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## A Message Without a Code?

### Abstract

The photographic paradox is said to be that of a message without a code, a communication lacking a relay or gap essential to the process of communication. Tracing the recurrence of Barthes's definition in the essays included in *Image/Music/Text* and in *La Chambre claire*, this paper argues that Barthes's definition is platonic in its will to dematerialize the troubling – graphic – immediacy of the photograph. He writes of the image in order to flee its signature. As a function of media, his categories are written in order to be insufficient and inadequate; to maintain an ineluctable difference between language heard and letters seen; to protect an idiom of loss which the photograph disallows. The article studies the strategies of his definition in «The Photographic Paradox» as instrument of abstraction, opposes the notion of code, in an aural sense, to audio-visual markers of closed relay in advertising, and critiques the layout and order of *La Chambre claire* in respect to Barthes's ideology of absence.

### Keywords

message without a code, photography, Barthe, Image/Music/Text, La Chambre claire, dematerialization, media, audio-visual markers, abstraction, ideology of absence

## A MESSAGE WITHOUT A CODE?

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Barthes's essays on the photographic message and the rhetoric of the image resurfaced in America in 1977, in the collection of translations by Stephen Heath entitled *Image/Music/Text*. They show us how powerful linguistic theory can be when mapped onto the organs of major media. Barthes had long ago specified how rhetorical strategies of advertising naturalize objects, how they charge things with symbolic meaning and motivate them as an absence a buying public must fill—desperately—in primal scenes of purchase. As early as the publication of *Mythologies* in 1957, Barthes concludes that if publicity could eroticize everyday life with a death drive, it would force masses to consume endlessly. Along with Sartre, Barthes was one of very few intellectuals lucid enough to locate the nauseating mimesis we live when we buy collective pictures of ourselves in magazines. In jubilant moments we might call that identification an element of communication. But after reading Barthes, we see them more generally as purveying narcissism.

Long before Wilson Key's studies of advertising—studies that generally promote the modes of media exploitation in their very manner of critique, Barthes provides a sound theory for their decipherment. Yet one of his definitions remains so problematic that it can be seen less as a form of truth, a conclusion, or a code to be withdrawn from *Image/Music/Text* than an effect of his *effect*, that is, of gloss and sepia at the center of all his writing. We must ascertain exactly where the photograph encloses itself viciously in the circularity of the media he sets out to categorize. It occludes us from the clear timber of the Racinean voice that seems to motivate the *Mythologies* and contributions to *Communication*. Nowhere does Barthes better accede to the platitude of violence than in his

definition of the photograph as a message without a code.

*Message without a code* defines the media in their own tradition of the slogan. For while Barthes tenders the definition at the onset of «The Photographic Message» to determine later that no photograph of that sort can exist, the initial description remains pure, ideal, of another world. *If only* the photograph were a message without a code; without relay, the photograph would conflate all difference in exact duplication of the world. Yet, since no picture can copyright its image either so perfectly, or naively as in its own impossibility, the pictorial slogan assumes that perfection. So, like a self-enclosing figure that turns about and within itself in a circular symmetry, the definition incites the reader to throw it away...and buy another. A fabulous alterity that categorizes what the photograph can never be—that is, a mechanism devoid of relay—supplants the image to become, by definition, an image—or definition—of itself.

In the case of a newspaper title, we recall that the headline serves to provoke the eye, to tell of things catastrophically violent in their purity. Mythic thought at its best, or ideology, the headline or lead photo is the soul of a newspaper, while the text is its body. The higher the case or the greater the point size, the more potent the dose of truth. In the caption this will to apocalypse generates the vicious turbulence of circularity by evoking a pristine state that would allow no caudal difference. Alterity and platitude arouse the reader who sees either the image or the text (or both) in a unity that displaces their difference. For if a code can, on occasion, represent a syntactical gap, it is more generally an erotic delay. A strand of hair, a stain, a mole, a nipple, a bulge, a rift, a crease, a line between cloth and flesh, a printed mark, a displaced letter, a code always enframes itself. Without a mark, the slogan or caption marks a non-mark; that is, it persists in placing an absence within a marker that had displaced itself in the act of marking. A codeless message would be a borderless, frameless photograph. In effect the only analogy to Barthes's might be in the acronym *Kodak*, the trade-mark George Eastman coined to naturalize the photographic apparatus at the moment of its birth in mass production. A palinym of sorts, we see in *Kodak* a *code* that sets the clicking noise—in the grapheme *-ak*—of its own cliché in the final syllable; the word all but closes upon itself to play in its own symmetry. *Kodak* encodes the messages of itself in the uncanny border of *K*, holding the sound of its message in its shape. The fabulous con-

tinuum of symmetry and sound contains its relay so as to have the allure of Barthes's ideal photograph. (By way of Eros, the definition would be as desirable as the Zambinella, the non-coded figure who captures the imagination of Sarrasine, Balzac and the voice of S/Z. It is the object of a desire, both of a time past and of a signless era literally out of this world.)

If a «message without a code» is a slogan, it is a sign pointing to its own history. However much the definition would historicize what doxa accepts as a natural explanation, its power as a category also serves as an unquestioned nature—a nature of the definition, its *definicity*—in its formulation. Barthes allows for a residue of nature to shine through his meditation in the Platonic will to elaborate an ideally high logical type. The slogan can be located in any economic history of discourse. Adages are part of a program to reform the middle class through appeal to moralia and popular culture. Or, as Max Weber notes on the economy of the proverb and maxim in the *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (tr. Talcott Parsons, New York: Scribner's, 1958, pp. 50-51), the parsimonious use of language is at the basis of the spirit of reform. This is no less true for Barthes than for Benjamin Franklin, except insofar as with the inflection of theory in «Rhetoric of the Image,» Barthes's will to define and classify cannibalizes its own process, hallucinating and freezing linguistic categories in a photographic discourse. Through the critic's own need to define a concept in the shape of an item of media, we visualize the history of the maxim in the economy of capital. He turns it back against those who—pedagogues like himself—are forced to proffer definitions.

The movement of the «Rhetoric of the Image» betrays the paradox on which Barthes places his definition of the photograph. It begins at the copy desk of the tabloid, in rooms we remember through the past Garcin flashes back in *Huis clos*. The press photograph, Barthes writes, can be studied according to the complexity of a text which is both image—line, shading, color—and word. A captioned icon, Barthes's definition is produced in an environment more pristine than that where men, shirt sleeves rolled up to their elbows and ties loosened, hustle around light tables in air savory of cigar fumes and fresh ink. «The source of emission is the staff of the newspaper, the group of technicians certain of whom take the photo, some of whom choose, compose and treat it, while others, finally, give it a title, a caption and commentary» (*I/M/T*, p. 15). As the preceding sentence indicates, the production

of the image obeys the laws of linguistics that concern a sender, a message and a receiver. The mythic copy office of Gotham recounted in so many novels and films of the 1930's and 40's is left aside. «The press photograph is a message. Considered overall this message is formed by a source of emission a channel of transmission and a point of reception» (p. 15). It is transferred from the newspaper staff to its photographers and technicians; it goes to the newspaper itself and finally is imposed upon the public. Sociology, he writes, can study emission and reception, but the reader alone deals with the message in all its plasticity.

The pivotal moment in his analysis depends on those who *treat* the photograph. The reader is led to believe that in the offices treatment might refer to *development*, that is to say, to the translation from one form to another that Barthes defines as *relay* or code, as if from the pellicle to sensitive paper in a dish of liquid, we too, were dipped into a «lustral bath of innocence.» «In order to move from the reality to its photograph, it is in no way necessary to divide up this reality into units and to constitute those units as signs, substantially different from the object they communicate. There is no necessity to set up a relay, that is to say a code, between the object and its image» (*I/M/T*, p. 17). The photograph is apprehended not only by features inherent to itself—for it seems to have no code of its own—but along the same divisions of labor that are demarcated in the text.

In the same essay all types of categories which determine the photographic qualities of the realist style are drawn before us. Nowhere does the job of retouching enter the scene. Keen to the mode that selects one shot from a pile in order to motivate, naturalize, or even establish an «event» by the theatrical coding of the image, Barthes does not address much attention to scumbling in the preparation of the message. Is it because through a liminary relation with printed words the choice of image and selection of meaning provide enough to show us how the photograph is coded? That a pure photograph is violent enough not to be remarked? Perhaps only a work of art can be uncoded in its opacity or alterity before language.

When Barthes does not deal with the retouching of the images (as Key and others have done)—or when he determines how its incredible naturalizing power is omniscient, he argues for an absence and an irretrievability of experience. It may be that this privilege of loss in the text foretells why, on the one hand, his last work will be

on death, photography, and the loss of his mother or, on the other, why, soon after completing the formalist essays on the image, he turns to a vocabulary of desire to supplant that of the rhetoric of the image.

Readers of popular magazines have witnessed how photographs are always retouched to lend an effect of their context. They are air brushed to denote the dialectics of their message in brutally verbal terms. Pictures of bodies in magazines are incised with scrawls of graffiti, skulls, crossbones, vulva, hard-ons, draculean scars. Charming models become obelisks for hieroglyphs. On the cover of *Vogue*, Cheryl Tiegs is underwritten with figures of cunts, tits, dildoes and cocks. These are denotative versions of the gloss and varnish Barthes had specified as the ideology of photographic cooking in *Mythologies*. They seize the eye and momentarily murder it exactly in the way an overlay of lacquer petrifies the product it covers. Death is marked in the shapes of bubbles, froth, sparkles of light and irruptions of shadow, or in single letters heralding the profane words a reader associates with every grapheme of the alphabet. The same signs proliferate all over the surface of the page, where the text is eroticized to project in columns and tabloid format the messages that *are* the scars pasted on the images. Like writers of literature, as Barthes has shown in his comment on redundancy and cacography in *S/Z*, they overload their texts with the same signs when an imperative command must place a double bind on the spectator. The difference is that before an ideology of communication, the best writers interfere with their messages so carefully that literally nothing comes across the writing except its opaque immediacy which disallows any dialectic to emerge from the abstractions of letters. They denote loss in the loss that is written elsewhere into advertising in terms of erasive denotation. An example or two: *Vantage* cigarettes display a target on their package; the captain denotes «low tar» such that the sign of a minimum of nicotine anticipates a maximum by the allusive, unnamed *target* that impels the viewer to *get tar*. Or the case of *Barclay*, a new brand which announces that «Barclay is back,» carries a slogan depending for its effect of old age on a displaced L: written in white over a black background, the statement barks that it is *b(l)ack*, that is a harbinger of death and cancer. Or *Booth's* gin projects the pleasure of a couple holding drinks and fondling their boots, awaiting the marks left by the leather heels which will embody more than the effect of a martini.

That is why Barthes appears to incite us at the sight of his own slogans. He writes away from «message without a code» when he insists on asyndeton as the *modus vivendi* of publicity. That agrammatical space, a non-site, would seem to argue for the absence of the mark, for a felicitously optimal moment of play. That is, however, only a space of reversal, where his lure of a pristine locus can only be maculated by further commentary—or a shift in register, the very shift so many readers find in the history of his move from semiotics to desire in 1970. Nowhere is the problem borne out better than where Barthes almost vilipends his former definition in *La Chambre claire*. «Les réalistes, dont je suis, et dont j'étais déjà lorsque j'affirmais que la photographie était un message sans code—même si, c'est évident, des codes ne viennent en infléchir la lecture—ne prennent pas du tout la photo pour une 'copie' du réel—mais pour une émanation du *réel passé*: une *magie*, non un art. Se demander si la photographie est analogique ou codée n'est pas une bonne voie d'analyse. L'important, c'est que la photo possède une force constative, et que le constatif de la photographie porte, non sur l'objet, mais sur le temps» (*La Chambre claire*, 138-39). («Realists—among whom I count and have counted when I affirmed that photography was a message without a code—even if, clearly, codes do not happen to inflect the reading—never take the photo for a 'copy' of the real—but for an emanation of the *real past*: a magic, not an art. To wonder if photography is analogical or coded is not a good path of analysis. It is important that the photo stick to a declarative force, and that the photographic declarative bear not on the object but on time.») Barthes confesses that he has always insisted that the *réel* of realists—like Godard, Bazin, Rossellini—has little to do with a reality we are told to mime. The urge to reproduce it would aver as a sign of naturalizing its history. Thus as a theological reading of the *réel*, the passage in *La Chambre claire* heightens the former definition at the very moment it alters its formulation. The code in question would have been the objects of the world of other times, but which are real only when passed through the code of time. So Barthes transfers the (desired) codelessness or acaudality into temporality of eternity. In the posthumous text he retrieves the semiotic gesture of his past and projects it through the premonition of his own death that dominates every page of the book. Photographing his past and attaching himself to a series of news-item clichés at the very moment he calls up the image of his mother in a *Jardin d'hiver*, Barthes



reincarnates the mode of death that he had left in a figurative absence in the earlier writing.

Few texts are so morbid as *La Chambre claire*. Even Mark Rothko's last paintings, grandiose essays in the field of black marked by white borders, do not carry signs of impending death with the lucidity of these notes. When he adds, «car jusqu'à ce jour, aucune représentation ne pouvait m'assurer du passé de la chose, sinon par des relais; mais avec la Photographie, ma certitude est immédiate» (*La Chambre claire*, 177) («for until now, no representation could have assured me of the past of things, except by way of relay; but with Photography, my certitude is immediate»), he calmly looks over his past and builds a codeless profile of image of himself, as he had done in his pictorial autobiography. Evidence discloses that he wills to be done with every relay, every code. He wants to identify with Alexander Gardner's picture of the handcuffed Lewis Payne who awaits his death. And by virtue of a miniscule relay, he turns the *he* into an *I* in writing, «Il est mort et il va mourir» («He is dead and he is going to die»). The text decodes the death of the author, forcing us to imagine that Barthes's demise was part of the scenario that wrote *La Chambre claire*. Hence, like a photographic album, a book of platitudes, he writes new slogans that somehow never cut trenchantly as meditations. They must remove all dialectical residue from death, and in doing so they must divest it of sacrifice.

This is tantamount to writing codelessly. Opposition of *studium* to *punctum* is written to open a personalized abyss in the gallery of photographs, to happen upon details that seize without seizing, to discover signs that divert the photo from apprehending its message (the rotten teeth of the child in little Italy, on p. 70, rather than an anticipation of Eddie Adams' photograph of Nguyen Ngoc Loan's routine murder in Saigon that inspired a film as routine as *The Deerhunter*; the Danton collar a mongoloid child sports in a lurid profile of human monstrosity, p. 83; the «degree of opening» or «destiny of abandon» in the stretched arm of a Mapplethorpe photo, not the cropping that slices the right eye in two, nor the indication of the left finger which aims back to the edge cutting the breast and sternum in a flaccid portrait of delight, centered only on a sexual indeterminacy of the armpit or cavity of the collarbone in whose shadow is sketched a vulva, p. 95, or shots that either Barthes or the editors took care to present as thoroughly coded samples when they floated captions below to «quicken» their seizure.) The immediate shock of the photographic images Barthes

chooses is lengthened by means of the aestheticizing discourse.

Everywhere the definition is betrayed. When commentary is added to assuage their violence, the photographs are overcoded. This is confirmed in the center of the text where Barthes encrypts his mother, in allusion to the photo in the winter garden when he finds the picture that catalyzes his own death. *Je résolvais ainsi, à ma manière, ma mort*. A bogus picture Barthes «cannot show..., nothing more than an indifferent photo, one of a thousand manifestations of something whatever» (p. 115), it wounds only the author and leaves sign of the only «natural» movement through the medium. While the text arranges the irreplaceable urgency of the grandiose scene, welling up Proustian reminiscences in the most potent fashion, it displays Nadar's photo of either his mother or his wife (p. 108). «Degraded» by Nadar's artistic copy, the irreplaceable scene finds itself recoded through implicit reference to Proust and Nadar. All the contrition of the movement emerges as a variation on the unliveable, on the very deathly history of an individual who, like Albertine, had to be mummified in life, left in a dark room in order for the author's sentiment to be deposited in the center of his book. A remake of the narrator's privileged view of the Vinteuil daughter spitting on the photographic memory of her father, the evocation of the scene in the *Jardin d'Hiver* makes room for its own mode of vacuity.

Barthes writes that his mother's goodness «was precisely out of play (*hors-jeu*), she never belonged to any system» (p. 107). Was she not a message without a code? Or the instance that provokes Barthes's sense of universal guilt, in effect, at the thought of the photographic visibility of language? For already in the autobiography he had aroused our sympathies in confessing that he had the ill fate of seeing language. Like his universal *langue* of invisibility, Barthes's mother serves to incite us by virtue of the example he makes of her. A symmetrical absence, an impossible beauty in the taxidermic mode of *La Chambre claire*, she carries in her non-image our collective fantasm to be fixed in an image. But not quite, for Barthes seeks the indifference of the photograph in the semiotic terms he had frankly abandoned. She was outside of all systems, she could not be classified, etc. She can be described only in an infinite series of adjectives; the photo was, as Godard could never have it, both *une image juste* and *juste une image*, both *Mère* and *mère*, the «nature of a verb lacking an infinitive.» Too much to be seen, she comes off as the visible voice of the text, hence the

mark of its living death.

She embodies what he later calls the *Peu d'image* of reading, a Sartrean transparency—or lack of relay, a non-poetic clarity—that allows the eye to cross the threshold of ideas, to seize truth in death. All the contingent images he erects around her, many of which are gathered from Beaumont Newhall's *History of Photography*, furnish the opaque border of the self-portrait that puts her at the vanishing point. Sightless discourse, the word beyond the last work, she betrays the *Tout-Image* of photography, where the clutter of things never allows language to mediate the absence of distance between the viewer and the picture. Unlike the rampant codes of photography, her image, similar to a picture we see ourselves «cherishing,» serves to draw us back into the world of relay: in effect, to look with derision at the innocuous portraits of family and children that garnish our offices, television consoles, mantelpieces and living rooms.