

The Unseen Photograph in Non-Fiction and Fiction

Astrid Bracke

Radboud University Nijmegen

The photograph was very old. The corners were blunted from having been pasted into an album, the sepia print had faded, and the picture just managed to show two children standing together at the end of a little wooden bridge in a glassed-in conservatory, what was called a Winter Garden in those days. My mother was five at the time, her brother seven.

Roland Barthes. *Camera Lucida*. 67-69.

The Winter Garden photograph, the picture of his mother as a five-year-old girl that Roland Barthes described in his final work, *Camera Lucida* (1980), is no doubt the most famous unseen photograph in photographic discourse. Leaving out pictures is not unusual in photography studies, and Barthes's *Camera Lucida* fits into a long line of works, from Virginia Woolf's *Three Guineas* (1938) to Susan Sontag's extensive work on photography.

The complex dynamics of unseen photographs are not merely limited to non-fiction. Although the role of the medium in novels has been studied in those cases in which photographs *are* part of the narrative, the far more numerous instances of fictional, or purely textual, photographs, are generally left unexplored.

My aim today is to provide a very brief overview, more of a taster really, of the unseen photograph. Beginning with some comments on non-fiction, I'll discuss two novels in more detail, and conclude with some remarks on developing a sustained approach to literature and photography.

THE UNSEEN PHOTOGRAPH IN NON-FICTION

Virginia Woolf's *Three Guineas* famously *does* include photographs, just not the ones that are at the heart of the text: the Spanish Civil war pictures. Peculiarly, those that have been included in most editions of *Three Guineas* since the first, are *not* referred to at all in the text itself.

Even more than Woolf, Susan Sontag continuously urges the reader to look at images with her, both in *On Photography* (1977) and particularly in *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003). In the latter, Sontag engages extensively with her own, and the reader's responses to photographs of war, torture and death. A typical example of such "shared looking" occurs when she mentions images of a Chinese prisoner undergoing "the death by a thousand cuts" in 1910. They are "simply unbearable: the already armless sacrificial victim of several busy knives, in the terminal stage of being flayed ... and still alive in the picture, with a look on his upturned face as ecstatic as that of any Italian Renaissance Saint Sebastian" (88).

Yet why not reproduce these pictures, particularly now that they're so widely available online? In Sontag's case, the risk of colluding in propaganda is not an issue – as it was with Woolf's Spanish Civil War images. Writing in 2003, Sontag observes that “there is a mounting level of acceptable violence and sadism in mass culture” (*Regarding the Pain* 90). Printing pictures of torture and war would be contributing to this as well as lead to the dulling passivity that Sontag believes results from the overkill of shocking imagery (*Regarding the Pain* 90-91).

Yet, this widespread practice among photographic theorists of not printing such photographs obscures what according to James Elkins is at the heart of photography: pain. Photography, he argues, “gives us all kinds of things that we don't want it to give us” (174), including bodily pain (178). Consequently, Elkins prints precisely those images that Sontag viewed, but not reproduced: those of the Chinese prisoner. He includes them because they are both at the extremes and at the heart of photography: “[they] are at one limit of what photography is, at its boundary, and they are also, I think, at the very center of what photography is” (189).

Yet to me, “pain” is too specific, and narrow, a concept to explain the decision made by Woolf, Sontag and Barthes not to include certain images. Barthes' concept of the *punctum* – the “pricking” or “wounding” that happens when the viewer watches these images – is more useful here, since in all its vagueness it is also more expansive. It does not, however, account for the unseen photograph in fiction.

The play of the seen and unseen in non-fiction photography discourse is translated in fiction into the opposition between photography and language. Critics often suggest that language serves to destabilize the authenticity often attributed to photography (Adams), or, conversely, that pictures address the reader in a pre-linguistic way (Mauro). Although much significant work has been done on Victorian literature and photography (Armstrong; Novak), I'll skip ahead to contemporary literature for the sake of time.

Engagements with photography in post-2000 novels reflect two central oppositions in contemporary views on photography: absence and presence, and authenticity and fake. Although these concepts have in some form always been part of photography discourse, their role and significance in contemporary fiction is different, due to developments in photography, as well as its ubiquity and digitalization.

Both Mark Haddon's *The Red House* and Janet Davey's *By Battersea Bridge* were published in 2012 and demonstrate a concern with the unseen photograph on three different levels – none of which corresponds to the *punctum* in non-fiction. The first of these is the *iconic photograph* that exists outside of the text, comparable to the unseen photographs mentioned by Sontag and others. On the second level are *physical photographs* – images that exist and are seen and referred to by

characters in the book, but do not exist outside of it. Finally, the third level consists of *inner photographs*: images based on actual or imagined events which only exist inside the characters' minds.

An iconic photograph appears in *The Red House*, when a child imagines a typically English rainstorm getting completely out of hand: "like in the tsunami, cars and walls and trees pouring down the street, people ripped apart in a great wet grinding machine. And when the dove flew over the land there would have been bodies everywhere all bloated and black like in New Orleans" (176). The boy was neither present at the 2004 tsunami, nor witnessed the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2005 firsthand, but knows – and describes – these events in terms of the images he's seen of them. Such visual intertextuality provides, and presupposed, a cultural and historical context. This shared cultural context is vital in the recognition and use of iconic photographs as unseen photographs in texts: for instance, seeing certain images "with" Sontag, as she repeatedly urges the reader to do, only works if he or she is familiar with them. Similarly, understanding the scene imagined in *The Red House* is only possible if the reader shares the cultural and historical context, and has seen the same kinds of images of the tsunami and New Orleans after Katrina.

The opposition between *absence* and *presence* is explored primarily in both novels through *physical* photographs and *mental* photographs. This dialectic is embodied by the popularity of Photoshop, which suggests both a presence – in terms of the final product – but also entails an absence, in terms of the original photograph. When in *The Red House* one of the family members isn't present when a family picture is taken, the girl's uncle suggest that's no problem: "*Alex can Photoshop her in later. Little square in the top right hand corner. Which was good, thought Alex, because then he would have to take a picture of her on her own and you couldn't wank over a photo that contained your parents*" (97). This scene illustrates precisely the ambiguity surrounding contemporary ideas on photography: a family photograph is taken to remember the weekend, yet it doesn't matter that not the entire family was present – as long as it *looks* like everyone was present.

This dialectic is taken an absurd extent in *By Battersea Bridge*, in which the protagonist – Anita – takes on a job to photograph Bulgarian homes for a real estate website. Yet she leaves Bulgaria before taking a single shot, and ends up taking pictures of properties in the Lea Valley: "The chance of coming across a house that would look at home in Dobrich was small but maybe, between the trees, in the right sort of light" (112). Feeling like a fraud, she tries to reassure herself by thinking of practices in contemporary cinema: "She clung to the thought that the Illyrian coast where Gwyneth Paltrow was washed up at the end of *Shakespeare in Love* had been Holkham beach in Norfolk. It was a question of imagination and keeping an open mind" (116). Drawing the comparison with Hollywood film illustrates again the contemporary expectance that presentations of reality are

altered, combined with the desire to believe that it's the truth. In other words, we *want* but don't *need* a scene to be authentic.

In fact, we seem to expect some sort of retouching – faking – for an image to be real. Paul Hansen's "Gaza Burial" – winner of the 2013 World Press Photo – was said to be a composite of three different photographs. Both World Press Photo and Hansen released statements, the first suggesting that the image complies with the organization's guidelines which state that "Only retouching which conforms to the currently accepted standards in the industry is allowed" (qtd on Huffington Post), which allows for a fair share of Photoshopping. Hansen himself said: "I developed the raw file with different density to use the natural light instead of dodging and burning. In effect to recreate what the eye sees and get a larger dynamic range". By resolving the discrepancy between what the eye sees and what the camera records, Hansen suggests that he made the picture "more real".

The veracity accorded by photographs is explored particularly poignantly in *The Red House*, in which one of the characters thinks of a certain photo album: "She thought of all those pictures of Karen. Two years old, playing with wooden blocks on a sheepskin rug. Nine years old, in front of a rainbow-coloured windbreak. Fourteen years old, in a green duffel coat at some steam fair" (57). Yet the album never existed, and the child Angela thinks of was stillborn years before. But the presence of the photographs, if only in her mind, briefly obliterates the absence of the stillborn child itself.

This very brief discussion just scratches the surface of the role photography plays in these novels and contemporary fiction in general. A sustained exploration of this topic would need to be two-fold and examine both the role of photography in the work as well as the effect on the narrative itself. Particularly this second aspect has not been explored in contemporary scholarship, besides the occasional comment on the discovery of a photograph accelerating the narrative's pace. A key issue here is the oft-noted relationship between photography and language. Barthes, for instance, suggested that the *punctum* is so powerful, yet enigmatic, that it cannot be captured in language – in fact, it is *beyond* language.

A *seen* photograph, then, destabilizes the narrative, and opens it up to possibilities beyond the book itself. Given our extremely visual culture, images carry much more weight and credibility than words – after all, a picture is said to say more than a thousand words. As such a *seen* photograph also undermines the language of the narrative. An *unseen* photograph, on the other hand, lends some of the veracity and proof of the photograph to the linguistic narrative itself. By merely describing or referring to the photograph, the threat of the image itself is contained, while the possibilities and connotations of contemporary photography can still be explored.

This is exactly what happens in *The Red House* and *By Battersea Bridge*: they explore and use photography, while undermining and containing it. Hence, much more than the *seen* photograph, the

unseen photograph in fiction engages with the functions of contemporary photography – and the future of the novel.