

Genealogies of Memory and Perception: Literature and Photography
Spring 2018
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Texts:

- Bergson. *Matter and Memory*. Trans. N.M. Paul and W.S. Palmer. Zone Books, 1988.
- Breton. *Mad Love*. Trans. Mary Ann Caws. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1987.
- Proust. *Swann's Way: In Search of Lost Time, Vol. 1*. Trans. Lydia Davis. Penguin Books, 2004.
- Barthes. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. Trans. Richard Howard. FS&G, 1981.
- Carson, Anne. *Autobiography of Red*. Vintage Books, 1999.
- Derrida, *Athens, Still Remains*, Trans. Michael Nass and Pacsale Birault. Fordham, 2010.
- Xeroxed Reader* [XR]

Musts:

1. do all the reading.
2. come to all the seminars.
4. Write one long paper (15-20 pages) or two short papers (8-10 pages each), in either English or Greek.

Trajectories:

Since its advent in the nineteenth century, photography has been a privileged figure in literature's efforts to reflect upon its own modes of representation. This seminar will trace the history of the rapport between literature and photography by looking closely at a number of literary and theoretical texts that differently address questions central to both literature and photography: questions about the nature of representation, reproduction, memory and forgetting, history, images, perception, and knowledge. Reading texts by Nadar, Baudelaire, Bergson, Breton, Proust, Kracauer, Benjamin, Barthes, Carson, Ritsos, and Derrida, we will be interested not only in explicit discussions of photography--of which there will be many--but also in the ways in which these texts again and again have recourse to the language of photography. For these writers, photography provides an entire vocabulary for what Proust calls "the optics of the mind": the flashes of insight and intuition, the light and shadows that enable and interrupt perception, the workings of memory as it tries to seize or fix an image, and in general the various ways in which we perceive or represent the world around us. We will also try to account for recurring motifs within this history. Why is it, for example, that

many of these texts--in particular, those of Baudelaire, Proust, Benjamin, Kracauer, Barthes, and Derrida--associate photography with meditations on the relations between death and memory? What is it about death and memory that enables us to think about photography? Why do figures of photography so often call forth hallucinations, ghosts, and phantoms? Why is it that Baudelaire, Proust, and Kafka insist that writing can only take place in dark rooms? In what way is citation within a literary text a kind of photography? If photography is another name for the relation between light and writing, between referents and mirrors, can we begin to read the relation between photography and literature in texts such as Plato's allegory of the cave, Ovid's story of Narcissus and Echo, or the myth of Medusa? Guided by these questions, we will throughout try to think about the relation between vision and language, images and history.

Indeed, as new technologies—video, digital and computer imaging, thermographic image techniques, medical imaging, and so forth—increasingly seem to replace the medium of photographic film (with its indexical dimensions of temporality and contingency), such questions are essential, especially given this growing sense that photography itself has now become a thing of the past, that, in our present era of global media networks and ever more expansive visual technologies, the revolutionary tasks that a Benjamin, for example, imagined for film and photography have been diluted. In response to this sense, this class will suggest that Benjamin's meditations on the relations between photography and history not only comprehend, anticipate, and account for the recent developments in reproductive technologies, but that they are perhaps more urgent and pertinent today than ever before. Placing the question of the image at the heart of all his analyses, Benjamin (along with several of the other writers we will be reading this semester) insists that politics and history can no longer be thought as prior to the technical media, that historical and political events have to be understood in relation to issues of representation and reproduction, and that reproductive technologies, promising to bring things “closer” to us, simultaneously lead us both toward and away from history. That there is no event today that is not touched by the technical media—and we should remember that language itself is always one of these media—is at least one measure of the importance of this insistence, and also of the endurance and relevance of a thought that seeks to explore the way in which these “new” technologies—with all their consequences for contemporary reflections on subjectivity, perception, memory, archivization, politics, and history—are to be understood within the horizon of this earlier set of questions, and this even though the historico-political contexts within which we find ourselves at the beginning of the twenty-first century are different from the configuration of forces within and against which these writers engaged the same issues. In other words, if these contemporary modes of reproduction suggest something new, this something new is not a “first time” in history. They point instead to the intense acceleration of a movement that has always already been at work within the history of reproductive technologies, an acceleration that belongs to the processes whereby techniques of reproduction increasingly can be said to influence and determine nearly every moment of our life, and of our relation to the world. This course has as one of its aims the delineation of the pre-history of this condition.

Readings:

- Week 1 *Introduction: Literature and Photography*
- Week 2 Nadar, *When I Was a Photographer* (selections) [XR]
- Week 3 Baudelaire, *Fleurs du Mal* (“Correspondences,” “Blind Men,” “A
une passante”) [XR]
- Week 4 Bergson, *Matter and Memory*
- Week 5 Breton, *Mad Love*
- Week 6 Proust, *Swann's Way* (“Overture”)
- Break*
- Week 7 Kracauer, "Photography" [XR]
- Week 8 Benjamin, "A Small History of Photography," "The Work of Art in
the Age of Technological Reproducibility" [XR]
- Week 9 Barthes, *Camera Lucida*
- Week 10 Derrida, *Athens, Still Remains*
- Week 11 Ritsos, *The Fourth Dimension* (“The Window,” “Ismene,”
“Helen”) [XR]
- Week 12 Carson, *Autobiography of Red*