

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 ought to inquire further than its technological advances or its recognition. Early studies in this respect include the 1929 manifesto and manual *Es kommt der neue Fotograf!* by Werner Gräff 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 Tötösy 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 Coover 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 writing was 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 region as well as 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 engaging in modern identity, 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 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 writing 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 presence 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 daguerreian age through the digital age" (2). Dinius analyzes the writerly anxiety about mass culture by how the author-as-a-fictional-character is represented in novels. Photography is equated with mass culture's antagonism to complexity, while writing is identified as a way to hold on to individuality. Brunet makes a similar analysis as he notes "literary 'ambivalence' 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 faces publicized" (116). Another way to approach authorial presence is to study how photographers themselves become "authors" and this perspective is apparent in Brunet's observation that "the coincidence of the invention of photography ... with this post-Romantic advent of literature as the culturally sanctioned expression of the creative self" (10). The question then becomes how photographers sought to deal and maybe assimilate literature's perceived function as the culmination of expressive individuality. To understand this evolution, we must turn to how the invention of photography was first represented in discourse. In the beginning, photography was mostly contrasted to painting by an "inescapable confrontation of photography's mechanical character to the painter's artistic freedom" (Brunet 7). In the nineteenth century, "photography was usually not considered to have much to do with imagination, let alone the imagination of oneself" (Brunet 88). Change in this conceptualization of photographic practices occurred slowly through the publication of autobiographies (e.g., of photography pioneer Félix Nadar), manuals, and journal articles. Brunet notes that this "new urge to speak and write publicly was motivated by a new awareness of photography as having 'made history' ... but also as having 'become history'" (92). This impulse was still retrospective and did not yet fully articulate the potential of photography as an expressive medium. It was with the advent of "serious" photographers by for example Alfred Stieglitz when "an increasing recognition of the great photographer as an artist endowed with a special visionary talent [which] went hand in hand with the notion that 'great photographs' were symbolic constructs that involved conscious choices and thus called for commentary and narrative" (Brunet 98).

Related to the issue of the representation of the photographer as an authorial presence is the function ascribed to photography. At least at its very beginnings, photography was contrasted with literature and as Brunet shows, photography was often used with the intent of "collecting, classifying and cataloguing" various natural or social phenomena (49). The rise of one of the dominant genres, photo-books, was linked to "utilitarian concerns rather than aesthetic ones. In the nineteenth century, the dominant function of photographic publishing was documentation, whether scientific, historical, or commercial; its main operative mode was the survey or the archive; and its main product was the book or album, often large and expensive" (Brunet 49). They were also the result of collaboration that distances photography from the literary ideal of the solitary author. In contrast to the use of photographs as illustration in scientific books and in publications about discoveries, Coover points out that "photographers emphasize the human relation to landscapes, the aesthetic beauty of views" (37). By placing photography in a configuration of changing ideologies and disciplines, Coover is able to focus on how photography was also used in the construction of "romantic imagery and narrative language [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 foundational 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 connectedness 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*.

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