2: This Thing in the Text: Photography, Thing Theory, and the Return to Realism in Literature

Talkative things instantiate novel, previously unthinkable combinations. Their thingness lends vivacity and reality to new constellations of experience that break the old molds.

—Lorraine Daston, *Things That Talk*

Thing Theory: On Humble Objects and Wild Things

THINGS ARE A TIME-HONORED INTEREST of Western culture and its philosophical, historical, and social debate—from the Kantian/transcendental "Ding an sich" and its repercussions in the works of Nietzsche, Adorno, and Heidegger, to Michel Foucault's poststructuralist critique in *Les mots et les choses* (1966) or the postmodern sociology of Jean Baudrillard in *Le système des objets* (1968). In more recent years, things have triumphantly reemerged in the wider field of cultural studies. The angles and disciplines from which scholars tackle the phenomenon are manifold. Anthropology, the field traditionally associated with material culture studies, has seen publications such as Daniel Miller's (2005) *Materiality*, which replenished the discipline's well-established discussion of "the social life of things" (Appadurai 1986). Other productive areas of research are found, for example, in the history of science, with Lorraine Daston's (2004) *Things That Talk*. Gathering "object lessons from art and science," Daston proposes a "thinking *with* things," instead of a mere thinking *about* things (20; emphasis added). Peter Schwenger's (2006) *The Tears of Things: Melancholy and Physical Objects* examines the (often elegiac) shortfall of artistic representation—in literature or the visual arts—vis-à-vis the object world. Equally concerned with the incommensurability and disorder of things in a representational/medial context is, for instance, Gisela Ecker, Claudia Breger, and Susanne Scholz's (2002) *Dinge—Medien der Aneignung, Grenzen der Verfügung*.

This critical trend to review the ontological status, cultural significance, and medial representation of things has also reached the realm of image studies. The question is dealt with, for example, in W. J. T. Mitchell's (2005) study *What Do Pictures Want?: The Lives and Loves of Images*, which asks whether the "eruption" of material culture studies in recent years might in fact be "a compensatory move for the sense of derealization produced by cyberspace and virtual reality," if not a "nostalgic gesture" (111). Concentrating specifically on photographic images, Elizabeth Edwards and Janice Hart have edited a collection of essays on *Photographs Objects Histories: On the Materiality of Images* (2004b). In contrast to studies on the fate of things *in* photographs, they suggest a reading of photographs *as* things. Similar to Mitchell, who holds that "there are no images without objects (as material support or referential target)" (2005, 108), Edwards and Hart insist on the materiality of photographs and criticize the common privileging of image content over image matter.

The contributions by Mitchell and by Edwards and Hart will be discussed in more detail below. At this point, however, I would like to take a step back and approach the discussion of photography and things and photography-as-thing from a more inclusive refocusing on the object world in current scholarship, as represented by the cultural and literary critic Bill Brown. One of the most prominent exponents of thing theory, Brown has given the field particular momentum with the collection *Things* (2004), a publication based on his editorship of a 2001 special issue of *Critical Inquiry*. Brown's introductory essay under the title "Thing Theory" is an illuminating investigation into the nature of things and their scholarly assessment. Interestingly, though, the author warns from the start that things can be stubbornly resistant to theory, defying unifying discourses and rationalizing master narratives:

> Is there something perverse, if not archly insistent, about complicating things with theory? . . . Why not let things alone? Let them rest somewhere else—in the balmy elsewhere beyond theory. From there, they might offer us dry ground above those swirling accounts of the subject, some place of origin unmediated by the sign, some stable alternative to the instabilities and uncertainties, the ambiguities and anxieties, forever fetishized by theory. (1)

The term "thing" itself, Brown notes, challenges with its "specific unspecificity" (3), oscillating as it does between crude materiality and ephem-

eral generalities: pointing to an in-between conception of "liminality," things can be said to "hover over the threshold between the nameable and the unnameable, the figurable and unfigurable, the identifiable and unidentifiable" (5). Hence Brown's ideas about things promise less of a grand theoretical superstructure than an open framework for a notoriously elusive phenomenon. Rather than roping in its volatile subject, Brown's thing theory rests precisely on the assumption that things are "objects' others," that they cannot be objectified—or mistaken as objects, for that matter.

Brown maintains an opposition between things and objects. Things precede and exceed objects, and objects are what the human intellect makes of things. Daily life, it is argued, is replete with objects, in the sense that human beings perceive of the latter as legible and intelligible "codes"—while things, in contrast, seem scarce and marginal:

> As they circulate through our lives, we look *through* objects (to see what they disclose about history, society, nature, or culture—above all, what they disclose about us), but we only catch a glimpse of things. We look through objects because they are codes by which our interpretative attention makes them meaningful, because there is a discourse of objectivity that allows us to use them as facts. A *thing*, in contrast, can hardly function as a window. (Brown 2001, 4)

Here, the cultural transparency of objects is pitted against the opaque nature of things. Not qualifying as a quasi-immaterial window on the world, but obstructing the view and drawing attention to itself, the thing is more like a smudged pane (a "real, very dirty window"[1]), which at the same time promises and withholds what lies beyond. Things seem to fall through the "grid of legibility" and escape the "order of objects" (4), or at least demand an alternative reading, or "misreading," of well-rehearsed cultural scripts. While objects seem "meaning-transparent," things are "meaning-opaque."

With a myriad of penetrable objects to generate meaningful interpretations, Brown argues, the odd and obstinate thing is hardly noticed in an everyday context. Yet it emerges all the more powerfully from under the smooth veneer of objecthood, once a given object fails to deliver: "We begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us: when the drill breaks, when the car stalls, when the windows get filthy, when their flow within the circuits of production and

distribution, consumption and exhibition, has been arrested, however momentarily" (4).

That is to say, on the one hand, the disclosure of an ordinary object in its disruptive thingness is a chance event, an unexpected and unintentional encounter between subject and thing, and an instance of shock sensation rather than cool intellection (typically, things will hit you hard over the head: "You cut your finger on a sheet of paper, you trip over some toy, you get bopped on the head by a falling nut," 3–4). On the other hand, it must be noted that the distinction between objects and things is not dependent on inherent properties—such as one being immaterial (or quasi-immaterial) and the other persisting in dogged materiality—but on their functioning or, rather, malfunctioning in a particular context and in relation to a specific perceiving and apperceiving subject: "The story of objects asserting themselves as things, then, is the story of a changed relation to the human subject and thus the story of how the thing really names less an object than a particular subject-object relation" (4). Objects and things are really two sides of the same coin—with either face up, depending on their reception by an interpreting subject:

> [Things are] what is excessive in objects, . . . what exceeds their mere materialization as objects or their mere utilization as objects—their force as a sensuous presence or as a metaphysical presence, the magic by which objects become values, fetishes, idols, and totems. Temporalized as the before and after of the object, thingness amounts to a latency (the not yet formed or the not yet formable) and to an excess (what remains physically or metaphysically irreducible to objects). But this temporality obscures the all-at-onceness, the simultaneity, of the object/thing dialectic. (5)

Thus, things may be conceptualized as the "before and after" of objects, as the manifestation of "excess" and "latency," but in the final analysis such temporal order has to give in to an "all-at-onceness." In other words, every humble object, at any time, might reveal itself to be a "wild thing."

Brown closes his introduction to thing theory with a meditation on the sculpture *Typewriter Eraser* (1999) by American artist Claes Oldenburg, a painted steel-and-cement construction from the National Gallery of Art Sculpture Garden in Washington, DC. Hopelessly dated

and almost forgotten, the erstwhile useful object, enlarged to colossal dimensions, makes an eye-catching reappearance in the context of art as the odd thing it has become in the twenty-first century. Through artistic reappraisal, the object has returned to its latent and excessive thingness, as described above. Brown argues that Oldenburg "thus shows how inanimate objects organize the temporality of the animate world" (16), how they are part and parcel of a society's cultural contexts and codes at a certain time. In this particular case, Brown notes, the typewriter eraser evokes the "rhetoric of inscription, erasure, and the trace" (2001, 16)—which might come to an end in the "future of [our] present" (16). "As a souvenir from the museum of twentieth-century history," Brown writes, "the *Typewriter Eraser* reminds us that if the topic of things attained a new urgency in the closing decades of that century, this may have been a response to the digitization of our world" (16).

Ending his essay on an excursion into the art world on the one hand, and a nod to the rhetoric of the trace and the rise of the digital on the other, Brown offers me a twofold opportunity to adapt his ideas to my own concerns in this study. First, I, too, am working with works of artistic production—in this case not sculpture, but literary texts on photographs and photographic discourses. Needless to say, this literary perspective gives a specific bent to my analysis (as opposed to, say, an anthropological approach to photography). As with Oldenburg's *Typewriter Eraser*, I find that the realm of art and artifice brings the discussion of things—for instance, photographs—to another level, going beyond the context of everyday life by bringing photography's mechanisms—its practices and effects—to a heightened awareness. As a matter of fact, such reasoning resonates to some extent with Brown's own thinking on the relation between literary text, realism, and thingness, as put forward in his (2003) monograph *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature*, which gathers readings of late nineteenth-century authors (Twain, James, Norris, etc.) for their engagement with the burgeoning material culture of American society at the time.[2] Photography is only a minor concern, and one of many "things," in Brown's book, however. His literary scholarship comes closer to the objectives of this study in an essay from 1998, titled "How to Do Things with Things (A Toy Story)." Here, Brown concludes that literary texts may resurrect the thingness of objects via the defamiliarization of routine reception: "Literature might then serve as a mode of rehabilitative reification—a resignifying of the fixations and fixities of thing-ification that will grant us access to what

remains obscure (or obscured) in the routines through which we (fail to) experience the material object world" (937).

Second, Brown's brief mention of "traces" and "digitization" prompts me to link his more general elaborations on the nature of things with my specific focus on photography in a twenty-first-century environment. Not only has photography been traditionally regarded as a trace of reality (see, for instance, Susan Sontag in *On Photography*), but it also stands as a potent trace of an analog past in a digital present. In the following, I will therefore expand Brown's thing theory toward a *photo-as-thing theory*, presenting photos as representatives and embodiment—if not epitomes—of things, which regain a renewed significance precisely in the context of the digital.

The Photo-as-Thing: On the Matter and *Punctum* of Photography

In the aforementioned volume *Photographs Objects Histories: On the Materiality of Images*, Elizabeth Edwards and Janice Hart endorse the "central rationale . . . that a photograph is a three-dimensional thing, not only a two-dimensional image" (2004a, 1). They bemoan that this very material presence and sensuous experience of photography has been conspicuously neglected—with few exceptions[3]—in the history of photo criticism: "The prevailing tendency is that photographs are apprehended in one visual act, absorbing image and object together, yet privileging the former. Photographs thus become detached from their physical properties and consequently from the functional context of a materiality that is glossed merely as a neutral support for images" (2). This neglect of photography's material aspects in academic discourse is all the more peculiar for its obvious blind spot concerning common cultural practices. From exquisite daguerreotypes in velvet-lined boxes to dog-eared snapshots on the refrigerator door, the specific materiality of the photographic image has always been a crucial part of its production and reception. The practice of photography, Edwards and Hart rightly notice, involves manifold "processes of intention, making, distributing, consuming, using, discarding and recycling" (1). To overlook these dynamics and the physical transit of photographs through time and space is to ignore, quite simply, "the elemental fact that they [photographs] are things" (2).[4]

Against this background, the volume's concluding essay by Joanna Sassoon rehearses a common argument concerning the sorry fate of photographic thingness in the digital age. Commenting on the digitization of analog photos in custodial institutions such as museums, Sassoon finds those hybrids (what I have termed analogo-digital images) resurrecting a crude focus on image content alone, and a leveling, if not total eclipse, of material diversity: "In the process of becoming an increasingly image-based culture, the universal equality of digital images overrides material differences between objects through the creation of a morass of digital mono-media" (2004, 201). Reproduced in digital format, "what were once three-dimensional physical objects become one-dimensional and intangible digital surrogates, with the tactility and materiality of the original object being reduced to both an ephemeral and ethereal state" (190).

To be sure, matter matters. Photography manifests itself in a concrete and tactile form, with regard to both the carrier of the image itself (a glossy paper, a laminated passport) and its presentational form (in a photo album, in a silver frame). It is simply overstating one's case, however, to declare the end of the specific thingness of photography—its material origins and effects—with the age of digital production and reproduction. On closer inspection it should be argued, against Sassoon and others,[5] that technological development from the analog to the digital presents again differences in degree, not in kind. Even in its ostensibly most disembodied reincarnation, as a digital operation on the computer screen or a cell phone display, the photographic image still requires certain hardware in order to *materialize* in front of the beholder. Digital images, too, are dependent on solid matter, though clearly under accelerating and "promiscuous" conditions. Unlike analog, chemical-mechanical images they may effortlessly travel from one material carrier to the next—no strings attached—and change their look at the push of a button and in the blink of an eye.

Photographs Objects Histories traces the physical aspect of photography in a wide panorama of individual forms, specific functions, and historical occasions, with a clear bias toward photography in analog format. Evidently, the volume takes the idea of photography's thingness quite literally by translating it into a case for a given photograph's *physical* materiality—and a stable materiality at that, wary of the volatile material guises of digital images. Certainly, such sturdy physical thingness cannot be overemphasized in photographic discourse and criticism. However,

in keeping with Brown's suggested terminology, the central argument of *Photographs Objects Histories* recalls his definition not of "things," but of "objects": the latter, as Brown states, remain bound to "mere materialization" and "mere utilization" (2001, 5), that is, to physical and functional aspects alone.

I therefore suggest that scholarship on the materiality of photography should be complemented in two main areas: first, regarding the *accommodation of natively digital or digitalized photographic images in a revised concept of materiality*—as has been argued above, a cell phone with a photo display is as much a thing to hold and handle as is a Polaroid; and second, concerning a more *conceptual understanding of photographic thingness.* Scholars have not yet fully tapped into the thingness of the medium in any but a very literal sense, which I seek to redress in the following with a photo-as-thing theory on the basis of Brown's thing theory.

W. J. T. Mitchell again proves helpful in this context, enabling a smooth transition from thing theory to image studies. His study *What Do Pictures Want?* transcends the above "conservative" approach to materiality by speculating on a more abstract and associative level about the thingness of images. Echoing Brown's thing theory (which is explicitly acknowledged in a footnote by Mitchell [2005, 156]), Mitchell sums up his associations and conjectures about thingness versus objecthood in the following whirlwind passage, which runs the gamut from "brute materiality" to "je ne sais quoi," from debris to fetish, from the doggedly "concrete" to the "nameless figure of the Real":

> Things . . . are simultaneously nebulous and obdurate, sensuously concrete and vague. A thing appears as a stand-in when you have forgotten the name of an object. . . . Things play the role of a raw material, an amorphous, shapeless, brute materiality awaiting organization by a system of objects. Or they figure the excess, the detritus and waste when an object becomes useless, obsolete, extinct, or (conversely) when it takes on the surplus of aesthetic or spiritual value, the je ne sais quoi of beauty, the fetishism that animates the commodity, the "wild thing" or "sweet thang" or "Black Thing" that you wouldn't understand. The thing appears as the nameless figure of the Real that cannot be perceived or represented. When it takes on a single, recognizable face, a stable image, it becomes an object; when it destabilizes, . . . it becomes a hybrid thing . . . that requires more than one name, more than one identity. The

> thing is invisible, blurry, or illegible to the subject. It signals the moment when the object becomes the Other. (2005, 156)

Transferred to the field of photography, such discursive instability seems only too fitting. Photographs emerge as strikingly amenable to Mitchell's ruminations on the thingness of images and, particularly, to Brown's thing theory. If, as the latter maintains, a latent thingness resides in even the most trivial and negligible of objects—waiting to erupt in the sudden confrontation with an interacting subject—photographs are a case in point. In fact, as will be elaborated below, photography characteristically seems to be divided in itself, or, in more affirmative terms, to be a site where objecthood and thingness complement each other—the one submissive to human intellection, the other resisting discursive domination.

This double identity of photographic images—as both objects and things—manifests itself in palpable encounters in a quotidian context, with the sight of photography oscillating on a daily basis between "a massive generality" and treasured "particularities" (Brown 2001, 4). That is to say, in our postmodern world, photographic images are, on the one hand, as ubiquitous and evident as they are banal and quasi-invisible. On the other hand, in some one-on-one encounter with a beholding subject, they may emerge from the stream of fleeting images and pool of minor props to acquire a singular significance.

More often than not, the fault line runs between the public and the private spheres. In the public realm, the surge of photographic images on the streets and in the media has long been enshrined as the omnipresent face, if not cliché, of postmodern life and visual culture. Photographic images are commonly thought to form part of some generic "white noise" underlying contemporary existence in the information age, and to blend seamlessly into a Baudrillardian universe of simulating surfaces.[6] A novel sensation and provocative spectacle in earlier times, the proliferation of photographs in our age has thus lost much of its topicality to, precisely, the medium's ubiquity. Today's commonplace digital image processing of photographic pictures did not create this scenario—as is sometimes claimed—but merely hastened it along by dramatically accelerating the dissemination and circulation of photographic images.

Accordingly, with the exception of the occasional shock picture in the news, some eye-catching advertising piece, or the rare artist's print on a gallery wall, most photographic images circulating in the public

arena go more or less unnoticed. Vying in vain for closer attention, they usually elicit only a cursory glance from the perceiving subject; in consequence, they appear insubstantial—in the sense of being both dematerialized and insignificant—and are hardly recognized as distinct or individual. Existing as a constant flow of disembodied and delible images, they recall Brown's characterization of objects—in contrast to things—as commonplace commodities "within the circuits of production and distribution, consumption and exhibition" (Brown 2001, 4). Indeed, a commodity, to quote Igor Kopytoff, is "a thing that has use value and that can be exchanged in a discrete transaction for a counterpart [which] has, in the immediate context, an equivalent value" (1986, 68). Photos as public objects are exemplary of such dynamics, with their explicit "exchangeability" suggesting commodification on the one hand and indistinctiveness on the other: "To use an appropriately loaded even if archaic term, to be saleable or widely exchangeable is to be 'common'—the opposite of being uncommon, incomparable, unique, singular, and therefore not exchangeable for anything else. The perfect commodity would be one that is exchangeable with anything and everything else, as the perfectly commoditized world would be one in which everything is exchangeable or for sale" (69).

That being said, if we "begin to confront the thingness of objects [only] when they stop working for us" (Brown 2001, 4), it takes some major disturbances in the field, some stalling of well-oiled reception mechanisms, to provoke a different response to photographs on public display. Such deliberate sabotaging of public images is often the domain of photo artists—see Richard Prince, Barbara Kruger, or Cindy Sherman—who appropriate and manipulate the photographic surfaces of advertising, film, pornography, and other visual commodities.

For the average consumer of photographic images in a quotidian context, however, the photo-as-thing tends to emerge in a more mundane and intimate encounter between human subject and photographic object. The private and treasured picture—traditionally stored, displayed, and viewed in the shelter of the home—becomes the unlikely site of revolution here, potentially revealing dormant thingness in photographs. Looking back on a long twentieth century of domestic photography in analog format (which was ushered in with Kodak's 1888 landmark introduction of roll-film cameras), we find domestic photographs to be greatly cherished goods, whether they are meticulously filed in albums, haphazardly arranged on the wall, or loosely stored in

shoe boxes. In fact, even if they have sunk into oblivion for a certain time, domestic photographs may immediately reconnect with a perceiving subject once they are retrieved from the private archive. For the individual and a close circle of friends and family, they seldom represent *objects* of tepid concern, but very often *things* of burning significance.[7] They mark the hot spots, so to speak, of a person's life and identity, as constructed retrospectively through personal narrative. Bringing the past into the present and transforming absence into presence, photographs of younger selves, long-lost friends, or unforgettable vistas become cornerstones to the narrative edifice of one's life story.

By way of their sheer materiality on the one hand, and their often-quoted transparency on a bygone reality on the other, photos thus seem to lend a vicarious stability and substantiality to fickle memories, providing structural support, factual evidence, and narrative coherence to human biographies. As Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Eugene Rochberg-Halton have remarked in their (1981) study *The Meaning of Things: Domestic Symbols and the Self*, the domestic photo thus ranks highest among a household's "most special objects," employed to "create permanence in the intimate life of a person" and meant to "preserv[e] the memory of personal ties" (16–17, 69). In other words, photos are convenient biographical props to be (re)appropriated by human subjects and put into the context of their lives in the present tense.

The situation is paradoxical, of course, for while the photo-as-object—the photo in the service of objectification—operates to streamline memories and memorabilia into a sequence of, allegedly, hard biographical facts, it cannot do so without conjuring its stark opposite, namely, the photo's unruly thingness. That is to say, in order to bestow the nimbus of authority, objectivity, and authenticity onto personal narrative, the photo must evoke "the object's other": it must draw on the mythical, marvelous powers of things—"the magic by which," as Brown notes, "objects become values, fetishes, idols, and totems" (2001, 5).

Endowed with such mythical prowess, photos—especially those that are very dear or disturbing to their beholder—then radiate with a haunting, uncanny presence. A sense of transcendence or enchantment becomes oddly concrete when looking at such images, with the photograph indeed evoking some "balmy elsewhere" (Brown 2001, 1), some realm beyond the confines of the gilded frame and the polished rationales of theory. Here, the power of thingness takes hold of the photo and its beholder alike—and not merely on the grounds of its prosaic

materiality but due to its quasi-mythical presence. The photo-as-thing means that its material and immaterial, physical and mystical, practical and ephemeral aspects are in fact inseparable, that even the most trivial photograph, in the hands and in the eye of the beholder, may come to sparkle with the shine of "everyday magic."

Such "magic," it should be stressed once again, is independent of the given photo's format—analog, digital, or analogo-digital—and is, rather, fueled by contexts, interests, and desires. As has been argued in chapter 1, photography's time-honored claim to a superior realism through its evocation of the Real does not divide along technological but along cultural, situational, and intentional lines that are remarkably continuous from the analog to the digital age. Clearly, the photo of a newborn baby, taken by a cell phone and sent to family and friends, seeks to transport the same message of stunning truth and incomprehensible wonder from sender to receiver as would an analog photo. Likewise, digital holiday snapshots that fail to deliver—happy faces, great scenery—might be deleted from the hard drive, but given the sheer number of pictures, overt manipulation seems hardly worth the while. Tech-savvy consumers notwithstanding, Photoshop is modestly employed, or not at all, in domestic photography, and for the average woman or man, the digital challenge to the Real is a question of little to no significance when shooting pictures.

That said, is the "magic" of photography, analog or digital, a token of aura in a post-Benjaminian age? An anachronistic, residual mythology for the digital age? Brown, for his part, goes as far as describing the auratic power of things as a kind of "metaphysical presence" (2001, 5), conjuring a post-poststructuralist line of thinking in which the notion of a "metaphysics of presence" is no longer anathema to any self-respecting critic. While poststructuralism famously dismissed the idea of a "transcendental signified" (which claims to anchor certain and stable meaning in a realm beyond language), photography, read through the lens of thing theory, then, still lures with the dream of "some place of origin unmediated by the sign" (Brown 2001, 1), some Edenic state of semiosis where signifier and signified have not yet fallen from innocence and recognized their difference/*différance*.

Certainly, such venturing into the mined terrain of "magic" and "metaphysics" is a daring enterprise, both in the field of thing theory and concerning the discourse of photography.[8] Nevertheless, here I would like to round off my theorizing on the "photo-as-thing" through

a stereoscopic view of Brown's thing theory and the writing of Roland Barthes, eminent poststructuralist and one of the most astute commentators on photography. Barthes's photo criticism, notably his (1981) much-discussed last work, *Camera Lucida*, resonates with and helps to explicate the above revisiting of photography's "metaphysics." Thus, by reading Brown through Barthes, I wish to, on a conceptual level, ground this study more firmly in the field of photo criticism proper and, on a historical level, reach across the so-called analog-digital divide. In the following, *Camera Lucida* will therefore be analyzed in connection to the previously elaborated understanding of photography against the background of contemporary thing theory and its double identity as both object and thing.

Similar to Brown's thing theory, which admits the unwieldiness of things in academic discourse, *Camera Lucida* offers a theory of the "essence" (Barthes 1981, 73) of photography against all odds, theorizing what lies, ultimately, beyond the realm of words and intellection. Published at the onset of the digital age, Barthes's essay sparkles with an unsurpassed elusive lucidity vis-à-vis the end of an era in photographic history, to which its author finds himself "one of its last witnesses . . . and this book . . . its archaic trace" (94). *Camera Lucida* is a threshold text indeed, written at the historical interstice between analog and digital image production, reminiscing about photographic traditions on the verge of their extinction, and yet standing, by way of its rhetorical brilliance, as an enduring testimony to the power and persistence of those same traditions.

Despite its elegiac tone, and the book's clear "sense of an ending," *Camera Lucida* is not a swan song. Quite to the contrary, from a twenty-first-century point of view, Barthes's reappraisal of photography in the analog tradition has proved a stronghold against hasty conclusions, digital frenzy, and tales of apocalypse. In its slow-paced, meandering argumentation, its somewhat archaic rhetorics, and its loose essayist format, it stemmed against a tide of accelerated technological development at its own time. More importantly, its idiosyncratic prose still stands as a potent alternative, a sobering and decelerating document against easy dismissals and rash commentary concerning the fate of the analog in an increasingly digital environment. To readers in the new millennium, *Camera Lucida* serves as a reminder to look also beyond the omnipresence of the digital paradigm in public and academic discourse.

In the iconic center of *Camera Lucida* stands the author's engagement with a photo of his recently deceased mother as a little girl in

1898. The so-called "Winter Garden photograph" is, however, withheld from the reader—as has been stressed time and again in critical responses to the book. The picture of the mother-as-child rather asserts its pervasive presence through its actual absence from the book. From this gaping visual vacuum, Barthes derives one of the most famous ontological assessments of the photographic image in the analog tradition, namely, the differentiation between a photo's *studium* on the one hand, and its *punctum* on the other.

A multitude of literature has been written about this distinction. The punctum, in particular, remains a passionately discussed concept, which continues to challenge its exegetes well into the twenty-first century. In this context of constant reappraisal, I am well aware of eloquent voices that find *Camera Lucida* and/or the punctum either overestimated, misread, or critically exhausted.[9] Rather than seeing such assessments as indicative of the essay's shortcomings, however, I find the unceasing engagement with it evidence enough of its seminal status within contemporary discussions of photography. In this account, *Camera Lucida*'s characteristic elusiveness is not a fault but an asset, inviting multifaceted readings and sharpening the wits of its champions and opponents alike. What is more, I take the "impracticability" of *Camera Lucida* as a theory on photography to capture the essence of the medium in its very resistance to theory. Against this background, the punctum is not an exhausted and overinterpreted concept, but reincarnates in every new reading. As a theoretical model, it remains as open to individual interpretations as its detection in a given photograph remains a completely subjective encounter between interpreter and image.

For the purpose of this study, I would therefore like to point out a striking congruence, respectively, of studium and objecthood and of punctum and thingness. What Barthes introduces as studium denotes the coding and decoding of a given photograph in a cultural collective. Studium refers to a mode of docile, "channeled" reception that searches the photo for what is already known—asserting cultural scripts rather than reading between the lines. A photo in the bonds of studium is always relegated to fulfilling a specific function, such as providing evidence or illustrating knowledge ("It is by *studium* that I am interested in so many photographs, whether I receive them as political testimony or enjoy them as good historical scenes. For it is culturally . . . that I participate in the figures, the faces, the gestures, the settings, the actions" [Barthes 1981, 25–26]). In the context of the studium, a particular photo

might well arouse one's interest, yet ultimately it remains "but an indifferent picture, one of the thousand manifestations of the 'ordinary'" (73). At most, it is about "unconcerned desire" and "inconsequential taste" (27), speaking not to one's loves but to one's likings (27). Such analysis, of course, ties in neatly with what has been said before on the lackluster existence of objects—including the photo-as-object—as delible props of postmodern life.

Correspondingly, Barthes's notion of the punctum recalls Brown's insistence on the unruly nature and discursive incommensurability of things:

> The second element [the *punctum*] will break (or punctuate) the *studium*. This time it is not I who seek it out (as I invest the field of the *studium* with my sovereign consciousness), it is this element which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me. A Latin word exists to designate this wound, this prick, this mark made by a pointed instrument: the word suits me all the better in that it also refers to the notion of punctuation, and because the photographs I am speaking of are in effect punctuated, sometimes even speckled with these sensitive points; precisely, these marks, these wounds, are so many *points*. The second element which will disturb the *studium* I shall therefore call *punctum*; for *punctum* is also: sting, speck, cut, little hole—and also a cast of the dice. A photograph's *punctum* is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me). (1981, 26–27)

As the prime example of such pricking, bruising, and wounding, the Winter Garden photograph of a mother-as-child, in absentia, reveals its punctum but to her loving son. The poignant significance of the picture cannot be communicated to, let alone directly experienced by the recipient of an illustrated essay titled "Camera Lucida"—which is read, or better *studied*, precisely for its cultural learnedness and discursive authority. In other words, the Winter Garden photograph-as-thing can be evoked, yet hardly mastered by Barthes's intellectual acumen; it is, in itself, the punctum of *Camera Lucida*, which, paradoxically, resists theorizing yet engenders theory.[10]

Like Brown in his thing theory, which posits the "all-at-onceness" of the "object/thing dialectic" (2001, 5), Barthes emphasizes the "co-presence" (1981, 42) of studium and punctum in potentially every photograph. Collapsing binary oppositions, he envisions the

punctum as a "supplement" (47) to the studium. In the words of fellow-poststructuralist Jacques Derrida,

> This apparent opposition (*studium/punctum*) does not forbid but, on the contrary, facilitates a certain *composition* between the two concepts. What is to be heard in "composition"? Two things that compose together . . . The "subtle beyond" of the *punctum*, the uncoded beyond, composes with the "always coded" of the *studium*. . . . It belongs to it without belonging to it and is unlocatable within it; it is never inscribed in the homogeneous objectivity of the framed space but instead inhabits or, rather, haunts it: "it is an addition [*supplément*]: it is what I add to the photograph and *what is none the less already there*." . . . We are prey to the ghostly power of the supplement. . . . Ghosts: the concept of the other in the same, the *punctum* in the *studium*, the completely other, dead, living in me. (2001, 41–42)

In keeping with the notoriously "impossible" notion of "supplément"—which means, simultaneously, an addition to something complete and something added for the sake of completion—photographs can be conceived as prime examples of such paradoxical doubleness, constantly oscillating between thingness and objecthood and complementing each other in an eerie, haunting manner. As has been stated before, photographs are meaning-transparent objects at the same time as they are meaning-opaque things. They follow cultural codes of production and reception (studium), yet may disturb such prescriptions by force of the elusive punctum. The latter is not about the lucid reading (or studium) of visual information, but about the obscure experience of affects and affections vis-à-vis the image and in reaction to a lost existential presence that is being re-presented. It is in such private instances, then, that the individual beholder experiences what, in extension of Brown's thing theory, we may indeed call the "everyday magic"—the totem-like, fetishized idol—of the photo-as-thing. In fact, Barthes's definition of the punctum explicitly evokes the ineffable realm of "magic": "The realists, of whom I am one and of whom I was already one when I asserted that the Photograph was an image without code . . . the realists do not take the photograph for a 'copy' of reality, but for an emanation of *past reality*: a *magic*, not an art" (1981, 88).

As this quotation shows, Barthes's particular ingenuity as a theorist of photography is also the result of his reconciling different agendas in his

career, namely, his later/ontological approach with earlier/semiological interests. At first sight, his oeuvre seems to suggest a rather linear development from semiotics to ontology, from the "Rhetoric of the Image" (1990b; first published 1964) to the "essence of the Photograph" (1981, 73) and from "The Photographic Message" (1990a; first published 1961) to the "noeme of Photography" (1981, 76–77). A closer look, though, reveals the earlier semiological pieces on the "doings" of photography already anticipate the reflections on photography's "being" in *Camera Lucida*,[11] such as when Barthes writes on "The Third Meaning" (1990c; first published 1970) of photographic images (here, specifically, film stills). The latter, similar to the punctum, manifests itself in an "erratic," "obstinate," "obtuse" kind of meaning, which asks not for intellection but a "'poetical' grasp" (Barthes 1990, 53–55). Lying outside the system of symbolic order or "signification," it constitutes a "supplementary" excess of meaning, which Barthes—drawing on a distinction made by Julia Kristeva (between the realm of "the symbolic"/signification and "the semiotic"/signifiance)—describes as "signifiance." Like the punctum, it is endowed with the thing-like quality of the supplement, recalling Brown's comments on thingness as a site of "latency (the not yet formed or the not yet formable)" and "excess (what remains physically or metaphysically irreducible to objects)" (Brown 2001, 5).

"The Third Meaning" may thus be read as a kind of prologue to the idea of the punctum in *Camera Lucida*. The latter, in turn, also resonates with Barthes's earlier writings on the photograph, as, for instance, with regard to the idea of the photograph as "perfect *analogon*" of reality, which the author had already explicated in the essay "The Photographic Message" from 1961 (1990a, 17). Twenty years later, in *Camera Lucida*, this analogy between signifier and signified, or between representation and its object, reincarnates in the often-quoted assertion that "in short, the referent adheres" (6). Trying to come to terms with the ontology of the photographic image, Barthes muses:

> A specific photograph, in effect, is never distinguished from its referent (from what it represents), or at least it is not *immediately* or *generally* distinguished from its referent (as is the case for every other image, encumbered . . . by the way in which the object is simulated). . . . It is as if the Photograph always carries its referent with itself. . . . The Photograph belongs to that class of laminated objects whose two leaves cannot be separated without destroying them both: the windowpane and

> the landscape . . . (I didn't know that this stubbornness of the Referent in always being there would produce the essence I was looking for). (1981, 5–6)

What Barthes calls a "laminated object"—gluing together medium and referent, windowpane and landscape—translates, once again, into the focus of this study on the photograph's double identity as object and thing. As for the object-side, the photo offers transparency of a bygone reality and promises a meaningful interpretation thereof: "We look *through* objects (to see what they disclose about history, society, nature, or culture . . .)," Brown writes (2001, 4). With W. J. T. Mitchell, we might also say that the photo-as-object stands for "the way things appear to a subject—that is, with a name, an identity, a gestalt . . . , a description, a use or function" (2005, 156). The photo-as-object acts as a stable signifier, then, guaranteeing reference and anchoring meaning within a fixed framework of preconceptions and expectations.

The photo-as-thing, in contrast, rises all the more potently from the shadows of such "reality effects," generating not "significance" but "signifiance." The photograph-as-object is always overshadowed, threatened to be overwhelmed, by its dormant thingness, or, to quote from Derrida's reading of *Camera Lucida*, the "latency" of the punctum (2001, 57). Referencing some amorphous totality beyond the speck of the particular—"the absolute Particular, the sovereign Contingency," "the Real" (Barthes 1981, 4), the photograph-as-thing thus implies nothing short of a mind-blowing experience.

The Return to Realism in Literature: A Photographic Reading

Barthes ends *Camera Lucida* with the following conclusion:

> Mad or tame? Photography can be one or the other: tame if its realism remains relative, tempered by aesthetic or empirical habits . . . ; mad if this realism is absolute and, so to speak, original, obliging the loving and terrified consciousness to return to the very letter of Time: a strictly revulsive movement which reverses the course of the thing, and which I shall call, in conclusion, the photographic ecstasy. Such are the two ways of the Photograph. The choice is mine: to subject its spectacle to

> the civilized code of perfect illusions, or to confront in it the wakening of intractable reality. (1981, 119)

Interestingly, as I elaborated above, such thinking is strikingly congruent with the tenets of Brown and W. J. T. Mitchell. Here, too, photography shows itself to be Janus-faced: as an object, to speak with Barthes, it remains "relative" and "tame"—as a thing, however, it spins an "absolute," "mad" realism through its reference to what Mitchell conjures as "the nameless figure of the Real" (2005, 156).

I position this congruence of ideas from two distinct historical and discursive contexts as final evidence for my reading of photos as things in the vein of recent thing theory, also and particularly in the digital age. Barthes's writing on photography on the one hand, and Brown's and Mitchell's conjectures about thingness on the other, testify to and historically frame photography's continuous haunting by the Real—from its analog origins to its digital present. Whereas *Camera Lucida* appeared on the verge of the digital age and discusses the issue of the Real with regard to a long and venerable tradition of analog photography in which the nature of photographic realism had been the central conundrum for generations of critics, Brown and Mitchell write in an age of, allegedly, post-photography, which sees new challenges to the question of the Real. All three authors agree that this capitalized Real ultimately exceeds the range of rationality and pure intellection, evoking some ephemeral, shape-shifting phenomenon that goes well beyond the objects and objectives of discourse and representation. They hence recall, in a different manner and from different angles, what Brown has identified as the "liminality" of things, situated on the "threshold between the nameable and the unnameable, the figurable and unfigurable, the identifiable and unidentifiable" (2001, 5; see above).

Based on such reasoning, I understand the idea of photography's thingness to culminate, indeed, in the "return of the Real"[12] in our time and age. At a point in photographic history when the constitution and representation of what is "real" and "true" in and about a photograph are often being contested by digital imaging and, even more so, its critical debate, I argue it is all the more important to take into account a continuous phenomenological response to photography, which recognizes the persistence of the analog code, photography's ongoing claim to realism, and the tenacious bond between "the Real" and "the photographic." As Sarah Kember has noted on this capitalized return:

> The power of affect in photography seems to derive—perversely—from the "Real" that critical languages can reason away but cannot finally expunge from the subject's experience of photography. That is, we can *know* the impossibility of the real in representation . . . but we can nevertheless *feel* its presence. (1996, 158)

> This transformative experience of the self based on an uncanny encounter with the real has been at the heart of our persistent (but irrational) faith in photography. It is a faith which precisely cuts across our more rational investments in . . . the truth status of photography—because it is placed in a real located ultimately in our own interior worlds rather than in an exterior one. (161)

That is to say, in the digital age—and thus under, ostensibly, most unfavorable conditions—the investment of photography in the Real sees a renewed topicality. In a provocative, "perverse" (Kember) manner, such thinking reintroduces into the discussion of photography the question of the Real with a capital *R*. Reimplanted from its analog roots into a twenty-first-century environment of digital image production and consumption, this discussion of the Real revisits the mythical, auratic power of the medium and "the complex relationship that photography has always had with the real" (Sutton, Brind, and McKenzie 2007, 11).

It cannot be overemphasized, though, that the Real in this context—in keeping with my conceptualizing of the photo-as-thing—is a highly elusive and contingent phenomenon, which should not be conceived of, in an essentializing and normative manner, as a universal claim to reality and its transparent, objective representation. It does not mean a naive equation between photographic object and material reality, or a straight document of what once has been, positively, in front of the camera. As has been argued in chapter 1 of this study, photography's reference to the Real exceeds any sense of a "vulgar indexicality." Rather, whether called a "nameless figure" (W. J. T. Mitchell) or punctum (Barthes), the Real under the tenets of thing theory stands as a sort of placeholder for individual affective responses to a particular photograph. These responses not only undermine purely intellectual analyses of image content, style, or form vis-à-vis a given photograph. They also go beyond the question of universal objectivity in photographic realism, and instead imagine a realism that is predicated on a subjective, contingent

form of referentiality and the individual's "irrational" (Kember) trust in the truth and realism of the image.

In other words, the Real in a photograph—as I want to define it for a twenty-first-century context—rests on and evokes a long history of the medium's association with authenticity, objectivity, and veracity, which, indeed, have often stood in capital letters and seemed carved in stone. Yet at the same time, and particularly so under the topical beleaguerment of the digital, these tropes are absolutely dependent on the beholder's faith and trust in them. In this, the photo's referencing of the Real describes a contingent relation indeed, based as it is on a kind of contract between beholder and photo—a contract concerning not a "willing suspension of disbelief," as goes Coleridge's proverbial dictum, but rather generating what I want to call an "extension of belief."

Primarily, this "extension of belief" and "contract of trust" concern a continuity from analog to digital format. In the next step, it may also concern an extension from photographic realism to literary realism, to an *aesthetics of trust* in literary representation as well. That said, I seek to elaborate in the following the central analytical rationale of this study, which proposes a linkage between photographic discourse—more precisely, the idea of the photo-as-thing—and selected examples of contemporary *literary* realism. At this point, then, the various strands of this study may be pulled together: first, the poetics of realism today and its base in an aesthetics of trust (see the introduction to this study); second, the dialectical dynamics between analog and digital photography in our time (see chapter 1); and third, the theoretical conceptualization of photography against the background of recent thing theory, including the latter's fruitful commonalities with the photo criticism of Roland Barthes.

The step from photographic to literary realism refers us back to the current negotiation of realist and postmodernist paradigms in contemporary literary production and criticism, as laid out in the introduction to this study. Here, the extension of belief, of trust and faith in a communicable and representable reality, marks the center of gravity for a whirling academic discussion of the current revival of literary realism. In fact, the idea of a "contingent referentiality," as referenced above, has been introduced not in connection with the issue of twenty-first-century photography, but as a default term for contemporary realist fiction of the greatest variety. Proposed by Klaus Stierstorfer in the essay collection *Beyond Postmodernism: Reassessments in Literature, Theory,*

and Culture (2003a), "contingent referentiality" acts as the common denominator for contemporary fictions, which, in one way or another, reinvestigate the equation between representation and represented, sign and referent, realism and reality. Stierstorfer's comments provide an apt summary on "the tendency, however diverse in its specific realizations, toward a 'new anchoring' of what is variously characterised as the free-floating signifiers or the irresponsible playfulness of the more 'radical' versions of postmodernism to a system of referents and values, however tentative or contingent" (2003b, 4). Further, Stierstorfer remarks on both contemporary, post-postmodernist fiction and its academic reception: "The major lines of discussion today consequently seem to be directed at establishing . . . platforms, however local or contingent, where (re-)constructive strategies might find their common grip, while at the same time avoiding the nefarious consequences of essentialist realism and structuralist models of signification. If a summary term . . . were, therefore, to be found, the best I could suggest is something like 'contingent referentiality'" (10).

The notion of a contingent referentiality is, by definition, hard to grasp. The approach of this study via photography and its discourses—both as a literary motif *in* and magnifying lens *to* selected novels in the realist vein—provides one viable way into the problem, and a base for analysis. For its excessively elusive nature, "this thing photography" seems perfectly fitted to an investigation of referentiality in literary realism today, while at the same time not diminishing the latter's characteristic complexity. What is more, photography's current suspension and negotiation between analog and digital modes and discourses provides an original perspective to examine the equally conflicted site of contemporary literary practice. By making an issue of photography in their fictional texts, the authors selected for this study invite us to reflect not only on the now more than ever "dubitative" image of photography that makes photographic truth a matter of trust (Lunenfeld 1997, 92–98). They simultaneously task the reader to reconsider the issue of doubt and trust in the exchange between writers, their subjects, and their readers, and to ponder the question of how to represent—faithfully, truthfully—contemporary realities.

In order to shed light on a much debated, often contested, and manifoldly labeled field of contemporary literary production, I therefore propose a *photographic reading* of the texts in question. This approach should be an original contribution to the topical discussion of twenty-

first-century realism(s) and the return of the Real to literary production, criticism, and scholarship. In the following chapters, three novels published after the year 2000 will thus be subjected to a photographic reading, that is, I will examine them for their rewriting of literary realism in the context of contemporary photographic discourse and its suspension between analog and digital paradigms.

Notes

A shorter version of the first two subchapters of this chapter was published under the title "The Photo-as-Thing: Photography and Thing Theory," in the *European Journal of English Studies* (Breitbach 2011b).

Epigraph: Lorraine Daston, "Introduction: Speechless," in *Things That Talk: Object Lessons from Art and Science*, ed. Lorraine Daston (New York: Zone Books, 2004), 24.

[1] Brown 2001, 3. Brown quotes here from A. S. Byatt's novel *The Biographer's Tale*, in which a doctoral student, tired of poststructuralist abstractions and deconstructions, pines for "things": "a real, very dirty window, shutting out the sun. A *thing*" (2000, 2).

[2] See also Elaine Freedgood's (2006) study *The Ideas in Things: Fugitive Meaning in the Victorian Novel*, which rereads canonical British realist novels for "the fugitive meanings of apparently nonsymbolic objects" (4)—that is, objects, or things, which at first glance seem mere props, employed to create a referential illusion or "reality effect," but which on a closer look reveal a discursive autonomy and opposition not unlike Brown's "things." Freedgood, applying a "strong" metonymic reading to the excess of things in the Victorian novel, argues that many objects conjure histories and stories of their own, which must be "refigured alongside and athwart the novel's manifest or dominant narrative" (12).

[3] Edwards and Hart quote, for instance, Geoffrey Batchen's (1997) study, *Burning with Desire: The Conception of Photography*.

[4] For a prominent counterstatement concerning photography's thingness, see Vilém Flusser's (1984) *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* (first published in German in 1983): "Although remnants of materiality, of 'thing-ness,' still adhere to it [the photo], its value is not in its being a thing, but in the information it carries on its surface" (36).

[5] See also, for instance, Jorge Ribalta, who argues that photography is currently seeing a "fantasmatic reappearance as disembodied from its traditional technological material condition. Photography deterritorializes itself and becomes the immaterial paradigm of visual culture" (2008, 179–80).

[6] See, for instance, Flusser, who describes a postmodern world of simulations and hallucinations, with photography ("the technical image") at the center of debate: "Omnipresent technical images have begun magically to restructure 'reality' into an image-like scenario" (1984, 7).

[7] Or rather, *signifiance*; see Roland Barthes's distinction between "significance" and "signifiance," as discussed below.

[8] See also Brown in the aforementioned article "How to Do Things with Things (A Toy Story)," where he wonders whether it might be safe (again) to propose thinking about extratextual reference in connection with things: "What fallacy do we risk when we pause to grant a text some extratextual dimension? What hazards do we chance (naiveté, banality, empiricism, humanism?) when we read a literary text to write a history of the referent? What fetishism do I commit?" (1998, 935).

[9] See, as representative examples, Elkins 2005 and 2007a.

[10] See Jacques Derrida's congenial reading of Barthes's Winter Garden photograph as *punctum*, which offers a "metonymic" extension toward a general theory of photography:

> The metonymy of the *punctum*: scandalous as it may be, it allows us to speak, to speak of the unique. . . . The Winter Garden Photograph, . . . is the *punctum* of the entire book. The mark of this unique wound is nowhere visible as such, but its unlocatable brightness or clarity . . . irradiates the entire study. It can continue to assure a certain generality to the discourse and offer it to analysis by submitting its concepts to a quasi-instrumental use. How else could we, without knowing her, be so deeply moved by what he said about *his* mother . . .) How could this be poignant to us if a metonymic force . . . were not at work? (2001, 58)

"The Deaths of Roland Barthes" was first published as "Les morts de Roland Barthes" in *Poétique* 47 (September 1981): 269–92. For Derrida's take on photography in digital format, and his reconsideration of *Camera Lucida* in this context, see also his interview with Hubertus von Amelunxen and Michael Wetzel (Derrida 2010).

[11] For a similar reading, which stresses aspects of continuity and dialogicity between Barthes's early and late writings on photography, see Burgin 1990 and Shawcross 1996. Shawcross, for instance, notes that "*Camera Lucida* is a palimpsest in which various intertexts reside. Interaction between these texts moves in several directions, not simply the direction of past onto present. The elucidation of this text reanimates the earlier writing in a way that a strictly chronological discussion of Barthes's writings would inhibit" (1996, xiii). A perceptive overview of Barthes's positions on photography throughout his career is also given by Rabaté (1997).

[12] I borrow from the title of Hal Foster's (1996) study of the same name here. Foster, however, is concerned with a different, if related, issue and artistic context, namely, the "return of the Real"—the return of "actual bodies" and "social sites"—to the artistic production of the "avant-garde" at the end of the twentieth century.