Photography, Writing, Literature: A Book Review Article of New Work by Brunet and Beckman and Weissberg

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Geert VANDERMEERSCHE

Photography, Writing, Literature: A Book Review Article of New Work by Brunet and Beckman and Weissberg

The history of photography is in many ways the history of the diversification of its functions in art, science, and culture. This means that in studying the development of photography inquired further than its technological advances or its recognition. Early studies in this respect included the 1929 manifesto and manual *Es kommt der neue Fotograf* by Werner Graff and Hans Richter about whose thought Daniel H. Magilow reflected in Karen Beckman’s Karen and Liliane Weissberg’s edited book *On Writing with Photography* arguing that “photographs ... eroded the text image distinctions and made it necessary to reconceptualize them entirely. Photographs became the text by adopting the functions of written and spoken language” (96) and Walter Benjamin’s 1936 “L’Oeuvre d’art à l’époque de sa reproduction mécanisée” in which he argued that, among other technological advances, photography as reproduction of art creates new insight.

In his introduction to John Berger’s *Understanding a Photograph*, Geoff Dyer identifies three authors who spurred his interest in photography: Roland Barthes, Susan Sontag, and John Berger. While these authors are recognized as canonical in the writing on photography, they are foremost known as literary authors, not photographers. Indeed, Dyer notes that for him reading texts about photography always preceded viewing the actual visual images of such as Arbus or Kertész. While such a statement contradicts recent claims about the dominance of the visual over the written word (see, e.g., Stephens), one could note that photography’s development and position are often framed by the written word and that photography influenced the development of literary narratives. Whether approached as media or as artistic forms, literature and photography have a symbiotic and adversarial relationship. The two books I am reviewing here suggest connections and contrasts between writing and literature on the one hand and photography on the other: François Brunet’s 2009 *Photography and Literature* and Karen Beckman’s and Liliane Weissberg’s 2013 edited volume *On Writing with Photography* (2013).

While contributors to the Beckman and Weissberg volume focus on the productive aspects of intermedial relationships and how these function as mediators of experiences and ideas, François Brunet takes a more explicitly revisionary and historical position in order to “reverse the angle of vision by looking at photography’s encounters with literature from the point of view of photography and photographers” (8). While the written word might be held in higher regard in traditional scholarship, assessing photography as a medium solely in terms of ideals and expectations that originated in literary culture might distort the medium’s function and nature. In this context, Lars Elleström claims that to study photography it is the “intermedial perspective, based on the belief that one cannot understand photography without thoroughly comparing it to how other media are construed” and that the same insight also applies to the study of literature (153). With this reversal, Brunet also touches on discussions on the introduction of intermediality in literary studies (on this, see, e.g., studies in Steven Tótosy de Zepetnek’s edited volume *Digital Humanities and the Study of Intermediality in Comparative Cultural Studies*). Scholars of literature often contend that the study of more than one medium risks losing sight of the centrality of written texts and their distinctiveness from other media in literary research (see, e.g., Wolf). Over and above the digital turn, Beckmann and Weissberg stress in their introduction to *On Writing with Photography* that studies on the interactions between writing and photography must go beyond texts of literature per se toward a broader view of what writing means in order to include different media and practices. This allows for a broader examination of writing practices which advances our understanding of the relation between writing and photography. For instance, in *On Writing with Photography* Leah Rosenberg offers an analysis of how “McKay’s early verse and his novel *Banana Bottom* comprehensively challenge the tropicalizing iconography of early tourist photography and, as an alternative, offer an empowering national vision of the peasantry” (42) and Roderick Cooper illustrates the difficulty of maintaining the specificity of each medium or mode of communication in the origin and presentation of multimodal discourses. Alternatively, in *Photography and Literature*, Brunet points to the difficulty of defining literature diachronically of its interactions with photography and notes how the extension of the term “literature” which once also included scientific writings changing at the time of the invention of photography toward literature as “both cultural heritage, especially national, and individual pursuit with a reflexive, aesthetic ambition, as well as a claim to deliver truths about society” (10). The connection between this latter definition of “literature” and the social and cultural evolution of photography is a theme throughout the book. Photographers have sought to conform to or subvert these “literary” ideals and expectations tackling notions of the authorial presence of the photographer, the social and cultural function of photography, and in the cross-fertilization between photography and literature.

While the loss of the idea that media and art forms have a distinctive and isolated origin and existence may trouble some literary scholars, it is a direct consequence of approaching culture as a collection of multimodal or multimedia practices: “the fact that language and culture have been multimodal since the beginning of history as we know it, but also the fact the throughout history the different media have been inter-related in terms of both structure and content, has been a blind spot to the human sciences” (Lehtonen 72). This is a point Werner Wolf also makes suggesting that “medial conditions shape the literary content to a considerable degree and therefore merit attention — even where literature shares features with other media” (22) and in "What Pictures Tell Us about the Letter: Visual and Literary Practices in Latin America" Jorge Coronado explains his interest in photography as
"the manifestation of a deep-seated need to engage with both the project of lettered culture in the
reality and all its limitations in its current iteration. As such, photography represents one of many
cultural practices where, paradoxically, the role of lettered production in both representing and engag-
ing in modernity, state-, and region-building projects is being probed" (157). Coronado exhibits
how media studies enhances literary research. However, Wolf also notes that the initial impulse of
many literary scholars today still study literary texts solely from a mono-medial perspective. In some
cases, this may be in fact hinder full analysis of the studied texts. In On Writing with Photography
Stuart Burrows examines Walker Evans’s pictures and how James Agee deals with the failure of his writing to
capture what the pictures represent: “the difference between language and photography is that writ-
ing can reflect on its own failures, while the camera must be necessarily blind to them” (126).

One aspect of intermediality is that it can be productive with regard to the status of authorial pres-
ence in literature and photography. Literary scholars are accustomed Roland Barthes's notion about
the "death of the author" and following Barthes's argumentation about his/her re-emergence. In On
Writing with Photography Marcy J. Dinius 'examine[s] how and why photography has been understood
to authorize literature and writers form the daguerrean age through the digital age" (2). Dinius ana-
lyzes the writerly anxiety about mass culture by how the author-as-a-fictional-character is repre-
sented in novels. Photography is equated with mass culture's antagonism to complexity, while writing is iden-
tified as a way to hold on to individuality. Brunet makes a similar analysis as he notes "literary 'am-
bivalence' to photography ... for many writers, guarded behavior was guided not only by frustration
with their photographic images but by a more political reaction against the pressure to have their fac-
e in the public eye or the archive; and its main product was the
sur-
emedness
ought to
develop a new skill set. They must learn how to read images
intermediality to go beyond our
clear when compared to other media
are
(38).

[which] is quickly fading into the stuff of history and legend, of popular media and imagination, while
on how photography was also used in the construction of "romantic imagery and narrative lange
[which] is quickly fading into the stuff of history and legend, of popular media and imagination, while
the practices of the local actuality are drawn in lines and grides and written out in deeds and laws"
(38). Photography becomes a language that communicates, persuades and tells stories in ways that
are distinct from other modes of communication. Therefore, it has many functions and they become
clear when compared to other media. This takes us back to the demands of the research project
of intermediality to go beyond our limited knowledge of one medium and it "demand[s] that audiences
develop a new skill set. They must learn how to read images" (Magilow 106), which is a message that
ought to resonate with scholars of literature.

"Our ability to understand images becomes essential as literacy in the study of literature because
"writing with photographs constitutes not a minor subset of literary practice, but [is] rather a founda-
tional aspect of the modern reading experience" (Beckman and Weissberg xiii). Similarly, for writers
themselves the practice of taking photographs becomes a topic for their novels and in more abstract
terms it is seen as "an important stimulus for thought ... a kind of criterion ... and even a powerful
analogy for the process of writing" (Brunet 69). Hence the importance of understanding the connect-
edness of different media in the study, history, and development of literature highlight the value of
Photography and Literature and studies in On Writing with Photography.

Works Cited


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