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### Author

Howell, Kaila

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# TIME, LOSS, AND THE DEATH OF THE (M)OTHER IN ROLAND BARTHES' *CAMERA LUCIDA* AND SALLY MANN'S *DEEP SOUTH*

By Kaila Howell

This paper inquires into the ethical potential of photography. To what extent and how can photographs evoke an affective response in viewers? It is this affective response, I argue, which, as the foundation of empathy, forms the basis for photography's ethical potential. I show that one's particular emotional response to a photograph is the trace of a deeper, universal experience that is constitutive of being human: the separation from the (M)other at birth. Photographs are particularly powerful at evoking an affective response that unconsciously recalls this primal experience because of certain qualities inherent to the photographic medium. This paper investigates these universal qualities of photography through an examination of Sally Mann's photographic series *Deep South*. Mann's series is a particularly useful object of study because of its prompting of questions concerning time, materiality of land, and the materiality of photographs themselves. Inscribed in the land and in photographs, as well as in the human body, are traces of the past. Photographs bring this past to the present by evoking an affective response that recalls the original separation from the (M)other, thereby reminding us of our constant striving—and failure—to reconnect with our mothers and, through that, with others in our present. It is this shared experience of the failure to share experience that can ultimately connect us with each other and form the basis for empathy. In viewing photographs, we, together, are unconsciously reminded of our shared striving to return to the womb and reclaim shared experienced with an/other.

## I. Introduction: The Ethical Potential Of Photography

In her essay “Surviving Images: Holocaust Photographs and the Work of Postmemory,” Marianne Hirsch argues that postmemory “can serve as a model” for “an ethical relation to the oppressed or persecuted other” such as the Holocaust survivor. Under Hirsch’s understanding of postmemory, the child of a Holocaust survivor “can ‘remember’ [his/her] parents’ memories.”<sup>1</sup> Hirsch claims that photography occupies a privileged status “as a medium of postmemory.”<sup>2</sup> This is not only because of the indexicality of photographs, which give them evidential force as testaments to what Roland Barthes terms in *Camera Lucida* the “ça-a-été” or “having-been-there” of the past, but also because of their ability to produce affect, thereby communicating “an emotional or bodily experience by evoking the viewer’s own emotional and bodily memories.”<sup>3</sup> Barthes suggests, through his association of photography with death, that the cutting of ties with the (M)other that occurs during the cutting of the umbilical cord after birth is the underlying bodily experience—or primal scene—whose memory is triggered by the photograph. The simultaneous death of the (M)other and of the self that results is humanity’s ultimate trauma: its loss of the ability to share emotional or bodily experience with another human being. Because the photograph by nature refers to this ultimate death, it causes us to witness our own failure to witness the other’s suffering, thereby provoking a collective remembering of our shared loss of collective bodily experience.

An inquiry into the ethical potential of photography need not examine images of explicit suffering in order to arrive at a theory. Every photograph, I wish to argue, serves an ethical function by reconnecting us with the ultimate trauma that separates us: our separation from the (M)other at birth. Any subsequent trauma is to an extent a trigger of this primal traumatic moment. Photography, due to its temporal structure, is inherently traumatic. As a result, every photograph serves to remind us of our collective loss of the (M)other and consequent loss of any capacity to share direct experience with an/other. This holds true even when viewing photographs absent of human figures. In fact, landscape photographs can serve as especially powerful triggers because of their uncanny absence of human life. Sally Mann makes use of this potential in her *Deep South* series, which is an overt examination of photography’s relationship with the passing of time.

## II. From The Particular To The Universal

*Camera Lucida* is different in style and purpose from Barthes’ previous writings on photography. Barthes has typically been labeled a “structuralist” because of his insistence on an underlying set of principles that govern the structure of any given text. We might therefore expect *Camera Lucida* to be an attempt at determining a grammar of the photograph.<sup>4</sup> In the first few pages of

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1 In their influential book *Testimony*, Dori Laub and Shoshanna Felman develop a theory of witnessing based off of their claim that the Holocaust is an extreme historical crisis of witnessing. In their text they suggest that to bear witness to an/other’s pain is to, partly through imagination, engage in an empathetic response to the other’s trauma. In my reading of their theory of witnessing, to witness the trauma of an/other is to experience an emotional and embodied response that recalls the trauma of that other.

2 Hirsch, Marianne. “Surviving Images: Holocaust Photographs and the Work of Postmemory,” 13.

3 *Ibid.*, 15.

4 In his 1977 book *Image, Music, Text*, Barthes sets out to do just that. In the chapter “The Photographic Message,” Barthes claims that the photograph (he is, in particular, concerned with the press photograph) is a structure

the book, however, we are given an admittance of defeat: “I found myself at an impasse and, so to speak, ‘scientifically’ alone and disarmed.”<sup>5</sup> Barthes has difficulty isolating the photograph in order to determine its essence because, according to him, the photograph cannot be abstracted from the photographed object: the referent is always, stubbornly, there. “Each time I would read something about Photography,” Barthes claims, “I would think of some photograph I loved, and this made me furious” because “Myself, I saw only the referent”<sup>6</sup> instead of caring “about the rules of composition of the photographic landscape” or “about the photograph as family rite.”<sup>7</sup> Not only is the referent in the way of viewing the photographic essence as a structure but Barthes’ repeated interjection of himself—“I,” “Myself”—into the text suggests that he, too, who represents every potential “I” put in front of an image, is also in the way. In the next section, Barthes resolves to forego reducing photography to “any reductive system” and instead make “what Nietzsche called the ‘ego’s ancient sovereignty’ into a heuristic principle.”<sup>8</sup> Barthes must begin his inquiry into the nature of photography with himself, with his own constitution as a feeling observer. It is only from this starting point that he may arrive at a universal essence of the photograph: “starting from a few personal impulses, I would try to formulate the fundamental feature, the universal without which there would be no photography.”<sup>9</sup> and so “I make myself the measure of photographic ‘knowledge.’ What does my body know of Photography?”<sup>10</sup>

Barthes therefore locates the knowledge to be had of photography in an individual’s body, in particular his own. What we can know of photography becomes present in the observer’s own emotional and bodily response to a particular photograph. When Barthes claims that he sees only the referent because every time he is confronted with photography as a concept he cannot help but “think of some photograph I loved,”<sup>11</sup> he is also referring to his inability to separate photography from the emotional and embodied response that particular photographs evoke in him. This individual response can then be used to form the basis of a more general understanding of the human condition. In the sixth section of his book, Barthes describes his project as an attempt to extend his own individuality “to a science of the subject.” He writes:

I have always wanted to remonstrate with my moods; not to justify them; still less to fill the scene of the text with my individuality; but on the contrary, to offer, to extend this individuality to a science of the subject, a science whose name is of little importance to me, provided it attains (as has not yet occurred) to a generality which neither reduces nor crushes me. Hence it was necessary to take a look for myself.<sup>12</sup>

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similar to written text. In the chapter’s opening pages, he declares the objective to provide “a structural analysis of the photographic message” (Barthes 1977, 16). Throughout the remainder of the chapter, Barthes develops a vocabulary for analyzing the structure of the photographic message. According to him, inherent to the Photograph are two messages: the denoted message, which is the literal or non-coded message of the photograph, and the connoted message, or the culturally coded meanings that the image signifies. In *Image, Music, Text*, published only four years before *Camera Lucida*, Barthes treats photography like a Saussurean linguistic system. If the Photograph is a sign, the signifier and signified of the denoted message are the same while those of the connoted message are distinct, which is why Barthes calls the connoted message coded.

5 Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida*. Translated by Richard Howard. (New York: Hill and Wang, 2010), 7.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid., 8.

9 Ibid., 9.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid., 7.

12 Ibid., 18.

The final sentence of this citation, which is the final sentence of the book's sixth section, functions as another beginning of the text, in which Barthes claims that the origin point of any theory of photography must be the author's own particular emotional and embodied responses to specific photographs. The choice of phrasing, "take a look *for* myself," which is slightly awkward as opposed to "take a look *at* myself" suggests Barthes' own decenteredness. There are, in effect, two Barthes: the active subject of "take" and the indirect object "myself." In order for these two Barthes to be reunited and form a single, unified self, the active subject Barthes must find the other. This search for the self, Barthes suggests, collapses into his search for a universal theory of photography. It is through "tak[ing] a look for [him]self,"<sup>13</sup> that Barthes is able to develop "a science of the subject" that "neither reduces nor crushes" the individual.

*Camera Lucida* therefore seeks to develop a universal theory of photography through personal reflection. Barthes narrates in first person throughout the text in order to emphasize the deeply subjective nature of photography. While he begins with a question about photography as a universal essence, with the declared objective "to learn at all costs what Photography [i]s 'in itself,'"<sup>14</sup> Barthes' attempt to answer this question is through personal reflection on his own emotional and embodied response to particular photographs. From personal reflection and introspection, Barthes can then extrapolate to the larger community of photographic observers. By emphasizing his own uniqueness, Barthes suggests that the uniqueness of each potential individual observer and, in particular, of each observer's emotional and embodied response to a particular photograph, is instrumental to understanding photography as a universal essence.

The form of Barthes' writing fits his method of personal reflection and introspection. Throughout the text, Barthes' sentences travel, taking up time and space in order to arrive at an idea.<sup>15</sup> Instead of using concise, academic-style prose, as he often does in his other works, Barthes chooses a stream-of-conscious style in which he frequently repeats himself, giving the impression that we, as readers, are being shown not a finished product but the writing process itself. This writing process then mimics his own process of thought. In the first sentence of the above citation, Barthes presents an idea through a series of dependent clauses, separated by semicolons, that each qualify the first independent thought of the sentence: "I have always wanted to remonstrate with my moods."<sup>16</sup> Each of these dependent clauses ("not to justify them; still less to fill the scene of the text with my individuality") are negative responses to an anticipated reading of the first independent thought. Eventually, Barthes arrives at his argument through a series of negative statements that express what he is *not* wanting to argue.<sup>17</sup> This creates the effect that Barthes is thinking as he writes instead of first planning his argument and then presenting it in a single concise statement. This choice suggests that Barthes believes it is important to his task of uncovering photography's essence that his writing adopt a stream-of-conscious style that is inclusive of each moment in his process of thought. Barthes' personal style, written like a memoir, reflects what he believes to be the deeply personal nature of photography.

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13 Ibid.

14 Ibid., 3.

15 In this way, they, like the photograph, resist the ephemeral nature of time.

16 Ibid., 18.

17 Ibid.

### III. Photography As A Wound

The emotional and embodied response of the viewer that is critical to Barthes' theory of the photograph contributes to his understanding of photography as a type of wound. Towards the beginning of the book, Barthes states:

The anticipated essence of the Photograph could not, in my mind, be separated from the 'pathos' of which, from the first glance, it consists. . . . As *Spectator* I was interested in Photography only for 'sentimental' reasons; I wanted to explore it not as a question (a theme) but as a wound: I see, I feel, hence I notice, I observe, I think.<sup>18</sup>

In the final line of this citation, Barthes proposes a chronological and causal chain for photographic witnessing: "I see, I feel, hence I notice, I observe, I think."<sup>19</sup> The statement is divided by the conjunctive adverb "hence" into two parts. The structural arrangement of the first ("I see, I feel") suggests that Barthes sees the photograph and then afterwards feels its wounding effect. At the same time, however, the conjunctive adverb "hence," which implies a causal and hence chronological relation between "I see, I feel" and "I notice, I observe, I think," and the lack of any conjunction between "I see" and "I feel" suggest that Barthes sees and feels simultaneously. By permitting the mere possibility of the second reading and by employing the conjunctive adjective "hence" to convey a causal and chronological relation between the two parts of the statement, Barthes prioritizes feeling over thinking. For him, feeling precedes thinking.

Barthes claims that the particular feeling the photograph evokes in viewers is a type of wound. The word "wound" suggests that the experience of photographic witnessing is a form of trauma. "Trauma," which comes from the Greek word for wound, can be defined as a type of psychic wound.<sup>20, 21</sup> In *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, Jean Laplanche describes trauma as an "event in the subject's life, defined by its intensity, by the subject's incapacity to respond adequately to it and by the upheaval and long-lasting effects that it brings about in the psychical organization."<sup>22</sup> Trauma is therefore determined by its power to produce continuing effects on the psychic constitution of an individual long after the original traumatic moment has ceased. To describe this defining characteristic of trauma, Laplanche uses the term "afterwardsness" or "nachträglichkeit" originally proposed by Freud. "Afterwardsness" dictates that traumatic events be deferred; in order to constitute a trauma, the original traumatic moment, or primal scene, must be revisited at a later moment in time. During this second moment, a present day "trigger" elicits an unconscious memory of the primal scene that inhibits one from living fully in the present. Through this process, energy from repressed experiences of the past is redirected to the present day in a cycle of repetition that recurs until one achieves closure. To understand the

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18 Ibid., 21.

19 Ibid.

20 The Greek τραῦμα, or trauma, is related to the Greek verb *tetrainein* τετραίνειν, meaning "to pierce" ("trauma, n." OED Online. March 2015. Oxford University Press. <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/205242?redirectedFrom=trauma> (accessed June 28, 2014)).

21 The first instance of trauma being used to describe a psychic wound is by William James in an 1894 article in *Psychological Review*: "Certain reminiscences of the shock fall into the subliminal consciousness, where they can only be discovered in 'hypnoid' states. If left there, they act as permanent 'psychic traumata', thorns in the spirit, so to speak" ("trauma, n." OED Online. March 2015. Oxford University Press.)

22 Laplanche, Jean. Trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith. *The Language of Psychoanalysis*. (New York: Norton, 1974), 465.

photograph as a wound or trauma, as Barthes does, is therefore to understand it as determined by its persistence. This persistence is double: he views a photograph and is affected by it. The original traumatic moment of viewing, however, is not fully assimilated by consciousness and therefore returns in the future to haunt the present of the photographic observer. This is the first type of persistence inherent to photography.<sup>23</sup> The psychic constitution of the photographic observer is not only haunted by the photograph. The photograph itself, by its own temporal constitution, is haunted by the passing of time. Like trauma is constituted by a necessarily past original traumatic moment that recurs in the future (and is therefore never fully experienced in the present), the photograph is a representation of a necessarily past moment to be viewed in the future. As a result, there is no present in the photograph: only a past and future. This is the second type of persistence inherent to photography.

Later in *Camera Lucida*, Barthes terms the wounding, or traumatic effect of the photograph, the “punctum” or the “sting, speck, cut, little hole ... that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me).”<sup>24</sup> It is usually a detail in the photograph which, paradoxically, engulfs the entire picture. It is also unique to each particular observer put in front of an image. What gives a photograph *punctum* is a specific observer’s unique experience of that image at a particular moment in time. When Barthes describes the *punctum* of the Winter Garden Photograph, he claims that it is the photograph’s color palette that generates *punctum* in him. Similarly, in the James Van der Zee family portrait (1926) reproduced on page forty-four of *Camera Lucida*, the *punctum* that pricks Barthes is “the belt worn low by the sister (or daughter)—the ‘solacing Mammy’—whose arms are crossed behind her back like a schoolgirl, and above all her *strapped pumps*” he calls Mary Janes. It is these two details that arouse “great sympathy in me, almost a kind of tenderness.”<sup>25,26</sup> Barthes asks “why does this dated fashion touch me?” but leaves the question unanswered.<sup>27</sup> The question, Barthes suggests, is unanswerable. The *punctum* does not operate on a logical or intellectual level and it is therefore impossible to uncover through reason an understanding of why particular photographs generate *punctum* for a specific observer. Barthes suggests that all one can do is to accept one’s own wounding and, if he or she wishes, to attempt to describe that wounding effect to an/other. Such an attempt, however, is inevitably doomed to failure because words cannot accurately express emotional and embodied experience.

In her seminal work *On Photography*, which precedes Barthes’ *Camera Lucida*, Susan Sontag describes a similar wounding experience she underwent as a child while witnessing a collection of Bergen-Belsen and Dachau photographs in a Santa Monica bookstore. This experience, which she calls her “first encounter with the photographic inventory of ultimate horror,” functions as a kind of “negative epiphany,” an initial shock experience or revelation in which she first bears witness to extreme suffering.<sup>28</sup> Sontag’s own embodied response to these photographs takes precedence over any visual analysis of the photographs themselves. Throughout the passage, Sontag fails to provide any visual description of what type of suffering the photographs depict. All she claims is that they are photographs of suffering and “of an event”—the Holocaust—which she does not name.<sup>29</sup> When she does label these photographs ones of suffering she identifies that

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23 Susan Sontag’s experience of viewing the Bergen-Belsen and Dachau photographs is an example.

24 Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida*. Translated by Richard Howard. (New York: Hill and Wang, 2010), 27.

25 Ibid., 43.

26 Ibid.

27 Ibid.

28 Sontag, Susan. *On Photography*. (New York: Picador, 2001), 20.

29 Ibid.

suffering in relation to herself: “They were only photographs— ... of suffering I could hardly imagine.”<sup>30</sup> Despite this unimaginability of the other’s trauma, Sontag’s own embodied response to the photographs is itself a form of trauma. She is pricked by the photographs to the extent that she feels “irrevocably grieved, wounded” and ultimately broken: her “feelings started to tighten; something went dead, something is still crying.”<sup>31, 32</sup> Sontag claims to be so affected by these Bergen-Belsen and Dachau photographs that she can divide her life into two parts: before she saw the photographs and after. The witnessing of an/other’s suffering indirectly through a photograph therefore serves as a traumatic moment in its own right, despite the viewer’s distance from the other in the photograph.

As Sontag shows (“They were only photographs—...of suffering I could hardly imagine”), the trauma of an/other and especially major collective traumas such as the Holocaust remain unimaginable to photographic witnesses because of their horror.<sup>33</sup> The nature of trauma is such that the event is so horrific, one must repress its memory in order to continue living. Otherwise, the emotional and psychological pain would be too overwhelming. Trauma is therefore unimaginable on a certain level even for the first-hand witness of the event. Marianne Hirsch suggests in her book *The Generation of Postmemory* that photography is the ideal medium for representing trauma because of the impossibility that is inscribed in its essence. Photography itself is therefore a testament to the unimaginability of trauma. This is because photography creates the false illusion of providing “access to the event itself” by means of its indexicality, or what Barthes terms, the *ça-a-été*, or “that-has-been,” of the photograph.<sup>34</sup> In fact, photography does not provide complete access to the event because the photograph necessarily describes an event that is already past. As Hirsch states, photographs “enable us, in the present, not only to see and to touch that past [the traumatic event] but also to try to reanimate it by undoing the finality of the photographic ‘take.’ The retrospective irony of every photograph . . . consists precisely in the simultaneity of this effort and the consciousness of its impossibility.”<sup>35</sup> Photographs, because of their indexicality, bring viewers back to the past only to remind them of its impossibility. In that sense, photography functions as a metaphor for trauma. Because of “afterwardsness,” trauma is only established in a sort of “future past” or future perfect tense in which the past becomes realized only in the future. According to this model, the past—and trauma—remains always an impossibility because it is only realized when it is past. The trauma is therefore defined by the impossible search. And photography, because it is the visual representation of this impossibility by means of describing a past event to be observed in the future, is, as Hirsch explains, the ideal medium for trauma.

If photography is the ideal medium for representing trauma, how is it that a photograph can produce a traumatic effect if it only indirectly reveals to us an/other’s pain? Sontag says herself, “They were only photographs.”<sup>36</sup> Unlike Reality, a photograph is a two-dimensional object, an index of the Real instead of the Real itself. It is non-living: inanimate. And yet, in *Camera Lucida*, Barthes emphasizes the photograph’s capacity to animate its viewer as a fundamental property of photography: “it animates me, and I animate it.”<sup>37</sup> *Animation* is “the

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30 Ibid.

31 Ibid.

32 Ibid.

33 Ibid.

34 Hirsch, Marianne. *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust*. (New York: Columbia U Press, 2012), 107.

35 Ibid., 115.

36 Sontag, Susan. *On Photography*. (New York: Picador, 2001), 20.

37 Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida*. Translated by Richard Howard. (New York: Hill and Wang, 2010), 20.

attraction” that makes the photograph exist.<sup>38</sup> It is the viewer, according to Barthes, who gives life to the photograph: who gives it meaning through his or her personal embodied response to the image. This embodied response is, reciprocally, the photograph animating its viewer. With these claims, Barthes suggests that the *studium* of the photograph (or its culturally coded meaning), which is socially derived and non-specific to the individual viewer, is nearly irrelevant. The visual content of a photograph is only important for the ethical potential of photography insofar as it triggers a memory from the viewer’s past. This memory may be but usually is not conscious to the viewer. As Barthes shows throughout *Camera Lucida*, it most often requires extensive personal reflection in order for one to understand why a particular photograph produces *punctum*. Any photograph, absent of whether or not it explicitly depicts human suffering, can therefore serve an ethical function, if we define “ethical function” as the evocation of an emotional and embodied response in a viewer.<sup>39</sup> The photographs of Sally Mann’s *Deep South* series are valuable objects of analysis not only because they bear the potential to evoke an embodied response but because they transparently reveal the structure by which photographs are inherently traumatic.

#### IV. Time And The Uncanny In *Deep South*

Sally Mann is best known for her photography series *Immediate Family*, which was released as a photobook in 1992 along with an exhibition at the Houk Friedman Gallery in New York. The series provoked a considerable amount of controversy because it contained nude photographs of Mann’s young children. It was also released at a time when child pornography was a heated subject in the news. In the late 1990s, Mann began to move away from photographing her family and instead focus on landscapes.<sup>40</sup> Her photobook *Deep South* is a collection of black and white landscape photographs divided into three parts: “Motherland,” “Deep South,” and “Last Measure,” which all together depict the landscapes of Georgia, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Mann’s native Virginia. Mann begins her photobook *Deep South* with text that calls upon an experience from her past. While in her early twenties, Mann discovered “a cache of glass negatives”<sup>41</sup> taken of her Virginia hometown—what Mann calls “familiar, local places”<sup>42</sup>—by Michael Miley, a Civil War veteran. In the photographs, Mann recognizes parts of her farm—such as “the river and cliffs opposite the cabin”<sup>43</sup> where she imagines Robert E. Lee would take a swim—and claims that many of the places Miley photographed are nearly unchanged over a century later. This stubborn intransience amidst the passing of time—a strange mixing of past and present—Mann identifies with the South itself. “Living in the South,” she claims, “means slipping out of temporal joint.”<sup>44</sup> Part of being Southern is to live with a history that is both “inescapable and formative” and “also impossibly present.”<sup>45</sup> This history is, specifically, one “of defeat and loss”<sup>46</sup> and, Mann suggests, also one of love. She identifies the South as a lost paradise—the only true kind of paradise, she argues—where “love emerges from loss and becomes memory” and where “that memory

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38 Ibid.

39 This will be qualified later in the essay.

40 *What Remains*. Dir. Steven Cantor. Perf. Sally Mann. Zeitgeist, 2008. DVD.

41 Mann, Sally. *Deep South*. (New York: Bulfinch Press, 2005), 7.

42 Ibid.

43 Ibid.

44 Ibid.

45 Ibid.

46 Ibid.

informs and enriches art.”<sup>47</sup> Mann’s photographs examine this relationship with history, memory, and loss, which she claims is intrinsic to the land itself. What she does not explicitly state but implicitly suggests, through her choice of photography as the medium to express the “peculiar phenomenon”<sup>48</sup> of living between past and present that is inscribed in the culture of the South, is that photography itself is also inherently bound up with questions about love, loss, and the passing of time. Mann’s photographs not only refer to the South and its relationship with these themes but they also refer to photography itself. The understanding of the South in relation to time and loss that Mann constructs in her photographs is a metaphor for photography’s inherent relationship with time and the human condition.

Mann’s series plays with the concept of the “uncanny,” a word Sigmund Freud understands as describing a duality: the “uncanny” signifies something that is at once both familiar and unfamiliar.<sup>49</sup> *Deep South*, like her better known *Immediate Family* series, adopts the familiar as its subject matter. Instead of photographing her children as she does in the 1992 *Immediate Family* series, Mann deals exclusively with the landscapes of the American South, in particular of Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Virginia where she has lived all her life. A large number of the photographs were taken on Mann’s farm in the Shenandoah Valley. In the documentary of her life and career, *What Remains*, Mann says, “For me the local has two parts: my family and the land. . . They are the inspiration for all my work.”<sup>50</sup> Mann’s use of the term “the local” can be thought of as a synonym for “the familiar.” The primary difference between the two terms is that “the local” has spatial connotations, suggesting that the thing in question is familiar because of spatial proximity. For Mann, the landscapes she photographs are familiar because they are the space in which she and her ancestors were born and spent the majority of their *lifetimes*. Time spent on the land then develops into a type of union with it. Like the mixing of blood between family members, there is a mixing of material substance—of skin—between those who spend time on the land and the land itself. This union is the mark of familiarity. Mann examines this idea further in her subsequent series *What Remains*, in which she juxtaposes images of bodies decomposing into the earth with landscape photographs of the Antietam battlefield.<sup>51</sup> This juxtaposition reinforces what is already implied in *Deep South*: the ultimate mark of familiarity between a person and the land on which he or she spent her time is death. To die on the land is to merge with it: after death, one’s material body is subsumed by the material substance of the earth.

For Mann, death and defeat during the Civil War is what makes Southern land defiant to the passing of historical time. All those who died on the land are inscribed in it, refusing to be forgotten. The landscapes Mann photographs are symbolically and literally “what remains” of those who died. In *Deep South*, therefore, the lack of human figures does not mean a lack of human presence. Rather, the land is a testament to the human life *that has been*. For Mann, what resonates most in the land are the deaths of those who fought during the Civil War. This is because of the importance of the war as an historical moment. For Mann, History’s collective memory of the Civil War is part of what gives the land its resistance to historical time: “The hands of time are stilled by the resonance of history at the sites I photographed,”<sup>52</sup> she states in the introduction to the final chapter of her photobook. “Physical traces of the struggle remain. . . . In this peculiar place of stilled time [the South], the spirits seemed to drift up in the ground

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47 Ibid.

48 Ibid.

49 Freud, Sigmund. *The Uncanny*. Translated by David McLintock. London: Penguin, 2003.

50 *What Remains*. Dir. Steven Cantor. Perf. Sally Mann. Zeitgeist, 2008. DVD.

51 Mann, Sally. *What Remains*. New York: Bulfinch Press, 2003.

52 Mann, Sally. *Deep South*. (New York: Bulfinch Press, 2005), 89.

fog rising from the fields.”<sup>53</sup> What is of particular interest to Mann is the history that is inscribed by means of physical traces in the land with which she is *familiar*, which she calls “the local.” According to Mann, “of the 384 principal battles of the Civil War, 123 were fought in Virginia.”<sup>54</sup> All of these battles “were confined to only one-third of [Virginia’s] counties,” which together form the shape of a comma on a map. “Right at the lower curve” of what she terms “this comma of death” is the town in which she lives. It is this sharing of *familiar* land that connects Mann to her fellow Southerners who died and fought during the Civil War.<sup>55</sup>

Despite this familiarity, Mann suggests throughout *Deep South* that the land also bears a certain *unfamiliarity* to her and her photographs’ viewers. This *unfamiliarity* is made present through the photographs’ expression of time. In the opening text of her photobook, Mann states how her photographs are intended to pose questions about what it means to be Southern and what the land of the American South represents. “Living in the South,” she claims, “means slipping out of temporal joint.”<sup>56</sup> This “temporal slippage” Mann describes is the living between past and present that is, she argues, central to what it means to be Southern: “To identify a person as a Southerner suggests not only that her history is inescapable and formative but that it is also impossibly present.”<sup>57</sup> Part of this sense of temporal limbo or living between past and present that her photographs are meant to evoke is the uncanny. Existing in this strange space of still time, the land of the American South appears both familiar and *unfamiliar* with the present and with the past. The places Mann examines through her camera lens exist in a different temporal mode from that of historical time. It is as though time is inscribed in the land in layers, symbolized by the invisible remains of material bodies that have died and decomposed into the earth. While in the present, then, the land also remains haunted by its past like the Southerners who inhabit it. This state of being haunted is a form of the uncanny, a state of being “not at home” where one calls home.

The experience of the uncanny evoked by Mann’s series is therefore expressed through her photographs’ relationship with time. In Mann’s photographs, what is uncanny is the temporal slippage between past and present that Mann believes is embodied by the land. To communicate this, Mann employs particular visual and compositional techniques in order to construct the appearance of age. All of the photographs in the series convey age despite being taken in the present day (2006). “Agedness” is conveyed, in part, by Mann’s choice to use black and white instead of color. This is true for all of the photographs in the series. In the photograph on page eleven, one of the few that depicts man-made objects, agedness is also conveyed through Mann’s choice of subject matter and particular compositional choices. The photograph depicts a moss-covered brick wall and gate, which Mann centers in the frame. Running through the gate is a dirt road, flanked on each side by unkempt grass. Beyond, a forest of gnarled and twisting trees, some of which are moss-covered like the wall and gate, occupies the background. On each side of the road lies a garden pot, equidistant from the other that, stripped with long dark lines that signify moss and ivy growing down the outer sides, is also weathered-looking. While the man-made gate and wall, centered in the frame, are arguably the focus of the image, the height of the wall pales in comparison with that of the trees. In addition, Mann’s centering of the gate in the middleground of the photograph, flanked on each side by vegetation, suggests the supremacy of the landscape over man-made objects. This is emphasized by the dark patches on the wall signifying moss and

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53 Ibid.

54 Ibid.

55 Ibid.

56 Ibid., 7.

57 Ibid.

ivy, which not only convey the wall's age but also suggest nature's prevalence over the man-made: over time, the surrounding greenery has grown over the wall, laying claim to what was once designated space for the man-made.<sup>58</sup>

Despite this insinuation that the land outlives human life and the objects men leave behind, Mann's photograph also emphasizes the temporal endurance of the wall and gate. The agedness connoted by the man-made objects in the image mimic the agedness of the landscape. The verticality of the gate pillars mirror that of the trees in front of which they stand, intimating that they approach the trees in maturity. Meanwhile, the brick material of the wall and gate suggest sturdiness, as though they have stood for a few hundred years and could stand for a few hundred more. Like all of those in the series, in this photograph there are no human figures. The image therefore suggests that the landscape it depicts (both nature and man-made objects) outdates the span of a human life. If there were a human figure in the image, it would appear an odd juxtaposition of the timeless and the transitory. While this photograph suggests that the landscape outlasts the man-made as well as human life, it also proposes the temporal endurance of man-made objects in comparison to human life. Merely by putting man-made objects in a landscape photograph, Mann suggests that the man-made is part of the landscape.<sup>59</sup> Both the man-made wall and gate and the surrounding greenery are signifiers of age in Mann's photograph. This "agedness" that the photograph conveys is an element of the series' evocation of the uncanny. The photograph appears old and *unfamiliar* to viewers despite its being taken in the familiar present day. This temporal slippage between past and present therefore makes the photograph at once both familiar and *unfamiliar* to viewers.



Figure 1

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>59</sup> Historically, it is common for landscape painting to feature man-made objects. For example, in "Bridge with a Sluice," the 17<sup>th</sup> century oil on canvas by Dutch painter Jacob van Ruisdael, a bridge and sluice are centered in the frame, giving precedence to the man-made over the surrounding nature. In a later example, Claude Monet's 1872 "Impression, Sunrise" (which gave the Impressionist movement its title) depicts the Le Havre harbor in France, an orange sun far in the background, miniscule in comparison with the oil rigs and smoke towers that overwhelm the landscape.

This temporal slippage, which is an element of the uncanny, is imbued in the very materiality of the photographs. Despite having taken these photographs in the age of digital photography, Mann uses a process of the past: the wet-plate collodion process. The collodion process was the most widely used photographic process in the mid- to late nineteenth century, and was the most common type of process used to visually record the Civil War. By using the same photographic process, Mann attempts to recreate the aesthetic of Civil War photography. Not only does using the wet collodion process give the image the superficial appearance of being from that time but it also gives it the same material structure. The photograph on page eleven is materially stuck in a state of temporal limbo, in between past and present, straddling the temporal space between the two. This use of the wet collodion process as well as of visual and compositional techniques to convey age, despite being taken in the present, all work to *de*-familiarize the landscape Mann calls her present home.

The uncanny experience of witnessing Mann's photographs is made double by the fact that they reference specific photographs of the past, which Mann came into contact with through an uncanny experience of her own. In her late twenties, Mann came across a cache of glass negatives in a local attic. The photographs she discovered were taken by Michael Miley, a returning Civil War veteran who would later become well known for taking photographs of Robert E. Lee in retirement. Instead of the celebrated photographs of General Lee, Mann "found pictures of familiar local places, many all but unchanged in the intervening century."<sup>60</sup> Mann's photographs do not merely mimic the aesthetic and materiality of Civil War photographs in general, but they specifically mimic those taken by Miley. They express the uncanny lack of change in the landscape since Miley took his photographs during the Civil War. This uncanny quality is made double by the fact that Mann recognizes images of her own family's farm in the collection taken by Miley.

Among them, I recognized with delight the river and cliffs opposite the cabin on our farm. For centuries, that tree-shaded bend in the river has been a popular swimming hole, and it is easy to imagine that Lee himself swam there. Even more likely would have been Stonewall Jackson, in whose house I was born not quite a century after he rode to war. For certain, my own family has been immortalized against those cliffs, and in those gentle rapids. Holding the Miley plates in the same careful-not-to-cut-myself way I now hold my own glass negatives, I found myself weirdly shifting between centuries.<sup>61</sup>

The swimming hole Mann describes in this passage is represented in the photograph that is reproduced on the cover of her *Deep South* photobook. It is also represented in her infamous *Immediate Family* series, as Mann suggests when she claims her "own family has been immortalized against those cliffs."<sup>62</sup> These photographs are in a sense doubles of Miley's because they depict the same location as Miley's and because they recreate the same aged aesthetic despite being taken in the present day. This aspect of "doubleness" is inherent to the concept of the uncanny: a thing is uncanny if it possesses the double quality of familiarity and *un*familiarity. A double of another, such as Mann's photograph of the swimming hole Miley took pictures of over a century earlier, is also by nature uncanny because it copies something that came before, thereby *de*-familiarizing

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60 Mann, Sally. *Deep South*. (New York: Bulfinch Press, 2005),7.

61 Ibid., 7.

62 Ibid.

the familiar object that precedes it. While Mann's photograph *de*-familiarizes Miley's familiar photographs, it is, as a more recent and therefore *unfamiliar* object, also made familiar by Miley's photographs.

The experience of the uncanny that Mann's photographs evoke because of their relationship with photographs of the past, specifically those of Miley, is heightened by her photographs' portrayal of an uncanny timelessness that is present throughout the series. In the photograph of the swimming hole that is reproduced on the cover of the series photobook, this temporal stillness is largely expressed through compositional choices that emphasize the physical stillness of the landscape. The image depicts a river, flanked by trees as it curves into the background. In the foreground is hanging foliage that descends in a triangle shape, occupying the top right corner of the image. This foliage functions as a type of shield, distancing the viewer from the river behind as it separates the foreground from the middleground and background of the photograph. This triangle of foliage is the part of the photograph that is clearest in focus and thereby creates an effect of proximity to the viewer. The foliage on the right bank of the river is darker in tonal value than the space with which it is adjacent. The trees on the left side of the bank are of a lighter gray, which helps to construct the illusion that they are farther away, descending into the distance. The light gray of the river, although marked with patches of dark, contrasts with the dark tones of the trees. While the river is not as light in tonal value as the sky above, it is close to it. This similarity in tonal value as well as the fact that the sky and river are spatially parallel mirrors the spatial and tonal parallel between the trees on the right and left banks of the river. These compositional choices evoke a sense of relaxation and stillness. The river itself is devoid of many ripples. Although the trees in the distance are blurred in areas (this blurring is created in part by Mann's manipulation of soft focus, which is prevalent throughout the series), this does not signify movement. Instead, it suggests spatial distance. The compositional order and lack of movement thereby serve to reinforce the uncanny timelessness that pervades Mann's series.

The static figures and compositional order of this photograph paradoxically work to disorient the viewer, reinforcing the image's relationship with the uncanny. The photograph's representation of objects as well as the objects it represents in themselves are placed into conflict. "River" in itself signifies movement: the passage of water in space over time. The lack of movement of Mann's river is, then, disconcerting. The photograph does not appear to arrest movement by arresting time; instead, it captures a moment in a timeless space that does not change. Mann's river has no wind. The "relaxed" stillness of the photograph is overly still to the point of being supernatural. As a result, the photograph becomes an object of the uncanny. What appears familiar, a river flanked by trees, becomes *unfamiliar*: a timeless space devoid of movement. At the top and bottom left corners, the edges are rounded so that the space between the edge of the positive image and the rectangular white border of the photobook page is black. The rounded edges of the photograph's right side are obscured by the lack of tonal difference between the black space between edges (of the page border and of the positive image) and the black trees depicted in the image. In other photographs, all corners are darkened such that the photograph forms an oval shape. To create this effect, Mann deliberately leaves these spaces bare, choosing not to pour the collodion solution over the corners of the plate so that there is no reaction between light and silver that can create a positive image. The effect is that viewers are given the experience of viewing the referent indirectly through a lens. This creates another level of distancing or *de*-familiarizing from the familiar object. We are given the illusion of being transported into an *unfamiliar* space: a space of uncanny temporal stillness and of temporal slippage between past and present. The uncanny represented in *Deep South* is this double existence of past and present.

Mann's photographs are therefore representative of the relationship between space and time. For Mann, the space—both the literal space of the photograph and the space it represents or the landscape it depicts—connote time itself: time having passed and time failing to pass. That is, the persistent presence of the past in the present. Mann's photographs are, in essence, haunted by the past like the southern landscape they represent. This theme of being haunted by the past takes on multiple levels in the series. First, the materiality of the landscape *Deep South* depicts is inscribed in the material remains of those who died during the Civil War. To express this, Mann imbues the materiality of her photographs with the past through her use of the wet-plate collodion process. The temporal shifting imbued in the materiality of Mann's photographs is therefore a metaphor for the landscape's own haunting by the past. In addition, the photographs in the series are haunted by the Michael Miley photographs Mann found in a Lexington, Virginia attic during her early twenties. It is this event from the past (of finding the images she revisits almost two decades later that haunts the entire series.

Similarly, my experience with Mann's photography and this paper is haunted by an event from my past. Mann's *Deep South* series was put on display as part of an exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum in New York called *Haunted* in 2010. Unaware of Mann at the time that I saw this exhibit, I recalled the exhibit four years later while researching Mann for this paper. That is my first conscious memory of seeing Mann's work, though I was unaware at the time who she was. In that sense, this paper is haunted by my experience at the Guggenheim in 2010, by a particular event from my past. The *Haunted* exhibit thematizes visual and performance art's, specifically photography's, relationship with time and the past. The exhibit inspires participants to engage with the ways in which photography is inherently *haunted* by the past. The Guggenheim website describes the exhibition as an examination of "the unique power of reproductive media while documenting a widespread contemporary obsession, both collective and individual, with accessing the past."<sup>63</sup> Like Mann's photographs and the landscapes they depict are imbued with the past, the Guggenheim exhibit is intended to be a conceptual, visual, and spatial<sup>64</sup> exploration with art and the past. The spatial configuration of the museum spiraling and participants' physical experience walking through it while viewing the exhibition are specifically intended to recreate the experience of being transported back in time.

Mann's photographs are not only investigations of the Southern landscape's relationship with the past. Mann's photographs, as the Guggenheim suggests by placing them within a larger exhibition, point to the relationship of photography in general to the past. In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes describes two related qualities that distinguish photography from other art forms such as painting: "in Photography I can never deny that *the thing has been there*," which implies "a superimposition . . . of reality and of the past."<sup>65</sup> It is this, Barthes argues, that constitutes "the very essence, the *noeme* of Photography."<sup>66</sup> A photograph, by definition, refers to a moment that both actually existed and is now past. Photography is therefore inherently bound up with the past.

Sally Mann's *Deep South* series not only explicitly refers to the relationship of the land of the American South to the past but it also indirectly refers to photography's relationship with the past. If the connotative message of her photographs is age or *pastness*, this *pastness* not only

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63 "Haunted: Contemporary Photography/Video/Performance." *Guggenheim*. 2010. < <http://www.guggenheim.org/new-york/exhibitions/past/exhibit/3698>>. Web. September 2014.

64 The Guggenheim Museum, designed by architect Frank Lloyd Wright, is structured such that museum-goers ascend up a swirling white ramp as they view the art objects of the museum's main exhibition.

65 Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida*. Translated by Richard Howard. (New York: Hill and Wang, 2010), 76.

66 *Ibid*.

refers to that of the land but also to that of itself: to the *pastness* of photography. Photography is inherently haunted by the past, as well as by its past (as Mann's use of the wet-collodion process reinforces). But this quality of being haunted by the past does not make photography of the past. As Barthes notes in section thirty-five of *Camera Lucida*, "The Photograph does not call up the past."<sup>67</sup> It does not "restore what has been abolished" nor does it bring the thing referred to back to life, to that moment in time.<sup>68</sup> But, rather, it simply tells the viewer that the thing, the moment, once existed and that that moment is now gone. Photography is therefore unlike other mediums of art; its function is to tell the viewer that the thing referred to has been there.

## V. Presence, Absence, And Loss In The Photograph

Barthes claims that "Photography offers an immediate presence to the world"<sup>69</sup> that is at once of a political and metaphysical order. The meaning of this statement is double. This "immediate presence" is a consequence of the fact that the referent of a photograph actually existed and also of the fact that the observer is "the reference of every photograph."<sup>70</sup> This last claim, that the spectator is ultimately the reference of the photograph he or she observes, Barthes argues, provides the impetus for the observer to address himself "to the fundamental question: why is it that I am alive *here and now*?"<sup>71</sup> Ultimately, the photograph presents an observer with questions about his own existence, by putting the existence of the photographed thing into question. The photograph puts into focus (literally and figuratively) the existence of the photographed thing by questioning its existence: is the subject alive today? When was it alive? What or who is it? By extension, the observer begins to ponder and question his own existence: "why is it that I am alive *here and now*?"<sup>72</sup> This existential questioning is necessarily temporal. Putting into question the existence of the photographed thing means putting into question its temporality. When did the thing exist? When did the moment the photograph depicts occur? A photograph necessarily refers to something that is in the past. But, Barthes argues, it does not necessarily point to what is no longer, merely to what has been.<sup>73</sup> The photograph is therefore by its nature implicated in a temporal slippage between past and present: it necessarily refers to a persistence of the past (the "that-has-been") in the present (the "here and now").

In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes links the indexicality of photography to an umbilical cord connecting the observer to the thing photographed. The photograph is unique because it "is literally an emanation of the referent,"<sup>74</sup> which for Barthes means that "radiations which ultimately touch me" proceed "from a real body."<sup>75</sup> These radiations that "touch me like the delayed rays of a star" are "a sort of umbilical cord [that] links the body of the photographed thing to my gaze."<sup>76</sup> Here, Barthes imagines that the observer and the referent or *that-has-been* of the photograph are linked by a metaphorical umbilical cord. With this model, Barthes ignores the fact that the

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67 Ibid., 82.

68 Ibid.

69 Ibid., 84.

70 Ibid.

71 Ibid.

72 Ibid.

73 Ibid., 85.

74 Ibid., 80.

75 Ibid.

76 Ibid., 81.

photograph is a mere representation of a real-world referent. For him, the photographic observer is able to reconnect with—to touch—the *that-has-been*. This metaphorical umbilical cord does not only link the photographic observer to the photographed thing but it also links the observer to the past moment during which the photograph was taken. Barthes' *that-has-been* therefore has a double meaning: it is both the photograph's referent and that moment of the past during which the photograph was taken.

Because the photograph depicts a moment *that has been* or that already occurred in the past, it can be thought of as a trace of the past. It is a trace because it is an index of the real and because it depicts a moment that already occurred and is now past. The photograph therefore gives us "reality in a past state: at once the past and the real."<sup>77</sup> In her article, "Photography Unlimited," Susan Sontag describes the photograph as "not only an image (as a painting is an image), an interpretation of the real," but also as "a trace, something directly stenciled off the real, like a footprint or a death mask."<sup>78</sup> For both Sontag and Barthes, the photograph, unlike the painting, "register[s] an emanation (light waves reflected by objects),"<sup>79</sup> a phenomenon Barthes describes through his umbilical cord metaphor and which Sontag describes as "a material vestige of its subject."<sup>80</sup> It is this power of being a trace that gives the photograph the potential to connect the viewer to the moment during which it was taken as well as to the photographic referent. In his method of deconstruction, Jacques Derrida develops his own understanding of the trace as the presence of a non-presence or absence. The photograph can be understood as such. While according to Barthes it has the power to link the viewer to its referent, this connection will always be incomplete: the umbilical cord is purely metaphorical. The presence of the referent is therefore always simultaneously its absence because it is not the real thing or moment in full embodied form. The essence of the photograph is therefore necessarily inscribed with loss. Because it is a trace, it is not merely the presence of an absence but it is the presence of a loss.

Photographs are often invoked when considering questions about loss because photography is a primary means of confronting the past, which is inevitably beset with things lost. When people die, for example, we often turn to photographs that remind us of them, as if a photograph could capture and contain the essence of a human being. In his book, Jay Prosser considers photographs in autobiography as a way, alternative to written text, for the author to make sense of and come to terms with his or her past. Prosser invokes Tim Lott's autobiography, arguing that for Lott "photographs of his family's life" signify "something essential out of reach of his understanding" through which he can "attempt to make sense of his mother's suicide."<sup>81</sup> In his book, Lott describes the photograph as a specific kind of trace: "It is as if a sudden flashlight had been held up to illuminate my past and then switched off, leaving only an engram, a faint memory trace."<sup>82</sup> The photograph is therefore used to cope with loss, such as the loss of Lott's mother. Similarly, in *Camera Lucida*, Barthes looks at photographs to help come to terms with the loss of his mother shortly before he wrote the book. Photography is used, therefore, to help cope with loss by reawakening in the observer the memory of the lost object (the mother).

In psychoanalysis, photographs are frequently used during therapy sessions in order to help bring a particular memory back to the patient's immediate consciousness. This could be the loss of a particular person, such as Lott's and Barthes' mothers, or it could be the loss of a

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77 Ibid., 82.

78 Sontag, Susan. "Photography Unlimited," *The New York Times*, June 23, 1977.

79 Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida*. Translated by Richard Howard. (New York: Hill and Wang, 2010), 80.

80 Sontag, Susan. "Photography Unlimited," *The New York Times*, June 23, 1977.

81 Prosser, Jay. *Light in the Dark Room: Photography and Loss*. (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota, (2005), 9.

82 Ibid.

particular moment. Photography is therefore not only about the loss of things and people but it is also about the loss of the past. By extension, this loss of the past, inscribed in the essence of photography, alludes to another loss: the loss of memory. Prosser claims in his book that “the photograph seared inside autobiography elucidates not memory’s presence but memory’s loss.”<sup>83</sup> Not only does photography reawaken the loss present *in* particular memories (such as the memory of losing one’s mother) but it also awakens the loss *of* particular memories by serving to trigger those previously unconscious. Photography is therefore a tool for trauma because it necessitates the reawakening of the original traumatic moment, which photographs can help to provoke. According to Freud’s concept of “afterwardsness,” trauma, by definition, must consist of two moments: the first, the original traumatic moment (such as the death of one’s mother), and the second, the reawakening of this original moment by a trigger (such as viewing a photograph of the lost mother). The photograph therefore functions as a trigger of this original traumatic moment—of the original loss—and, as a result, makes a second loss conscious: the loss of memory of that original moment.

In her essay “Unclaimed Experience,” Cathy Caruth argues that “trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual’s past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature—the way it was precisely *not known* in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on.”<sup>84</sup> According to Caruth, then, one’s loss of conscious memory of the original traumatic moment—or the failure to assimilate that original moment into consciousness—is what makes that moment traumatic. To formulate this claim, Caruth relies upon the concept of afterwardsness that is inscribed in the meaning of trauma. Because the original moment does not become traumatic until it is revisited later in life, trauma depends upon the subject’s unconscious forgetting of that original moment. Since the moment is repressed and not assimilated into consciousness, this forgetting takes place before the event is even made conscious. It is only through the work of psychoanalysis, which aims to connect the original traumatic moment with the displaced repetitions of that moment later in life, that the traumatic moment may finally be assimilated into consciousness. This assimilation into consciousness is not an assimilation of that original traumatic moment in its full complexity, as it occurred at the initial moment in time. The original form of that primal scene is forever past just as the moment in time during which it occurred.

Photography therefore makes conscious the loss of memory that is inherent to trauma. The loss of memory is in effect a loss of time. This is because the loss of memory results from one’s failure to assimilate a moment into consciousness. This failure to consciously and therefore fully experience a moment in time is not only the loss of one’s full, conscious experience of that moment but it is in effect the loss of that moment in time. Repression is therefore ultimately a loss of time. The photograph, because of its temporal structure, is inherently an expression of this loss of time inscribed in the experience of trauma and in the experience of life. Photography functions by creating the illusion of a presence. In the case of Lott’s mother, the photograph creates the illusion of the presence of his mother by freezing an image of her at a particular moment in time. This image is not her embodiment. It is a particular arrangement of light reflected on paper. Nonetheless, the photograph provokes an embodied emotional response from the viewer (Lott). That loss is not merely the loss of his mother but is, more specifically, the loss of the moment the photograph depicts. Since the photograph by nature refers to a moment that is already past, it also refers more generally to the constant and inevitable passing of time—to the “unattainability”

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83 Ibid.

84 Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins U Press, 1996), 4.

of any particular moment. The photograph freezes moments in order to remind us that we can never catch them, that time is always escaping us. In that sense, time always signifies loss because individual units of time can never be sustained.

## VI. Time, Timelessness, And Trauma In *Deep South*

While Mann's photographs seek to express the timelessness of the Southern landscape, they ultimately express the failure of time's ability to be sustained. The land's embodiment of timelessness—its uncanny and disorienting temporal stillness—serves to elucidate the failure of time to ever be still. Several of Mann's Virginia photographs evoke this otherworldly stillness. On page forty-five of her *Deep South* photobook, for example, there is a photograph of a grassy forest clearing. The photograph's composition is such that we, as viewers, are positioned in the middle of the clearing, equidistant between each row of trees. These rows extend horizontally into the distance until they meet a vertical strip of trees marking the far background of the photograph. The photograph is "well-composed," as are most of Mann's images, in the sense that it is geometrically symmetrical: the lines of trees form an open rectangle that together mimic the edges of the frame. A white urn is foregrounded at the center of the frame, mimicking the position of the viewer and reinforcing the photograph's compositional symmetry. This symmetry evokes a sense of spatial stability, which contributes to the temporal stillness that the image evokes. Like the river image on page eleven, this photograph, also taken in Virginia, is uncannily still. No movement is suggested. The individual leaves and branches of the trees outlining the clearing are clearly discernable, signifying that there is no wind: the branches do not sway. The blurring effect of the trees in the far background does not suggest movement but instead, like in the river image, appears to be a consequence of their distance from the camera. This is reinforced by Mann's use of a soft focus, which by itself causes a blurring effect, especially for objects located farther in the background.<sup>85</sup>

Mann's use of light in this image and throughout the series serves to mystify the represented landscape. The light source of the photograph comes from the sun, which illuminates the middle of the clearing, suggesting that it is high noon. The trees positioned in the background are lighter in tonal value than those that mark the sides of the clearing. In addition, the trees in the middle of the far background become lighter as they extend vertically upward, such that the top of the trees is only faintly distinguishable from the sky above. This sky is bright white, a beaconing source of light that contrasts starkly with the dark tonal values of the gray grass and trees below. Mann attests to the particularity of Southern light which, unlike the "crisp and clear light"<sup>86</sup> of the North, gives mystery to a setting: "the quality of the air and light are so layered, complex, and mysterious"<sup>87</sup> that the landscape itself is put into doubt by being put out of clear focus. Despite the ephemeral quality of air and light that is visually represented in the photograph as thick and material, obscuring the clarity of the landscape, Mann's photograph creates a sense of temporal stillness. Her manipulation of light, in fact, aids in evoking the feeling of the uncanny that is the result of this temporal stillness. The thick and heavy quality of the air that works to obscure one's visual perception of the surrounding landscape evokes not only a feeling of what Mann calls

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85 Mann, Sally. *Deep South*. (New York: Bulfinch Press, 2005), 45.

86 "Interview: Sally Mann—"The Touch of an Angel." (2010).

87 Ibid.

“mystery”<sup>88</sup> but also of the uncanny. The thickness of the air works to *de*-familiarize viewers with the landscape they see.

The temporal stillness that is a source of the uncanny is also constructed by Mann’s compositional choices. In the center foreground of the image, directly opposite the viewer, is a marble urn on a pedestal. The urn is very light in tonal value, although it is darker than the sky above, while its pedestal approaches the darker value of the grass on which it stands. The urn stands still, heavy and inanimate, impervious to change. It is in the image as though to suggest that the landscape in which it exists is equally at rest. The position of the urn in the center foreground of the photograph, mimicking the position of the camera, suggests that it functions as a surrogate viewer, taking our place within the frame. This choice intends to suggest that we, the viewers, are as still as the urn: frozen in time like the landscape Mann’s photograph depicts. This suggestion alludes to the photograph’s own relationship with time. It freezes time. Mann’s landscape, itself subjected to a temporal stillness, is therefore a metaphor for the photograph itself, whose purpose it is to freeze visual representations of moments in time so that future viewers can later be reconnected with that moment by means of a Barthean umbilical cord.

This temporal stillness of the viewer is the viewer’s repression, a state of (often unconsciously) reliving the past instead of fully living in the present. In his essay “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,” Walter Benjamin argues that all modern individuals are engaged in this type of repetition because the passing of time in modernity is itself traumatic. For Benjamin, time is traumatic because modern urban life necessitates that one be subjected to a constant influx of stimuli. Because of the sheer overflow of stimuli, one cannot possibly assimilate all into consciousness. As a result, stimuli take on the form of traumatic shocks, which are necessarily repressed. What Benjamin terms “shock experience” is therefore the experience of modern life.<sup>89</sup> As a result, the passing of time is experienced as a succession of shocks that continue to build in the modern individual’s unconscious, such that he or she becomes increasingly repressed with the passing of time. Time itself, therefore, becomes traumatic. While shock experience may augment the traumatic experience of time in modern life, one does not need to be “modern” in order for time to be traumatic. Rather, the photograph reveals that the passing of time is in itself always traumatic. This is because time is ephemeral. Time can be broken down infinitely into smaller components. As a result, each “moment” is necessarily past before it is ever experienced. Experience itself is only assimilable as a succession of temporal moments. Time is, therefore, constantly escaping us. Each moment, in isolation, is repressed because it is too short to be assimilated into consciousness. As a result, time is always the traumatic loss of time. The photograph shows us this by, paradoxically, freezing moments. Through its freezing of time, the photograph reminds us that time can never be frozen: that time is, always, the traumatic loss of each moment.

Mann’s photographs are particularly expressive of this fact because of their insistence on making time stand still. The majority of photographs in *Deep South* express a temporal stillness like those analyzed above. This temporal stillness is often so extreme that it gives the effect of being uncanny. In the image on page seventy-one, Mann depicts a long tree branch sticking out of the same swimming hole represented in the photograph reproduced on the photobook’s front cover. In this photograph, the lack of ripples in the water is more extreme. Despite the fact that the tree branch breaks the water, the water fails to show any indication that it has been affected:

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88 Ibid.

89 Benjamin, Walter. *The Writer of Modern Life: Essays on Charles Baudelaire*, Edited by Michael W. Jennings. Translated by Howard Eiland and Edmund Jephcott. Cambridge: Belknap, 2006.

there is an unsettling lack of movement. The landscape Mann's photograph depicts appears to be timeless. It is beyond time, as though the photograph has frozen a moment that was already frozen. This temporal stillness that dominates the entire photograph is unsettling because viewers know (consciously or unconsciously) that time cannot be frozen. Mann's photographs therefore evoke the uncanny because they present us with a natural landscape displaced from time.



Figure 2

For Mann, the places of “stilled time”<sup>90</sup> she photographs appear impervious to temporal change because they are preserved by History. In the last chapter of her photobook, “Last Measure,” Mann juxtaposes images of the Civil War battlefields at Manassas, Chancellorsville, Appomattox, Fredericksburg, and the Wilderness, which she claims “appear virtually unchanged.”<sup>91</sup> These historic sites serve as material vestiges of the Civil War, memorials to this event in collective memory. Mann's complete series, however, shows how the landscapes of the entire South (in particular of Virginia, Tennessee, Georgia, and Mississippi) embody the South's resistance to temporal change. Mann not only reveals this through the visual content of her images; the very materiality of Mann's photographs attempts to slow down time. Unlike a photograph taken almost instantaneously with a digital camera, the collodion photograph takes time to come into being. First, the glass plate must be coated with collodion (a mixture of nitrated cotton, alcohol and ether) and then dipped in silver nitrate before it is placed inside the camera and exposed to light by the removal of the lens cap. Exposure time can vary from twenty seconds to over five minutes, depending on how quickly the silver salt compounds react to light and on how exposed the photographer wants her image. Exposure time is, therefore, far from instantaneous: it takes time for light to be materially substantiated into a glass negative. After the plate has been exposed to light, it must be developed in a dark room by pouring an iron sulfate and acetic acid solution over the plate so that the silver salt compounds turn to metallic silver. After this, the unexposed silver salt compounds must be removed by placing the plate in a tray filled with sodium thiosulfate solution. Once this is done, the plate is washed again and the collodion negative is placed over a paper sheet that has been treated with albumen and silver nitrate to

90 Mann, Sally. *Deep South*. (New York: Bulfinch Press, 2005), 89.

91 *Ibid.*

form an albumen print.<sup>92</sup> The wet-plate collodion process therefore takes a substantial amount of time in order to make a photographic print. Consequently, the materiality of the photograph is also an attempt to slow down time. That is, the moment captured in the photograph is extended by means of the photographic process itself. Inscribed within the materiality of the glass negative and positive print is time itself, embodied in the layers of different material solutions that mark distinct moments within the process of creating the image.



Figure 3

The timelessness of the American South that Mann's series seeks to express is not merely an imperviousness to change but also a state of living in the past instead of the present. The South, Mann's photographs want to claim, has refused to move forward after the collective trauma of the Civil War. Instead, it is engaged in a state of collective repression, whereby the past repeats itself in the present day, denying the South the capacity to live fully in the present. The Civil War—the major traumatic moment in the collective memory of the South—was not only a source of trauma for those who lived, fought, and died during the period but also for the land itself, which is inscribed with the traumatic memory through its physical inscription with the material bodies of those who died. These bodies are now no longer visible to the eye nor to the camera. Instead, photographs such as those taken by Michael Miley serve as material traces of the trauma of the Civil War. Mann's photographs also serve as traces of the trauma by means of revealing how little the landscape has changed since Miley took his.

## VII. The Trauma Of Time In The Photograph

The trauma of time can be described as the “unattainability” of the present. Because every moment is already past before it is experienced, the present is perpetually eluding us. All that is experienced is what is already past. Similarly, implicated in the concept of trauma is the constant repetition of the past because of one's failure to ever fully experience that past moment. Time is

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92 “Photography: The Wet Collodion Process,” *The J. Paul Getty Museum*. Accessed June 2014. <http://www.getty.edu/art/collection/video/134942/photography:-the-wet-collodion-process/>.

therefore not only traumatic, it is also the ultimate trauma: every trauma is the trauma of time because it is the failure to experience the present moment. Photography is the ideal medium for trauma because it is the trigger of the passing of time and, as a result, can evoke an embodied response in the viewer that recalls the trauma of time's passing. Mann's photographs, because they explicitly take up the subject of time—both the freezing of time and the passing of it—are especially powerful for triggering an embodied response in the viewer. By slowing down time to reveal the landscape's resistance to change, Mann's photographs reveal the ephemeral nature of time. The trauma of the land is not only the violence of the Civil War; it is also the trauma of time itself. The timelessness of the landscape is uncanny because time cannot be made still. It takes the photograph to freeze time. As a result, Mann's photographs are expressive of the traumatic nature of time. Time is, as explained above, inherently traumatic because it is perpetually lost, unable to ever be captured or frozen as the camera attempts to do. The camera is therefore, in essence, a device that artificially freezes time in order to capture a particular moment. By artificially freezing time, the camera then paradoxically works to remind viewers of the trauma of time. As a result, the photograph is inherently traumatic.

Not only is the photograph traumatic because it reminds us of the constant and inevitable passing of time but it is also traumatic because of its own temporal structure. There is no present in a photograph; the photograph captures a moment of the past in anticipation of its being viewed in the future. Similarly, because of the concept of afterwardsness that is inscribed in the meaning of trauma, trauma does not include a present. Like the moment of a photograph, the original traumatic moment is a moment of the past that recurs in the future. The present of the original moment is never fully experienced because of this repression. It is only felt as an unconscious repetition of the original moment in an altered form. One could therefore claim that the afterwardsness inscribed in the meaning of trauma is similarly inscribed in the essence of the photograph. This augments the potential for every photograph—not only those, such as Mann's, which explicitly question time—to trigger the viewer's own traumatic memory of the passing of time.

### VIII. Death As The Essence Of The Photograph

Because inscribed in the essence of time is its own traumatic loss, time always signifies loss. This loss of time, then, signals death. In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes claims that “The photograph tells [the viewer] death in the future”<sup>93</sup> and it is this relationship with death that is the source of the photograph's *punctum*. For Barthes, the photograph is inherently bound up with death because it implies simultaneously both what “*this will be* and *this has been*.” The “*that-has-been*” (*noeme*) of the photograph is its indexicality: the fact that the moment the photograph depicts actually occurred in time and space. Because the *that-has-been* refers to a moment past, it is bound up with the concept of death: the “death” (or loss) of the moment the photograph depicts. At the same time, the “*this-will-be*” informs the viewer of his or her own impending death as well as of the imminent death of the subject depicted in the photograph. The particular photograph Barthes is analyzing when he makes this claim (Alexander Gardner: Portrait of Lewis Payne. 1865) is of a convicted felon waiting in his cell to be hanged. In this particular instance the *this-will-be* of the photograph is therefore in a very concrete sense the impending death of the photographed other.

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93 Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida*. Translated by Richard Howard. (New York: Hill and Wang, 2010), 96.

In a more abstract sense, however, the photograph is by nature always about death: death is the essence of photography. Early on in *Camera Lucida*, Barthes claims that “what I am seeking in the photograph taken of me (the “intention” according to which I look at it) is Death: Death is the *eidōs* of the Photograph.”<sup>94</sup> On the same page, Barthes describes the clicking noise of taking a photograph (which is for him the sound that personifies photography) as “the noise of Time.” “Cameras,” he goes on to state, are “clocks for seeing.”<sup>95</sup> Barthes suggests, then, that death is the essence of photography because of photography’s relationship with time. The perpetual loss of time for which photography is a signifier is ultimately the perpetual death of time, including that of the moment of the photograph. “There is always a defeat of time in the Photograph: *that* is dead and *that* is going to die.”<sup>96</sup> This death of the photograph is not only the death of the moment of the photograph but simultaneously the imminent deaths of both the subject depicted in the photograph and of the viewer. Barthes suggests that the photograph is inherently bound up with death because it implies simultaneously both “*this will be* and *this has been*.” For Barthes, the death(s) inherent to the photograph is the ultimate *punctum*: “What pricks me is the discovery of this equivalence” between the death (loss) of the past and death in the future. “Whether or not the subject is already dead, every photograph is this catastrophe:”<sup>97</sup> the loss of time—both now (of the past) and in the future (of the present).

This ultimate *punctum*—Death—Barthes speaks of is, according to him, most evident in photographs from the past, such as those taken by Michael Miley that Mann bases *Deep South* on. “This *punctum* ... is vividly legible in historical photographs: there is always a defeat of Time in them: *that* is dead and *that* is going to die.”<sup>98</sup> The uncanny inherent to photography is that, despite this death that is the essence of the photograph, the thing *that-has-been* was alive during the moment the photograph was taken. Observing a photograph of two young girls, Barthes remarks, “how alive they are!”<sup>99</sup> and yet, he continues, “they are dead (*today*).” For Barthes, they are also “then *already* dead.” This is because the moment of the photograph is past before it occurs due to the loss that is inherent to the nature of time. The photograph, then, is the mark of death because it is a testament to its own impossibility: the impossibility of freezing time. Barthes claims that these photographs of the past need not be of human figures in order for them to produce the ultimate *punctum*, reminding the viewer of the death of time: “there is no need to represent a body in order for me to experience this vertigo of time defeated.”<sup>100</sup> The photographs of Miley and of Mann can be just as if not more powerful producers of this ultimate *punctum*. Mann’s photographs, in referencing those of the past (in particular, of Miley), attempt to recreate the effect of being from the past, thereby producing the stronger *punctum* that historical photographs have the capacity to produce.

Barthes suggests that life and death in the photograph are intimately bound up with one another. For him, while death is the essence or *eidōs* of the photograph, photography also serves to *animate* the viewer. Reciprocally, this *animation* is also the “life force” of the photograph, or “the attraction which makes it exist.”<sup>101</sup> What Barthes means by *animation* is ultimately *punctum*. The photograph animates the viewer by pricking him or affecting him such that an embodied

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94 Ibid., 15.

95 Ibid.

96 Ibid., 96.

97 Ibid.

98 Ibid.

99 Ibid.

100 Ibid.

101 Ibid., 20.

emotional response is generated. The ultimate *punctum* is present in all photographs because the essence of the photograph is death, specifically the death of time. Reciprocally, the viewer animates the photograph by giving it meaning through the viewer's embodied response to it. Meaning, Barthes suggests, is not semantic meaning or the denoted and connoted messages of the photograph. Rather, it is the emotional response that is generated through viewing. This emotional response is specific to each viewer and relates to his or her own personal life history. Through the work of *animation* or *punctum*, then, despite the photograph's relationship to death, the photograph is nonetheless a source of life for the viewer by making him or her feel in an embodied way. In fact, because the ultimate *punctum* which is universal to all photographs is the death of time, death is what animates the viewer. Death, then, is the ultimate source of life in the photograph.

It has been suggested that *Camera Lucida's* preoccupation with death is a result of the death of Barthes' mother, which occurred just before Barthes began to write the book. Considering this, the writing of *Camera Lucida* operates as a form of grieving similar to how Susan Sontag's writing of *On Photography* can be interpreted as a form of grieving and coming to terms with the childhood wound of viewing the Bergen-Belsen and Dachau photographs. Throughout the text, Barthes discusses his mother, including her life, her death, and his difficulty coping with her loss. In particular, Barthes addresses his association of his mother with what he calls the Winter Garden Photograph. For Barthes, this photograph embodies the "essential identity" of his mother—her eyes—personified by its color palette:

Yet in these photographs of my mother there was always a place set apart, reserved and preserved: the brightness of her eyes. For the moment it was a quite physical luminosity, the photographic trace of a color, the blue-green of her pupils. But this light was already a kind of mediation which led me toward an essential identity, the genius of the beloved face. And then, however imperfect, each of these photographs manifested the very feeling she must have experienced each time she "let" herself be photographed ...<sup>102</sup>

Though Barthes visually describes the photograph in chapter twenty-eight, *Camera Lucida* does not reproduce it for us. Some have suggested that the Winter Garden Photograph is the photograph reproduced on the first page of the book, labeled "Daniel Boudinet. Polaroid. 1979."<sup>103</sup> This photograph does not abide by the description given in chapter twenty-eight, being somewhat abstract, but its color palette is a luminous blue-green, like that of his mother's eyes, which Barthes describes in the above passage. It is the "brightness of her eyes... the blue green of her pupils" which, through synecdoche, represents "the genius of her beloved face" and thereby embodies her "essential identity." It is "the photographic trace of a color," Barthes suggests, that reminds him of his mother and is the source of the Winter Garden Photograph's *punctum*.

For Barthes, this photograph not only embodies his mother's "essential identity" but it also embodies his own grief by means of the *punctum* it produces in him. He compares the experience of viewing the Winter Garden Photograph to listening to *Gesang der Frühe*. For Barthes, this metaphor serves to help overcome the limits of language, which cannot describe his own grief. Similarly, the limits of language prevent Barthes from describing his mother. It is the photograph, specifically the Winter Garden Photograph, which best expresses both the essence

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102 Ibid., 66.

103 This argument is supported by Barthes' claim on page 69 of *Camera Lucida* that "the Winter Garden" is "the house where my mother was born in Chennevières-sur-Marne." The photograph on the first page of the book appears to depict a living room, with blue-green curtains (the predominant focus of the image) and a sofa chair.

of Barthes' mother and Barthes' own grief, which is embodied in the photograph by means of the *punctum* it produces.

...this Winter Garden Photograph was for me like the last music Schumann wrote before collapsing, that first *Gesang der Frühe* which accords with both my mother's being and my grief at her death; I could not express this accord except by an infinite series of adjectives, which I omit, convinced however that this photograph collected all the possible predicates from which my mother's being was constituted...<sup>104</sup>

This embodied response that is produced by the *punctum* of the photograph is specific to Barthes. On page seventy-three Barthes explains that the Winter Garden Photograph "exists only for [him]."<sup>105</sup> He is affected by this particular photograph in a particular way because of his personal history and individual constitution.

For you, it would be nothing but an indifferent picture, one of the thousand manifestations of the 'ordinary'; it cannot in any way constitute the visible object of a science; it cannot establish an objectivity, in the positive sense of the term...<sup>106</sup>

For Barthes, then, each viewer's individual response to a particular photograph is unique. The detail in a photograph that generates *punctum* in an individual viewer is specific to that viewer and cannot be reduced to any objective science. If the Winter Garden Photograph Barthes speaks of is the one printed on the inside cover of *Camera Lucida*, there is nothing in the content of the image that signifies mother: Barthes' mother is not the referent. Nonetheless, because of its color palette which recalls her eyes, Barthes claims that the photograph embodies her essence. The fact that what generates *punctum* is specific to each viewer and his or her personal history does not, however, claim that there is no universal *punctum*.

## IX. The Death Of The (M)other

As has already been established, the death of time that is inherent to the photograph can be described as a form of universal *punctum*. It is, as described above, the ultimate *punctum*. Barthes suggests, however, through his focus on his mother, that there is another, even more fundamental universal *punctum* inherent to the photograph. This *punctum* is the loss—or death—of the (M)other. In *Camera Lucida*, the death that is bound up in the nature of the photograph is at heart bound up with the death of Barthes' mother. Every photograph is, for Barthes, not only the realization of his own imminent death but also the realization of the death of *his* mother. The death of Barthes' mother is also, however, bound up with his own theory of photography. The particular therefore serves as a basis for a universal theory. Barthes suggests that there exists in the Winter Garden Photograph not only the essence of his mother but also the essence of photography. This essence, as Barthes clearly states, is death. Implicitly, he also suggests that the death that is the essence of the photograph is the *punctum* that is felt by the loss of one's mother. At this moment, Barthes' mother becomes the universal and symbolic (M)other.

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104 Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida*. Translated by Richard Howard. (New York: Hill and Wang, 2010), 70.

105 Ibid., 73.

106 Ibid.

The death of the (M)other that is the essence of photography is bound up with the death of time. Because all photographs by nature refer to the perpetual loss of time—to the fugitive moment—they also inherently refer to loss and, more specifically, to the loss of the (M)other. The loss of time ultimately signifies lost time with one's mother. This symbolic loss of the (M)other is the breaking of the umbilical cord during birth, which is the ultimate experience of loss: it is the loss of the (M)other and with that the loss of shared experience with any other. From that moment on, we are completely alone, confined within our own bodies, incapable of experiencing with another person. While the umbilical cord is still intact, the exchange of fluid between mother and child means a mutual sharing of bodily experience. The child feels with the (M)other. Once the cord is cut, however, we are left alone. The climax of birth (this cutting of the umbilical cord) is paradoxically a form of death because it is the moment when we become independent and lose the ability to share direct experience with an/other. The loss of the (M)other is therefore also a symbolic death of the (M)other. This death of the (M)other to which photography refers is not only the (M)other's symbolic death, but also the symbolic death of the self. Like the *that-has-been* and the *this-will-be* signify the imminent deaths of both the subject depicted in the photograph and the viewer, the death of the (M)other symbolizes both the death of the (M)other and the death of the self.

The breaking of the umbilical cord—the splitting from the mother—is in effect the same splitting of the self that Sontag refers to when she witnesses the Bergen-Belsen and Dachau photographs. In Marianne Hirsch's essay "Surviving Images: Holocaust Photographs and the Work of Postmemory," Hirsch herself claims that this breaking Sontag describes is the "child realization of death."<sup>107</sup> This death is not only the death depicted in the Bergen-Belsen and Dachau photographs but it is the double death Barthes alludes to in *Camera Lucida* that is inherently bound up with photography: the death of the (M)other and the simultaneous death of the self that occurs during the cutting of the umbilical cord. In effect, the realization of this double death causes Sontag's own figurative death of the self: "When I looked at those photographs, . . . something went dead."<sup>108</sup> While Sontag describes the Bergen-Belsen and Dachau photographs as themselves responsible for her figurative death, Barthes' understanding of the relationship between photography and death suggests that Sontag is already "dead;" the photographs merely trigger the memory of the primal scene of the death of the (M)other, thereby unconsciously reminding her of her primal wound. She is already broken—split—because she is split from the (M)other and can no longer share direct emotional or bodily experience with an/other.

The wounding experience of viewing a photograph is therefore a recalling of the past, in particular of the loss of time experienced with the mother. This separation from the (M)other that occurs during birth, symbolized by the cutting of the umbilical cord, is the primal scene for all trauma. That is, the death of the (M)other is the ultimate trauma. Every subsequent trauma that is experienced during childhood and adult life is partly a repetition of this initial traumatic loss. That is because the infant comes into an understanding of what trauma is through this first major experience of trauma. From that moment on, all subsequent traumatic moments must recall this original moment if they are to be understood as trauma. Freud's Seduction Theory, later expanded on by Jean Laplanche, understands the mother's breast (or that of the wet nurse, who plays the role of surrogate (M)other) as the primary symbol for trauma. It is the separation from the mother's breast during breastfeeding that constitutes the original traumatic moment from which all subsequent trauma is derived. The breastfeeding mother does not have an infinite supply of milk. This infinite supply of milk that the infant expects translates into an infinite

107 Hirsch, Marianne. "Surviving Images: Holocaust Photographs and the Work of Postmemory," 6.

108 Sontag, Susan. *On Photography*. (New York: Picador, 2001), 20.

amount of time spent breastfeeding. It can therefore also be understood as a form of timelessness. At this stage of development, the infant does not understand time. He or she does not understand how time is the perpetual loss of itself. The separation from the breast is the first trauma. It is the moment when the infant experiences loss for the first time: the loss of the breast and mother's milk and the loss of time.<sup>109</sup> The theory of seduction presumes that there is an original moment to trauma itself: a sort of primal trauma, or initial traumatic moment to which all future traumas ultimately refer.

In his 1929 book *The Trauma of Birth*, Otto Rank takes Freud's theory of trauma and mother fixation farther back in infantile development. For him, the original traumatic moment which serves as a blueprint for all future trauma takes place during birth. According to Rank, fixation on the mother begins during womb-life, which "includes the earliest physiological relation to the mother's womb,"<sup>110</sup> and not during breast-feeding. Correspondingly, "the first separation from the first libido object" is the separation "of the new-born child from the mother."<sup>111</sup> Instead of the separation from the mother's breast, the separation from the mother at birth is the ultimate primal scene, the original traumatic moment upon which all future trauma is based. Throughout the rest of the individual's life, she or he is confronted with what Rank terms the "*rebirth-phantasy*." This *rebirth-phantasy* is the desire to return to this past moment of birth in order to relive the experience such that it can be assimilated into consciousness. As with all forms of trauma, the trauma of birth unconsciously repeats itself in altered forms throughout the individual's life until some form of closure (lived out through a complete fulfillment of the *rebirth-phantasy*) is achieved.

Later on in *The Trauma of Birth*, Rank suggests that the ultimate fulfillment of the *rebirth-phantasy* occurs during death. For Rank, darkness—in particular dark, enclosed spaces—symbolizes the womb, thereby triggering unconscious memories of womb-life, birth, and the separation from the mother. Death, often symbolized by darkness, is, for him, a return to the womb and, therefore, a return to the (M)other. Rank modifies Freud's "death drive," arguing that it is really "a wish-reaction to the birth trauma."<sup>112</sup> For him, death is "an everlasting return to the womb. Everyone born sinks back again into the womb from which he or she once came into the realm of light, roused by the deed of man."<sup>113</sup> Rank suggests, then, that literal death is a symbolic return to life before the separation from the (M)other at birth and consequent figurative death of the self. If womb-life is true life before the figurative double death of the (M)other and of the self, then life and death, Rank suggests, are ultimately near equivalents. The difference from the other which helps to constitute the meaning of each concept ultimately dissolves as the two form an equivalence: if womb-life is a beginning, then literal death is a return to that same origin.

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109 As with many of his ideas, Freud abandoned the seduction theory. The written "moment of abandonment," scholars claim, occurs in a letter Freud wrote to his good friend and fellow scientist Wilhelm Fliess on September 21, 1897. In it, Freud states: "I no longer believe in my neurotica." Several psychoanalytic theorists after Freud—perhaps most notably Jean Laplanche—have claimed that this was a terrible mistake. Laplanche develops his own theory from his reading of Freud's theory of seduction. In Laplanche's theory, the human psyche is formed by this moment of seduction during infancy. Seduction, for Laplanche, is the moment when the infant becomes implanted with the enigmatic messages, or "strangeness," of the (M)other. The human psyche is therefore in part constituted by this strangeness of the other: "the very constitution of this topography of the psychic apparatus is bound up with the fact that the small human being has to cope with this strangeness" of the other. ("An Interview with Jean Laplanche and Cathy Caruth." Emory University, 2001.)

110 Rank, Otto. *The Trauma of Birth*. (Mansfield Center: Martino, 2010), 4.

111 Ibid.

112 Ibid., 114.

113 Ibid.

## X. Life And Death In The Photograph

In *Camera Lucida* Barthes suggests that he has nothing to live for—save for his writing—after the literal death of his mother.

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.<sup>114</sup>

In these lines, one could argue that Barthes expresses Rank's version of the death drive—a desire to die in order to return to his mother. The return to the (M)other that is symbolized by death is not only symbolic: considering Barthes' mother is dead, Barthes' only way of being with her again is by means of his own literal death. In the sentence that follows the above passage, Barthes claims: "That is what I read in the Winter Garden Photograph."<sup>115</sup> The photograph therefore triggers Barthes' innate death drive instinct. Because this death drive is ultimately a desire to return to the (M)other, it can be thought of as a response to the traumatic separation from the (M)other. The photograph therefore triggers the death drive by unconsciously triggering Barthes' memory of the cutting of the umbilical cord.

If the essence of the photograph is death, as Barthes claims, and life and death are near equivalents, then photography's essence is also one of life. The photograph helps to trigger the unconscious memory of the death of the (M)other, thereby animating the viewer<sup>116</sup> by means of producing *punctum*. This triggering of the death of the (M)other is a partial fulfillment of the ultimate wish: the "birth-phantasy" that Rank refers to. Because complete fulfillment of the birth-phantasy is a return to symbolic "Life"—that is, to (womb-)life before the separation from the (M)other and the consequent double death of the (M)other and self—photography helps to reconnect the viewer with Life by putting him or her in touch with his own symbolic death. Life after (womb-)life and the cutting of the umbilical cord is a symbolic state of non-living, a life without the (M)other, and therefore without the ability to share direct experience with any other. In this state of symbolic non-living, which is a state of post-traumatic repression, one is perpetually engaged in unconscious repetitions of the initial traumatic moment of separation from the (M)other—the "primal trauma." so to speak. It is these repetitions—which attempt and fail to overcome the state of non-living and return to (womb-)life—that recall the primal trauma that gives meaning to one's life. These repetitions symbolically attempt to fulfill the birth-phantasy in which the individual fully re-experiences the trauma of birth, thereby assimilating the embodied experience into conscious memory. The ultimate birth-phantasy, Rank suggests, is literal death: the moment in which the individual symbolically returns to the womb and to the (M)other, meeting his or her own mother in death. Although there is no ultimate return, literal death is the closest one comes to return. In daily life, unconscious repetitions achieve partial fulfillment of the birth-phantasy by putting the individual (although unconsciously) in touch with the primal trauma. Photography helps to achieve such partial wish fulfillment through its recall of the primal trauma.

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114 Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida*. Translated by Richard Howard. (New York: Hill and Wang, 2010), 72.

115 Ibid.

116 Ibid., 20.

In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes describes the relationship between the viewer and the photograph as a sort of umbilical cord: “A sort of umbilical cord links the body of the photographed thing to my gaze.”<sup>117</sup> Implicitly through his umbilical cord metaphor, Barthes suggests that the photograph serves to reconnect the viewer with the (M)other, symbolically re-attaching him or her to the time before birth when the umbilical cord was still attached. For Barthes, this is achieved through *punctum*. All photographs, through their inherent relationship with time, recall the death of the (M)other, thereby triggering the ultimate *punctum*. While this recall does not serve as a complete fulfillment of the birth-phantasy (only in literal death is this possible<sup>118</sup>), it nonetheless serves as partial wish fulfillment. Barthes goes on to describe the umbilical cord that links the viewer to “the body of the photographed thing” as a source of light “like the delayed rays of a star:” “light, though impalpable, is here a carnal medium, a skin I share with anyone who has been photographed.”<sup>119</sup> Light, for Barthes, is therefore also a metaphor for the umbilical cord and for one’s attachment to the (M)other (through the sharing of skin). The photograph functions by recording the light reflected by an object (the referent) onto some sort of film. In the collodion wet-plate process Mann uses, light is reflected onto glass covered in silver nitrate. The trace of the referent—and what gives the photograph being—is therefore the light that it reflects, which is embodied by the glass plate inside the camera. In order for the referent’s trace to be recorded and the photograph not to be too over-exposed, the silver-covered glass must be kept in darkness until the photographer is ready to take the picture by opening the camera’s shutter. The photograph is, then, darkness that briefly sees light only to return to another state of darkness: the closed shutter opens and is quickly closed again. If, as for Rank, life after birth is symbolized by light while darkness signifies the womb (“Everyone born sinks back again into the womb from which he or she once came into the realm of light”<sup>120</sup>), then the camera can be interpreted as a type of symbolic womb, which briefly exposes itself to life after (embodied by the light of the referent) only to return once more to its familiar darkness. Through our use of the camera, we are, in essence, symbolically returning to the womb. The moment the shutter opens is the figurative connection between womb-life and life after: it is the symbolic reattachment to the umbilical cord.

In Mann’s *Deep South* photographs, it is the contrast between light and dark that forms the image. Shapes are constituted through difference of tonal value. Mann’s images are spaces of juxtaposed dark and light, signifying life and death. They are also juxtaposed spaces of negative and positive, absence and presence, inside and outside (the (M)other). Though Mann’s photographs emphasize this distinction by depicting strong contrasts between dark and light, ultimately all photographs are constituted by these differences and are therefore signifiers of life and death. This is more overt in *Deep South* because of Mann’s photographs’ relationship with time. As already contended, Mann’s series is an explicit representation of the death of time that is inherent to the essence of the photograph. All of the images in *Deep South* suggest the ephemeral nature of time’s passing while paradoxically attempting to freeze time and portray the “timelessness” of the Southern landscape. The death of time, or fact that time is a perpetual absence (the absence of itself), ultimately refers to the loss of time with the (M)other that occurs

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117 Ibid., 81.

118 Even then, the complete fulfillment of the birth-phantasy that is achievable in death is not an actual return to the mother and to life before birth. The birth-phantasy is only a phantasy and is purely symbolic. While the aim of the birth-phantasy is to return to the womb and to re-experience birth, its meaning is constituted by its necessary failure to achieve that aim. The fulfillment of the birth-phantasy is not equivalent to the fulfillment of the aim of the birth-phantasy.

119 Ibid.

120 Rank, Otto. *The Trauma of Birth*. (Mansfield Center: Martino, 2010), 114.

during the cutting of the umbilical cord. This ultimate loss, which is the primal trauma, is the infant's first experience of loss: the simultaneous experience of both the loss of time and the loss of the (M)other. During (womb-)life, the infant exists in a state of timelessness, in which he or she does not yet comprehend time. It is the loss of the (M)other—the ultimate *punctum*—that is the infant's first experience of time, which manifests itself as lost time with the (M)other. It is upon this experience that all future comprehension of time, loss, and trauma is based. The photographs in *Deep South* not only recall the ultimate *punctum* but they inform us of how all photographs accomplish this feat.

## XI. Conclusion: The Ethical Power Of Photography

This triggering of the primal trauma is the ethical power of the photograph that Marianne Hirsch refers to in her essay “Surviving Images: Holocaust Photographs and the Work of Postmemory.” To “remember’ the suffering of others”<sup>121</sup> is to remember the death of the (M)other. Because every photograph ultimately refers to this death, every photograph has the power to wound us by triggering the memory of the primal wound. As a result, every photograph has the power to do the work of postmemory Hirsch claims is necessary for an ethical relation between self and other. To “remember” the death of the (M)other is to recognize the loss of our ability to share direct experience with an/other: to actually remember or experience the suffering of the other depicted in the photograph (which is ultimately derived from this primal trauma). Photography therefore reminds us in an embodied way of the ultimate tragedy of life. It makes us feel our own tragic containment within our individual bodies, reminding us of the loss of our ability to feel with an/other. The only memory we can collectively remember is our own collective loss of this failure to witness an/other's pain: the primal scene of the death of the (M)other. “Retrospective witnessing by adoption”<sup>122</sup> or remembering the memories of an/other is to remember our own primal trauma of the death of the (M)other and through that to “remember” the other's primal wound.

As this paper attempts to show, an examination of the ethical potential of photography does not necessitate an examination of explicit images of suffering. Sally Mann's *Deep South* series reveals how photography inherently triggers an embodied response in the viewer that recalls the primal trauma, thereby reminding the viewer of his/her failure to share direct experience with an/other. It does so through its explicit investigation of the death of time. Mann's photographs show us how time is necessarily fugitive and constituted by loss through their attempt to slow down time, revealing the timeless nature of the Southern landscape. In these photographs, we are presented with the resilient defiance of change embodied by the landscape of the American South. Defying historical time, the landscapes Mann depicts appear virtually unchanged since the Civil War despite the changes that have taken place from a human perspective. These photographs thereby work to reveal not only the ephemeral nature of time but also the ephemeral nature of the human body. The time of the landscape is different from time as perceived by human life: it moves more slowly, appearing almost “timeless” to the human eye. For the viewers of the photograph, Mann's “timeless” landscapes remind us of the ephemeral nature of time as we perceive it. They remind us of our perpetual loss of each moment, and of our own lost time with the (M)other. With this, they remind us of the ephemeral nature of the human body. We grow

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121 Hirsch, Marianne. “Surviving Images: Holocaust Photographs and the Work of Postmemory,” 10.

122 Ibid.

old, die, and quickly decay into the earth. Meanwhile, the land, despite its absorption of human remains into its own materiality, appears unchanged, resistant to time as humans perceive it. The photograph, like the land, is also resistant to time: it freezes it, capturing a moment from the past with the expectation of it being perceived in the future. The medium of photography therefore, like the land, works to reveal the ephemeral nature of time by revealing its own defiance to that nature. Through this exploration of time as loss, Mann's photographs connect viewers with the ultimate loss of the (M)other.

The ethical function<sup>123</sup> of photography is to remind us of this loss and consequent inability to share direct experience with an/other. It is this *punctum* that we all share. When Sontag, a young girl in California far removed from the events of World War II, observes images of the Holocaust and, acknowledging her own inability to even imagine the horror before her, asks "What good do they serve?"<sup>124</sup>, she asks what is the ethical potential of photography. Given the distance between viewer and photographed other, how can there exist the empathy needed to constitute an ethical witnessing? If viewers cannot even fully empathize with an embodied other due to their failure to share direct experience with that other, how can they empathize with the other in the photograph? As Sally Mann's *Deep South* shows us through its reveal of the photograph's inherent recall of the primal trauma, photography can provoke empathy in the viewer by triggering an embodied response that recalls our separation from the (M)other. This ultimate loss is an experience that all humans indirectly share and one which all subsequent trauma is derivative of. In witnessing a photograph, then, viewers are able to share traumatic experience. Though the specificity of the trauma remains unimaginable to the viewer, he or she is still able to indirectly share the experience of trauma through his or her emotional and embodied understanding of the primal trauma of which all subsequent trauma is derivative.

## XII. Epilogue: From The Universal To The Particular

In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes reminds us that this experience of the death of the (M)other, although shared by all humans, is particular to each individual.

"No more than I would reduce my family to the Family," Barthes states, "would I reduce my mother to the Mother...For what I have lost is not a Figure (the Mother), but a being; and not a being, but a *quality* (a soul): not the indispensable, but the irreplaceable."<sup>125</sup>

Barthes' experience of the loss of his mother is not merely the symbolic loss of the (M)other: it is the loss of *his* real mother, Henriette Barthes. The experience of his loss—symbolic and literal—is also a particular experience, as it is for all individuals. Though everyone is separated from his mother at birth and at death, the emotional and embodied experience of that loss is specific to each. In addition, any theory of photography or of mother fixation is, Barthes tells us, an expression of the writer's own particular experience of that ultimate loss. "In the Mother,

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123 We may now define "ethical function" as the evocation of an emotional and bodily experience that recalls the loss of the (M)other.

124 Sontag, Susan. *On Photography*. (New York: Picador, 2001), 20.

125 Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida*. Translated by Richard Howard. (New York: Hill and Wang, 2010), 75.

there was a radiant, irreducible core: my mother.”<sup>126</sup> Similarly, the reader’s interpretation of the writer’s theory is specific to him or her. The (M)other is always derived from the mother. Like when we read, when we view a photograph we experience the art object with our own particular intellectual, emotional and embodied responses that are consequences of our specific histories and pasts. Universal theories, whether they acknowledge it or not, always begin with “I.”

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