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Francois Brunet, *Photography and Literature*,
London, Reaktion Books, 2009

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Francois Brunet, *Photography and Literature*, London, Reaktion Books, 2009

Alan Trachtenberg

- 1 There is much to praise in François Brunet's recent book, *Photography and Literature*, not least being the intellectual courage and verve of the undertaking itself. It's a daring book. The topic, immense and inchoate, at once invites and defies investigation. As Brunet notes at the outset, "the history of photographic involvements with literature remains a shadowy and fragmented subject." (8). After Brunet's thoughtful and provocative study, the subject is notably less daunting. He meets the historical and definitional challenges with striking poise and impressive erudition in both literary and photographic history. And the book's grounding in semiotics is evident throughout; it is a kind of homage to Roland Barthes, who Brunet sees as the founder of the modern tradition of critical thinking about photography; in *Camera Lucida* (1980), Barthes gives definitive shape to the "literary discovery of photography" that had begun about a century earlier in important reflections on the medium by the likes of Edgar Allan Poe, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Lady Eastlake, and Paul Valéry. A work of "serious writing," elegant, self-confident, richly allusive, *Camera Lucida* itself takes its place for Brunet as exemplary of the very tradition it reflects upon.
- 2 Something similar can be said about Brunet's book, that it is not only about its declared subject but also a significant contribution to the subject it studies, the "interaction" between photography and literature. Brunet remarks that while the interactions discussed in the book are predominantly from the literary point of view, he wishes to change the order of precedence. In his title "photography" comes first. After a chapter on "The Literature of Photography," the book concludes with "The Photography of Literature." Brunet tells a somewhat teleological history: in the beginning, photography was etymologically understood as "sun-painting," then, "more recently" (7), it became "light writing," no longer derisively compared to painting but more akin to writing, to literature, which itself had risen in cultural prestige since Romanticism to its high

position as the heart and nerve-center of modern culture. Brunet constructs his story as an on-going process: photography frees itself from painting, aligns itself with writing, and then, in the current condition of “interaction,” arrives at a hybrid state between the visual and the written, now charged with the mission “to image literature” (12). Hence the telos: the author describes his work as “a history of an emergent meeting between photography and literature” (9).

- 3 Subtle and complex, the argument has its problems; it’s not always persuasive, perhaps a bit too neat. But it is always at least on the edge of something important and often enough, distinctly original and cogent. The book has the imprimatur of a series of relatively brief books on photography in relation to something else—“photography and science,” “photography and cinema,” and so on. The “and” foregrounds the definitional problem by asking what photography is in light of something else. Brunet holds consistently to the elusive idea of photography as a discursive concept, whereby ontology—what it *is*—is revealed as a historical question: “what it is” translates as “how it is understood” at particular junctures. Brunet is superb and often brilliant in his readings of key discourses such as Arago’s address before the French assembly in 1839 and the articles by Holmes on the stereograph. He takes photography as a subject within the history of consciousness, as a set of practices entangled with neighboring discourses such as science, art, and literature. Emphasis on the conceptual and the relational distinguishes *Photography and Literature* from conventional empiricist histories, which generally misunderstand historicism as empiricism couched in the rhetoric of contemporary correctness. Brunet writes as an intellectual and cultural historian for whom photography as concept is prior and fundamental to its chemical and optical processes whose material outcome both fits and revises concepts of “picture.” Which is to say that the idea of photography is often indistinguishable from ideology. Its proper locus is thus the history of consciousness, as Brunet seems to know quite well. The book’s choicest sections are its often dazzling readings of written descriptions of the medium, particularly in the nineteenth century when all was still fresh and startling. How was the visual product of the medium to be understood? Was it something visual pure and simple, like painting or drawing—as suggested by the suffix “grapheis”—or, taking another cue from the same suffix, as a new kind of writing, which Lady Eastlake famously claimed in her astonishing essay of 1857? Brunet makes a great deal out of the fact that “photography” appeared first as a written idea before it became visible as actual pictures; it *began* as words, a verbal not a visual phenomenon. Brunet calls this “the written condition of the invention of photography” (13).
- 4 One wonders how it might have been otherwise. Even if technical means existed to broadcast the news of the invention (or was it a *discovery*?) visually, is visual experience ever entirely free of words? As soon as someone asks what it is and where it comes from, narrative enters the discourse, and with narrative comes an idea of the literary. That photography was born into language is key to Brunet’s argument, and while the proposition may seem self-evident, Brunet develops its implications beyond the obvious into a subtle and far-reaching interrogation. The book asks how visual and verbal, the visible and the legible, stand toward each other within changing cultural and technological conditions of modernity.
- 5 An inevitable question of definition hangs over the book. It is clear that throughout its history, photography (whether this signifies light picture or light writing) has been defined mainly as an adjunct of something else, as if its strictly visual character could not

stand on its own. Apparently absent from the picture itself, the camera has a paradoxical relation to the photographic picture: its invisibility or apparent absence actually represents its unique presence, its “having been there” (in Barthes’s famous mantra) at the scene of what is pictured. The notion itself of *picturing* may well be a product of photography, which Talbot defined as the means whereby nature *pictured itself*. In one light the book can be taken as a history of changing definitions or discursive understandings of the medium, from sun painting to light writing to one or another hybrid form such as photo-text. As for discursive meanings of literature, it is often unclear whether what is meant is everything expressed in words, or only those written expressions that fall into recognizable literary genres such as biography and narrative. Brunet asks at one point, “Literature, or the realm of the written?”⁽⁷⁾ More consistent reference to writing as a “realm” that includes non-literary alongside literary verbalizations might have dispelled occasionally distracting ambiguity. Brunet seems to have in mind an inclusive notion that anything expressed in words counts as literature, but at the same time he evokes “the literary” as a separate privileged domain within the “realm of the written.” Photography has wanted the prestige, but it also has wanted the understanding of itself as a kind of writing. But what kind of writing is it or can it be? Do its images work as communications by means of syntax and grammar? Barthes already settled this issue, but Brunet still slips into speaking of the “interplay of light and shadow as the constituent language of photography” (40). Can photography be truly a language or only figuratively so? Shadows and light are visual terms, not linguistic. What can we mean when we say that photography is “light writing”—or, as Brunet remarks at one point, that it has ‘turned into’ literature?

- 6 Which brings us, from the point of view of rhetoric and of syntax, to the key terms themselves, photography and literature. Can we really say that “photography” *wants* anything, as if it were a person? Throughout Brunet speaks of photography and literature as if they were human agents in a kind of Hegelian discourse. But the discourse of the book is obviously historical and historicist. We have to take the anthropomorphic uses of the central terms more as habit of speech than propositional. Nevertheless, by setting up his argument as a relation between seemingly polar opposites, then revealing them to be (or to have become) one and the same (perhaps), Brunet creates certain problems for himself. Echoing Kracauer, he speaks of “affinity” between photography and writing. Does this refer to perception or to objective fact? Brunet has gathered abundant historical evidence of *perceptions* of affinity, bringing together for the first time, I believe, in a single coherent argument, dozens of writers from Poe to Sebald and major photographers like Alfred Stieglitz, Edward Weston, Walker Evans, Brassai, and Robert Frank. The question remains hanging of whether the sense of affinity matches anything we can say is objectively the case. Is the sequence of perceptions from sun-painting to light writing to photo-text an unfolding of traits innate to the medium, or, more likely, a record of changing consciousness? If the latter, what accounts for it? It is clear that the author is enough of a historicist to eschew the “unfolding” thesis, but how can we otherwise explain photography’s having seemed to “turn into” literature?
- 7 We might respond by asking, on Brunet’s own evidence, what was photography from the start but an analogue and an adjunct to writing, adjunct in the sense of always implying an accompanying text (call it a caption). To say that photographs invite writing is not to say that any single text will suffice as an exclusively true text—in fact, an unlimited multiplicity of possible texts calls into question the notion of any single sayable truth

inherent in the photograph. Henry Fox Talbot, one of the heroes (along with Barthes) of the book knew this well and embodied the insight in the ambiguities of his title, the *pencil* (writing or drawing or printing?) of nature. Talbot recognized at the birth of the medium that “book” was one of its destinies, perhaps the major destiny of the photograph, and the photographer thereby destined to emerge as author. And indeed, as Brunet makes beautifully clear in his important chapter on “Photography and the Book,” from its beginning the discourse of the photograph included “book” in ways explicit—books as props in portraits, portrait albums—and implicit. Brunet refers to signs of this symbiosis of the image and book as “symptoms of photography’s original subjection to ‘literature’ or written culture, and the redefinition of photography as art construed as evidence of ‘the library’ realigning itself with ‘the museum’” (35)—the photograph, in other words, as the site of a rapprochement of word and image. Talbot’s invention occurred at the same moment as Daguerre’s; Brunet makes the shrewd observation that the daguerreotype “popularized [...] taste for the picture as self-contained object and semi-autonomous spectacle,” establishing “photography as a technology of imaging” rather than of printing as in Talbot’s process (38).

- 8 This *aperçu* typifies what is most remarkable and praiseworthy in Brunet’s book, his keen eye for material embodiments of cultural discourse, in this case the tense balance between “visuality” (a necessary solecism, unfortunately) and literacy as twin competencies in modern life. His chapter on the book is an excellent example; starting with the simple fact that book and photograph at first seemed an impossible marriage except by extraneous addition (or tipping in) of chemically-produced photographs, which alters the idea of book as something wholly printed and creates a mongrel form. Rapport between photograph and book was first achieved when Talbot overcame the paradox of the oxymoron by imagining a book on the model of an artist’s sketchbook, and added the invention of photographer as author to his credit. Daguerre, ever the showman, created the photographer as impresario of a revised kind of spectacle, hand-held and portable. Talbot’s urge was to make his photographs legible, and this required that he write a book that would show and tell at once.
- 9 Another key event at the dawn of photography was the self-portrait of Bayard in which he performs his own death. Theatricality, Brunet argues, has been a different literary mode appropriated by photographers, from Bayard to Cindy Sherman and beyond. It is a bit odd that advertising and fashion photography, in which undisguised make-believe rules the game, is absent from the book. A current rippling through Brunet’s book concerns an additional tantalizing paradox: the medium that earned its status as art for its apparent truth-telling turns out to have been telling lies all along. Fiction presides at the birth of the medium, explicitly thanks to Bayard’s odd self-pitying impulses, but also implicitly in various ways throughout its history: books, paintings, statues as props in studio portraits, signs of apparatus of self-fashioning in commercial portraits, staging of scenes including dragging corpses from place to place in American Civil War battlefield scenes, Walker Evans moving furniture (maybe!) to improve the view in sharecroppers’ shacks, and so on and on. Here, in the propensity for fiction of even the most stalwart “documentary” of photographers, may lie a revealing explanation for the present *literary* prestige of the newly hybrid medium. However ironic, the great medium of validation of the real may now, especially in its digital mode, have turned into an equally great instrument of skepticism, undercutting the “truth” of appearances and affirming the contingency of “the real.” Perhaps this is the photography our age needs most, a

photography that tells the truth by denying truth any fixed, unchanging form. Brunet's compelling book puts such challenging thoughts into motion, a handsome and significant achievement.

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Thèmes : Comptes rendus

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