work of mourning that bears the stamp of the intense emotion Barthes felt upon seeing a photograph of his deceased mother, « la Photo du Jardin d'Hiver » (the Winter Garden Photograph). For Barthes, this overwhelming feeling was provoked by what he calls the « *punctum* » of the photograph. The *punctum* arises through a personal reaction to something that a viewer perceives in the picture that would not necessarily affect others. For this reason, Barthes does not reproduce « la Photo du Jardin d'Hiver » in *Camera Lucida* because its *punctum* can only be registered by somebody who shared his affection for his mother, that is, by no one else. Since the *punctum* is contingent and primarily exists in the eye of the beholder, its definition is difficult. Derrida's reading of *Camera Lucida* focuses on four main aspects of the *punctum*: its relation to « detail », music, « haunting » and « intensity ».

As the Latin etymology suggests, the *punctum* stands for a detail that makes all the difference, for the point or punctuation that pierces through the even surface of the picture, that punctures it as it wounds or poignantly moves the viewer. The *punctum* destabilizes the “unary photograph” (*photographie unaire*), the picture without or with no apparent attention to detail, the cliché that leaves one impassive due to a unity of composition devoid of any disturbance. The *punctum* also deranges what Barthes calls the « *studium* », the other major theme of *Camera Lucida* that is more common in photographs, and that encompasses the standard affect foisted upon a broader audience and the studious analysis of the cultural, political, and historical codes upon which this median reaction depends.

The *punctum* resists such codification, but it does not simply stand in opposition to the *studium*. To elaborate on the relation between the *punctum* and the *studium*, Derrida develops two analogies that are at work throughout *Camera Lucida*: musical composition, more specifically, the counterpoint, and haunting. Like two themes in a counterpoint, the *punctum* and the *studium* remain essentially separate even though they can harmonize or sound as one to enhance the overall composition.

The *punctum* also haunts the *studium* : it composes with it, within its frame-work, while eluding its grasp, codification, or conceptualization. As Barthes himself acknowledges, the *punctum* is a « supplement », it points to the absence as well as to the plenitude that marks the *studium* of the photograph. In photography, the relation of absence and presence is closely linked to that of life and death. Barthes calls the target or « referent » of a photograph the « Spectrum » because the etymology of the term alludes to spectator, spectacle, and, significantly, to « specter ». A camera essentially captures the specter of an object, it records the light radiating from an object, and in turn embalms it at the instant the picture is taken. This instant is irretrievable, but it survives through the photograph as a specter, the presence of an absence, the image of an object that has passed away. Since a photograph consists of

the simulacrum of something that is not anymore, and since its experience consequently entails in Barthes's words, « the return of the dead<sup>23</sup> », it becomes an important tool in thinking through the concept of haunting itself, particularly as the counterpoint to the simplistic binary oppositions of life and death or *studium* and *punctum*.

For Derrida, the life-death and *studium-punctum* polarities do not hinge upon the mere opposition of their poles but, like the counterpoint in music, upon a « relation without relation [rapport sans rapport]<sup>24</sup> », on the way they supplement, or haunt one another like a photograph hosts a ghost, or an instant that has passed away even though it can live on in the eye of the beholder. Despite eluding its grasp, the *punctum* haunts the *studium* because it is not manifest until a viewer revives it or brings it out of a state of latency by seeing something in the photograph that stirs an intense emotion. Hence, the *punctum* is also a kind of invisible « reserve » that can unfold into a felt « intensity » through, Derrida argues, metonymy:

[the *punctum*] can invade the field of the *studium*, to which, strictly speaking, it does not belong. [...] the *punctum* irradiates and, what is most surprising, lends itself to metonymy. As soon as it allows itself to be drawn into a network of substitutions, it can invade everything, objects as well as affects. This singularity that is nowhere *in* the field mobilizes everything everywhere; it pluralizes itself. If the photograph bespeaks the unique death, the death of the unique, this death immediately repeats itself, as such, and is itself elsewhere. I said that the *punctum* allows itself to be drawn into metonymy. Actually, it induces it, and this is its force, or rather than its force (since it exercises no actual constraint and exists completely in reserve), its *dynamis*, in other words its power, potentiality, virtuality, and even its dissimulation, its latency. [...] This metonymic power is essentially related to the supplementary structure of the *punctum* [...] and of the *studium* that receives from it all its movement, even if it must content itself [...] with turning round the point and never getting down to it. Henceforth, the relationship between the two concepts is neither tautological nor oppositional, neither dialectical nor in any sense symmetrical; it is supplementary and musical (contrapuntal)<sup>25</sup>.

Photography proceeds via metonymy, it links the part to the whole as it captures the light emission of an object, an emission that is only the spectral, partial, or visual aspect of its origin, but that can nevertheless bring it to mind. As the poignant detail that Barthes saw in « la Photo du Jardin d'Hiver », which wounds as it revives the specter framed by the photograph, the *punctum* also works like metonymy in the way it cuts through as it connects. The *punctum* supplements the *studium*. It provides the *studium* with an invisible « reserve » a metonymic power, or a kind of discontinuity that keeps studious analysis going. Without such marked discontinuity there would be no need for the *studium*. « The Deaths of Roland Barthes » which consists of a series of « fragments » of several details demarcated by black dots, gives form to the fact that the *studium* « must content itself [...] with turning round

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<sup>23</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida : Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard, New York: Hill and Wang, 1981, p. 9.

<sup>24</sup> Jacques Derrida, « The Deaths of Roland Barthes » in *Psyche : Inventions of the Other*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2007, p. 289.

<sup>25</sup> Jacques Derrida, « The Deaths of Roland Barthes » in *Psyche : Inventions of the Other*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2007, p. 288-289.

the point and never getting down to it [tourner autour du point]<sup>26</sup> ». This type of punctuation fragments the *studium* that Derrida undertakes to make sense of what Barthes called the *punctum*, or what « induces » a metonymic power linked to death. This metonymic power cuts through to cause the wounding intensity of a singular emotion, which both theorists attempt to fathom through photography.

In the concluding fragments of « The Deaths of Roland Barthes » Derrida claims that he has just read for the first time the « textual analysis » of « The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar », and cites Barthes's reiteration that Valdemar's « I am dead » is « the impossible utterance<sup>27</sup> ». In his tribute to Barthes, Derrida comes back once again to this point of contention that had intermittently resurfaced in their respective works since the 1966 John Hopkins Conference:

“Would the impossible utterance “I am dead” really never have taken place? [...] he was never able to say “I am dead” literally or according to the letter. Were he to have done so, he would have again given in to metonymy. But metonymy is no mistake or falsehood; it does not speak untruths. And literally, according to the letter, there is perhaps no *punctum*”.

For Barthes, the « I » of the « I am dead » can only refer to someone who is either mad or dead. The latter would be impossible since whoever pronounces or reads « I am dead » must be alive to do so. At most, « I am dead » is a figure of speech. For Derrida, this figure of speech is not just a mere ornamentation or a lie. Like photography and the *punctum*, it points to a metonymic power that informs the relationship between life and death and that could be apprehended in terms of haunting.

Due to this metonymic power something of the order of « utopia » or of the « impossible » happens, something that appears to cut through life and death, Barthes and his deceased mother, « I » and the « other ». « I am dead » refers to the haunting of the « letter » as well as that of the « I » of the self:

Wouldn't the utterance « I am dead » which he says is impossible, fall into the province of what he calls elsewhere—and calls on as—*utopic*? And doesn't this utopia impose itself in the place, if one can still say this, where metonymy is already at work on the I in its relation to itself [...] <sup>28</sup>?

Magnetic somnambulists rendered manifest such metonymic power when, in their trance, the I became other. Kerner identified this metonymic power as a « small death » that supported his belief in spiritual immortality. In Poe's ironic appropriation, the « I » in « I am dead » appears both mortal and immortal. Death remains closely linked to a perplexing absence that is not simply absorbed in the promise of immortality.

In *Camera Lucida* Barthes noted that the advent of photography must be related to the “crisis of death” provoked during the middle of the nineteenth century by the secularization of death. Without symbolic value, the place of death in modern society migrated from the sacred sphere to the new medium:

For Death must be somewhere in society; if it is no longer (or less intensely) in religion, it must be elsewhere; perhaps in this image which produces Death while trying to preserve life. Contemporary with the withdrawal of rites, Photography may correspond to the intrusion, in our

<sup>26</sup> Derrida makes a pun with the expression “tourner autour du pot” (to beat around the bush).

<sup>27</sup> Jacques Derrida, « The Deaths of Roland Barthes » p. 294-297.

<sup>28</sup> Jacques Derrida, « The Deaths of Roland Barthes », p. 296.

modern society, of an asymbolic Death, outside of religion, outside of ritual, a kind of abrupt dive into literal Death. *Life / Death*: the paradigm is reduced to a simple click, the one separating the initial pose from the final print”<sup>29</sup>.

Staring at a photograph of himself Barthes experienced a « small death » (une micro-expérience de la mort) when he saw his self turned into an « object », a « Total-Image » (Tout-Image), and a « specter<sup>30</sup> ». Unlike Kerner’s « magnetic life » the « small death » induced by the photograph is not a promise of immortality; it only reminds Barthes of the ineffability of death, of his mother’s and his own. What characterizes the apprehension of death in the age of mechanical reproducibility is its « platitude ». This is the « irony » of the work of mourning that Barthes performs in *Camera Lucida*: « to speak of the “nothing to say”<sup>31</sup> ».

Poe’s obsession with death and its meaninglessness faced a similar irony. He gave form to this irony and its metonymic power through mesmeric tales that conveyed a paradoxical multiple vision of the relationship between life and death. Although Valdemar’s ironic utterance « *I am dead* » drew a theoretical wedge between Barthes and Derrida, it yielded critical insights into the nature of language and the *punctum*.

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<sup>29</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, p. 92.

<sup>30</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, p. 14.

<sup>31</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, p. 93.

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